

Para Mi Papa, Que Sigue Viviendo En El Mar

Melissa Torres Escalante

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Para Mi Papa, Que Sigue Viviendo En El Mar

Melissa Torres Escalante

I suffer from something called aphantasia, the inability to see/picture/ imagine things in my mind. This doesn't stop me from knowing what things look like, I can describe fruits, people, and things well. When you close your eyes and imagine a red star, what do you see? Can you see the shape of a star? The color? Or do you only see an outline? When I try to do this task, I see nothing. It's just black with a gray static overlay, like a 90s tv that has just been turned off. The lack of ability to see things in my head has never bothered me before, the fact that when I close my eyes all I see is blackness and static. But now I live my days feeling as if I am meant to suffer. Now, when I close my eyes, no matter how hard I plead with a god that never listens, I can't see my dad. No matter how many details I know, no matter if I repeat his features like I'm praying the rosario, I can only see him in pictures.

Even now as I write this, I recall everything I can. His curly hair that refused to fall from his head even in his 70s, the black that faded to gray and white, the serious and impossible to read facial expression, his nose and how it looks so much like my own, his eyes that could never decide between hazel and green. And as much as I try to remember him alive, the details of his death bed creep forward the most. I can't remember my dad alive without remembering him dead.

My dad loved to fish, that's how he survived going hungry in El Salvador after being orphaned as a child during the 60s. But when he came here to the States, fishing was no longer a survival tactic. It was a way for him to remember his home, to remember his family and friends that he could no longer speak to, to relax and let go. He loved the ocean even more. As he got older and slowed down more than he would like to admit, he would say "preocupanse cuando ya no quiero ir al mar, cuando no quiero pescar."

Out of my siblings, there's 3 of us with me included, I am the one who picked fishing up with the same passion. My brother was born 14 years before me and raised in El Salvador by my grandmother; he never got the chance to experience having parents because they were in a com-

pletely different country sending money back. My little sister, 3 years younger than me, just didn't like it. The beach was too cold, too windy, she wanted to go home and sleep. Then there was me, the child who ran to the sea as if it was my long-lost family. My parents first took me to the beach to fish when I was only a couple of months old and since then they have taken me. I remember being small, I couldn't look over the wooden railings of the pier and watching my dad with wide eyes as he got his fishing rods ready. From setting up the hooks, putting on the weights, and lastly hooking the pieces of bait. Finally, there was the way he cast the rod, the fishing line flying through the air with such a force and speed that I was sure it would snap and get lost in the waters below. But it never did, not when he had to reset his bait, not when he began to catch fish. I remember in those moments wanting to grow and be as tall as him, just so that I could finally fish by his side.

It took several years but I had to have been around 9 when my dad began to teach me, first by explaining everything that he was doing. Then by letting me reel in the rods whenever there was a bite, or it was time to check the bait. After several months, it was time for me to cast my first fishing rod. It went terrible. Being inexperienced, I wasn't confident to send it flying the way he did from the pier. But slowly, I began to gain that confidence. In the beginning, I tried to will the fish to take my bait, to get stuck onto my hook so that I could show my dad that I did it. My impatience made me fidgety, had me checking every few minutes. "Con paciencia se hace todo," was what he would tell me. I think it took me around a year to finally settle down. And during this time, especially during the summer months, my dad and I would spend every single Friday there at Newport Beach pier, fishing and not saying a word. There was a language that we developed together, one that didn't involve speaking to be understood. He taught me how to read the tides, how certain fish come out during the day, how to catch sand crabs so we could have live bait.

My father was a quiet man, steady like the earth. As a child, he lost so much and from a young age he was never allowed to enjoy the comforts of being a kid. I recognize that due to his life experiences, he was never a man of words, rather expressing what he felt through actions. A typical Latino dad, I mentioned once that I loved Sabritones and for weeks afterwards he would buy me a bag every time he went to Northgate. His actions were plenty, although there were moments in the silence that we shared that I craved to hear words. What did he think about? What were his dreams

when he was a boy? What was it that made him decide to come to this country? There were so many questions that whirlpooled in me and yet there was nothing that he wanted to share, always keeping his emotions and thoughts close. In that aspect, he was like the ocean, profound and full of the unknown.

I am a fisherman's daughter. There were times that I even began to catch more than he did, when I could tell where the fish were and aim well. There is a unique culture around pier fishing, especially when it's the same group of people seeing you every week. There was a time when one of my dad's fishing friends came over after I caught several fish and asked my dad about me fishing. All I heard my dad say was "La estudiante ya pasó a su maestro." My chest filled with pride, carried forth by happiness like swell waves.

At times, I miss the sea, the ocean and its secrets. We stopped going the moment the pandemic had us in lock down. Yet, there was mi viejo, watching YouTube videos about fishing and constantly setting up his equipment. "Cuando ya podemos, vamos ir a pescar." He would tell me. Enthusiastically, I would nod my head, looking forward to being able to fish the way we used to. In the end, that day never came. I can still feel the screams in my chest building up, like a tsunami about to reach the shore. The day that my dad passed was the day I knew I would never find another person to fish with again. I still don't have the heart to, can't find the will to go by myself. Perhaps I will someday, when the pain and the grief doesn't feel like a current that wants to take me under and drown.

