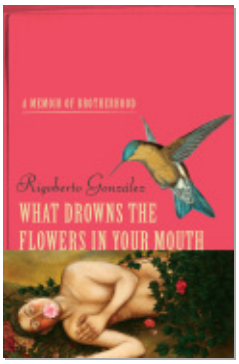
A Oaxaca Journal



we had to stop wallowing in our setbacks and start changing our attitudes—those around us would appreciate it. Shifting directions wasn't easy. It didn't happen in a week and it didn't happen in a month. But we eventually reached a place during our weekly check-ins that offered us some hope, if not some peace of mind.

"How are things going between you and Guadalupe?"

"It's going. We're talking more. We still fight, but we're not making stupid threats like before. How about you? How are things going with you?"

"I lost a little weight finally. I had to give up drinking, but I don't miss it, to tell you the truth. In fact, it feels great not to have to depend on alcohol."

"Yeah, I cut back on the drinking too. Trying to quit altogether," Alex said. "What would our father say about that?"

"That's just another one of those things we will never know," I said. "And maybe it's better that way. But back to us."

"Yes, back to us."

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Días de los Muertos. The Days of the Dead. I traveled here to the colonial city of Oaxaca to pay tribute to my parents as if honoring them on Mexican soil gave my gesture more meaning. I should have gone to Michoacán, our home state, but I wanted to situate myself at the center of Mictlán, the land of the dead. No other place in México builds a more convincing stage than Oaxaca: Each restaurant, hotel, and shop places a human-sized Catrina as skeleton hostess at the entrance to welcome clients and guests. Sugar skulls, altars fiery with orange marigolds, clusters of young people in painted skeleton faces strolling the cobblestones—everything and everyone is complicit in the theater. Even the bread. Pan de muerto. Bread of the dead.

At breakfast at the hotel restaurant, I sit beneath the flat screen TV to avoid looking at it, though I can hear the sounds of gunfire. The station is showing a typical American detective show dubbed in Spanish. I praise my choice when I notice that a pair of diners seated at the next table can't resist glancing over once in a while as they chat. Suddenly one of them says to the other, "Look, look! You see that? That's an American cemetery."

Though I know exactly what I am going to see, I still look up at the funeral scene taking place among a row of nondescript headstones, each indistinguishable from the next, dramatically

different from the Mexican cemeteries with their colorful tiles and angel statues presiding over flowers at every stage of decay.

"How ugly," declares the second diner. "How do they even find the grave they're looking for?"

"Maybe that's the point," says the first, mischief in her voice. "Maybe they bury them there to lose them." And they burst out laughing.

I laugh too because that is the kind of dark Mexican humor I came looking for, the kind that makes the pain a little more tolerable. Isn't that the whole point to the Days of the Dead? To smile in the face of absence and loss? I lost my mother and my father young. She died when I was twelve. He died when I was thirty-six, though he abandoned me when I was thirteen. I have just turned forty-five. Their deaths are so far away, yet I still sob for them with the same adolescent fervor.

On the first night in Oaxaca, I fall asleep to the sounds of a brass band and fireworks. I am exhausted from the journey, but I still feel a sense of freedom to do nothing but rest and then focus on my mission. Outside, so much joyful screeching and cheering. And then I wonder: Is there room among the merriment for the size of my grief?

After breakfast, I walk down the main cobblestone road, Macedonio Alcalá. It unsettles me because that was my mother's maiden name. Now I see and hear the name—Restaurante Alcalá, Galería Alcalá, Calle Alcalá—repeatedly during my stay. Santo Domingo church towers majestically over the road, and the artisan shops line both sides of the street all the way down to el zócalo, the main city square. I have been collecting Day of the Dead imagery since I left México at the age of ten. Now I collect Day of the Dead art—expensive items that I never dreamed I could own. Back then, all I kept were the cheap trinkets that cost only a few pesos because only a few pesos was all I had to spend during my family's yearly trip back to México.

