

“TIJUANA SUMMERS”

By Gabriella Sofía Olson

I remember the summers before they came.

It was just me and you, Tijuana heat glazing our backs, our lips slick with guava juice, our eyes squinting in the light, our fingers extended as we tried to capture the sun. One hand tangled with the fence to keep our balance on that hot metal, the other twisted against the blue sky, catching a sunray as it shifted. Those summers we'd race back and forth between the barn shed and the fields, the silk white clouds puffed above us. The river welcomed us when we jumped in, the swampy water climbing to our necks as it cooled our skin, which wasn't too far a color off from the brown riverbed gravel. We'd sit on rooftops at sunset, our bare feet dangling off the edge, brushing the grooves of the tile.

How did we get here now, to the nights I sit alone with the radio, scared to sing or break the silence? How did we let them strip the honey sunlight and the breaths of floral scented air from our skin and lungs? We lost so quickly the jicama clouds and star speckled skies. It was the summers we lost, the summers when the heat fell away so quickly like a stolen embrace pulled and taken, that felt the coldest. As if they brought with them a chill of uncertainty, the icy rush of fear.

I don't sleep anymore, not when I gasp awake at night searching for you among the black and the blue, grasping for your hand as if you're reaching out to me. Rest is a luxury, and something I can't afford to think I can have, not when I can still feel your essence steeped into every rincón of this house. Sometimes I stop breathing, and I swear I can hear you in the kitchen amid the clinking of pans, pretending you know how to cook. Sometimes I climb that fence in the fields where we used to sit, and the metal for the first time feels cold. But I haven't climbed to the rooftop yet; it feels too sacred to sit there without you.

Do you remember us, the us that existed before all we knew was fear and before we learned the air could turn black with smoke? The us that we had before we faced the barrel of a gun and breathed the acid down our throats? The us that our world still had when we could afford to be kids?

And yet, Tijuana is the same and not the same. The faded cerulean shingles, the loud streets, the distant farmlands that I still break away to just for a gulp of clean air. Every day I retrace these steps, lift my eyes to the darkening sky, not sure if what I'm seeing is rain or smoke. The church still smells like candles and incense, the honk of cars drowns out chatter, bright colors drown the city in hopes to cover all the dark.

How much we all wish we could walk down the street without hunched shoulders and downcast eyes. This has left me memorizing every crack in the asphalt from the house all the way to the church, this Sunday morning ritual, and I wonder what is this all for? Because here, in this casa, the darkness taints the very air we breathe, and never again can we watch the citylights from the fence or splash around in muddy water or sing Apache lullabies to each other on the roof. No longer can we pick white flowers and race towards the sinking sun.

These are the memories that lay heavy in my heart, those stolen Tijuana summers.