What Drowns the Flowers in Your Mouth

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Despite the meaning of its name, “place where it frosts,” on the few occasions I visited Nahuatzen, the weather was muggy and humid. The first time, I must have been thirteen going on fourteen. Each summer, my paternal grandparents took a road trip to México to visit relatives and deliver clothing they had been gathering all year from the flea markets. They took turns taking one of their grandchildren with them, but after my mother passed away, they became my legal guardians, and so thereafter my brother, Alex, and I made the trips down with them. Eventually, even Alex tired of the two-day drive in the back of a truck, pirekuas playing at full volume, and I made the journey all alone under the camper, sleeping and daydreaming, except when we made brief stops to stretch our legs.

On one occasion, as we entered the state of Michoacán, we stopped in Nahuatzen. It was a surprising decision—the first time we had ever done so. I could tell by the way Abuela María became emotional. This was the place of her birth. To me, it was a town like all the others: mud buildings stood next to cement ones; a Pepsi logo painting on the side of one structure let it be known it was the store; uneven sidewalks flanked the cobblestone street; stray dogs walked past; and citizens of the town milled about, usually men in worn hats turning their heads whenever a vehicle drove by.
Abuelo pulled up next to a kiosk in the town square. Every town had a zócalo, large or small. This one was a tinier version of the ones I had grown up with in Zacapu, before my family uprooted and moved to California, before we traded the wide, open space of a town square for the cramped living rooms of our homes in the U.S.

I was about to hop off the back when my grandfather stopped me.

“Don’t bother,” he snapped, banging the side of the truck with his fist. “We’re not staying here long.”

I looked over at Abuela María. She already knew this and couldn’t hide the look of disappointment on her face. I said nothing and sat back down. Abuelo left the camper door open, fortunately, and so I was able to look out at the people looking back at me.

“Pardon me, friends,” my grandfather said to a pair of men nearby. “Where can I buy music in this town?”

The question disarmed the men, who had been considering us apprehensively. They knew by our clothing we were not from around here. My grandfather sported a crisp new hat he only wore on his visits to México. My grandmother had short, dyed hair—an unusual look for an older woman in these parts.

The men pointed to a building just across the zócalo. I was tempted to spring out of the camper as soon as my grandfather walked into the building, but I knew better than to disobey him. Abuela María sat in the truck cabin and took in whatever she could from where we were parked. It was hot, and I was grateful that Abuela María walked over to the little store to bring me a jarrito, a tamarind-flavored soda. I knew the drill. I finished the drink quickly and then handed back the bottle, which Abuela returned to the grocer to get her cash deposit back.

“Do you recognize anyone?” I asked Abuela after she came back from the store.
“Nothing but strangers in this town,” she said heavily, and I wasn’t sure if she was referring to us or to the people on the square. Abuela climbed into the front of the truck. To demonstrate my empathy, I wanted to mutter the few words in Purépecha she had taught me, but they had flown right out of my head. This failure saddened me even more.

As I savored the dissolving flavor of tamarind, I considered the way Abuelo became extraordinarily meek when he interacted with others. It never ceased to annoy me because I knew his true temperament—he was mean-spirited and unnecessarily cruel. That soft voice turned disdainful as soon as the person he was talking to was out of earshot. He had to show his true colors to us, those who lived with him; otherwise we could not fear him.

I knew this surprise visit to Nahuatzen was some sort of torture he was inflicting on my grandmother, showing her something she couldn’t have. I imagined she still had relatives there, and old friendships with old stories she wished to hear again or be reminded of. But at least she felt the ground beneath her feet, and her entire body took in the breeze. I sat quietly in the back of the truck the entire time like a caged bird without a song.

Just then, a young man around my age rolled over in an old bicycle. The paint had chipped all over the metal body, and the handlebars were missing the rubber grips. Someone had wrapped cloth around the handlebars to protect his hands from blistering. I recalled such blistered hands from my Mexican neighborhood so many years ago. He was curious and fearless about approaching me.

“You’re from the north?” he asked, pointing with his chin. He placed one hand on the tailgate to keep his balance as he swayed back and forth. I sensed the two men quiet down to eavesdrop.

“Yes,” I said. “From California.”

He looked inside the camper. There was nothing much to see, only the garbage bags filled with clothes that I leaned against
when I slept. Our luggage was stacked in one corner. I brought nothing more than a duffel bag.

“You bring any marbles from the north?”

I was caught off guard by the question. I remembered those toys from childhood: marbles, a top, a yo-yo, a slingshot, a balero—the cup-and-ball game I never mastered. I owned none of these anymore and I couldn’t explain to myself why not. How did they not cross the border with me? How did they disappear from my list of things that brought me joy? And what had replaced them?

“No. I don’t play marbles,” I admitted.

The young man laughed incredulously. “Really?”

I knew I had become even more foreign to him, and this brought me some shame. But there was no way to convince him that deep down inside I was just like him, a Michoacano—of Purépecha bloodlines with ties to Nahuatzen, the very place we now breathed in. There was my proof sitting in the truck. I turned around and tried to find my grandmother in the cabin. But the camper wall obstructed my view.

Suddenly I felt the young man’s finger brush across my wrist. Up until that sensation, I had not realized that I too had my hand resting on the tailgate. He remained expressionless, as if that was enough to hide the breach of boundary even from me. The old men behind him did not suspect anything. It appeared that they had lost interest in the visitors from the north entirely and weren’t even looking our way. The young man, meanwhile, continued to roll back and forth, back and forth, and the motion became somewhat erotic for me. I still felt his touch on my skin, and now it burned even more.

“What is your name?” I asked.

He grinned, looking shy suddenly. “I’m not going to give you my name.”

He said this flirtatiously, and I wasn’t sure how to interpret it. Was he mocking me, or was he revealing something about himself
only to me? A quiet came over us as if we were communicating telepathically, and this comforted me. It gave me courage to move my hand on the tailgate a few inches toward his. I was imagining myself daring to shift my fingers even closer when he broke the trance.

“Give me your name,” he said.

The way his eyelashes fluttered when he said that gave him away: he had seen right through me and was now going to use that knowledge against me. I had been through this so many times before in both México and the U.S.—a young man would coax that hidden part of me out into the open and then stomp on it. It was the part of me that made me vulnerable no matter where I lived, no matter where I went.

Without moving, I felt myself withdraw into myself. The cave of the camper became darker, and I wanted to vanish inside of it. My look of hurt, of disappointment, was also a strategy, though it didn’t always work, but when it did, my tormentor would take pity on me and drop his game. This time, the moment was interrupted by my grandfather’s return. He arrived holding a few cassette tapes, and with his free hand, he reached up to grab the camper door.

“Excuse me, boy,” Abuelo said. His voice sounded so kind and feminine that it made me angry. The one time I might have excused my grandfather’s rudeness, that acidic tongue he used on me too often was not there.

The young man rolled out of the way as my grandfather closed the door on me, and I was again protected inside. A minute later, we were on the road once more, headed for Zacapu. Abuelo tested one of the tapes. The speakers were latched to the inside of the camper, which is why my grandparents turned the volume up, high enough so that they could hear from the cabin. I was locked inside with the violins and guitars, the high-pitched pirekua singers, no Purépecha vocabulary and no marbles in my pocket. I saw the young man through the small back window, and I forgave him.
because he had less than I did, and I had the luxury of summer travel, clean American clothes, and, if I really wanted them, toys, shiny and new. And yet I envied him because on his rusty old bicycle, he could be himself because, unlike me, he was undeniably free.