What Drowns the Flowers in Your Mouth

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Published by University of Wisconsin Press

González, Rigoberto.
What Drowns the Flowers in Your Mouth: A Memoir of Brotherhood.
University of Wisconsin Press, 2018.
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In the summer of 1984, two years after the death of my mother, my aunt decided to make good on a promise: to ensure that my brother and I completed one of the mandated holy sacraments: our first communion.

At fourteen, I was considered a latecomer. My brother at twelve, also. Usually, children in México took their first communion before the age of ten. There was no proper explanation for why our family had neglected this Catholic duty, so my aunt simply walked into the church in Mexicali to seek advice from the priest. The priest shook his head and looked down at us, two poor orphans, with grave pity and gave my aunt the name of a catechism teacher, a catequista, who would be more than happy to offer us a crash course. “She’s a widow, you know,” the priest informed us, and I wasn’t sure if he meant that not having a husband allotted her the time for such charity or if her widowhood made her more sympathetic to our needs.

That same afternoon, we walked over to la catequista’s house. She too listened patiently and kept glancing at us as my aunt tried to justify why we had to compress a yearlong instruction into one summer: we were visiting from the U.S., this was the only chance we had before we were returned to our nonpracticing Catholic grandparents, we were in need of salvation. La catequista didn’t react, as if she had seen this situation many times before. About
the only thing that surprised her was when my aunt insisted that my brother and I not sit on the couch but on the floor because we were dirty. La catequista was flustered at first but let it go. It was as if she understood my aunt’s awkwardness at stepping into a house that was clearly a rich lady’s home. None of us were used to entering such spaces with porcelain knickknacks and doilies so white they settled on the furniture like miraculous snowflakes that would never melt.

I took an immediate liking to la catequista. She was the most beautiful lady I had come across. She was impeccably coiffed, her dress looked freshly pressed, and she had the most delicate hands I had ever seen on a woman, my mother included. La catequista’s were the hands of a woman who wasn’t used to hard labor, who probably had a maid to do the household chores, and I didn’t hold any of these things against her because I was smitten. And I wanted her to like me back just as quickly.

As usual, my brother and I were simply passive observers to the decisions of the grown-ups. We left la catequista’s house, and on the way home, my aunt explained to us the summer’s drill: Three days a week for the next month, we would come here for lessons. The rest of those days, we would have to memorize the teachings in the catechism, the Catholic manual of questions, answers, and prayers. The expectation didn’t frighten me, though my brother was sure from the get-go that this was going to ruin our summer fun.

“I don’t mind,” I said to him.

“Of course, you don’t,” my brother said. “You’re no fun.” He then scampered off to join the rest of the boys in a game of soccer on the street.

Since there was absolutely nothing of an athlete but plenty of nerd in me, I took to the tiny catechism book with enthusiasm. Each day, I spent hours copying the pages into a notebook because
we had borrowed the catechism from a neighbor. My aunt said she didn’t have money to spend on a book we would use for only one month, but the truth was she didn’t have any money at all, so I didn’t question the odd request to rewrite the entire book so that I could return the catechism to its rightful owner. While I copied, I underlined words I didn’t know. In the afternoons, I stood next to my aunt as she unpinned the clothes from the line and explained these words I had never heard before. At bedtime, I murmured the prayers to myself, determined to please my beloved catequista.

During this time, there was another event unfolding in the background. I caught snippets of information on the neighbor’s radio or on the news reports on Mexican TV—the Olympics were taking place in Los Angeles. LA was only a few hours away, but it might as well have been another planet since most people we knew could not cross the border. And those who could, like my father or my aunt, had no reason to venture that far north. They never traveled past the agricultural fields of the Coachella Valley, where they worked most of the year as farmworkers.

The subject of the Olympics did, however, infiltrate the conversation of one of our weekly cookouts on the back porch. My aunt kept bringing out fresh meat from the fridge and my uncle stood over the grill. Other grown-ups were already digging in while the younger kids ran around and had to be snagged by the shirt collars to force them to eat. The radio was on, and the announcer suddenly chimed in to report that México, just like every Olympic year, sucked.

