What Drowns the Flowers in Your Mouth

González, Rigoberto

Published by University of Wisconsin Press

González, Rigoberto.
What Drowns the Flowers in Your Mouth: A Memoir of Brotherhood.
University of Wisconsin Press, 2018.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/113340.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/113340

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3626544
My brother’s question was innocent enough, a conversation-starter fired off during our weekly international phone call—he still in Baja California Sur, me sticking to New York—three hours apart, sometimes four, depending on the time of the year. He might have thought it was a unique way to begin, a different starting point other than What’s up, Turrútut? I dialed and he answered, and as soon as I said, “Hey, it’s me,” Alex said, “Turrútut, did you ever see that photograph of our father in New York City?”

I spun the Rolodex of memory, of all those tales, exaggerated or invented, that Apá used to hook people’s attention with. When I was six and my brother was five, it worked like a charm, like the time he came home bloodied, his lip and thumb sliced open, his clothes disheveled, claiming he had jumped over the cemetery wall to take a piss and then had to fight off the mummies. My brother and I sat transfixed by his courage, the back kick he still had strength to show us even though it was late and our mother stood at the doorway shaking her head in disapproval. At the time, I didn’t know what that look on her face meant, until I saw it many times later during his moments of drunkenness. Apá’s energy for telling a story never waned, and he wasn’t ruffled by expressions of disbelief or if members of his audience lost interest—as long as there was one person listening, that was enough to keep
him going. Sadly, I was usually not that person because I had stayed away, which is why my Rolodex started coming up empty, its lack of reference evidence of my distance from my father during my adolescence and beyond.

Though if Apá had ever been to NYC, I would have latched on to that tidbit, if not at the moment of the first telling then definitely after NYC became part of my everyday reality. Certainly I wouldn’t have wanted to regale my family with details of my new home in the Big Apple as if none of them had ever been there. The very idea of Apá in NYC seemed outrageous.

“I don’t believe it,” I said to my brother.

I was ready to offer by way of a rebuttal the time I was visiting El Rancho and the three of us sat watching the news on Mexican television. At one point, there was a snippet of footage of Columbus Circle, the huge statues on the corner of Central Park with its infestation of pigeons. I said to them, “Look! That’s New York, that’s where I live!” And Apá had quipped, “And those pigeons . . . are they edible?” That was just one of many opportunities my father had to tell that he had been there, but he never did. He didn’t offer that story about his trip to NYC, I concluded, because he didn’t have it.

“For real,” Alex said. “It’s a photograph of our father standing over a little stove in a tiny kitchen. I saw it in Abuela’s photo album, but she didn’t know where it was taken. So later, when I asked him, he said that it was a picture of him making breakfast before looking for a job in New York. He was living in the Bronx at the time.”

Stunned, I didn’t respond. I couldn’t imagine Apá even knowing about places like the Bronx.

“Are you there?” my brother said.

“Is that all he said?” I asked.

“That’s it. And then he started talking about other things, so then I forgot about it until it suddenly popped up in my head this morning.”
I became overwhelmed by the pang of loss. There was no way to find out more because Apá had been dead for years now, and so had Abuela. Her albums, likely the property of some relative we didn’t speak to, were no longer available to either of us.

“Wow,” I said. “Well, that knocked the wind out of me. Are you sure he didn’t just make that up?”

My brother laughed. “I guess we’ll never know.”

“That just isn’t fair,” I said, and though I was referring to the never-knowing, I was also thinking about how my access to Alex was also limited. We were relegated to being two voices in different countries, holding on by a telephone wire, and even then I was only metaphorically speaking since all I had was a cell phone. Good grief; I wasn’t attached to anything. Not even to my fucking wall.

So I latched on to the history of this photograph that was real enough though the story behind the image seemed questionable. Wasn’t it always that way with my father? If I were a more cynical son, I would call it fiction. But this wasn’t about me; it was about my father the storyteller, the entertainer, he who could embellish a late-night walk from a drunken brawl at a bar into a battle with the undead.

