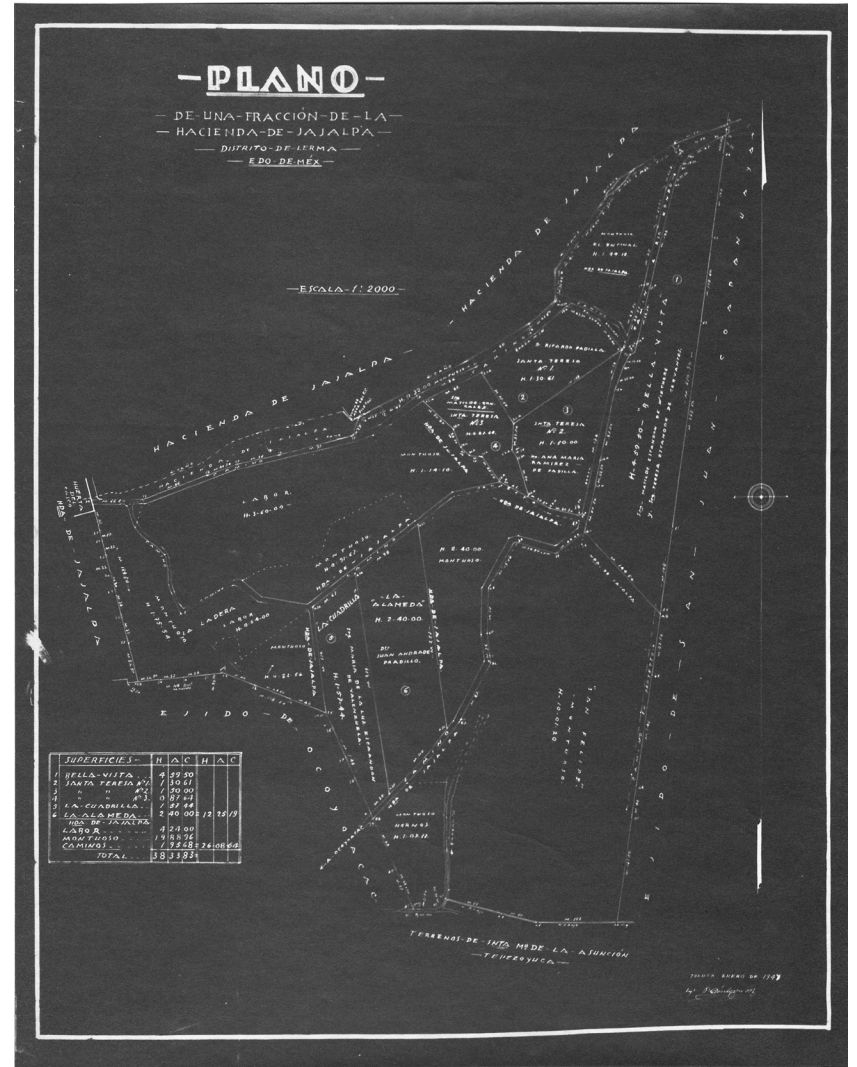


Hand drawn archival map of a fraction of Hacienda de Jajalpa, Distrito de Lerma, State of Mexico, Mexico 1947.



How do you map an interminable sadness? Wake up and stare at the beautiful light. It is white and yellow and green.

*N' dotí: lugar donde hay un pozo. Ocotl yácatl co: en la nariz del ocotal.*

My mother and her two sisters live on La Marquesa's foothills, where they co-own the backed end of Hacienda Jajalpa. I used to think that our family had been living on this land for over three centuries, but history did not play out like that. Well, not exactly like that. In the nineteen twenties, after the Revolution, the hacienda, one of the multiple properties which once belonged to the Pliego family, was up for sale. Papá Polo, my great-great-grandfather, *oriundo de Valle de Bravo, antes del lago y los resort*, bought the estate. Thirty-eight acres. A gift for his wife, María Mercedes Pliego.

