



northeastern edge, a series of roofless columns delimits the southwest. Piles of twigs, branches and floral detritus are laid out to dry on the weathered tiles, weeds and feral grass spurting roots where the clay's cracked. Like the bracken, they too will turn to ash: the rust-coloured dust bleached to a dirty white.

I get down on all fours and crawl over the cragged ground. Drag myself along towards a pile of charcoal and dirt. The mud buildings around me stand crumbling, gaunt under a scorching hot dryness that makes my skin shrivel. I arrive and kneel. Sink my hands into the black mound, sod making its way into the folds between my flesh and the collagen planes of my fingernails. I then raise my hands towards the sky. Soil seeps between my fingers, grit grates against my skin. Empty-handed, my fingers lock together, palms form into a spade. They dive down and pierce the earth, meeting in the middle, fingers curling underneath. I raise my hands again and repeat the gesture. Feel each particle fall. Listen to the sound of sand raining upon sand.

*Mamá me contó que alguna vez de niña se atrevió a bajar a sótano de la capilla del casco donde está enterrada toda la familia. Llena de valor abrió un ataúd y se encontró con María Mercedes reposando. Sus uñas eran largas y grises, su piel como papel china. Y en un parpadear de ojos la muerta se desvaneció, dejando solo una fina capa de polvo blanco.*

•

*Quiero y mando, y es mi voluntad, que todos los esclavos, indios e indias naturales de esta tierra, que el dicho Juan Cano mi marido y yo tenemos por nuestros propios, por la parte que a mí me toca sean libres de todos servicios, servidumbre y cautiverios, y como personas libres hagan de sí su voluntad, porque yo no los tengo como esclavos, y en caso de que lo sean, quiero y mando que sean libres*

Isabel Moctezuma's will, 11 July 1550

From the arboreal garden, I walk past the house my grandparents built on the top of the hill. The structure totters over three levels construct-ed over time using cheap materials and an anachronous array of orna-ments salvaged from the Pliegos' villa in Toluca.

On the right side of the path, cemented onto stone ruins, there is a three-meter-tall *zaguán*. Dark. Burly. Coated in tar. A heavy two-piece wooden doorway with door knockers shaped like wrought iron swans, accompanied by a floral bas-relief encasing two perfectly

rhomboid eggs. Mirroring profiles adorn the middle of each door panel. A pair of snarling apes with dark elongated eyes break out from the two-dimensional plane. Their jaws protrude belligerently from the flat surface as if safeguarding the eggs, their gaping necks restrained by chiseled out chains that wrap upwards towards the appliqué flowers; an arrangement of leaves falling, curling and enfolding around the closed-off blackness of each profile's face.

A thunderous dark cloud takes over. I run down towards the stables and take shelter in the granary. It is dry and empty. Fallow. For hours I listen to the angry tumid drops that plunge onto the rocky ground, watching the rain spring up like needles, the sky striking with lightning, resonating like an angered drum.

*Y me pregunto, ¿qué sentía Pacesita al encontrarse con estas bestias?*

I want to write about how the *zaguán* was not here, how it wasn't built here, how it was not part of the hacienda as a swift reading of the object and its location would have it be. In 1966 my grandfather Bobby brought that monster of a door to Jajalpa from the villa in Toluca. The door marks the entrance to nothing. It is closed from the inside. The armature is the fantasized exoskeleton of a torn-down past, the baroque appearance of historic amnesia hidden behind a screen of filigree and soot. A partial or total loss of memory and only Abuela left to ask... 'What was there here before?'

Answer: *un muladar*. A house for the half-cast offspring of a donkey and a horse.



Isabel Tecuichpoch Ixcaxochitzin *flor de algodón* 'hija del señor' Moctezuma. Aztec princess. Mexica empress. Wed five times. Five times widowed. Mother of seven. Raped once, by Cortes himself. Her progeny forcefully whitened; Leonor, Juan de Dios, Juan, Pedro, Gonzalo, Isabel, and Catalina.

