

History Into Fiction

By Sylvia Sellers-García

Testimonio

In early July of 1999, I found myself standing by the side of a highway in Guatemala, waiting for the arrival of a priest I had never met. Our encounter had been arranged by a mutual acquaintance who had told me that I wouldn't have any trouble recognizing him: he would be the only person by the side of the highway other than me with blue eyes. The priest showed up alone, in a small, run-down car, and walked up to me without hesitation. Instead of trying to speak over the roar of the traffic, he shook my hand and then pointed to the roadside café where he had parked his car.

The priest asked me only a little about myself, and then he began to recount some of the things he'd seen while working in a rural parish. He had arrived soon after the worst period of political violence and had found his parish torn apart by its self-imposed silence. He said he would describe some of the more important things he'd learned in ministering to his congregation. There were certain telltale signs, he explained vaguely, signs that were clear and undeniable, even though their meaning was not. The people who had sat in the café before us had spilled a bowl of sugar on the table, and the priest smoothed out the sugar and drew through it as he spoke, his blue eyes fixed on the granules.

I had no idea, during our long conversation, that I was researching a novel. As far as I knew, I had gone to Guatemala to do research for a Master's thesis on *testimonio* and oral history. A genre of autobiographical testimonial literature, *testimonio* had particular significance in Guatemala thanks to Rigoberta Menchú, the Nobel Prize winner who became famous for her autobiographical account published in 1983. Likewise, the broader practice of collecting oral histories had particular significance in Guatemala owing to the investigations of the United Nations' Historical Clarification Commission and the Catholic Church in Guatemala. In the 1990s, both institutions conducted extensive interviews with survivors of Guatemala's armed conflict, amassing thousands of testimonies. Their reports, with conclusions heavily critical of the Guatemalan government and military, were inescapably public and politically contentious.

By 1999, collecting oral accounts of recent history was a politically charged but, by the same token, familiar practice to people in Guatemala. Individuals with whom I spoke recognized the nature of my research so immediately that it hardly required explanation. In fact, once the word "*testimonio*," had been uttered, their own notion of what my research consisted of was so clear that I had trouble persuading them that my conception was somewhat different. Their well-defined understanding did not involve *studying* the form and history of *testimonio* but *enacting* it: that I listen to and record the conversations myself. Initially, I resisted. I knew that the widespread recognition of *testimonio* did not by any means imply an overwhelming enthusiasm to be a part of an oral history "project." On the contrary, if the armed conflict had left any common legacy to Guatemalans, it was a shared commitment to silence.

Family History

I was surprised, however, to find that some people actually *were* willing to speak with me — despite the political atmosphere and the fact that I was an outsider. Through family members and friends, I managed to arrange several meetings that resulted in lengthy recorded conversations. These conversations were everything testimonio was supposed to be. In fact, they were striking not only in how closely they resembled the archetypal testimonio accounts but how closely they resembled one another. The people who spoke with me were always eye-witnesses of political violence. They were more often than not illiterate and more often than not of Mayan descent. They accounted for themselves in fluid, even polished narratives that took in the scope of their whole lives. They told incredible stories of hardship, survival and, ultimately, salvation.

Encouraged by these conversations but desirous, at the same time, of speaking with people who had experienced the armed conflict differently, I attempted to broaden the pool. However, I immediately found it difficult to persuade anyone who deviated from this profile to speak with me in the same format. People who were literate and educated, or had not witnessed political violence firsthand or had seen only the aftermath of violence were extremely reluctant to talk about their lives. They kept the silence I had originally expected. When I did succeed in persuading such individuals to speak with me, their accounts were radically different from the classic style of testimonio and from one another. Some, like the priest who met me by the side of the highway, preferred to provide analysis and commentary rather than anything like a life story. Others, who tried to speak more personally, told stories that were remarkably disjointed and incoherent. I found no survival and salvation among these narratives.

With time, I began to realize that what distinguished the fluid testimonios from the other accounts was *practice*. It was not that literate and educated people were inherently disjointed in their storytelling or that illiterate witnesses spontaneously saw their lives as lucid salvation narratives, but rather that, by some process of selection, more people who fit the illiterate-witness profile had told their story. In fact, by the time I arrived, some of them had told it several times. Regardless of how this selection process had taken place, it had produced a definite and self-reinforcing effect. Providing an oral account of one's life in Guatemala had come to be associated with a certain demographic, and thus, the practice had acquired a specific cultural connotation. It had become, for some people, subtly demeaning to ask them to recount their life story to a tape recorder.

The nature of this cultural connotation became clearest to me when I spoke with my Guatemalan relatives. Long before traveling to Guatemala in the summer of 1999, I had begun working on a fiction project inspired by our family history. Expansive, intricate and in many places cut tragically short, our family tree had always seemed a promising starting point for a novel. Quite apart from my academic research, I continually attempted to pick up anecdotes and recollections from family members in Guatemala. Understandably, however, the two pursuits seemed to some family

members indistinguishable. Having grasped quite clearly that I was researching testimonio, they knew what was at stake when I asked about the past.

