

Afterword

My father's mother, María Jesús Martínez, used to call across town from her house in Albuquerque to say that she had been praying for me. A native of Chihuahua, Grandma had a rich Spanish accent that pressed hard against the narrow corridors of English, the passage she took to reach her numerous grandchildren. "Mijita," she would tell me, "I feel like the Lord wants you to read this verse from the Bible."

She often had me turn to the Book of Isaiah: "Moonlight will be bright as sunlight and sunlight itself be seven times brighter—like the light of seven days in one—on the day Yahweh dresses his people's wound and heals the scars of the blows they have received."

Light breaking forth from darkness, strangers that turn out to be angels, poor people inheriting the Earth while the rich are sent away empty—such were the images Grandma pondered in her marked-up Bible where scripture-study tracts written in Spanish were pressed between pages like roses.

Ironically, it was my grandmother's desire to read the Bible that led her away from Catholicism to a First Spanish Assembly of God congregation. It bothered her that laypeople were discouraged from reading scripture on their own; indeed, in those days reading the Bible at home was associated with Protestantism. Instead, María Jesús found new faith in a humble, cinder-block church where working-class Mexicans and Chicanos pored over the Good Book like scholars. Unlike Catholics, these people spoke to God without a priestly mediator. They prayed in tongues, languages not yet invented; and God answered back in the poetic cadences of a preacher who spoke Spanish, María Jesús's mother tongue.

I remember watching Grandma read her Bible at home. She often opened the book at random, letting her finger fall upon a verse. Stepping out of ordinary time and into mythic time, she read and re-read a few lines by the buttery light of her night lamp, extracting meanings, spinning new cosmologies.

In a magnificent paradox that anticipated Latin America's liberation theology, my grandmother dared to interpret her own life in light of a text that all too often had been used against the poor and against women. She named the sacred in experiences the world would never honor, namely cleaning, cooking, and caring for children and grandchildren. She survived the death of her husband knowing that in the end she belonged not to man but to God.

The documents that defined her were the Bible and her U.S. citizenship papers. But she pledged allegiance to one kingdom only, where she believed all people would be made welcome regardless of skin color or cash flow. Her reading freed her imagination. She saw a day when humanity would be made whole, when God would "heal the scars" of a world at war with itself.

Given the nature of my grandma's phone calls, it was inevitable that I would come to equate the written word with comfort, power, and magic. I began keeping a journal when I was about fourteen or fifteen years old. Slightly overweight and too shy to converse with most of my peers, I began conversing with myself in a green-and-white chemistry notebook. I wrote down accounts of the day, to-do lists, pep talks, and poems. I wrote my way out of depressions by copying down melancholic lyrics, then making up some of my own.

The notebook was a door between worlds temporal and eternal—a door too many writers close when they "grow up" and set out to learn something practical. I graduated from Princeton University in 1982 with a degree in public policy. There is little I recall

about those years, but one image has stayed with me: I am sitting near a fountain by the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, reading the poet Nikki Giovanni. Four years into college, I am clear about one thing: Life is too short to work at a job that requires hose, heels, and forty hours a week. Why settle for a career when one might have a calling, I asked myself.

After graduation I returned to Albuquerque and joined what was then Sagrada Art School, a community headed by a Dominican nun and painter who warned budding artists to stay away from full-time jobs. I lived for about six years in Old Town, Albuquerque's original plaza, where Sagrada was located. A few doors away, the names of ancestors who had first settled in the plaza in 1706 were painted on a wall. I made it a habit to go to a restaurant or outdoor cafe and read first thing in the morning. I opened a book of poetry at random, waited for the caffeine to strike and for a stanza to reveal some secret of the universe. It always did, in imagery that was a far cry from that of supply and demand which I had tried learning at Princeton.

Whatever job I had—whether waiting on tables or freelance reporting—I did during the afternoons. In the mornings, with my poetry and my journal, I became my grandmother.

