

# Call Me Daughter

By Silvia Heredia

“Aguacates... Cacahuates... Cerillos... Ciruelas... ¿Qué le damos, marchantita? ¿Qué le damos, güerita? ¿Qué va a llevar?” This is what I heard, all at once, as it always goes: the chorus, a rolling rush of rousing remarks, sing-sung slogans that zoom after shoppers so they can eye and buy one or all of the avocados, peanuts in their shell, boxes of matches and plums splendidly stacked and crowned with a sample that has its insides on display. “What will it be, hon’? What can I get you, sunshine? Whadda ya need?” is kind of sort of what the women in the market say real, real fast, but then again, not really. It’s really more like, “Pásale por acá, güerita, pásale, ¿qué vas a llevar? Mira, están bien frescos, los trajeron hoy. ¿Qué le damos, marchantita? ¿Qué le damos, joven? ¿Qué va a llevar? ¿Cuántas? Están a dos por tres y éstas a cinco por diez...”

“Come this way, sweetheart, come, come, whadda ya need?”

“Look they’re real fresh, they brought them today.”

“What can I get you, hon’? What will it be, little man?”

“What are you taking today? How many? They’re two for three and these are five for ten.”

So many trueques and negoceos going on at once, so many deals and deliveries, pick-ups and drop-offs, negotiations, shortchanges, and prices being hiked up for the sake of a triumphant regateo, the classic haggling with customers, those ultimate bouts of market custom in which sales pitches are played out fast and strong and prices are wiggled down very slowly, enough so, so that eventually everyone gets a good deal.

And all around the people and peddlers and perishable and plastic goods are the buses, rickety and old, still farting smog along the way, just like my cousin said they did way back when we were seven. They’re still loud and most of them hard to get on. Generally speaking, los amarillos go south and los verdes north, but before I knew that, I just loved to repeat in my head where the yellow and green buses went. To myself I’d repeat in my head what I read off the windshield: Jojutla, Zacatepec, Galeana, El Mesquite, Los Pilares, El Jicarero, La Zapata, El Higuerón. Some towns are near, others far; some are names of places that are now cities, others names of places that still aren’t towns at all. But on this day, with their names scribbled across the windshields I feel them all big and quite close, at my fingertips, just like the cotton-ball clouds I swear I can grab every time I reach up when I’m down here. I look around to find some favorite names, the ones I’ve come to love, the ones that were hard to learn, the ones that need all the room as they read out nice, curvaceous and long: Chimalacatlán, Timimilcingo, Tequesquitengo, Xoxocotla spelled out from the first ex to the last tee, el and a, making for a most delightful mouthful.

“¡Rápido, apúrenle, caminen!” chime in from behind me some women bustling their children along, snapping at them to put a move on and keep up because they better not miss the bus. I hear the call of the man selling cooked yams, that unmistakable jingle of ¡camoooooteeeeeees! ¡camoooooteeeeeees! followed by his pushcart’s whistle and his pot’s rising steam. I continue walking, unfolding my mental list as I go: herbs, candle, egg.

On the corner, a woman wails making reference to a list of ailments all curable by the powder she holds in her hand. Turning the corner I pass the electric and hardware shops, the chicken rotisseries (round and round they go), I pass the fruit and hat stands, the pastel-colored beauty creams, the corner flower stand (where we always buy the flowers for our dead), the fish stand (glistening and stinky), and in front of it a fruit shake place and creamery. Down that way I get glimpses of other creameries, more fruit stands and some chickens, all dead and deplumed, their heads somewhat dangling, their skins yellow, their bodies plump but limp, stacked like logs along the tiled counter, some whole, some quartered, some gutted, some gizzards on display; everything will be sold. Looking down I catch sight of dirty dogs, jiving amongst themselves, moving in small packs as they roam and scavenge, some looking sad and stressed, stretched out, on edge, barely making it; others appearing more go-lucky, pack leaders with strong strides, tails up as they strut through the market crowd.

Then I come to the silence of the pig heads on the stone counters of the butcher stands, gatekeepers of that whole section of *carnicerías* that glows pink and red and starkly smells of fresh kill and blood. In getting my herbs I have to go through here, there's no escaping, even peripherally, the chunks of carnage hanging from hooks, the sight of so much flesh all at once: the dangling shoulders and rumps and chorizo links, the dark wine-colored livers, the fuzzy feet, the tripe, the blood sausage, the hearts that follow – so much meat needed to feed so many that day. I feel both slightly queasy and aroused, amidst the beauty and the beastly, moving between things dead and delicious, finding my way between the cooked and the raw.

“They brought them today, they're really tender, a kilo for 10 pesos, how many can we get you?” I'm dazzled by the ripe pinkness of the guavas, and their pricing of about one dozen for one dollar. I pick one, squeeze it lightly and bring it to my nose, the way I saw mi mamá do so many times in supermarkets in New York, as if suspicious that what she was holding in her hand was a guayaba at all. Nowadays, it's no surprise to find guavas or tortillas or even tamarindo, cilantro or mole in the city's Upper West Side. I suddenly chuckle, remembering my tía Juanita's clever Mexicanized name for this now changed big apple, Manhatitlán.

