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## The Wondrous Flight of the Hummingbird

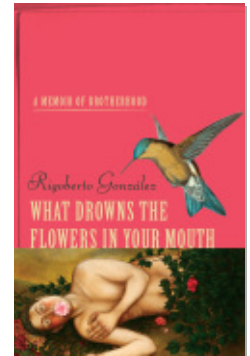
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“Well, good for you,” she said, in a tone that made me realize I had interrupted something important. “I wish I could let you speak to your brother, but I kicked him out.”

My heart sank. “What? I don’t understand.”

“I kicked him out. So I need another man. Bring me back an Italian.”

And then we got cut off. But I didn’t feel like dialing again. My companion saw the look of devastation on my face, so he turned away to stare at the canal. A boat passed by with a group of revelers singing in a language I didn’t know. They were drunk. One of them dropped a plastic cup overboard, and I wanted to scold him.

I shook the memory out of my mind and returned to Guadalupe, who looked quite annoyed.

“You don’t have to keep an eye on things,” she said. “That’s my job.”

“Oh, is it?” I snapped. “Well, one of those things is your man. Just so you know.”

Her disdain made me ashamed I was letting my overprotectiveness become an exchange of cheap shots and innuendoes. I wanted to apologize, but she shifted her energy over to her children. In the distance, Alex kept casting his net, his last desperate attempts at snagging something. Guadalupe walked over to convince him to give up; Halima and André followed closely behind.

Now the family portrait was complete without me in it. This was my brother’s most hard-won journey, this twenty-year marriage and fatherhood. My one sadness was that neither of our parents was alive to witness it. But I was. I was witnessing it. And as their bodies moved forward in unison, it was the most beautiful sight I saw that day.

## THE WONDROUS FLIGHT OF THE HUMMINGBIRD



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**D**o you remember Tzintzuntzán?”  
“I don’t,” my brother says. “I don’t remember Tzintzuntzán at all.”

The name of the town at the northeast shore of Lake Pátzcuaro is pure onomatopoeia. Say it—Tzin-tzun-tzán—and a hummingbird zips by with each syllable. These elusive little birds are so fast they’re invisible and can never be caged. In fact, the only way the people of Tzintzuntzán can attempt to capture a hummingbird is to carve one out of wood, or to sculpt one in iron. The only way for visitors to own one is to buy it. I brought two of them with me that hang from the kitchen doorway of my NYC apartment. As soon as I put them up, I realized how ridiculous this illusion was since the wings are frozen midflight and the bodies dangle from fishing lines because what I “caught” was nothing less than decorated dead weight. These are memorials to the fleeting hummingbird, a wondrous feathered creature whose population has been dwindling over the years. I saw hundreds of memorials in Tzintzuntzán, but not a single living example of what all that artistry honors. Still, it is difficult to challenge the town’s name—it *is* the place of the hummingbirds. They are everywhere: on furniture, on pottery, and stitched near the hems of pretty little dresses. And each time I

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say the town's name, the hummingbird becomes audible—a ghost sound emanating from the vibrant depictions.

We will have to go, Turrútut, the next time we visit Michoacán, though I have no idea when it will be safe to do so again. The stories of the region's kidnappings are alarming, and what used to be a fear that belonged to other people in other parts of town is now ours as well—we have walked into our homeland's darkest alley and are still dealing with the anxiety of that encounter. What a tragedy to be denied entry to our childhood landscape, to imagine it wilt and wither without us as we pretend, quite stupidly, that it remains the same, unchanged because we are not in it. We must remain outside the place of first memory as if in exile. "It's safe to come here," our relatives tell us, but it never sounds convincing coming from people who never had to say the words we said that time when language died like flowers in our mouths, empty of hope and bloated with despair. How long before the nightmares ended? How long before you could climb into your car without reaching down beneath the seat to feel the comfort of the tire iron? How many years of life did you lose as you wandered through the streets in Mexicali in a crazed panic? How many years of life drained down to my feet as I stood there, waiting for news of your fate?

At the moment, my mobility continues to improve with this new therapy that includes painful shots of hormones and steroids. But the discomfort is worth it. I've even begun to jog again, something I had not been able to do in almost a decade. My muscle growth has astounded the doctors, who had simply wanted to slow down the loss of body mass, and there I was bulking up like a champ. I can feel the fit body that I buried many years ago inside this crippled one begin to surface, to reclaim its proper place in front of the mirror. I'm rebuilding my strength and my confidence, daring to flirt again, to venture into the passionate embraces of

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other men. Intimacy is so much more beautiful when it's not relegated to fantasy but a realized sensory experience with another being—when it is an expression without obstacle. I have found the pleasures I had forgotten and never thought I would ever have again. I'm in the throes of joy. I'm alive.

