

## Remembering Califas

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1.

My califas is a ragged flag of memory shouldered por una anciana. Fragments of heart rupture pinned together, my califas is the fabric of our lives.

We were once a family of safety pins to hold up pantalones. Elastic waistbands huanga and useless after too many washings handed down. The thread of my corduroy still good and warm though. Still good.

We were once a family of safety pins for diapers and repair. I was taught to mend: hems, patches, split seams. But the lesson of embroidery never took. My stubby fingers, too brutos and boyish. The art, too fina for me and my mexican-american girlhood.

2.

In a califas before Beach Boys, girls not like me, she said, waited patiently for love. Fingering the dowry of embroidered cloth, I imagined her, lace and linen sleeping beneath a cedar lid. Hers, the hope chest of my despair.

My dowry was the free love movement of the sixties. My dowry, stupid sex in a stupid motel six. My dowry had no romance. Neither did hers, really. I, born too late too tough. She, just too damn poor.

3.

From Dementia's bed, on eve of my wedding to a woman, my ancient mother, bequeaths to me the following: hundreds of free easter christmas cards novena masses & calendars from the missionaries of the Sacred Heart League and the Society of the Little Flower; ten heavy duty black trash bags of dresses and sequined gowns, sizes ten to two, worn from ages sixty to ninety, respectively; four shoe boxes of costume jewelry (an occasional shining diamond and real pearl among the rough); seven hardly-used compacts, flamenco dancer on the lid; three broken pairs of bifocals; four Folgers coffee cans of curlers circa 1970; dozens of used lips sticks, single knee-high stockings, and had-been-lost-blame-it-on-your-father house keys; a few social security cards and california Ids; and one mink stole.

I choose to keep: the white metal wash basin with the black rim, which held the wet silk delicates of my mother's wantings; the dark stained applicator bottle for Clairol hair dye; the box of Argo gloss laundry starch, never opened; the thick-glassed double-cola bottle she fashioned into a clothes spinkler. This, before spray starch, technicolor, and permanent press. This which leaves doilies thirty years guardados, as crisp and new as that weeknight my mother ironed them. Her children's eyes fixed on the flickering Million Dollar Movie in the foreground.

I also keep the Big Boy Burger salad dressing jar of buttons, multicolored. I don't know why.

#### 4.

From above the condor's eye flying, I spy an ancient primordial califas. The golden bridge dissolves. The jagged horizon of concrete and market economies

fades with it. And there is only land as grand as continents, as intimate as lapping canoe rides from shore to marshy shore.

This is the country I hold in the seventy-three pounds of bone and organ, which shape the geography of my mother's momentary and infinite history. She inhabits a daily california, where spirits are not strangers, where the acorn becomes a meal and your children and their children and their children are no longer her possessions.

My mother is this map of califas. Take her body. Take any mexican indian woman's body and you will find the history of this country before man-made maps and markers. Before buildings and gringo husbands who stand in a pool of fifty-five years of regret and cry, "I miss you so much, honey."

Good white men who fail to see, with the best of selfish intentions, she was there all along presente. She was there all along wife and lover and mother and worker. She was there all along. Too late now too late now there all along.

"I did the best I could," she says and walks away. Pretense dissolves as easily as that golden bridge of a conquered california.

5.

Kneeling at the bedside of Dementia, I had only one prayer. Relieve her of her heartbreak. This was the state we had always lived in, a family sewn together by the tutored hand of my mother's grief. She made nothing up. Every traición, every loss, cada rechazo conjured in escenarios, not as they happened, but as grand and nightmare as her heart remembered them.

Now, her mind shrouded in the silk of a deeper knowing, my prayers are answered by a different kind of teacher. I enter her bedside. Her arms, like

wings, rise to greet me. Her face, the innocence of an angel-child, she is the fierceness of the condor. She refuses to grow extinct.

6.

My califas lies buried inside the cave of a woman's grave knowing, that open site of enter and depart woven with the barbed wire of her wounding. It is the prison wall we chew through when we threw away the map of the trespasser's making. Her bones scattered, she is broken seam of borderline between the lie of chronology/conquest/colony and the real life we seek to know. My hands are not strangers to the thread and needle of repair. It is a labor of love to remember her this way. My mother. My country.

Oakatzlán, Califas.

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