Founded in 1566, Jajalpa belonged to the *encomienda* of Tlacopan (Tacuba) which Tecuichpoch Ixcaxochitzin Moctezuma inherited from her mother. After the execution of her cousin and third husband, Cuauhtémoc, in 1525 at the hands of the Spaniards, Tecuichpoch Ixcaxochitzin converted to Catholicism. Baptised Doña Isabel Moctezuma and married off to a Spanish nobleman, Cortés granted the heiress what was rightfully hers: the *encomienda* of Tlacopan.

Jajalpa sits on a hilltop overlooking the town of Ocoyoacac and the Chignahuapan lagoons. The property gives way to a terraced slope, cypress trees lining a dirt road zigzagging down towards the old wood. It's been thirteen years since I last stepped on this pebbled trail; the prodigal daughter walking down in leather *huarache* sandals, lost amongst dry grass, oak trees, and pines. I breathe in the parched air. The sky above me sparkles. Light. Blue. Golden.

Sitting on a rock, I stare out onto the Matlatzinco Lerma valley. Xinantécatl stands across me, lining the southwestern edge of the valley, the lagoons below a mirror under the towering mass of brown. Swallow ducks, tepalcate ducks, black-necked stilts, snipes, phalaropes, red-tailed hawks, peregrine falcons and violet-green swallows travel three thousand kilometers to arrive at the volcano's neighboring winter wetlands. It is all raucous and noise in these boggy waters. Wind carries up the sound of the salesman's van as it sweeps over Ocoyoacac's cobbled streets, its tires bouncing off knee-deep potholes, earth clouding over the van's loudspeaker as dust frees itself into a limitless expanse of ripples that moistens the dryness of the wood, sand and dirt blending into a thunderous female voice that offers fresh bread, steamed sweet potatoes, aluminum pans and factory priced lingerie:

*Aprovecha, aprovecha. No pierdas la oportunidad... Camotes. Camotes. ¡Ricos camotes!... Sartenes, ollas, camas, ¡sofás!*

And in the heat, my vision deforms the quadrilateral shape of the houses below. Concrete melts into a formless accumulation of grey filled with tiny iron bars that impale a horizon of cedar and oak, the landscape burning under the searing rays. I run a hand over my forehead, returning thirsty with relief; I am beginning to sweat. Perspiration dampens where my thumb meets my palm, dirt gathering into clumps over a plump bit of flesh. The dry brown residue sticks onto my skin, steel over pale sienna, which when washed off, will mix in with water, grayish-brown runnels leaking towards the bottom edge of Mamá's white bath-room sink.

There is a well on our property. Fresh spring water is pumped straight to our homes. The sewer in my aunt's house shoots out onto this same hillside and down towards the wood, a rivulet of curdled black water returning to the aquifer. It trickles through stone, sand and mud.

*Mamá me contó que cuando ella era niña, podías encontrar truchas y tortugas de río en el arroyo de Río Hondito.*

In 650 AD, the Otomí founded N'dotí as a ceremonial center; 'there where there is a well'. Conquered by the Aztec Tlatoani Axayácatl in 1476, the site was renamed Ocoyoacac: 'on the ocotal tree's nose, there where the pines start'. On the second fortnight of July 1521, in a bid to free his town from Aztec rule, Chimaltécatl, the cazique of Ocoyoacac, joined the Spanish and Tlaxaltecs on their quest to conquer the Matlatzincó Valley. In gratitude for his men's service, Hernán Cortés named Chimaltécatl the first governor of Ocoyoacac.

