

The book cover features a stylized illustration. In the foreground, a young man with dark hair and a serious expression is shown from the chest up, wearing a red tank top with a gold fleur-de-lis and a crown emblem. He has a yellow halo around his head and his right arm is raised with the palm facing forward. In the background, there is a red and black patterned wall. A circular inset in the upper left shows a bearded man with a halo, and another hand is visible in the upper right corner.

THE Curse OF THE Gypsy

TEN STORIES
AND A NOVELLA

ALICIA GASPAR DE ALBA

Praise for the work of Alicia Gaspar de Alba

“De Alba’s Puritans are as rich and complex as any characters in recent historical fiction.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* on *Calligraphy of the Witch*

“De Alba has a firm grasp of her historical material and portrays the pirate life as convincingly as the witch trials.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *Calligraphy of the Witch*

“Gaspar de Alba proves again that she is a meticulous historical novelist who understands how to write a complex, suspenseful story that also remarks upon our present.”

—Emma Pérez, author of *Gulf Dreams* and *Electra’s Complex*

“Gaspar de Alba not only crafts a suspenseful plot but tackles prejudice in many of its ugly forms: against gays, against Hispanics, against the poor. An in-your-face, no-holds-barred story.”

—*Booklist* on *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders*

“Offering a powerful depiction of social injustice and serial murder on the US-Mexican border, this is an essential purchase for both mystery and Hispanic fiction collections.”

—*Library Journal* on *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders*

“In her first novel, poet and Chicano studies scholar Gaspar de Alba brings to life Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, a prolific, brilliant, and complex author and nun of 17th-century Mexico. Gaspar de Alba has artfully combined excerpts from the writings with explicit, fictionalized journal entries to create a vibrant, if sometimes anachronistic, account of a complex life. Eminently readable.”

—*Library Journal* on *Sor Juana’s Second Dream*

“As Gaspar de Alba tells it, Sor Juana was not only a woman who questioned a patriarchal and superstitious society, but also a lesbian. She makes a convincing case by juxtaposing the nun’s own poetry with actual events and fictional journal entries. Commendably, Sor Juana’s flaws are not glossed over; she is portrayed as vain, prejudiced and difficult. This work of fine scholarship and vision should increase awareness of a compelling historical figure.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *Sor Juana’s Second Dream*

THE Curse OF THE Gypsy

TEN STORIES
AND A NOVELLA

ALICIA GASPAR DE ALBA



Arte Público Press
Houston, Texas

The Curse of the Gypsy is funded in part by grants from the City of Houston through the Houston Arts Alliance and the National Endowment for the Arts. We are grateful for their support.

Recovering the past, creating the future

Arte Público Press
University of Houston
4902 Gulf Fwy, Bldg 19, Rm 100
Houston, Texas 77204-2004

Cover design by Mora Design
Cover art by Alma Lopez

Names: Gaspar de Alba, Alicia, 1958- author.

Title: The curse of the gypsy : ten stories and a novella / by Alicia Gaspar de Alba.

Description: Houston : Arte Público Press, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017061344 (print) | LCCN 2018011214 (ebook) |
ISBN 9781518504938 (epub) | ISBN 9781518504945 (kindle) |
ISBN 9781518504952 (pdf) | ISBN 9781558858626 (alk. paper)

Classification: LCC PS3557.A8449 (ebook) | LCC PS3557.A8449 A6
2018 (print) | DDC 813/.54—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017061344>

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

The Curse of the Gypsy © 2018 by Alicia Gaspar de Alba
Printed in the United States of America

Dedication

Para Alma, el amor de mi vida,
and to our daughter, Azul Fernanda

Table of Contents

THE CURSE OF THE GYPSY: A Deconstructed Novel in Ten Stories

Lorca's Widow	3
The Octogenarian with the Petrified Fetus Finds Herself in Good Health	23
The Curse of the Gypsy	25
The Bullfighter's Last Confession	46
Day of the Dead	52
The Sacrament	66
The Tattoo	68
Artemis House	85
Calaveras in the Closet	97
Shortcut to the Moon	116

