

Women
in
Color:
de
Ellas
Soy



IN CONSIDERING WHO I AM, I thought of those who have given place that I might be. Especially, my thoughts repeatedly returned to those Guatemalan women from whose pains I grew, from whose roots I could flourish. I considered roots and their significance to the life of the tree. Roots, essential to the body for strength and nutrients, must live in obscurity and darkness so that the branches may live in and breathe light. Despite their “poor spot in the vineyard,” my roots grew deep and strong because in many cases, like roots, their only thought and opportunity was: we must survive and we must ensure that our children survive. However, amidst their persistent push for survival, some of its body broke the surface and tasted light. My father, with their strength, found the gospel, a promised land, and knowledge that allowed me as the branch to gain the light of truth, education, equality, and the dream to flourish amidst the work of surviving.

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When the Spanish man came,

He came without a woman.
He crossed the seas and found her,
Our mother,
La Maya.
To that wedding he had come,
His skin white as milk,
In boats both fast and greedy.
And when they married
La Tierra was our Mothers'
Dowry—
Bleeding for him ripe round
tomatoes.
Still from their arms
he left
with skin now red and ruddy,
in boats now golden and slow.
“Y todavia la gente cree,
With all he took, he must have left
Some gold inside the mountain.”
But I believe, what he had left
as sun of his horizon,
was a child's golden head.
Yes, he had left his gold--
She who had his hands, strong hands,
Which passed the day by taking
Soft dough and slapping it
into submission.
The Spanish man left her
on her knees, knees so like her mother's,
To bow during mass and pray
to the cross that had crossed the sea
with the Spanish man,
her father.
And as he left, she prayed,
Bending like her mother.
She whispered and pleaded
With the Spanish man's tongue.
He took our lips, and tongue, and body, and
left.

IN A GUATEMALAN SEPTEMBER, the rain has finished washing the dusty browns and grays from leaves and branches. Those grays and browns drip from the mountainous landscape revealing a vibrant green as complementary beginnings of the later blossoming of infinite colors in flowers and lush growth. The skies are often gray, but in many municipalities, the streets are full of color. Houses, painted in neon shades line the streets, and women with rich brown skin tones run between them, covering their heads and wearing traditional clothing: huipiles, fajas, and cortes, which are handwoven with their regional colors either simple in design or extravagant in detail. In the markets, produce, exaggerated in size, gives off plump, stretched reds, minty and spicy greens, and tangy oranges. Amidst all these colors, the rain continues its natural marimba on burnt orange tiles or lamina.

But in Agua Blanca, in September 1910, the citizens in large measure do not mirror the world's splendor. Agua Blanca was named for the local white milky fountains of water that descend from the Viejo Ojo de Agua. Perhaps its waters are what drew the Spanish settlers near. Perhaps the water promised them that if they drank, planted, and fed by its power, they would have the promise to retain their holy whiteness for generations to come. Their skin was their pride, and any differentiation was a pollution to their virgin superiority. For that whiteness was their greatest tie to Mayan

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myths of the white deity; their greatest asset in upholding the natural order. These Spanish lived in their own darkness, for it is in darkness that colors recede.

And so it was that on the sixteenth of September, 1910, washed from the red blood of labor and life, my bisabuela was born white, head dawned in rose gold, and with eyes that would transform into an icy and searing blue. She was beautiful, but in a world where ugliness, hate, and poverty reigned, beauty would do little for her.

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“Disculpe, conoce a alguien de apellido Castañeda?” My father asks for the third time as we continue down the Barrio Arriba of Agua Blanca. The previous shopkeepers have signaled, but only with hazy, unsure direction. They are unsure because we are strangers asking about an old generic name to which we can only lay claim through an ancestor who lived there briefly a hundred years ago.

It helps that the day is beautiful, partly cloudy and devoid of the seasonal heat because of the steady wind. And it helps that my father has already met this relative with my sister in search of names for our family tree. What doesn't help is that while he remembered the dusty winding street on which she lives, he has no recollection of the house.

So, we are glad when, finally, the woman holding a broom with which she has been cleaning her tienda or convenient store answers, “En la casa de enfrente viven algunas Castañedas, pero si siguen adelante, despues de la fuente, tambien hay una casa con un porton melon.”

While no one answers us at the first house, there is a woman standing in the shadows within the house when we approach the second. It is a dark red brick house with arches, and a white intricate fence higher than our heads.

We say, “Buenas!” and she slowly makes her way towards us.

To me, it seems that the woman invites us in with a little trepidation and annoyance. Her mother is old and resting, and these unfamiliar people from the United States have arrived without introduction. But she lets us in, and moments later her mother leaves her room aided by the maid. She is

101 years old, and she is proud of it, as she should be. She repeats twice that many people in those days did not live past fifty. And my dad adds in wonderment that her head is clear and active.

Her name is Berta Castañeda, and she will turn 102 in October of this year, 2021.

My dad whispers, “Look at her, she doesn’t look Guatemalan.”