Over the centuries, Ocoyoacac has swollen, its waters redirected, the town ebbing towards the edge of the wood. Industry sprouts on the perimeter of the motorway between Mexico City and Toluca, attracting new residents—people from Oaxaca, Atlacomulco, San Miguel Oxtotilpan. The town's new inhabitants settle on the bottom edge of the hill. They cut down the forest below, erect houses out of cinder-blocks and rebar. Plastic tubing pushes underneath the buildings' foundations like roots looking for water; hair, soap, toothpaste and toilet paper gushing through the pipes and onto a dying local stream. Strayed in this wilderness, I look up at an old willow tree which my cousins and I used to swing off as kids. I focus on its canopy. Inspect its leaves. It is plagued. Riddled with disease.

*Muerdago: mistletoe. A parasite rooted in my mind's eye as*

pine green with red fruits. A formless garland under which lovers in colder, whiter climates sit. Velvety olive. Three leaves in the form of a spade. The parasite grafted onto the willow tree's branch. Over time it grows luxuriant and thick. Slowly, it spreads across the trees, colonising a nearby *aile, un encino y un capulín*.



Jajalpa: *Xaxalpa. Xali, arena, sand. Pa, sobre, over. Xali pa. Sobre la arena. Over the sand.*

I leave the woods and walk up the sloped path. I imagine the insurgency troops as they made their way up this same hill, up to the old stone wall. White, but mostly shades of brown. How old is this dirt road? How many shades of blood?

In 1810 the ground rumbles with fiery canons. The Royalist troops headed by Torcuato Trujillo camp out in the hacienda. They wait for Miguel Hidalgo's insurgents behind the stone wall. As the insurgents make their way up the hill, their ascent is suddenly halted. A white wave descends from the hilltop, followed by sinuous streams of red.

My grandfather Bobby planted an arboreal garden above the stone wall. Magnolias, willows, jacarandas, araucaria, alnus and eucalyptus rhodantha make up his collection of local and exotic trees. On the side, Abuela Kate keeps peppers and chiles; fruits fertilised by a mixture of soil, volcanic ash and blood. There is a photograph of Abuela standing next to this same wall. She looks young and happy. She must have just arrived. Abuela peers over her shoulder, the Matlatzincó Valley behind her, unfurling into a blue and grey expanse.

The arboreal garden lines the southern rim of an enormous terracotta courtyard. A row of cypress trees draws round the patio's

northeastern edge, a series of roofless columns delimits the southwest. Piles of twigs, branches and floral detritus are laid out to dry on the weathered tiles, weeds and feral grass spurting roots where the clay's cracked. Like the bracken, they too will turn to ash: the rust-coloured dust bleached to a dirty white.

I get down on all fours and crawl over the cragged ground. Drag myself along towards a pile of charcoal and dirt. The mud buildings around me stand crumbling, gaunt under a scorching hot dryness that makes my skin shrivel. I arrive and kneel. Sink my hands into the black mound, sod making its way into the folds between my flesh and the collagen planes of my fingernails. I then raise my hands towards the sky. Soil seeps between my fingers, grit grates against my skin. Empty-handed, my fingers lock together, palms form into a spade. They dive down and pierce the earth, meeting in the middle, fingers curling underneath. I raise my hands again and repeat the gesture. Feel each particle fall. Listen to the sound of sand raining upon sand.

*Mamá me contó que alguna vez de niña se atrevió a bajar a sótano de la capilla del casco donde está enterrada toda la familia. Llena de valor abrió un ataúd y se encontró con el cuerpo de María Mercedes. Sus uñas eran largas y grises, su piel como papel china. Y en un parpadear de ojos la muerta se desvaneció, dejando solo una fina capa de polvo blanco.*

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*Quiero y mando, y es mi voluntad, que todos los esclavos, indios e indias naturales de esta tierra, que el dicho Juan Cano mi marido y yo tenemos por nuestros propios, por la parte que a mí me toca sean libres de todos servicios, servidumbre y cautiverios, y como personas libres hagan de sí su voluntad, porque yo no los tengo como esclavos, y en caso de que lo sean, quiero y mando que sean libres.*

Isabel Moctezuma's will, 11 July 1550

From the arboreal garden, I walk past the house my grandparents built on the top of the hill. The structure totters over three levels constructed over time using cheap materials and an anachronous array of ornaments salvaged from the Pliegos' villa in Toluca.

