

Poems by
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How to Survive a Drought

I picture women, narrow and bronze,
mis abuelas y tías who lived in this desert,
next to low mesquite trees with arched arms,
grinding last year's brittle corn for daily masa,
walking among cotton plants halted knee high,
and harvesting nopales that hide flesh under long spines.
While summer stretches still, life stagnates in this desert
where vacas chew cud under the same tree all day,
perros hide in water troughs til dark,
and the dust resettles on floors while you sleep.
No wonder the children grew lean and strong,
one right after the other, one for each year.
No wonder. Mis abuelas y tías, who knew
about drought, must have turned to their husbands
the last weeks of winter with deliberate passion.
Sí, they wanted to feel a child ripening towards birth,
needed their swelling stomachs as evidence among stillness
that life was moving from this long season to the next,
needed this long hope to outlast such heat.

Gifts

Sometimes, she cooked on the hearth,
a big hole in the yellow kitchen wall.
Until I was seven, she kept cows
penned behind the house.
My brother and I called her grandma
with the cow, abuela con vaquita.
She hung a picture of Jesús Cristo
against the wall where she slept.
Her cocina was yellow like masa.
She bent to wash pots and pans
under a faucet outside the kitchen door.
In the picture, Jesus wore thorns.
Loud voices woke us every morning,
and chorizo smells from her kitchen.
Grandma slept on her side,
her hands together, praying.
My brother and I slept on the floor,
behind the dividing wall.
She wrapped her head in a rag at night,
wore washed-out cotton shifts,
long dark socks, blue slippers.
After the funeral,
because I am small,
like she was,
my aunt gave me
her slips and camisoles.