Who can really say what a Guatemalan is supposed to look like, but I know what he means. On our way here, we saw many people like Berta. Agua Blanca is the only place I have been to in Guatemala where people would not immediately guess I was from the United States. Because while I am considered brown in the United States, I am considered white in Guatemala. But here in Agua Blanca, my light skin is no different from many of the people, and my dark hair might even add to the connection. Berta is light-skinned as far as I can tell. Her skin is an origami made of age, a fold and a wrinkle for every year. And it is dotted with the same age spots that have begun to take over my parents’ limbs and faces. Her eyes are small round circles, sunken and close together, and her nose is long and thin. But Berta still has the forcefulness and strong will of a young woman. The same will and strength that got her through a century of change.

We do not learn much from Berta, because her connection to my bisabuela is only through marriage, and it would be too much to ask for a verbal biography of her childhood. She does leave me with one image, however.

She lived through sickness, poverty, and disease, but what took her mother’s life was her brother’s struggle to attain one. In this struggle, a new born baby would be traded for his mother. This left her father with several children, a new born, and without a caretaker-wife. It left him to try fruitlessly to give the child up. The child cried and cried, but no one wanted him. No one could take him in. It is a poor, desolate country that will leave a child’s tears unanswered. For either they are poor in money or they are poor in love. But, in the end, it was Berta, who would, even as a small child herself, become the mother.

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Beyond this, only pleasantries were exchanged. It seemed as though, just like the waters for which Agua Blanca is named, the robust history I wanted might have long ago dried up.

And yet, amidst the holes and faded lines of my family history, the parts that remain, like Berta's, are still so shocking, so telling, so other-worldly, not to tell. It may not be a novel, but the story is there and it is a skeleton that does not require meat to give it life.

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Virgilia was created not in act of love, but in passion. Passion whose face might resemble love, is at its core based on the self, and like the mortals who hold it, its life is usually brief. Passion would not expect or accept its child if the child was not the means to its end.

And this child was not a means to any promising end. What did she mean for her mother? A burden whose weight not only pained the spine, but stretched and burdened the will. This growth was evidence of the "woman's sin," a bastard child for which many might cast a stone. And more basically, it meant a mouth to feed beyond her own; a woman and a girl left alone to find their way in a foreign land who was herself in an endless recovery from economic stagnation and decline.

Even with all this, however, she would certainly mean more to the mother than the father. He whose seeds were tossed thoughtlessly among the thorns and the open fields. Where they landed had little influence on the partner whose body would not change, whose shame would not grow, whose life was not necessarily bound to another.

At best what would passion deed its daughter?

At worst, Virgilia, was born in her mother's dying blood, Virgilia's life was given with her mother's last gasps for a life that at best would have been fleeting and full of struggle.

And yet, for nine months, Virgilia in her mother's swollen belly, would have felt the closeness of a mother who, in letting that stomach swell, had accepted passion's swindle.

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“Do you think Virgilia was born in a mud house?” I ask my parents as they get ready for bed in our home in San Luis, Jilotepeque.

“A clay house, yes.” My mom answers.

My mom met Virgilia and has heard all the stories, but I still wonder if she has authority to answer all these questions. She is not from Guatemala. Although she lived here for twelve years and raised her oldest children here, she is from the United States, from English and Irish and German ancestors. But I also wonder if I have authority to write a story about my Guatemalan ancestors. I spent my early years in Guatemala, but much of my connection has come instead through my dad’s stories, through culture entering our doors alongside visitors who called my dad *tío*, or through my summer visits to my parents’ new house in Guatemala. I wonder how Guatemalan I have to be to write this story, not realizing that later I will wonder how Guatemalan my ancestors have to be to publish it.

So, I repeat my question to my father, “Papi, do you think the house had dirt floors, and was there anything special they would do at births?”

“What? Yes, uh-huh, and...” My dad distractedly responds, as he clicks away at his keyboard working on yet another poem as I wonder if he as a dedicated writer without much recognition also wonders why his daughter, the American-born child who does not spend the mornings and evenings dedicated to her writing as he does, is writing a story he has already written. I wonder if I, as a girl who grew up surrounded by first-world comfort—by water fountains, public schools, overflowing grocery stores, and future jobs—can even do it justice, or if by annoying him with all these questions it means he is again just rewriting his story.

“They ate gallo didn’t they?” My mom finishes.

“Awe, yes, for sure.” And my dad finally seems interested as he remembers the old traditions.

“But her mom didn’t eat them that night, right, because she died, right?” I ask trying to get something to write. Something to show to myself or whoever reads that my bisabuela was born in a darkness without compassion, equality, or, most importantly, love. Because maybe if I show this to myself, I can forgive her for what she will become. And maybe, as I

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address personal and familial trauma, I can find an answer to national trauma.

“No, but it would have been there, that is certain,” he repeats.

“But that wasn’t a Spanish tradition, right?” I ask thinking about my bisabuela’s complicated connection to the native population.

“Right.” My dad says, catching onto my thoughts, and emphasizing with his nodding face and pursed lips the many things he wants me to know about the hypocrisy and strangeness of my bisabuela’s inherited prejudice.

