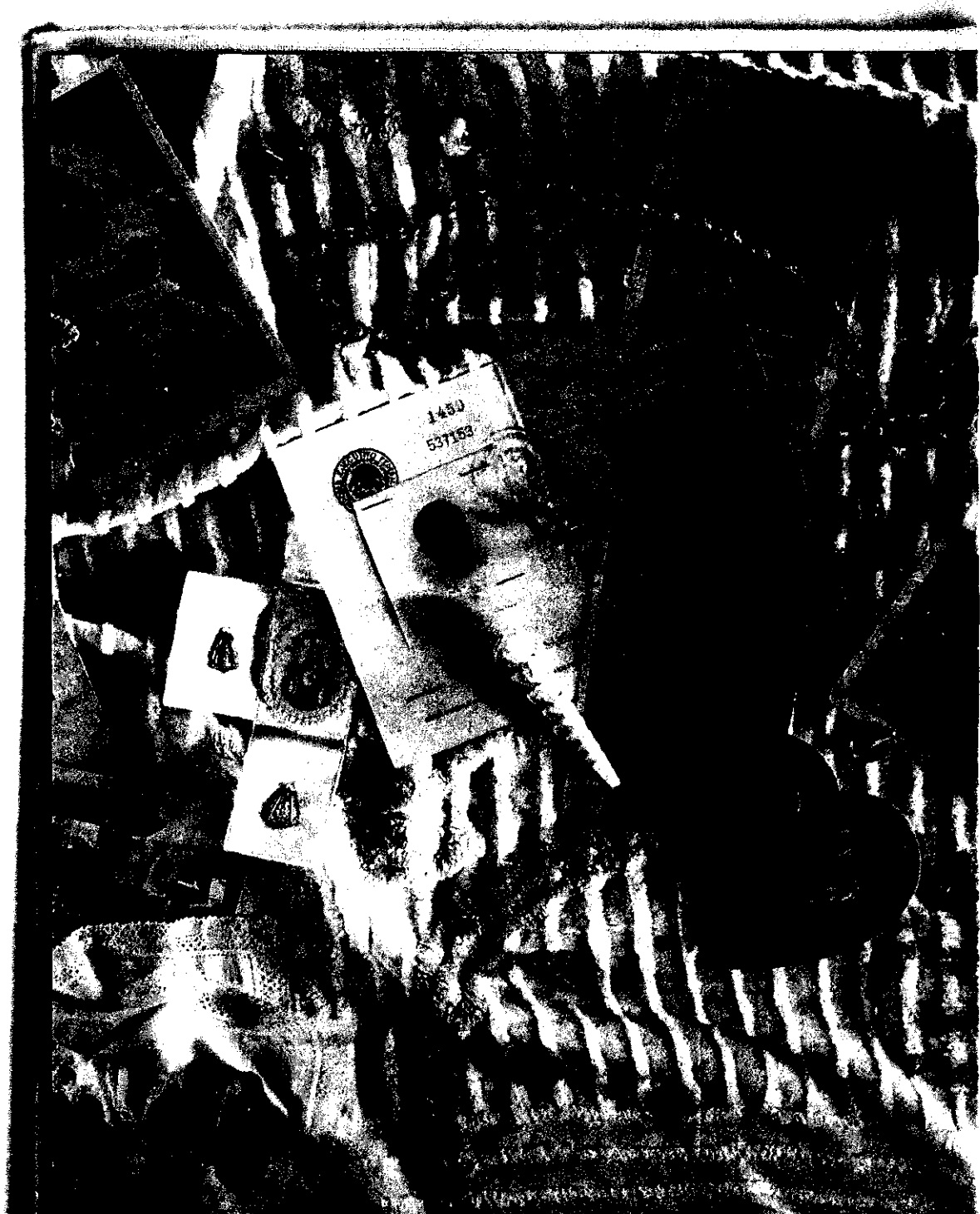


FORMA BUENA CANI

# CANÍCULA

*Snapshots of a Good Day  
by La Frontera*

UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO  
Albuquerque



Brinca la tablita,  
Yo ya la brinqué,  
Bríncala de vuelta,  
Yo ya me cansé.

*Children's game*

All photographs are *memento mori*.

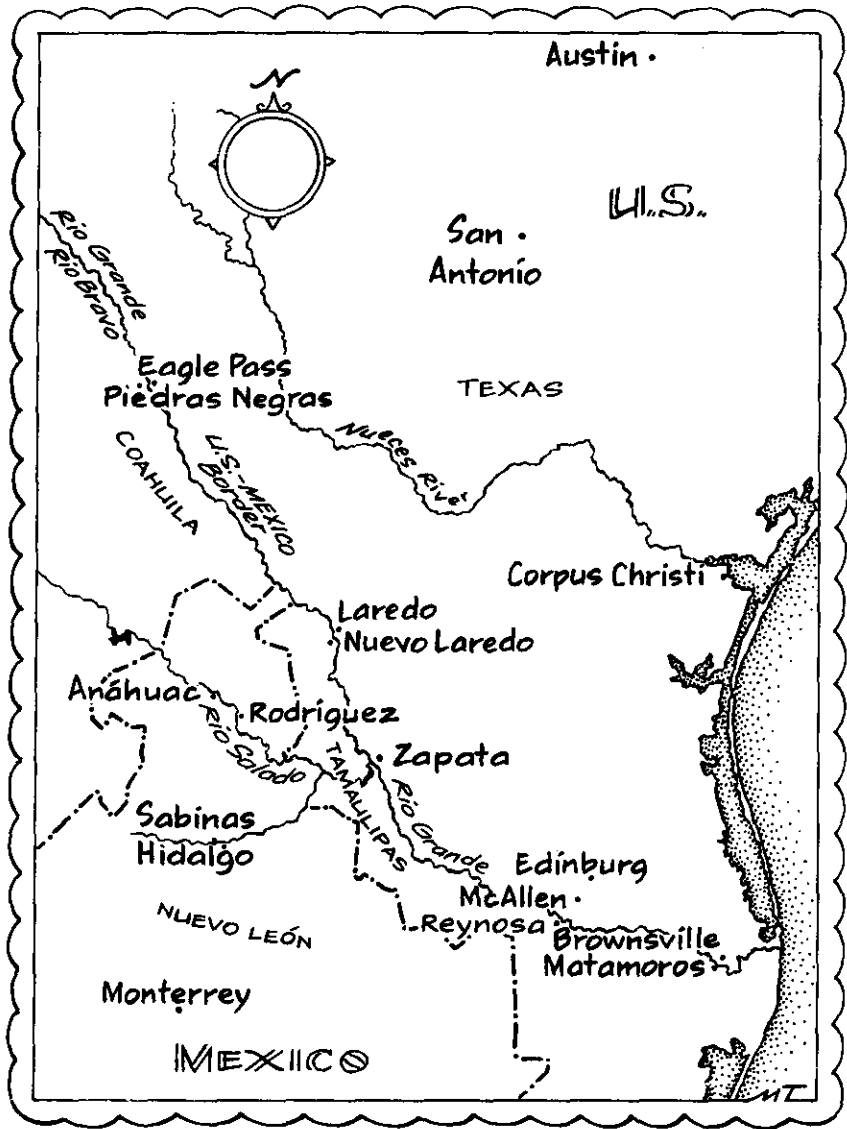
*Susan Sontag*

The U.S.–Mexican border es una herida abierta  
where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds.

*Gloria Anzaldúa*

## Contents

<i>Introduction</i> xii	<i>Margarita</i> 43	<i>Outings</i> 90
<i>Prologue</i> 1	<i>Blue Stroller</i> 45	<i>Summer Reading</i> 92
<i>Las Piscas</i> 3	<i>Lola's Wedding</i> 47	<i>La Escuelita</i> 93
<i>May</i> 4	<i>Mase</i> 49	<i>La Cueva</i> 95
<i>Crossings</i> 5	<i>Nena at Three</i> 53	<i>The Fire</i> 97
<i>Rocking Horse</i> 5	<i>Last Piñata</i> 54	<i>Susto</i> 98
<i>On the Bridge</i> 7	<i>Communions</i> 56	<i>Romana</i> 99
<i>The Flood</i> 9	<i>Panchita</i> 57	<i>El Mercado</i> 100
<i>Pepa</i> 11	<i>Body Hair</i> 60	<i>First School</i> 102
<i>Esperanza</i> 12	<i>Declamación</i> 62	<i>Santa María</i> 103
<i>Tino</i> 14	<i>Doña Carmen</i> 63	<i>Dahlia Two</i> 105
<i>Perpetuo Socorro</i> 15	<i>Polka Dots</i> 64	<i>The Wedding</i> 107
<i>Papi's Horse</i> 15	<i>Don Vicente</i> 64	<i>Tía Nicha</i> 108
<i>Mamagrande</i> 16	<i>A Baby</i> 65	<i>Kites</i> 112
<i>Los Pulido</i> 18	<i>Martha's Mamagrande</i> 66	<i>Matachines</i> 113
<i>Dahlia One</i> 19	<i>Halloween</i> 68	<i>Fever</i> 114
<i>Mexican Citizen</i> 21	<i>Camposanto</i> 70	<i>Fridays</i> 115
<i>Bueli</i> 24	<i>Huesario</i> 71	<i>Nun's Habit</i> 116
<i>Azalia</i> 25	<i>Lucita</i> 72	<i>The Beach</i> 118
<i>Ojo de Agua</i> 26	<i>Treky-treat</i> 73	<i>Cowboy Boots</i> 118
<i>First Steps</i> 28	<i>Elisa</i> 75	<i>Susirio</i> 120
<i>Third Grade</i> 29	<i>Tina One</i> 78	<i>Abijada</i> 121
<i>Políticos</i> 30	<i>Chalo</i> 79	<i>Pancho</i> 121
<i>Nacho</i> 31	<i>Tina Two</i> 82	<i>Healings</i> 122
<i>Cowgirl</i> 33	<i>Bodas de Oro</i> 82	<i>Piojos</i> 124
<i>Comadres</i> 35	<i>Tía Chita</i> 83	<i>Memo</i> 125
<i>Parade</i> 37	<i>Tía Piedad</i> 84	<i>René</i> 127
<i>China Poblana One</i> 38	<i>Christmas</i> 87	<i>Martin High</i> 130
<i>China Poblana Two</i> 40	<i>Henrietta</i> 88	
<i>Green Organza</i> 42		