*Katherine es mi abuela; Catalina Isabel, my mother. El mestizaje como protocolo de blanquimento y yo como resultado.*

Pascuala, Paz, Pacesita. Born in Texcoco, taken in by my grandfather's mother, Maria Luisa Rebollar Pliego, at sixteen. Bobby must have been a child when Paz joined the family. He must have seen his mother teach Paz how to speak Spanish, cook and clean. Soon after, Maria Luisa and my great-grandfather died in a tragic car accident, leaving Paz with Bobby as a sort of substitute mother.

Paz had a son of her own, Juan; a child born out of wedlock who Bobby adopted as his godchild. Years later, my grandfather married Abuela Kate. Together they had four children. Two of them wanted, two of them unplanned, in a growing family of eight. There was always more than one woman in Bobby's life; Abuela locked up in the bedroom, Paz working in the kitchen, caring for their kids.

*Mamá era la favorita de Paz. Nena, Pacesita la llamaba. La nana y la nena: madre e hija.*

I met Paz when I was very young. Mamá took me to visit her in the city apartment she was living in at the time. I remember the gardens were wide and open, the multi-family complex surrounded by scattered trees and dry flower beds. Paz had arthritis and acute herpes simplex, her diseased toes had been cut off. My memory of her amputated. Excised with shame and self-reproach for knowing only the image of a woman with furrowed brown skin and black almond eyes. I see her posing shyly in blue and white, pink and yellow dusk wrapping around her straw hat. My grandparents' half-built house sits at her back *y el pueblo de Ocoyoacac* lays further off behind.

•

My mother's house used to be the hacienda's chicken coop. Three rooms and a bathroom make up what once was an oversized bird pen for *guajolotes, gallinas, patos y gansos*. At the back of Mamá's house, there is a row of empty stables, a cattle trough, a barn, and a wood store.

*Mamá dice que hay un archivo con la historia de Fajalpa guardado en uno de los establos. Juntas vamos a buscarlo.* We look for a ladder

hidden below the timber. We scramble between branches and heavy stumps, our lungs filled with grime and three hundred year old dust. Every summer rain comes in through the broken roof, running into rivers down the carved out mud wall. Umber water pools over these logs throughout the summer months waiting to be dehydrated by the ensuing long winter drought.

It takes four hands to maneuver two aluminum poles barred together. Our tiered arms move in unison, steering the awkward object out of the store and inside one of the neighboring stables. The space is empty, uninhabited except for the darkness and a thin cupboard that has been built into the left wall. We position the ladder in front of the closet. I climb up its steps and reach the deep incision in the wall that is the topmost cupboard. The crevice forms a vast, hollow cave that swallows my body in its damp darkness. Guided by a blind obstinate hand, I stretch my arms into the cold air and find the edges of what I presume is a box. My fingers move along the rim of the cardboard surface, each hand taking hold of a separate corner, lifting it, and pulling it out.

The archival box is beige and brown and weathered. Its paper layers protrude out of shape. Stains mark the areas where water has leached, brown softened into tawny circles after years of being wrapped under the permanent sun that comes in through the window in Abuela's study. Thirty-three manila envelopes are folded neatly inside, everything labeled with Abuela's elegant cursive lettering. I leaf through the folders. I unearth my paternal great-grandmother's high school diploma, her wedding photograph and letters from her father Papá Polo, followed by correspondence from the municipality requesting access to the land to extract clay, pictures of Mamá and Paz, Bobby's will and his *Escuela Secundaria Número Tres* school grades. And as I do this, I wonder how much Abuela despised my grandfather, holding on to his family's documents for years after their divorce, clinging onto that box—its innards fixed and unmoving under the harsh light of her window as if his body never shut its eyes even at night. Until, years after his death, she gifts the specimen to my mother.

Plants are born in this dark moistness, grasshoppers walk atop the leaves. They rub their legs together, transmitting anxiety into the night's hollow air. I dream I am half-naked, from the bottom down. A breeze flows between my labia, flapping everything into view; the skeleton of the place inverted, corrupted, exposed.

•