

## EXCERPT...

### Semilla

They tried to bury us  
but they didn't know  
we were seeds.

—Mexican Proverb

Imperial Valley, California • March 1965

### Remolino

I sometimes think about how  
I lost my voice.

I could have buried it in the earth,  
in the surco, the long row of dry dirt  
where we planted onion bulbs last spring  
while the heat of a too-hot California day  
fell on our  
arched  
backs  
like barrels  
of sun.

It could have happened  
when Papá screamed for me to work faster  
just as I was singing along  
to Mamá's song  
louder than Papá's angry words  
or the drone of planes spraying the  
fields overhead.

It could have been taken  
by the roaring remolino  
that slammed into us  
like the storm of Papá's belt when we upset him,  
an out of nowhere tornado  
ripping through the fields.

maybe that's when the dirt-drenched air  
pulled  
my voice out of my breath  
and caught it in the  
spin of wild wind.

What's left is a whispery rasp  
an orange-yellow mist  
that comes and goes  
like clouds.

My real voice is either somewhere  
in the tumble of dirt  
in the onion fields  
of the Imperial Valley  
or  
was taken by  
the anger of the wind.

One day, I pray it comes back.

Delano, California • September, 1965

### **Open-Sky Hammocks**

We drown bedbugs  
in a pail of water,  
chinchés we pluck  
from the mattresses  
propped up outside  
on rusty barrack walls.

The worst kind of chore  
on our first day in Delano,  
in another labor camp  
as terrible as the last  
and the one before that.

Concha and Rafa race to see  
who can drown more bugs.  
They beat me by a lot  
because they're  
five and four years older.

I ask Mamá if we can sleep  
in our hammocks instead  
but she doesn't turn around.  
She still can't hear the tiny hiss  
that comes from me when I try to speak.

"¡Mamá!" I try to say louder.

She reads the question on my lips.

"Lula, the mattresses are better so we are together  
and not hanging like leaves from the trees."

Me? I'd rather sleep outside  
in a crest of oaks  
at the edge of the grape fields  
all around us  
with surcos like long fingers  
spread throughout the vineyard  
and thick vines  
growing big across the wires.

I'd rather sleep beneath  
a blue-black sky glistening  
with bright stars.

A stage. A place to dream.

Where I can announce  
a make-believe circus like a ringmaster  
to an audience of hooting owls  
hunting field mice in the night.

Outside under the dense, starry sky  
we can only see in the back roads of California  
where we work and chase the harvests,  
so different from the city where we hardly go  
and where the glow of lights washes away the contrast.

Yes, it's colder in our hammocks  
than in the one-room wooden barrack,  
especially in the winter,  
but so much better  
than getting eaten alive by chinchas.  
"Pero, Mamá, I wish we could . . ." I try to argue.

"No time for wishing now, Lula."

Mamá leans on my shoulder  
as she passes me holding a grass broom.  
Her long thick braid lays against her neck  
as her body bends like a willow branch,  
and she sighs,

"Vamos, Lula, Concha, Rafa. Let's keep cleaning,  
mis amores."

## Light Blue Schoolhouse

I watch water glisten as it splashes  
    against the tin of the pail I fill  
at the only tap at this new but familiar camp.  
    I think of the light blue schoolhouse  
    I saw from the truck as we arrived,  
        and my panza flutters.

I wonder about the new school year  
and if the school will have  
a twelfth grade for Concha  
and a seventh grade for me  
because there's never a guarantee.

A school!  
Where we'll be the new faces  
along with other farmworker kids  
whose families came like ours  
for the grape harvest  
and who also won't know  
what they'll be learning  
and will struggle to catch up.

An actual school!  
Not housework,  
not watching my baby siblings,  
and not field work.

Back in Bakersfield  
Rafa missed so many days  
he was whittled down two whole grades.  
    That's when he had it  
        and instead followed Papá and Mamá  
            into the fields each daybreak  
    to pick whichever crop was in season.  
Truant officers didn't even blink  
to see him in the fields  
as dandelion tall as he is.

I'd taken what Concha  
once told me to heart.  
No matter how much we miss,  
no matter if teachers are mean,  
no matter they sometimes punish us  
for speaking Spanish,  
no matter if we can't keep friends,  
school is ours.

“Lula, you're here to soak up anything you can,  
porque tomorrow, we'll be on the road again  
and the only thing you can take with you”

—she tapped my head— “is up here.”

The best thing about Concha  
is she loves school  
as much as me.  
Concha’s gentle brown eyes  
are maps  
when I can’t find my way.

