

To Yolanda whose spirit is unbreakable

PART I.

the beginning

By Angela Ramos S.

My mother speaks of the twentieth century
Bittersweet
Her tongue clicks, her jaw clenches
The silence of what happened slips through her teeth

I ask my mother about the twentieth century
In disbelief
Hands sweat, mouth trembles to ask questions

My mother speaks about the twentieth century
Rummaging through pages
I am desperation
To know my mother before she became my mother
19, a law student
The story goes
They break in
They take her away
She survives
When she kissed the dirt and raised her hands to heaven
She learned to survive only by faith
That was not my mother
It is a part of the woman who was someone before she was my mother
She reminds me
Suffering does not define us

She tells me about the twentieth century in hushed whispers
A secret everyone knows already

I ask her about the twentieth century
Morbidly curious, reckless
As if it didn't hurt to remember
As if sometimes there were not knives tucked away under pillows and chairs piled up by the door
At night
War may be a distant relative but my mother has slept with glass in her hair

I listen to my mother speaking of the twentieth century
Interrupting herself
As if she was disturbing those whose blood soaked the land
Memories they once agreed to hide away so its children could learn pride
And carry it everywhere
Exercising joy to cope with loss
Joy as nothing but the acknowledgement we survive
this land
and we are still beautiful

My mother speaks of the twentieth century
Firecrackers
Bombs
Shots
Bullets
Muffled prayers
She taught me to distinguish them all
Register the sound
Don't flinch
Train your mind to settle

She speaks of youth, a generation of:

Portraits, old rusty fridges in tiny apartments by loud avenues
Parties where she was not my mother,
Or the woman with glass in her hair
She was the soul, the beginning, the end and
She danced through the firecrackers, bombs, shots, bullets, muffled prayers
She taught me to dance through it all
Register the sound
Let your feet distinguish the music from the noise outside
Train your mind to settle
Let your body know that happiness drowns sorrow
Its louder

My mother speaks of
Coming of age stories, becoming a woman inbetween daily news and newspapers that drip obituaries
I ask my mother about the last century
Legacy
And I only find
Silence
Stolen youth

Land soaked in blood
The absence left by the people eaten by the jungle
Camouflage pants
Black rubber boots in the wrong feet
Women looking for the children that the soil swallowed whole
A flag, I wear like a dress
A national anthem, I sing like a heartbreak song
A pledge of allegiance
A riddle,
A paradox that speaks of:
cornstarch and carnival bliss
White powders and tragedies we'll turn into TV shows
A tainted flag: yellow for the gold they stole from us, blue from the two oceans that bathe our shores, red
from the blood that was spilled for our freedom
Red from the blood that was spilled
For our freedom
I don't find freedom
Silence

I ask my mother about the twentieth century
An effort to see beyond shame
To understand indifference taught for survival
To reject panic as my master

I ask my mother about the twentieth century
As if the last decades were dead bodies and this was our wake
Exhuming corpses
Speaking with ghosts that are very much alive
Our arms so sore for raising white flags in vain
We cannot reach to help each other
My grandfather died with peace in the tip of his tongue
Cynical

My mother speaks of the twentieth century
And she gives me wind
She remembers the start of a new millennium
Ignoring there are blurred images in the corners of my childhood

I let her breathe

December 31st, 1999 was a happy day

The twentieth first century

I speak to my mother about the new millennium:

I am 5 years old and we hide under the bed

Firecrackers

Shots

Muffled prayers

I don't distinguish them well

I speak to my mother about the twentieth first century:

2002 Presidential Elections

Anchorwoman:

The paramilitary have taken over cities in the Caribbean, power outages may occur

Pamphlets "*Social cleanings scheduled*"

Curfew

We come back home before the sun dies

I am not allowed to pick up the phone

Deciphering conversations with my grandfather

And

Silence

I ask my mother about the twentieth century

As if it was alive, as if it could hear me

Laughing at me

Because I am her daughter and I don't know her

It eats me alive

All hidden

Underneath the dining table

Inbetween lines

Under by bed

The twentieth century is a stranger

The war is a distant relative

My hands know how to pray for all the things I am ignorant of

My history

Will the land soaked in blood remember me while I am away?

