

# Roots

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Katelan Foisy is a multidisciplinary artist. She has created backdrops for The Smashing Pumpkins as well as William Patrick Corgan's *Ogilala* tour, and most recently interior design for Madame Zuzu's Teahouse. She is the illustrator for both *The Hoodoo Tarot* and *Sibyls Oraculum* with Tayannah Lee McQuillar. Her writing can be found on *Motherboard/VICE*, *Fenris Wolf*, and *Electric Literature* among others. She was called a "Female Jack Kerouac" by Taylor Mead.



I trace the lines on maps, remembering the movements of my fingers down the stems of lemon balm in my grandmother's garden as a child. The scent fills my memory. I had accidentally uprooted them thinking they were weeds. Her hand passed over mine quickly placing them back into the dirt. Lemon balm will grow in almost any soil. It will thrive in both full sun and partial shade. It is resilient and strong. Her mother used it for medicine in Austria, her grandmother as well and so on. In the United States she planted herbs and flowers from her motherland to feel less lonely and here I was, one of the middle grandchildren, born on American soil digging them up.

Sometimes family histories are hidden, like the roots of lemon balm, chamomile, and other herbs we cherish for medicinal qualities. Sometimes they can be found within those medicines and recipes. I watched my grandmother go about day-to-day life. I'd pick up on certain little rituals like lighting a candle and going through each room of the house with a small prayer in a language I didn't understand, or how she separated the laundry or washed the dishes. There were folk remedies like red string and a key thrown over your left shoulder, a surefire way to rid yourself of menacing hiccups. A knife placed downward in a glass of water and drunk fast would do the same. I would later find the meaning of the herbal medicines she made. As an immigrant in a small New England town after the Second World War she was quick to hide anything that made us outsiders. She stopped speaking anything but English. My mother asked her to keep our language in the household as a child. Later I would beg her to teach me and she'd reply, "You live in America. We speak English here." Generations of the same reply made me wither like a flower dying of thirst. I would be angry at the United States for this, although I didn't quite understand the reasoning behind it. Our small town was not well versed in knowledge of Sinti or Roma or even Austrian heritage for that matter. Despite being a town of immigrants, the newest to arrive were always shunned, this was the way it was. No one ever tried to change it and it seems this was and is an ongoing story no matter where one may live.

As children we look to our parents and grandparents for guidance. We look to our families for a sense of belonging and ways to connect with our cultures. But what happens when we are removed from them? We didn't find out we were Sinti until my grandmother was passing away. She spoke it in a poetic manner, tiny things I picked up on were small parts of a culture hidden away. I was glad to know, but understanding this gave me an overwhelming sense of imposter syndrome, one I gather many children and grandchildren of immigrants trying to acclimate to life in a foreign country also feel. And so I turned to plants and food. In plant medicine I found connections to family. Brewing tea, with a tiny bit of jam, sliced oranges, and a drop of honey became a ritual on its own. Remembering my grandmother harvesting lemon balm for tea, making sure our bellies were digesting or to sprinkle on chicken for health. Fresh and dried chamomile soothed us when we were sick, along with small spoonfuls of honey. I took comfort in the bits of culture found in the home; edelweiss, a flower famed for being hard to reach as it grew on the sides of mountains, framed both on the wall and in pendants around our necks. It was said when someone gave you edelweiss it was a token of great love, as those who set out to pick it would risk their lives to do so. "Edel" means noble and "weiss" means white. The flower was also a symbol of purity and courage. The petals of edelweiss and leaves carved into the Black Forest cuckoo clock that chimed each hour alerting us with its mechanical sounds. Sometimes she would sing songs in German faintly while rocking my baby sister. I would try and listen closely to see if I could decipher the code that was another

dialect. By the clock where she sat in her rocking chair sat a “weather house.” I was enamored with the “weather houses” with men and women dressed in traditional clothing telling us the temperature by the way one would emerge and the other would hide. The decorations contained cornflower and edelweiss paintings on the sides of the wooden cabin. Stencils of luludzje (flowers) trimmed the walls in the dining area and softened the goat horns on display. Sometimes snippets of languages would sneak through a bit of German and a bit of Chib. I always enjoyed those moments most.

Many of the family meals took place in the dining room. It was attached to the kitchen and when gatherings occurred you’d often find strudel, Linzer tarts, lemon breads, stollen, or spiced cookies. The memories I have of foods were often desserts and medicinal herbs. My grandmother was a nurse but she also knew the land. Elderflowers and peppermint could cure any stomach ailment; thyme not only helped with acne but also breathing issues caused by allergies or asthma. Dandelion and tomatoes helped with blood. Primrose, alder, and comfrey could be boiled up, cooled and pressed against swelling limbs and burns. Blackcurrant and lemon made into tea with a small spoonful of honey could cure a cold in a matter of a day or two. Folk belief that apples and lemons are good luck find their way into our apple strudels and lemon breads. Strong coffee (along with a little willow bark and water or rosemary) not only clears away a headache but also clears the mind. She kept these remedies and grew many of these herbs in her garden to keep her connected to the family she moved away from. She grew them for comfort and to ease the loneliness that comes from immigrating to a new land with its own set of wounds and culture.

In my youth I had no way of connecting with the language, only words and phrases I jotted down in small notebooks. As I grow older I look to the languages my family was not allowed to speak and recreate the recipes from not only my childhood memories but the lands that we traveled through and where we eventually settled. Spiced cookies with nutmeg for health but also to banish the evil eye, cinnamon for sweetness and luck, and perhaps a little acorn meal for love and family peace. Within our bloodlines are stories. They come in movements, how we prepare food, wash our clothes, or adorn ourselves. Regardless of whether we know our ancestors or not, our roots are strong like those of the lemon balm with the ruggedness of edelweiss. Our stories spread like chamomile, abundant and ever growing as we connect with others in both our bloodlines and outside of them. We connect through herbal recipes, food of our lands, and the deep connection to our art and stories. Our bodies are maps of those who came before us, their medicine is our medicine running deep within our veins. No matter where we are uprooted, no matter how much we are picked we will continue to grow, to resist, to be resilient and strong in the face of all that tries to oppress us. We are strong, rooted and grounded. Our networks are many and we will continue to claim each other. Some of us hang our *patrin* (leaves) and sweetgrass symbolically, continuing to notify the others that we have been here, to offer advice, heed warnings, and forever move through crossroads.