“Well, that was unnecessary,” one of the grown-ups said.

“But it’s true,” my aunt said. “And it’s because our government won’t give these kids proper training. The United States claims every medal and makes México look like it showed up by accident.” She leaned forward to take a bite of her taco in order to avoid spilling grease on her blouse.
“Maybe we should compete in what we excel in,” my uncle, her husband, said, in a rare show of courage to speak up. “Like taco eating.” He pointed at my aunt with the tongs.

I thought his statement was kind of funny, but the delivery was too slow on the uptake, so it didn’t pick up any traction and no one laughed. Also, my aunt just glared at him, chewing her food with an exaggerated movement that served as a warning.

The Olympic Games, just like LA, just like la catequista’s house, were foreign territories to us. Of course we knew what they were, but none of us took much interest, not even in soccer or boxing, which were sports many of our family members liked to follow on TV. Our history teacher in high school was excited to brag that he knew the man who was choreographing the marching bands for the opening ceremony. My fellow ninth graders were not readily impressed by that, and I didn’t know how to react to it either. I suppose that at that age we were all simply preoccupied with our individual adolescent worlds.

My particular world was still grief-stricken from the loss of my mother. And the loss of my father, who had decided to remarry and move out of my grandparents’ house while my brother and I were in school. Staying with my aunt and my five cousins over the summer was my grandparents’ way of giving us some space, though I knew it was they who wanted their cramped two-bedroom apartment back. Whatever the reason, studying the catechism seemed like a small price to pay in order to spend the summer at my aunt’s big house with a large back porch and its expansive view of the boulevard that stretched so far out it shrank the huge cargo trucks down to the size of bugs.

The other reason my brother and I were there, I suspected, was to mend a bridge with our father. I had not forgiven him for leaving us behind with our grandparents. One afternoon, I walked into my aunt’s house after sitting on the back porch, bored of leafing through the catechism in my notebook, and was surprised
to see my father sitting in the living room. The TV was on, and like every other station, the Olympic Games were showing—swimming or some other water sport. No one was really watching, but it was a habit to keep the TV playing, the white noise necessary to muffle the constant chaos of people walking in and out at all times of the day.

My body froze when I saw him sitting on the couch with a beer in his hand. He smiled and took a sip from the bottle.

“You were outside reading?” he asked.

“Yes,” I stuttered.

My two uncles were also seated in the living room, so I felt I had invaded some exclusive masculine space. It certainly stopped me from displaying any emotion, like crying because I was so happy to see my father, or yelling because I was so upset he had abandoned me. Instead, I kept walking right through the living room and to the kitchen as if that had been my intention all along.

I don’t remember if my little brother had a difficult time with our father’s presence. Alex seemed more interested in the streets. I couldn’t get him to sit still and read the catechism notebook, so my aunt forced one of her sons—my brother’s sidekick in all things mischief—to simmer down once in a while to study.

My father, always a popular center of attention, wandered about the place, joking and telling stories, which made it more challenging to justify my resentment toward him. Just when I thought I could edge my feelings toward forgiveness, something came along to remind me of how much he had failed us. Like the time my aunt sat with me on the porch behind the house to tell me about deodorant.

“Smell this,” she directed me, holding up one of my own dirty shirts.

“It smells,” I said.

“Those are your armpits,” she said. She explained it so gently but it still felt like a type of shaming, as if I should have been
spared this embarrassing exchange if only my father had told me about the need for deodorant in the first place.

Puberty was a tougher subject to navigate, so my aunt left it up to her husband, that shy man whom I rarely heard speak except to reprimand one of his boys for doing this or not doing the other. We had our chat on the bench one afternoon, and I knew it was as devastating to him as it was to me.

“You’re in a stage of your life when your body changes. And has urges,” he said as flatly as if he were giving me directions to the post office.

I stared out at the boulevard and slipped into tune-out mode. My neck was flushed and so was his as he stumbled his way into a less-colorful version of the birds and the bees that my older cousins had been regaling us with those evenings at the clubhouse—a makeshift “boys only” room built on top of my aunt’s house. I didn’t venture there often, only when my female cousins wanted to have some “girls only” time of their own, in which case I had no choice but to sit and listen to the boys’ dirty jokes and idiotic stories with implausible erotic plot lines that always seemed to end with a scene involving a naked priest or a horny nun. And when they arrived at the masturbation testimonials, I shook my head and said, “That’s wrong.”