“Están bien dulces, ¿cuántos le damos, señoito? They're really sweet, how many can we get you, ma'am?” Ma'am?! Did she just call me ma'am?! Do I look like a ma'am? I hate it when they call me ma'am. Hate it when they formally refer to me using “usted,” they make me feel like I should be knitting. Please, por favor, no titles, no proper names. Hit me instead with older names, more clever names, local forms of address I only hear here and take with me as they make me smile with their sound and think myself always here and someone different. Bring on more *marchantitas*, more *güeritas*, more *chinitas*, even; lather me with as many of these unique and hard-to-translate names that, if one must, literally render “little woman buying,” “light skinned or blond girl,” and “little Chinese girl.” I don't mind being called these names at all, even though I'm by no means a little woman, blonde, or Chinese. I don't mind these calls, for all I hear is sweet inflection and familiarity, feeling each of them a linguistic embrace, a subtle verbal caress that makes me feel as if they remember me, know who I am, and accept me so. You can even call me *cielo* or *cielito*, sky or little sky, but, por favor, do me the favor of leaving all quips for Mrs. out, leave out all ma'ams, señoras and señoitos, all doñas and doñitas. Put no generations between us. But if call me something you must, call me

“m’ija,” I’ve never minded m’ija in the market. Rather, I’ve always kind of enjoyed being called m’ija by las mujeres, “my daughter” by the women. I hear my grandmother’s echoes in this call, feel mi abuelita ever closer and myself more put together in knowing that with m’ija I’m never too old or alone or sick, I’m simply someone’s daughter. So with this new chorus of m’ija in my head, I block out all ensuing ma’ams and buy a bag of guavas for my taxi ride back to la casa del huesero, the bone man’s abode.

And as personal ritual has it after shopping at el mercado, I go to exit the market through its middle section so I can walk by my grandmother’s old stand. I pass the long row of juice bars, shoe stands and more and more produce stands with more and more dangling market bags, t-shirts and bloomers as décor. I turn by the row of young women selling handmade tortillas kept warm under many layers of cloth and plastic in big wicker baskets. Chiquihuites, they’re called. Chiquihuites that are carried on the hips by women, on the shoulders by men, and by the children used as pens to hold them while they’re sleeping or awake. And as another personal ritual has it, I stop by los agua fresqueros, the longtime family neighbors from the other side of the wall, dubbed literally, “the fresh water makers.” Daily, they make “fresh water” fruit drinks made from the like of lemons, oranges, hibiscus flowers, watermelon, pineapple, cantaloupe, and rice seeds, and many more things. I order myself un agua de Jamaica, grande, anxious for its flavor and coolness and careful not to get this cranberry-juice-look-alike on myself. Now with my agua fresca in hand, I head for my grandma’s old stand, marked by the painted sign post that still reads “Barbacoa Lupita,” beneath this a painted white lamb, black goat, and steaming bowl of consomé, the hearty stew classically served as a side or main dish.

I walk on by never recognizing the new owners but always remembering my time spent here at el puesto de mi abuelita. I remember going to buy tortillas for customers, always amazed by how the women quickly fingered through and counted out the dozens of steaming hand-made corn circles without the slightest hint of hurt or burn. I also remember standing at the butcher block when mi abuelita would go to the bathroom, how I’d put the apron on and pick up the big knife as if about to cut and weigh out all orders on the scale. I remember also how much I loved it when my grandmother would send me to get change or buy other things like fruit shakes (with no sugar!), or the frozen fruit bars, and chili peppers, but not just any chili peppers, they had to be red chili peppers, rajas rojas and of a particular brand: Herdez. With coins in hand I’d walk down to the stand of grains and canned goods, repeating to myself over and over again, rajas rojas Herdez, rajas rojas Herdez, loving the roll on my tongue, rajas rojas Herdez, rajas rojas Herdez. It was so much fun back then when I was ten. But now, how different my word mantras were, composed not of alliterations or spice, but replaced instead with the cold and clinical terms of chronic, autoimmune, and disease. Even now, years later, there is still a sting when pronouncing these words.

And then, right there in front of my grandmother’s old stand, I couldn’t help but wonder: how is this all going to work? How is he going to heal me exactly? Is he going to stick his fingers in me to heal me? How will he “pick up” my ovaries, as he says they’ve fallen? They’ve fallen?! Fallen ovaries isn’t even what I went to see him for in the first place! But could they have? Is this the source of years of irregular menses? Is this the source of my years of searching? Could this be the source of it *all*? And with this rousing rush also came the flashing memory of a mom’s story I once heard, one that told the tale

of the time her little girl was jumping rope and she suddenly stopped to say inquisitively and with grave concern, “Will I crack my eggs?”

As I walk on by the stand, walking away slowly, I wonder who I am and how it is my body has betrayed me and branded me with a rash they call butterfly, how it is pieces of me have fallen away and broken already. Had my eggs really fallen? Fallen out of what, from how high up? Were my eggs slightly cracked? Fully broken? Did I now have an omelet and not know it? And how was a man, this bone man, this man with a limp, going to fix them and my face? I gulped some hibiscus water to cool my wonder, hushing the fearful I-don't-knows fluttering inside. What can I do?

I put my hat back on before leaving the market and moving to hail a cab.