On the right side of the path, cemented onto stone ruins, there is a three-meter-tall *zaguán*. Dark. Burly. Coated in tar. A heavy two-piece wooden doorway with door knockers shaped like wrought iron swans, accompanied by a floral bas-relief encasing two perfectly

rhomboid eggs. Mirroring profiles adorn the middle of each door panel. A pair of snarling apes with dark elongated eyes break out from the two-dimensional plane. Their jaws protrude belligerently from the flat surface as if safeguarding the eggs, their gaping necks restrained by chiseled out chains that wrap upwards towards the appliqué flowers; an arrangement of leaves falling, curling and enfolding around the closed-off blackness of each profile's face.

A thunderous dark cloud takes over. I run down towards the stables and take shelter in the granary. It is dry and empty. Fallow. For hours I listen to the angry tumid drops that plunge onto the rocky ground, watching the rain spring up like needles, the sky striking with lightning, resonating like an angered drum.

*Y me pregunto, ¿qué sentía Pacesita al encontrarse con estas bestias?*

I want to write about how the *zaguán* was not here, how it wasn't built here, how it was not part of the hacienda as a swift reading of the object and its location would have it be. In 1966 my grandfather Bobby brought that monster of a door to Jajalpa from the villa in Toluca. The door marks the entrance to nothing. It is closed from the inside. The armature is the fantasized exoskeleton of a torn-down past, the baroque appearance of historic amnesia hidden behind a screen of filigree and soot. A partial or total loss of memory and only Abuela left to ask... 'What was there here before?'

Answer: *un muladar*. A house for the half-cast offspring of a donkey and a horse.





Isabel Tecuichpoch Ixcaxochitzin *‘flor de algodón’ ‘hija del señor’* Moctezuma. Aztec princess. Mexica empress. Wed five times. Five times widowed. Mother of seven. Raped once, by Cortes himself. Her progeny forcefully whitened; Leonor, Juan de Dios, Juan, Pedro, Gonzalo, Isabel, and Catalina.

*Katherine es mi abuela; Catalina Isabel, my mother. El mestizaje como protocolo de blanquimento y yo como resultado.*

Pascuala, Paz, Pacesita. Born in Texcoco, taken in by my grandfather’s mother, Maria Luisa Rebollar Pliego, at sixteen. Bobby must have been a child when Paz joined the family. He must have seen his mother teach Paz how to speak Spanish, cook and clean. Soon after, Maria Luisa and my great-grandfather died in a tragic car accident, leaving Paz with Bobby as a sort of substitute mother.

Paz had a son of her own, Juan; a child born out of wedlock who Bobby adopted as his godchild. Years later, my grandfather married Abuela Kate. Together they had four children. Two of them wanted, two of them unplanned, in a growing family of eight. There was always more than one woman in Bobby’s life; Abuela locked up in the bedroom, Paz working in the kitchen, caring for their kids.

*Mamá era la favorita de Paz. Nena, Pacesita la llamaba. La nana y la nena: madre e hija.*

I met Paz when I was very young. Mamá took me to visit her in the city apartment she was living in at the time. I remember the gardens were wide and open, the multi-family complex surrounded by scattered trees and dry flower beds. Paz had arthritis and acute herpes simplex, her diseased toes had been cut off. My memory of her amputated. Excised with shame and self-reproach for knowing only the image of a woman with furrowed brown skin and black almond eyes. I see her posing shyly in blue and white, pink and yellow dusk wrapping around her straw hat. My grandparents’ half-built house sits at her back *y el pueblo de Ocoyoacac* lays further off behind.

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My mother’s house used to be the hacienda’s chicken coop. Three rooms and a bathroom make up what once was an oversized bird pen for *guajolotes, gallinas, patos y gansos*. At the back of Mamá’s house, there is a row of empty stables, a cattle trough, a barn, and a wood store.