All heads turned to me. “What?” one of my cousins said.

“It’s wrong to touch yourself,” I said. “God is watching.”

A few of them stifled a laugh. My oldest cousin, the ringleader, decided to take over. “And you’ve never touched yourself?”

“No,” I said in earnest. “It would offend God.”

A quiet descended on the group, which I now know was more like pity. I would have become the object of relentless ridicule if my cousin, in an unusual display of mercy, hadn’t intervened. “That’s alright,” he told the group. “He’s an innocent. Stupidly so, but there’s no reason to hold that against him.”
The group proceeded with their vulgarities, pretending I wasn’t in the room.

If I could have excused my poor uncle from this uncomfortable duty, I would have. But I respected his effort, so I let him go on a little longer, telling me about men and women and this mysterious physical thing that happened, which could result in an unwanted pregnancy and then what a fine mess we would all be in.

My catechism was a little more all-inclusive in exploring that territory. One of the questions simply asked: What are the three enemies of the soul? The answer: The devil, the world, and the flesh. My aunt extrapolated. They were enemies because they were temptations: the devil tempted me into wrongdoings, into crimes against God; the world tempted me with the love of money, of material things, the trappings of power and position and wealth; the flesh—and I was surprised my aunt spat this one out so easily—meant the temptation of sex with those women of ill repute.

It was an odd answer, but I understood that in some strange way she was actually talking about my future stepmother. I suspected this because anytime the subject came up, she was quick to criticize the fact that Amelia wore makeup, that she bought those expensive bras with girdles attached, that she dyed her hair blonde. Amelia was a list of offenses against feminine decency, perhaps even obscene. It made me feel sorry for her until I remembered that I faulted her too for taking my father away from me.

After the whole enemies of man explanation, I asked my aunt, quite innocently, “So what are the enemies of women?”

She answered without skipping a beat. “Just one: man.”

At this point in the rambling narrative of my poor uncle’s beleaguered sex education course, he was approaching the subject of masturbation, which made his mouth so dry he started to cough. I thought it would be wise to let him off the hook.

“Thank you, uncle,” I said. “I know all that already.”
He looked at me with relief. “Oh, well that’s good,” he said. “Though I hope you’re not getting all of your information from the boys at the clubhouse.”

“It’s all in here,” I said, and I lifted my catechism notebook to show him.

“Good,” he said. He rose from the bench and looked out at the boulevard. “Looks like rain this afternoon. Let me go roll the windows up in the truck.” And with that, he left, and I wondered what strange method he was using to predict the weather since there was nothing beyond the boulevard but clear sky.

Instruction day. I rose early, showered, and pressed into my armpits a few extra layers of deodorant so that I could sit on la catequista’s couch, though by the time we reached her house, we were drenched in sweat. My brother would only come along if his sidekick, our cousin, was there to keep him company, which everyone agreed to just because nothing else seemed to motivate him.

“My, look at you all. It’s so hot; why didn’t you take the bus?” la catequista asked.

“We can’t afford the bus fare,” my cousin answered, which seemed to distraught la catequista. I made a note to tell my aunt that he had done this.

We drank our glasses of water and prepared for the lessons, but first la catequista had to chase her son out of the room. He was seated in front of the TV watching the Olympics.

“Raymundo, my love,” la catequista said, sweetly. “Can you please watch the TV in the back room?”

“Yes, mamita,” Raymundo said. He turned the TV off and came over to give la catequista a kiss on the cheek before exiting the living room.

The heat I felt was coming from my brother and my cousin, who I was certain were going to mock this public display of
affection all the way home. “Yes, mamita, how old is this fucking faggot?” one of them would say to the other, while I lagged behind.

As for me, I felt a bit jealous. This Raymundo didn’t look very smart. He was dressed in better clothes, but that was because his mother dressed him. And maybe my mind was playing tricks on me, but I could have sworn he smelled, that rank armpit smell that was no longer a part of who I was. I discreetly sniffed myself just in case. No, I swore on my catechism notebook that it was Raymundo.