My eyes light up each time I walk into the small paradise of Mexican folk art. I remind myself that I can't possibly fit another item in my overcrowded studio apartment in Queens, but this is just a formality since it has never stopped me from purchasing yet one more thing. *It can sit on the windowsill or hang on the kitchen door*, I reason, justifying my decision. No matter how large, I envision a place for it.

Guests to my apartment always marvel at my collection of Mexican folk art. At first. At first, it was fun to say how it was like checking into a gallery, how it was like sleeping in a museum. But once they realize they have to walk with extreme caution to avoid knocking down a piece of pottery or bumping into a display stand, they begin to make suggestions about downsizing or rearranging the items in order to clear a path to the bathroom. Here I scoff at their criticisms and say something rude like "You know where there's plenty of space to move around? A hotel room."

I collect. I accumulate. Not necessarily hoarding, but I am headed there. Once, an ex-boyfriend said, "The thing about waking up here is that there's always a pair of eyes on me." As I choose three more masks for my wall, each one so unique in its artist rendering of pre-Columbian iconography, the truth of that statement haunts me. Eyes on papier-mâché skulls, on beaded masks, on faces made of clay and wood, on paintings. But no photographs of people. I don't have a single family photograph on display because I have so precious few that I keep them only for private viewing.

The truth is I've been robbed of the pleasure of keeping photographs most of my life. When my mother died, I was too young to wonder about what became of her personal cache of photographs. My father remarried and moved away, and after he died, I imagined that his cache rightly belonged to his daughters, like that photograph of my parents taken soon after their marriage: she, still a teenager, her head slightly tilted toward my father's shoulder; he in his early twenties, broke and likely wondering how much this studio portrait was going to cost him. I claimed it once, and then

my father fought me for it, so I gave it back. Who knows what my half sisters did with it after coming across this image of their recently deceased father posing lovingly with a woman who died long before they were born?

My paternal grandparents, who raised me in California, are also gone, and I know for certain that their memorabilia was claimed by their only daughter, an aunt I no longer spoke to after she became a born-again Christian and disowned me because I was gay. My access has been nil to most of the photo images of my youth, of my family, of our history in Michoacán before our various migrations north to California.

I remember with plenty of envy those afternoons my grandparents would sit on the couch and sift through thick family albums and boxes of black-and-white or sepia pictures that for some inexplicable reason were not set into albums. There they were, a community of stand-alone images, the curve of the paper becoming more pronounced with age, like old people's backbones.

If she wasn't too lost in thought, Abuela would answer my questions about people and places from an era in México when such things as cameras and visits to the portrait studio were improbable luxuries, especially for poor families like the González clan. It was surprising that they had any of these keepsakes at all.

"That's Marina," I screeched once, impressed that I could identify a younger, thinner version of my cousin. Abuela affirmed my guess. That was also one of my favorite photographs. Abuela, her youngest son, Ramón, only a teenager then, and little Marina had been traveling through Mexico City. There was a photographer in the main square with a large drawing of an airplane on a stretch of plywood. Openings had been cut out in the shape of windows, and people could stand behind the wood and poke their heads through as if they were passengers on this make-believe flight.

It never dawned on me to ask whose idea it was to pose for this funny picture. Was it a whim from Tío Ramón, who usually

got his way? Or did little Marina make this childish request? Or maybe it was Abuela herself, knowing that this photograph would make her giggle many years later. I was never to find out because Abuela died, and that photograph vanished in the string of ownership changes. But I still remember it. And the photograph now lives in the memory of Abuela on the couch with me sitting beside her, absorbing the heat of her amusement.

My entire apartment in Queens is not a gallery or a museum. It is an altar. And I place myself inside it as one more symbol connecting life to death. My body is what is left of my mother and my father on this earth. Yet I don't blame them for its hard-won journey: a lifelong struggle with eating disorders, a number of battles with drug and alcohol addiction, and its current vulnerability to a mysterious neurological disorder that's slowly wearing me down. I give my parents credit for my body's will to fight. Perhaps that is why I chose to come to Oaxaca during muertos season—to take myself out of the altar, to stand outside of it and see it with fresh eyes. What have I been living inside all these years?

