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Las Vueltas

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GRETCHEN E. HENDERSON

*Las Vueltas*

*re pi ta*  
*re-pi-ta*  
*repita, por favor =*  
please repeat

Sift your fingers through double-braced barrels of petrified kernels of corn. Grasp handfuls to empty into the basin in your arms. At the village pump, swizzle the parched seeds. Keep water flowing. Pump and release, pump and release: the action requires repetition, muscles solidified by labor, strength you have not previously needed. After cleaning the kernels, shuttle the basin to a lean-to with a fire kindled before dawn. Twigs poke from a hollowed-out stone that will blister your touch, if you don't take care. Beside the hot rock, there is a tarnished grinder; grit grainy paste through the shredding sieve. The paste should hesitate, then curl before falling onto a rolling slab. With a pestle passed down through generations, urge the pulp flat, flatter. Gather the cohesion into a ball to shape between your palms. Turn it forward and forward, rotate and pat, again. Flat. Your circle is thin, but not supermarket thin, palm-sized sustenance that you place raw and imperfect (since you are learning) on the scorching stone to sizzle, faintly. Pockets of air rise as it heats, freckles and browns. Remove it and add it to the growing pile of steaming disks wrapped in a cloth, warm.

You eat the tortillas with her, a grandmother. You talk of lost children and wait. As boiled milk cools, your tongue burns. Too hot: wait, so ground cinnamon won't stick to your lips. The milk came from a goat across the lane, offered after it bleated and kicked and a knowing hand cradled its neck, to calm. The hand was not yours because you are a foreigner; you do not know how to assuage a goat, or the meaning of calm. You watch, hungry for knowledge not learned in books, imagining the wise fingers on your slender neck. Greedy eyes, she calls you in soft laughs, as she senses you want to be generous but are learning.

You forget that sunrise is a habit because you have no blinds on your windows. Instead of glass, wooden sockets frame a vegetable world. Banana trees, coffee plants, and palms grow lush among deheaded cornstalks, hollowed houses, stone-littered roads. In afternoons, thunder grumbles over the valley. Silence defines sound because it is evasive; there is always the undermurmer of cicadas and the river.

At night, too. There is always the undermurmer of cicadas; the river. Behind the buzz, breezes, bombs. Under murmur. Guns. Fire. Don't breathe, or scream. This happens again, as before: through wooden shutters, skeins of sunlight sketch hammocks as colored cobwebs, pinned among sleeping bats, hidden wings. Droppings scatter a doorway, lit by dusk, an uninhabited yard: hollowed stone oven, an awning, rusted drainpipes, scuttling chickens, hole in the ground. Under your hammock, moonlight seeps around shifting bodies. Creaking beams. Snoring. Rustling. Screeching. Dark arcs slip out the door, flights soft as whispers. The sky cracks, stars. Falling on the ground, you crawl to a cracked wall to see: stars in the street, dancing; the neighboring house a flame.

*Say-ee-say-a-day* . . . not a word.

*Cicada. Say, cigarra—*

*See guerra—*

*Sí, sí, sí—*

Through the valley, the river rims a dusty road and twists from your surrogate community, Las Vueltas ('the turns,' you learn the meaning), to villages beyond the verdant ridge, pocked hills, mountains, camps, bordering there:

A route of repatriation.

Here, she comes behind the lean-to through the dirt yard. It's night. A candlelight's ringed glow catches her shadow as she raises her wrinkled hand to speak. To you. She trusts you with words: how the soldiers came and took her pregnant daughter, opened her on a rock, and made birth a double funeral. She thinks you will protect stories like you protect your own life, no longer. You cradle her words, as she taught you to nurture tortillas, to rotate them, again and again. She grasps your unblemished fingers before disappearing into darkness.

...

Repeat after me:

re pi ta  
re-pi-ta  
repita, por favor =  
please repeat

Me di ga  
Me lo diga  
Dígamelo

*diga* = Ud. form of root-changing irregular verb *decir*  
*decir* = to tell  
*me* = pronoun replaces direct object, *yo*  
*lo* = pronoun replaces indirect object, masculine antecedent  
*un, el cuento* = a, the story  
*escuchar* = to listen

es cu che  
es-cu-che  
escuche

lis ten  
lis-ten  
listen

*Ab-u-e-la, cuén-te-me-lo.*

el cuen to  
el cuen-to  
elcuento

the sto ry  
the sto-ry  
thestory

—*Mi hija, escuches. El cuento. Me apena decirtelo.*

I do not want to bring you pain. Do not tell.

—*No comprendes. Los cuentos son las vidas. Apuntan por la verdad.*

The truth? I don't yet understand *la verdad* or *la vida*.

*la vida* = life

*presente!*

*presente!*

*presente!*

I'm listening. By this candle in the yard, I see you. I hear you.

—*Mis niños.*

Your children?

