

# Pilgrims of Babylon

by

*Eirini Nathanailidou*

The Lord said: “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”

Gen. 11:6-7

Thou flying creature in the woods  
Baba Yaga, I seek thee, demon!  
Thy daughters call you;  
Assist our wounds!  
Reclaim and sing along our song anew  
to mend the errs of tales, myths and folklores

Yo soy Iréne	[I am Irene
La negra campesina	the black peasant
la refugada, la madre et mujer histérica;	the refugee, the mother, and hysterical woman;
la tramposa, la Malinche!	the cheater, <i>la Malinche!</i>
la abandonada, dejada, perdida	the abandoned, left, lost
Yo soy muerta, sin llorada, olvidada	I am dead, unmourned, forgotten]

Το ονομα μου ινε Ιρινη <sup>1</sup>	[My name is Irene]
My mother died when I was five	
I was orphaned twice when my papa became a political prisoner	
I travelled mileless miles ασό χωριόν στην πόλην <sup>2</sup>	[from the village to the city]
σο Yedikule, only to see ... him	
Γαρή και μάνα ασό κουνίμ <sup>3</sup>	[Wife and mother from my cradle]

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<sup>1</sup> Misspelled in Greek.

<sup>2</sup> From the Pontiac dialect.

a motherless mother to my younger sisters

I worked and worked and worked the fields

under the scorching pitiless sun.

Then I married, gave birth to five; lost the two

Αξάν δουλίαν!<sup>4</sup>

[work again!]

Only to be kicked out of my home, τη πατρίδαμ, once more...

[my motherland]

at old age now

pero mi ciego -disparatado hombre- fantacised I was una Chingada! [because my husband -crazy man-/  
a 'fucked one']

Even my children found me a new “home”

where I could keep my insanity locked

until I was maimed and dead

Burried? Yes...

yet alone, forgotten, unmourned...

Έι κιτι έι κιτι! Ενεγκάσθα.<sup>5</sup>

[Ah, Alas! I'm exhausted.]

Αέτς απέθανε η Λούλα τι Πάσκιοβλι –Πππππ!<sup>6</sup>

[That's how Loula of Pashkiovli died-Ptui!]

Аз съм Паулина,<sup>7</sup> Παυλίνα, Поли...

[I am Paoulina/Poli]

I refused my father and altered my name, abandoned my country

for love—ha!

I became the alien, the stranger, the intruder for HIS family

Never accepted, constantly insulted, cheated, deceived....alone!

Then I gave birth на щерката ми,<sup>8</sup>

[to my little daughter]

whom I did, and did not, raise on my own.

Half of my blood, she belonged to different worlds;

But alas! We were sacrificed to the darkness;

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<sup>3</sup> From the Pontiac dialect.

<sup>4</sup> Pontiac dialect. The misspelling in “δουλίαν” instead of “δουλείαν”, conflates the two homophone words, slavery and labour accordingly.

<sup>5</sup> Pontiac dialect.

<sup>6</sup> Pontiac dialect.

<sup>7</sup> From Bulgarian.

<sup>8</sup> From Bulgarian.

I worked all the phases of the moon so she wouldn't miss anything  
and yet, we sacrificed each other  
As the daughter of the light, we barely met  
and she became engulfed by her father's culture

So, I became la Llorona  
sacrificing her once more  
in the name of my father, to save him...  
and I returned home?

Изоставих я от ново...<sup>9</sup>

[I abandoned her again]

Цужденка! Тука съм Гъркинята, а там бях Българката...<sup>10</sup>

[The stranger! Here I am the Greek  
and there I was the Bulgarian]

И тука само работа,<sup>11</sup>

[And here, again, my life consists  
only of work]

Изостанали и двете самотни.<sup>12</sup>

[Both abandoned and lonely]

Αραγκε та καταλάβει;<sup>13</sup>

[Will she understand]

Will she forgive

... the mother that cries

for her daughter no more... ?

My name is Ειρήνη' или Беба...<sup>14</sup>

[Irene or Beba]

I like my name though I never chose it

It was my granny's, и бащинската победа<sup>15</sup>

[my father's victory]

over my mother's resistance

Blackmailed;

she succumbed only to demand later on his departure

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<sup>9</sup> From Bulgarian.

<sup>10</sup> From Bulgarian.

<sup>11</sup> From Bulgarian.

<sup>12</sup> From Bulgarian.

<sup>13</sup> Greek in a Bulgarian accent.

<sup>14</sup> "Ειρήνη" is a Greek name, also meaning "peace." "Беба" is a pet name usually given to babies before they are baptised. It can also be used endearingly to show love, as it means "my little baby".

<sup>15</sup> From Bulgarian.