Raising an altar is an art. All of them have to have the four elements represented, usually flowers (earth), incense (air), tequila or mezcal (water), and lighted candles (fire). The rest is personal expression. Here, in the artisan shops of Oaxaca, the altars are highly creative with the artist's unique flourish depending on his or her artistic medium or specialization. A potter molds clay into flowers and skulls, and then lines the tiers of the display with jugs and vases, the entire altar looking like a terra cotta showroom. A textile worker creates a wall-sized postcard by layering woven cloth bearing images of lilies, skeletons, and candles. Restaurants highlight perishable fruit and kitchen specialties. The altar at the church features religious imagery. Hotels built their altars around one of their paintings, usually of the Spaniard it was named after. This

week, the next generation of Oaxacan artists pay tribute to revolutionaries: Villa, Zapata, and Che Guevara. Many small boutique altars honor previous owners or founders, their pictures prominently displayed at the top. I take picture after picture of these altars, sharing them on social media. And I think, how unfortunate that the digital age arrived long after my parents died. Whenever friends of mine share photographs of their visits home to see their aging parents, I become jealous. My mother died at age thirty-one, my father at age fifty-eight. Their faces remain frozen in my memory, and it's impossible to imagine them as elderly. If anything, it is I who am aging on their behalf, surpassing my mother's age at the time of her death and, with each passing day, nearing my father's age at the time of his. I am to become the old person each of them never had a chance to be.

On All Saints' Day, I decide to follow the crowds to the cemetery, though my dead are not buried there. My mother was buried in Michoacán, though this being many years later, two other bodies have been stacked on top of her grave. She herself was laid to rest on top of her grandmother. Cemetery real estate has become so precious that these high-rises are a necessity. I have been expecting those same tomb monstrosities in Oaxaca but am pleasantly surprised that the walls surrounding the large cemetery have been turned into mausoleum crypts that house the remains of the dead. Each crypt has been adorned with a candle: the winking flames cast a peaceful glow over the walkways and the shadowy visitors who pass by them in polite silence. I walk past all four walls, paying my respects to the thousands resting there. The center of the cemetery with its clutter of tombstones is at peace, undisturbed and invisible in the darkness.

My father was not buried. He was cremated, a choice I talked him into after Abuelo died and my aunt insisted he be buried. It was a costly expense to do so in California, but no one could talk

her out of it. Abuela was particularly upset because the money came from Abuelo's bank account, which meant it would cut into the funds she had inherited. The rest of us knew that once Abuelo was buried, none of us would visit. He was such an ornery man that we hesitated reaching out to him while he was still alive. Dead, he was easily dismissed.

When Abuela died, she was buried right beside Abuelo and his bristly mustache. And that pained me because she died always wishing she could go back to Michoacán. I thought it might have been appropriate to send her remains back to her homeland, but that didn't happen. Not with my aunt in charge. So when my father died, I made sure that I had a voice in the matter. My aunt didn't intrude. His ashes were handed over to his second wife. I also gave her the money I didn't spend on a funeral or a burial. I thought that maybe my stepmother would do the appropriate thing and scatter his ashes in Michoacán, but she didn't. She scattered them in the backyard of their house in Mexicali on the U.S.-México border. None of these burials had that poetic end I envisioned for them. And that's the most honest reason I didn't go to Michoacán for the Days of the Dead.

After my stroll inside the cemetery, I walk out into a flurry of activity since the night has turned the street into a fair with amusement rides, carnival games, and a row of enterprising women who set up pop-up kitchens to prepare quesadillas, tacos, and tlayudas. At first, I scoff at the opportunism of the whole thing, but then I sit myself down and order a quesadilla stuffed with flor de calabaza—my favorite ingredient. I take a photograph of the woman heating the tortilla over the metal disc of a brasero. I devour it and order another.

The walk back is lonely for some reason. Without intending to, I have chosen an isolated route back to my hotel. Once in a while, I see a few young people, most of them in painted faces that

make them look like pandas in the shadowy streets as they head toward the zócalo, where the brass bands are in full comparsa mode. This is a celebration for the young who dance into the late hours of the morning, tossing back shots of mezcal and documenting the night every fifteen minutes with selfies. I walk into my room, shower, climb into bed, and lie awake.

