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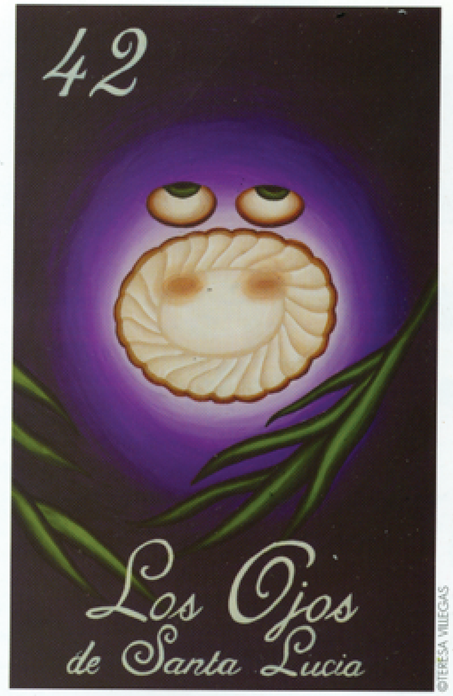

A contemporary Mexican lottery card celebrates Saint Lucy, patron of the blind and bearer of enlightenment, whose image is represented traditionally as a young woman holding a palm leaf and, on a small dish, two eyes. Her feast day is celebrated on the Northern Hemisphere's shortest day of the year

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In colorful cards and riddles that reveal this nation's psyche, two contemporary artists re-create the popular culture of *lotería*

Mexico's Ritual of Chance

by Ilan Stavans
Illustrations by Teresa Villegas

***¡Looooh-teh-ree-ah!* . . . The sound still resonates in my ears.** Pepe and Lalo Gutiérrez, a charismatic set of siblings who lived next door to my childhood house in Colonia Copilco, in the southern part of Mexico City, often organized impromptu tournaments of Lotería, a board game somewhat similar to bingo. These took place on weekday afternoons. Pepe, the younger of the two, enjoyed drawing out the syllables, especially the first one. His pronunciation foreshadowed an afternoon of clamor and competition in their dining room. A small purple box would be taken out of a kitchen cabinet, where it was religiously stored after each session. Soon every neighbor—there are approximately eight players per session—would have a *tabla* (i.e., playing board) in front and a pile of blue and yellow chips the size of a nickel at the side, ready to be placed in the right spot. The group guide, appointed by majority (usually, Lalo was the chosen one), would pick up a card, immediately covering it from everyone else's view. Then he would chant a brief riddle: *"¡Pórtate bien cuatito, si no te lleva El Coloradito!"*—loosely translated into English as "Behave properly, my friend. Otherwise the Little Red One will sweep you away!" The first one to guess the answer would immediately shriek: *"¡El Diablo!"* (The Devil). Or else: *"Para el sol y para el agua"* (For the sun and for the water). The answer: *"El Paraguas"* (The Umbrella). At these points, anyone with the images on their table would place a chip on them.

The winner would be awarded a sack full of five-cent coins. An hour or so later, each neighbor would be called home to finish homework and have dinner. The order to the afternoon had been about envy, frustration, genuflection, perhaps even anger. In how many games was I a loser? Too many to count. It was the goddess of Fortune (with a capital "F") that had been courted, but the courtship, in my own case, was hardly ever fruitful. Noticing my dismay, Pepe and Lalo's uncle, who lived with them, would always say: *"¡El que de suerte vive, de suerte muere!"* (He who rises by luck, falls by luck too!)

The term *lotería* has the Teutonic root *hleut,* which was adopted into the Romance languages: in French it evolved into *loterie,* in Italian into *lotto,* and in English it is the source of *lot,* a method used in ancient times to solve disputes by appealing to chance. The *lots,* according to the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española de la Lengua,* were placed in a receptacle—in Homeric Greece, a helmet—with an element (a sign, a letter) that tied them to each of the participants. The receptacle was then shaken, and the victorious lot was the first one drawn. Every country, from Scandinavia to Africa, has one or more varieties of games of chance, and Mexico is no exception. Or is it?

Ilan Stavans, who teaches at Amherst College, is the author of The Hispanic Condition *and* The One-Handed Pianist and Other Stories. *Text and images on these pages are reprinted with permission from the book* Lotería, *published by the University of Arizona Press, 2004. Original artwork is by Teresa Villegas (www.teresavillegas.com) with essay and riddles by Ilan Stavans.*

As with most things popular, the game has a complex, still-unexplored history. According to the chronicler Bernal Díaz del Castillo, Hernán Cortés was an assiduous card player. In La Nueva España, as Mexico was known during the viceroy period, there were public stands for the dwellers of la Ciudad de México to play cards and fixed board games. As a collective pastime, La Lotería Nacional was established in 1769 by King Charles III of Spain. It quickly traveled across the Atlantic Ocean, and since then it has flourished like virtually no other Mexican institution: almost free of corruption (with a brief exception in 1838) and with philanthropic tentacles that support schools and hospices. To this day the variegated tickets are like currency, with the peculiarity that they become worthless once the drawing for that ticket is held.

