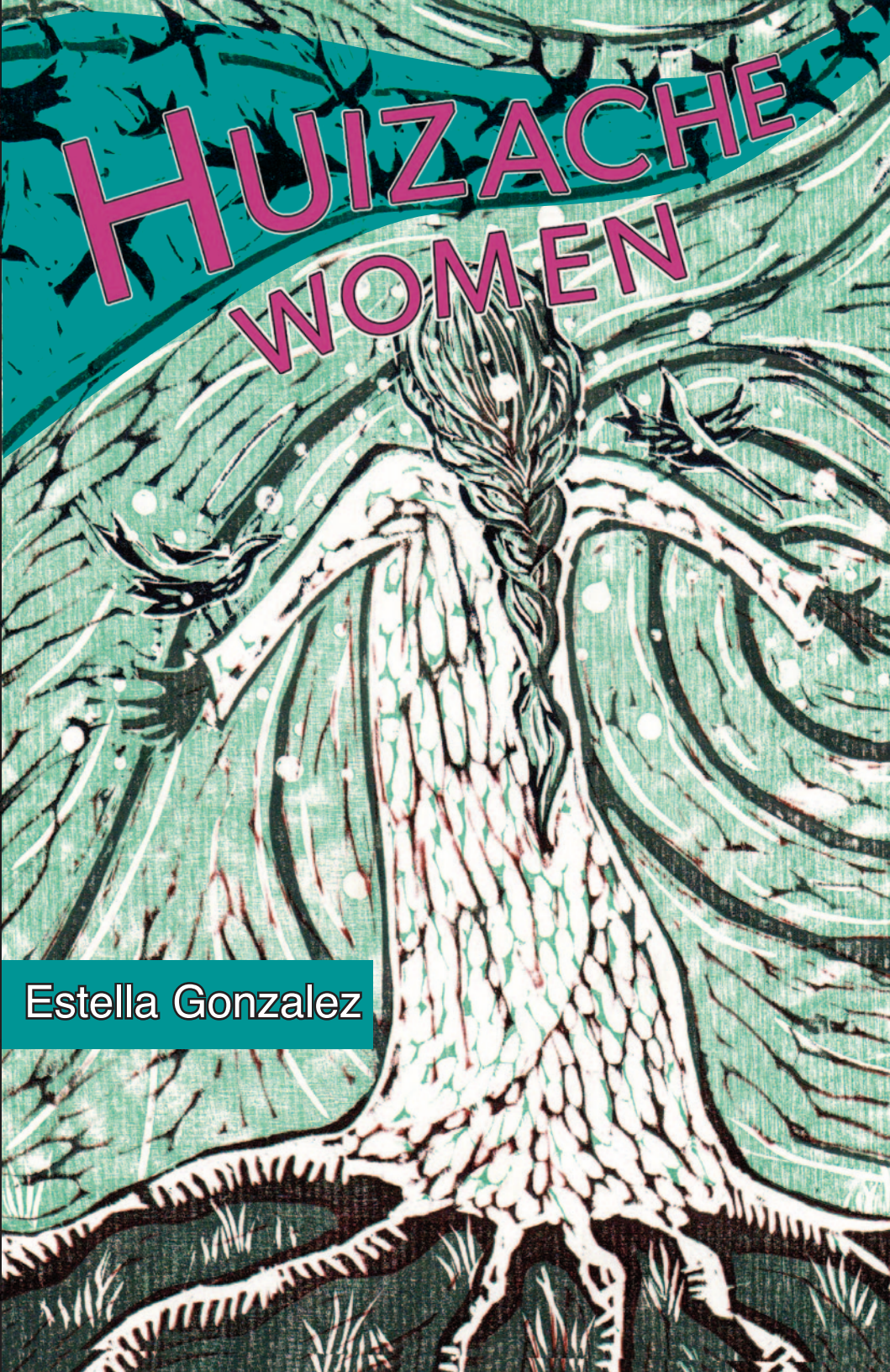


# HUIZACHE WOMEN

A stylized illustration of a woman with a long, thick braid, wearing a long, patterned dress. She is surrounded by a dense, textured background of green and brown, suggesting a natural or forest setting. The overall style is reminiscent of traditional Mexican folk art or textile patterns.