Middle-aged, I have become an early riser. When Abuela used to tell me she only slept four hours or so, I was in disbelief because she would go to bed around 7:00 p.m., sometimes even earlier. She was usually up by 4:00 a.m., stirring sugar into her coffee.

"So what do you do in bed all that time?" I asked.

"I think," she said.

Abuelo, on the other hand, slept all night. His loud snoring was evidence of that, and I felt bad that Abuela had to lie next to this noise for hours, doing her thinking. But I understand her now. The night owl in me became exhausted from that habit of staying up past midnight, a bad habit begun in my college days. Once I became a creature of the light, my body felt relieved. Now I am in bed by 10:00 p.m., sometimes sooner, and I usually fall asleep by 11:00 p.m., only to wake up at 5:00 a.m. Awake in bed, I do my thinking. I never asked Abuela what she thought about night after night, but I suspect it was not the kind of thinking that kept her awake, but rather the kind of thinking that helped her get some rest. I too sift through the rubble of what has happened this day or yesterday or the year before, in order to make peace with it.

The mornings in Oaxaca during the Days of the Dead are still and quiet, a stark contrast to the festive evenings. I dress in my exercise clothes and walk out for a brisk stroll. The young man behind the hotel counter is polite about unlocking the front gate though I can tell he had been partying most of the night by the way he fumbles half-awake with the keys. The streets are empty

except for a few elderly folk who stick to their routines and sweep the sidewalks with large branches that function effectively as brooms. I reach El Llano, the small public park, and do my laps. Not a single soul joins me, not even the stray dogs.

As I circle around, I am secretly thrilled to have the entire park to myself, and then, just as quickly, I am startled at how I have turned into Abuelo. He was a cranky old man who liked to be around people less and less. I always said that he would have been happier had he remained single, wifeless, and childless, setting a schedule that took into consideration nobody's needs but his own.

And then another thought seizes me. I came to Oaxaca to honor my parents, yet I have been thinking about my grandparents much more. Perhaps because my own parents were not such a large part of my life, not since adolescence. My grandparents, on the other hand, got to see me stumble into adulthood. If I was identifying family resemblances and shared traits through them, it was because they were my points of reference—not my mother, not my father.

I sit on a nearby bench as this revelation weighs on me. What am I holding onto then with that altar in Queens? To the never was? To the could have been? A sure sign that what was, what had been, has left me wanting, dissatisfied.

The last time I visited my maternal grandparents in Michoacán, I came across a cosmetics case that my mother had brought with her on her final visit, shortly before she passed away. I was more interested in holding the things that had felt her touch but was pleasantly surprised to come across a small stack of pictures—of me as a child accompanying my family on the California grape boycott marches of the 1970s, of my parents dating as teenagers, of my father in his twenties, of our only visit to Disneyland as a family. I knew not to ask for them, so I borrowed half a dozen and had them reproduced at the nearby portrait studio.

"You are too young to keep things like these," my grandmother argued when I asked for permission to copy them. I was in my twenties at the time.

"But I don't have any of my own," I pleaded. "I want something to remember her by."

She relented, and even though I had simply made copies, it seemed that I had cheapened their value, or at least sullied their uniqueness somehow. I stored away the photographs in a small box and rarely looked at them after that. I wasn't sure if this was because I wasn't used to having these kinds of keepsakes or because I knew they had been hidden from me all that time and so they would never really be mine. How troubling it was for my grandmother that I should take something that she had inherited from her oldest daughter. How troubling it was for me to add them to the baggage of things that followed me whenever I moved.

There was one other photograph that came to me by accident. It was a picture of my mother, my brother, and me, posing in front of La Villa in Mexico City. It was taken on our first airplane ride, on my mother's final trip to the homeland. My mother, having survived her open-heart surgery, wanted to thank her guiding saint, La Virgen de Guadalupe. It was surprising to see how tiny my mother looked. I wasn't even a teenager, yet I was already taller and thicker. She stood, thinner than I remembered her, between my brother and me, that telltale grimace on her face, an expression made permanent by the stroke she had suffered earlier in the year. In a few months, she would be dead and buried in Michoacán.