### **Baby Work**

Papá comes back  
with work orders from the crew leader  
and a face folded in worry.

He, Mamá, and Rafa  
will pick grapes tomorrow morning.  
Our baby sister, Gabriela,  
and babiest brother, Martín,  
will go with them  
so Concha and I can get to school.

Mamá doesn’t ask us to  
work the fields to pick cotton,  
potatoes, strawberries, or grapes  
because that’s when school’s in session.

Mamá doesn’t ask us to skip school  
to watch the babies, either,  
she likes what we learn  
about the world outside the fields.  
She loves to hear us translate for her  
the stories in the books we get to read,  
the English transforming into the Spanish  
that she and Papà speak.

Threat of a truant officer  
or no truant officer,  
I don’t think Mamá  
would want it any other way.

I wouldn't mind watching the babies,  
Gabi and Martín are  
two balls of sweet masa with legs.

Gabi’s almost three and runs  
like a cheetah on her bare feet  
with one too many toes on each foot.  
Mamá calls her “una hija de Dios”  
and because she’s a child of God,

she is perfect just as she is  
with no need for shoes  
we can't afford anyway.

Martín crawls like a ladybug  
because being one year old is still pretty little.  
He reaches up  
with his  
dimpled hands  
whenever he wants  
to be carried,  
and we always happily sweep him up.

It's not hard to do squishy baby work like that.

### **Escabs**

I overhear Papá tell Rafa,

“Caramba, we just walked into a strike. Men with picket  
signs and bullhorns were yelling at all of us not to work.”

“What do you think they're fighting for, Apá?”

I get closer but he pulls Rafa inside,  
and gives me a “what do you want, nosy”  
kind of look but I can still hear him.

“Los Filipinos seem to have left the fields because they  
want higher wages. They're en huelga, and they think  
we're taking their jobs,” he says.

“Do you think there'll be trouble, Apá?” Rafa asks.

“Pues they were protesting and screaming ‘Don't  
be escabs!’ at us while we were getting crew orders.

Josesito said *escab* means traitor because we are crossing  
their picket line.”

Papá says the word *scab* like  
his tongue is a skipped record  
adding a syllable up front.

Mamá is sitting on the edge of the bed,

holding her head between her hands  
like she's hurt,  
frowning into her closed eyes.

I want to see what's wrong with her  
but I stay outside the barrack  
so Papá doesn't know  
I'm snooping.

Martín toddles up to Papá,  
reaches up to him.  
Papá unfolds his brows and arms,  
lifts him up and tosses him into  
the air with an "Ah, imi muchachito!"

Papá saves his sweetness for the babies.  
As soon as we get older,  
seeing his love for us  
is a sight as rare as rain  
falling on desert earth.

## **Carpa Smiles**

I remember a time  
before the whirlwind,  
a time before Gabi and Martín were born  
when we snuck into the circus.  
Rafa and me.

Papá went without  
his bottles of beer for once  
to buy three tickets  
for Mamá, Concha, and him.

Hidden behind crates,  
Rafa held up the tent's wall  
to keep me from getting scratched  
like he did as he crawled  
beneath the canvas.

We emerged into a flurry of people  
trying to get a seat to see La Carpa Vázquez,  
the traveling Mexican circus.

We squirmed, pushed, and shoved  
other kids to sit up front.  
As the lights began to dim,  
I searched and found  
Concha, Mamá, and Papá

sitting still inside a crowd  
moving like ants around them.

Suddenly the lights, the music,  
and a loud, booming voice  
welcomed us.

“Señoras y señores, niños y niñas, welcome to the  
world-famous La Carpa Vázquez!”

That’s when I saw it.  
Papá’s smile,  
with its missing right-side molar.  
A smile so pretty and wide  
it shined like a galaxy  
in the center  
of the deep brown night  
of his face.

I don’t understand why  
he never lets us see it,  
but seeing him smile  
because of the ringmaster’s smooth voice  
opened up my own sonrisa  
like a squash bloom  
following  
the light of day.

I swept my head around  
and was pulled like never before  
and never since  
into the magic of la carpa.

The clown jugglers,  
the comedians, the singers,  
the dancing dog show,  
the tightrope walkers,  
and the flying trapeze.

Rafa and me clapped, hollered,  
and fell on each other,  
imuriéndonos de risa!

When I took a breath,  
a dream was etched in my heart,  
to join the circus one day,  
as ringmaster.

I think about the ringmaster  
whenever I am still.

I think about how his voice  
made the lights of Papá’s face



come alive.

I want to be one of the reasons Papá smiles.

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