Estella Gonzalez

## Praise for *Chola Salvation*

"Gonzalez's debut collection delivers a layered portrait of Mexican-American life rooted in 1980s East Los Angeles. An inviting tapestry."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"In her first collection of stories set mostly in her hometown of East Los Angeles, Gonzalez unfurls the preoccupations of Mexicans and Mexican Americans and conveys an array of emotions they feel stemming from their blue-collar jobs, cultural heritage, faith and poverty. Her use of Mexican slang adds a distinctive flavor that enhances the atmospheric setting. Beneath the machismo and the matriarchal dominance that reverberate in Gonzalez's stories is a thriving Chicano/a pride that unites and rewards these flawed but resilient characters as they achieve bittersweet triumph over steep odds."

—*Booklist*

"Smoldering stories that center the lives of Mexican Americans by complicating common tropes and conceptions. This debut collection of interlocking short stories turns an unflinching eye on the small tragedies, gut-wrenching betrayals and enduring courage of working-class Latinx folks in East Los Angeles and the borderlands. Imagine *Winesburg, Ohio* featuring Chicano of East Los Angeles with a touch of mystical realism."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"The candid storytelling brings the vibrancy, beauty, flaws and hope within a thriving culture to unforgettable life. *Chola Salvation* is a choice pick for public library collections; highly recommended."

—*Midwest Book Reviews*

"What is most astonishing about *Chola Salvation* is Estella Gonzalez's skill in dropping the reader right into the action. Each story's razor-sharp characterizations allow us to recognize the bravada these *mujeres* live by, for better or for worse, or to root for queer love sought by *hombres*. With its bars, churches, hair salons and neighbors, this collection is East Los in its beautiful, aggrieved, celebratory finest."

—Helena María Viramontes, author of  
*Their Dogs Came with Them* and *The Moths and Other Stories*



# HUIZACHE WOMEN

Estella Gonzalez



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Recovering the past, creating the future

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For all the *madres, tías, hermanas y abuelas tercas*,  
keep your thorns sharp and your roots deep. Stay  
forever *chingonas!*



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And to all the *chingonx* who love and bloom on both sides of the *frontera*. Stay strong y *afilén los colmillos!*



## CHAPTER 1

### *Santa*

When Merced saw the framed movie poster for *Santa* on the wall of the *tiendita* she stopped so hard, she almost fell. Lupita Tovar, the most beautiful movie star in all of Mexico, in the world, blazed before her, an angel with her eyes tilted up toward the heavens, her hands posed in prayer. A rumble, then a roar surged through Merced's body until her mouth opened.

"*Un ángel,*" Merced sang softly as her finger touched the cold glass protecting the poster, protecting Lupita. Slowly she traced over Lupita's thin black eyebrows before touching her own.

The number 5 was prominent at the bottom of the poster. Although she could not read most of the words, she knew it would cost *cinco centavos* to see it projected in the movie tent.

She knew she'd have to lie to her aunt Pina to keep some of the money she earned selling the *ancho chiles* at the *mercado* in Villa Ahumada. But her aunt could sniff out a lie quicker than a dog could smell out the chorizo hidden in the dovecote. No, she'd have to start setting aside a penny a day if she could. One penny would not make a difference to her aunt, not right away, anyway.

Every evening from then on, instead of paying the penny to return on the train, she offered some of the remaining *chiles* to those farmers heading back to El Sueco instead of those heading back to her little town. Instead of dropping her off at the *placita* in El Sauz, she would make them drop her off a mile down the main highway. Tía Pina would have overheard the gossip about her niece taking rides from men.

“Pina will catch you for sure,” her oldest sister Cleófilas told her as they rode the train down to Villa Ahumada.

“Don’t you tell her Cleo” Merced answered as she held her basket of *chiles* carefully. The glossy skins of the *chiles* looked liquid in the dim morning light.