The design remains beautiful, though. The anonymous designers in charge of producing them are an inspired cast. The pictures represented in the tickets include the Mexican flag, an emblem of the nation's sovereignty; a bunch of Aztec hieroglyphics; and the angel symbolizing Mexico's independence from Spain. They have a standard size that doesn't change: four inches by eight inches. What distinguishes not only one edition form another, but also a single ticket from the rest, are the numbers, randomly organized: 4135428201, 2566494, 040761 . . . Why buy a particular ticket and not another? The response, of course, is simple: intuition. Fortune is ruled by intuition.

Al indio defiende,
El Sup nos sorprende.
«¡A'lante!» proclama,
su voz nos reclama.
¿Quién es?

Of Indians' defender,
El Sup has a call.
His words to contender:
"Utopia for all!"
Who is it?

THE REVOLUTIONARY

La carne te incita,
inocente postor.
Acude a la cita,
destruye tu honor.
¿Qué es?

Aroused by a torso,
a knee even more so.
The instinct pernicious,
finds flesh just delicious.
What is it?

LUST

Along with the tickets, La Lotería Nacional produced large quantities of publicity material: posters, calendars, boxes of matches, and special toys. The momentous weekly Lotería contest, held late in the afternoon on Mondays and Wednesdays, mesmerized the entire population. A bounty is awarded to a single individual. The selection makes no distinction across racial, class, religious, or ideological lines. Everyone is eligible as long as the individual is willing to invest one peso for a single ticket. The results are publicized in the late evening and next morning through radio, TV, and newspapers.

When I was little, my father's business often took him to the hustling downtown section of El Centro. I often accompanied him. We would start the day with a stop for breakfast at the Sanborn's of Los Azulejos, on Calle Madero, and then do the rounds on adjacent streets where he needed to visit clients and creditors. It was in the Edificio de La Lotería Nacional, near the statue known as El Caballito in the intersection of Avenidas Reforma and Benito Juárez, where on occasion he would stop to buy a ticket.

My own grandfather, Zeyde Srulek, an immigrant from the Ukraine in the early part of the twentieth century, arrived in Mexico penniless. He began selling shoelaces and razor blades. After a short time, he invested the little money he had saved in a Lotería ticket—and he hit the jackpot. The experience made him forever grateful. Fortune had smiled. Mexico had opened its arms to him.

I vividly remember the back streets behind El Caballito as a full-scale ant colony: vendors pulling improvised chariots with rags and cages filled with parakeets, señoritas swinging their miniskirts while being greeted by adventurous swindlers, *tragafuegos*—fire-breathers—vomiting flames on traffic corners, desperate policemen running after a thief, automobiles and buses sounding their horns repeatedly, while bicyclists artfully sneaked through the fumes, and, amidst the hullabaloo, *marchantes* selling tickets while screaming ingenious slogans constrained only by endless exclamation marks: *"¡¡¡¡¡Gane sus millones hoy y despreocúpese mañana!!!!!"* (Receive your millions today and stop worrying tomorrow!)

Were the weekly national contents of La Lotería Nacional and the individual sessions in Pepe and Lalo's house that concentrated our attention on those *tablas* before us different? Not really. They are fundamentally the same game, played on different scales.

La Lotería is a favorite *entretenimiento* not only in Mexico but also in the western and central parts of the United States. From Oregon to Texas, it is ubiquitous at *ferias* attended by migrant workers and sold in *mercados* in the same versions manufactured since 1887 by the French

entrepreneur Don Clemente Jacques, widely known as the principal promoter of the game. It was and still is sold in manageable containers that include ten boards, fifty-four cards, and a joker, known as *el naipe*. The commitment of Jacques to the game is still shrouded with rumor. In fact, the development of the pastime might owe more to him than to anyone else.

It is said that in the central state of Querétaro, Jacques built, in the late nineteenth century, a prosperous canned-food and ammunition business. (The former has flourished; fortunately, the latter is gone.) At the time of the Mexican Revolution, around 1912, aware of the long hours of duress the soldiers were subjected to, he decided to attach a small Lotería board to his products so that they could "pass the time." (Nowadays the division of Don Clemente Jacques devoted to the manufacture of the game is called Gallo Pasatiempos.) It was when the *soldados* returned home after the battle that the demand for Lotería boxes increased notably. In response, Jacques, using the same press he used to create food labels, printed more . . . until the brand and the game became synonymous.

I still keep an old set made by his company in a closet: It includes cards that feature, among other characters, The Drunkard, The Hunchback, and The Indian. Over the years, I've studied these images almost to exhaustion. And I've also become acquainted with other designs. For instance, the lampoonist José Guadalupe Posada made his own set. It included one of Posada's recognizable *calaveras*, a skeleton poking fun at . . . what else but death? There was a plethora of sets designed for kids, as well as kits depicting heroes in Mexican history (Huitzilopochtli, Cuauthémoc, Hernán Cortés, Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, Porfirio Díaz), and famous themes (Indian slavery), events (for instance, the independence movement of 1810, as well as the Battle of Puebla, in which the fateful Cinco de Mayo marked the clash between the armies of the United States and Mexico), and sites (Mitla, the castle in Chapultepec, and so forth).

