

The Turnip Picker | BY DESIREE LACEY

Somewhere in the inner edge of my nightstand drawer, among the “grow your own bean plant” gag gift and broken trophies, is a cache of family photos. They were stashed for safekeeping but were forgotten, that is until I began rearranging my furniture. While moving this hunk of wood the top drawer slid open, reminding me of these photos. The stack mostly consisted of my classy cat costume, my parents’ wedding, and some extended family members. But then there was that one 3 x 5 photo I hadn’t seen in years. Her brown clay-colored hands grasp my swaddled body. I’m a newborn. These are the hands of a caring and loving abuelita. The hands of my great-great-great-grandmother, Petra Rodriquez Zavala (*below*). One could not predict her age based on appearance and title alone. However, her hands give her away. The skin is silky, like the appearance of a desert dune, yet loose. The wrinkles are prominent, like a miniature of the Sierra Madres swooping down into valleys freckled with sun-spotted plains. The fingers bent like the upper branches of an Ocotillo. She is ninety-eight years old. These hands that hold me so securely and gently provided for our family and an entire community. These hands are the forgotten hands of a migrant worker.

The work ethic conditioned from such labor would be sown into our family, but most would never know this type of work. The next generation, the United States born



Petra Rodriquez Zavala

generation, was removed from migrant labor. Born into upper class privilege. As the economy made social mobility easier, we became better at the climb. My mother’s hands never knew this work. And my hands will never know this work either. Grandma Petra’s imprint on the land is only remembered by those of us willing to acknowledge her sacrifice and our universal wish to be part of the ghost-like American dream.

As I look at the map on Google, the expansive terrain of Mexico doesn’t seem so bad. It looks like an aerial shot of those westerns I like. I type in her hometown. I type in her destination. And then I select the walking option—1,506 miles—the walking distance from Zacatecas, Mexico to Long Beach, California. The selected path: straight through the Sonoran Desert—the hottest desert in North America—a desolate wilderness. This sub-region of the Mexican portion of the desert is decorated by ancient, bright-green creosote bushes with golden blooming buds resembling orange blossoms; oval leafed, velvet mesquite; and towering saguaro cactus reaching into the sapphire sky. At one time, the rain created desert streams, which now just wind like dry, abandoned, forked backroads. However, there is still wildlife. The fat-tailed, orange-and-black-striped Gila monsters rub their soft bellies on the cracked desert floor, and rattlesnakes camouflage into the earth in curled tight coils. Though there is beauty in this sand, everything will try



Petra’s daughters

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Mother and me

to kill you here—if given the chance.

Grandma Petra began her journey across this landscape with her daughters. These are the girls who would carry their own weight in belongings across the desert with her. They set out in the early 1920s, when the 1,951-mile stretch of the United States-Mexico border was practically open. Of course, they paid a small price to the border officials as they pushed them through. But they just walked across with their suitcases, and didn't stop until they reached Bixby Knolls, Long Beach. The land of the playa, palm trees, and money. Shortly after her arrival she found work. The only kind of work offered to immigrants. Hard, grueling, and paid with insulting wages. That's the kind of work she took.

Her image is like a sunstroke-induced desert mirage when I attempt to picture her in a Long Beach turnip field. The topsoil creates puffs of dust as fellow workers shuffle to gather the picking bags from the pickup truck bed. Petra attaches her bag to her waist. The attire for today's work is functional instead of fashionable. Her

golden straw hat is weathered and worn around the edges. The brim wide enough to cast shade over her entire face. A red bandana used to secure her wavy black hair rebelliously pokes out around the inner edges of the hat. The lower half of her face is protected by a dark woven scarf; it is a poor attempt to filter out the thick swirling dust. Her petite 4 foot 9 inch frame appears larger than normal as she stands there facing the little green stalks poking out of the brown mounds. She is wearing two thick jackets, to insulate against the morning chill. Her pants are work-worn and break over dirty work boots. The tools of this brutal trade—her hands—are concealed by gloves. She adjusts the neck strap on the hat and sets out to her position in the field. On her way through the evenly spaced field rows she passes workers who are hunched over the vegetables, while others are squatting as they rip the dirt apples from the earth. For Grandma Petra, working through this turnip field means sitting on the earthy floor for hours on end. Her arthritic body is unwilling, but she forces herself to endure the intense labor. But more so, to endure the afternoon heat, the minimal breaks, and the lingering pesticides in the air. When she reaches her location she sits on the back of her calves with her weight shifted to one hip. This is the position she will stay in for hours. When she finishes with a small patch she will simply scoot herself along the path until her row is finished. Eventually, when her daughters are old enough they will join her in the field too.

One day, she will tell them, "you will know what it is to work." ■

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versity who enjoys writing creative non-fiction. This piece was written in response to the 2016 Natures conference theme "Habitats and Hazards."