A victory of protecting

το μπάσταρδο, την κόρη της πόρνης<sup>16</sup>

[the bastard, the whore's daughter]

Her Беба.... denying my name to those who denied me

I am the half breed of half breeds

Of an infinite mixing and remixing of the Balkan history and cultures:

Conqueror, conquered, free?

Constantly on the move, my suitcase always ready

Moving across families, cultures, languages, borders and countries.

Constantly struggling and attempting to bridge the unabridged

traumas of rejection and betrayals;

Transfigured, melted into my non-innocent origins,

my unwielded complex heritage.

Afraid of being η γιάγια μου,<sup>17</sup> майка ми,<sup>18</sup>

[my grandma, my mother]

ο εαυτός μου,<sup>19</sup> себе си,<sup>20</sup> myself...

Am I neither? All? a little bit of both

I am both Ειρήνη and Беба;

I am myself, and yet we are the same...

I now wear proudly the badge of former shame

for I bear the names of my various cultures

no longer afraid;

accepting and manipulating their powers and transfigurations

Είμαι η Ειρήνη, Беба, Byrene, Renée, Eiren!

And this is my mutated and contagious essence,

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<sup>16</sup> From Greek.

<sup>17</sup> From Greek.

<sup>18</sup> From Bulgarian.

<sup>19</sup> From Greek. Meaning "myself."

<sup>20</sup> From Bulgarian. Meaning "myself."

our shapeshifting entities, names and stories  
 which will ever flow over the lines of this poem  
 that I created and dedicate to us.

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*The poem presented in this Echoes issue is the outcome of a painstaking self-reflection jotted down on paper, and later on edited, at a period of global self-isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. The kindling spark that set my conflicted memory, imagination and inspiration ablaze was the challenging task of self-reflection on the creative writings of Chicana/o authors we were studying in Dr. Sophia Emmanouilidou's postgraduate course, "Ethnic Studies," where we were prompted to offer our own testimonios. As the poem is heavily autobiographical, I would like to share a bare minimum of the personal information necessary, for the purpose of facilitating understanding instead of guiding readers towards an autobiographical/psychoanalytical reading. It should suffice to merely state that I am the spawn of a mixed marriage between a Pontiac Greek father and a Bulgarian mother. I was raised and educated in Greece, receiving, however, stimuli and experiences from my Greek, Bulgarian and Pontiac heritage, including a bilingual background.*

*Taking into account George Yúdice's insight into testimonial writing, I have also attempted to emphasize "popular and oral discourse" while maintaining the portrayal of my own "experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of some kind of collective memory and identity" (17), if those can ever exist as such. Viewing his insight as a kind of guideline, I also tried to summon multiple "truths" in the cause of "denouncing former situations of exploitation and oppression" within the patriarchal confines and xenophobic matrix of Greek society for women and foreigners, in an attempt to exorcise and set aright the "histories" of the two women in my poem, borrowing their voices and hopefully not muting them anew.*

*With that being said, the writings of contestation, self-cancellation and reparation or self-invention/discovery of Latina authors Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, and Maria Lugones have also been a tremendous source of inspiration towards a multicultural and multivocal text that would engage with the complexity of hybrid identities, influenced from my own personal experience and that of Chicana authors, and which would show that difference and hybridity, an identity in a flux that mutates, adapts, clashes, and evolves can be seen as space of unison and similarity rather than difference and marginalization. There are many steps and battlefields we face daily; some are victorious, others leave us defeated. Cultural,*

*linguistic, gender and other barriers are constantly lifted, lowered or altered in the aforementioned authors. Histories and myths are challenged and re-told offering a whole new nexus of innumerable creative possibilities. Anzaldúa's shaping of identity in the borderlands, in the margins of society, Lugones's notion of "world-travelling" and the privilege of "border-crossing" as well as this endless journey towards cultural re-discovery and retelling of patriarchal myths, such as those of la Malinche and la Llorona, for the purpose of cancelling gender and ethnic stereotypes have certainly enabled the poetic voices in this poem. And like the narrator in Gaspar de Alba's "Name that Border," I also ended up undergoing the same journey of self-rediscovery by unearthing the repressed memories of those first abject other(s), my mother(s).*

*In my poem, I consciously choose to abridge rather than eliminate difference. The biblical story of Babylon treats multilingualism as a linguistic artificial barrier that leads to division and the collapse of the tower of Babylon; a way to divide and conquer. Hopefully, by imbedding Spanish, Pontiac Greek, Modern Greek, Bulgarian, and even Turkish I have not re-enforced the myth, and meaning does not collapse. And as for Baba Yaga, the Balkan myth of an old woman-witch abducting children in the forest, she is invoked to be the "savior," the unifying link between the poem's women who appear to be divided in terms of education, ethnicity, employment etc.*

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