But the remarkable feature on that photograph was the cigarette burn above her head, deliberately placed there by the smoker who held this picture in his or her hands. The mark was too centered, too precise to have been accidental. It was a cruel, destructive gesture. The photograph had been buried among a stash of clothing. When one of my aunts discovered it, she gave it to me

discreetly, expressing concern about that malicious act and complete bewilderment about who might have done it.

"It's rightly yours," she said to me. "You're the oldest. You have to tell your children your mother's story."

"And what do I say about that burn?" I asked sheepishly. My aunt just shook her head.

I still have the photograph, but no children. Over the years, I have often thought about surrendering it to my brother, but I hesitate each time. His wife and children never knew our mother, who died when my brother was only eleven. This photograph, like all the other ones I keep stored in my apartment, was destined to meet the same fate that my father's belongings met after his death: disappearing into the hands or caprices of person or persons unknown. No saving grace awaits the González family heirlooms after death. I imagine those faces, dissociated from their identities and stories, anonymous and blank—two-dimensional relics in a bargain bin at a secondhand store, at best. At worst, discarded paper.

On the eve of All Souls' Day, Oaxaca is in full party mode, but the energy is no more intense than the previous night. Revelers recover enough to repeat their antics, and the streets fill up with crowds and brass bands whose tunes animate the extroverts to dance, the tuba punctuating the stomping. My somber mood keeps me from joining in. Down at the zócalo, the book fair tents showcasing authors and literature panels are coming down, and a crew of young people passes out flyers announcing the next cultural happening—a film festival at the historic Teatro Macedonio just a few blocks away. I take a schedule of the screenings and resolve to attend at least one of the showings, but at the moment, I have more pressing needs—to sate my hunger.

Only in México do I have the courage to enter a restaurant alone. I am not self-conscious about dining solo, and neither do I

feel any judgments from the other diners. This isn't something I feel comfortable doing in NYC, though I have seen people eating alone there on many occasions. But as a New Yorker, dining out without company feels like an admission of loneliness. Somehow, as a tourist, this act doesn't seem so devastating.

I take a seat at one of the more upscale bistros on Alcalá, and the server immediately swoops in to give me attention. He is handsome, and his dark complexion reminds me of my father. This is a typical connection for me; I seem to always be looking for my father in the faces of middle-aged Mexican men. Although in situations like this, the resemblance is immediately broken by the exaggerated politeness and deference in the voices of the servers. My father was loud, imposing, and given to fits of laughter that showed his entire upper row of teeth.

I order the mole poblano and a salad with nopales and flor de calabaza. No mezcal for me. That will come later, at the curandero's house. A friend of mine had told me about this faith healer whose massages were designed to relieve physical and emotional stress simultaneously. He was having a get-together—a kind of spiritual healing—for his frequent clients at the nearby town of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and my friend had talked him into allowing me to attend though I had never been his client. I keep glancing at my watch, more and more nervous about the taxi ride to the outskirts of town to a place so isolated, part of the directions read: "You will go down a winding road with no street lights for about twenty minutes."

As I leave the restaurant, one of the famous Oaxacan calendas is winding its way down from Santo Domingo. I had seen these oversized lanterns and giant papier-mâché figures as part of wedding party processions, but tonight it is just one more current of energy streaming downtown. Nothing gets in the way of a calenda, and it brings traffic to a frustrating halt. By the time I manage to find a taxi driver who will agree to give me a few hours of his time, I am so relieved that my nerves about the impending trip dissipate.

The farther the taxi travels out of town, the darker the streets. By the time we reach the unpaved roads, my anxiety kicks in again, though I am careful not to show it. Suddenly, just when I begin to suspect I might have led the driver to the middle of nowhere, a town springs into view.

Perhaps I expected to find myself in some quaint rural village with burro carts and women with thick braids clad in rebozos, the curandero's residence a wooden shack slightly removed from the community because it has been given its place of prominence, like a church. Instead, the town is rather modern, with paved roads, cement buildings, and an internet café. The curandero's house looks no different from the others with its iron gate that opens to an enclosed courtyard where the taxi driver parks next to a truck that looks like it has just come out of the factory. And the curandero, Alejandro, a handsome man with blue-green eyes, greets me with a firm handshake. He looks no older than me.