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The advent of 1910, the same year of the white orphan’s birth, signaled the declining decade of Manuel Estrada Cabrera’s regime over Guatemala. Although no one at that moment could be sure of this decline, there were many that wished it. Assassinations not only gave him the presidency, but they also followed him throughout.

But Cabrera wouldn’t die.

One attempt, enacted at point-blank range, succeeded in wounding his pinky alone. Nothing could or would unlatch Cabrera’s strong arms from the neck of the nation. Nothing except his own lunacy and incapacity.

Cabrera, although unique in his various escapes from overthrow, was not unique in his violent dictatorship. Several presidents had taken hold of this mountain land to gorge their appetites, to bleed the country in order to pursue more selfish rather than national ends.

Guatemala was not a virgin land, and under Cabrera she was not just prostituted to military and political despots, but also to foreign capitalistic entities. She was given here and there for the lusts of the present and the deterioration of her future.

Guatemala belonged to everyone and no one all at once. Tossed from man to man so frequently, tenuously, and capriciously, no one could be designated as total and complete possessor.

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Like the nation in which she lived, Virgilia belonged to no one really. It could be said that after being essentially orphaned she was given to her godmother's care and therefore belonged to her godmother. But belonging signifies time, security, and a sense of comfort. These conditions were not on the minds of her foster parents when they agreed without her consent to send her off with a forty-year-old colonel as a nascent woman of fifteen years.

Virgilia had long golden hair. On the day she was first seen by the colonel, Virgilia had readied this hair for an acquaintance's funeral. She had brushed up and down, up and down, and up and down until it shone even under these dim funeral lights. Her hair was not the only striking characteristic of her visage. Her eyes underneath her hair's glimmering contrast were vibrant and penetrating. They were not soft and inviting, but piercing and unyielding. Not many would have failed to spot her in the crowd, especially not a retired colonel whose wandering eyes and conquering heart would have been drawn to her.

But the worry of those days was not immoral old men, rather the worry of those days was that the young women were being robbed without permission. Women from the village were disappearing. It was believed that they were stolen by truly evil men, by "los indios." What dark evils those young women would then inherit, what mystery of inferior traditions they would learn to practice, could only be avoided through one method: give them to men in the community that could be trusted.

The coffin, at this funeral, seemed to contain not only that for which the populace mourned that evening, but that for which Virgilia had whispered through each stroke of her hair. For, it was that night that fate would bury with this corpse, any youthful or hopeful indulgence, any illusion of what her life might be.

When she woke after the wake, Virgilia believed they were preparing for a guest. Virgilia might have welcomed the stranger in with timid courtesy. She would have never been prepared for what would occur over the course of the next hour or so. She certainly would have not foreseen herself riding at the back of this stranger's horse, saying goodbye silently to all that she had ever known. But she would have been prepared to obey any demand placed upon a woman. She would have known that her task to

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wake early, prepare breakfast, set the table, welcome guests, and marry a man, were never dependent on a woman's choice or desire. No, all that was expected and trained into this girl would have prepared her to bow her head not in defeat, but in acceptance.

I believe that even with her head bowed, her eyes grew more resilient and more impenetrable. Virgilia would face this new horizon without surrender until she discovered too that she belonged to no one but herself.

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Virgilia sat behind the tall colonel and could not see that through the bends, down and over the mountain paths, they were making their way to a little village called San Luis Jilotepeque. She could not see this man's supersubtle eyes. She could not see the two women and the two families who had fallen captive to this man. She had not heard that in his village he was seen as picaro, a philanderer. Her eyes would not have seen within or without, and after waking the next morning, she would have thought they were still closed in a dream or nightmare when they presented her with the truth.

Two women and two guns were her bienvenida. Virgilia woke up unmarried, to threats of murder from the colonel's first wife and his first concubine. The Colonel had found himself a young play thing to challenge their rights to his money and care.

La cosa es que no one knew the Colonel in Agua Blanca. But he was a colonel, he was handsome, he had lips that spoke words dripping in honey. Most importantly, he was white, in other words, he had prestige and power and the ability to avoid a mixing, to avoid a mestizo line. If Colonel Ramon Gonzalez Martinez had ever been a faithful man, he might have shown penitence as flimsy as the screen through which the priest would respond: thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not covet, and thou shalt not bear false witness. Say three ave maria's and your sins are forgiven. The priest would have known Ramon's voice as well as God and the devil knew Ramon.

Ramon would die in his seventies from a curse. Even before he became a lifeless corpse lying under the dirt from which he had been made, worms would crawl from his rotten insides finding any exit they could. These worms were the literal personification of what dwelt within him:

crawling, creeping, sensual appetites whetted by culture, apostasy, three wives, and many other “excursions.”

What had he been cursed for? For coveting, adultery, and bearing false witness; for profaning those commandments by raping a young indigenous girl.

But all this was inconsequential to the present need of the trade. They needed a white man to save this virgin from the dark men lurking and pressing into their fair security. Virgilia would have accepted being an unwed woman if it meant that she was saved from the greatest sin of all. Committing adultery was nothing compared to the marriage of two races.