## Introduction

This work is the second part of a trilogy that goes from the late 1800s to the late 1900s. The first part, *Papeles de Mujer*, consists of correspondence and documents that tell the story of a family in the geographical space between Monterrey, Mexico, and San Antonio, Texas, from 1880 to 1950. That work is entirely in Spanish. The third work is titled *Cabañuelas* and continues the story to the end of the twentieth century. As in most fiction, many of the characters and situations in these three works originate in real people and events, and become fictionalized. In *Canícula*, the story is told through the photographs, and so what may appear to be autobiographical is not always so. On the other hand, many of the events are completely fictional, although they may be true in a historical context. For some of these events, there are photographs; for others, the image is a collage; and in all cases, the result is entirely of my doing. So although it may appear that these stories are my family's, they are not precisely, and yet they are. But then again, as Pat Mora claims, life en la frontera is raw truth, and stories of such life, fictitious as they may be, are even truer than true. I was calling the work fictional autobiography, until a friend suggested that they really are ethnographic and so if it must fit a genre, I guess it is fictional autobioethnography. The *canícula* of the title refers both to the time when I wrote the bulk of the material—the dog days of 1993—and to the idea of a particularly intense part of the summer when most cotton is harvested in South Texas, at that time

because of the intense heat, it is said, not even dogs venture out. Canícula: the time between July 14 and August 24, according to my father. In my childhood scheme of things, it is a miniseason that falls between summer and fall. The subtitle merely prepares the reader for what is to come, for this is not a narrative strung out in keeping with Freytag's pyramid: it does not adhere to conventions of plot development. Instead it is a collage of stories gleaned from photographs randomly picked, not from a photo album chronologically arranged, but haphazardly pulled from a box of photos where time is blurred. The story emerges from photographs, photographs through which, as Roland Barthes claimed, the dead return; the stories mirror how we live life in our memories, with our past and our present juxtaposed and bleeding, seeping back and forth, one to the other in a recursive dance.

Norma Elia Cantú

## ~ Prologue ~

In 1980 a car hits a man on a busy Paris street. Roland Barthes dies. The next morning, at the Cafe Colón in Madrid, a woman reads about the accident in *Ei Fais* over café con leche and churros. In Paris a few weeks later she buys *Nouvel Observateur* and reads it cover to cover; it's a special issue on Roland Barthes. His book, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* is published.

In 1980 on the squeaky iron bed in a seventh-floor piso in Madrid two lovers intently go over photographs kept in an old cigar box. Photographs, snapshots, and formal studio photos, yellowing and brittle cover the antique linen bedspread, embroidered and edged with lace. The cigar smell sticks to the photos like the fine dust of time. The woman pieces together her lover's life—the parents smile from black-and-white photos taken before the Spanish Civil War, the war that took the father and left the mother a widow. A baby—cherubic—sits on a manto and gives the camera a wary look; he's an only son. An old girlfriend from England—young, wearing a sweater called a jersey pronounced "hersay" (she's wearing a jersey called a Rebecca after the character in the movie *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*)—her blonde hair very fifties, smiles at the camera, dedicates the photo, "To the one I love." He has offered his life in a sheaf of photos to an intimate stranger from an unknown land he cannot fathom, a land as far from Spain as the unknown, between two countries—Mexico and the United States—a land that's to her as far as last night's dream after listening to *La Traviata* and the dinner he cooked, chicken in red wine sauce, el vino tinto reminding her of her mother's red-blood roses. A land that's to him as far as the moon that waxes in the bluepurple sky above the treetops. She has no photographs to offer, to

share her life through. Her photographs, silent witnesses of her life, her history, lie an ocean away, across the Atlantic, across the United States, across Texas, at the borderland where Mexico meets Texas. Her childhood home on San Carlos Street holds the photographs of her life; these are stuffed in shoe boxes tied with old shoelaces, treasured and safe in that land in between that she calls *la frontera*, the land where her family has lived and died for generations.

In 1985, back in that safe space, between two countries, the woman Nena and her mother bring out the boxes, untie the white-turned-yellow shoelaces, and begin going through the memories. The smell of the past trapped along with the memories. For days, for weeks, for months, they hold the photographs reverently, and the stories come to them. Sometimes the sisters—Dahlia, Esperanza, Azalia, Margarita, Xóchitl—join them and then leave, taking their memories of things, the younger ones not remembering stories, only images, brief descriptions of how they wore a favorite dress; they grieve for a long-past missed birthday, remember a sisterly fight over a long-forgotten childish thing. The father too, curious, interrupts, contributes stories. They continue, the mother filling in gaps for the daughter, of before, of the times before and during that she has forgotten, or changed in her mind—the family, the neighbors, celebrations, events. Some they both experienced yet remember differently; they argue amiably, each sticking to her version of what happened.

The woman Nena begins to shape her story, drawing it out as carefully as when she ripped a seam for her mother, slowly and patiently so the cloth could be re sewn without trace of the original seam. The stories of her girlhood in that land in-between, *la frontera*, are shared; her story and the stories of the people who lived that life with her is one. But who'll hear it?

## ~ Las Piscas ~

On a hot, hot, hot August day, the chicharras' drone forces me to the present; they madly hum incessantly, insistently. A long row of cotton to be picked, capullos de algodón, nothing moves; the dust has settled on the green leaves and on my skin. El olor a sudor, mi sudor, heavy odor of sweat I wear with the blue plaid flannel shirt. Can't get away from it. As comforting in its intimacy as Mami's sweet scent of talcum powder and sweat. Sun so bright it hurts my eyes, barely look at it and I see bright red spots. Sweat runs in rivulets along my back. The acrid smell of the pesticide nauseates, sticks to the cushy, dusty white fruit, glassy fibers in my fingers as I pull as carefully as when I pick a burr off my socks. I hold and stash tiny white filaments soft as *barbas de chivo* weed we harvest from Doña Carmen's fence when playing comadritas. Slowly, I fill the saca, custom made by Mami to fit a nine-year-old shoulder. It'll bring fifty cents or even maybe a dollar. Don Guillermo writing it all down in his book when I go with Papi to empty it in the truck. Strange insects—frailesillos, chinches, garrapatas, hormigas—some or all of these pests—ticks, fleas, tiny spiders the color of sand—some or all of these bichos—find their way to exposed ankles, arms, necks and suck life-blood, leaving welts, ronchas—red and itchy—and even pus-filled ampulas that burst and burn with the sun. In the photo, smiles belie tired, aching feet and backs; smiles on serious faces, stiff bodies posed for life. And in the distance the river slithers silently down to the end, or the beginning. High above in the heavens a speck of metal—a jet from the north—flies south, leaves a trail of white cloud as a tail on a homemade paper kite.



## ~ May ~

Dahlia, Bueli, Tino, cousin Lalo, and I pose one balmy May evening in front of the four-room frame house on San Carlos Street. I and Dahlia wear white organdy—recycled first communion garb. I am all long skinny legs and arms and a flash of white teeth. Later we'll pick flowers—bouquets of tiny pink blossoms, san dieguito, clumps of sweet smelling, ivory-white jasmynes, flecks of white on green stems, recedad, bright white daisies we call margaritas, and leafy spiky deep-green ferns, fine as thread—to offer them to Mary at San Luis Rey Church as we sing "O María, Madre mía, o consuelo del mortal, ampararnos y guiarnos a la puerta celestial." And pray the rosary. The smell of incense so strong I want to faint; instead I'll count the lines on the inside of my wrist—each stands for twenty years of my life according to my cousin Pepa. I'll dream of going to Monterrey and eating a pirulí—a candy that really lasts all day long, and you place it in a glass of water overnight so it'll keep. And later after the rosary and the walk and the cup of yerbabuena tea, I lie on

*to wear  
it like a girl!*

the floor out on the porch on a thick colcha and count the stars, *sin cuenta*! I smile at the joke, *without count* sounding like the number *fifty*—*cincuenta*—all at once. And maybe wish on a falling star that May will forever be like this.