It didn’t matter that my brother and my cousin threw dagger eyes at me each time I got the questions right or when I recited a prayer so flawlessly it brought great joy to la catequista—I was doing this for her, not for them or even for me. I was dazzling her with my memorization skills because she had become so special to me. I adored the way her eyes sparkled when I made it all the way through the Apostles’ Creed, the way she clasped her hands to her chest and said, “Amén,” and the way that word floated out of her pretty lips, a blessing that hovered over me like a guardian angel. Tearing myself away from la catequista after the hour’s lesson was such a disappointment for me. And such a delight for my brother. We left, and, predictably, my cousin and brother couldn’t stop bad-mouthing Raymundo. And for once, their stupid remarks made me smile.

When we arrived at the neighborhood, there was a flurry of activity on the street. Don Pepe had just parked his candy cart in front of my aunt’s house, and the kids buzzed around it like bees. My cousin ran inside to ask his mother for money, but my brother stayed behind. Suddenly he turned to me for sympathy because I was the only other person who understood at that moment that we had no one to hear our pleas for money.

I was about to offer some words of comfort when my cousin ran out of the house yelling, “Hey, Alex, your father’s here!”
That changed everything for Alex, who ran into the house. Perhaps it was the contagious excitement, or the many tempting items dangling from Don Pepe’s candy cart, that made me set all modesty aside and also run into the house. I crossed paths with my brother, who was already on his way out. But as soon as I saw my father, I changed my mind.

“You need some money too, son?” he asked.

Something boiled inside of me. Son? He had called me his son. But when my brother walked in waving his candy in my face, my anger subsided.

“Well, maybe I want one of those,” I said, pointing at the sweet and spicy wheels that unroll into foot-long strings of tamarind pulp.

My father walked out to the candy cart, and I hated myself for letting my sweet tooth betray me. I didn’t like this age where I could be bribed and bought with candy. When my father walked back in, he held out an entire pack with six wheels linked together. I was not sure what kind of response he expected, but what I gave him made his face darken.

“What are you doing?” I yelled. “I just wanted one! Why are you embarrassing me like this? Why are you showing off to everyone when you’re not even my father anymore? Why don’t you just go away and leave me alone!”

I left him standing in the middle of the living room with the candy, and I ran out of the house to hide out on my bench. A few minutes later, my aunt came out to sit beside me.

“That wasn’t very kind,” she said. “You hurt your father’s feelings.”

I started crying.

“You’re old enough to understand that he has to live his own life,” she said. “Your mother passed away and he needs a woman. And believe me, you don’t want a woman of ill repute to be your mother. So it’s better this way. You have your grandmother to
take care of you. And you have me and your other aunts, although, don’t put too much faith on them since they’re only related by marriage.”

I was still crying, but I also wanted to laugh at the ridiculous logic of grown-ups and their flexible values. They behaved in complete contradiction to the teachings of the catechism that laid things out clearly and openly: this was right, that was wrong, you did this, you didn’t do that. Maybe I wasn’t the one who needed the crash course. And that’s when the idea finally took root in my mind. It had been planted there from the beginning, but I wasn’t nurturing it the way I really wanted to. The answer was indeed la catequista. “She’s a widow, you know,” the priest had told us. Which meant she had to be lonely and lonelier still if all she had was that stinky armpits Raymundo to keep her company. I resolved then and there to ask la catequista to adopt me.

“I’m okay now,” I said to my aunt, who seemed surprised the crying just stopped. I got up and walked into the house to accept those candy wheels from my father because this was the last time I was going to see him.

My heart fluttered with so much anticipation all night that it was difficult to fall asleep. I recited my prayers, my memorized questions and answers, spinning them in my brain until I was dizzy and eventually drowsy. The next morning, I woke myself up singing. Nothing to be embarrassed about except that I didn’t sleep alone. Since there wasn’t much space to go around, we slept five to a room. My spot was on the floor, between two other bodies.