So, Virgilia accepted the trade. Eventually, the other women accepted her into the harem. Virgilia found her place in San Luis. She grew strong and unbreakable. She was powerful, but like other women around her she could always bend. She cooked the tortilla's, she got the water, she sold bread as her husband sold his body. She bore Ramon children until he was old and could do nothing for her.

When Ramon was sixty-nine, Virgilia was pregnant with her twelfth. Her sons had her beauty and her husband's mustache. Her daughters were not as beautiful as Virgilia, but they were softer. Their hearts were lighter, and their backs weren't made of stone. Yet, Virgilia made sure that their bodies learned labor, that their hands new how to split and smash the maiz. Virgilia made sure that her daughters did not even play with “los indios.” She fed them black beans, but she taught them to cover their heads with shawls, walk in the shady side of the streets, and to turn their brown eyes from the brown men so that their children wouldn't look like the soupy water in which those beans floated.

Even with all her trouble were Virgilia's dreams ever answered? No. She had a useless husband. He gave her no money, no help, and too many children. He took her away from the white waters of her birth, to a town filled with what she had run away from. Brown miscreants ran around the village, and to her utter dismay, she was as poor as them. Her children as poor as their children. Darkness had led to darkness, and hatred to more hatred. The harder her life became, the harder Virgilia became. She cast away anything that might insinuate weakness. She saw no other way. And

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so, seeing a life with Ramon as debilitating and serving no end, she started planning her escape. She would go to the coast, she would make her own money, she would be in charge. She would belong to no one: not Ramon, not the past, not her poverty.

But, by then, it was too late. Too late to save her daughter Maria.

MARIA OR MARUCA WAS YOUNG AND QUITE PRETTY THEY SAY, quite delgada they say, from a good family they say. She could have married well, but then she married that morenito they say.

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Other than the fact that she feared for her life every time she made a mistake in her mother's home, Maria could have lived a simple, gentle life in San Luis. She could have, like her best friend, married a good Evangelical man, even a humble indigenous man, and lived until her eighties in a fairly large home with tiled floors and a smiling maid in the ever-growing San Luis. She could have sat on the corner with her friend laughing, singing rancheras, and talking about their children as they saw cars and tuk-tuks race past in numbers they could never have imagined as young girls in a very rural out-of-the-way town.

But then Maria turned fifteen, and for Castañeda's this is the age of vulnerability. This is the age where an old stranger may spot you and desire you for his own. This is the age where even the basic task of getting water from the central plaza can leave you vulnerable to the evil machinations of a conniving old extranjero.

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The photo of my abuela's wedding is black and white. It is black and white like they wanted it— no color. The bride and the groom are wearing white, and the light has washed out much of the darker grays in my abuelo's face. In the photo he and she stand apart, their arms only just graze the other. In this positioning, it seems as if their bodies and not just their clothes have been pressed with starch. My abuela has managed a slight hint of a smile, but my abuelo is staring straight ahead. This is business for him, business that began with a little bit of pleasure.

His eyes are blood-shot. Of course, you cannot tell this from a photograph, but my abuelita has since told my father that he was so drunk that the next morning he did not recognize her. The day after this wedding, not yet awakened from the daze of alcohol-soaked veins, he must have seen her as his young maid because as she, a girl no older than his own daughter, prepared him breakfast he asked her gruffly, "Who are you? Why are you here."

On some level, she must have wondered the same thing. What am I, a fifteen-year-old girl, to do with my self now, now that my parents have sold me into a marriage with a liar and a drunk? Why am I here, why did I accept the fraudulent trade? And she would have remembered the answer.

A photograph, especially one that is black and white, does not give the details needed to find these answers. It does not show pain, sorrow, or joy. It shows the shades of black and white that it can capture, but it does not show nuances or details that would give its subjects life and depth. It alone shows no details of the subject's pasts or their future motives.

For example, in a photograph it is not immediately evident that my abuela is only fifteen and my abuelo is forty-two. It does not express that he is "un indio" and she is a poor Ladino arranged into this marriage because of her poverty. It does not reveal the absence of all the indigenous people of San Luis who were not invited, nor all the wealthy guests who may have not come to the wedding of an indigenous man from Quiche no matter how rich he was. It does not expose that my abuelo is a master of deceit and my abuela is a survivor.

Nor does this image, having no ability to describe continuous rather than static time, give a sense of the past or future effect of trauma on my grandparents; it fails to show whether they had or would fight and overcome their trauma without letting it first fester and feed itself on their moral souls. Beyond anything, taken alone in this static condition, a photograph does not allow its viewer to reach any just judgement of the subjects' actions and lives. The light or the absence of light it captures shows an instant and outward rather than inward and comprehensive visual of a moment, of a marriage, of a couple.

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Even a story which might give some depth and colorful humanity will fail to be omniscient. But stories, nonetheless, are all that is left from the past.