“You’re not supposed to be watching those kinds of movies, anyway,” Cleófilas said.

Merced rolled her eyes at her older sister, who was always preaching instead of helping.

Merced placed every penny she saved in a tin box she kept buried near the *huizache*, a tree so stubborn, it kept growing back every year, even after her father, Plutarco, burned it down to its roots. The next year, ten saplings would grow in its place.

“Something so stubborn deserves to live,” he said one warm spring day after trying to dig up its roots.

From then on, the *huizache* tree became her preferred place to rest and to hide her secret possessions from her sisters and aunt. Now it was a place to hide her money.

Every morning, Merced would be sure to get up earlier than her aunt and sister and head out to the fields with her hand-woven basket. Night would be cracking with a filmy glow revealing rows of dark green leaves, some bulging with swollen ancho *chiles*. As harvest time neared, the cool fall air filled with woodsmoke from the fires stoked by field hands working the cattle ranch on the other side of the field. Cowboy coffee, Merced thought. She had tasted it once before when she had snuck up on the field hands sitting around the fire. One of them had given her a taste in exchange for a kiss.

Sometimes, she would kiss the farmers who brought her back to El Sauz, dropping her off, just before they continued on to the capital. Sometimes she'd hitch a ride with Mennonite farmers who would just nod and look straight ahead. Merced preferred those pale silent men who left her alone. She would sit in the back of their wagon and watch the Sierra mountains shadowed by fiery sunsets. Sometimes, she would break off a piece of the Mennonite cheese the farmer would offer. Its salty firmness comforted her.

"Your feet are dirtier now," Pina told her on the fifth night she arrived by Mennonite. "Don't they clean that train?"

Merced rubbed the back of one leg over the front of the other. She looked down at her cracked dusty toenails, the *centavos* in her pocket steadying her weary body. When she handed them over, Tía Pina looked her in the eye.

"Hmm, you're making less money this week," she said.

"*Mentira*," Merced snapped back. "I'm making more than Cleo."



"Maybe I should send you all to Ahumada," Pina said as she stored the money in her apron pocket.

When she would sit at the table to eat her share of beans and tortillas, her father would say nothing. He'd just continue to eat the tortillas Cleófilas tucked in between the quilted tea cloths.

Sometimes, while Cleo, Plutarco and Pina were on the far ends of the rows tending to the *chiles*, Merced would lay out her *rebozo* between rows and lie down to contemplate the blue sky. Sometimes, she would close her eyes and let the aroma of the fresh, green *anchos* roll around inside of her. Sometimes, if she was still hungry after eating her lunch, she would roast *chiles* over a makeshift fire under the *huizache* and enjoy them folded into a tortilla.



“That stained the earth, didn’t it?” Pina remarked when she saw the remains of an earlier fire. Luckily, she didn’t see the stems and seeds littering the back of the tree.



Now that she had enough money to attend the tent theater, Merced had to figure out a way to slip out that evening. Everyone usually went to bed at sundown, but Merced had deliberately chosen this *Santa* evening to clear and wash the dishes and tend the fire in the wood-burning stove. Cleo had eyed her sister, aware that Merced planned on escaping to the plaza but kept her sister’s secret. When the candlelight was snuffed out in Plutarco’s room, Merced breathed easily. Quickly, she went over to the corner behind the stove to pull the recently unearthed tin box she had hidden under the logs. It was gone!

Merced crouched and ran her hands down under the logs where she knew she had placed it. Nothing. Her heart nearly cracked until she heard Plutarco’s door open. Lately, her father had started waking up from his deep sleeps to visit the room she shared with Cleófilas. This time, instead of going to their room, he went straight to the kitchen. Merced’s heart-beat faster. Plutarco stood between her and the door.

“¿*Buscas esto?*”

His hard, calloused hands gripped the rusted, dirty box. The coins clinked inside the box as if they were trying to break out. Plutarco must’ve found the box when she was busy grinding corn. As he walked toward her, she knew she would have to either let him keep the money or let him see her breasts. That’s what he had been demanding now when he found her alone. She knew he demanded the same of Cleófilas.

