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My Memory, or Lack Thereof

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My Memory, or Lack Thereof

By Yolanda Cesareo Zacarias

I remember the eight houses I've lived in.

Some more than others,
although I'm not too sure why.

Could it be that they all had
a vibrant garden –
succulents sucking the sun, lilies imitating the clouds
the purple drooping flowers, crying yellow tear-
drops – crafted by my dad's swollen thumbs?

Or could it be that in each house
I have memories of my mother coming home
burrowed underneath her leather work gear
her chaparreras, flopping onto a worn couch,
bathed in dirt, sweat, and the scent of broccoli
as she lifted her tiny feet
so that I could unlace her boots?

Or maybe it's the memory from Apt B,
when Edgar climbed up on the church roof
to grab la pelota
the blue paint on the walls, a sky-blue hue,
the same shade I felt in my stomach
at his funeral a week later.

Or perhaps it's the gunshots and the sirens
all around my East Side?

Or the gray-hooded man – bullets piercing into his chest –
falling to the ground –
outside of the red corner store where I'd buy
mazapan De la Rosa?

Or the pain underneath my face
one thousand needles piercing my skin
as I tripped over the uneven sidewalk?

Or is it that all the moments
sitting around a worn-down dinner table
eating pan dulce –
soft conchas that melted in my mouth,
and coffee thick in the air –
have all blurred together?

Or maybe I—?

Maybe I don't remember the houses
because they were all the same:
two bedrooms for thirteen children and both my parents;
bunk beds and mattresses from garage sales—
two to three bodies squeezing into each.

Maybe I don't remember the houses
because I buried my nose in books,
breathing in the pages
wishing the words would write me away
to a world where I couldn't hear the screaming.

Maybe I don't remember the houses
because I can still hear Joan Sebastian
and Leo Dan
as I pick out the best candy
and light a veladora so she can find me
— an ofrenda for my sister who barely had the chance to
breathe.

There was a small brown coffee table—
wooden, chipped along the edges—
that survived all the moves—
used as a desk
where I taught my little brother to read and write—
two of the most valuable weapons—
because every sibling raised the next
and he was my responsibility at the time—
today, my greatest treasure.

— This was in the mustard yellow house
with the brick red roof on Alma St.
— with the huge backyard filled
with a small pumpkin patch
(could you believe they sprout from yellow-orange flowers?),
and a garden full of tomatoes, carrots, pomegranates, limes,
and various yerbas.

My oldest sister, and second mother, cooked our meals,
with that huge silver pot that never gave up—
no matter how many times the flames flicked it—
caldo de rez, sopa de fideo, tamales, pozole, menudo.

I do remember.

There was a house we painted –
outside a soft pink –
what a rose would be if it wasn't associated with love – i
nside a vanilla cream
and the bathroom a pastel green
I memorized the address to this one.

Then the beige house with two stories.
I prayed this would be the last,
but there were two more to follow that.

By the last sunshine yellow,
the sun had died and the night came to
collect us.

Its bittersweet realizing we're not the same residents
from Apt B, the pink house on 1211 Rider,
not even the ones on Tecopa Way.
hardly any of us speak now, but I know
we all hold pieces to our puzzled memories.

These are my shades of brown.
the deep chocolate mocha, chocolate de abuelita, café negro,
or with a dollop of milk, my golden caramelo, hints of red
and russet, a light cream, stirred with canela and a few
teaspoons of golden-brown sugar.