*Mamá dice que hay un archivo con la historia de Jajalpa guardado en uno de los establos. Juntas vamos a buscarlo.* We look for a ladder

hidden below the timber. We scramble between branches and heavy stumps, our lungs filled with grime and three hundred year old dust. Every summer rain comes in through the broken roof, running into rivers down the carved out mud wall. Umber water pools over these logs throughout the summer months waiting to be dehydrated by the ensuing long winter drought.

It takes four hands to maneuver two aluminum poles barred together. Our tiered arms move in unison, steering the awkward object out of the store and inside one of the neighboring stables. The space is empty, uninhabited except for the darkness and a thin cupboard that has been built into the left wall. We position the ladder in front of the closet. I climb up its steps and reach the deep incision in the wall that is the topmost cupboard. The crevice forms a vast, hollow cave that swallows my body in its damp darkness. Guided by a blind obstinate hand, I stretch my arms into the cold air and find the edges of what I presume is a box. My fingers move along the rim of the cardboard surface, each hand taking hold of a separate corner, lifting it, and pulling it out.

The archival box is beige and brown and weathered. Its paper layers protrude out of shape. Stains mark the areas where water has leached, brown softened into tawny circles after years of being wrapped under the permanent sun that comes in through the window in Abuela’s study. Thirty-three manila envelopes are folded neatly inside, everything labeled with Abuela’s elegant cursive lettering. I leaf through the folders. I unearth my paternal great-grandmother’s high school diploma, her wedding photograph and letters from her father Papá Polo, followed by correspondence from the municipality requesting access to the land to extract clay, pictures of Mamá and Paz, Bobby’s will and his *Escuela Secundaria Número Tres* school grades. And as I do this, I wonder how much Abuela despised my grandfather, holding on to his family’s documents for years after their divorce, clinging onto that box—its innards fixed and unmoving under the harsh light of her window as if his body never shut its eyes even at night. Until, years after his death, she gifts the specimen to my mother.

Plants are born in this dark moistness, grasshoppers walk atop the leaves. They rub their legs together, transmitting anxiety into the night’s hollow air. I dream I am half-naked, from the bottom down. A breeze flows between my labia, flapping everything into view; the skeleton of the place inverted, corrupted, exposed.

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An occurrence of quakes in overwhelming quantities shapes this landscape, countless vibrations quiver in my insides. It is 1727, 1884, 1931, 1962, 1988, 2021 and I am banging my fist against the wall, striking the stone harder and harder *una y otra vez* for twenty, thirty, fifty-seconds, five minutes, ‘the great Mexican tsunami of 1787’ puckering towards the country’s center. A fist hits the stomach, another below the eye, her blood vessels distending; they rupture with *purpura y magenta y mi piel irradia con una cólera violenta*. So I stop. Rub the section above the stone. Feel the adobe’s softness, the clay sticking to my fingertips. My knuckles throb swollen and tender as the earth convulses again. I kick the wall. Push my weight against it, my Reebok trainers colliding against mud, rock and brick, causing my toenail to split into a piercing pain that shoots through my foot, traveling from the inner edge of the toenail, rippling along the cuticle and spreading into the bone.

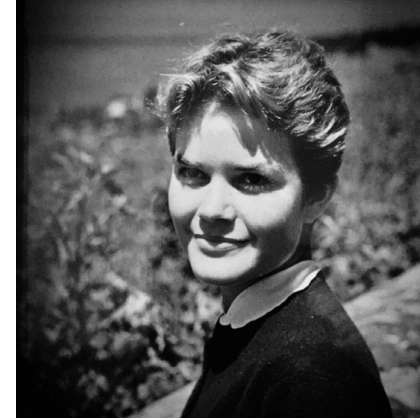
I take my shoes off. Stare apathetically at the flushed skin. There is blood on my big toe. I pull my leg up towards the sink, awkwardly straddle the kitchen counter and turn the tap on. A rush of water splatters blood across the sink’s walls and onto my black t-shirt, the current forming into inky red eddies that swivel towards the drain. I turn the tap off. Standing on one foot, I pull my drenched leg out of the sink and aim the bruised foot at a clean towel. I submerge my toes beneath the white cotton. It is soft and plush and red and pink. But the skeleton is still intact. The stone wall is still there. As are the granary, the stables, the estate house and the church. Only fire will bring these buildings down. Burn edifices made of dirt.