She eyed her father and lifted her blouse. His hands trembled as he handed the box to her. Beyond her father, she saw the door to Pina’s room open slightly, then close. Before she could snatch the box away, he grazed her nipples. Merced’s body froze. The clattering of the tin box against the stove broke

her trance as she pulled down her blouse and pushed Plutarco down with all the strength she used for pushing cattle away from the barbed-wire fencing.

As she crashed into the night, her breath could be seen in the moonlight. Behind her the door slammed. She stopped. The song of the crickets was all she heard. Tears ran down her cheeks. An aching pain throbbed in the back of her throat, but she pressed it back until it settled around her heart. Plutarco had let her get away in exchange for more favors, favors owed to a father by his daughter, he would tell her before she closed her eyes.

When Merced got to the plaza, a larger tent had been erected around the smaller one she had seen earlier. At the entrance she gave the man in the straw hat her five *centavos*. Men and women from El Sauz and Villa Ahumada were there. Some she recognized, and others were new and strange, including some women with dyed blonde hair. They looked like actresses from the movie posters she sometimes saw in Juárez when she and Cleo traveled there for the farmer's market. The movie projector had been set in the center aisle, its power cord snaking out under the tent. As the crowd waited for the movie to start, a *conjunto* played a *norteño* song. Rufina, a tall girl she knew who sometimes invited her to sit by the fires on cold fall mornings, waved her over. Rufina's brother Moti stood up the moment he saw her.

"Are you here to see the movie?" he asked, tipping his hat back to see her better.

Merced tilted her head, her voice still caught in her throat.

"We're going to see it, too," Rufina whispered, looking furtively at her brother. "Can I sit with you? *Estos pendejos* always talk during the movie."

"I can't find a chair." Merced shrugged and tightened her blouse around her waist.

Rufina instinctively wrapped her *rebozo* around them both. Most of the benches in the back were filled up, but there were blankets on the floor in front, where the two girls ended

up sitting. The tent was full of people from the area. Ranchers, *señoras* who only left the house to go to church, farmhands, daughters, mothers, some fathers and sons, all looking up at the wall, waiting for the movie to begin. Before it started, a man with a hulking camera began taking pictures of the audience, his flash tray exploding. He caught one of Merced and Rufina wrapped in the *rebozo*. Rufina smiled straight into the camera, while Merced looked straight at the wall.

Suddenly, the lights dimmed, and the whirring of the film projector started. Everyone quieted down. The moment Lupita's name appeared on the wall, the audience clapped.



Merced hated harvest time. It meant earlier mornings and longer nights. It meant cold lunches in the field and heavy baskets. As she tracked the field, she would crouch down to feel the girth of the *chiles*. If they were firm with a deep green, she pulled them from the plant. If there was a remnant of the blossom, she left them.

“They’re still babies,” her aunt Pina would tell her. “They need more time.”

As the sun rose and the soil warmed, Merced could feel the sweat forming over her lips and under her blouse. Her arms and back ached when she got home. Quickly, before her father returned home, Merced would fill a bucket with water and sponge the sweat off her body before her father tried to touch her. Afterwards, she'd rush out to the woodpile and stoke the fire in the stove. Cleófilas would come in and begin kneading the dough for the tortillas, while Pina busily chopped onions, tomatoes and garlic cloves for the salsa.

Harvest season meant fresh roasted *chiles*, salsa, *rellenos*, and it also meant traveling to Juárez as well as Villa Ahumada. The first time Merced traveled to the big city, Ciudad Juárez, she and Cleófilas had hitched a ride on the back of a

neighbor's wagon. Now, they drove the wagon their father had bought a while back.

On the driver's seat, Rufina and Hernán, her oldest brother, sat chatting, sometimes looking back at the sisters sitting behind the open boxes of tomatoes, onions and *chiles*, discussing what to do about her father.

Cleo's mouth flattened. "He needs a wife."

Merced rolled her eyes. "Who? Nobody will marry him. He's too . . . *cabrón*," Merced offered.