I came to depend upon my morning epiphanies, those visitations. The Holy Spirit? The muse? Who cared what name mankind had imposed upon the mystery of it all? I felt the joy of Jeremiah, the prophet María Jesús so often quoted—"When your words came, I devoured them: Your word was my delight and the joy of my heart."

From there it was an easy step, moving my pen across the page like the pointer of a Ouija board. Letter by letter, poem by poem, meanings were revealed. By 1987 I had finished a collection of poetry called *Turning*.

In 1988 my experience of poetry changed radically. That year the

U.S. government attempted to use one of my poems against me in a court of law. The poem, titled "Nativity, for Two Salvadoran Women," referred to the U.S. role in El Salvador's brutal civil war. The punch line of the poem was "In my country we sing of a baby in a manger, finance death squads."

Indicted on charges related to smuggling two refugee women into the country, I faced a twenty-five-year prison sentence. A year and a half earlier I had accompanied a Lutheran minister to the U.S.-Mexico border, where he helped two Salvadorans cross over as part of the Sanctuary movement.

The two women were pregnant, due to give birth in December. The minister, struck by the parallel with the story of the Holy Family fleeing oppression in Egypt, suggested I write an article about the women's plight. At the time I was covering religion for the *Albuquerque Journal* and freelancing for the *National Catholic Reporter*, an independent newsweekly.

The indictment lasted about seven months; then I went to trial along with the minister. It was a poet's nightmare, in which words, so full of liberating possibilities, were twisted and used against me and a movement dedicated to saving the lives of refugees. The nightmare penetrated even the thick adobe walls of my house; my attorney ordered me to be careful of what I said over the phone, given the likelihood of government spying.

Her worries were not so far-fetched. In the middle 1980s, the FBI spied on, among other groups, the Maryknoll nuns of Cleveland, who opposed U.S. military aid to Central America. At that time the United States was sending about \$1.4 million a day to El Salvador alone.

After a two-week trial, I was acquitted on First Amendment grounds. The minister was also acquitted because we had taken our trip to the border in 1986—the year New Mexico had been declared a Sanctuary state by then-governor Toney Anaya.

After my acquittal, however, freedom of expression was more

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of an abstraction for me than a reality. I felt as if someone had cut out my tongue. Writers, after all, talk in rough draft. Circumscribe what you say, and before long you are censoring what you write, however unwittingly. For years after the trial, I held emotions in check and treated language as if it were a tool to defend one's self or one's point of view—rather than a music, and writing an act of love on behalf of the self that can never be fully known or explained, much less condemned to either innocence or guilt.

Nonetheless, I continued struggling to write poetry. In 1990 I joined the staff of the *National Catholic Reporter* in Kansas City. Before long I was blaming my lack of creativity on the fact that I had a full-time job.

Then, in 1992, a miracle happened.

The poet and activist Luis Rodríguez invited me to a Chicano poetry festival at the Mexico Fine Arts Center in Chicago. I remember standing in the back of a dark auditorium and listening to various authors. The evening unfolded. Sandra Cisneros took her place and began reading from *Woman Hollering Creek*.

It was then, lost in the music of her words, that I heard a strange, dissonant note.

I heard a voice, a voice whose origins I've yet to name. These are the words I heard: "His nation chewed him up and spat him out like piñon shell and when he emerged from an airplane one late afternoon I knew I would one day make love with him."

A number of emotions vied for room in my heart at that moment, but fear prevailed. Somehow I knew that what I had heard belonged not to a poem but to a novel, a story I sensed was already finished and floating in its dark universe awaiting a ready ear and a blank page. The problem was that I had no idea how to write a novel; worse still, I didn't want to learn. I said to myself, go to bed, get a good night's sleep, by tomorrow morning you will have come to your senses.

The next morning, thankfully, I was still very much out of my

mind. I felt ecstatic, yet deeply peaceful as I took out the hotel stationery and wrote down the words I'd heard the night before. My lack of formal training in the genre turned out to be a blessing. I could do nothing but sit still and listen. Nine months later I had completed a novel—or what I prefer to think of as a long poem in disguise about a Salvadoran refugee and his Chicana lover, titled *Mother Tongue*.