Maria's story becomes mine through marriage. Maria's story, like those of my other Guatemalan ancestors, will be born into a darkness that will compound into a greater night. However, Maria as the heroine of her own story will on the one hand choose the darker path, but on the other hand will not, like various members in the Castañeda and Argueta lines, be overcome or infiltrated by the encompassing, parasitic, and traumatic darkness.

The choice to marry was not initially her own, it is a choice that begins with Virgilia the controlling mother, Ramon the negligent father, and Margarito the conniving future-husband. Virgilia and Ramon had made a deal, the price of which was their daughter given in marriage. They bartered her and her future for land and their futures. And they had in the greatest demonstration of irony and hypocrisy bartered her to a rich "indio" by the name of Margarito Argueta.

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Although Margarito came from the land of "indios," and "must surely then be an Indian," he had done much to erase this history. He had done much in other words, to make their eyes see white where there was brown. He was rich, well-connected, and an outward philanthropist. But in order to exchange his brown mestizo for a white ladino, he had to strike a deal with the devil. He was rich because he stole, he was well-connected because he extorted, he was a philanthropist because he had to seem a sheep when he

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was truly a ravenous wolf. How else to defy nature? How else to defy the verdict of your birth? He at least could see no other way to rid himself of his brown transgressions than by sitting in the shade of darker whiter sins.

And had he not been taught how to be white and dominant by the first white devil to violate Mayan lands? Yes, perhaps he had heard of a Pedro de Alvarado, who entered the gardens of Guatemala with a false happy, brilliant countenance, who had terrified even the most murderous of Mayans, and yet had been called the sun god by those whom he would either subjugate or massacre. And so, had Margarito not been taught by the greatest teacher of deception? By one who had shown the Mayan people's how far one must go to consummate one's lusts, to transcend one's given roles. If Pedro Alvarado could go from vice conquistador to godhood, perhaps Margarito could go from a light brown to an untouched and untouchable white.

There were a few factors that enabled Pedro de Alvarado to achieve conquest. These included division, disease, decimation through advanced warfare, and as my dad likes to add, a determination of the Mayans to be hospitable (which I would call strategic surrender). But I would also add, or at least retitle, another: women. On one hand, women in the colonial period may appear futile. In a world of powerful man-gods what could they become? Beyond the basic domestic role, they might inhabit one of the following: sacrificial offerings to signal war, sexual slaves, or mistresses. There was, however, one role that gave them some standing, that made them significant enough to be called by name in the annals of the history of man: a symbol of national alliance, a tie between two nations that would lead to the destruction of another. Alliances in the form of women gave Alvarado the forces and powers needed to decimate the last remaining semblances of the Mayan empire.

It is probably not the case that when Margarito saw Maria in the plaza, he considered empires or territorial conquest, but it might have entered his mind that in order to more fully enter affluent white society, he had to ally himself to them. Maria was to be a bridge for his ongoing insecurities to cross over into the security of belonging. And not only was she attractive enough, she was an alliance that could be cheaply purchased. For Margarito would discover that he need only pretend to give Virgilia and Ramon land

in order for them to hungrily and wholeheartedly agree to the blasphemous match between him and their young attractive daughter.

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It would be the one and only time Virgilia would be taken in. She who only had surface-level white privileges and saw an opportunity to finally back their social investments with substantial wealth, had let her poverty blind her to what her cold heart should have recognized in Margarito. But at first, Virgilia heard only the memory of Ramon's laughter and his revelation that they were practically "indios" because they were as poor as them.

Nevertheless, it wouldn't be long before her clear vision would return to recognize that the darkness that had surrounded her and swallowed her soul also could be found in this man and his promises. But for Maria it was too late—too late to unplan the wedding, to uninvite the guests, to hide the truth of this shameful barter from the town and their judgment, and too late to deny her own reprisal of her parent's greedy use of her by willfully marrying the man they now hated.

And so, Maria, in the end, chose to marry him, and by doing so, set off multiple disastrous consequences. First, her mother disowned her for marrying a lying and deceiving "indio." In fact, Maria would not see Virgilia's face until Margarito, lying in a coffin from liver failure, left Maria's life forever. Then, in place of a mother, albeit a fairly terrifying one, she received a vindictive and hypocritical master. He held her captive. He brutally enslaved her to the slovenliest of duties in the most inhumane conditions, he beat her for the smallest of errors, he scared away her childhood friends and thus her connections to laughter and true joy, and he gave her children he could never love. He did all this and then confessed on his knees to rid himself of any unwanted guilt. To do this, he made the pilgrimage to Esquipulas alone, and he crawled for five blocks toward the black Jesus carved in dark wood, confessing, exclaiming, and dramatizing his penitence. And, by the end of his visit, it was enough, he was clean, he had been forgiven by God, and so how could Maria withhold the same forgiveness?

Consequently, the once fortuitous bargain presented by Margarito took her innocent joys and left her accustomed to forgiving and accepting

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abuse. Any wealth that she may have gained from the union (besides a store that she was later forced or deceived into mortgaging) died and disappeared with him.