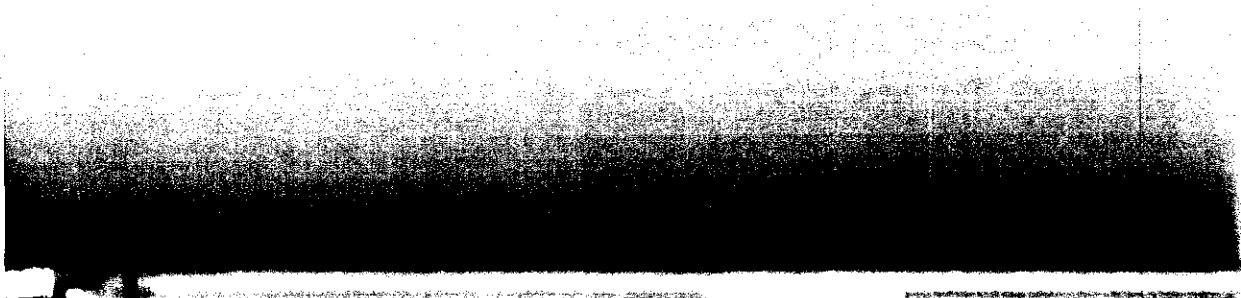
## ~ Crossings ~

Bueli and Mami and Papi crossed the bridge on foot from one Laredo to the other; they took turns carrying me, or maybe only pushing my blue stroller. Chirinola, our dog, came too, papers and all. It was 1948. For Bueli the move brought back memories, mental photographs gone now, except for the stories she told: how in 1935 she and Maurilio, my Texas-born grandfather, and their two young daughters packed all their belongings and drove their pickup truck down from San Antonio. They felt lucky; most deportees left with nothing but the clothes on their back—sent in packed trains to the border on the way to Mexico, even those who were U.S. citizens. She told of crossing from one Laredo to the other and losing everything—Buelito's pride and joy, a black Ford pickup truck and all their belongings—to the corrupt customs officials at the border. Tía Nicha still talks of how weeks later she saw a little girl wearing her dress—a mint green dress she'd hemmed herself with pastel blue thread, a memorable dress so unlike the ugly, drab, navy-blue uniforms of Sacred Heart Elementary School. But there was nothing to be done, except cry and go on. And in 1948 crossing meant coming home, but not quite.



### ~ *Rocking Horse* ~

I ride the rocking horse Buelito's built from discarded wood planks, painted the color of the red coyoles—red as memories. My feet sandaled in brown huaraches from Nuevo Laredo with tiny green nopales and the tinier red pears, tunas, painted on the delicate leather. A white ribbon holds flimsy black curls away from my face; wisps of rebellious curls escape. Mami has made my sundress, blue like the sky, and embroidered tiny pink rosebuds on the handmade smocking—just like the ones she made when she worked as a seamstress at the dress factory. I wear a serious face; riding a horse is serious business at age two. Even as I squint in the noon-time sun, I look straight at the camera at Mami who's kneeling on one knee to be at eye level with me. The screened front door and the window of the house on San Francisco Street where Tino was born frames



us, me and my red horse. Blood-red verbena on the ground, tall-leaf coyoles bloom red in the background. The ride's bumpy on the gravel front yard, but I hold on as tight as if I were riding the real pony I long for—the sad-looking pinto that we ride round and round at the carnival. Because I'm the oldest, I am the beneficiary of Buelito's carpentry skills; he makes toys from wooden spools and toothpicks and rubber bands. Later, when we live on Santa María, the same year Dahlia is born, he'll build a tiny table and chair for me and my dolls. There I'll sit and drink Chocomilk and galletas marías when I come home from Sra. Piña's escuelita where I learn to count and sing and declamar poems for Mother's Day: "Si vieras mamita, que lindas flores / amarillas y azules / de mil colores / aquí las veo abiertas / acá en botón / pero todas alegran mi corazón" and "Un lunes por la mañana me decía mi mamá / levántate, Azucena, si no le digo a tu papá / y yo siendo una niña de carta cabal / me quedaba calladita / ¿Qué no me oyes, lucero? / ¿Lucero? si ni candil soy!" Buelito, who is sometimes gone, has come to be with us for awhile. I ride a red rocking horse to the rhythm of lullabies, look at Mami, and suddenly cry. My tears are round stains on the smock of the pinafore, a darker shade of blue.

### ~ On the Bridge ~

We're crossing the bridge sometime before the flood when the street photographer snaps the picture. Mami holds Esperanza; three of us stand huddled around her. We've been shopping at the Mercado Maclovio Herrera in Nuevo Laredo; we carry bags she calls *redes* full of meat, sugar, tomatoes, groceries. Papi's gone to work in construction and only comes home once a month. Sometimes, she sends Tino and me to run these errands. We make the rounds at the mercado, go to the butcher's and buy red juicy meat and have it ground by Raúl who winks as he puts in a pilón; we go to Rangel's for cookies—galletas marías and morenas—and

sugar, piloncillo, and dark aguacates which he carefully cuts in half, satisfying U.S. Department of Agriculture requirements he extracts the pit so we can legally cross them to the United States and closes them again, like fine carved wood boxes. We carefully count out the money, figuring out the exchange pesos to dollars. Tino gets a shoeshine at the plaza across from Santo Niño de Atocha Church, I eat fruit—perhaps a slice of watermelon, pineapple, or jícama—sprinkled with red chili powder; we drink jamaica from tall glasses, the red thirst-quencher fills my bladder; I must go. At the Mercado Maclovio Herrera baths I stand in line, crossing one leg over the other as I stand and wait, about to burst; the old woman who sits by the toilets carefully cuts thin brownish tissue paper; hands it to me, I hand her a veinte, a Mexican coin brown and fat. Ritualized exchange. The smell of disinfectant can't disguise the other smell, stronger and overpowering, that lies underneath, makes me want to gag; I hurry. Come out to the blinding, shining sunlight. We walk, cross the bridge, resting every half block or so, resting our arms, sore from carrying the heavy redes. We take the bus home.

In the photo Mami squints in the sun, she is beautiful and angry, impatient. The weight of all of us on her shoulders. Soon, Papi quits the construction job with Zachry Construction. Too many nights away from home, working in strange cities called Waco and Odessa. Buys an old grey Nash that looks like a giant water bug, the headlights two puffy eyes. He finds work at the smelter where Tío Güero and Antonio, our neighbor, work, and with them will be laid off periodically. During those times the trips to Laredo, Mexico, are put on hold; only for emergencies do we cross—to see the doctor, to visit an ill relative, or to pay a manda at Santo Niño de Atocha Church. Tino and I miss our adventures, our sojourns al otro lado. Now Papi takes Tino to get haircuts and shoes shined while Mami and I buy *Confidencias*, a women's magazine I'll read a escondidas, during siesta time. Hiding in the backyard, under the pirul,

I'll read "Cartas que se extraviaron," and pretend the love letters are for me, or that I wrote them, making the tragic stories mine. I pretend I'm a leading star—María Félix, Miroslava, Silvia Pinal. During recess, I retell the stories to Sanjuana and Anamaría, embellishing to fit my plots.

## ~ *The Flood* ~

A scary flood, threatening and overwhelming. The massive bridge, wiped away as if it were a matchstick toy like the ones Buelito makes for me. And the people gather in the streets, the men home from the smelter, the factory, the store because of the disaster. Salinases, Mendozas, Treviños, Bacas, Valdezes and Sánchezes, all have gathered in our front yard. We fear disaster. But as they listen to the radio—to the announcers talking on and on all afternoon—the fear becomes commonplace. Late into the night we play "a la roña," chasing each other—the adults don't seem to care if we stay up. We are ready to evacuate; clothes and a few possessions packed in pillowcases, in boxes, in paper sacks, we wait. Finally, the word comes: Zacate Creek is rising; we must leave and go to the high school gym on San Bernardo for the night. And we sleep safe and sound, exhausted by waiting, playing, fearing. The next day we come home. The flood without rain has come and gone. Back home, we find the water stopped at our doorstep. Our homes are safe, for they sit high on stilts. But the raging water took what it could: our stairs, the mailbox; it uprooted peach trees, but the orange and grapefruit trees held on, as did the mesquite, the huisache, and the pirul, the pirul struck by lightning only three years later. Mami's roses, her hibiscus we know as tulipanes, the jasmine, recedad, the ferns are all gone.