For years, I had waited for the opportunity to speak with a relative named Roberto, a man who had served as a high-ranking officer in the Guatemalan armed forces. In the 1960s and 70s, as the Cold War raged and the Guatemalan military took an increasingly hard line against student groups, labor unions and opposition leaders, Roberto was at the height of his career. During much of this time, Roberto's sister, Mélida, was married to one of the leaders of the Communist Party in Guatemala. I had heard secondhand accounts of the uneasy truce between Mélida and Roberto and the attempts Roberto had made to assist, avoid or overlook Mélida's husband before his disappearance in 1972. But I had never been able to speak to Mélida or Roberto about their recollections of that difficult time. That hadn't stopped me from imagining a compelling fictional account inspired by it. When I finally had the occasion to speak with them in 1999, I was looking forward to hearing anything they would be willing to tell me.

What Mélida and Roberto had to say surprised me. After a few minutes of polite conversation, Mélida demurred, claiming that she really had no expertise on the subject. "After all," she said with a smile, "the one you really want to speak with is Roberto." She spoke kindly, as if smoothing over an embarrassing misunderstanding. Roberto took the reins and told me in no uncertain terms that he wouldn't be telling his life story to a tape recorder, if that were my intention. I protested, making some effort to explain the difference between my interest in our family history and my research for the Master's thesis. As I went on, I realized my explanation wasn't making much sense. Roberto fixed a stern eye on me and said, "Let me tell you something that will interest you." For the next hour or so, he proceeded to detail the hierarchy of the Guatemalan military, his role within it and the various acquaintances and colleagues who had worked alongside him. He didn't refer even once to his sister or his brother-in-law.

Fiction

The silence Guatemalans keep on the past is so formidable that one has to wonder what it means when someone speaks. By saying, in the gentlest way possible, "We are not going to tell you," Roberto and Mélida had gone a long way towards illuminating why people speak — or don't. In talking about the past, people re-situate themselves in the present. The number of times they have articulated their memories, the resonance those memories have with their current circumstances, the immediate context of their unfolding and their relationship to the listener all matter. In other words, the story of how someone tells their past greatly influences — or contaminates — the larger story. The moment of narration is inextricably part of the narrative. And the person who asks to hear the story is, unavoidably, part of it.

The researcher of testimonio intends to leave herself out of the story, but like an unreliable narrator in a work of fiction, she ends up making herself the center of it. Her own background, her desires in pursuing the research and her frustrations with the results are supposed to be suppressed, yet they direct the research and its outcome at

every turn. She repeats the words of her informants faithfully in her written work, but she edits and frames them, becoming at each step more visible where she intended to be invisible.

As I traced the recent history of Guatemala, the unreliable narrator that I imagined in this light became a fictional character: Nítido Amán. Born of Guatemalan parents and raised in the United States, Nítido returns to the Guatemalan town that he believes is his birthplace. When he arrives, he is mistaken for a priest, but instead of correcting the mistake, Nítido assumes this role and accepts his part in the story.

An excerpt from When the Ground Turns in Its Sleep:

The rituals of mass, familiar to me from childhood, were simple enough to perform. Writing the sermon, however, was a completely different question, and as I delivered it, I felt keenly the small errors of phrasing and the greater errors of content and tone. Even this effort, however, soon came to seem insignificant. The afternoon of the first service I began taking confession, and the confessions released — in a trickle and then a wave — concerns that would sweep me away, nearly obliterating my original purpose in Río Roto. At first the confessions struck me as only further instances of failed comprehension; but as they began to repeat themselves, not in their specifics but in their general contour, they came to suggest a meaning I couldn't ignore.

Because on that Sunday the first woman who came for confession, Carmen, began by talking about the sermon, I was distracted at the very moment when the nature of the confessions first made itself apparent. Only later, when I considered it in light of other confessions, did I consider the significance of what she'd said. Carmen's braided white hair coiled over her forehead, giving the impression of a dented crown. She held her hands with her bent and calloused fingers curled in her lap. The dress she wore still bore the stiff creases of the packaging, though it had been ironed; from its pocket she pulled a white handkerchief embroidered with blue flowers.

"Father, I'll leave this for you," she said. "You might ask Claudio to tie it around your thumbs."

"Thank you. I hadn't thought of that."

She nodded. "My sister used to be incredibly clumsy. We'd tie her thumbs together. But next time you won't be as nervous."

I looked down at my knees. "I hope so."

"You shouldn't be. You can't expect us all to understand it." She smiled. "I'm so slow, myself."

I looked at her through the screen. She folded and refolded the handkerchief and then spread it out over her knee. I didn't know what to say.

