

Gloria Anzaldúa
is also the co-editor of
This Bridge Called My Back

Gloria Anzaldúa

Borderlands

La Frontera

The New Mestiza

1987

aunt lute books

SAN FRANCISCO

(1st edition)

1

The Homeland, Aztlán

El otro México

*El otro México que acá hemos construido
el espacio es lo que ha sido
territorio nacional.
Esté el esfuerzo de todos nuestros hermanos
y latinoamericanos que han sabido
progressar.*

—Los Tigres del Norte¹

"The *Aztecas del norte* . . . compose the largest single tribe or nation of Anishinabeg (Indians) found in the United States today . . . Some call themselves Chicanos and see themselves as people whose true homeland is Aztlán [the U.S. Southwest]."²

Wind tugging at my sleeve
feet sinking into the sand
I stand at the edge where earth touches ocean
where the two overlap
a gentle coming together
at other times and places a violent clash.

Across the border in Mexico
stark silhouette of houses gutted by waves,
cliffs crumbling into the sea,
silver waves marbled with spume
gashing a hole under the border fence.

*Miro el mar atacar
la cerca en Border Field Park
con sus buches de agua,
an Easter Sunday resurrection
of the brown blood in my veins.*

*Oigo el llorido del mar, el respiro del aire,
my heart surges to the beat of the sea.
In the gray haze of the sun
the gulls' shrill cry of hunger,
the tangy smell of the sea seeping into me.*

I walk through the hole in the fence
to the other side.

Under my fingers I feel the gritty wire
rusted by 139 years
of the salty breath of the sea.

Beneath the iron sky
Mexican children kick their soccer ball across,
run after it, entering the U.S.

I press my hand to the steel curtain—
chainlink fence crowned with rolled barbed wire—
rippling from the sea where Tijuana touches San Diego
unrolling over mountains
and plains
and deserts,
this "Tortilla Curtain" turning into *el río Grande*
flowing down to the flatlands
of the Magic Valley of South Texas
its mouth emptying into the Gulf.

1,950 mile-long open wound
dividing a *pueblo*, a culture,
running down the length of my body,
staking fence rods in my flesh,
splits me splits me
me raja me raja

This is my home
this thin edge of
barbwire.

But the skin of the earth is seamless.
The sea cannot be fenced,
el mar does not stop at borders.

To show the white man what she thought of his
arrogance,
Yemaya blew that wire fence down.

This land was Mexican once,
was Indian always
and is.
And will be again.

*Yo soy un puente tendido
del mundo gabacho al del mojado,
lo pasado me estirá pa' 'trás
y lo presente pa' 'delante.
Que la Virgen de Guadalupe me cuide
Ay ay ay, soy mexicana de este lado.*

The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal." Gringos in the U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens—whether they possess documents or not, whether they're Chicanos, Indians or Blacks. Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot. The only "legitimate" inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those

who align themselves with whites. Tension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus. Ambivalence and unrest reside there and death is no stranger.

In the fields, *la migra*. My aunt saying, "No corran, don't run. They'll think you're *del otro lao*." In the confusion, Pedro ran, terrified of being caught. He couldn't speak English, couldn't tell them he was fifth generation American. *Sin papeles*—he did not carry his birth certificate to work in the fields. *La migra* took him away while we watched. *Se lo llevaron*. He tried to smile when he looked back at us, to raise his fist. But I saw the shame pushing his head down, I saw the terrible weight of shame hunch his shoulders. They deported him to Guadalajara by plane. The furthest he'd ever been to Mexico was Reynosa, a small border town opposite Hidalgo, Texas, not far from McAllen. Pedro walked all the way to the Valley. *Se lo llevaron sin un centavo al pobre. Se vino andando desde Guadalajara*.

During the original peopling of the Americas, the first inhabitants migrated across the Bering Straits and walked south across the continent. The oldest evidence of humankind in the U.S.—the Chicanos' ancient Indian ancestors—was found in Texas and has been dated to 35000 B.C.³ In the Southwest United States archeologists have found 20,000-year-old campsites of the Indians who migrated through, or permanently occupied, the Southwest, Aztlán—land of the herons, land of whiteness, the Edenic place of origin of the Azteca.

In 1000 B.C., descendants of the original Cochise people migrated into what is now Mexico and Central America and became the direct ancestors of many of the Mexican people. (The Cochise culture of the Southwest is the parent culture of the Aztecs. The Uto-Aztecan languages stemmed from the language of the Cochise people.)⁴ The Aztecs (the Nahuatl word for people of Aztlán) left the Southwest in 1168 A.D.

Now let us go.

*Tibueque, tibueque,
Vámonos, vámonos.*

Un pájaro cantó.

*Con sus ocho tribus salieron
de la "cueva del origen."
los aztecas siguieron al dios
Huitzilopochtli.*

Huitzilopochtli, the God of War, guided them to the place (that later became Mexico City) where an eagle with a writhing serpent in its beak perched on a cactus. The eagle symbolizes the spirit (as the sun, the father); the serpent symbolizes the soul (as the earth, the mother). Together, they symbolize the struggle between the spiritual/celestial/male and the underworld/earth/feminine. The symbolic sacrifice of the serpent to the "higher" masculine powers indicates that the patriarchal order had already vanquished the feminine and matriarchal order in pre-Columbian America.

At the beginning of the 16th century, the Spaniards and Hernán Cortés invaded Mexico and, with the help of tribes that the Aztecs had subjugated, conquered it. Before the Conquest, there were twenty-five million Indian people in Mexico and the Yucatán. Immediately after the Conquest, the Indian population had been reduced to under seven million. By 1650, only one-and-a-half-million pure-blooded Indians remained. The *mestizos* who were genetically equipped to survive small pox, measles, and typhus (Old World diseases to which the natives had no immunity), founded a new hybrid race and inherited Central and South America.⁵ *En 1521 nació una nueva raza, el mestizo, el mexicano* (people of mixed Indian and Spanish blood), a race that had never existed before. Chicanos, Mexican-Americans, are the offspring of those first matings.

Our Spanish, Indian, and *mestizo* ancestors explored and settled parts of the U.S. Southwest as early as the sixteenth century. For every gold-hungry *conquistador* and soul-hungry missionary who came north from Mexico, ten to twenty Indians and *mestizos* went along as porters or in other capacities.⁶ For the Indians, this constituted a return to the place of origin, Aztlán, thus making Chicanos originally and secondarily indigenous to the Southwest. Indians and *mestizos* from central Mexico intermarried with North American Indians. The continual intermarriage between Mexican and American Indians and Spaniards formed an even greater *mestizaje*.

El destierro/The Lost Land

*Entonces corrí la sangre
no sabe el indio que hacer,
le van a quitar su tierra,
la tiene que defender,
el indio se cae muerto,
y el afuerino de pie.
Levántate, Manquilef.*

*Arauco tiene una pena
más negra que su chamal,
ya no son los españoles
los que les hacen llorar,
hoy son los propios chilenos
los que les quitan su pan.
Levántate, Pailabuan.*

—Violeta Parra, "Arauco tiene una pena"⁷

In the 1800s, Anglos migrated illegally into Texas, which was then part of Mexico, in greater and greater numbers and gradually drove the *tejanos* (native Texans of Mexican descent) from their lands, committing all manner of atrocities against them. Their illegal invasion forced Mexico to fight a war to keep its Texas territory. The Battle of the Alamo, in which the Mexican forces vanquished the whites, became, for the whites, the symbol for the cowardly and villainous character of the Mexicans. It became (and still is) a symbol that legitimized the white imperialist takeover. With the capture of Santa Anna later in 1836, Texas became a republic. *Tejanos* lost their land and, overnight, became the foreigners.

*Ya la mitad del terreno
les vendió el traidor Santa Anna,
con lo que se ha becho muy rica
la nación americana.*

*¿Qué acaso no se conforman
con el oro de las minas?
Ustedes muy elegantes
y aquí nosotros en ruinas.*

—from the Mexican corrido,
"Del peligro de la Intervención"⁸

In 1846, the U.S. incited Mexico to war. U.S. troops invaded and occupied Mexico, forcing her to give up almost half of her nation, what is now Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and California.

With the victory of the U.S. forces over the Mexican in the U.S.-Mexican War, *los norteamericanos* pushed the Texas border down 100 miles, from *el río Nueces* to *el río Grande*. South Texas ceased to be part of the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. Separated from Mexico, the Native Mexican-Texan no longer looked toward Mexico as home; the Southwest became our homeland once more. The border fence that divides the Mexican people was born on February 2, 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. It left 100,000 Mexican citizens on this side, annexed by conquest along with the land. The land established by the treaty as belonging to Mexicans was soon swindled away from its owners. The treaty was never honored and restitution, to this day, has never been made.

The justice and benevolence of God
will forbid that . . . Texas should again
become a howling wilderness
trod only by savages, or . . . benighted
by the ignorance and superstition,
the anarchy and rapine of Mexican misrule.
The Anglo-American race are destined
to be forever the proprietors of
this land of promise and fulfillment.
Their laws will govern it,
their learning will enlighten it,
their enterprise will improve it.
Their flocks range its boundless pastures,
for them its fertile lands will yield . . .
luxuriant harvests . . .
The wilderness of Texas has been redeemed
by Anglo-American blood & enterprise.

—William H. Wharton⁹

The Gringo, locked into the fiction of white superiority, seized complete political power, stripping Indians and Mexicans of their land while their feet were still rooted in it. *Con el destierro y el exilo fuimos desuñados, destroncados, destri-*

padros—we were jerked out by the roots, truncated, disemboweled, dispossessed, and separated from our identity and our history. Many, under the threat of Anglo terrorism, abandoned homes and ranches and went to Mexico. Some stayed and protested. But as the courts, law enforcement officials, and government officials not only ignored their pleas but penalized them for their efforts, *tejanos* had no other recourse but armed retaliation.

After Mexican-American resisters robbed a train in Brownsville, Texas on October 18, 1915, Anglo vigilante groups began lynching Chicanos. Texas Rangers would take them into the brush and shoot them. One hundred Chicanos were killed in a matter of months, whole families lynched. Seven thousand fled to Mexico, leaving their small ranches and farms. The Anglos, afraid that the *mexicanos*¹⁰ would seek independence from the U.S., brought in 20,000 army troops to put an end to the social protest movement in South Texas. Race hatred had finally fomented into an all out war.¹¹

My grandmother lost all her cattle,
they stole her land.

"Drought hit South Texas," my mother tells me. "*La tierra se puso bien seca y los animales comenzaron a morir de se'. Mi papá se murió de un heart attack dejando a mamá embarazada y con ocho buercos, with eight kids and one on the way. Yo fui la mayor, tenía diez años. The next year the drought continued y el ganado got hoof and mouth. Se calleron in droves en las pastas y el brushland, pansas blancas ballooning to the skies. El siguiente año still no rain. Mi pobre madre viuda perdió two-thirds of her ganado. A smart gabacho lawyer took the land away mamá hadn't paid taxes. No hablaba inglés, she didn't know how to ask for time to raise the money." My father's mother, Mama Locha, also lost her terreno. For a while we got \$12.50 a year for the "mineral rights" of six acres of cemetery, all that was left of the ancestral lands. Mama Locha had asked that we bury her there beside her husband. *El cementerio estaba cercado*. But there was a fence around the cemetery, chained and padlocked by the ranch owners of the surrounding land. We couldn't even get in to visit the graves, much less bury her there. Today, it is still padlocked. The sign reads: "Keep out. Trespassers will be shot."*

In the 1930s, after Anglo agribusiness corporations cheated the small Chicano landowners of their land, the corporations hired gangs of *mexicanos* to pull out the brush, chaparral and cactus and to irrigate the desert. The land they toiled over had once belonged to many of them, or had been used communally by them. Later the Anglos brought in huge machines and root plows and had the Mexicans scrape the land clean of natural vegetation. In my childhood I saw the end of dryland farming. I witnessed the land cleared; saw the huge pipes connected to underwater sources sticking up in the air. As children, we'd go fishing in some of those canals when they were full and hunt for snakes in them when they were dry. In the 1950s I saw the land, cut up into thousands of neat rectangles and squares, constantly being irrigated. In the 340-day growth season, the seeds of any kind of fruit or vegetable had only to be stuck in the ground in order to grow. More big land corporations came in and bought up the remaining land.

To make a living my father became a sharecropper. Rio Farms Incorporated loaned him seed money and living expenses. At harvest time, my father repaid the loan and forked over 40% of the earnings. Sometimes we earned less than we owed, but always the corporations fared well. Some had major holdings in vegetable trucking, livestock auctions and cotton gins. Altogether we lived on three successive Rio farms; the second was adjacent to the King Ranch and included a dairy farm; the third was a chicken farm. I remember the white feathers of three thousand Leghorn chickens blanketing the land for acres around. My sister, mother and I cleaned, weighed and packaged eggs. (For years afterwards I couldn't stomach the sight of an egg.) I remember my mother attending some of the meetings sponsored by well-meaning whites from Rio Farms. They talked about good nutrition, health, and held huge barbecues. The only thing salvaged for my family from those years are modern techniques of food canning and a food-stained book they printed made up of recipes from Rio Farms' Mexican women. How proud my mother was to have her recipe for *enchiladas coloradas* in a book.