If there was any truth to that photograph linking my father to the Bronx, then it must have been taken circa 1968, shortly after my father turned twenty-one, thinking himself a man because he had grown an attractive mustache, so he went seeking out both adventure and employment in the United States. I had grown up situating my family’s second migration in the early 1960s exclusively to California since this was familiar territory. Abuelo had been born in Riverside, south of LA, during the first migration back in the 1930s, and I was born in Bakersfield, north of LA, in 1970 on my mother’s first journey north. The vertical paths from Michoacán to California did not appear to vary through the generations. So the possibility of my father wandering to the east coast opened up a startling narrative about who he was as a bachelor,
just two years away from eloping with his girlfriend, who had become pregnant with me.

My father’s early adulthood is the one fuzzy period in the family lore. Over the years, I had heard from his siblings many stories about his childhood antics in Michoacán—how Tío Rafael once led him around with a string around his neck because that’s what was done with the beetles that were as dark as my father; how Tío Rafael used a homemade bow and arrow to knock my father out of a tree, and the scar on my father’s waist had swollen into a mole; how Tía Melania and my father, neither of them older than ten, were trying to figure out a gas oven and she stood back and watched him singe his eyebrows and eyelashes. Apá offered plenty of comic relief for the family in those days. Later, I realized that they held on to the funny moments because the somber ones were too painful to revisit as often—about Abuela losing two infant daughters; about the times she sent her children to scour the back of the town market for discarded but still edible fruit and vegetables; about the hours she spent cutting garnish for the butchers, who always decorated their goods in those days with sprigs of cilantro, chopped onion, and teeth of garlic that shimmered like pearls next to the red meat; about the nights of unyielding abuse from a frustrated, angry Abuelo.

Abuelo as a father held the key to a likely reason Apá left or fled or escaped to the other coast back in 1968. I had done the same in 1998, when the thought of living close to my family filled me with anxiety because I couldn’t reconcile my college years as an out gay youth with my family’s don’t-ask-don’t-tell policy. So instead of going west after I dropped out of a PhD program at the University of New Mexico, I headed east, to NYC.

I imagined Apá’s expectations as a young man were no different from my own: an opportunity to define himself apart from those he loved but who troubled him. He and I were both first-born males, the burden of leadership and responsibility was upon us,
but so too the privileges of whims and impulses, like leaving home and coming back when we felt like it—the right to play the archetypal prodigal son.

Abuelo was a bully and a brute, but what my brother and I endured the many years we lived with him did not compare to what his own sons had to contend with back in the day. Apá and Tío Rafael reminded us of this fact whenever my brother or I had cause to complain about how Abuelo wouldn’t let us use the telephone or locked us out of the house if we stayed out after that cruel seven o’clock curfew. These oppressions didn’t even come close to the regulations they were subjected to.

“Remember the chickens, you?” Tío Rafael said to my father, who nodded calmly as he sipped his beer. “Your grandfather insisted the damn things sleep on their perches. So every evening we had to frighten them up to the nests so that they wouldn’t lay their eggs on the ground. It was the most ridiculous demand.”

They laughed at the memory of it, but I didn’t find it amusing. They preferred to retell these strange flashes from the past because they refused to talk about the more serious matters, like the beatings they got and the beatings my brother and I got. And then my head swelled with rage because I knew he also beat Abuela. He would beat her in the dark, and I could hear her holding back her cries. He hit her because he couldn’t beat his grown-up sons anymore or his adolescent grandsons. My father and uncle knew this as well, but none of us spoke up about it. No one did anything to protect Abuela. What happened out of sight was never real enough to confront in the spaces we shared, like the living room, where Abuelo sat comfortably next to Abuela, the two of them laughing at the antics of the Mexican comics on the television. They seemed so compatibly matched, and so it seemed vulgar to even hint at the knowledge of what transpired in their bedroom in the cover of dark.
As a young man, my father had ambitions other than dedicating his life to harvesting the crops of southern California. At one time, he wanted to become a boxer and had trained in his hometown of Zacapu, where young athletes were either long-legged cyclists or stocky pugilists. My father at five foot two was shaped like a bull, all chest and calves. He must have had some talent since it warranted the purchase of red training gloves and a red pair of silk trunks that he hauled with him years after he gave up on that dream. I would later hear that he wasn’t a very good boxer at all, especially from my mother’s sisters, who liked to tease him about it in front of me. I remember feeling sad for him during these jabs because I knew that his boxing days were special to him and that it hurt him to have them disparaged so callously.

