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No tengo ni una sola memoria

René Saldaña

Texas Tech University

(Canoga Park, CA)

I don't remember learning English.

Nor Spanish, for that matter.

I had to've picked them up at the same time, though—
at the same time both of them living in my mouth.

I don't have a single memory of ever thinking
one language was different from the other.

Not one memory of me thinking *now I'm speaking Spanish*
(or English). To me, they got the job done as needed.

'Amá laughs telling me about when I first started
talking: I was late doing it, three years old maybe?

Up to that time it was me just grunting.
I'd point a finger at a thing I wanted and grunt.

She was starting to worry I'd never talk, ever.
Mudo, she says. For life I'd just point and grunt.

It was my sister who interpreted what I meant: food or
a toy or to be taken up onto a sister's warm lap and held.

But driving down a street one day, I pointed out
the window and said, *Ollo, ollo*, meaning KFC chicken.

But it wasn't Spanish or English I was talking.
A kid's got to eat and say so, right?

Or he'll starve from hunger 'cuz he never said.

El Espejo

René Saldaña

Texas Tech University

*“Nos miramos en el espejo,
y nos vemos uno al otro.”*

--a new Chicano proverb

Esos mochos, we whisper-shouted.

Chicanos pochos, they screamed back.

One ridiculing the other—*You don’t speak right.*

Brothers and sisters ripped apart by something so simple as a river.

My own father among them, who crossed back and forth

time and again, and today recites the *Pledge*

in broken English like a shattered window. *But*

he isn’t them, I told myself. And neither am I.

So what am I if not my father’s son? And

what my story and my tongue?

I listen to the river rushing past, and

I hear it clearly, fluidly telling me

that we are all the same: brothers and sisters,

mothers and fathers, tíos and tías, and the primos.

Lost

René Saldaña

Texas Tech University

I head to Tío Polo's shop.

He's a carpenter.

There are mounds of sawdust
on the floor, sawdust in
every nook and cranny.

I find my corner,

pull out the latest

Kaliman, el hombre increíble,

& read. I'm lost

in the sawdust,

lost in the adventure.

Lost in the language.

A Word So Much More Beautiful

René Saldaña

Texas Tech University

(1985)

On the day 'Apá got his citizenship,
he was asked to answer a bunch of questions.
To prove he was deserving of this prize, I guess.

He'd learned just enough English to get by
at work with his boss, Mike. Enough to move up
in the concrete-laying ranks anyhow. But

today, in front of some official sitting squat
behind his desk, a pen in his hand, who held tightly
onto the thing my father wanted so badly and who

seemed to be shielding it from folks looking
for their slice of the sueño americano pie,
even if it was just a sliver of that dreamy wedge

('Apá's portion of pie looking like working his fingers
to the marrow, mochilas full of books for his kids,
a pillow for his tired head, food in our bellies),

that man asked one final question of 'Apá:

What's the color of the jacket you're wearing?

A softball lobbed down the middle of the plate,

right there hanging, the size of the whole earth, he couldn't miss,
right? 'Apá, in his mocho's English, his accent sopping thick, said,
Purpo, but sorry I can't say it right in English.

In Spanish, though, he said, the word is morado.

No, the official said, *it's not purple or morado.*

Your jacket's maroon, it's guindo. But close enough.

The jacket was 'Apá's pride and joy, a gift from 'Amá who'd been with Levi's for a decade now. Her prize now his, he wore it another ten years when he had to dress up. But that day 'Apá had no word in English for *guindo*. His reservoir mostly empty yet. He knew *close enough*, though. And besides, isn't *guindo* so much more beautiful to say than *maroon*?

El sueño americano—

René Saldaña

Texas Tech University

Don't it sound so much more beautiful than its English counterpart—

The American Dream: predetermined: baseball, apple pie, Chevrolet?

El sueño though's something to make your own and trudge towards,

a thing to fight for if you've got to, to strive after day after day.

To fall asleep conjuring up. A brand new day every day.