El cruzar del mojado/Illegal Crossing

"*Ahora si ya tengo una tumba para llorar,*"
dice Conchita, upon being reunited with

her unknown mother just before the mother dies
—from Ismael Rodríguez' film,
*Nosotros los pobres*¹²

La crisis. *Los gringos* had not stopped at the border. By the end of the nineteenth century, powerful landowners in Mexico, in partnership with U.S. colonizing companies, had dispossessed millions of Indians of their lands. Currently, Mexico and her eighty million citizens are almost completely dependent on the U.S. market. The Mexican government and wealthy growers are in partnership with such American conglomerates as American Motors, IT&T and Du Pont which own factories called *maquiladoras*. One-fourth of all Mexicans work at *maquiladoras*; most are young women. Next to oil, *maquiladoras* are Mexico's second greatest source of U.S. dollars. Working eight to twelve hours a day to wire in backup lights of U.S. autos or solder miniscule wires in TV sets is not the Mexican way. While the women are in the *maquiladoras*, the children are left on their own. Many roam the street, become part of *cholo* gangs. The infusion of the values of the white culture, coupled with the exploitation by that culture, is changing the Mexican way of life.

The devaluation of the *peso* and Mexico's dependency on the U.S. have brought on what the Mexicans call *la crisis*. *No hay trabajo*. Half of the Mexican people are unemployed. In the U.S. a man or woman can make eight times what they can in Mexico. By March, 1987, 1,088 pesos were worth one U.S. dollar. I remember when I was growing up in Texas how we'd cross the border at Reynosa or Progreso to buy sugar or medicines when the dollar was worth eight *pesos* and fifty *centavos*.

La travesía. For many *mexicanos del otro lado*, the choice is to stay in Mexico and starve or move north and live. *Dicen que cada mexicano siempre sueña de la conquista en los brazos de cuatro gringas rubias, la conquista del país poderoso del norte, los Estados Unidos. En cada Chicano y mexicano vive el mito del tesoro territorial perdido.* North Americans call this return to the homeland the silent invasion.

"A la cueva volverán"
—El Puma en la canción "Amalia"

South of the border, called North America's rubbish dump by Chicanos, *mexicanos* congregate in the plazas to talk about the best way to cross. Smugglers, *coyotes*, *pasadores*, *enganchadores* approach these people or are sought out by them. "*¿Qué dicen muchachos a echársela de mojado?*"

"Now among the alien gods with
weapons of magic am I."

—Navajo protection song,
sung when going into battle.¹³

We have a tradition of migration, a tradition of long walks. Today we are witnessing *la migración de los pueblos mexicanos*, the return odyssey to the historical/mythological Aztlán. This time, the traffic is from south to north.

El retorno to the promised land first began with the Indians from the interior of Mexico and the *mestizos* that came with the *conquistadores* in the 1500s. Immigration continued in the next three centuries, and, in this century, it continued with the *braceros* who helped to build our railroads and who picked our fruit. Today thousands of Mexicans are crossing the border legally and illegally; ten million people without documents have returned to the Southwest.

Faceless, nameless, invisible, taunted with "Hey cucaracho" (cockroach). Trembling with fear, yet filled with courage, a courage born of desperation. Barefoot and uneducated, Mexicans with hands like boot soles gather at night by the river where two worlds merge creating what Reagan calls a frontline, a war zone. The convergence has created a shock culture, a border culture, a third country, a closed country.

Without benefit of bridges, the "mojados" (wetbacks) float on inflatable rafts across *el río Grande*, or wade or swim across naked, clutching their clothes over their heads. Holding onto the grass, they pull themselves along the banks with a prayer to *Virgen de Guadalupe* on their lips: *Ay virgencita morena, mi madrequita, dame tu bendición.*

The Border Patrol hides behind the local McDonalds on the outskirts of Brownsville, Texas or some other border town. They set traps around the river beds beneath the bridge.¹⁴ Hunters in army-green uniforms stalk and track these economic refugees by the powerful nightvision of electronic sensing devices planted in

the ground or mounted on Border Patrol vans. Cornered by flashlights, frisked while their arms stretch over their heads, *los mojados* are handcuffed, locked in jeeps, and then kicked back across the border.

One out of every three is caught. Some return to enact their rite of passage as many as three times a day. Some of those who make it across undetected fall prey to Mexican robbers such as those in Smugglers' Canyon on the American side of the border near Tijuana. As refugees in a homeland that does not want them, many find a welcome hand holding out only suffering, pain, and ignoble death.

Those who make it past the checking points of the Border Patrol find themselves in the midst of 150 years of racism in Chicano *barrios* in the Southwest and in big northern cities. Living in a no-man's-borderland, caught between being treated as criminals and being able to eat, between resistance and deportation, the illegal refugees are some of the poorest and the most exploited of any people in the U.S. It is illegal for Mexicans to work without green cards. But big farming combines, farm bosses and smugglers who bring them in make money off the "wetbacks" labor—they don't have to pay federal minimum wages, or ensure adequate housing or sanitary conditions.

The Mexican woman is especially at risk. Often the *coyote* (smuggler) doesn't feed her for days or let her go to the bathroom. Often he rapes her or sells her into prostitution. She cannot call on county or state health or economic resources because she doesn't know English and she fears deportation. American employers are quick to take advantage of her helplessness. She can't go home. She's sold her house, her furniture, borrowed from friends in order to pay the *coyote* who charges her four or five thousand dollars to smuggle her to Chicago. She may work as a live-in maid for white, Chicano or Latino households for as little as \$15 a week. Or work in the garment industry, do hotel work. Isolated and worried about her family back home, afraid of getting caught and deported, living with as many as fifteen people in one room, the *mexicana* suffers serious health problems. *Se enferma de los nervios, de alta presión.*¹⁵

La mojada, la mujer indocumentada, is doubly threatened in this country. Not only does she have to contend with sexual violence, but like all women, she is prey to a sense of physical helplessness. As a refugee, she leaves the familiar and safe

homeground to venture into unknown and possibly dangerous terrain.

This is her home
this thin edge of
barbwire.

2

Movimientos de rebeldía y las culturas que traicionan

Esos movimientos de rebeldía que tenemos en la sangre nosotros los mexicanos surgen como ríos desbocados en mis venas. Y como mi raza que cada en cuando deja caer esa esclavitud de obedecer, de callarse y aceptar, en mi está la rebeldía encimada de mi carne. Debajo de mi humillada mirada está una cara insolente lista para explotar. Me costó muy caro mi rebeldía—acalambrada con dervelos y dudas, sintiendome inútil, estúpida, e impotente.

Me entra una rabia cuando alguien—sea mi mamá, la Iglesia, la cultura de los anglos—me dice haz esto, haz eso sin considerar mis deseos.

Repele. Hable pa' tras. Fuí muy boricona. Era indiferente a muchos valores de mi cultura. No me deje de los hombres. No fui buena ni obediente.

Pero he crecido. Ya no soló paso toda mi vida botando las costumbres y los valores de mi cultura que me traicionan. También recojo las costumbres que por el tiempo se han provado y las costumbres de respeto a las mujeres. But despite my growing tolerance, for this Chicana la guerra de independencia is a constant.

The Strength of My Rebellion

I have a vivid memory of an old photograph: I am six years old. I stand between my father and mother, head cocked to the right, the toes of my flat feet gripping the ground. I hold my mother's hand.

To this day I'm not sure where I found the strength to leave the source, the mother, disengage from my family, *mi tierra, mi gente*, and all that picture stood for. I had to leave home so I could find myself, find my own intrinsic nature buried under the personality that had been imposed on me.

I was the first in six generations to leave the Valley, the only one in my family to ever leave home. But I didn't leave all the parts of me: I kept the ground of my own being. On it I walked away, taking with me the land, the Valley, Texas. *Gané mi camino y me largué. Muy andartega mi hija*. Because I left of my own accord *me dicen*, "*¿Cómo te gusta la mala vida?*"

At a very early age I had a strong sense of who I was and what I was about and what was fair. I had a stubborn will. It tried constantly to mobilize my soul under my own regime, to live life on my own terms no matter how unsuitable to others they were. *Terca*. Even as a child I would not obey. I was "lazy." Instead of ironing my younger brothers' shirts or cleaning the cupboards, I would pass many hours studying, reading, painting, writing. Every bit of self-faith I'd painstakingly gathered took a beating daily. Nothing in my culture approved of me. *Había agarrado malos pasos*. Something was "wrong" with me. *Estaba más allá de la tradición*.

There is a rebel in me—the Shadow-Beast. It is a part of me that refuses to take orders from outside authorities. It refuses to take orders from my conscious will, it threatens the sovereignty of my rulership. It is that part of me that hates constraints of any kind, even those self-imposed. At the least hint of limitations on my time or space by others, it kicks out with both feet. Bolts.

Cultural Tyranny

Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture. Culture is made by those in power—men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them. How many times have I heard mothers and mothers-in-law tell their sons to beat their wives for not obeying them, for being *haciconas* (big mouths), for being *callajeras* (going to visit and gossip with neighbors), for expecting their husbands to help with the rearing of children and the housework, for wanting to be something other than housewives?

The culture expects women to show greater acceptance of, and commitment to, the value system than men. The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males. If a woman rebels she is a *mujer mala*. If a woman doesn't renounce herself in favor of the male, she is selfish. If a woman remains a *virgen* until she marries, she is a good woman. For a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother. Today some of us have a fourth choice: entering the world by way of education and career and becoming self-autonomous persons. A very few of us. As a working class people our chief activity is to put food in our mouths, a roof over our heads and clothes on our backs. Educating our children is out of reach for most of us. Educated or not, the onus is still on woman to be a wife/mother—only the nun can escape motherhood. Women are made to feel total failures if they don't marry and have children. "*¿Y cuándo te casas, Gloria? Se te va a pasar el tren.*" *Y yo les digo, "Pos si me caso, no va ser con un hombre."* *Se quedan calladitas. Sí, soy hija de la Chingada*. I've always been her daughter. *No 'tés chingando*.

Humans fear the supernatural, both the undivine (the animal impulses such as sexuality, the unconscious, the unknown, the alien) and the divine (the superhuman, the god in us). Culture and religion seek to protect us from these two forces. The female, by virtue of creating entities of flesh and blood in her stomach (she bleeds every month but does not die), by virtue of being in tune with nature's cycles, is feared. Because, according to Christianity and most other major religions, woman is carnal, animal, and closer to the undivine, she must be protected. Protected from herself. Woman is the stranger, the other. She is man's recognized nightmarish pieces, his Shadow-Beast. The sight of her sends him into a frenzy of anger and fear.

La gorra, el rebozo, la mantilla are symbols of my culture's "protection" of women. Culture (read males) professes to protect women. Actually it keeps women in rigidly defined roles. It keeps the girlchild from other men—don't poach on my preserves, only I can touch my child's body. Our mothers taught us well, "*Los hombres nomás quieren una cosa*"; men aren't to be trusted, they are selfish and are like children. Mothers made sure we didn't

walk into a room of brothers or fathers or uncles in nightgowns or shorts. We were never alone with men, not even those of our own family.

Through our mothers, the culture gave us mixed messages: *No voy a dejar que ningún pelado desgraciado maltrate a mis hijos*. And in the next breath it would say, *La mujer tiene que hacer lo que le diga el hombre*. Which was it to be—strong, or submissive, rebellious or conforming?

Tribal rights over those of the individual insured the survival of the tribe and were necessary then, and, as in the case of all indigenous peoples in the world who are still fighting off intentional, premeditated murder (genocide), they are still necessary.

Much of what the culture condemns focuses on kinship relationships. The welfare of the family, the community, and the tribe is more important than the welfare of the individual. The individual exists first as kin—as sister, as father, as *padrino*—and last as self.

In my culture, selfishness is condemned, especially in women; humility and selflessness, the absence of selfishness, is considered a virtue. In the past, acting humble with members outside the family ensured that you would make no one *envidioso* (envious); therefore he or she would not use witchcraft against you. If you get above yourself, you're an *envidiosa*. If you don't behave like everyone else, *la gente* will say that you think you're better than others, *que te crees grande*. With ambition (condemned in the Mexican culture and valued in the Anglo) comes envy. *Respeto* carries with it a set of rules so that social categories and hierarchies will be kept in order: respect is reserved for *la abuela*, *papá*, *el patrón*, those with power in the community. Women are at the bottom of the ladder one rung above the deviants. The Chicano, *mexicano*, and some Indian cultures have no tolerance for deviance. Deviance is whatever is condemned by the community. Most societies try to get rid of their deviants. Most cultures have burned and beaten their homosexuals and others who deviate from the sexual common.¹ The queer are the mirror reflecting the heterosexual tribe's fear: being different, being other and therefore lesser, therefore sub-human, inhuman, non-human.

Half and Half

There was a *muchacha* who lived near my house. *La gente del pueblo* talked about her being *una de las otras*, "of the Others." They said that for six months she was a woman who had a vagina that bled once a month, and that for the other six months she was a man, had a penis and she peed standing up. They called her half and half, *mita' y mita'*, neither one nor the other but a strange doubling, a deviation of nature that horrified, a work of nature inverted. But there is a magic aspect in abnormality and so-called deformity. Maimed, mad, and sexually different people were believed to possess supernatural powers by primal cultures' magico-religious thinking. For them, abnormality was the price a person had to pay for her or his inborn extraordinary gift.

There is something compelling about being both male and female, about having an entry into both worlds. Contrary to some psychiatric tenets, half and halves are not suffering from a confusion of sexual identity, or even from a confusion of gender. What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other. It claims that human nature is limited and cannot evolve into something better. But I, like other queer people, am two in one body, both male and female. I am the embodiment of the *bieros gamos*: the coming together of opposite qualities within.