Only once do I recall him bringing up the subject when Alex and I stumbled into him Sunday afternoon at home, the only time he claimed time in front of the television because the station featured boxing. We knew not to disturb him, so we sat quietly on the couch at his side, biding our time to take over the television.

During a commercial break, he announced, “That could have been me.”

It was then that I realized how vague those boxing days were, which seemed odd for a man who could improvise as seamlessly as if he were tying his shoes. At the same time, I took pleasure in the fact that maybe my father was capable of keeping something to himself, the way I did about the crushes I had on other boys. If my father had a private joy like me, then that endeared me to him a little more.

“Why did you stop?” I dared to ask. In the back of my mind, I remembered my aunts’ teasing, and suddenly I felt insensitive about the question, but it was too late to take it back. My father didn’t respond. He simply grinned and tilted his head to the side to indicate he had no answer, that this was one of those rare moments he was going to remain quiet.
So instead he suggested, “Maybe one of you will become a boxer.”

The statement made me nervous. But I had no reason to fret. When I became a teenager, my father had given up on the idea of me becoming a boxer because I had bad eyesight and swung a hook like a girl. Alex became the athlete, though he chose football as his sport, to my father’s disappointment because he had found a gym in the area that trained young men to box.

That grin, however, stayed with me. I collected them over the years, like that time my mother finally confronted him about his drinking, the time he had to come pick up Alex and me in Michoacán after our mother had died, and the time Abuela gave him money to bail him out of financial woes when his second marriage was hurting. The grin was his response to a deep pain or loss.

If my father left home at the age of twenty-one, it had to have been after an argument with Abuelo. Over money, over freedom, over a girlfriend—over a punishment he deemed unjust. Abuelo was always asserting control over his sons’ affairs. I pictured my father as a rebellious young man finally reaching the breaking point, mustering the courage to gather his few belongings in a duffle bag and set out on foot. His greatest heartache must have been leaving his little brother, Rafael, behind—they had never been apart. The family was living in either southern California or central California, but what’s certain is that they were toiling the grape fields, that their clothes smelled of sulfur and their skins were still warm from absorbing hours of summer heat.

I saw my father arrive at the station. Maybe his plan was to head south, back to Michoacán, where dozens of doors would open for him without question. He was Rigoberto—the joyful one, the jokester, the happy drunk. He was always the highlight of the party. But maybe, for those same reasons, he decided not to
return to the familiar and the comfortable—not if he wanted to take ownership of his story. I’m not sure how much a bus ticket across the country cost in those days, but my father would not have been able to afford it had Abuela not discreetly shoved some money in his pocket when he said his good-byes. He might not have told his father he was leaving, but he was always kind to his mother, and so he let her in on his decision, maybe the night before, after the big fight that ended with Abuelo telling my father to leave if he didn’t like it and with my father saying that he didn’t like and so he was going to leave.

Why NYC? Maybe he had seen something on television that appealed to him: the rivers of energy because everyone had direction and function, or the excitement of a nightlight with pretty girls in red heels and bars that kept their doors opened for anyone, or the wide streets lined with buildings taller than cathedrals—they had to be in order to answer all those prayers that walked into the city from every corner of the world—and he was determined to be the newest member of the congregation. Or maybe he simply chose at random, an impulsive selection made according to the schedule of departures: “Next bus to New York City departing in ten minutes!” And ten minutes later he was on the road.

But since he claimed to have been cooking breakfast for friends, it was more likely he had reconnected with other young men who had already made that journey east, who told him, “Hey, what the fuck are you doing wasting away in the fields like a cross-eyed donkey? The city is where it’s at. Come over!” And so he did.