The True and Tragic Story of Liberata Wilgefortis, Who, Having Consecrated her Virginity to the Goddess Diana To Avoid Marriage, Grew a Beard and Was Crucified

The Bizarre Birth	135
The Lodestone	147
The Mage	154
The Strange Girl	158
The Cave	165
Return of the Midwife	168
The New Nurse	177
Dream of the Eight Sisters	187

The Young Crone	191
The Stranger	194
The Blood	198
The Summons	200
The Bearded Bride	204
The Circus	209
An Unearthly Croaking of Toads	212
Acknowledgements	215
Notes	227

THE CURSE OF THE GYPSY:
A Deconstructed Novel in Ten Stories

Lorca's Widow

I didn't say I was his wife. I said I was his widow, in the Gypsy sense of the word, not the Spanish. I guess it won't hurt anybody now to tell you the story, to explain to you why I wept so much when you gave me that book of García Lorca's poetry for Mother's Day that year. But if you want to hear the story, promise that you will believe everything I say. Do you promise? Listen, then, and don't ask me anything until I finish.

Everyone knew Lorca liked men. Even though his best friends were always women, it was men he loved. Men he wrote about in his verses. Men he wept about when he came to the Tavern of Los Vargas in the Sacromonte and sang to the black dregs of his heart about a love that was killing him. Still, he drew women like bees to jasmine. Always he was surrounded by the *payo* girls who accompanied his flock of rich friends. The minute he started to sing, the women had eyes for no other. His voice was like the finest *jeréz*, and we were all intoxicated by it. My mother, my three brothers—Elías, Moisés and Nahum—and me, most of all. Margarita Petita, he called me. Everyone loved Lorca's voice. I loved those Moorish eyes of his that seemed always on the verge of spilling their sad liquid down his face.

I fell in love with Lorca the first night I saw him in our family's tavern. He was young and clumsy on his feet, but that didn't stop him from challenging Moisés to a duel of voices. Elías plucked madly at his guitar, knowing that Moisés had never been able to sustain that tempo, but Lorca did. Kept time with my elder brother's music as

though he, too, were a Gypsy. Afterwards, Moisés and Elías hugged him and called him “cousin.”

I was sixteen and married to a soldier who had gone off to fight the Prussians in the first big war of the world. Lorca was not much older than I, barely getting his whiskers and his voice, but already such a romantic. Two seasons went by and he did not return to the tavern. I didn’t see him again until the Saturday before Easter. The Gran Vía was filled with smoke from the burning of the Judases. My brothers all stood around me as we watched first one effigy then another go up in flames. Suddenly, there stood Lorca, reciting something that sounded like a Gypsy verse, empty wineskin dangling off his belt.

“¡Primos!” he said to Elías and Moisés, who scowled at his familiarity. “Don’t you recognize me?” he asked Moisés. “I’m the green man who beat you at our duel of voices.” He turned to Elías. “Your guitar,” he said, as if that explained everything. “You called me ‘primo.’”

“I recognize you, Cousin,” said Nahum, the youngest. “You said you were a Vargas.”

“My great, great grandmother was a Vargas,” said Lorca, his words slurred into one, “and my great grandfather Antonio married a Gypsy from the Albaicín, and my middle name is Sagrado Corazón de Jesús”—he pretended to stab a dagger into his heart—“which is why I must know the name of this dark beauty before I die!”

“Me llamo Margarita,” I said boldly, knowing that my brothers would never introduce me to the young man. Elías cut his eyes at me and Moisés pinched my arm.

“Margarita Petita,” said Lorca, and proceeded to invent a drunken verse that sounded like he was using the letters of my name: “*Morena, la angustia me retuerce la garganta, arrepentido recelo del imán de tus tobillos, ampárame.*” I memorized it instantly, though it made no sense. “Dark Lady, agony twists my throat, a forlorn distrust of the magnet of your ankles, protect me.” He bowed low and reached playfully for my ankles, but Moisés stopped him.

“She’s married,” he said gruffly.

Lorca straightened up, stared at my brother as though he'd lost his five senses, then howled with laughter, slapping his thighs like a jester. A group of his university friends appeared and whisked him away into the crowd. I watched the blaze of the last Judas, my face hot with a virgin's excitement.