Later, we brave a bridge that swings, made of wood and rope, to cross the river to check on friends and family who, not so fortunate as we, have lost their house, their furniture, everything to the cleansing, avenging waters. Bueli prays other prayers, not just the usual, "Vente Azucena, no

te quedas," and I, wanting to assure her that I'm not staying with the river spirits, repeat as if chanting, "ay voy, ay voy, ay voy" as we cross the river, going and coming. The toy bridge swinging, and I holding on to Bueli as she prays. Now we fear illness, typhoid, crippling polio, some because of the flood, others whose origins are mysterious. So we wait for hours and hours standing in line for immunization shots and for water and for more immunization shots that hurt. Most kids cry, but I am courageous, shut my eyes tight to keep from crying; my brother follows my lead and tears come, but he doesn't scream, but Dahlia runs and runs, all over the grounds around the high school, crying, wanting to escape the inevitable, embarrassing us all. Mami's fears multiply with the stories of kids who get polio and fevers so severe they kill. Bueli lights candles to the image of the Virgen de San Juan by her bed—the one that glows silvery in the dark and is grey over old rose in the light of day. One Sunday morning we pile into Compadre Leo's car. Before the sun's even up, we're on our way to the shrine for the Virgen in San Juan, down in the Valley, to thank the Virgen for sparing our house. The photo shows five adults—Mami, Papi, Leo, Tina, Bueli—and five children standing before Compadre Leo's Ford. We come home late that night, tired and sweaty. I pretend to sleep. When Bueli tries to wake me, I make myself heavy until Compadre Leo carries me in, lays me on the bed. "She's a seven-year-old baby," I hear Mami say.

After the flood, Mami and Bueli begin again, all year they plant, sharing cuttings from neighbors' plants that have survived: hibiscus, jasmines, ferns and roses, and a brand new gardenia bush right under the bedroom window to sweeten the night air. And Bueli's herbs—ruda for earaches, albahcar, estafiate for fevers, romero, and yerbabuena for everything. The store where our neighbor Don Vicente works, only a block from the bridge, is ruined. Soon, only watermarks on the walls of banks, stores, offices, reminders of loss, of fear, remain along with photographs from the newspaper like the one Mami has saved along with her photos.

## ~ Pepa ~

At my cousin Pepa's quinceañera they serve chicken in mole, a rich chocolaty sauce, and I try to be neat, but it's impossible. And there I am, a wisp of a girl, smiling at the camera, my arms strategically crossed trying to hide red-brown mole spots on my pastel yellow dress, a hand-me-down from Chelito, Mami's friend who lives in Corpus Christi. Pepa's hand rests on my shoulder, and I know I'm her favorite cousin. My best friend Anamaría claims Pepa's not really my cousin, claims that Tía Trine and my uncle never married. But, I don't care, she's still my favorite. She paints my nails with red, red polish; combs, braids, curls my hair. She was there to comfort me when Mami pierced my ears, strung red floss, then placed tiny gold loops through the needlewide holes. She treats me like a little sister, wants me next to her on the photo taken in their backyard. The smell of orange blossoms intoxicating, drawing the bees that Quico, Pepa's youngest brother teases. They sting him; he cries. But no sound comes forth until he turns purple and finally lets out a scream that brings everyone to him. Everyone has remedies: cobwebs, no that's for cuts; mud, no that's for insect bites, well, maybe; ice-cubes; mashed rue; aloe vera. But, Tía Trine will have none of that and scolds him and tells him he deserves it for playing with bees. Soon he's playing with the rest of us; after all it was only two bees that got him. But now he cautiously plays on the other side of the yard by the fig tree and away from the orange trees. At the dinner, Dahlia cries and screams: she wants a grownup plate. Mami's embarrassed, but Tía Trine brings a plate just like the adults' with jalapeños and all, sets it before two-year-old Dahlia on the picnic table, and she's happy. Later, she'll cry and scream again to see Mami and Papi dancing to Isidro López on the record player. Mami excuses Dahlia's crankiness saying, "She's just chípil." And it's true, Mami's pregnant. Esperanza comes soon after that.

## ~ Esperanza ~

It's a cold January night. I've laid out my clothes for school. Said my prayers, made the sign of the cross over my pillow three times like Bueli has taught me. In the middle of the night I awaken to commotion and crying. "It's okay," Bueli calms me, "it's only the cats fighting." I go back to sleep. In the morning, I'm surprised Mami's not in the kitchen, but still in bed. Bueli's making tortillas and chorizo con huevo for breakfast, she's fixing Papi's lunchbox. "There's a surprise for you, a new sister," Papi says and takes a sip of coffee. In the bed, a tiny little bundle. A baby no bigger than Gatón, my cat, suckles at Mami's breast. I'm fascinated, full of questions. By now I know that babies aren't bought at the store like when I was trained to say that I was bought at the Mercado Maclovio Herrera in Nuevo Laredo and Tino at Kress's in Laredo. But all Mami will say is Carlota came in the night and brought this real live doll with her. Carlota who comes and sits under the pirul, talking while Bueli and Mami quilt. Carlota who laughs so loud I think she's crying. How? Why? I don't want to go to school, especially when Carlota, the partera, arrives to check on Mami and the baby. I want to carry the baby, bathe her, wake her up, teach her to talk, sing her to sleep as I swing the cradle. But I have to go to school, where I brag about my new baby sister. A few months later, it's no fun at all to rinse her diapers, burying the mustard yellow mass that stinks worse than rotten eggs and makes my stomach want to come up. I run the tap water straight onto the soiled area, and then pile the diapers into a pail with bleach. Mami or Bueli will boil them in a washtub, set on bricks over a fire, stir them with an old broomstick. Rinse them in another tub. I help, too: hang each diaper, clean-smelling of bleach, on the line with wooden pins a challenge to open for my seven-year-old hands. And I bring them in and fold them before the evening dew comes. The same sereno that heals mouth sores can give the baby a rash.

Only a few days after she arrives, the new baby gets sick and is dying

one night. "She's leaving us," Bueli cries. She's having convulsions, has turned purple. Papi's working the night shift or maybe is working out of town, I feel his absence as fear. Juanita, Mamagrande's entenada, is visiting and offers remedios that don't work. Scared, Mami sends me to Jovita's to use the phone, call a doctor, explain. It's dark and they don't hear my frantic knocking. Pita, their dog wags her tail, greets me with a whine and a cold nose on my bare leg. I use a rock, bang against the screen, the door shut against the cold. Still no answer. I call, "Jovita!" and finally Eusebio hears the Valdez's dogs barking next door and comes to the door, turns on the light, and sees me. I make the call. The doctor speaks English. My words come out in Spanish. I'm terrified, but I understand: she wants the baby in the hospital. Now. Eusebio takes Mami, Esperanza, and Juanita to the hospital. The nurses, the doctor, all are sure she's going to die. Juanita becomes her emergency room madrina as they baptize the three-day-old baby. Mami offers her to the statue of St. Joseph in the waiting room at Mercy Hospital. That's why she's "Esperanza José," the only one with a middle name. The infant so weak and limp she wouldn't even cry is soon screaming for her food, responding to the medicine, surprising everyone. She survives, and comes home. And Juanita, raised by Mamagrande when her own mother died of tuberculosis, becomes Espy's madrina. Eleazar, my neighbor and friend, sits with me under the mesquite, talking. He angers me to tears with his questions: what will we do if the baby dies, what if the illness comes back and she dies? They'll have to bury her, just like they buried her ombligo in the backyard near the mesquite tree, and I remember Papi burying the dark mass, that finally fell leaving a neat belly button on the baby's tummy. I'm furious, I won't play or talk with him for days. And Tía Nicha asks who's my favorite, and I say Esperanza, of course. Why? Well, because, she is. That's all.



~ Tino ~

He did it at four. And again at nine. He stands to the side with his hand out as if pointing a gun or a rifle. Everyone else is crowded around me; the piñata in the shape of a birthday cake sways in the wind above our heads. Everyone's there: aunts, uncles, cousins, the neighbors, my madrina, everyone, even Mamagrande Lupita from Monterrey. I'm holding the stick decorated with red, blue, yellow tissue paper that we will use to break the piñata. And he's playing, even in the picture, at being a soldier. Only ten years later, 1968, he is a soldier, and it's not a game. And we are gathered again: tías, tíos, cousins, comadres, neighbors, everyone, even Mamagrande Lupita from Monterrey, and Papi's cousin Ricardo who's escorted the body home. We have all gathered around a flag-draped coffin. Tino's come home from Vietnam. My brother. The sound of the trumpet caresses our hearts and Mami's gentle sobbing sways in the cool wind of March.