In November 1915, amidst a choleric civil war, *el Ejército del Sur* burnt down the estate house, the warehouses, the stables, and the mill. The old train station was ravished and the grain fields set ablaze. *La tía Tere me contó que durante la revolución, cuando ella era niña, se tuvo que resguardar en el sótano de una hacienda. Ella, sus hermanas, primas y las otras criadas vivieron un mes bajo el suelo. Cuando salieron, todo era negro. Todo estaba carbonizado.*

Outside Abuela’s house, there is a roofless chapel. An enormous mud ribcage overrun with ivy makes up the burnt-down ruins of a mill. Climbing cactus twines its way up into the weathered columns, the plant’s spines wedged between clay and brick. A half-oval shape has been notched into the North facing wall, creating a shallow nook for a limestone cross. The crucifix consecrates the space. It silently declares this place is sacred, dedicated to the newborn, the newlywed and the dead. Broken, tonne heavy, five centuries old. A repurposed millstone

stands a couple of meters in front. The makeshift altar made out of volcanic material is propped over a circular conglomeration of cement and igneous rock.

When Bobby died we held a vigil here. Scattered his ashes amongst his neighboring rose beds. But the roses have been since forgotten, they are no more than squalid stumps. And the jacaranda tree, once tall and luxuriant, is half dead.



The next morning I go visit Abuela in the house that was once my grandfather’s. The house they built together, the house where he latter lived with his second wife.

Abuela doesn’t stay in the master bedroom. She stays in the one below. She hardly leaves the room. Her shrunken frame has fused onto the armchair. Her swollen joints consolidated into bony lumps. CNN keeps her company. The sound from the television marks out a territory: the United States of America is transported through the cable, the presenter’s grating *gringo* accent building rapport.

Abuela tells me how she left her fiancé in California to marry Bobby. She tells me how seductive he was, how she didn’t speak any Spanish. There are things that we don’t put down into words, secrets taken with us when running away to a foreign country, echoes that reoccur; infidelities, the names of brown lovers, unwanted pregnancies and divorce. Silence forms a blanket and like children we hide underneath. The weight of Abuela’s body under the thick duvet presses down onto the corduroy cushion, causing friction to rupture the supple skin of the buttocks. Boils turn the thin leather into the flattened craters of

a volcano while she watches TV. Away from the sun, her white dermis turns a pale azure, her teary eyes the color of Xinantécatl's steel lagoons. An expanse stretches beneath these trembling waves of sultriness: lakes or luminous stains of sky.

Copal from the náhuatl *copalli*, designates a number of aromatic tree resins. Copal Santo or Torote Blanco bridges the human world with that of the gods: *Tlaloc patrón de la lluvia y el relámpago, Xiuhtecuhtli señor de la hierba, Ehécatl señor del viento, Huítzilôpôchtli señor de la guerra y Chalchiuhtlicue, la de la falda de jade.*

In the month of *Huey tozoztli*, a girl of seven or eight is dressed in blue; her head decorated with a leather garland and adorned with cobalt feathers. Priests take her to the lagoon and offer her to Chalchiuhtlicue, goddess of fountains, rivers, lakes and lagoons. The girl's beheaded body is thrown into a rushing eddy, followed by jewels, precious stones and a tree.