"Just wait till I tell Mamá how you were flirting," said Moisés in my ear.

But all I could think of was seeing Lorca again. Margarita Petita, he'd called me, and made my name into a poem. Every morning before I opened my eyes to a fresh sky, and every night after the lamps were snuffed and the doors barred, snuggled up in the bed covers next to my mother, I whispered the poem to myself, like a prayer.

"Protect your heart," my mother told me one day as we ground the coffee for breakfast. "It's getting away from you, Margarita. What will you tell your husband when he returns from the war and finds out that you've given your heart to another man? It is *mala leche* to deceive your husband. Do you want to ruin us?"

"He isn't going to return," I told her, and my mother, knowing my predictions to be true, only shook her head and made a sign against bad luck. Later I learned from Nahum that she had gone to visit the King of the Gypsies, old Chorrojumo, who even at his age still gave counsel.

For an entire year, I took to following Lorca around the city. From his family's house on the street overlooking the river—66 Acera del Darro, I remember the exact address—he would walk up into the Alhambra wood, eyes down, hands deep in his pockets, pausing here and there in the dense shade of the poplars to take out his notebook and his pencil. Then he would amble down to the Alameda to meet his friends at the same café every afternoon. There they sat for hours playing dominoes and arguing about literature. He never saw me. Not even when I'd walk up to their table and brazenly offer to read their palms. He had eyes only for his friends and his verses. Sometimes after the Alameda he walked as far as the *cementerio*, and sat for a long time writing in his notebook, surrounded by graves.

Once, he caught me peering into the *zaguán* of his house and had me dragged into the courtyard to be questioned by his mother. I was nearly eighteen years old by then, much too old to be spying at doorways.

“What are your intentions?” the mother asked. “Are you looking for work? Are your children hungry? What do you want?”

I stared at my feet. “I tell fortunes,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

“We don’t need our fortunes told,” said the mother. “You Gypsy thieving *ratera de mierda*. And if I ever see you lurking by our door again I’m calling the authorities.”

I was pushed out to the street by one of the servants, humiliated not so much because the woman assumed I was either a beggar or a thief, but because Lorca didn’t recognize me. I stopped following him after that.

As I had foretold, my husband came home in a box before the war was over. My mother warned me to observe the tradition, and I had to wear black and not be seen in public for an entire year. I was not permitted to talk to men, not even my brothers, for I was polluted with death, and this would bring bad luck to any man whose path I crossed. The year of my mourning passed slowly. My brother Elías’ wife gave birth to another son and Moisés got married and had a big wedding that I was not allowed to attend. His young wife took my place serving the wine to our customers and telling their fortunes, if they asked. But she was no good at it. She couldn’t really see anything, just pretended. And she did not have any grace for dancing.

We didn’t see Lorca in the Albaicín or the Sacromonte for a long time. Some of his friends who frequented our tavern would talk about how he was traveling in the north, in the land of the witches called Galicia, and then we learned he had gone to Madrid to attend the university. Here and there we heard that he was becoming famous, not as a singer or a musician, but as a writer of poetry and plays. Then, suddenly, there he was again in his usual circle of young men and adoring women, looking much the same, except thinner and more haunted. I was much changed. I was a widow, now, with a

plump belly good for dancing, and breasts and lips full of mystery and desire, eyes as sad as his own.

I could see right away that he was in love. Heard him telling my brothers one night after all the customers had gone that he wanted to leave Granada once he finished his degree, leave Spain altogether, escape the prison of his heart that produced such dark songs of deep unhappiness. It was Paris he wanted to see. Most of his friends from that café on the Alameda had gone to Paris, and he wanted to follow them there. But his parents would not allow it, forcing him to remain in the sterility of his broken heart. He confessed all of this to my brothers in between rounds of the wineskin and the guitar. I listened to his words, stored them like seeds against a hungry winter, and set about casting my strongest spell.