Fear of Going Home: Homophobia

For the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behavior. She goes against two moral prohibitions: sexuality and homosexuality. Being lesbian and raised Catholic, indoctrinated as straight, I made the choice to be queer (for some it is genetically inherent). It's an interesting path, one that continually slips in and out of the white, the Catholic, the Mexican, the indigenous, the instincts. In and out of my head. It makes for *loquería*, the crazies. It is a path of knowledge—one of knowing (and of learning) the history of oppression of our *raza*. It is a way of balancing, of mitigating duality.

In a New England college where I taught, the presence of a few lesbians threw the more conservative heterosexual students

and faculty into a panic. The two lesbian students and we two lesbian instructors met with them to discuss their fears. One of the students said, "I thought homophobia meant fear of going home after a residency."

And I thought, how apt. Fear of going home. And of not being taken in. We're afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, *la Raza*, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged. Most of us unconsciously believe that if we reveal this unacceptable aspect of the self our mother/culture/race will totally reject us. To avoid rejection, some of us conform to the values of the culture, push the unacceptable parts into the shadows. Which leaves only one fear—that we will be found out and that the Shadow-Beast will break out of its cage. Some of us take another route. We try to make ourselves conscious of the Shadow-Beast, stare at the sexual lust and lust for power and destruction we see on its face, discern among its features the undershadow that the reigning order of heterosexual males project on our Beast. Yet still others of us take it another step: we try to waken the Shadow-Beast inside us. Not many jump at the chance to confront the Shadow-Beast in the mirror without flinching at her lidless serpent eyes, her cold clammy moist hand dragging us underground, fangs barred and hissing. How does one put feathers on this particular serpent? But a few of us have been lucky—on the face of the Shadow-Beast we have seen not lust but tenderness; on its face we have uncovered the lie.

Intimate Terrorism: Life in the Borderlands

The world is not a safe place to live in. We shiver in separate cells in enclosed cities, shoulders hunched, barely keeping the panic below the surface of the skin, daily drinking shock along with our morning coffee, fearing the torches being set to our buildings, the attacks in the streets. Shutting down. Woman does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her; when the males of all races hunt her as prey.

Alienated from her mother culture, "alien" in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can't respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits.

The ability to respond is what is meant by responsibility, yet our cultures take away our ability to act—shackle us in the name

of protection. Blocked, immobilized, we can't move forward, can't move backwards. That writhing serpent movement, the very movement of life, swifter than lightning, frozen.

We do not engage fully. We do not make full use of our faculties. We abnegate. And there in front of us is the crossroads and choice: to feel a victim where someone else is in control and therefore responsible and to blame (being a victim and transferring the blame on culture, mother, father, ex-lover, friend, absolves me of responsibility), or to feel strong, and, for the most part, in control.

My Chicana identity is grounded in the Indian woman's history of resistance. The Aztec female rites of mourning were rites of defiance protesting the cultural changes which disrupted the equality and balance between female and male, and protesting their demotion to a lesser status, their denigration. Like *la Llorona*, the Indian woman's only means of protest was wailing.

So *mamá, Raza*, how wonderful, *no tener que rendir cuentas a nadie*. I feel perfectly free to rebel and to rail against my culture. I fear no betrayal on my part because, unlike Chicanas and other women of color who grew up white or who have only recently returned to their native cultural roots, I was totally immersed in mine. It wasn't until I went to high school that I "saw" whites. Until I worked on my master's degree I had not gotten within an arm's distance of them. I was totally immersed *en lo mexicano*, a rural, peasant, isolated, *mexicanismo*. To separate from my culture (as from my family) I had to feel competent enough on the outside and secure enough inside to live life on my own. Yet in leaving home I did not lose touch with my origins because *lo mexicano* is in my system. I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry "home" on my back.

Not me sold out my people but they me. So yes, though "home" permeates every sinew and cartilage in my body, I too am afraid of going home. Though I'll defend my race and culture when they are attacked by non-*mexicanos*, *conosco el malestar de mi cultura*. I abhor some of my culture's ways, how it cripples its women, *como burras*, our strengths used against us, lowly *burras* bearing humility with dignity. The ability to serve, claim the males, is our highest virtue. I abhor how my culture makes *macho* caricatures of its men. No, I do not buy all the myths of the tribe

into which I was born. I can understand why the more tinged with Anglo blood, the more adamantly my colored and colorless sisters glorify their colored culture's values—to offset the extreme devaluation of it by the white culture. It's a legitimate reaction. But I will not glorify those aspects of my culture which have injured me and which have injured me in the name of protecting me.

So, don't give me your tenets and your laws. Don't give me your lukewarm gods. What I want is an accounting with all three cultures—white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—*una cultura mestiza*—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture.

The Wounding of the india-Mestiza

Estas carnes indias que despreciamos nosotros los mexicanos así como despreciamos y condenamos a nuestra madre, Malinali. Nos condenamos a nosotros mismos. Esta raza vencida, enemigo cuerpo.

Not me sold out my people but they me. *Malinali Tenepat*, or *Malintzin*, has become known as *la Chingada*—the fucked one. She has become the bad word that passes a dozen times a day from the lips of Chicanos. Whore, prostitute, the woman who sold out her people to the Spaniards are epithets Chicanos spit out with contempt.

The worst kind of betrayal lies in making us believe that the Indian woman in us is the betrayer. We, *indias y mestizas*, police the Indian in us, brutalize and condemn her. Male culture has done a good job on us. *Son los costumbres que traicionan. La india en mí es la sombra: La Chingada, Tlazolteotl, Coatlicue. Son ellas que oyemos lamentando a sus hijas perdidas.*

Not me sold out my people but they me. Because of the color of my skin they betrayed me. The dark-skinned woman has been silenced, gagged, caged, bound into servitude with marriage, bludgeoned for 300 years, sterilized and castrated in the twentieth century. For 300 years she has been a slave, a force of cheap labor, colonized by the Spaniard, the Anglo, by her own people

(and in Mesoamerica her lot under the Indian patriarchs was not free of wounding). For 300 years she was invisible, she was not heard. Many times she wished to speak, to act, to protest, to challenge. The odds were heavily against her. She hid her feelings; she hid her truths; she concealed her fire; but she kept stoking the inner flame. She remained faceless and voiceless, but a light shone through her veil of silence. And though she was unable to spread her limbs and though for her right now the sun has sunk under the earth and there is no moon, she continues to tend the flame. The spirit of the fire spurs her to fight for her own skin and a piece of ground to stand on, a ground from which to view the world—a perspective, a homeland where she can plumb the rich ancestral roots into her own ample *mestiza* heart. She waits till the waters are not so turbulent and the mountains not so slippery with sleet. Battered and bruised she waits, her bruises throwing her back upon herself and the rhythmic pulse of the feminine. *Coatlalopeuh* waits with her.

*Aquí en la soledad prospera su rebeldía.
En la soledad Ella prospera.*

The Conquistadores

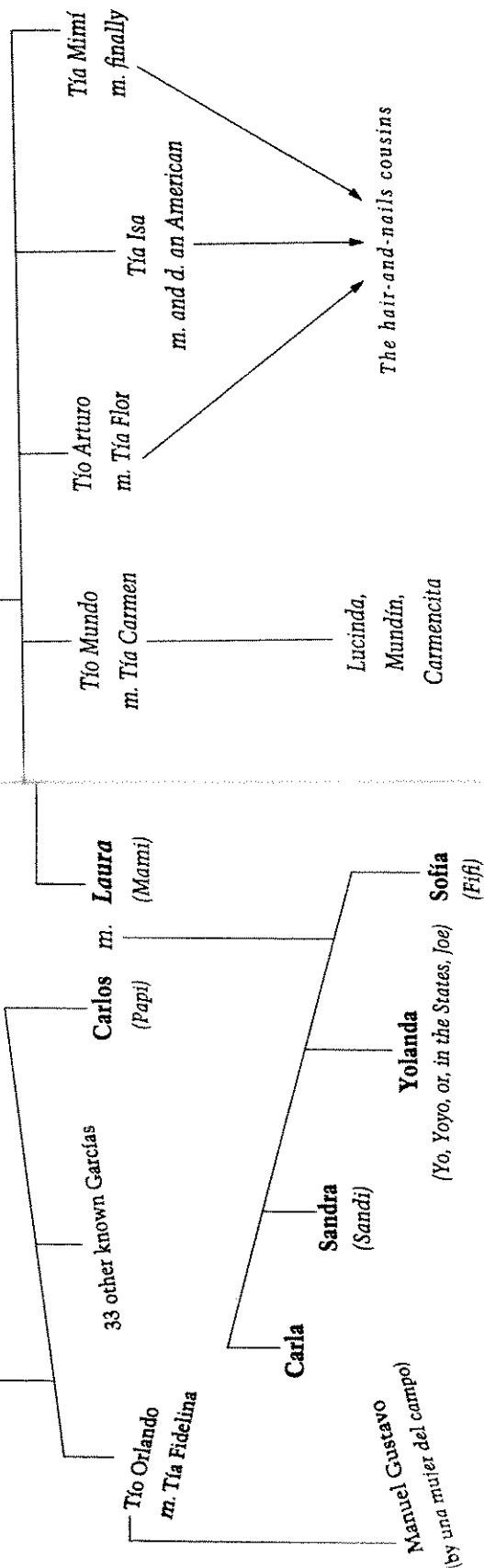


The García Family

The *de la Torre* Family

The great-great-grandfather who married a Swedish girl

Papito and Mamita



less likely prospect. In fact, her parents were sinking roots here. Only a month ago, they had moved out of the city to a neighborhood on Long Island so that the girls could have a yard to play in, so Mami said. The little green squares around each look-alike house seemed more like carpeting that had to be kept clean than yards to play in. The trees were no taller than little Fifi. Carla thought yearningly of the lush grasses and thick-limbed, vine-laden trees around the compound back home. Under the *amapola* tree her best-friend cousin, Lucinda, and she had told each other what each knew about how babies were made. What is Lucinda doing right this moment? Carla wondered.

Down the block the neighborhood dead-ended in abandoned farmland that Mami read in the local paper the developers were negotiating to buy. Grasses and real trees and real bushes still grew beyond the barbed-wire fence posted with a big sign: PRIVATE, NO TRESPASSING. The sign had surprised Carla since "for-give us our trespasses" was the only other context in which she had heard the word. She pointed the sign out to Mami on one of their first walks to the bus stop. "Isn't that funny, Mami? A sign that you have to be good." Her mother did not understand at first until Carla explained about the Lord's Prayer. Mami laughed. Words sometimes meant two things in English too. This trespass meant that no one must go inside the property because it was not public like a park, but private. Carla nodded, disappointed. She would never get the hang of this new country.

Mami walked her to the bus stop for her first month at her new school over in the next parish. The first week, Mami even

Trespass



Carla

The day the Garcías were one American year old, they had a celebration at dinner. Mami had baked a nice flan and stuck a candle in the center. "Guess what day it is today?" She looked around the table at her daughters' baffled faces. "One year ago today," Papi began orating, "we came to the shores of this great country." When he was done misquoting the poem on the Statue of Liberty, the youngest, Fifi, asked if she could blow out the candle, and Mami said only after everyone had made a wish.

What do you wish for on the first celebration of the day you lost everything? Carla wondered. Everyone else around the table had their eyes closed as if they had no trouble deciding. Carla closed her eyes too. She should make an effort and not wish for what she always wished for in her homesickness. But just this last time, she would let herself. "Dear God," she began. She could not get used to this American wish-making without bringing God into it. "Let us please go back home, please," she half prayed and half wished. It seemed a less and

rode the buses with her, transferring, going and coming, twice a day, until Carla learned the way. Her sisters had all been enrolled at the neighborhood Catholic school only one block away from the house the Garcías had rented at the end of the summer. But by then, Carla's seventh grade was full. The nun who was the principal had suggested that Carla stay back a year in sixth grade, where they still had two spaces left. At twelve, though, Carla was at least a year older than most sixth graders, and she felt mortified at the thought of having to repeat yet another year. All four girls had been put back a year when they arrived in the country. Sure, Carla could use the practice with her English, but that also meant she would be in the same grade as her younger sister, Sandi. That she could not bear. "Please," she pleaded with her mother, "let me go to the other school!" The public school was a mere two blocks beyond the Catholic school, but Laura García would not hear of it. Public schools, she had learned from other Catholic parents, were where juvenile delinquents went and where teachers taught those new crazy ideas about how we all came from monkeys. No child of hers was going to forget her family name and think she was nothing but a kissing cousin to an orangutan.

Carla soon knew her school route *by heart*, an expression she used for weeks after she learned it. First, she walked down the block by heart, noting the infinitesimal differences between the look-alike houses: different color drapes, an azalea bush on the left side of the door instead of on the right, a mailbox or door with a doodad of some kind. Then by heart, she walked the long mile by the deserted farmland lot with the funny sign. Finally, a sharp right down the service road into the main

thoroughfare, where by heart she boarded the bus. "A young lady señorita," her mother pronounced the first morning Carla set out by herself, her heart drumming in her chest. It was a long and scary trek, but she was too grateful to have escaped the embarrassment of being put back a year to complain.