The drive across country took days, long enough for him to reflect on what it meant to have left his family. With each mile, the gravity of the fight, the size of his oppressions, became smaller and smaller, so he began to second-guess his decision, though not enough to turn back because no matter how far away he journeyed, the sting of Abuelo’s ultimatum never disappeared completely. If
ever there was a way to prove to his father that he wasn’t a child anymore, it was like this—surviving the outside world alone with only his balls and his gut to guide him.

He was a social creature. Solitude was not his thing. So he struck up conversations with the other passengers around him, and soon a nostalgic mood seized the travelers because no one was going home to NYC; home was back there—California, or the border, or Coahuila, or D.F., or Michoacán. New York was only the next stop. Not the last one. If the bus was full of Mexicans, then it was certain that as they journeyed farther away from home, the more tenaciously they held on to the names of their hometowns, to the foods they missed, and so they called them out in their storytelling punctuated with laughter, pausing only to sigh. Like this, my father learned his first valuable lesson: these were the precious stones immigrants carried in their pockets. They would make separation tolerable and remind them to stay alive in order to make their way back. His own stones were getting heavy, but that was the price paid for leaving. No complaining. On a journey with so much uncertainty ahead, this might end up being the smallest of the burdens.

What was the Port Authority Bus Terminal like in the late 1960s? My father must have felt his heart fluttering with excitement and anxiety as he joined the crowds of strangers whose voices spoke in unrecognizable languages. The volition was all-consuming; the speed, stress-inducing. Everyone walked with purpose, and so he tried to make himself fit in somehow. The bus station was nothing like the smaller versions he had come across in Morelia or even Guadalajara. This beast was all mouth and gnashing teeth, a slippery tongue of a floor that swallowed people whole as it spat others out. Unfettered, he stood up straight and marched right out into the street as if he knew where he was headed. Maybe his friends were waiting for him in a nearby deli and they introduced him to the delicacies of the region—lox and bagels, roast beef sandwich, the pizza slice that folded into an
envelope so that he could eat it while walking. But more likely they gave him an address. Not in the Bronx but in Manhattan because that’s where they all worked. They told him to wait on a bench in a park nearby until quitting time. It was easier that way.

But it was hours until quitting time, and my father was not one to sit around and people-watch. So he squeezed his duffle bag beneath his arm and went for a stroll. The city was a grid. There was no getting lost. He took in the dirty chaos of Times Square, the elegant entrances of hotels and theaters, the formality of doormen, the mischief of young boys who navigated the sidewalks so confidently because they had been born in this city though their parents were born in Ireland, Italy, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. He would have to wait to ride the subways, but what a thrilling prospect—how bodies descended and ascended the stairs with efficiency. This was a city in constant motion. Even the marquees did not look stationary as they flashed and dazzled like cabaret dancers. Could he see himself staying here? It was too soon to tell. The only thing he was sure of in that moment was that he had become part of the city’s circulation the minute he stepped off that bus.

When he finally met up with his friends, they were unrecognizable in their fatigue, their faces wilted at the end of the workday, and for a moment he second-guessed his decision because these were the same faces he saw in the fields. So what was different except that in the city they went home and were still not home? But he shook that question out of his head. It was too soon to sully his arrival with negative thought.

The long subway ride to the Bronx was oddly soothing, and people in the car exchanged places with people on the platform at every stop. He would have to memorize the underground map and learn to understand the conductor’s announcements in that nasally New York accent since he was barely literate and didn’t trust his skill for quickly reading signs. On the way, his friends still took the time to ask about his family, about news from...
home—it was polite chatter, not the usual banter that’s the public exchange of young men since they were very tired, their eyes glassy and small because they were minutes away from falling asleep but still a dozen stops away from their neighborhood.

Twelve stops later, they exited the subway. After a short walk through an alley and getting startled by a barking dog, which provided the only moment of levity, his friends unlocked the door and welcomed him into his temporary home. It was a bachelor space, no doubt about that. It smelled of sweaty feet and the masculine musk of bodies that clocked in an additional two or three hours of perspiration on a commute after a twelve-hour shift. The only splash of color was a poster of la Virgen de Guadalupe, a Mexican flag, and a delicate red vase from Chinatown that one of the young men planned to take back to his mother for the holidays. A black suitcase against the wall was doubling as a shelf, and a white stuffed bear with a pink ribbon around its neck looked so out of place among the contents of that room that was empty of femininity and childhood.