I danced just for Lorca that night. I had started to dance with my little cousin Manuel who had come to live with us earlier in the year. He was only eleven years old, but already had the deep rhythms of the *duende* in him. I rattled my castanets and started to click my heels to the rhythms of my brother's guitar. Manuel grabbed his *panderete* and joined me. I could feel Lorca's eyes on me as I moved. In truth, he was as mesmerized by Manuel's movements as by mine, but his eyes, those dark fathomless eyes in which I had drowned as surely as if I had fallen into one of the wells of the city, his eyes were like black brandy emptying into mine, and I used every power that I could summon to plumb the depths of his heart.

What pain I saw! I doubled over with his pain, my heels stamping on the boards the staccato of his aching love. He wanted someone more than his life. Not me, not any woman, I saw that clearly. Not Manuel, either, for he was just a boy, though the secret was in Manuel's body and in my brother Moisés' yearning voice and in the keening strains of my brother Elías' guitar.

"Take me," I told him with my eyes, *zapateando* near his chair. "I will give you what you need."

I swung my hips in front of his face, reached for a *chirimoya* from the bowl of fruit my mother liked to keep on the table in the middle of the room, and handed it to him, still clacking my heels. Then I turned my backside on him, felt the thumping of his heart like

a drumbeat in my own blood. With my eyes closed, I danced around the table and worked him with my mind.

“Lover of Gypsies,” I said, “be my lover. Take me like this fruit.” A final rattle from Manuel’s tambourine, a flurry of wrists and castanets. *Eppah!* I opened my eyes to see if he had fallen under my spell, but his chair was empty. He had left.

The next day, it was a Friday, I remember. Two days before the Feast of Santiago, I received a gift, a sewing basket lined in pale green linen. It was filled with sewing items: a box of pins, another of needles, a leather thimble, several spools of colored thread, a pair of scissors, a pincushion in the shape of a heart. The kind of gift a young man would give to the girl he wants to marry. On the bottom of the cushion, he had pinned a note, this note that I have kept stashed in my prayer book for more than seventy years. Here, let me read it to you, but you will have to translate it for yourself, Child. I will not spoil Lorca’s words by changing them to English.

Gitana,
Hoy me comí la chirimoya que me diste,
Today I ate the *chirimoya* you gave me,
la carne dulce como labio de niño,
the flesh sweet as a boy’s lip,
fresca como la noche que yace oscura en tus ojos,
fresh as the dark night in your eyes,
semillas negras que quiero sembrar
black seeds I want to plant
adentro de tu jardín, cáscara vieja que flota
inside your garden, old skin that floats
cual el recuerdo por las aguas frías del Darro.
like memory in the cold waters of the Darro.
Atrás de la Alhambra, en un matorral
Behind the Alhambra, in a thicket
de juncos y zarzamoras, al lado de la cascada
of cattails and blackberries, beside the cascade
te espero bajo la luna verde de la noche de Santiago.

I wait for you under the green moon of Saint James night.

—Federico (1923)

None of what happened later would have occurred if my mother hadn't gone to see Chorrojumo. She never forgave me for betraying my husband, you know. Told me Chorrojumo had foreseen that I would pollute myself with a *payo*, a non-Gypsy, and that I would become a pariah to my own family. Chorrojumo predicted my offspring would be cursed for eternity unless I returned to the Sacromonte and buried my shame in the right place. None of it made any sense to me, then, but I knew I was doomed.

You see, I was carrying Lorca's child, but my mother put a curse on it, and it never came to term. When she found out I was pregnant, she was enraged, and beat me with my dead father's belt. She paced up and down our *piso* in the Albaicín, pulling at her hair, yelling off the balcony that her daughter had been shamed, that misfortune had found us, but to me she hissed, "I know it's your fault, I know you worked your magic into him somehow." She ordered my brothers to find him. "Go and bring that *hijo de la gran puta* to me!" She said she just wanted to talk to him, but I knew it was revenge she desired for the disgrace he had brought to our family.

My brothers found him in his usual café, drinking absinthe and reading a book. For once, he was alone. Either he had not believed the rumor that *los Vargas* were after him, or he didn't care. They say he came willingly, jauntily, some said, as if daring my brothers to avenge the family's name right then and there.

He got only as far as the vestibule in our building before my mother descended upon him with all her fury.

"My daughter is carrying your child, Señor Lorca," she declared, and I had never seen her look more venomous. "You had your fun, now you must meet your obligation."