And as the months went by, she neglected to complain about an even scarier development. Every day on the playground and in the halls of her new school, a gang of boys chased after her, calling her names, some of which she had heard before from the old lady neighbor in the apartment they had rented in the city. Out of sight of the nuns, the boys pelted Carla with stones, aiming them at her feet so there would be no bruises. "Go back to where you came from, you dirty spic!" One of them, standing behind her in line, pulled her blouse out of her skirt where it was tucked in and lifted it high. "No titties," he snickered. Another yanked down her socks, displaying her legs, which had begun growing soft, dark hairs. "Monkey legs!" he yelled to his pals.

"Stop!" Carla cried. "Please stop."

"Eh-stop!" they mimicked her. "Plees eh-stop."

They were disclosing her secret shame: her body was changing. The girl she had been back home in Spanish was being shed. In her place—almost as if the boys' ugly words and taunts had the power of spells—was a hairy, breast-budding grownup no one would ever love.

Every day, Carla set out on her long journey to school with a host of confused feelings. First of all, there was this body whose daily changes she noted behind the closed bathroom door until one of her sisters knocked that Carla's turn was over. How she

wished she could wrap her body up the way she'd heard Chinese girls had their feet bound so they wouldn't grow big. She would stay herself, a quick, skinny girl with brown eyes and a braid down her back, a girl she had just begun to feel could get things in this world.

But then, too, Carla felt relieved to be setting out towards her very own school in her proper grade away from the crowding that was her family of four girls too close in age. She could come home with stories of what had happened that day and not have a chorus of three naysayers to correct her. But she also felt dread. There, in the playground, they would be waiting for her—the gang of four or five boys, blond, snotty-nosed, freckled-faced. They looked bland and unknowable, the way all Americans did. Their faces betrayed no sign of human warmth. Their eyes were too clear for cleaving, intimate looks. Their pale bodies did not seem real but were like costumes they were wearing as they played the part of her persecutors.

She watched them. In the classroom, they bent over workbooks or wore scared faces when Sister Beatrice, their beefy, no-nonsense teacher, scolded them for missing their homework. Sometimes Carla spied them in the playground, looking through the chain link fence and talking about the cars parked on the sidewalk. To Carla's bafflement, those cars had names beyond the names of their color or size. All she knew of their family car, for instance, was that it was a big black car where all four sisters could ride in the back, though Fifi always made a fuss and was allowed up front. Carla could also identify Volkswagens because that had been the car (in black) of the secret police back home; every time Mami saw one she made the sign

of the cross and said a prayer for Tio Mundo, who had not been allowed to leave the Island. Beyond Volkswagens and medium blue cars or big black cars, Carla could not tell one car from the other.

But the boys at the fence talked excitedly about Fords and Falcons and Corvairs and Plymouth Valiants. They argued over how fast each car could go and what models were better than others. Carla sometimes imagined herself being driven to school in a flashy red car the boys would admire. Except there was no one to drive her. Her immigrant father with his thick mustache and accent and three-piece suit would only bring her more ridicule. Her mother did not yet know how to drive. Even though Carla could imagine owning a very expensive car, she could not imagine her parents as different from what they were. They were, like this new body she was growing into, givens.

One day when she had been attending Sacred Heart about a month, she was followed by a car on her mile walk home from the bus stop. It was a lime green car, sort of medium sized, and with a kind of long snout, so had it been a person, Carla would have described it as having a long nose. A long-nosed, lime-green car. It drove slowly, trailing her. Carla figured the driver was looking for an address, just as Papi drove slowly and got honked at when he was reading the signs of shops before stopping at a particular one.

A blat from the horn made Carla jump and turn to the car, now fully stopped just a little ahead of her. She could see the driver clearly, from the shoulders up, a man in a red shirt about the age of her parents—though it was hard for Carla to tell

with Americans how old they were. They were like cars to her, identifiable by the color of their clothes and a general age group—a little kid younger than herself, a kid her same age, a teenager in high school, and then the vast indistinguishable group of American grownups.

This grownup American man about her parents' age beckoned for her to come up to the window. Carla dreaded being asked directions since she had just moved into this area right before school started, and all she knew for sure was the route home from the bus stop. Besides, her English was still just classroom English, a foreign language. She knew the neutral bland things: how to ask for a glass of water, how to say good morning and good afternoon and good night. How to thank someone and say they were welcomed. But if a grownup American of indeterminable age asked her for directions, invariably speaking too quickly, she merely shrugged and smiled an inane smile. "I don't speak very much English," she would say in a small voice by way of apology. She hated having to admit this since such an admission proved, no doubt, the boy gang's point that she didn't belong here.

As Carla drew closer, the driver leaned over and rolled down the passenger door window. Carla bent down as if she were about to speak to a little kid and peeked in. The man smiled a friendly smile, but there was something wrong with it that Carla couldn't put her finger on: this smile had a bruised, sorry quality as if the man were someone who'd been picked on all his life, and so his smiles were appeasing, not friendly. He was wearing his red shirt unbuttoned, which seemed normal given the warm Indian-summer day. In fact, if Carla's legs hadn't be-

gun to grow hairs, she would have taken off her school-green knee socks and walked home bare-legged.

The man spoke up. "Whereyagoin?" he asked, running all his words together the way the Americans always did. Carla was, as usual, not quite sure if she had heard right.

"Excuse me?" she asked politely, leaning into the car to hear the man's whispery voice better. Something caught her eye. She looked down and stared, aghast.

The man had tied his two shirtends just above his waist and was naked from there on down. String encircled his waist, the loose ends knotted in front and then looped around his penis. As Carla watched, his big blunt-headed thing grew so that it filled and strained at the lasso it was caught in.

"Where ya' going?" His voice had slowed down when he spoke this time, so that Carla definitely understood him. Her eyes snapped back up to his eyes.

"Excuse me?" she said again dumbly.

He leaned towards the passenger door and clicked it open. "C'moninere." He nodded towards the seat beside him. "C'm'on," he moaned. He cupped his hand over his thing as if it were a flame that might blow out.

Carla clutched her bookbag tighter in her hand. Her mouth hung open. Not one word, English or Spanish, occurred to her. She backed away from the big green car, all the while keeping her eyes on the man. A pained, urgent expression was deepening on his face like a plea that Carla did not know how to answer. His arm pumped at something Carla could not see, and then after much agitation, he was still. The face relaxed into something like peacefulness. The man bowed his head as

if in prayer. Carla turned and fled down the street, her book-bag banging against her leg like a whip she was using to make herself go faster, faster.

Her mother called the police after piecing together the breathless, frantic story Carla told. The enormity of what she had seen was now topped by the further enormity of involving the police. Carla and her sisters feared the American police almost as much as the SIM back home. Their father, too, seemed uneasy around policemen; whenever a cop car was behind them in traffic, he kept looking at the rearview mirror and insisting on silence in the car so he could think. If officers stood on the sidewalk as he walked by, he bowed ingratiatingly at them. Back home, he had been tailed by the secret police for months and the family had only narrowly escaped capture their last day on the Island. Of course, Carla knew American policemen were "nice guys," but still she felt uneasy around them.

The doorbell rang only minutes after Carla's mother had called the station. This was a law-abiding family neighborhood, and no one wanted a creep like this on the loose among so many children, least of all the police. As her mother answered the door, Carla stayed behind in the kitchen, listening with a racing heart to her mother's explanation. Mami's voice was high and hesitant and slightly apologetic—a small, accented woman's voice among the booming, impersonal American male voices that interrogated her.

"My daughter, she was walking home—"

"Where exactly?" a male voice demanded.

"That street, you know?" Carla's mother must have pointed. "The one that comes up the avenue, I don't know the name of it."

"Must be the service road," a nicer male voice offered.

"Yes, yes, the service road." Her mother's jubilant voice seemed to conclude whatever had been the problem.

"Please go on, ma'am."

"Well, my daughter, she said this, this crazy man in this car—" Her voice lowered. Carla heard snatches: something, something "to come in the car—"

"Where's your daughter, ma'am?" the male voice with authority asked.

Carla cringed behind the kitchen door. Her mother had promised that she would not involve Carla with the police but would do all the talking herself.

"She is just a young girl," her mother excused Carla.

"Well, ma'am, if you want to file charges, we have to talk to her."

"File charges? What does that mean, file charges?"

There was a sigh of exasperation. A too-patient voice with dividers between each word explained the legal procedures as if repeating a history lesson. Carla's mother should have learned long before she had troubled the police or moved into this neighborhood.

"I don't want any trouble," her mother protested. "I just think this is a crazy man who should not be allowed on the streets."

"You're absolutely right, ma'am, but our hands are tied unless you, as a responsible citizen, help us out."

Oh no, Carla groaned, now she was in for it. The magic words had been uttered. The Garcías were only legal residents, not citizens, but for the police to mistake Mami for a citizen was a compliment too great to spare a child discomfort. "Carla!" her mother called from the door.

"What's the girl's name?" the officer with the voice in charge asked.

Her mother repeated Carla's full name and spelled it for the officer, then called out again in her voice of authority, "Carla Antonia!"

Slowly, sullenly, Carla wrapped herself around the kitchen door, only her head poking out and into the hallway. "¿Sí, Mamá?" she answered in a polite, law-abiding voice to impress the cops.

"Come here," her mother said, motioning. "These very nice officers need for you to explain what you saw." There was an apologetic look on her face. "Come on, Cuca, don't be afraid."

"There's nothing to be afraid of," the policeman said in his gruff, scary voice.

Carla kept her head down as she approached the front door, glancing up briefly when the two officers introduced themselves. One was an embarrassingly young man with a face no older than the boys' faces at school on top of a large, muscular man's body. The other man, also big and fair-skinned, looked older because of his meaner, sharp-featured face like an animal's in a beast fable a child knows by looking at the picture not to trust. Belts were slung around both their hips, guns poking out of the holsters. Their very masculinity offended and threatened. They were so big, so strong, so male, so American.

After a few facts about her had been established, the mean-faced cop with the big voice and the pad asked her if she would answer a few questions. Not knowing she could refuse, Carla nodded meekly, on the verge of tears.

"Could you describe the vehicle the suspect was driving?"

She wasn't sure what a vehicle was or a suspect, for that matter. Her mother translated into simpler English, "What car was the man driving, Carla?"

"A big green car," Carla mumbled.

As if she hadn't answered in English, her mother repeated for the officers, "A big green car."

"What make?" the officer wanted to know.

"Make?" Carla asked.

"You know, Ford, Chrysler, Plymouth." The man ended his catalogue with a sigh. Carla and her mother were wasting his time.

"¿Qué clase de carro?" her mother asked in Spanish, but of course she knew Carla wouldn't know the make of a car. Carla shook her head, and her mother explained to the officer, helping her save face, "She doesn't remember."

"Can't she talk?" the gruff cop snapped. The boyish-looking one now asked Carla a question. "Carla," he began, pronouncing her name so that Carla felt herself coated all over with something warm and too sweet. "Carla," he coaxed, "can you please describe the man you saw?"

All memory of the man's face fled. She remembered only the bruised smile and a few strands of dirty blond hair laid carelessly over a bald pate. But she could not remember the word for bald and so she said, "He had almost nothing on his head."

"You mean no hat?" the gentle cop suggested.

"Almost no hair," Carla explained, looking up as if she had taken a guess and wanted to know if she was wrong or right.

"Bald?" The gruff cop pointed first to a hairy stretch of wrist beyond his uniform's cuff, then to his pink, hairless palm.

"Bald, yes," Carla nodded. The sight of the man's few dark hairs had disgusted her. She thought of her own legs sprouting dark hairs, of the changes going on in secret in her body, turning her into one of these grownup persons. No wonder the high-voiced boys with smooth, hairless cheeks hated her. They could see that her body was already betraying her.

The interrogation proceeded through a description of the man's appearance, and then the dreaded question came.

"What did you see?" the boy-faced cop asked.

Carla looked down at the cops' feet. The black tips of their shoes poked out from under their cuffs like the snouts of wily animals. "The man was naked all down here." She gestured with her hand. "And he had a string around his waist."

"A string?" The man's voice was like a hand trying to lift her chin to make her look up, which is precisely what her mother did when the man repeated, "A string?"

Carla was forced to confront the cop's face. It was indeed an adult version of the sickly white faces of the boys in the playground. This is what they would look like once they grew up. There was no meanness in this face, no kindness either. No recognition of the difficulty she was having in trying to describe what she had seen with her tiny English vocabulary. It was the face of someone in a movie Carla was watching ask her, "What was he doing with the string?"

She shrugged, tears peeping at the corners of her eyes.

Her mother intervened. "The string was holding up this man's—"

"Please, ma'am," the cop who was writing said. "Let your daughter describe what she saw."

Carla thought hard for what could be the name of a man's genitals. They had come to this country before she had reached puberty in Spanish, so a lot of the key words she would have been picking up in the last year, she had missed. Now, she was learning English in a Catholic classroom, where no nun had ever mentioned the words she was needing. "He had a string around his waist," Carla explained. By the ease with which the man was writing, she could tell she was now making perfect sense.

"And it came up to the front"—she showed on herself—"and here it was tied in a—" She held up her fingers and made the sign for zero.

"A noose?" the gentle cop offered.

"A noose, and his thing—" Carla pointed to the policeman's crotch. The cop writing scowled. "His thing was inside that noose and it got bigger and bigger," she blurted, her voice wobbling.

The friendly cop lifted his eyebrows and pushed his cap back on his head. His big hand wiped the small beads of sweat that had accumulated on his brow.