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In the end, my grandmother's life did not resolve itself. My grandmother died from pancreatic cancer. On her last day in her weakened and depleted body, she woke to tap the foot pedal of her sewing machine for the last time. My grandmother died from pancreatic cancer, it was considered the cause of death, but my grandmother was killed little by little over the course of her life. And yet, her laughter and open personality gave her life amidst this slow murder of her inner body and mind. That is how she survived for so long the devils and darkness that plagued her bright spirit. That is how she survived her deep-seated fear of a mother's retribution; that is how she survived being sold in marriage to a drunkard devil whose devotion to her came in blows and a short leash; that is how she survived the below-sea-level poverty and the four first-husband-understudies that practiced bloodletting on any body of success she tried to produce.

Before she died of these many infirmities, my abuela finally reunited with my father, for my father was not raised by his mother. His plot-line allowed him to determine his future towards one of two ends: the *infierno de pobreza* of his mother or the *infierno de abuso* with his grandmother. At the young age of seven he could not see past the masks of these futures, and so he chose the adventure of the coast with his grandmother over his current low and fear-filled existence of San Luis. Seeing his grandmother for the first time, and finding her to look and seem quite ethereal, he chose a life based on his fantastic notions that were later smothered under her strong fist and hard heel.

On his first day in his cold, adopted reality, Virgilia interviewed her gangly grandchild. "Y qué puedes hacer? Puedes barrer? Puedes cortar leña?"

After answering in the negative to many of these qualifications, my dad responded, "No, pero, puedo hacer dos cosas: cantar y reír."

And oh, what a tragedy that was for Virgilia who would later tell young Oscar, "I will kill you first, grind you, and then form you into a

man.” But what a success that was for young Maria who, under the worst of conditions, instilled in her son a love for joy and expression.

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Maria and Oscar reunited, but by then she was changed and so was he. Later in life, in our home in Iowa, I saw them reconcile years where their laughter and songs had not joined in harmony. I watched them in the little laundry room sit together watching novelas. Teresa, a story of a young girl who will give up anything, even those she loved, to escape the humiliation of her poverty, was one of their favorite dramas. As its melodrama increased with new revelations, deaths, adultery, and divorce, and Teresa’s evil grew, they laughed and chastised together. Their laughs joined and sounded to me like a howl. Did they both relate to Teresa’s desperate attempts to escape the dark clouds of poverty? Did they both laugh because Teresa was only a weak portrayal of the truth? Did their laughter transform into a howl because they knew that behind every cheap telenovela, is a deeply cutting Latin American horror story?

...

Every morning my father wakes up at five in the morning to walk the streets of San Luis. One day he walks past a nearby stream. This stream carries within its waters and along its banks the refuse of the city. There are swollen diapers, beer cans, and black plastic bags. It is more sewage than natural spring.

My dad angrily chides the community, “How disgraceful, how could we do this to our beautiful country?”

God answers his anger, “Anger will do nothing, but you can do something.”

My dad then spends the following years recruiting volunteers for cleanup, construction, and landscaping. He spends many of his days considering how he will pay the gardener, how will he gather donations, how he will light the walk way along the river, how will he extend the purifying of the stream to the distant corner with the cross. As he ponders and plans and promotes, the people walk its banks and admire the flowers and vegetation that now grow instead of piles of trash. People begin to help

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my father without recompense. They donate a wheel barrow, a plant, or some solar lights. But as the work continues, not all are happy with its progress. How will the horses cross the deeper water, how will they keep their neighboring lands private and free from the park's visitors, or how will they keep the lands that were theirs by common consent from being made into a public park? They fear change, and they fear that progress will not enable them to live the nonrenewable life they have chosen.

But still my dad and community members push forward. Still, they believe in the stream as it once was, and love it for what it has now become. My dad describes this change in a poem,

¡Levántate río! Sacude tus alas.
Llego la hora de tu redención,
pues has vivido décadas malas,
pero eso ya es pasado río Cajón.
Tus hijos, hombres muy malos
dimos en hollar tu claro caudal.
Y así infames te dimos de palos
y así seguimos tratándote mal.
Y así le fuimos tirando basura
a tu luz, a tu verde y a tu azul.
Y al manchar así tu hermosura
manchamos tu seda, rompimos tu tul.
Pero no llores más río querido,
río de mis amores no llores más,
porque no podrá otro descuido
a tu claro caudal dañarlo jamás.
Aún hay quijotes de la mancha
amantes de justicia y dignidad.
Y te devolverán una más ancha
corriente y una mayor felicidad.

...

Today I walk through the garden stream. It is now called the Paseo de Felicidad. My dad shows me the new flowers. He shows me where the path will continue and where he hopes it will end. He describes plans for a

second bridge. He is more hopeful now because the fears of the neighbors have been quelled by the local judge. We stop to take pictures so my dad can show the park's donors the newest progress. As we turn back, he breathes in, and in an amazed voice exclaims, "Mila you look so much like my mother."

Perhaps he says this because I have her nose, her eyes, and her cheeks that bunch up as she smiles. Perhaps my laughter is like hers who would laugh at pain and laugh at sorrow. Perhaps I learned from her that it is better to laugh sometimes than cry and give in to the pain. And I hope that perhaps, he says this because I am like the woman who had the strength and optimism to rise above shadows and choose to live in the colors of light.