“Someone’s happy,” my cousin said.
“Did I wake you?” I asked.
“You woke us all up,” my brother said from the top bunk bed.
“What did it sound like?” I asked.
“I don’t know. It sounded like a church song.”

———

A canto, a hymn—the confirmation I needed that I was doing the right thing today.

“What were you dreaming about?” my cousin asked.

I wasn’t sure what I was dreaming about, but when I didn’t answer, no one cared enough to pursue it and everyone went back to sleep. I got up, folded my blanket, for the last time, I was sure of it, and put together a backpack with a small bundle of things I didn’t want to leave behind—my favorite shirt, extra underwear, a picture of my mother I carried with me when I traveled, a rosary I took from my grandmother’s room because it reminded me of the novena we prayed after my mother’s burial.

That afternoon, I couldn’t get to la catequista’s house soon enough. I had it all planned out. As soon as lessons were done, I would let my brother and cousin walk out ahead of me and I would stay behind to make my proposition.

But during our lesson I was distracted, daydreaming about how I was going to be having breakfast at the table every morning, about what my new bedroom was going to be like. I stared at a picture of la catequita’s dead husband on the lamp table as if I wanted some telepathic communication and to get some words of advice about what to do to make his widow happy. I was looking around the room so often that la catequista paused at one point to ask me if I was alright. This startled me. My brother and cousin glanced at each other, storing the mishap for later use.

“Let’s continue,” la catequista said. “Alex, name the seven capital sins. Rigoberto, name the seven virtues.”

The slight annoyance in her voice unsettled me. I was setting the wrong tone for the occasion. My brother dragged the list out of his memory banks with his cheerleader at his side. But when my turn came, the seven virtues completely flew out of my head. I stared blankly at la catequista.

“Rigoberto, I’m surprised at you today,” she said. My brother mocked me by shaking his head in disapproval. I found it difficult to swallow.
As we finished the lesson, Raymundo couldn’t wait to turn on the TV to watch the Olympics. When my cousin asked for a soda, la catequista directed him to the fridge and my brother joined him in the caper. La catequista just breathed in deeply as if she had no choice but to accept the ways of the adolescent boys around her.

“Señora,” I managed to say. Though I wasn’t sure what was going to come next. Should I apologize for being such a terrible student or should I go ahead and tell her that I wanted her to adopt me, to take me away from that family that only knew how to love me with candy and cookouts and vulgar stories that made me feel disrespectful toward God?

“What is it, Rigoberto? Do you have something to tell me?”

“I—” The words felt heavy in my mouth. *Say it, say it, say it, you idiot!* a voice inside me demanded. But that lingering doubt that I had ignored before now began to make my entire body tremble. Yet I had to know. I really had to know whether she would take to the idea of adopting me or laugh me right out of her home. But when I finally said it, it came out in a whisper, a sound too faint for her to hear.

La catequista came closer. “What did you say? I didn’t hear you. Raymundo, my love, please turn the television down!”

But Raymundo of the stinky armpits didn’t turn the television down. Instead, he yelled back: “Mami, mami, look, look, we’re going to win a gold medal! We’re going to win a gold medal!”

Everyone turned to the TV. And sure enough, there was excitement in the announcer’s voice because Ernesto Canto was most certainly going to place in the men’s 20 km race walk.

“Canto, Canto, Canto,” the TV announcer began to chant. My brother and cousin closed in on the TV set with Raymundo, who was already chanting along with the TV, “Canto, Canto, Canto.”

“Too exciting!” la catequista said, and she placed her delicate hand on my shoulder to hold herself still because she was shaking. And as Ernesto Canto reached the finish line, a joy overcame la
catequista. She beamed, and I could feel that warmth press against me when she threw her arms around me in exhilaration. I breathed in her perfume and smiled. Oh my God, this was my heaven.

“México, México, México,” the announcer changed his chant, and so did the boys in the living room.

I didn’t know what was going to consume me first, the fact that poor little México was going to win its gold medal, or that I finally got what I had been waiting for—an affectionate touch from someone in the room who thought that it mattered that I too was in the room. It was a small thing, that hug, but in that moment, it was a giant triumph, like that gold medal, worth clinging to because deep down inside we all knew there would be very few others to come.