Carla prayed without prayer that this interview would stop now. What she had begun fearing was that her picture—but who was there to take a picture?—would appear in the paper the next day and the gang of mean boys would torment her

with what she had seen. She wondered if she could report them now to these young officers. "By the way," she could say, and the gruff one would begin to take notes. She would have the words to describe them: their mean, snickering faces she knew by heart. Their pale look-alike sickly bodies. Their high voices squealing with delight when Carla mispronounced some word they coaxed her to repeat.

But soon after her description of the incident, the interview ended. The cop snapped his pad closed, and each officer gave Carla and her mother a salute of farewell. They drove off in their squad car, and all down the block, drapes fell back to rest, half-opened shades closed like eyes that saw no evil.

For the next two months before Carla's mother moved her to the public school close to home for the second half of her seventh grade, she took Carla on the bus to school and was there at the end of the day to pick her up. The tauntings and chasings stopped. The boys must have thought Carla had complained, and so her mother was along to defend her. Even during class times, when her mother was not around, they now ignored her, their sharp, clear eyes roaming the classroom for another victim, someone too fat, too ugly, too poor, too different. Carla had faded into the walls.

But their faces did not fade as fast from Carla's life. They trespassed in her dreams and in her waking moments. Sometimes when she woke in the dark, they were perched at the foot of her bed, a grim chorus of urchin faces, boys without bodies, chanting without words, "Go back! Go back!"

So as not to see them, Carla would close her eyes and wish them gone. In that dark she created by keeping her eyes shut,

she would pray, beginning with the names of her own sisters, for all those she wanted God to especially care for, here and back home. The seemingly endless list of familiar names would coax her back to sleep with a feeling of safety, of a world still peopled by those who loved her.

tributary swig onto the street. "I'm God when I put a gun to your head. I'm the judge and you in my courtroom."

Where I'm from, it's the late night scratch of rats' feet that explains what my mother means when she says slowly, "Bueno, mijo, eso es la vida del pobre." (Well, son, that is the life of the poor.)

Where I'm from, it's sweet like my grandmother reciting a quick prayer over a pot of hot rice and beans. Where I'm from, it's pretty like my niece stopping me in the middle of the street and telling me to notice all the stars in the sky.

Willie Perdomo

where a Nickel Costs a Dime

WW Norton

NY 1996

Nigger-Reecan Blues

—Hey, Willie. What are you, man? Boricua? Moreno? Que? Are you Black? Puerto Rican?

—I am.

—No, silly. You know what I mean: What are you?

—I am you. You are me. We the same. Can't you feel our veins drinking the same blood?

—But who said you was a Porta-Reecan?

—Tu no ere Puerto Riqueño, brother.

—Maybe Indian like Ghandi-Indian?

—I thought you was a Black man.

—Is one of your parents white?

—You sure you ain't a mix of something like Cuban and Chinese?

—Looks like an Arab brother to me.

—Naahhh, nah, nah . . . You ain't no Porty-Reecan.

—I keep tellin' y'all: That boy is a Black man with an accent.

If you look real close you will see that your spirits are standing right next to our songs. Yo soy Boricua! Yo soy Africano! I ain't lyin'. Pero mi pelo is kinky y curly y mi skin no es negro pero it can pass . . .

—Hey, yo. I don't care what you say. You Black.

I ain't Black! Every time I go downtown la madam blankita de Madison Avenue sees that I'm standing next to her and she holds her purse just a bit tighter. Cabdrivers are quick to turn on their *Off-Duty* signs when they see my hand in the air. And the newspapers say that if I'm not in front a gun you can bet I'll be behind one. I wonder why . . .

—Cuz you Black, nigger!

Don't call me no nigger. I am not Black, man. I had a conversation with my professor and it went just like this:

"So, Willie, where are you from?"

"I'm from Harlem."

"Ohhh . . . Are you Black, Willie?"

"No, but we all the same and—"

"Did you know our basketball team is nationally ranked?"

—Te lo estoy diciendo, brother. Ese hombre es un moreno.
Miralo!

Mira, pana mia, yo no soy moreno! I just come out of Jerry's Den and the coconut spray on my new shape-up is smelling fresh all the way up 125th Street. I'm lookin' slim and I'm lookin' trim and when my compai Davi saw me he said: "Coño, Papo, te parece como un moreno, pana. Word up, kid, you look just like a light-skin moreno."

—What I told you? You Black my brother.

Damn! I ain't even Black and here I am suffering from the young Black man's plight / the old white man's burden / and I ain't even Black, man / a Black man I am not / Boricua I am / ain't never really was / Black / like me . . .

—Y'all leave that boy alone. He got what they call the
"nigger-reecan blues."

I'm a spic! I'm a nigger!

Spic! Spic! Just like a nigger.

Neglected, rejected, oppressed and dispossessed
From banana boats to tenements
Street gangs to regiments
Spic, spic, spic. I ain't nooooo different than a nigger!

Let Me Ask You Somethin'

Mmmm . . . those glazed donuts from Georgie's smell like they just came out the oven.

A breeze of fresh collar-green's bum-rushes me from the open doors of Soul Food Haven.

Damn—I'm hungry . . .

Scent of indigo incense caresses me into a dream of kings and queens.

Manchild steppin' strong on the street with his fresh-out-the-box Nike 380s,

Holdin' his head high he plexes his gold Nefertiti medallion.

Curling irons are pressing kitchen away,

And the history of Black hair is changing every day.

Bob Marley's self-determination blasting out of totally

Rasta-owned AWARENESS RECORDS,

Martin's dream making my hair stand,

And Malcolm up the block telling me to hit back if I really wanna be free.

PUBLIC ENEMY bringing the noise.

Little queen in her stroller points to the discount toys.

Homemade Kid Capri tapes at high black market prices cuz they boomin'

Wanna make a donation to the nation, brother?

A fight! A fight!

A moreno and his hermano—again?

Did you hear the pow! boom! plah!

Guns or drums? Take your pick.

Skunk weed is all I need to forget what I gotta do and why.

Love starin' at me with a sly smile.

Senegalese masks hanging off parking lot gates,

A laugh sits next to a cry: the face of tragedy straight from the motherland.

We can't wear all them 8-Ball jackets on display at Dr. Jay's.

One man blues band—SATAN

Steady jammin' by the Studio Museum of Harlem

I go from a hip-hop strut to a blues rut

Now—let me ask you somethin':

Did you hear all that while you was walking up 125th Street?

Did you see all that while you was walkin' up 125th Street?

Did you feel all that while you was walkin' up 125th Street?

Or was you just on your way

to pay

the phone bill?

AmeRícan

we gave birth to a new generation,
AmeRícan, broader than lost gold
never touched, hidden inside the
puerto rican mountains.

we gave birth to a new generation,
AmeRícan, it includes everything
imaginable you-name-it-we-got-it
society.

we gave birth to a new generation,
AmeRícan salutes all folklores,
european, indian, black, spanish,
and anything else compatible:

AmeRícan, singing to composer pedro flores' palm
trees high up in the universal sky!

AmeRícan, sweet soft spanish danzas gypsies
moving lyrics la española cascabelling
presence always singing at our side!
AmeRícan, beating jibaro modern troubadours
crying guitars romantic continental
bolero love songs!

AmeRícan, across forth and across back
back across and forth back
forth across and back and forth
our trips are walking bridges!

it all dissolved into itself, the attempt
was truly made, the attempt was truly
absorbed, digested, we spit out
the poison, we spit out the malice,
we stand, affirmative in action,
to reproduce a broader answer to the
marginality that gobbled us up abruptly!

AmeRícan, walking plena-rhythms in new york,
strutting beautifully alert, alive,
many turning eyes wondering,

admiring!

AmeRícan, defining myself my own way any way many
ways Am e Rícan, with the big R and the
accent on the í!

AmeRícan, like the soul gliding talk of gospel
boogie music!

AmeRícan, speaking new words in spanglish tenements,
fast tongue moving street corner "que
corta" talk being invented at the insistence
of a smile!

AmeRícan, abounding inside so many ethnic english
people, and out of humanity, we blend
and mix all that is good!

AmeRícan, integrating in new york and defining our
own destino, our own way of life,

AmeRícan, defining the new america, humane america,
admired america, loved america, harmonious
america, the world in peace, our energies
collectively invested to find other civili-
zations, to touch God, further and further,
to dwell in the spirit of divinity!

AmeRícan, yes, for now, for i love this, my second
land, and i dream to take the accent from
the altercation, and be proud to call
myself american, in the u.s. sense of the
word, AmeRícan, America!

Tato Laviera

American

Arte Publico Press
Houston 1985

Days of Obligation

An Argument with My Mexican Father

Richard Rodriguez

1992



PENGUIN BOOKS

CHAPTER THREE

Mexico's Children

When I was a boy it was still possible for Mexican farmworkers in California to commute between the past and the future.

The past returned every October. The white sky clarified to blue and fog opened white fissures in the landscape.

After the tomatoes and the melons and the grapes had been picked, it was time for Mexicans to load up their cars and head back into Mexico for the winter.

The schoolteacher said aloud to my mother what a shame it was the Mexicans did that—took their children out of school.

Like wandering Jews, Mexicans had no true home but the tabernacle of memory.

The schoolteacher was scandalized by what she took as the Mexicans' disregard of their children's future. The children failed their tests. They made no friends. What did it matter? Come November, they would be gone to some bright world that smelled like the cafeteria on Thursdays—Bean Days. Next spring they would be enrolled in some other school, in some other Valley town.

Mexico's Children

The schoolroom myth of America described an ocean—immigrants leaving behind several time zones and all the names for things.

Mexican-American memory described proximity. There are large Mexican-American populations in Seattle and Chicago and Kansas City, but the majority of Mexican Americans live, where most have always lived, in the Southwestern United States, one or two hours from Mexico, which is within the possibility of recourse to Mexico or within the sound of her voice.

My father knew men in Sacramento who had walked up from Mexico.

There is confluence of earth. The cut of the land or its fold, the bleaching sky, the swath of the wind, the length of shadows—all these suggested Mexico. Mitigated was the sense of dislocation otherwise familiar to immigrant experience.

By November the fog would thicken, the roads would be dangerous. Better to be off by late October. Families in old trucks and cars headed south down two-lane highways, past browning fields. Rolls of toilet paper streaming from rolled-down windows. After submitting themselves to the vegetable cycle of California for a season, these Mexicans were free. They were Mexicans! And what better thing to be?

HAIH-EEE. HAI. HAI. HAI.

There is confluence of history.

Cities, rivers, mountains retain Spanish names. California was once Mexico.

The fog closes in, condenses, and drips day and night from the bare limbs of trees. And my mother looks out the kitchen window and cannot see the neighbor's house.

Amnesia fixes the American regard of the past. I remember a graduate student at Columbia University during the Vietnam years; she might have been an ingenue out of Henry James. "After

Days of Obligation

Vietnam, I'll never again believe that America is the good and pure country I once thought it to be," the young woman said.

Whereas Mexican Americans have paid a price for the clarity of their past.

Consider my father: when he decided to apply for American citizenship, my father told no one, none of his friends, those men with whom he had come to this country looking for work. American citizenship would have seemed a betrayal of Mexico, a sin against memory. One afternoon, like a man with something to hide, my father slipped away. He went downtown to the Federal Building in Sacramento and disappeared into America.

Now memory takes her revenge on the son.

■ ■ ■

VETE PERO NO ME OLVIDES.

Go, but do not forget me, someone has written on the side of a building near the border in Tijuana.

Mexicans may know their souls are imperiled in America but they do not recognize the risk by its proper name.

Two Mexican teenagers say they are going to *los Estados Unidos* for a job. Nothing more.

For three or four generations now, Mexican villages have lived under the rumor of America, a rumor vaguer than paradise. America exists in thousands of maternal prayers and in thousands of pubescent dreams. Everyone knows someone who has been. Everyone knows someone who never came back.

What do you expect to find?

The answer is always an explanation for the journey: "I want money enough to be able to return to live with my family in Mexico."

Proofs of America's existence abound in Mexican villages—stereo equipment, for example, or broken-down cars—but these are things Americans picked up or put down, not America.

Mexico's Children

Mexicans know very little of the United States, though they have seen America, the TV show, and America, the movie. Mexico's pre-eminent poet, Octavio Paz, writes of the United States as an idea of no characteristic mansion or spice. Paz has traveled and taught in America, but his writings relegate America to ineluctability—a jut of optimism, an aerodynamic law.

To enter America, which is invisible, Mexicans must become invisible. Tonight, a summer night, five hundred Mexicans will become invisible at 8:34 P.M. While they wait, they do not discuss Tom Paine or Thomas Jefferson or the Bill of Rights. Someone has an uncle in Los Angeles who knows a peach farmer near Tracy who always hires this time of year.

Compared with pulpy Mexico, grave Mexico, sandstone Mexico, which takes the impression of time, the United States and its promise of the future must seem always hypothetical—occasion more than place.

I once had occasion to ask a middle-class Mexican what he admires about the United States (a provocative question because, according to Mexican history and proverb, there is nothing about the United States to admire). He found only one disembodied word: "organization." When I pressed the man to anthropomorphize further he said, "Deliveries get made, phones are answered, brakes are repaired" (indirect constructions all, as if by the consent of unseen hands).

Coming from Mexico, a country that is so thoroughly *there*, where things are not necessarily different from when your father was your age, Mexicans are unable to puncture the abstraction. For Mexicans, even death is less abstract than America.