Cleo burst out laughing so hard she nearly fell off the wagon. Suddenly, she heard laughter in front of them.

"Your mother married him," Rufina said after she wiped tears from her face. "I heard he was handsome when he was young."

"Handsome men are the worst," Hernán said, even though he was handsome enough.

Merced loved Hernán, who was never crude like his younger brother Moti. Some cool, fall mornings he would offer her his thin cotton jacket as warmth. No kisses, no touching necessary. This made Merced want to touch him all the more.

"How would you know?" Rufina asked her brother.

"Look at Dad," Hernán said, slapping down the reins on the horses' haunches.

Rufina nodded, recognizing that their own father had another family in Chihuahua. At least, he was rich, Merced thought. At least, Hernán and Rufina's father had bought a wagon and two horses to haul their harvest. They didn't have to lug heavy baskets to the market every week. And they had a servant too, an *indita* from Creel.

Merced looked up at the dawn peering over the sierras. She had heard that Pancho Villa and his men had buried gold up in the caves, that it had never been found. One day she would hike up there and find it.

"It's probably buried deep in a cave," Plutarco told them one night while they cleaned up the kitchen.

“*Puro pedo*,” Tía Pina said. “That’s an old legend.”

“Who says?” Plutarco said, facing his sister. “Donaciano?”

Pina turned red, pressed her mouth shut. Merced knew that her aunt was in love with the owner of the *tiendita*. Donaciano was not handsome at all but he was rich. His mother, Doña Margarita, owned a big store in Chihuahua that served some of the city’s politicians. Rumored to have been Pancho Villa’s favorite lover, she inherited a crate filled with his gold bars. Too bad Doña Margarita and Plutarco would not let Pina marry Donaciano.

Merced had heard Plutarco tell his sister that she was supposed to take care of him until he found another wife.

“That was Mamá’s dying wish,” Plutarco would remind Pina.

“When’s that gonna happen?” Pina would cry out in desperation.

Once, she called him a *pinche culero*, insulting his masculinity, and Plutarco punched her right in the nose.

Merced had never seen Plutarco punch anybody. She had only seen bloody fights in the movies. Sometimes, the field hands would tussle but none had thrown a punch, none had bled. Since Tía Pina’s nose would not stop bleeding the next day, Merced had to take her to the doctor in Villa Ahumada. Throughout the train ride, Pina kept her eyes closed. Sometimes a few tears slid down her cheeks. Her breath stank of a miserable night because it had been too painful to rinse out her mouth. The doctor set her nose and did not ask any questions.

“How much?” Merced asked.

“Your bill’s been paid,” the receptionist said, barely looking up from behind the counter.

The fragrance of rose water reached out to Merced. It was a miracle. She looked up at the picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe that hovered behind the receptionist.

When they returned home, Cleo ran over to them before they got to the door.

“Donaciano was here,” she said. “He beat Plutarco bad.”

Pina smiled slightly from under the gauze bandage.

“Where are they?” Pina asked as she lowered herself onto her bed.

“Behind the dovecote,” Cleófilas said. “The last I remember, Donaciano was punching him in the face.”

By the time Merced and Cleo reached the dovecote, Donaciano was gone, but Plutarco sat in his favorite spot on the log that served as a bench. His eye was swollen, and blood had dried around his lip.

“¿*Qué chingados ven?*” Plutarco snarled, daring them to stare at him. “Bring me the bottle of *pulque*.”

Cleo quickly returned with a bottle full of the cloudy liquor. Without a word, Plutarco pulled the cork out and drank down half of it. His daughters watched, fascinated by the cuts and the swollen swelling eye closing into a slit. After they had dragged Plutarco back to his bed, the sisters sat at the table eating what was left of the beans and tortillas.

“Now what?” Merced asked.

Cleófilas ate in silence.

Merced knew that all of El Sauz would be talking about the fight. That night would be the last showing of *Santa*. Next week, it would be *Candelaria* with her favorite actress, María Félix. Next week, she would be free to go wherever she wanted, and she could leave messes like these behind her.