Years later, I was visited again; the first poems of *Breathing Between the Lines* came to me in a gust of joy one quiet afternoon in Cambridge, Massachusetts. For three months I lived inside that voice. When it ceased I continued to work in silence, editing what had come before and adding to the fold some poems written in prior years.

Maybe one day I will have the courage to believe that what I was following was my own voice—a voice free and whole, talking right over the heads of “the authorities,” both real and imagined. In the land of poetry, such authorities are the ones who are sent away empty, for poetry belongs to the biblical meek whose inheritance is nothing less than the earth itself.

Discovering America

for P., 1992

Santo Niño on a
bedroom desk,
holy water in a
mouthwash bottle
Grandma had the
priest bless,
this house,
a medieval city
you visited,
what you sought
was not here.

Not in wrists
oiled with sage,
Chimayo earth
sprinkled on sheets,
nor San Felipe bells
that pecked away
the dark,
Cordova blanket
we hatched
awake in.

To prove love
I shed still
more centuries,
rung by rung
into a pueblo
kiva where
you touched
the sipapu,
canal the universe
emerged from,
brown baby glazed
in birth muds.

You thought
America

was on a map,
couldn't see it
in a woman,
olive skin,
silver loops
in lobes,
one for each
millennium
endured on this
husk of red earth,
this nuevo méjico.

Last night
I dreamed
a map of the
continent,
the train
that took you
from me whipped
across tracks
like a needle
on a seam
somewhere
near Canada.

It took me
four years
to heal.
Have you?
Have you
discovered
America
or at least
admitted
a woman grew
maiz here
long before
you named it
corn?

Only So Long

Old Town Plaza, Albuquerque

Castiron nights of August,
women refry beans, cicadas hum like
gourds on ankles of pueblo dancers.

Shop after shop,
mud walls fluted
as wasps' nests,

red chile pods
on doorposts
like Passover blood.

Pueblo women plant turquoise
on blankets under a portal,
harvest tourist dollars.

This night, my world,
your touch: I've learned
the names for so many things,

come home, I will give them all,
hundreds of days have poured
through my fingers like flour.

My patience is long
as a grocery list
but life is brief

as mesquite brush.
Someday, soon, I might
wrap up my wound and go.

Demetria N

Wanted

after Allen Ginsberg, 1988

America our marriage is coming apart
I've done everything right got my degree
Now you tell me my English won't do
America I'm not good enough for you?
Better my Spanglish than your smooth talk America
No I won't sleep with you not now not ever
Ah come on America all I wanted was a little
 adobe house in Atrisco a porch swing
 two niños some democracy
Now I read in the *Albuquerque Journal* you left me
 for a younger woman
Bought drugs for guns guns for drugs
Destroyed Managua in order to save it
Spied on communist Maryknoll nuns in Cleveland
America your face is on wanted posters in post offices
And I'm on sleeping pills again America
Last night I dreamed the Pentagon was a great
 Ouija board spelling out REPENT REPENT
In half sleep I reached for you love but got
 only a scent of amber waves of grain
I got up for a hit of caffeine the Book of Psalms
And whoosh I saw the promised land
You don't need citizenship papers there it's colored
 and smells of refried beans
Remember remember who you are America
Purple mountain majesty above fruited plains
 worked by mejicanos
America call off your dogs
America give me a green card though I don't qualify
America forgive me if I gag your memory
 at La Paloma bar on South Broadway
America I'm twenty-seven and tired thanks to you
And thanks to you I found God on a stoop on Arno Street
America you claim crime's fierce in this neighborhood
I tell you it's nothing next to your crimes
The wars we fund start at the package liquor store

and end twice a year at confession
America I don't want progress I want redemption
Cut the shit we could be lovers again don't hang up
America I'm your dark side embrace me and be saved
Pull yourself up by your bootstraps I know you can
America I'm not all bitter I'm a registered Republican
At parties when friends ask America who? I introduce
you explain you've had a difficult upbringing
But I can't cover up for you America get that straight
Honey it's not too late it's not too late
America the ball's in your court now