

## QUEEN NOPAL

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She survived a copperhead bite to her Achilles tendon, the COVID-19 epidemic, and the death of my grandfather, but my grandmother could not survive the inevitability of time. My mother and I, naively, believed we would have my grandmother forever, like the nopal that clawed itself into the ground along the driveway. When the winter storm of 2020 bore down on south Texas, froze the pipes until they busted, and ruptured the power grid revealing a debilitated infrastructure, the nopal shriveled into an old woman—her arms embraced the ground, exhausted from years of her hands raised toward the heavens in praise. The months turned her meaty pads into blisters, a savory meal for grubs, beetles, and finches. As my mother held my grandmother's hand in her transition, the nopal became a porous skeletal cardboard-like fossil. When the summer came, new pads sprouted from between the nopal's skeletal remains. The nopal endured like a stubborn memory.

### I.

Before time hollowed out my grandmother's bedroom, she confided in my mother and I that if she ever found the copperhead snake that bit her, she would make it pay for her weekend stay in the hospital and her reaction to the antivenom that caused more harm than did the snake bite itself. We laughed until our bellies were sore, my grandmother who was supposed to be bound to a wheelchair, refused to sit in. Instead, she bent her knee in the seat and carted herself throughout the house doing household chores that she would be damned if anyone else thought

they could do. “Me las va a pagar! A snake bite will never stop me,” my grandmother rebelled as she propped her leg on a stepstool to dust the living room, a space she had slowly begun to empty of her Indian porcelain angels, photographs, crystals, and candles. My mother commented that she may be ready to transition. Intuitive as my grandmother was, she revealed, “I’m not dying! I’m only making room.” She never indicated what she was making room for. I assumed we would know as time continued its journey throughout her home and within her bones.

## II.

For my eighteenth birthday, my grandmother gifted me a casuela to make tamales and two prickly pear cactus pads in a yellow ceramic pot. “Enterrala, hija. Bury her in the ground as soon as you are able. She likes to be dry but give her water once in a while and she will thank you,” my grandmother exclaimed. I set it in my backyard under the Mexican Willow whose purple buds fluttered over her first yellow silk petals then again at her first eruption of burgundy, seedy tunas. As months passed, womb shaped cactus pads pushed their way to the surface, thorns like stars on the Blessed Mother’s manta. Months birthed years and I forgot about the nopal under the Mexican Willow. It wasn’t until my grandmother made a decadent nopal salad and asked about her gift that I went into my backyard to check on her, sure the nopal was dead. I did not have to approach it to see that it had become treelike, taller than me, pads giving glory to the scorching sun, yellow silk flowers like a crown for her majesty. The pot no longer contained her. She had tipped over and found the ground. She had grabbed onto the earth, free and determined. She would grow ten feet tall and fifteen feet wide before the winter storm made the afterlife visible on earth in the skeletal remains of a frostbitten queen nopal.

III.

Removing thorns or bristles from a cactus pad is an art. If gloves are used, it ensures no bristles will lodge themselves like tiny, nearly invisible spears into the flesh. Without gloves, where the joints bend, hair-like bristles create invisible fires making it nearly impossible to touch anything without pain or combustion. Each thorn has to be cut clean with a paring knife lest the bristles also congregate in the throat. I had gotten good at removing the bristles without gloves like my grandmother taught me. Death is like a cactus thorn unlike the rose thorn whose stature is unapologetic. The cactus thorn is to be respected, removed, and forgotten. If it is not respected its bite lasts until every thorny tooth is removed from the flesh it has devoured. It renders the hands useless. Another fear of cleaning nopal pads is the danger of finding a snake coiled beneath its shade. *I thought a piece of glass had sliced the back of my foot*; my grandmother described the copperhead snake bite. *I screamed for your uncle to bring me the peroxide. He's the one that took me to the hospital. What a bunch of drama*, she had chuckled to herself. While she lay in the hospital, every hour was a cactus thorn lodged in the joints of our bodies. Every inch of our bodies hurt at the idea that grandmother wouldn't make it. When she pulled through nearly unscathed save for a limp that lasted a week, even though she was told she might never walk again, we were sure she was immortal. One week later, when her leg could be stretched straight, she took up the water hose again to ensure her ruda, Easter lilies, four o' clocks, chili piquín, and bougainvillea were taken care of and were kept alive. The cactus preserved itself and remained untouched by drought. In fact, it thrived.

IV.

We are made of sixty percent water. The prickly pear cactus stores eighty-five percent of water. My grandmother believed the water in our bodies

is the weight of memory. *More than half of our body is a memory. Every body is responsible for the carrying*, she pontificated. If water is memory, the cactus has plenty to remember. When my grandmother came to San Antonio, she was a toddler. Her mother and her mother before her brought her to San Antonio from Uvalde, Texas. Hailing from a long line of Marys, my grandmother changed her first name the first chance she got. She kept her middle name, Carolina. She was the first in a matrilineal legacy of women to remove Mary from her legal documents. She was also the first woman to get a tattoo albeit no one knew of it until she was seventy-five years old. While sitting at the dinner table for my grandfather's birthday, she confided in us that she had experimented with tattoos. The beauty mark on her face, which she always filled in with a brown eyeliner pencil, was not a beauty mark but a tattoo she had acquired in her chola days. When she met my grandfather and married him, she penciled it in for decades, passing it off as a beauty mark. I cried at the revelation. I don't know if I cried at the revelation or at the idea that my grandmother was not a perfect sculpture, but a human woman with thorn-like bristles, blossoms, and the weight of history.

#### V.

If you cut off a nopal pad and bury it in the ground, it will grow and spread and take up residence where it is planted creating new families and clusters of prickly pear shrubs. They can survive and thrive in arid places amid desert-like conditions. When the nopal began to take over my backyard, I knew it was time to gift pieces of her to others. I gave some to Crystal's mother in Houston, Texas to plant after her family rebuilt following Hurricane Harvey. It took a few months for the pads to sprout small pads of their own. Lately, I see they are well through Instagram photos. I gifted another few pads to Vicky whose husband is a diabetic. She read that she could use the saliva from the nopal pads as medicine. I taught her how to cook them as well. She makes the best

nopal salad I've ever tasted. After the Texas winter storm, I told Vicky about my decaying nopal. She brought over three pads from the ones I had gifted her some months prior. In one week, the pads took root. In two weeks, they blossomed—a yellow crown before her blessing. I thanked it and whispered into the wind, we are inextricably linked.

VI.

When I die, don't cry! I'm not going anywhere, my grandmother had warned. I wasn't ready, but are we ever ready to lose a matriarch should we be blessed enough to have one? My mother told me when my grandmother took her last breath, she saw a puff of smoke escape her lips shaped like a snake, as if her soul was articulated into the bedroom space. My mother confided in me that she did not cry; she only felt gratitude. The machines which monitored my grandmother's heart rate and blood pressure were finally shut off. No more beeps and thumps. She was no longer hooked to the artificiality of life that kept the rhythm of her every breath, that kept score and mechanically documented her last weeks. That evening, a film blared through the television screen. The title escapes me. One of the characters stated of her dead mother, death can be a sort of blessing. At that, my mother turned off the television and unplugged it from the wall. She hated television, my mother quipped. Above the lifeless box of television sat a small ceramic cup holding a nopal pad still and upright. From where I sat on the couch, a tiny pad appeared to break through. It had begun its crowning. Its green was a brilliant display—eternal, transcendent, a gift.