Those nightmares I sometimes still suffer from might seem ridiculous compared to what yours might be. In my darkest dream-  
scape, my cane snaps in two or sinks to the ground or is madden-  
ingly out of reach, and it's this state of helplessness that makes me  
wake up and cry into my hands. Who will take care of me if the  
affliction returns? Now I understand, as you understand, that the  
hardest thing to admit is that you must take care of you. I must  
take care of me.

So what are we waiting for? Let's march directly to Michoacán  
as stubbornly as we have moved through our adult years. It's not  
blind luck that gets us through; it's the hard-won strength of our  
roughed-up spirits, the history of our battle scars. We haven't  
faced anything yet that can defeat us.

I remember that time you and our father drove all the way  
from El Rancho to Tempe, Arizona, to help me move. I was re-  
locating from one cockroach-infested apartment on the east side  
to another one on the west, just as cockroach-infested. Except that  
I was now going to live alone, without roommates. It was a huge  
financial sacrifice for me, but it was necessary—I wanted the space  
to read and write without having to work around the schedules of  
the people I shared an apartment with. I wanted complete and un-  
interrupted access to my creativity. It was my final year of graduate  
school, and I had a thesis to finish—a novel about the California  
grape pickers, a book about our family's life of labor. I can't imagine  
if any of that factored into your decision to make that trek to Ari-  
zona, but I suspect that for our father it was paternal duty. You  
had both driven me to Riverside for my first college degree, and to

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Davis for my second. I drove myself to Tempe, but now I needed help, and there you both were again.

I had a bed, boxes of books, and a small bureau I purchased from one of my neighbors. It was Apá's idea to bring a bookshelf. Or rather, to build one. He brought along the wood and a drill. Since it was the middle of the sweltering Arizona summer, we moved long after sundown, when the weather was still humid but tolerable. As we crossed the main drag in that scrappy truck, our father was stunned by all the foot traffic. "What the fuck are all these people doing out at this hour?" he said. "Don't they have homes?" I laughed at how foreign the concept of the college town appeared to him.

While Apá built the bookshelf, you and I unloaded, unpacked, and then we walked to the small store down the street to buy generic brands of canned vegetables and tuna, mayonnaise and bread. I didn't have a table, so we ate on our knees on the carpet. I was embarrassed that I didn't have any money to treat you to a nice meal at a restaurant, but neither of you minded.

"It's like those times we used to pick grapes together," Apá said. And we were transported back to the shade underneath the grape vines, where we would huddle around a small crate and eat the only meal of the day—beef and bean burritos that Abuela had packed at dawn. There was no place to wash our hands, so we ate dirt and sulfur, and if we had cut our hands with the shears, we tasted our blood.

"You sure have come a long way," Apá said as he looked around at my modest living quarters, and I beamed because that was as close as he got to an expression of pride. The following summer I would be just as broke, subsisting on rice and potatoes but reading a book a day in order to educate myself because I was determined to be the well-read writer that my professors wanted me to be. And what got me through that hardship was knowing

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that you and Apá had given me your blessing to pursue this unusual dream to become a writer. I felt it each time I saw that bookshelf. The tensions between our father and me kept me from thanking him for that and for all the other times he was a good father. I'm fortunate, however, that I still have you and that I can thank you for being a good brother. Everyone else is gone. It's only the two of us now. Let's not keep anything unsaid before it's too late, before there's only one.

"Do you remember your mother?" our father used to ask us, on those moments of sentimentality that said he had been thinking about her, missing her, and he wanted us to bring her memory back together—a collective energy that blossomed with language in the mouth instead of drowning its flowers with grief or sadness or loss.

Turrútut, do you remember our father? Do you remember that time you came to Tempe together? How you had opened a map in order to chart your itinerary back to Mexicali and wanted to find a route around Phoenix because it had been the most stressful and frightening part of your trip? But there was no way around the bustling city, so you drove right back through it. In the age before cell phones, I had to wait for hours before I found out you had made it safely to the border. So in the meantime, I sat down next to the telephone and wrote because that was the only form of prayer I knew.

The last time I visited you in Baja California Sur, I woke up at the crack of dawn each day to write, to do the work I was being paid to do, what in turn paid for that trip to visit México and many other places. As my visit came to an end, you asked if I needed to print my boarding pass. I said no, that I would do that at the airport.

"There are printers at the airport?" you asked, quite earnestly.

"Yes, of course," I replied, puzzled.

You scratched your chin. "When I drove a tour bus, those people were always so worried about printing their boarding