Mexican teenagers waiting along the levee in Tijuana are bound to be fooled by the United States because they do not yet realize the future will be as binding as the past. The American job will

Days of Obligation

introduce the Mexican to an industry, an optimism, a solitude nowhere described in Mexico's theology.

How can two Mexican teenagers know this, clutching the paper bags their mamas packed for them this morning? The past is already the future, for the bags contain only a change of underwear. These two may have seen *Dallas* on TV and they may think they are privy to the logic and locution of America. But that is not the same thing as having twenty American dollars in their own pockets.

• • •

Mexico, mad mother. She still does not know what to make of our leaving. For most of this century Mexico has seen her children flee the house of memory. During the Revolution 10 percent of the population picked up and moved to the United States; in the decades following the Revolution, Mexico has watched many more of her children cast their lots with the future; head north for work, for wages; north for life. Bad enough that so many left, worse that so many left her for the gringo.

America wanted cheap labor. American contractors reached down into Mexico for men to build America. Sons followed fathers north. It became a rite of passage for the poor Mexican male.

I will send for you or I will come home rich.

I would see them downtown on Sundays—men my age drunk in Plaza Park. I was still a boy at sixteen, but I was an American. At sixteen, I wrote a gossip column, "The Watchful Eye," for my school paper.

Or they would come into town on Monday nights for the wrestling matches or on Tuesday nights for boxing. They worked on ranches over in Yolo County. They were men with time on their hands. They were men without women. They were Mexicans without Mexico.

Mexico's Children

On Saturdays, Mexican men flooded the Western Union office, where they sent money—money turned into humming wire and then turned back into money—all the way down into Mexico. America was a monastery. America was a vow of poverty. They kept themselves poor for Mexico.

Fidel, the janitor at church, lived over the garage at the rectory. Fidel spoke Spanish and was Mexican. He had a wife down there, people said; some said he had grown children. But too many years had passed and he didn't go back. Fidel had to do for himself. Fidel had a clean piece of linoleum on the floor; he had an iron bed; he had a table and a chair; he had a frying pan and a knife and a fork and a spoon. Everything else Fidel sent back to Mexico. Sometimes, on summer nights, I would see his head through the bars of the little window over the garage of the rectory.

My parents left Mexico in the twenties: she as a girl with her family; he as a young man, alone. To tell different stories. Two Mexicos. At some celebration—we went to so many when I was a boy—a man in the crowd filled his lungs with American air to crow over all, ¡VIVA MEXICO! Everyone cheered. My parents cheered. The band played louder. Why VIVA MEXICO? The country that had betrayed them? The country that had forced them to live elsewhere?

I remember standing in the doorway of my parents' empty bedroom.

Mexico was memory—not mine. Mexico was mysteriously both he and she, like this, like my parents' bed. And over my parents' bed floated the Virgin of Guadalupe in a dimstore frame. In its most potent guise, Mexico was a mother like this queen. Her lips curved like a little boat. *Tú. Tú.* The suspirate vowel. *Tú.* The ruby pendant. The lemon tree. The song of the dove. Breathed through the nose, perched on the lips.

Days of Obligation

Two voices, two pronouns were given me as a child, like good and bad angels, like sweet and sour milks, like rank and clement weathers; one yielding, one austere.

In the sixteenth century, Spain bequeathed to Mexico two forms of address, two versions of "you": In Mexico there is *tú* and there is *usted*.

In Sacramento, California, everything outside our house was English, was "you"—hey you. My dog was you. My parents were you. The nuns were you. My best friend, my worst enemy was you. God was You.

Whereas the architecture of Mexico is the hardened shell of a Spanish distinction.

Treeless, open plazas abate at walls; walls yield to refreshment, to interior courtyards, to shuttered afternoons.

At the heart there is *tú*—the intimate voice—the familiar room in a world full of rooms. *Tú* is the condition, not so much of knowing, as of being known; of being recognized. *Tú* belongs within the family. *Tú* is spoken to children and dogs, to priests; among lovers and drunken friends; to servants; to statues; to the high court of heaven; to God Himself.

The shaded arcade yields once more to the plaza, to traffic and the light of day. *Usted*, the formal, the bloodless, the ornamental you, is spoken to the eyes of strangers. By servants to masters. *Usted* shows deference to propriety, to authority, to history. *Usted* is open to interpretation; therefore it is subject to corruption, a province of politicians. *Usted* is the language outside Eden.

■ ■ ■

In Mexico, one is most oneself in private. The very existence of *tú* must undermine the realm of *usted*. In America, one is most oneself in public.

In order to show you America I would have to take you out. I would take you to the restaurant—OPEN 24 HOURS—alongside

Mexico's Children

a freeway, any freeway in the U.S.A. The waitress is a blond or a redhead—not the same color as at her last job. She is divorced. Her eyebrows are jet-black migraines painted on, or relaxed, clownish domes of cinnamon brown. Morning and the bloom of youth are painted on her cheeks. She is at once animaternal—the kind of woman you're not supposed to know—and supramaternal, the nurturer of lost boys.

She is the priestess of the short order, curator of the apple pie. She administers all the consolation of America. She has no illusions. She knows the score; she hands you the Bill of Rights printed on plastic, decorated with an heraldic tumble of French fries and drumsticks and steam.

Your table may yet be littered with bitten toast and spilled coffee and a dollar tip. Now you will see the greatness of America. As one complete gesture, the waitress pockets the tip, stacks dishes along one strong forearm, produces a damp rag soaked in lethe water, which she then passes over the Formica.

There! With that one swipe of the rag, the past has been obliterated. The Formica gleams like new. You can order anything you want.

If I were to show you Mexico, I would take you home; with the greatest reluctance I would take you home, where family snapshots crowd upon the mantel. For the Mexican, the past is firmly held from within. While outside, a few miles away in the American city, there is only loosening, unraveling; generations living apart. Old ladies living out their lives in fiercely flowered housedresses. Their sons are divorced; wear shorts, ride bikes; are not men, really; not really. Their granddaughters are not fresh, are not lovely or keen, are not even nice.

Seek the Mexican in the embrace of the family, where there is much noise. The family stands as a consolation, because in the certainty of generation there is protection against an uncertain

Days of Obligation

future. At the center of this gravity the child is enshrined. He is not rock-a-bye baby at the very top of the family tree, as it is with American families. The child does not represent distance from the past, but reflux. She is not expected to fly away, to find herself. He is not expected to live his own life.

I will send for you or I will come home rich.

The culture of *tú* is guarded by the son, desired by the son, enforced by the son. Femininity is defined by the son as motherhood. Only a culture so cruel to the wife could sustain such a sentimental regard for *mamacita*. By contrast, much license is appropriated by the Mexican male. If the brother is taught to hover—he is guarding his sister's virginity—the adolescent male is otherwise, elsewhere, schooled in seduction. For the male as for the female, sexuality is expressed as parenthood. The male, by definition, is father. The husband is always a son.

It is not coincidental that American feminists have borrowed the Spanish word *macho* to name their American antithesis. But in English, the macho is publicly playful, boorish, counterdomestic. American macho is drag—the false type for the male—as Mae West is the false type for the female.

Machismo in Mexican Spanish is more akin to the Latin *graviditas*. The male is serious. The male provides. The Mexican male never abandons those who depend upon him. The male remembers.

Mexican *machismo*, like Mexican politics, needs its mise-en-scène. In fair Verona, in doublet and hose, it might yet play. The male code derives less from efficacy than from valor. *Machismo* is less an assertion of power or potency than it is a rite of chivalry.

The *macho* is not urbane Gilbert Roland or the good guy Lee Trevino; he is more like Bobby Chacon, the slight, leathery,

Mexico's Children

middle-aged boxer, going twelve rounds the night after his wife commits suicide. The *macho* holds his own ground. There is sobriety in the male, and silence, too—a severe limit on emotional range. The male isn't weak. The male wins a Purple Heart or he turns wife beater. The male doesn't cry.

Men sing in Mexico. In song, the male can admit longing, pain, desire, weakness.

HAIII-EEEE.

A cry like a comet rises over the song. A cry like mock-weeping tickles the refrain of Mexican love songs. The cry is meant to encourage the balladeer—it is the raw edge of his sentiment. HAI-II-EEE. It is the man's sound. A ticklish arching of semen, a node wrung up a guitar string, until it bursts in a descending cascade of mockery. HAL. HAL. HAL. The cry of the jackal under the moon, the whistle of the phallus, the maniacal song of the skull.

So it may well be Mama who first realizes the liberation of the American "you," the American pan-usted, the excalibur "I" which will deliver her from the Islamic cloister of Mexico. (*Tú.*)

■ ■ ■

A true mother, Mexico would not distinguish among her children. Her protective arm extended not only to the Mexican nationals working in the United States, but to the larger number of Mexican Americans as well. Mexico was not interested in passports; Mexico was interested in blood. No matter how far away you moved, you were still related to her.

In 1943, American sailors in Los Angeles ventured into an evil vein of boredom. They crashed the east side of town, where they beat up barrio teenagers dressed in the punk costume of their day. "The Zoot Suit Riots" lasted several nights. City officials went to bed early, and the Los Angeles press encouraged what

Days of Obligation

it termed high-spirited sailors. It required the diplomatic protest of the Mexican ambassador and the consequent intervention of the U.S. secretary of state to end the disturbances.

Mexico sent cables of protest to Washington whenever she heard of the mistreatment of Mexican nationals. In a city as small as Sacramento in the 1950s, there was a Mexican consulate—a small white building downtown, in all ways like an insurance office, except for the seal of Mexico over the door. For decades, at offices like this one, Mexicans would find a place of defense in the U.S.A.

In 1959, Octavio Paz, Mexico's sultan son, her clever one—philosopher, poet, statesman—published *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, his reflections on Mexico. Within his labyrinth, Paz places as well the Mexican American. He writes of the *pachuco*, the teenage gang member, and, by implication, of the Mexican American: "The *pachuco* does not want to become a Mexican again; at the same time he does not want to blend into the life of North America. His whole being is sheer negative impulse, a tangle of contradictions, an enigma."

This was Mother Mexico talking, her good son; this was Mexico's metropolitan version of Mexican Americans. Mexico had lost language, lost gods, lost ground. Mexico recognized historical confusion in us. We were Mexico's Mexicans.

When we return to Mexico as *turistas*, with our little wads of greenbacks, our credit cards, our Japanese cameras, our Bermuda shorts, our pauses for directions and our pointing fingers, Mexico condescends to take our order (our order in halting Spanish), *claro señor*. But the table is not cleared; the table will never be cleared. Mexico prefers to reply in English, as a way of saying: *¡Pocho!*

The Mexican American who forgets his true mother is a *pocho*, a person of no address, a child of no proper idiom.

Mexico's Children

But blood is blood, or perhaps, in this case, language is blood. Mexico worried. Mexico had seen her children lured by the gringo's offer of work. During the Great Depression, as the gringo's eyes slowly drained of sugar, thousands of Mexicans in the United States were rounded up and deported.

In 1938, my mother's brother returned to Mexico with only a curse for the United States of America. He had worked at construction sites throughout California and he was paid less than he had contracted for. At his stupefaction—the money in his hand—the contractor laughed.

What's the matter, babe, can't you Mexicans count?

And who took him back, shrieks Mexico, thumping her breast. Who?

No wonder that Mexico would not entertain the idea of a "Mexican American" except as a fiction, a bad joke of history. And most Mexican Americans lived in barrios, apart from gringos; many retained Spanish, as if in homage to her. We were still her children.

As long as we didn't marry.

■ ■ ■

His coming of age.

From his bed he watches Mama moving back and forth under the light. Outside, the bells of the church fly through the dark. Mama crosses herself. He pushes back the plastic curtain until his nostril catches air. He turns toward Mama. He studies her back—it is like a loaf of bread—as she bends over the things she is wrapping for him to take.

Today he becomes a man. His father has sent for him. His father has sent an address in the American city. That's what it means. His father is in the city with his uncle. He remembers his uncle remembering snow with his beer.

The boy dresses in the shadows. Then he moves toward the table,

Days of Obligation

the circle of light. He sits down. He forces himself to eat. Mama stands over him to make the sign of the cross with her thumb on his forehead. He smiles for her. She puts a bag of food in his hands. She says she has told La Virgen to watch over him.

Yes, and he leaves quickly. Outside it is gray. He hears a little breeze. Or is it the rustle of old black Dueña, the dog—yes, it is she—taking her shortcuts through the weeds, crazy Dueña, her pads through the dust, following him. He passes the houses of the village; each window has a proper name. He passes Muñoz, the store. Old Rosa, the bar. The lighted window of the clinic where the pale medical student from Monterrey lives alone and reads his book full of sores late into the night.

The boy has just passed beyond the cemetery. His guardian breeze has died. The sky has begun to lighten. He turns and throws a rock back at La Dueña—it might be his heart that he throws. But no need. She will not go past the cemetery, not even for him. She will turn in circles like a loca and bite herself, Old Dueña, saying her rosary.

The dust takes on gravel, the path becomes a rutted road which leads to the highway. He walks north. The sky has turned white. Insects click in the fields. In time, there will be a bus.

■ ■ ■

The endurance of Mexico may be attributed to the realm of tú, wherein the family, the village, is held in immutable suspension; whereby the city—the government—is held in contempt.