"Señora, I took your daughter to the river, thinking she was a maiden," he said defiantly, "and it turned out she was just an unfaithful wife. That child could be anybody's."

His own venom when he looked at me weakened my knees.

“No, Señor, my daughter was a decent woman, and a widow at that, until you kidnapped her heart and contaminated her body with your *payo* seed. I curse you, Señor Lorca. By the name of Chorrojumo, King of the Gypsies, I curse your offspring. May they all die before they see the light of day. May their hearts shrivel just as you have withered my daughter’s and my family’s heart.”

Lorca laughed and laughed. Even when my brothers, all three of them, dragged him out to the courtyard, kicking and beating him, he didn’t stop laughing. My mother threatened to inform his parents, to expose his indiscretion. But that was the end of it. The curse was enough. Lorca disappeared after that. There were rumors that he was writing Gypsy ballads, and later that he had gone to Barcelona to visit with a friend named Dalí, the one who became a famous painter of twisted clocks and severed heads.

Already the troubles were starting with the government, and my brother Nahum was forced to join the army, but I cared about nothing. I wanted Lorca to love me, to marry me, to be a father to my child. But he was gone, and by then my child was cursed. I could feel it dying month by month. And then its heartbeat stopped completely.

Over a year later, I saw Lorca again at the café on the Alameda, where I had rented a table for my fortune telling, since my mother had banned me from working in our tavern. He was drunk and desolate as usual, still yearning for Paris. By then, I hated him. I wanted him to be miserable the rest of his life. With the excuse of helping the owner’s wife clear the tables, I picked up his glass, swirled my finger inside it and licked it, knowing that in this way I could read his cards as though he himself had drawn the spread. The cards showed me his wretched fate. I saw a short life ahead of him, filled with fame and controversy and travel, but in the end, too brief, and then his body lying in a heap with others. A bonfire and then ashes.

That same summer, guided by a dream, I took my cards to the bullring in Ronda on the Feast of Corpus Christi. That’s where I met your grandfather, Benito Rivera. El Criollo, they called him, because he was born in Mexico. He had a special way of doing the *chicuelinas*, his tall figure pirouetting around the bull like a ballet dancer. To me, he was a mirage of Mexican beauty, much more beautiful than

Lorca. Like all bullfighters, he was a superstitious man. He wanted me to read his palms, he had no faith in the cards (in truth he feared them), and I remember the jolt I felt when my hand touched his, like an electrical current running through my body. I read the lines of his palms, but by then I already knew that he would be my husband. He was from Mexico, and I already knew that I would fulfill my out-cast's destiny and break my mother's heart by leaving Granada. But she had cursed me, cursed my child, and I never forgave her for that. I guess you could say I wanted to pay her back. I hope you have not inherited this Gypsy folly for revenge, Child.

Years later, after she had forgiven me for abandoning my people, as she put it, when she learned I had given birth to a son, she sent me a letter dictated to one of my nephews, telling me all about Franco and the Falangistas and how sweet Nahum's life had been sacrificed and how at least I was safe in Mexico because Spain had lost its mind. Never once did she mention Lorca.

But I was not meant to be happy in Mexico. For the first twelve years of our marriage, my body refused to conceive, and your grandfather was very distressed. Doctors told me I had an intestinal obstruction, that this was preventing me from conceiving. Others thought I had a cancerous tumor. Some claimed it was a large kidney stone that had somehow become embedded in the tissues behind the vagina. But it was none of these. It was my mother's curse, and I knew it. But I also knew that Benito would never believe such a thing. I couldn't tell him the cause of the curse or that I had ever been pregnant. His pride would have made him divorce me, Catholic and in love with me though he was. He preferred to believe I was fallow and that his good seed was going to waste, and so he took to finding other women with whom to father his children.

What could I say? Had your grandfather been a Gypsy, he could have deserted me after the first year for not giving him a child. That would have been his right as a man. Could I blame him for wanting a family? After my fifth miscarriage in six years, the doctors determined that I was barren. I was twenty-seven years old, my husband, thirty-five, both of us young, still, and yet our marriage was pronounced sterile. The shame of it drove your grandfather away.