## ~ Perpetuo Socorro ~

On the wall, the image of the Virgen de San Juan, a pale rose background, grayish black outline, shines like silver in the dark. Bueli lights candles when Tino is so sick el Doctor del Valle, the doctor in Laredo, Mexico, fears he will die. He's only three. The illness has taken over. But Papi cries in front of another image of our Lady. It's a calendar from Cristo Rey Church with the image of Nuestra Señora del Perpetuo Socorro. He prays, he weeps, hits the wall with his fists, like he would hit the mesquite tree in the backyard with his head sixteen years later like a wounded animal, mourning, in pain, that morning when Tino's death came to our door. But the child Tino survives the illness, the injections, the medication, the prayers, the remedios—something works, and Papi frames the calendar image in gold leaf, builds the image a repisita—a shelf for candles. In 1968, in his pain, tears running down his face, he'll talk to the image, "For this, you spared my son," he'll take the image down from its place on the wall, cannot bear to see it, to be reminded. On the wall, a rectangle of nothing, the color of the wallpaper Mami had hung for Tío Moy's last visit three years ago, like new—lines of green fern leaves on dusty beige. The votive candle on the tiny shelf still burning to an empty space.

## ~ Papi's Horse ~

My father is on his favorite horse. He wears a hat that casts a shadow over his face, but I can tell he's smiling his "I'm-so-proud-smile." He's young in the photo, it must be in Allende or in one of the nearby ranches where he grew up. In the photo, a huge cedar ash windbreaker sepia-darkens one side of the jacal in the background where a field extends into the sky. The land. My father venerates it, even now as he grows a couple of corn plants, squash, tomatoes. He used to talk of going back

to Mexico, of settling in a small town, Vallecillo, Sabinas, Anáhuac. "A ranchito, to plant again," he'd say. He doesn't mention these plans any more, resigned to arthritic disability, to retirement in Laredo. When we drove to the places where he'd lived as a child the trajectory went from Nuevo Laredo to Anáhuac, Rodríguez, Allende, Piedras Negras—through three Mexican states—Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, Coahuila, all in a day. And he joked about not visiting Las Minas, the mining town of Dolores, Texas, where he'd been conceived.

He tells his grandsons about his favorite horse, the one he'd ride to dances far and wide around Anáhuac, and how he had to shoot the horse he named Rocinante. The stories of the dances invariably lead to the stories about Gonzalo. Gonzalo, the brother who came back from California with the Model T, who loved to dance and tell jokes. In a teary voice he tells how his oldest brother was killed at a dance, at a ranch wedding, defending a friend, how he held him and wept as the uncle I never met breathed his last. And Papagrande would not have revenge and forbade his sons to seek it. My father was but sixteen and his older brother died at thirty-two, leaving two widows, one in Texas and the other in México. At the wake both showed up and Mamagrande was beside herself with grief—and embarrassment. ¡Qué dirá la gente! But no one could deny Tía Trine her mourning. She brought her child to see her dead father and to meet her half-siblings. Defying Papagrande, she stood and received "el pésame" with the rest of the family. And my father rode his Rocinante, and let his moustache grow in memory of his brother, the moustache that darkened as he grew into manhood and has whitened as he has aged into our lives.

### ~ Mamagrande ~

The photo shows a woman sitting surrounded by children—they're her sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters. Mamagrande, after

the move south, she of the blue blood, living in Anáhuac, the house at the parcela, not quite fit for her. Her aquamarine eyes behind gold-framed eyeglasses fill with tears that she dries with beautifully embroidered handkerchiefs. Mamagrande tells me stories of crossing the river "en wayin"—and I imagine a covered wagon like in the movies—and she pregnant with my Dad. Papagrande, the pacifist, made the decision and she followed south, as she had before fleeing the revolution in Mexico, going north to Las Minas, the area of the coal mines—Chanel, Dolores, Palafox. Now they flee again, when men they know who don't speak English are drafted, sent to fight overseas. World War I has come and they're moving again. Papagrande herding the goats, the younger children packed into the wagon, the older ones on horseback, crossing the river to Mexico once again. She holds her dreams in her heart. In the photo the tired woman almost lost among the children. The work, endless. From cooking daily meals—sopa de arroz, guisados, postres for lunch—and fancy festive meals—cabrito, mole, tamales—to keeping the linens whiter than white, fighting the dust and the grime of life on a ranch of a town. The keeping up of appearances, of dignity, of what is right is even more tiring. She yearns for the carefree girl she was, her girlhood house in the town near Monterrey where her ancestors settled newly come from Spain, yearns for servants to launder, iron fine linens, and the pleasures of her girl-life, Mass on Sundays and squash candy or yams with milk and honey. She married at fifteen, she tells me. "When I was your age, I'd birthed two children." Her parents buried in the family crypt in the main cemetery in Monterrey. Her children buried in Nuevo Laredo, in Dolores, in Anáhuac. Her pains and her joys buried in her heart, her hands ever busy crocheting, embroidering, knitting, quilting. The work never stops, her handkerchief a la mano in her apron pocket ever ready for the tears of joy or of pain. Mamagrande.

## ~ Los Pulido ~

Only four of the sixteen stand shyly in our front porch. Socorro, Leonor, Toño, Irene. Sofía, Mercedes, Fidel, Elena, Lucía, Clementina, Patricia, Javier, Sara, Emilio, Josefina, and Cecilia: names of eight born in Mexico and then the other eight born in the States. A family Comadre Fina wouldn't have imagined as a child growing up in the Anglo-owned ranch near Big Wells, Texas. But such is life; "así es la vida," she would exclaim, sitting under the pirul chatting with Mami, her comadre. She was U.S.-born and married to a real Mexican macho who wooed her back to Mexico with promises of wealth. Wouldn't leave his mother's side when Comadre Fina gave him the ultimatum—she pregnant with her ninth, Lucía, who lived only three years. Así es la vida. No, he didn't come join her in the United States until Lucía died; his own mother died a month after his daughter. Four of them, the Pulidos, in the faded black-and-white picture, I can't even tell who they are. But Pulido they are; "borrados" we called them because of their light skin and hazel eyes. In the photo they grin shyly, and I feel their embarrassment; the other kids tease them and call them "mojados" because they are new to the neighborhood, although they have come from Big Wells and not directly from Mexico. The same kids called mojados by the white kids pick on them. They will soon leave to work the fields in the Midwest—Nebraska, Wisconsin, Michigan—only to return in the fall, way after school has begun. Years later, after the older ones marry, they'll move to California, change their migrant route and travel only in that state, following the crops, buy a piece of land in the middle of an orange grove near Fresno. Así es la vida. But while still our neighbors, they have corn tortilla tacos with beans for breakfast—so unlike our own flour tortillas filled with papas con huevo. Still, we all drink the same café con leche Pet each morning before going to school.

## ~ Dahlia One ~

It's Dahlia's first birthday; that very same day she learns to walk. We've gathered around a piñata for a photograph. In the background a cubreviento—the one that tells me stories about birds and frogs, until I find out trees don't talk. We live in a barrio called Cantarranas, and on those rare nights when thunder lights up the night sky and the rains come, Bueli tells us about La Llorona, for if one listens very carefully, in the midst of the crying of the frogs one can almost hear the wailing of a woman looking for her children along the river banks. The story never varies and sometimes I fall asleep before Bueli ends with "colorín colorado éste cuento se ha acabado." But other times I am full of questions left unanswered by the story and by Bueli, who teases me calling me a lawyer always full of questions. She embellishes the story, but she never answers my questions: why would she kill her own children? Why would she then cry for them? Why, if she lived by the river, didn't we ever see her? Were there other children? How many were there? What were their ages, their names?—none of that matters—the tale never answers my questions.

A while later. I must be five, for I have forgotten the language of trees, we have moved to Las Cruces, a barrio farther away from the river, and La Llorona now wails along Zacate Creek a couple of blocks behind our new home—a small four-room frame house built on stilts. She's still looking for her lost children—my mother tells me—so I am never to go near the creek; La Llorona might mistake me for one of her lost children and take me with her, and I must also watch and make sure my younger siblings don't go near the water either. La Llorona, a bedtime tale, Bueli would tell her wide-eyed grandchildren on the rare rainy nights in Laredo in a barrio named Cantarranas, singing frogs along the banks of the Rio Grande, Rio Bravo. In the photo, Dahlia

who has taken her very first steps, smiles a toothless grin, I hold her pudgy one-year-old hand in mine; La Llorona is far away, as Bueli, wearing her good dress, the blue one with tiny white flowers all over, holds my hand.



140...  
537153



*Agucina Ranta*

DOMICILIO VICTORIA H. 301 Ciudad...

ESTA FORMA SE EXPIDE GRATUITAMENTE

Al portador (a) ...  
se le expide la presente por haber demostrado su nacionalidad MEXICANA, estando autorizado (a) para salir y regresar al país sin más requisito que la presentación de esta tarjeta.