MY MOTHER TELLS ME THAT MY TÍA ARACELI was there when my grandmother surrendered the light and darkness of the world.

“Did you know that Margarito came for Maria when she died?” She tells me. I certainly had not anticipated that conclusion.

Did she think that meant she was going to Hell? I wonder this sarcastically as my mother continues,

“Araceli said those were her last words. ‘Margarito, Margarito, por que estas aqui?’” And then I wonder if I have misjudged the past, and, by so doing, anticipated the wrong future.

It also is my mother, well-practiced in the art of forgiving quickly and whole-heartedly, who retells the experience of seeing Virgilia a couple of years before she died.

As Virgilia lived her final years, with no future trial to anticipate, but the kindness of death, she let in what she had for so long protected herself against: the softness of love, the burden of guilt, the vulnerable humility of forgiveness. She embraced my father, and admitted, “I hit you too much, didn’t I hijo?”

And those words, for a grandson whose abuela's opinion meant everything, seemed to say much more. They hugged and they cried for generations of pain, of unfairness, of darkness. When my dad returns to heaven his first desire is to embrace her again, embrace her with a new name, Valentina, because, as he says, it suits her better.

...

The more I study a past that is not wholly my own, the more I know that I could never know it. I cannot understand it, for it is little more than a photograph. It is always more and more a familiar stranger to me. Its shadow or roots never leave me, but I know little more than its name and introductory details. I can only see what someone else saw of the past, or feel the past through the sifter of someone else's life. In general, and by the apostle Paul's definition of clear vision, we cannot "see" the past. Not only this, but it becomes necessary that the past become simplified. Our limited capacity to capture its rotundness and color gives us a black and white negative. There is hardly any differentiation in shades, because there is not enough space and time to capture the nuances. History then by necessity simplified and biased, leaves a recorder, with his unique perspective, to instruct a future audience by binaries like winners and losers, sinners and saints, conquered and conquerors. And it is up to the historian to choose these binaries and on which of those sides the players lie. But how do we judge what we cannot wholly know or understand? How do we withhold forgiveness from what our eyes have not seen and our bodies have not lived and our hearts have not felt?

My father loves Virgilia, Maria laughed at Margarito, Margarito returned to a neglected Maria, and the stream is a garden now. The stream, which was once a landfill too dirty to traverse, is now filled with wild and human visitors. Children laugh and play, frogs jumps and swim, couples hold each other close, and grandmothers watch their family grow. Layers of rocks and dirt have been turned and relocated. Grains of its past have transformed and become its beautiful future. Who could have imagined? Who but He who sees.

I did not know this. I did not know that writing the story of my abuelas meant that I had to learn to see more clearly the past to understand my own story. I did not know that part of beautifying my future has to

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begin with turning over the rocks and debris of the past. I did not know that as I tried to forgive my bisabuela, I was really forgiving my father. And I did not know that as I came to know my abuela's history from new perspectives, I was actually coming to better know and see my father.

My own stream is riddled with trash that was never cleared from the past. It wasn't until recently, that I saw the leftover tenacles of abuse, had reached into my own childhood. Not until recently did I acknowledge, that those nights when my father had told me how worthless I was, were not to be excused by stress or believed as a truth affected by my errors rather than his.

And while I had accepted and forgiven this abuse before writing this particular history, I had not understood it. I had not seen that before me, it had been my father, and before my father it had been my grandmother, and before her, my great grandmother.

So, when my mother tells me the stories of deathbed and final-years forgiveness, when the image of embrace and healing between abuser and abused enters my mind, I see myself, and my father. I know him, I love him, and I forgive him.

In the end, perhaps we must forgive the past not because we know it is deserved but because we cannot know if it might be. We leave that judgment, that line to someone who sees beyond the black and white of our mortal visions. And we survive the past only as we learn to acknowledge and forgive it.

MY DAD SAYS HE WOULD LIKE TO BUY HIS OLD HOUSE in San Luis and make it into a museum for antiquities. I think this is ironic because the whole town is a museum of antiquities. Like other villages in Guatemala, it is a town of many times layered upon each other, indistinguishable or at least so intricately woven upon each other that they become almost inseparable.

Old men and women, dressed in homemade suits and dresses cut from the same pattern used fifty years ago and bent over with age sit on the stoops of clay homes. Their walls and their floors are made of mud, but from some of these homes you hear dramatic voices blaring from a television. As you make your way to the town square you may pay three quetzales for a tuk-tuk to drive you through narrow cobblestone streets. The town square is situated around two major centers: the cathedral and the market. The cathedral is white with black edges of deterioration. It is dedicated to the town's name's sake, Saint Louis or the King Louis IX of France. San Luisenos walk around this edifice in Nike shoes or sandals made from tires. They eat tortillas and drink Coca-cola. A picture from a hundred years ago shows a market just like you would see it today except that women are selling from plastic baskets rather than wooden ones, but

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they are still smiling, strong, patient, and powerful. The women there speak Spanish and Poq'omam.