The first night was painful. Not only did the remorse of his disrespect against his father set in, but he longed for the company of his little brother—his dirty riddles, his childish notion that wearing two shirts made his body look bigger, that wearing sunglasses made him look older—and he longed to hear his mother’s laugh. How he missed Amá, the Purepecha woman who didn’t know how to read or write, except for her signature—a simple scribble in all lowercase letters that endorsed her check from the fields every other week. She must have lost her sleep and was likely up at this hour watching the curtains catch moonlight and hoping her prayers, which were only whispers in bed, were loud enough for God. How bad he felt that he couldn’t keep his eyes open. How unfair that he didn’t have any trouble falling asleep. But this was the sacrifice of worried mothers: they stayed awake to watch over their errant sons.
The next morning, the movement of bodies woke him up, and his friends apologized but it was a workday, so piercing lights went on and so did the radio because it kept them from dozing off again. My father, to express his gratitude, got up and squeezed into the tiny kitchen. He would be making breakfast today and maybe the day after, until he found a job and became just another one of the guys, not the unemployed one who could sleep in and wander around as he looked for work.

Maybe the gesture was deeply appreciated, or maybe no one had the energy to give more than a low-voiced thank you, but one of them thought it was a noteworthy occasion—Rigoberto’s first day in the Bronx. He grabbed his camera and snapped a black-and-white shot of my father shirtless over the stove, one hand on the skillet and the other stirring the spatula—I remembered it now; I was certain of its existence.

Though Apá never spoke to me about it, he did walk through the streets of NYC before I did, and in doing so, he had paved a path for me. When I arrived thirty years later in 1998, I had only followed in my father’s footsteps. Perhaps he never told me because he sensed how proud I was that I had achieved something all on my own—freedom in a place no González had ever been. It was my personal triumph, my claim to a territory where I would write my singular narrative as the hero of the story. Wasn’t this the way to manhood? What a bubble burst it could have been had my father said, “Yes, New York City, of course, I’ve been there, done that.” So he opted to keep that little part of his personal history to himself. Besides, no one remembered it. No one knew how long he had stayed or why he came back.

The real mystery was why Alex didn’t remember that photograph while I was visiting from NYC and our father was still alive. How did it vanish from his memory all these years, only to reappear like some biblical miracle to deliver a message from the other side? And was I reading that lesson correctly? Unlike my father, I never
returned. Unlike my father, I didn’t wake up one morning, rattled by the sounds of sirens and street traffic, and decide that this wasn’t where I belonged. How he must have been eager to save his earnings, how he must have skipped a few nights out with the guys in order to buy his little brother a pair of sunglasses and his mother one of those red vases from Chinatown. And then one evening, the pull of those stones in his pocket became too much. The others did not object. They had seen this before. They knew who had it in them to endure the isolation and who was going to crack after a week or a month. They were fine saying good-bye because there was always another man ready to take over for the one who left.

Apá turned in his key without ceremony and made his way to the bus station alone, carrying the same duffle bag he arrived with. What a relief he must have felt when the bus finally squeezed out of the Manhattan bustle and made its way through the open roads of Pennsylvania where the sky was clear and the clouds appeared to breathe. Besides the stones in his pocket, he also had a small wad of cash to prove to his father that he could earn a living on his own, though he didn’t want to. On his own, that is. On that score, his father was right: one suffered apart from family. But time and distance heals all wounds. And money, my father added as he scratched the bills he had stuffed into his sock. He couldn’t help but let out a laugh thinking that he had to buy his way back into the family nest. Abuelo wouldn’t have it any other way. His laughter caught the attention of the man across the aisle.

“Going home, son?” the man asked.

My father smiled and said, “Yes, sir, I certainly am.” And the phrase pirouetted in the air because it also said he knew where he was meant to be. Life was hard with family but life was harder without it. How fortunate he was to learn the difference. His place was among his loved ones and—father, forgive me; mother, receive me; brother, stay near me—I’ll never ever ever leave again.