

Arboretum

by Angie Trudell Vasquez

An 1880 census conceals us
carving holes in steel cars,
for light, night air, hanging
hammocks for sleeping wives
to rock under galaxies.

One woman rides the continent
follows her man from Zacatecas.
Thighs astride her clacking motorbike.
Belly swings on a swing sways on the rails until...

Where they lived in box cars until kids were grown.
Where post partum was unknown
and unbalanced women got sent back.

Where my grandma, her cousins
hid on the school hill to eat quesadillas.

Neighbors claim the old man rode with Pancho Villa
when men in suits leap off skyscrapers in New York.

Where my mom and tia pretend not to speak English
teasing shopkeepers on the square.

Where my dad ran cross country to escape
those fences, farmland until he broke –
a mahogany streak on burnt clay tracks.

Where my uncle strove through bullets in Vietnam
dragging his buddy to the helicopter.

And grandmothers trade apples for pears
fingertips and ashy wrists
dig out change at the market,
dole out tortillas during meals.
One hand on the open flame,
one hand flutters holds the blue house dress.

Where peony roots divide on their own
sparking an arboretum of sweet pink light.
Whose perfume carries itself uptown
to the courthouse in drafts with garlic and chile.

Where my sister came the day my grandfather was buried.
Water gushing graveside.

And summers meant volting between family houses.
Rhubarb sticks dipped in bone white sugar.
Rope swing thigh burns. Treasure hunts in the gully.

Where I visit now water their parched Easter Lilies
as they lie beneath the grass.

Thank them:

for surviving Midwest winters, wars and lynchings,
for firewood split, *mole* recipes on parchment,
for raising people who love so much it hurts to swallow,
for lessons on how small caramel women united overcome
great sorrow,
for sharing their one red lipstick and rose hand lotion when I
was a girl flowering.