Autobiography of My Hungers

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In Purépecha, the town’s name means “rock,” though we have been chipping away at it for generations, flattening the landscape and replacing the boulders with brick.

The Purépecha are my paternal grandmother’s people. Short and dark, like many of us, they come down from the mountains to sell chapatas and nopales. They do not please the bank tellers when they walk through the doors in dusty sandals and rebozos cradling crying babies.

Purépecha songs are called pirekuas. Festive but sometimes melancholy, they are crooned with guitar, and late at night when Abuela thinks everyone’s asleep.

“I want to learn more Purépecha,” I said to Abuela as I put my head to her breast; she had just taught me to say tortilla—chúscuta. But then Abuelo burst in: “Don’t be stupid. You’ll have to learn English where you’re going.”

I bit down on the words to keep them in my mouth a little longer: Purépecha, chúscuta, pirekua, Zacapu. The afternoon light dissolved into the evening like salt in the bowl of soup.