It is all here again:

I am someone's mother before I am someone's mother

Someone's daughter is kissing the dirt and raising her hands to heaven

We all survive by faith

We all learn
To distinguish

Firecrackers

Bombs

Shots

Muffled prayers

And we keep dancing
We dance through it all

To the mothers of Dadeiba, to the women in the fields, your truth is our truth. The peace you deserve will soon find you.

PART II.

the present

By Angela Ramos S.

During the warm night and through the dense air, in a house made of wood and tin,
Mothers sit in a circle holding golden picture frames.

Marks on their knees,
Bleach scented hands,
Untouched broken nails,
Scarred legs from running;
The dirt is empty and their sons have not returned.
They wait for a sign, a call.

On the patio, chickens peck at their cages,
The smell of black coffee with brown sugar fills the room
While one of them grinds corn to suffocate the anticipated mourning.

The hills hear the rain coming and the droplets kiss the green grass and the wildflowers, and the water
filters through the cursed soil
Where
The bones without flesh lay restless
Among the white crosses and nameless tombstones.

On the other side of the city,
A tall woman of fair skin,
Jasmine scented manicured hands,
sits on a Victorian plush sofa in her apartment in the tall brick building.

Cashmere sweater, golden brooch.
Untouched legs crossed.

She lets a woman of bleach scented hands
Pour tea in her porcelain cup and place it on the Mahogany wooden table.

The fair skinned woman picks up a magazine,
Carefully examining the cover:
Three men in hazmat suits, kneeling down by an empty pit.

The headline reads:

Dadeiba

The fair skinned woman puts it down,
Dead bodies were never something she was interested in, or politics.
She waits for a call from her daughter who lives in a one bedroom apartment in the West Village.

Her daughter is at a party with the children of other fair skinned women.
The music is loud and cold.
She is free above ground.
They place the white powder over the kitchen table,
She snorts the white powder.
The high fades in twenty-five minutes,
One hundred and fifty dollars,
One gram,
Twenty-five minutes
She calls her mother

Two hours away in the bustling streets of Medellin,
A young woman keeps a stash inside her bag
Between eyes crossing, a sale is made
Seventeen pesos and thirty seven cents
At the store:
Milk,
Eggs,
Arepas,
Beans,
Some rice
The children can't go to bed hungry,
It breeds misery
She says to herself

The next day
Men with guns tucked inside their pockets

Shot one,
Shot two,
Shot three,

A trail of blood in hard cement

Seventeen pesos and thirty seven cents,

They run to hide
The women bring them rice and beans

In the house next door
The men keep stashing the white powder away
Sealed
Shipped
Sealed
Shipped
Sealed
Shipped
Repeat
Shot one, shot two, shot three
Sealed
Shipped
Sealed
Shipped
Sealed
Shipped
Repeat

That night in a small town in the mountains,
Hacari
There's a storm coming
At dawn,
The flood carries the empty bullet cartridges,
It showers the landmines sunk in the ground.

Not far away, a woman tends to her crops:
Parsley,
Turmeric,
Coffee
Next to it, the bright chartreuse green that adorns the mountain
Coca.

The men of uneven shoulders and loud voices pay their usual visit,
They ask for water
They keep a tight grip on their M4s that rest against their chest.
In less than twenty-five minutes,
Fire opens.

Soon the chartreuse green is gone
The parsley crushed beneath black rubber boots.

Her head lays on the ground,
The trail of blood left behind makes the orchids and bromeliads grow
For if there is no peace, at least there will be flowers.