—*Están desaparecidos.*

*desaparecer* = to disappear, vanish; (~*de vista*) to drop out of sight

*desaparecido* = missing; (*especie*) extinct; dead

Your four sons and daughters.

—*No.*

I misheard, or was something lost in translation?

—*Es verdad que tengo cuatro niños. No he visto a tres, pero vi a mi hija. Hijita mia . . .*

The letter *j* + *vowel*, like the combinations *ge* and *gi*, have no English equivalent; the Spanish is pronounced at the back of the throat, forcing the air through a narrow opening.

You saw one of your daughters? Where?

—*¿Qué veas?*

The letter *u* (pronounced *oo*, as in *tune*) in *que* or *qui* is always silent.

What do *I* see?

—*Miras la milpa.*

Cornfields.

—*Y los plátanos, cafetales y campos de yuca . . .*

Yucca, yesterday. The roots are difficult to harvest, tangling in soil near the stream.

—*El río . . .*

The river?

—*Viene de las montañas y de la lluvia . . .*

You showed me where it comes from the mountains. To bathe, there and in the rain. It rains heavily as if the sky were weeping.

—*Miras la aguja y el hilo.*

The needle and thread, on your lap?

—*Los hilos son como las personas. Si una puntada se desenreda, la cadena se desenreda.*

*puntada* = stitch  
*cadena* = chain; bond, link; series, sequence  
*desenredar* = unravel

—*A causa de la guerra.*

*una, la guerra* = a war, the war  
*causa, efecto* = cause, effect  
*efectos personales* = personal effects (a patch of clothing, a thread, a tooth, photograph in a pocket, a finger, a hand-written prayer)

—*Mi esposo murió.*

Your husband, *lo siento, lo siento*. Many lives lost.

—*La guerra. Más años que tú. Más años que yo.*

*cuántos años tiene* = how old are you? (*formal*)

*cuántos años* = how many years?

*cuántos* = how much, what amount?

a) *los desaparecidos*

b) *los muertos* (75,000)

c) *la guerra*

ch) *Yo, Tu, Ud, Uds, Nosotros, Vosotros* (me; you *informal*;  
you, he or she *formal*; them or you-all *formal*; us or we-  
all, *informal*)

—*Miras el pueblo.*

In this town, I live with you. You've been like a mother to me.

*Madre mia*

*Madre mia*

*Madre mia*

—*Las madres y los padres no están aquí. Viven en las montañas. Luchan por los niños del futuro.*

I've been through mountains with you. Past the river through fields and forests, to camps hidden among trees. Those who hide are willing to give their lives for children, those who are and aren't born.

—*Soy una abuela.*

You're a grandmother.

—*¿Y tú? Sabes la expresión para 'vida nueva'?*

*¿Cómo se dice . . . the expression for 'new life'?*

—*'Nacimiento.'*

'Birth'?

—Sí, ‘dar luz.’

‘To give light’?

—*Literalmente y en sentido figurado.*

Literally and figuratively.

—*Como la sangre.*

Like blood.

—*La sangre riega las semillas de la liberación. Riega las rosas de la U.C.A.*

*regar* = to water (a plant, a garden)

*las semillas* = seeds

*U.C.A.* = Central American University at San Salvador

I’ve seen the roses blooming in a circle on the graves. You called them a miracle. They’ve not stopped blooming, even in winter.

—*Que no se te olvide.*

I won’t forget. You teach me to remember.

—*No olvidamos. Juntas. Yo y tú.*

(We will not forget. Me and you.)

...

*re pi ta*

*re-pi-ta*

*repita, por favor* =

please repeat

*diga* = tell

*cuento* = story; tale

*cuenta* = counting; reckoning



...

How did you sleep, Grandmother?

—*No comprendo esta expresión.*

When you see a person in the morning, how do you inquire after her night's slumber? *¿Cómo se pregunta por la calidad del sueño?*

*preguntar* = a, the question

*calidad* = quality

*sueño* = sleep, dream

—*Entiendo. No tenemos esta expresión. Preguntamos, ¿Cómo amaneciste?*

A different verb than 'to sleep'. Amanecer, 'to dawn'?

—*Sí. ¿Cómo amaneciste?*

How did *I* dawn?

—*Esta es mi pregunta para ti.*  
(This is my question to you.)

...

It's still night. Under murmurs. *Cigarras*. Cicadas. *El río*. The river. The generator is broken. But you've learned to see by the moon and by bugs that light like stars. Fireflies. Their glitz bursts so expect-edly at nightfall, stars seem less common and are distilled by near-er-orbiting, new constellations. You catch the fireflies in an empty Coke-bottle glass. The bugs fill the hollow with glow—you do not consider the grasp as trapping. It becomes your flashlight. You trip giddily over reflective cobblestones with your live lantern and laugh like a drunk trying to suppress loss of control. The stupor implodes. Your shriek escapes before you catch it, freer than the bugs that flit slower and slower in their transparent cage.