MEDIA FILIACION

Estadía *en México*  
Color *Blanco*  
Ojos *Verdes*  
Pelo *negro*  
Señas particulares *Ninguna visible.*

Lugar de nacimiento *México - Arriaga - Oaxaca*

Fecha de nacimiento *3 de Enero 1941*

Ocupación *menor*

Estado Civil *menor*

La tarjeta se emite el día *10 de Abril* de 194*6*

EL JEFE DEL SERVICIO DE POBLACION  
*[Signature]*

~ Mexican Citizen ~

In the photo stapled to my official U.S. immigration papers, I am a one-year-old baldy, but the eyes are the same that stare back at me at thirteen when I look in the mirror and ask "Who am I?" and then go and cut my hair standing there in front of the mirror, just like Mia Farrow's in Peyton Place; Papi has a fit. The eyes are the same as the ones on another photo where I am twelve—this one stapled to a document that claims I am a Mexican citizen so I can travel with Mamagrande into Mexico without my parents. We sit for hours waiting at the consulado on Farragut Street until our number is called and the cheery clerk talks to Mamagrande, takes the papers to a mysterious back room to have the cónsul sign, and finally returns. The papers flourishingly signed and decorated with an official stamp—I am declared a Mexican national. I can travel back to Mexico without my parents. I stare into the camera a shy skinny twelve-year-old anxious about body hair and developing breasts that seem to be growing

FILIACION

Edad: 16 años  
Estado Civil: soltera  
Profesion: estudiante  
Estatura: 1.62 mts.  
Color: moreno  
Ojos: cafés  
Pelo: negro  
Señas particulares: ningunas



Lugar de nacimiento: Nuevo Laredo, Tamps. 3 enero 1947,  
Domicilio: 104 San Carlos St. Laredo, Texas.

FIRMA DEL PORTADOR

Inserciones:  
Reg. Ext.  
6-890-531.

*Anamaria Castro*

NOTA: Esta Matrícula deberá ser renovada cada dos años

out one larger than the other. Anamaría my best friend confides that that is her fear, too, for as oldest sisters we have been carrying babies almost all our short lives, since December we've been consciously shifting the babies from the right to the left so we won't have one breast larger than the other. We marvel at the bras hung on the line every Monday morning at the Valdezes', Doña Cata must have huge breasts, even bigger than Doña Carmen's, whose bras we've never seen on her line, so we deduce she doesn't wear a bra. We're obsessed by breasts, daily checking our self-perceived asymmetrical protuberances. And talk of when we'll wear bras and how to ask our mothers for bras for next year: how can we go back to eighth grade braless? Such a tragedy! Such a dilemma! But now I'm off to Monterrey with Mamagrande, to her house on Washington Street across from the Alameda. Where my cousins will tease me and call me *pocha* and make me homesick for my U.S. world full of TV—Ed Sullivan and Lucy and Dinah Shore and Lawrence Welk, Bueli's favorite—and Glass Kitchen hamburgers—eight, then six for a dollar on Saturday

afternoons. I'm homesick for parents, and siblings, and bingo at San Luis Rey Church with Concha our neighbor. Cousins. Kind and cruel, ask me to say something in English, I recite, "I pledge allegiance to the flag . . . ;" to sing something, and I sing to them silly nursery rhymes and tell them these are great songs: Humpty Dumpty, Jack and Jill, Little Miss Muffet, Old MacDonald. They listen fascinated, awed, but then they laugh when I don't know their games, "A la víbora, víbora de la mar, de la mar," or their hand-clapping games, "Yo no soy bonita ni lo quiero ser, porque las bonitas se echan a perder." And, "Padre e hija fueron a misa, se encontraron un francés . . ." I'm homesick and I don't have a word for it—I cry silently at night asleep in a cot out on the zaguán of the long long house with the colonial windows that face the street, sills close to the floor, cool to the touch, so wide we play jacks on them while the adults sleep their siesta. Cousins. Tina, Lupana, Tati. Scare me with stories of robachicos who steal children and sell them as slaves, or make them beg at the entrance of the cathedral. Cousins. Pita. Chabela. Rey. Teach me to ride a bicycle, to barter with the vendors, and I laugh at their jokes even when I don't understand them. Cousins. I'm sent as chaperone to Tina. She meets Chago, a escondidas. Later, at home, in my innocence I let it out that Chago bought me a paleta—de mango, my favorite—and she really gets it. Papagrande fuming; they don't like Chago because he's not Catholic, in fact he's the son of a Protestant minister. But I don't care. I like his laughing hazel eyes and curly puppy-brown hair. The next day on the way to Felita's to pick up an "encargo" for Mamagrande, Tina explains. I must learn to keep secrets otherwise Papagrande will be angry. I listen and obey, learn the lessons of growing up.



~ Bueli ~

In the photo, Bueli sits in her high-back rocking chair, her sillón where she'd rocked all of us to sleep, surrounded by Tino, Dahlia, Esperanza, and me, in our nine-by-nine living room with the pseudo pink lace plastic curtains, her hair braided and wrapped on her head like a crown, adorned with grey plastic combs, my Mother's Day gift from Kress's where I spent thirty minutes and thirty cents deciding on just this pair with the encrusted rhinestones. Because we crowd into the small room, wanting to be in the picture, Mami takes it at an odd angle; Espy's two-year-old face looms huge in the foreground. On the wall, hangs the calendar from San Luis Rey Church. In the very same room, we prayed around her coffin. The night she was buried I saw her. She sat rocking back and forth on her sillón in the living room. She told me to take care of the baby. With-

out words she spoke, "Cuida la niña," and I understood she meant Azalia, only three months old. I get up and check—she's asleep in the cradle Papi had painted the color of eggnog and decorated with bunny decals. Azalia's fine. But Mami's crying. We both cry, hug. When I tell her what Bueli said, Mami instructs, "Pray so her spirit can be at peace." And I do.

## ~ Azalia ~

Tino and I argue over what to watch on TV. There's only two channels—one from Laredo in English and one from Nuevo Laredo in Spanish. It's Saturday before school starts. Mami and Papi have gone to get our school clothes, shoes, supplies—Big Chief tablets for the little ones, loose-leaf paper and binders for the older ones, satchels and yellow pencils for all of us. Everything had been put on layaway weeks before. Mami has been paying on the accounts at Neisner's and J. C. Penney's every week. Luckily we've been working in the fields and she hasn't missed a week. Six-month-old Azalia squirms in my arms as Tino and I struggle, switching the knob back and forth. Azalia gentle and quiet as always, "Muñeca," Papi's nickname for her. Suddenly I lose my hold on her, she's falling and I'm still holding her legs. She cries and cries.

"See, what you did!"

"Nothing. I didn't do it." And we forget the TV for a while.

"Espy, get me some sugar, for her susto," I order Esperanza.

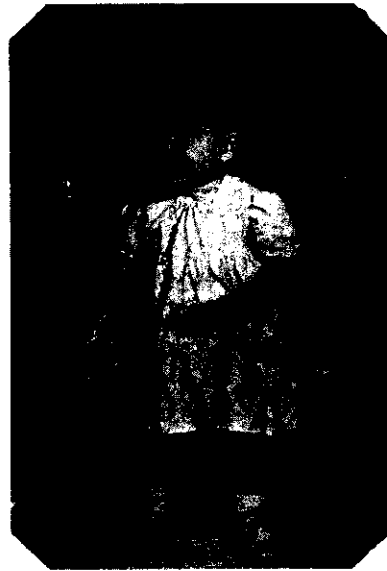
I coo, sing all the lullabies I know, rocking and praying. Nothing works. Not even the camomile tea I fix with plenty of honey. Finally she falls asleep in my arms, puffy, red-cheeked from crying, sighing for a long time even in her sleep. When I lay her down, she cries a little but settles down when I swing the cuna, and hum a lullaby, "Señora santana, porque llora Lala, por una manzana que se le perdió . . ." Mami and Papi come in loaded with the things we had picked out weeks before, new shoes and clothes, school supplies. But the things are never as nice as we re-

member. The baby Azalia fidgets and cries but doesn't wake up until morning. When Mami notices she's not moving one leg, and that she cries and cries, I tell her what happened. It's Sunday, and they take her to the emergency room. The baby Lala comes back with a fat white cast on her leg. For weeks she'll bang on the cuna enjoying the thump, thump, thump of the cast against the wooden frame. The doctor hopes the break will heal without causing permanent damage. But we won't know till she's fifteen or eighteen, she says. Guilt ridden, I agonize for years, and it's not until Azalia's a high school cheerleader and I see her cartwheel across the track, and jump and dance as she cheers the Tiger football team that the susirio lifts from my soul. At her wedding, I pray, "See, Bueli, I did take care of her."