Then there is the ecclesiastical Lotería set, with depictions of priests, biblical scenes, and the seven deadly sins. But whatever design one might come across, its power isn't reducible to its graphics. The poetic participation of the players is equally essential. At Pepe and Lalo's house the sessions would frequently become—especially when Lalo was the group guide—a sort of poetry slam. He would recite improvised riddles, known in Mexico as *acertijos*. He would also use other forms of popular poetry: *colmos, tantanes, refranes,* and *trabalenguas*—conundrums, corollaries, aphorisms, and tongue twisters. Sometimes these poetic capsules had a length of a single line. Others involved entire stanzas rhymed in easy patterns like ABAB and AABB. Pepe used to describe the sum of his brother's lyrics as a *cancionero,* a medieval term used to describe a compilation of ballads.

Today these images and the poems they were accompanied by might appear racy and even awkward, but they were commonplace at the time I was growing up. To some extent, I and millions of other children and young adults learned to understand the way Mexican people behave through them: the way they eat, drink, think, dream, dance, and have sex. The Mexico of the 1960s and 1970s was controlled by a corrupt single-party system, which might explain our obsession with chance. The reality that surrounded us was tight and undemocratic, with little space to debate ideas in any meaningful

Burguesas y criadas

la tele hipnotiza.

Del juicio desviadas

en llantos y risa.

¿Qué es?

Melodrama on tape:

anger, tears, and escape.

Cruel villains asunder

for wives half in slumber.

What is it?

THE SOAP OPERA

fashion, at least at the political level. It was in the private sphere where individual spontaneity was championed. It was also in that sphere where a person's future might be challenged and, along with it, the future of the country as a whole. For all of us felt that our lives were not controlled by a savvy, coherent government with enough knowledge to lead; instead, our fate was in the hands of a bunch of disoriented *políticos* without a clue as to how to feed approximately 80 million stomachs. Ramón López Velarde (1888–1921), the nation's most susceptible, heartrending poet, wrote about the randomness of La Lotería as Mexico's *manera de ser* in his poem "La suave patria", (roughly translated as "sweet homeland"):

Como la sota moza, Patria mía,
en piso de metal vives al día,
de milagro, como La Lotería.

Herein the English version by Margaret Sayers Peden:

Like a Queen of Hearts, Patria, tapping
a vein of silver, you live miraculously,
for the day, like the national lottery.

To us the images of Lotería cards and boards weren't types but prototypes and archetypes in the nation's psyche. To play a single game was to traverse the inner chambers of *la mexicanidad.*

Mysteriously, I've been transported back to the boisterous sessions in Pepe and Lalo's dining room through the rendition of Lotería done by artist Teresa Villegas. This modernized interpretation is the product of her journey to San Miguel de Allende, in the state of Guanajuato, filtered through a modern sensibility and a north-of-the-border view of life. I became hypnotized by it after I learned of an installation she had created of all fifty-four cards, rendered—reappropriated—by her brush. I've found myself enthralled, for instance, by the frequency in the game of gastronomic motifs *(churros, nopales, horchata, pozole),* religious symbols and amulets (ex-votos, miracles, magic powder, the Virgin of Guadalupe), and pop icons and the media (El Santo; Subcomandante Marcos, known as "El Sup"; TV soaps; comic strips). And I'm spellbound, too, by how the dichotomy of sexes is turned upside down: machos like the street-corner fire-breather on one side, and on the other dignified females like Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and the *independentista* Josefa Ortíz de Domínguez. Is this still the Mexico of my past? Not quite. Much has changed, but much remains the same.

Villegas's images have inspired me to re-create the riddles that populated my yesteryears, hopefully in a mood that is akin to our present era. These riddles of mine, a total of twenty-seven, which the artist herself has selected, pay homage to Lalo's talents. Hopefully, they contain the same dose of irony and fatalism his words were injected with. Indeed, his *cancionero* always seemed to distill a skeptical philosophy:

Is love truly redemptive? Does the food we eat have any connection with our emotions? Is there magic in the world? What is the value of freedom? In hindsight, those competitions in Colonia Copilco taught me early on some fundamental lessons in the art of living: *¡El que de suerte vive, de suerte muere!* I learned that things are not what they seem and that our existence is shaped by sheer chance. Every single decision we make, no matter how insignificant, represents a forking path before us. To choose one alternative among many is to say no to the other ones—to say no to the other selves we might have been. Albert Einstein once said, "God doesn't play dice with the universe." It isn't true. With us He plays *¡Looooh-teh-ree-ah!* ■

Décima Musa,

barroca en la entraña.

A hombres acusa,

a mujeres regaña.

¿Quién es?

Her stanzas are artful,

deep morals they search. . . .

This nun isn't bashful

of men and the Church.

Who is it?

THE POET