That morning a phone rings in the house made of wood and tin
The rain has not stopped
A mother sobs
Her insides go numb
The birds chirp louder than ever
Dadeiba
Each heartbeat, less air
There is no air
Below ground
For each gasp of air
For every time a son of the mountains dies
And a mother can't name her grief
A flower grows in the dry dirt
A prayer reaches her
There is calm

At noon a young girl watches the 12pm news
For lunch: beans, rice, eggs
No misery
Between bites
They say
Dadeiba
Where's Dadeiba mom
Somewhere by the mountains honey
They say
Hacari
Where's Hacari mom
Somewhere by the mountains honey
Cartography
Running fingers on colorful maps
Every time she learns a piece of the earth
She hears how many had to die for the name to reach her ears

She finds a new country
It all stops spinning

She grows a bean plant in a glass jar
There is a wish hidden in the middle of the leaves
“If I grow enough seeds”
Maybe no one will go to bed hungry
“If I grow enough seeds”
Maybe one day I can grow flowers
Tend a garden with water not tinted with blood
Grow
Parsely
Turmeric
Coffee
Feed the men of uneven shoulders
For the fire to cease
For the spinning of day/night
sealed / shipped
To stop
For abundance
Abundance of love
Where fair skinned women meet the women of bleach scented hands
Halfway
For if there is no peace
Let there be hope
And flowers
Orchids

Bromeliads

And rain to make them grow.

To the women who defeated Operation Condor

PART III.

the past

By Angela Ramos S.

Prologue

“A United States-backed campaign of political repression and terror. Formally implemented in November 1975 by the right-wing dictatorships of South America.”

50.000 gone

30.000 missing

We felt their footsteps on our throats
And they left the mark in the sand, in our rivers, in the trails to the jungle
In the aftermath of the firing squads
The city walls were dripping
Ever since,
Our cities are humid and the air is dense

Bolivia

*Domitila's child was poisoned after the explosion
Her belly was empty and she mourned him while her country was on flames
Domitila's empty womb and empty insides became the ground for liberation*

Men were the knife
Women were the flesh
Bodies in the shape of battlefield
Hands always tied
Blindfolded

Chile

*Valentina, Gina and Elizabeth had their cells next to each other
The mountain of Altar has stored their screams within the rock
They survived
But the silence that followed ate them alive*

Calluses from running
Hope was the bread
It was women who grew the wheat

Women made air out of nooses
And they sang
They carried the songs in their lungs

Uruguay

Luz was guided by a soldier who blindfolded her

Bare naked

81

82

95

100

What was left of her guided her out

They taught their children how to breath
In spite of the men who built countries out of guns
Holes in the map of shattered earth

Paraguay

Julia was playing outside when the Colonel told her she'd never return home. The men whose shoulders were uneven, rubbed their camouflage against her skin

Julia is alive, loud

She keeps her truth on the roof of her mouth and spits it back

Spirits still look for the farms they left behind
Or they run towards the north to the cages of those whose feet are still pressed against their chests and they are told to go back

Home

But home is dust the wind blew away
Home is what's left of a hand grenade
Home is a wish spelled with memories
After all, everything in this land belongs to us
It is all they took from our hands
All their riches were made out of our losses
Our children can't stop crying
And there are bullets tucked in envelopes
"Your sons are good for the war,
Your daughters would make good wives"

In this language justice is a blindfolded woman

In mine, we look for the women who were blindfolded
Never seen again

Argentina

The mothers gathered in Plaza de Mayo

White scarves on white hair

Children

Taken

An effort to fill their absence

Are they alive

Bring them alive

Bring them alive

Bring them alive

And it was the same women who used their bodies as shields for a country who would never loved them
back

Brazil- number of deaths unknown

Peru-number of deaths unknown

Ecuador- number of deaths unknown

Unknown

Just as the names of the women whose tired hands never stop pushing for a wrecked country to be
whole again

Women that turned the darkness into dreams

For their daughters to see beyond what was left of the crossfire

Into air

For all we have are birds, Condors

Whose feathers are made of the ashes of the women whose bones made the soil more fertile

And they watch over us

In the verge of their own extinction

Persevering

In the rightful history
Such women were never defeated
They are soaring over the Andes
Begging to be remembered

PART IV.
the dream

By Angela Ramos S.