Mexicans will remember this century as the century of loss. The land of Mexico will not sustain Mexicans. For generations, from Mexico City, came promises of land reform. *The land will be yours.*

What more seductive promise could there be to a nation haunted by the memory of dispossession?

The city broke most of its promises.

Mexico's Children

The city represents posture and hypocrisy to the average Mexican. The average Mexican imagination will weigh the city against the village and come up short. But the city represents the only possibility for survival. In the last half of this century, Mexicans have abandoned the village. And there is no turning back. After generations of ancestors asleep beneath the earth and awake above the sky, after roosters and priests and sleeping dogs, there is only the city.

The Goddess of Liberty—that stony schoolmarm—may well ask Mexicans why they are so resistant to change, to the interesting freedoms she offers. Mexicans are notorious in the United States for their skepticism regarding public life. Mexicans don't vote. Mexicans drop out of school.

Mexicans live in superstitious fear of the American diaspora. Mexican Americans are in awe of education, of getting too much schooling, of changing too much, of moving too far from home. Well, now. Never to be outdone, Mother Mexico has got herself up in goddess cloth. She carries a torch, too, and it is the torch of memory. She is searching for her children.

A false mother, Mexico cares less for her children than for her pride. The exodus of so many Mexicans for the U.S. is not evidence of Mexico's failure; it is evidence, rather, of the emigrant's failure. After all, those who left were of the peasant, the lower classes—those who could not make it in Mexico.

The government of hurt pride is not above political drag. The government of Mexico impersonates the intimate genius of patriarchy in order to justify a political stranglehold.

In its male, in its public, in its city aspect, Mexico is an archtransvestite, a tragic buffoon. Dogs bark and babies cry when Mother Mexico walks abroad in the light of day. The policeman, the Marxist mayor—Mother Mexico doesn't even bother to shave her mustachios. Swords and rifles and spurs and bags of money

Days of Obligation

chink and clatter beneath her skirts. A chain of martyred priests dangles from her waist, for she is an austere, pious lady. Ay, how much—clutching her jangling bosoms; spilling cigars—how much she has suffered!

REMEMBER. THE STRENGTH OF MEXICO IS THE FAMILY. (A government billboard.)

■ ■ ■

In his glass apartment overlooking the Polanco district of Mexico City, the journalist says he does not mind in the least that I call myself an American. "But when I hear Mexicans in the United States talk about George Washington as the father of their country," he exhales a florid ellipsis of cigarette smoke.

■ ■ ■

America does not lend itself to sexual metaphor as easily as Mexico does. George Washington is the father of the country, we say. We speak of Founding Fathers. The legend ascribed to the Statue of Liberty is childlessness.

America is an immigrant country. Motherhood—parenthood—is less our point than adoption. If I had to assign gender to America, I would notice the consensus of the rest of the world. When America is burned in effigy, a male is burned. Americans themselves speak of Uncle Sam. Uncle Sam is the personification of conscription.

During World War II, hundreds of thousands of Mexican Americans were drafted to fight in Europe and in Asia. And they went, submitting themselves to a commonweal. Not a very Mexican thing to do, for Mexico had taught us always that we lived apart from history in the realm of *tú*.

It was Uncle Sam who shaved the sideburns from that generation of Mexican Americans. Like the Goddess of Liberty, Uncle Sam has no children of his own. In a way, Sam represents necessary evil to the American imagination. He steals children to make

Mexico's Children

men of them, mocks all reticence, all modesty, all memory. Uncle Sam is a hectoring Yankee, a skinflint uncle, gaunt, uncouth, unloved. He is the American Savonarola—hater of moonshine, destroyer of stills, burner of cocaine. Free enterprise is curiously an evasion of Uncle Sam, as is sentimentality. Sam has no patience with mamas' boys. That includes Mama Mexico, *ma'am*.

You betray Uncle Sam by favoring private over public life, by seeking to exempt yourself: by cheating on your income taxes, by avoiding jury duty, by trying to keep your boy on the farm. These are legal offenses.

Betrayal of Mother Mexico, on the other hand, is a sin against the natural law, a failure of memory.

When the war was over, Mexican Americans returned home to a GI Bill and with the expectation of an improved future. By the 1950s, Mexican Americans throughout the Southwest were busy becoming middle-class. I would see them around Sacramento: a Mexican-American dentist; a shoe salesman at Weinstock's; the couple that ran the tiny Mexican food store that became, before I graduated from high school, a block-long electrified MEXICA-TESSEN. These were not "role models," exactly; they were people like my parents, making their way in America.

■ ■ ■

When I was in grammar school, they used to hit us for speaking Spanish.

THEY.

Mexican Americans forfeit the public experience of America because we fear it. And for decades in the American Southwest, public life was withheld from us. America lay north of *usted*, beyond even formal direct address. America was the realm of *los norteamericanos*—They. We didn't have an adequate name for you. In private, you were the gringo. The ethnic albino. The goyim. The ghost. You were not us. In public we also said

Days of Obligation

"Anglo"—an arcane usage of the nineteenth century—you-who-speak-English. If we withdrew from directly addressing you, you became *ellos*—They—as in: They kept us on the other side of town. They owned the land. They owned the banks. They ran the towns—they and their wives in their summer-print dresses. They kept wages low. They made us sit upstairs in the movie houses. Or downstairs.

Thus spoken memory becomes a kind of shorthand for some older, other outrage, the nineteenth-century affront. The land stolen. The Mexican scorned on land he had named. Spic. Greaser. Spanish, the great metropolitan language, reduced to a foreign tongue, a language of the outskirts, the language of the gibbering poor, thus gibberish; English, the triumphal, crushing metaphor.

I know Mexican Americans who have lived in this country for forty or fifty years and have never applied for citizenship or gathered more than a Montgomery Ward sense of English. Their refusal, lodged between *How much* and *Okay*, is not a linguistic dilemma primarily.

On the other hand, when we call ourselves Mexican Americans, Mexico is on the phone, long-distance: *So typical of the gringo's arrogance to appropriate the name of a hemisphere to himself—yes? But why should you repeat the folly?*

Mexico always can find a myth to account for us: Mexicans who go north are like the Chichimeca—a barbarous tribe antithetical to Mexico. But in the United States, Mexican Americans did not exist in the national imagination until the 1960s—years when the black civil-rights movement prompted Americans to acknowledge "invisible minorities" in their midst. Then it was determined statistically that Mexican Americans constituted a disadvantaged society, living in worse conditions than most other

Mexico's Children

Americans, having less education, facing bleaker sidewalks or Safeways.

Bueno. (Again Mother Mexico is on the phone.) *What kind of word is that—"minority"? Was the Mexican American—she fries the term on the skillet of her tongue—was the Mexican American content to say that his association with Mexico left him culturally disadvantaged?*

The sixties were years of romance for the American middle class. Americans competed with one another to play the role of society's victim. It was an age of T-shirts.

In those years, the national habit of Americans was to seek from the comparison with blacks a kind of analogy. Mexican-American political activists, especially student activists, insisted on a rough similarity between the two societies—black, Chicano—ignoring any complex factor of history or race that might disqualify the equation.

Black Americans had suffered relentless segregation and mistreatment, but blacks had been implicated in the public life of this country from the beginning. Oceans separated the black slave from any possibility of rescue or restoration. From the symbiosis of oppressor and the oppressed, blacks took a hard realism. They acquired the language of the white man, though they inflected it with refusal. And because racism fell upon all blacks, regardless of class, a bond developed between the poor and the bourgeoisie, thence the possibility of a leadership class able to speak for the entire group.

Mexican Americans of the generation of the sixties had no myth of themselves as Americans. So that when Mexican Americans won national notoriety, we could only refer the public gaze to the past. We are people of the land, we told ourselves. Middle-class college students took to wearing farmer-in-the-dell overalls and

Days of Obligation

they took, as well, a rural slang to name themselves: Chicanos.

Chicanismo blended nostalgia with grievance to reinvent the mythic northern kingdom of Atzlán as corresponding to the Southwestern American desert. Just as Mexico would only celebrate her Indian half, Chicanos determined to portray themselves as Indians in America, as indigenous people, thus casting the United States in the role of Spain.

Chicanos used the language of colonial Spain to declare to America that they would never give up their culture. And they said, in Spanish, that Spaniards had been oppressors of their people.

Left to ourselves in a Protestant land, Mexican Americans shored up our grievances, making of them altars to the past. *May my tongue cleave to my palate if I should forget thee. (Tú.)*

Ah, Mother, can you not realize how Mexican we have become?

But she hates us, she hates us.

Chicanismo offended Mexico. It was one thing for Mexico to play the victim among her children, but Mexico did not like it that Chicanos were playing the same role for the gringos.

By claiming too many exemptions, Chicanos also offended Americans. Chicanos seemed to violate a civic agreement that generations of other immigrants had honored: *My grandparents had to learn English. . . .*

Chicanos wanted more and less than they actually said. On the one hand, Chicanos were intent upon bringing America (as a way of bringing history) to some Act of Contrition. On the other hand, Chicanos sought pride, a restoration of face in America. And America might provide the symbolic solution to a Mexican dilemma: if one could learn public English while yet retaining family Spanish, *usted* might be reunited with *tú*, the future might be reconciled with the past.

Mexicans are a people of sacraments and symbols. I think few

Mexico's Children

Chicanos ever expected Spanish to become a public language coequal with English. But by demanding Spanish in the two most symbolic places of American citizenship—the classroom and the voting booth—Chicanos were consoling themselves that they need not give up the past to participate in the American city. They were not less American for speaking Spanish; they were not less Mexican for succeeding in America.

America got bored with such altars—too Catholic for the likes of America. Protestant America is a literal culture.

SAY WHAT YOU WANT.

What was granted was a bureaucratic bilingualism—classrooms and voting booths—pragmatic concessions to a spiritual grievance.

I end up arguing about bilingualism with other Mexican Americans, middle-class like myself. As I am my father's son, I am skeptical, like Mexico; I play the heavy, which is to say I play America. We argue and argue, but not about pedagogy. We argue about desire's reach; we exchange a few platitudes (being richer for having two languages; being able to go home again). In the end, the argument reduces to somebody's childhood memory.

When I was in school, they used to hit us for speaking Spanish.

My father says the trouble with the bilingual voting ballot is that one ends up voting for the translator.

■ ■ ■

In the late 1960s, when César Chávez made the cover of *Time* as the most famous Mexican American anyone could name, he was already irrelevant to Mexican-American lives insofar as 90 percent of us lived in cities and we were more apt to work in construction than as farmworkers. My mother, who worked downtown, and my father, who worked downtown, nevertheless sent money to César Chávez, because the hardness of his struggle on the land reminded them of the hardness of their Mexican past.

Days of Obligation

I remember the farmworkers' "Lenten Pilgrimage" through California's Central Valley in 1966. Lines of men, women, and children passed beneath low, rolling clouds, beneath the red-and-black union flags and the flapping silk banners of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Their destination was the state capital, Sacramento, the city, Easter. They were private people praying in public. Here were the most compelling symbols of the pastoral past: life on the land (the farmworker); the flag, the procession in song (a people united, the village); the Virgin Mary (her consolation in sorrow).

Chávez wielded a spiritual authority that, if it was political at all, was not mundane and had to be exerted in large, priestly ways or it was squandered. By the late 1970s, Chávez had spent his energies in legislative maneuvers. His union got mixed up in a power struggle with the Teamsters. Criticized in the liberal press for allowing his union to unravel, Chávez became a quixotic figure; Gandhi without an India.

César Chávez was a folk hero. But the political example for my generation was Mayor Henry Cisneros of San Antonio. As a man of the city, Cisneros reflected our real lives in the America of *usted*. Cisneros attempted a reconciliation between the private and the public, between the family and the world. On the one hand, he belonged to the city. He spoke a metropolitan English, as well as Old Boy English; Cisneros spoke an international Spanish, as well as Tex-Mex. He chose to live in his grandfather's house on Monterey Street. The fiction was that he had never left home. Well, no—the fiction was that he had gone very far, but come home unchanged.

My mother saw Henry Cisneros twice on *60 Minutes*. My mother said she would vote for Cisneros for any office.

The career of Henry Cisneros magnified the dilemma of other Mexican Americans within that first generation of affirmative ac-

Mexico's Children

tion. Had it not been for CBS News, my mother would never have heard of Henry Cisneros. Though his success was unique—though his talent is personal—my mother assumed that his career was plural, that he represented Mexican Americans because that is what he was—and that is what he was because he was the first. Groomed for leadership by an Ivy League college and by Democratic Party officials, Cisneros was then unveiled to the constituency he was supposed already to represent. He must henceforward use the plural voice on committees and boards and at conferences. *We* want. *We* need. The problem, in this case, is not with the candidate; it is with the constituency. Who are we? *We* who have been to Harvard? Or *we* who could not read English? Or *we* who could not read? Or *we* who have yet to take our last regard of the lemon tree in our mother's Mexican garden?

Politics can easily override irony. But, by the 1980s, the confusing "we" of Mexican Americanism was transposed an octave higher to the "we" of pan-American Hispanicism.

In the late 1980s, Henry Cisneros convened a conference of Hispanic leaders to formulate a national Hispanic political agenda.