Standing outside the stables, I lift a rock with both hands and throw it into the cattle's trough. The stone is a portal, a vortex, a curl—a mixture of water and chlorine that soaks into cotton, polyester and rayon. A shirt, a pair of socks, a heavy wool skirt, a drunk woman paddling in panic, having, seconds earlier, thrown herself into the pool with two filled up suitcases. She agitates the water, waves splashing over her face, the cases pulling her down. Someone help her. Jump!

But she drowns nonetheless. *Tequila, mezcal, vino y ron.* She drowns. Alone. In a foreign country. Surrounded by her family. Abuela drowns. And I think about alcohol's toxicity, how it becomes pluvial. Tears pouring with the first summer rain accompanied by frozen white pellets, they shoot onto the ground, shattering flowers and skylights alike, glass splintering all over Mamá's tiled floors, where I am curled up, overwhelmed by what is happening to her body. Why is it so thin? So frail? I run a hand through her hair. It comes out in clumps. I weave the hair into a ball, put the lump inside my mouth, and thread the fibers round my teeth. I hold my lips close, sealed tight. My limbs turn blue and grey. Mouth silver and black.

Depression runs like sap. Its toxicity propagates through blood vessels and veins, sowing seeds from one generation to the next. Cut an oak leaf and bring it to the center of your chest. Feel your heart palpitating. Feel how golden honey weeps from your wounds, five-fifty

millimeter lacerations fan around the cut like a sheaf. Go! Gather the sap with a cactus leaf. Soak it into a mixture of wood chips and ash and allow it to dry. Then burn it. Burn it until all that remains is smoke.

It is 9am and I am sitting in the chapel. Eyes closed. Body soaking the morning's subtle warmth. The sun peers between the columns. It cuts into the crisp air and leaks into the frigidity of the shade. Mamá helps Abuela out into the open space of the chapel, the pain of old age weaving a thread of forgiveness, the old lady's body taking in the light.

Light reveals everything, even the possible: the yellow, brown and olive green of rumpled oak leaves, the sandy-colored dirt ground, black mud after two days of rain. Purple flowers grow from one solitary jacaranda branch, leaves sprouting a soft camel rose in the light moistness of spring. And there, below the dying tree, between gravel, *tezontle* and sand, shoots a weedy *tepozán*. Mamá takes a cutting. A leaf or two. She steeps the silver-green leaves in boiling water. Presses with a mortar onto their velvety flesh. She then soaks a cotton bud in the infusion and cleans her mother's wounds.

#### Photographs

- 1 The author's mother, Catalina, in the hacienda's wood at dusk, age seventeen.
- 2 The author's mother and aunt, Catalina and Gloria, sitting on the old stone wall at dusk, ages seventeen and eighteen.
- 3 Paz wearing a straw hat and sitting in front of the author's grandparents house in Jajalpa as it was being built.
- 4 School photograph of Bobby, the author's grandfather. Approximately twelve years of age.
- 5 Abuela Kate, the author's grandmother, standing above the old stone wall and looking out onto the Matlatzinco Lerma valley. Approximately twenty-three years of age.

Superficies				
	Resacas	Sanegos	Resacas	Caballerías
San Cayetano	65.4			
Sa Mónica	17.6			
La Capilla	31.7			
El Mesón	9.5			
La Soledad	27.7			
San Bernardo	13.8			
San Agustín	18.8			
San Antonio	9.8			
El Muerto	10.8			
El Jagüey	8.2			
La Hoya	3.9	1.41		
Sa Gertrudis	5.3	1.04		
Santo Ángel	5.4	1.1		
La Covacha	2.2	1.26		
La Présita	3.2	1.46		
Sa Rosa	1.7	1.46		
La Cuadrilla	4.7	1.11		
San Felipe	2.4	1.11		
Suma la labor	277.3	11.4	11.4	5.186
Monte	512.4		512.4	11.910
Total			989.7	17.100

Archival table registering the measurement of different plots in the Hacienda de Jajalpa and its surrounding area (1947).