Alejandro's sister gives the taxi driver a cup of chocolate to drink as he waits patiently to drive me back to the city. There are a few other guests, but the conversation revolves around mutual acquaintances, and the only effort to include me is occasional eye contact as they gossip. Outside, the town's comparsa marches by and everyone rushes to the gate to catch a glimpse of the costumes the young people have been working on all year to show off at this parade. Indeed, the costumes are impressive and well thought-out. Small parties of threes and fours have coordinated their outfits, many made with colored spongy material shaped into monsters that resemble those from video games and not the famous *alebrijes* so popular with folk art collectors.

"They will go at it until dawn," Alejandro says.

"Well, it's only for one night," I say, by way of condoning the partying.

"Just one night?" he replies. "This is day two. This goes on for a week in the towns."

I grow weary simply knowing that the young people will walk from one corner of the street to the next, hour after hour, dancing and cheering until the bright morning sun sends them home.

The spiritual healing itself feels more like a counseling session, with people checking in and reporting their progress—that depression, this marital discord. Pan de muerto is passed around, as well as instant coffee and mezcal, poured as each person shares a moment of unburdening. We sit in Alejandro's living room. His altar, very unassuming with simple candles and a few pieces of fruit over the different tiers, sits snugly between the sofa and the television.

When my turn comes to speak, I don't have much to say except to introduce myself, a stranger who has come from so far away to infiltrate the communal therapy of people who clearly have meaningful relationships with one another. I feel awkward, as if I had walked into a support group and had been too embarrassed to leave. What would my host think if he knew that I had expected a smoky room that smelled of burning copal, a pre-Columbian ritual with sacred water sprinkled with sage and performed by an ancient curandero dressed in indigenous garb? What film had planted that romanticized version of Mexican folk healing in my head?

I babble on incoherently until I notice the disinterest in other people's eyes, and so I simply stop. No one protests, not even Alejandro, who looks anxious to move on. He offers a prayer that sounds more Catholic than Amerindian and then invites everyone to place the photographs of departed loved ones on the altar. Framed photographs pop out of handbags and backpacks. I feel even more like an interloper because that detail had not been relayed to me, so I sit there motionless as everyone steps forward, a few breaking into tears as they kiss the faces of those who have left them behind. Suddenly the altar, now populated by more faces foreign to me, seems farther away.

"And where are your dead?" the curandero asks me. And the question is too complicated to answer in a simple sentence. So I express myself the only way I know how. I cry, an unashamed release, and I feel a great sorrow spill out: the grief over my many losses—my parents, my grandparents—the regret of those unwise decisions in my youth that I suspect have come back to take their toll on my ailing body, the loneliness that comes with being an orphan, the isolation that comes with depression, and the burden of having to carry everyone else's stories because I'm the one who survived. And all this time I had been doing the Days of the Dead all wrong. Instead of opening up, I had been shutting in. Instead of standing in front of my altar, I had stepped inside it. Celebrating the Days of the Dead is an act of permission to keep living, to nod at death as a form of respect for the hard truth that all things come to an end. That truth also recognizes the suffering and torment of loss, but it is not meant to seize the soul year-round, rather only for a day or two. The point is to remember. Remember death. Remember life.

As I climb into the taxi and instruct the driver to head back to Oaxaca, I am amused that my lesson was learned not in the whimsical Mictlán as I had expected but in this unassuming little town I had never heard of and am likely never to see again. Yet I am filled with gratitude and a renewed sense of purpose as I imagine redecorating my apartment in Queens to make it look less like a tomb and more like a living space.

Just then, as the driver turns onto the main road, another taxi catches up with us and its driver lowers his window. "Check your back tire! Something's wrong!"

My driver looks at me through the rearview mirror and quips: "I better pull into the next gas station. I wouldn't want to get us killed. There's a ravine here that swallows entire buses, and no one's ever heard from again."