### ~ Ojo de Agua ~

In the black-and-white photo taken by Papi at the ojo de agua in Sabinas, a lanky teen smiles into the sun, shoulder-length hair caught blowing in the breeze. I'm wearing my cousin Tina's hand-me-down dress, a bright green cotton sateen, one with the three-quarter length sleeves, the wide collar, and side-zipper that always got stuck. It's a handmade dress and one of my favorites. The wide belt with the cloth-covered buckle reminds me of a dress Audrey Hepburn wears in *Roman Holiday* or some such movie I saw many years later, for at that time we only saw Mexican movies at the Cine Azteca or Cine México in Laredo or at the theaters in Nuevo Laredo. I wear black patent-leather, pointy-toe shoes Tía Luz bought for me and which I know my father disapproves of. I'm not dressed for a picnic, but then, this was an impromptu one; we've stopped to rest during the hottest time of the day and we'll soon be on our way. It's so hot that I feel the heat rising from the stones; I stand on a stone as large as a giant turtle's back and the heat penetrates the thin soles of my grown-up shoes. Papi has called me away from the shady avocado trees

loaded with fruit along the banks where I was wading in the cool spring water, where the youngest of my siblings happily splash and play in their underwear. My shoulder-length hair curls with the humidity, curly wisps frame my face. There's a sadness in my eyes that's hard to understand. We're on our way back from Monterrey where I've spent the better half of summer as Mamagrande's spoiled pocha granddaughter. I've been enjoying my cousins—Pita and Chabela who are younger and Tati who's my age, we've gone to movies with our "domingo" and "helped" by selling chickens from Tía Lucita's granja to the city neighbors—glad I wasn't older because the older cousins Tina and Lupana had to submerge the freshly killed chickens in boiling hot water and pluck them clean. I don't know this, but this is the next to the last summer that I'll go there. It is different, I feel grown up, I've started hanging out at the Alameda not like a child in the playground, but on Sunday evenings, platicando with boyfriends that change each week, but not really boyfriends. I'm sad to leave that world, but excitedly anticipate going to Lamar Junior High and resuming friendships with Nancy, my gringa friend whose family's stationed at Laredo Air Force Base, and Marilu, my friend from elementary, and Helen, my pachuca friend whose nickname is Toro, and Chelito—no, Chelito won't be there, in my absence she's gotten married or so the cryptic note from Estér claims. Later I will discover that she eloped with Tony who's almost eight years older and they've gone to Houston to live with his cousin, Cefe. She's only fourteen. I'm scared, at the same time curious: what's it like to be married? To leave? Papi clicks the Brownie, the kids squeal in the background. An urraca perched on a dead branch caws, sounds just like Cande, Mamagrande's neighbor, when she calls out to her kids—Caro, Chole, Tano, vengan! Mami proclaims that the weather will soon change. I'm aware of the adult talk, the water, feel the heat below and above me, but I only hear the black bird's warning; shivers run up my spine.



### ~ *First Steps* ~

I'm about to take a step—on my first birthday, bald, wide-eyed, and chunky, wearing a handmade pale pink satin dress Mami embroidered with beautiful smocking on afternoons that fall of 1947 when my father had gone al norte to Gary, Indiana, with her cousins Meme, Abelardo, and Moy to find work. He'd been working as a baker with his brother-in-law in Nuevo Laredo. Decided to chance it up north where they said one could get rich. The bakery didn't have a future, or rather, he didn't have a future with the bakery. Papi didn't last up there in that cold, harsh place, where everything was the color of cement grey and sad, where he could only speak with Mami's family and co-workers. Everywhere the English sounds, like the sounds of an unfamiliar engine that he couldn't

decipher, frustrated him. Claims he never thought of anything except coming home. The minute he got there, all he wanted was to come home. And as soon as he'd paid off the contractor and saved enough money to move us to the United States, he rushed home to us. Came home that spring of '48, determined, ready to make the move to the U.S. side, but not too far north, not too far away from family. Mami talks of loving the time alone with Bueli, the sewing time, making clothes for me on long lonely afternoons and evenings. It's my birthday and Mami's having a real photographer take the picture to send to him so far away in a place so cold snow falls from the sky and turns everything white. Mama-grande's gift, a gold chain with a gold medal of her namesake, our Lady of Guadalupe, around my neck, a gold bracelet on my wrist. I'm about to take a step.

### ~ Third Grade ~

Third Grade. Saunders School May celebration and I am the master of ceremonies, recruited only the day before because Griselda, the fourth grader who was chosen emcee is sick. I am terrified that I will forget the memorized welcome speech. "Don't worry," Mrs. Treviño instructs, "if you forget here's the talk in your pocket, just pull it out and read it." And of course in the middle of my talk, when I look up and see the sea of faces, Mami's amongst them, I do forget and I pull out the "papelito," and everyone laughs, but I pretend not to notice and I continue, on tiptoe, reading the welcome speech into the microphone that is too high for me. Because I'm performing, too, I have to rush and change while the second graders dance. Then the third graders are on: we dance to "Mr. Sandman," not knowing what it's all about we prance around: Angelita, Helen, Marilu, Anamaría, Peewee, and I. I'm in pajamas, a flowery pink and green print Mami's sewn especially for today. As we bow, the applause sends warm shivers all over. In the photo the six of us with pillows

for props. When my part of the emceeing is over, I go down and sit with friends. Later, Fito and Nacho chase us around the back of the makeshift auditorium. When the adults quiet us down and we're sitting on the floor in front of the stage, Dahlia reaches over and bites Fito's arm leaving red and purple teeth marks—he cries and cries and Cuqita his mother tells Mami that if he gets sick we'll see. Mami gets after me for not taking better care of Dahlia. Tino says he'll get Fito for being such a cry baby.

### ~ *Políticos* ~

It may be September, when rains come down so hard they almost flood our house, even though it's built on stilts. The rains are gone, only the hot sun and the puffy clouds like cotton, high up in the sky, remain. Eisenhower visits Laredo, and we line Saunders Street to see a convertible speeding by from the airbase to the bridge. A gringo waving to the brown faces of all ages that have come to see him. "¡Viva Ike!" someone shouts. But, he doesn't hear; doesn't seem to see us waving in the hot morning sun. When Miss Montemayor asks if anyone knows who the president is, I raise my hand, impress my teacher, "Eisenhower, and the vice president is Nixon, but we don't like them; they're not Democrats." Repeating in English what I've heard in Spanish at home. And Mami and Papi sacrifice to pay their poll tax, then give their vote to their compadre who works for the city so he won't get fired. At twenty-one I'll still ask why and rebel, and won't give my vote to the machine. Papi shrugs, "We'd vote Democrat, anyway. And this way if the smelter lays off again, I may get a job with the county." I don't understand. Remain angry at the machine, the bosses who control, who deprive. The políticos. Our money lines their pockets, paves private roads on their ranches, while our streets remain unpaved, run like rivers after every rain, while our public library remains as small as someone's private library; while the dropout rate remains between 50 and 80 percent; while judges, mayors,

sheriffs, high and low powerful ones abuse, rape, embarrass, harass, taunt, demean women. I see the pain, the hopelessness, the survival strategies of the poor. At eighteen, I can't forgive. At eight I ponder what makes men so important. That year, because I know their names, I make good grades in social studies and in English, I get to have my picture in the paper with Mr. Valle the principal who speaks our names in English—Murreea, Anjeleeta, calls me "Nina" instead of "Nena." We arrive in his Buick, meet the superintendent and the photographer who proceeds to line us up on the stairs in front of the main office on Victoria Street. Soon sweat runs down Superintendent Nixon's red face. Sweat beads into droplets on Mr. Valle's balding head. Some years later, both are dead; other men have taken their place. And I march to Austin protesting with the farmworkers; march in rallies protesting Vietnam; march for the ERA; wonder what else I can do, a lowly office clerk; wear a César Chávez button, read Marx.

### ~ Nacho ~

Nacho had sent the stone flying through the air in my direction; I'd skirted it, making him even angrier. But as it hit the ground next to me, the truth hit me hard, like the stone hit the ground—it was true. I liked him and he liked me. Why was I so upset then that I took careful aim and, anticipating where he would run, sent the stone flying and hit him right on the arm? I could hear him crying all the way home. Mami was incredulous when Nacho and his Mom showed up at our front porch to complain and make sure that I got punished. His Mom was red-angry and kept calling me a "malcriada," and a "bandida." I was mortified and blushed and blushed and couldn't even defend myself until they were gone and I couldn't hold the tears any longer. "But, Mami, he tried to hit me first. Chata's my witness," I told her. "You can ask her, she'll tell you how the others were teasing us; we were playing bebeleche. I only threw

the stone, the one I was using as my 'prenda,' after he almost hit me." How could I tell Mami of the anger, the humiliation, the mixed-up feelings that were held in that stone and in me? She'd never understand. I took my punishment, but already I was plotting revenge. I was going to write him a poem, call him a chimuelo chismoso, that'd serve him right. I savored the joy of having everyone laugh at him, as I read the poem at recess.



