

Lorna Dee Cervantes was born in 1954 in the Mission District of San Francisco, and later moved to San Jose with her mother and brother. Cervantes began writing poetry at a young age. She edited, published, and printed a small-press journal *Mango*, which successfully promoted other Chicano poets and helped establish her own reputation. She began to receive national attention in the late 1970s. After spending nine months at the Fine Arts Workshop in Provincetown, Massachusetts, she completed *Emplumada* (1981), the title of which is an amalgam of the participle "emplumado" (feathered or in plumage) and the nouns "pluma" (pen) and "plumada" (a pen stroke).

Emplumada is divided into three sections dealing with the social environment, the class status of women, the poet's harmonious relationship with the world of nature, and the act of writing, among other things. "Poem for the Young White Man Who Asked Me How I, an Intelligent, Well-Read Person, Could Believe in the War Between the Races" attempts to understand her world through the act of writing. Her full realization as a Chicana is articulated in "Visions of Mexico While at a Writing Symposium in Port Townsend, Washington."

Cervantes has come to terms with her multiple and complex identities. About her 1981 collection, Roberta Fernandez says: "Written in a controlled language and with brilliant imagery, *Emplumada* is the work of a poet who is on her way to becoming a major voice in American literature." Cervantes's later collection, *From the Cables of Genocide: Poems on Love and Hunger* (1991), validates Fernandez's sentiments.

**Poem for the Young White Man Who Asked Me
How I, an Intelligent, Well-Read Person,
Could Believe in the War Between the Races**

In my land there are no distinctions.

The barbed wire politics of oppression
have been torn down long ago. The only reminder
of past battles, lost or won, is a slight
rutting in the fertile fields.

In my land
people write poems about love,
full of nothing but contented childlike syllables.
Everyone reads Russian short stories and weeps.
There are no boundaries.
There is no hunger, no
complicated famine or greed.
I am not a revolutionary.
I don't even like political poems.
Do you think I can believe in a war between races?
I can deny it. I can forget about it
when I'm safe
living in my own continent of harmony
and home, but I am not
there.
I believe in revolution
because everywhere the crosses are burning,
sharp-shooting goose-steppers round every corner,
there are snipers in the school . . .
(I know you don't believe this.
You think this is nothing
but faddish exaggeration. But they
are not shooting at you.)
I'm marked by the color of my skin.
The bullets are discrete and designed to kill slowly.
They are aiming at my children.
These are facts.
Let me show you my wounds: my stumbling mind, my
"excuse me" tongue, and this
nagging preoccupation
with the feeling of not being good enough.
These bullets bury deeper than logic.
Racism is not intellectual.
I can not reason these scars away.
Outside my door
there is a real enemy
who hates me.

I am a poet
who yearns to dance on rooftops,
to whisper delicate lines about joy
and the blessings of human understanding.
I try. I go to my land, my tower of words and
bolt the door, but the typewriter doesn't fade out
the sounds of blasting and muffled outrage.
My own days bring me slaps on the face.
Everyday I am deluged with reminders
that this is not
my land
and this is my land.
I do not believe in the war between the races
but in this country
there is war.