I see the annual growth rings of my family tree within the city's own layering when I walk through San Luis. I see times of plenty and times of drought. The inner rings of pain and hatred, optimism and survival, whose growth affect and touch the outer rings.

There are two green wooden doors which form a corner near where my father was born. As he feels them and taps them, he tells me they have been there for over fifty years. On the opposite corner, there is a video store, a clothing store, and a tienda. These stores have been painted blue and green, but under the paint which covers a sort of plaster is a clay wall.

"That was my house," my father says as he measures its extent, "That is where I was born." I watch him as he shows that its dimensions cover the whole block.

"It was big," I say surprised because I know that my father had grown up in abject poverty.

"My father was rich," my dad explains, "He wasn't always rich, but when he moved to San Luis he knew everyone's secrets. He was friends with everyone. He became rich, he became white."

"Come," he tells me as I try to catch up with his long strides.

My father said he can never be still, he must always be attentive and in a hurry because of his grandmother. He says his grandma said that he was like a female sheep: always jumping. He jumped because it was always better to have done what she asked before she could even think about asking it. He points to a large tool shop.

"This is the colonel's house, this is Virgilia's house. It was big and inside it she had a large stone oven." He points across the street, "That house belongs to people with the apellido 'Gonzalez.' Still after all these years, they still live there. My grandmother hated them. They were "indians." They are rich now, they still are there, their children have gone to the U.S., that is how they built that house."

Later, I ask, “But what was the colonel’s name? Wasn’t it Gonzalez too?” Again, he gives me one of those nods, “Yes, that is why my grandmother did not want to live by them. She would not accept the name Gonzalez. We were always Castañeda. Always. I was Oscar Castañeda, not Oscar Argueta. No way.”

He is excited now, “And you know what, there is a woman here that knew your great grandmother. Come, come, she lives right there. She was their neighbor; her mother was my midwife. She knew your grandmother too.”

There is a customer at the door, but my dad kind of barges in past him after asking if the merchant’s mother is home. We push the shelf of fresh cheese over a bit to squeeze in and see her sitting right by the door.

She is happy with the company, “No se preocupen, no se preocupen, síentense.”

My dad asks if she knows him, and without much introduction begins the questions. Did she know Virigilia? Did she know Don Ramon (the colonel)? Did she remember Maruca (my dad’s mother)? What did she think of Virigilia, wasn’t she beautiful?

“Sí, ella era hermosa y era trabajadora. Ella podía hacer todo. Y podía hornear pan. Ese pan estaba tan rico. Pero como ella trabajaba.” She affirms.

My dad reminds her of how she would carry three cantaros to get water, and that when she was out on the road, she would carry a knife to protect herself from certain men.

“Sí, y cuando estaba en la plaza los hombres decían ‘suegra.’” She reveals.

My dad gasps and I ask what it means to say “suegra.” He tells me they said it because her daughters were beautiful, “your grandma was beautiful.”

She remembers a lot, but I am intrigued with how she answers one question, “A quién me parezco más? Mi mamá o mi papá?” She replies

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frankly, “No hay que pensarlo mucho. Te pareces a tu mamá porque tu papá era moreno.”

My father looks like his mother not because he, like her has smile wrinkles around his eyes, not because his mouth is large and wide, but because he is light skinned like she was. Years upon years of prejudice have layered and evolved, but people still whisper when they say “ellos son *indios*,” children in my English class still call peach or light tan “el color de piel,” and indigenous maids in a modernized feudal system still serve *ladinos*.

Woven between the walls and streets of San Luis are three generations. Here the roots of Castañeda, Gonzalez, and Argueta join. Here the story of my bisabuela becomes the story of my abuela. Here I write, a sample of that sedimentary layering. Proof of a story twice told, proof of a story gone astray, proof of the mixing of bloods. I am like the San Luis of old and the San Luis above the old. I am the market and the cathedral. I am the Nike shoes and the tire sandals. I am the coca-cola and the fresh pressed tortilla. I am conqueror and conquered. I am the ashamed daughter of modern and colonial assassin stock, and the pained daughter of the massacred. I was natured in Agua Blanca, but nurtured in San Luis. Natured Spaniard, but nurtured Mayan mestizo. I am hatred and love, pain and joy, and work and song. I am the white walls of Virgilia’s and Maria’s houses, broken up and painted with new color.

Because the tree is the body and the branches and roots appendages, I imagine that the branches hold root memory. They do not live with the roots, but they might have a sense of the dark earthy land from which they receive their nutrients. The branches love and breath light, but they taste and eat darkness as well. The branches grow within and because of these contrasting shades, and they remember, that they only breath light because the roots overcame and pushed through the dark ground first.

And so, we all must have root memory within in us. The past that has not left, and the individual strength shooting up through the generations.

In my tree, my memory seems largely female for those are the roots who send upward through the body of the tree the greatest strength. They are women from whose strengths I flourish with color and culture and caramel beauty.