### ~ Cowgirl ~

In the photograph, Peewee, Angelita, Sanjuana, and I wear long red-checked dresses; I smile a toothless second-grader chimuela—grin. And holding Quico's hand, I pose in front of the blackboard with the alphabet running across the top, with the U.S. flag we pledged allegiance to every morning. Right hand over the heart—I was always getting it wrong, although I wasn't zurda—it still felt "right" to pledge with the left hand not the right. We were to dance a sort of square dance for the end-of-the-year program. My brand-new, black patent shoes, bought with the money Mami made selling dresses she sewed on Bueli's Singer, remain hidden by the long, full skirt of the red gingham dress, also one of Mami's creations. My black curly hair is pulled back with red and white ribbons. Quico, like the other boys, wears a red kerchief around his neck, a white shirt, and what appear to be blue jeans. Miss Montemayor's version of cowgirls and cowboys; he's even wearing a hat and boots. Walking home from school, in the middle of talk with Anamaria, or with myself—wondering what Chicago was like, a city whose name said two bad words! Or worried about money for whatever crisis was at hand—the afternoon

cowboy show creeps into consciousness, and I rush home to find out what's on. We played cowboys and Indians, feeling "Western" for a long time. At the Azteca or the Cine México we watched Pedro Infante or Jorge Negrete be Mexican cowboys who sang and wooed and never fought Indians; and on TV we watched a different story. Those years when we watched Zorro, Hopalong Cassidy, Roy Rogers, The Cisco Kid, The Lone Ranger, we'd imitate movie plots out in the monte behind our house. Every afternoon the black-and-white TV programs would be interrupted by Cowboy Sam, and his sidekick, the blonde wife of the station manager who dressed as a cowgirl in fringed felt and boots, would interview youngsters who wrote and asked to be in the show. I wrote and got admitted to the show; so we went, Dahlia, Tino, and I. Rode the bus downtown and I managed it all without my parents help. "Sí m'ija, but remember you have to take your brother and sister with you," Papi had said when I asked permission. And when they had a story-writing contest, that's when I wrote my very first story—must've been third grade, the memory's fuzzy—every afternoon Tino and I would watch expectantly for the reading of the stories that had been submitted. Cowboy Sam finally read my name and the title of the story, but I was only an honorable mention. I didn't win anything. Not even the reading of the story, not even the case of Coca Cola or the month's supply of frankfurters the ventriloquist advertised with his cowboy dummy. I received the story back with the judges' comments, which I have erased from my memory, but one thing I remember about the story is that it had no female characters and the cowboy, the hero, saved the day for his friend and killed the bad guys in a shoot-out—not very creative and quite predictable given the models in the form of movies and shows I was watching. And all the while, my uncles in Anáhuac herding cattle and being real cowboys, my aunts living out stories no fifties scriptwriter for Mexican movies or U.S. TV ever divined. Peewee, Angelita, Sanjuana, and I, our partners stand behind us, second graders square dancing, counting—

one, two, three, four, under, one two three four, under—as the music blares over the loud speaker.

## ~ Comadres ~

Tres Mujeres. Vecinas. Comadres. Three women. Neighbors. They pose in front of a frame house, pink with blue trim as if announcing the babies, eight girls and three boys. Three women. They smile and tease each other, look into the camera self-consciously. Tina, the shortest, plump and comfortable with all that weight—it's hereditary, can't do a thing about it! Concha wears a perpetual frown and laughing eyes above ojeras, shadows dark and purple. Mami, does she see herself as the oldest? The most reserved? The one the others come to for advice? She has the most kids, the most talents, from healing a colicky baby to sewing a wedding dress complete with bridesmaids' gowns. The three comadres sharing worries, joys: each morning after the dishes are done, the clothes hung on the line, the beans cooking. Sharing chismes, dreams, gossip, advising each other:

"No, comadre, tell my compadre not to worry. Your compadre will help him put in the cesspool, like ours. Just wait till the summer heat passes, it's not good to do too much during the canícula."

"Sure, come February, you can have some cuttings from my rose-bushes."

"I don't think it matters whether you're married by the church or not, after all, it's not that you didn't want to; you couldn't because compadre Leo was already married by the church, he was divorced. But, you're legally married, so I don't think it matters, you can have your baby baptized, but your compadre will ask Father Jones, just to be sure."

"No, comadre, you already have five boys, what if the next is a boy, too. You're doing the right thing. If your compadre weren't so religious I would've done the same thing, but since he got involved with his Cursillo

movement, he won't hear of it. Good thing you found a doctor who would do it, too."

And every morning, *platicando*, and every evening playing *lotería*, laughing, chatting, leaning on each other for decisions, for support. *Las comadres* attend to each other's needs. Early on, it's their own kids running and playing all around, later it's grandchildren who sit on a lap, or need a runny nose wiped, or sleep secure in grandmotherly arms, when they gather to chat in the morning sun. In death, and in birth, there for each other; feeding the kids, doing laundry, sweeping linoleum floors and sunbaked backyards; sometimes pain forming bonds stronger than blood makes them more sisters to each other than to their own sisters, Thelma, Nicha, Tita. *Vecinas*. *Comadres*. Above all, women sharing life, tending to each other. Supporting each other. Teaching each other to mother, to survive, to understand, to live. In the picture it's neither the early youthful faces and dark hair, nor the later lined faces and grey-haired women. The three look straight at the camera with laughing eyes, hair blowing in the wind, their solidarity palpable as their love for each other; still to come is the pain of losing a child, of losing a parent, of poverty so acute children go hungry, of illnesses without doctors, of living. In their day, saying "I love you" not allowed, not needed, when their deeds show love every day in many ways for many years. As young wives they flirted with dreams of a wild future, their kids would be lawyers, doctors; fly off and go to better homes, better lives, free of need, of want, free of work—hard and unending—that barely gives enough to stay alive. Aging into comfort and discomfort they celebrate their children's successes: each high school diploma, each college degree, each wedding, each well-paying job, each recognition, each award, each promotion finds them jubilant. They weep for their children's failures, layoffs, divorces, drop-outs, miscarriages, drugs, fights, DWI's, fines, alcoholism, family disturbance calls, moves to far away cities—Chicago, Houston, Dallas,

St. Louis. They share it all, offer sympathy and prayers. Vecinas. Comadres. Mujeres.

## ~ Parade ~

In the street in winter, I'm no more than a year old. Papi's walking, holding me. I sit up high above the street in his arms. A street photographer captures us in a crowd. He, lean and thin wearing his good hat and dress clothes, a freshly starched shirt; and I, chubby-cheeked wearing a red, hand-knitted hat and sweater bundled up for winter. So comforting, so secure to be held aloft and feel the security, the strength of his arms. So many times he held me. For some of these there are no photographs. At one point the image of seeing a parade, must've been the George Washington's birthday celebration, for it was downtown and hundreds of soldiers from Mexico and the United States march—drums and trumpets so loud the sound stays in my head; huge military tanks with helmeted soldiers peering from the cubby holes; and little girls from elementary schools from both cities parading, singing, dancing, all in unison; cowboys and Indians on horseback, riding side by side—Pocahontas holding the key to the city—waving and gently guiding the beautiful horses. The floats like giant piñatas, carros alegóricos with young women decked out in shimmering gowns that shine like the sun, escorted by white-wigged young men who stand stiff as statues dressed in satin and lace, and wave mechanically. The flags go by, the men take off their hats, and everyone places a hand over their heart—the same for the U.S. or the Mexican flag, but when the Mexican flag goes by someone in the crowd shouts "¡Viva México!" and everyone answers "¡Viva!" And I atop my Papi's shoulders watching it all go by, freezing images in time, like a camera.



### ~ *China Poblana One* ~

Smiling I look straight at the camera; I grimace, smile, squint, under bright sun. Must be around noon—not a shadow shows. We have just returned from the George Washington's birthday parade. I hold up my china poblana skirt and point my toe as I stand for the photo. Mami has braided my shoulder-long hair, adding volume and length with yarn—green, white, and red—verde blanco y colorado la bandera del soldado. The dazzlingly white blouse embroidered with bright silk to shape flowers like the ones that grow in our yard—roses, hibiscus, geraniums, and even some that look like the tiny blossoms of the moss roses remind me of summer, although it's a warm February day.

I know Raúl is hiding behind his Dad's car to make fun of me; I pretend not to notice. Instead of his teasing though, I hear a whistle—a wolf

whistle—and I become even more upset than if he had called me skinny or wetback, yelled his favorite taunts, *mojada* or *flaca*. I mustn't move because Mami wants me to stand perfectly still until she takes the picture. I resist the urge to grab a stone, hit Raúl with it. My aim is good and I know exactly where he is, if only I could. And I feel like the Chalupa in the lotería game, like María Félix, Dolores del Río, a movie star frozen in costume. But then it's all gone like the dust remolino that came up unexpectedly and left us all dusty. A lonely urraca lets out a loud cawing in the noon heat, predicting a change of weather, warning of the freezing winds that will hit later that afternoon and will cut into my face as I ride the wheel of fortune at the carnival, where I'll bite into pink fluff of sugar and find it disappear into sweetness. We go inside the frame house, have lunch: sopa de arroz, picadillo guisado, and fresh corn tortillas with orange flavored Kool-Aid. Mami tells Bueli that I'm growing so fast the costume won't fit by next year, and Dahlia will wear it to the parade. I cringe and want to cry, but I won't let the thought spoil the present, and I ask if I can buy cotton candy at the carnival. Maybe I'll even win a little pink or blue chick to keep me company. And I do but when the chick becomes a chicken, Bueli wrings its neck, drains the blood, and we have arroz con pollo for Easter.