At night,
Moonlight
Awaken,
Restless

No revelation, no epiphany

Wrists bonded
Weight over gone
The men who were meant to protect you
The men who were meant to destroy you
Equal, above
Below ground
Encrusted with flesh
In between
Legs
Taught to
Hate our insides
Who taught them this hatred
Where do they keep it
In the mouth of their gun?
The man who broke the land learned to claim
Bodies
His absence, his presence
His name
Buried

Under fire
Our bodies learned to save us
Bodies
Merciful
Some learn to expire out of mercy

The next day
The scented soap
The dry blood

The torn dresses
Buried
The water carried the secrets but it did not bring us back home

Paralyzed
A rehearsed prayer
Weight
Less

A plea to God:
Please write on this earth how do we survive our own memory
Where do I keep the wrath
How to forgive the man who broke this land
A country that was shaped like a womb
Show us where to bury shame and
Resurface from this wasteland

But God,
There is no place on scorned earth that can hold it
No more space to hold all that women have buried
Between the cracks of dry rivers
Hoping to make sense out of the wreckage and beg for water to come back
End the thirst
Of the seeds once planted
By the same hands who torn them apart

And God,

At dawn with eyes wide open
There is a woman, body leaning forward
Arm stretched, hand opened
Move
Forward

On the other end
A woman like me

Questions

How do you forgive the man of broken country
Will his departure fill the emptiness
Is there a place to exile my wounds while my muscles heal?

Can I grow wind and plant it somewhere in my lungs?
Do you find freedom after having lost it all?
In silence at church, by the pews, kissing the cold marble?
In the inintelligible sobs of the scars that never heal?

There is no answer
No epiphany

All of her, all that breathes around her, an ambush
Triggered by the smell of something familiar that has lived inside of her

A sob that breaks through the sky
Her spirit raises and says:

Joy, joy please find me

Before sunrise,
In a dream
Her bones turn to light
Voices are hymns, lullabies
Hands, legs not bounded
When gasping for air, it was clean, pure
When her mind went to rest, it was blank

Hair laying in the cold dirt
No revelation
No epiphany
Just the birds birching
Women like her danced
No stains on their dresses
No marks on their wrists
The children of the men who broke the land do not haunt them

They all twirl
Girlhood is again,
Sacred
And there is celebration
Air in their lungs, no empty stomachs
No missing daughters
They picked flowers for those were alive and adorn their tables
A feast of all things lost
And found

Bodies

Miraculous

Joy, joy found her

In a dream

She found a way to be alive again

PART V. the future

By Angela Ramos S.

Once upon a time, women wrote promises in the constellations,
store them in Saturn rings,
within the clouds

A question burnt through the eyelids of girls who dreamed of touching the sky
What is the universe made of?

Rocks

Gas

Ice

Stars

Was heard in whispers

And light and our mothers' dreams

In the infinite space, wide, absurd

Boundless and ever growing

The promise was seared with the history that was sunk into oblivion

"Our daughters will be free"

And lungs breathed the air that kept the promise alive, bright

The sun did not forget,

Our ancestors never sow in infertile land

The water that nourished the earth, the blood that soaked the land, the carnage,

The crossing, the survival, resistance

Defied gravity when emptiness seemed to pull flesh and lift our feet

Groundbreaking

The same sacred energy of such unattained promise

Found us

At last

A prophecy fulfilled in a different lifetime,

That we,

Young women

Would be the ones to use our hands to build for ourselves

A world where our toes would grow roots in a place to call home

And there would be hope hidden under every rock

Rivers and fields, abundant, rich

Our bellies always full

At night we'd let moonlight find us, in the dark

For there would be no hiding for all the bullets would have turn into stardust

Because we worked for it and in such way,

Blown away by the wind

The fireworks would only be fireworks

And the open land holding space for the harvest
Weapons turn into pencils
Roads, clear to return
Our hands are open
Our arms are stretched
The children go home
Behind closed doors, the powerful meet compassion before greed
I wake up and speak my mother's language
We don't miss the land that birthed us
Mothers are once again with the sons that were taken away
And flowers grow in our hair, plenty
Landmines disappear, make the dirt fertile
Girls walk to school
They read the books of the women who grew up like them
We break the curse
Life is precious
Our ancestors blow wind into our chests
There is hope falling off the trees
There is a world worth winning
The rain brings our mothers' dreams back to us and we are whole
Pen and paper,
Blood and sweat,
Tears,
Laughter
We fall in love with the future
We tend to our present
We are grounded in our shared struggle, our past
And we daydream
And we work
And we move
Always
Forward