Mexican Americans constituted the majority of the nation's Hispanic population. But Mexican Americans were in no position to define the latitude of the term "Hispanic"—the tumult of pigments and altars and memories there. "Hispanic" is not a racial or a cultural or a geographic or a linguistic or an economic description. "Hispanic" is a bureaucratic integer—a complete political fiction. How much does the Central American refugee have in common with the Mexican from Tijuana? What does the black Puerto Rican in New York have in common with the white Cuban in Miami? Those Mexican Americans who were in a position to

Days of Obligation

speaking for the group—whatever the group was—that is, those of us with access to microphones because of affirmative action, were not even able to account for our own success. Were we riding on some clement political tide? Or were we advancing on the backs of those who were drowning?

Think of earlier immigrants to this country. Think of the Jewish immigrants or the Italian. Many came, carefully observing Old World distinctions and rivalries. German Jews distinguished themselves from Russian Jews. The Venetian was adamant about not being taken for a Neapolitan. But to America, what did such claims matter? All Italians looked and sounded pretty much the same. A Jew was a Jew. And now America shrugs again. Palm trees or cactus, it's all the same. Hispanics are all the same.

I saw César Chávez again, a year ago, at a black-tie benefit in a hotel in San Jose. The organizers of the event ushered him into the crowded ballroom under a canopy of hush and tenderness and parked him at the center table, where he sat blinking. How fragile the great can seem. How much more substantial we of the ballroom seemed, the Mexican-American haute bourgeoisie, as we stood to pay our homage—orange women in fur coats, affirmative-action officers from cigarette companies, filmmakers, investment bankers, fat cats and stuffed shirts and bleeding hearts—stood applauding our little saint. César Chávez reminded us that night of who our grandparents used to be.

Then Mexican waiters served champagne.

Success is a terrible dilemma for Mexican Americans, like being denied some soul-sustaining sacrament. Without the myth of victimization—who are we? We are no longer Mexicans. We are professional Mexicans. We hire Mexicans. After so many years spent vainly thinking of ourselves as exempt from some common myth of America, we might as well be Italians.

■ ■ ■

Mexico's Children

I am standing in my sister's backyard.

They are away. The air is golden; the garden is rising green, but beginning to fall. There is my nephew's sandbox, deserted, spilled. And all his compliant toys fallen where he threw them off after his gigantic lovemaking. Winnie-the-Pooh. The waist-coated frog. Refugees of some long English childhood have crossed the Atlantic, attached themselves to the court of this tyrannical dauphin.

Aserrín aserrán

Something something de San Juan . . .

I can remember sitting on my mother's lap as she chanted that little faraway rhyme.

Piden pan. No les dan. . . .

The rhyme ended with a little tickle under my chin. Whereas my nephew rides a cockhorse to Banbury Cross.

My youngest nephew. He has light hair; he stares at me with dark eyes. I think it is Mexico I see in his eyes, the unfathomable regard of the past, while ahead of him stretches Sesame Street. What will he know of his past, except that he has several? What will he know of Mexico, except that his ancestors lived on land he will never inherit?

The knowledge Mexico bequeaths to him passes silently through his heart, something to take with him as he disappears, like my father, into America.

■ ■ ■

In 1991, President Bush proposed the establishment of a free-trade consortium among North American "neighbors." In fact, the new idea derived from old Mother Mexico. It was Mother

Days of Obligation

Mexico, after all, who long ago mocked the notion of a border on the desert.

The United States shares with Mexico a two-thousand-mile connection—the skin of two heads. Everything that America wants to believe about himself—that he is innocent, that he is colorless, odorless, solitary, self-sufficient—is corrected, weighed upon, glossed by Mexico, the maternity of Mexico, the envy of Mexico, the grievance of Mexico.

Mexicans crossing the border are secret agents of maternity. Mexicans have slipped America a darker beer, a cuisine of *tú*. Mexicans have invaded American privacy to babysit or to watch the dying or to wash lipstick off the cocktail glasses. Mexicans have forced Southwestern Americans to speak Spanish whenever they want their eggs fried or their roses pruned. Mexicans have overwhelmed the Church—eleven o'clock masses in most Valley towns are Spanish masses. By force of numbers, Mexicans have taken over grammar-school classrooms. The Southwest is besotted with the culture of *tú*.

But Mexico was fooled by her own tragic knowledge of relationship. The desert is a tide. How could Mexico not have realized that tragedy would wash back on her, polluted with gringo optimism?

A young man leaves his Mexican village for Los Angeles in 1923. He returns one rainy night in 1925. He tells his family, next day he tells the village, that it is okay up there. The following spring, four village men accompany him back to L.A. They send money home. Mothers keep their sons' dollars in airtight jars, opening the jars only when someone is sick or someone is dying. The money is saturated with rumor.

Thus have Mexicans from America undermined the tranquility of Mexican villages they thought only to preserve. The Mexican

Mexico's Children

American became a revolutionary figure, more subversive than a Chichimeca, more subversive than Pancho Villa.

In the 1970s, President Luis Echeverría invited plane-loads of "Chicano leaders" to visit Mexico with the apparent goal of creating a lobby for the interests of Mexico modeled on the Israeli lobby. Perhaps the Chicano was the key to Mexico's future? The Chicano, after all, defied assimilation in the United States, or said he did. The Chicano sought to retain his culture, his mother tongue. In the 1980s, the government ministry in Mexico City announced a policy of reconciliation (*acercamiento*) regarding Mexican Americans.

By the 1980s, Mexican Americans were, on average, older, wealthier, better educated than the average Mexican; we also had fewer children. In the 1980s, the proud house of Mexico was crumbling, the economy was folding, the wealthy of Mexico had begun their exodus, following the peasant's route north. Along the border, Mexican towns inclined toward America and away from Mexico City. And from the North came unclean enchantments of the gringo—the black music, the blond breasts, the drugged eyes of tourists.

How much is the gum?

Mexico worries about her own. What influence shall she have? The village is international now. Most of the men have been north; many of the women, too. Have seen. Everyone has heard stories.

Mexico cannot hold the attention of her children. The average age of the country descends into adolescence. More than half of Mexico is under fifteen years of age. What is the prognosis for memory in a country so young?

For Mexico is memory. . . .

■ ■ ■

On the television, suspended from the ceiling over the bar, is Game Four of the World Series. I am sitting with five Mexicans

Days of Obligation

at a restaurant in Mexico City. Presiding is a woman in her thirties, a curator of the National Anthropology Museum. Others are a filmmaker, a cameraman, a location scout. We are all connected by the making of a television film.

The woman is scolding me—not severely—for not being as fluent in Spanish as she is in English. She will do most of the talking.

She has traveled, studied in Europe. I forget now whether she knows the United States—probably—but she has met enough Mexican Americans to mimic their embarrassment concerning Spanish.

Poquito, poquito (a double entendre, holding an inch of air between the lacquered bulbs of her thumb and index finger).

Peut-être je devrais parler français avec vous, Richard.

We will disagree about everything, Mexico and I.

Do I really call myself a Catholic, she asks in reaction to nothing I have said. She, of course, hates the Church for what it has done to Mexico.

(Of course.)

Where do you get your ideas about Mexico? From Graham Greene? You have the opportunity to say something in public, and you go on and on about old churches and old mothers. You do a disservice with your reactionary dream of Mexico. Here, we are trying to progress. . . .

She has raised her own child—she has been married, oh yes—her own child is as free from the past as could be managed. Each generation must be free to discover its own identity, don't you think so. But, then, you have no children. Perhaps you have some Catholic malady, like sexual repression? She smiles.

I smile.

I feel I know them all; recognize the way their faces crease into smiles; recognize the ease of irony in a language so extrav-

Mexico's Children

agent. Nothing is meant all that seriously, I suppose. They are speaking for my own benefit. They want to educate me.

I am not exactly bored, but I am demoralized.

They don't even seem like Mexicans. They are more like Americans of my generation. I would have avoided a dinner like this one, in a restaurant like this one, in California.

Do I have it all wrong? Was the Mexico I had imagined—the country of memory and faith—long past? Its curator a woman who reviles the past?

I lower my eyes. I say to Mexico, I say to my ice cubes:

I cannot understand you.

Do not pretend to understand me. I am but a figure of speech to you—a Mexican American.

What Richard needs to see, Alberto suggests, is . . . and then some Spanish name I don't catch. Titters all round.

We are drunk.

So, at one o'clock in the morning, we drive, five of us, crowded like clowns into a Volkswagen. I vote we go back to the hotel.

The curator wants to listen to jazz. But the filmmaker is driving.

We end up at a nightclub on a quiet downtown street. The nightclub offers three kinds of therapy for sexual repression. We opt for the dinner theater. There is a small stage; twenty tables.

Some Japanese businessmen at one table, some Mexicans at another. A drink costs a lot—ten American dollars.

A canned overture. Then two lines of dancers appear—"appear" cannot quite account for their corporeality. Twelve large vanilla flans, female; six samba shirts, male. The stage is so tiny the dancers must restrict their movements to the upper torso. After ten minutes of joust, a fog of dry ice is blasted from a funnel in the wings. The dancers fall to their knees and lift their arms to worship a tall, blond, goddessy woman who will sing of love.

The goddess's microphone is so revved up, her voice rides over

Days of Obligation

our skulls like a metal lathe. Mid-routine, the goddess hesitates, evidently overcome with *nostalgie de la boue*. She descends two semicircular steps to ringside, her pink halo spilling after her. She stops at a table of Mexican men. She rests her hip against the shoulder of a man who has several rings on several of his fingers. He kisses her hand.

The filmmaker raises his arm, beckoning the goddess to our table, pointing at the crown of my head.

The goddess's eyes dart toward the filmmaker's hand. (There is a bank note caught like a butterfly between his fingers.) She lowers her forty lashes. Her pink penumbra shimmers tremulously; her lips curve upward. She begins to mash toward our table.

A cold hand caresses my cheek, a strong hand begins to tug at my necktie. The filmmaker giggles; the curator approves, lights a cigarette. The goddess makes sibilant remarks about me to the audience, little flatteries.

She begins to sing.

Tú. Tú. The song of the dove.

Tú the ruby pendant . . .

Suddenly she thrusts the microphone at my face.

The canned soundtrack rattles away in the distance but the air, suddenly bereft of the concussion of the goddess's voice, seems a world without love.

I decline.

The goddess laughs—a detonation, like claps of thunder. The air is alive again, freighted with angels. She picks up the lyric, looping the cord of the microphone into a coil. . . .

Vete pero no me olvides.

Vete, amor,

Amor de mi vida,

Mexico's Children

*Toma la rosa,
Tinta de vino. . . .*

Violins edge into the track. The refrain. My cue. Again, the microphone is in my face.

The goddess looks infinitely bored. She wets her lips with her tongue, hacks up a little phlegm.

I sing.

I sing to her of my undying love and of rural pleasures. *Tú.* *Tú.* The ruby pendant. *Tú.* The lemon tree. The song of the dove. Breathed through the nose. Perched on the lips.

Anything to make her go away.

■ ■ ■ ■

I wrote:

I once met an old woman in Mexico who looked lonelier than anyone I have ever seen. She was a beggar woman in a slum market in Mexico City. The aisles of the market were covered with canvas; on either side of these tent aisles hung chickens and flowers and pineapples for sale. Within the transept of the market, against a stone wall, the old woman kept her anchor-hold.

Hair grew out of her nose like winter breath. Her reply to every question was *no*. Nothing. Nobody. No husband. No sisters. No brother. Her only son dead.

If there was no one to claim her from the past, then she was unalterably separated from life. She lived in eternity. Even the poor neighborhood people, the poorest of the poor, could spare a few pesos for this mother of tragedy. People were in awe of her, for she was without grace, which in Mexico is children.

■ ■ ■ ■

You stand around. You smoke. You spit. You are wearing your two shirts, two pants, two underpants. Jesús says, if they chase you throw that bag down. Your plastic bag is your mama, all you

Days of Obligation

have left; the yellow cheese she wrapped has formed a translucent rind; the laminated scapular of the Sacred Heart nestles flame in its cleft. Put it in your pocket. The last hour of Mexico is twilight, the shuffling of feet. A fog is beginning to cover the ground. Jesús says they are able to see in the dark. They have X-rays and helicopters and searchlights. Jesús says wait, just wait, till he says. You can feel the hand of Jesús clamp your shoulder, fingers cold as ice. Venga, corre. You run. All the rest happens without words. Your feet are tearing dry grass, your heart is lashed like a mare. You trip, you fall. You are now in the United States of America. You are a boy from a Mexican village. You have come into the country on your knees with your head down. You are a man.

■ ■ ■

I went to a village in the state of Michoacán, on the far side of Lake Chapala.

A dusty road leads past eucalyptus, past the cemetery, to the village. For most of the year the village is empty—nearly. There are a few old people, quite a few hungry dogs. The sun comes up; the sun goes down. Most of the villagers have left Mexico for the United States. January 23 is the feast day of the patron saint of the village, when the saint is accustomed to being rocked upon his hillock of velvet through the streets. On that day, the villagers—and lately the children of villagers—return. They come in caravans. Most come from Austin, Texas, from Hollister, California, and from Stockton, California. For a week every year, the village comes alive, a Mexican Brigadoon. Doors are unlocked. Shutters are opened. Floors are swept. Music is played. Beer is drunk. Expressed fragments of memory flow outward like cigarette smoke to tumble the dust of the dead.

Every night is carnival. Men who work at canneries or factories in California parade down the village street in black suits. Women

Mexico's Children

who are waitresses in California put on high heels and evening gowns. The promenade under the Mexican stars becomes a celebration of American desire.

At the end of the week, the tabernacle of memory is dismantled, distributed among the villagers in their vans, and carried out of Mexico.