She looked up at me briefly and smiled. "You must be very intelligent."

"Not in the least. I'm sorry; I'm not always as clear as I mean to be."

"I'll have to try harder next time," she said.

I wasn't listening as she started her confession. I began going over the sermon in my mind, trying to remember certain parts of it. I would have to ask someone about it —

perhaps Estrada. And yet I thought I hadn't made any obvious mistakes. Most of the collected sermons I'd brought with me were of no use: Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Clancy. They were philosophical tracts, and reading them before writing the sermon had evidently not put me in the correct frame of mind. I did have the two John Perry volumes you'd picked up at a garage sale in Oakland. I'd only brought them because you'd made some notes in the margins, but now it seemed worthwhile to read them through. From the little I'd read of Perry, however, it seemed I would be incapable of writing anything like his sermons.

I looked up, hearing Carmen pause. She seemed unable to go on. I hadn't heard any of her confession. "Go on," I said.

She put the handkerchief against her mouth and her lips turned faintly white. I was surprised to see tears in her eyes. "Father," she said.

"Yes?"

"I've been very ill."

I didn't say anything for a moment. I had the impression that she'd finished confessing and had gone on to speak of something else. "I'm sorry to hear it," I said.

She sighed deeply. "I have headaches. They start at the back near my neck. Then they spread out, filling my whole head. I have to close my eyes. If I don't, I see a blinding light around the edges. Everything I try to look at seems far away. Very far away, and then the light puts them out completely. Sometimes the pain goes on for hours. The longest one lasted two whole days. My daughter puts a cold towel on my head and I sit against the wall. Lying down makes it worse."

She waited for me to speak. I said the first thing that occurred to me. "How long have you been having them?"

Her voice shook. "For many years."

"Isn't there anything you can take?"

She glanced at me, surprised. "I've tried everything. Nothing helps." I waited, hearing in her silence that she expected me to say something else, but I couldn't think what. After several minutes she spoke again. "Forgive me my sins, Father."

Alternate Excerpt

I remembered as soon as I saw it that I'd left the bulb by my front door burning. At first I couldn't make out the peculiar shadow that darkened the front of the house something corrosive had apparently bored through the door and the ceiling around the bulb and the walkway, leaving a black, irregular hole — but after coming to myself and walking on I realized that every insect in the valley had been drawn to the bulb, the last one to go out. The writhing swarm that covered every illuminated surface seemed to be not crawling over but devouring the entrance of the sacristy. It carpeted the ceiling around the bulb so thickly that I could make out no single insect; they formed an undulating mass of legs, wings, and glittering eyes that emitted a dull murmur. Beetles the size of my open hand crawled on the walkway; a green insect I'd never seen with a long body

and spidery legs dangled from the doorknob; dozens of moths with enormous wings wavered or rested by the bulb. A desperate fluttering sounded from the moths, like the pattering of fingers on a closed door. Their eyes glinted metallicly in the light and their furred bodies collided against one another recklessly. Before the door and facing outward, as if on guard, crouched a Harlequin beetle as big as a sewer rat. Its legs spread easily to the edges of the doorway. The other insects moved around and under it, insensible to its size. I stared at it in horror, thinking that it might not be real, until its immense left antenna jerked upward and I stepped back, repulsed. A dozen other insects clung to the chain for the light, dangling perilously as they crowded against one another. As I stood watching, a giant moth with wings as wide as my outstretched hands flew out of the entryway and towards me. I ducked down and batted my arms wildly, feeling its wings everywhere at once. When I was able to stand calmly once more I rounded the house and checked the windows, which I'd locked. Then I checked the door to the vestry, which Xinia had locked. I thought of going to her for the key but felt immediately that I would prefer to sleep outside. The sight of the insects had filled me with repulsion; I felt the urgent need to leave, not caring where I spent the night. I walked out to the road and looked at the house from the street.

It was difficult to tell, because the house lay in darkness, but I thought I saw the curtain in the front room of Luz's house fall. A moment later, the light by her door went on. Within seconds, a moth flitted across to it, batting at the bulb. I waited, but she didn't appear. I heard Luz's voice from the front window. "Turn your light off," she called out. I looked at the chain, still covered with insects. "Thank you," I whispered towards the window. Taking the sermon out of my bag, I laid the papers flat over the insects in a row, as far as possible from the Harlequin beetle. The bodies underneath the papers cracked and gave way under my feet as I moved forward. I held the rest of the sermon in my hand and swatted at the chain, batting the falling moths away from me, until only a few remained. Still holding the papers I curled them around the chain and pulled, feeling the insects breaking under my fingers. The light went out. I shuddered and jumped away; perhaps I imagined that the insects would rush past me, as one, to the light across the street. In fact it took nearly half an hour for them to fill her front door, and when I finally forced myself to light the bulb of my house again, there were still a few stragglers. But the Harlequin beetle had gone. I turned the light off and got inside as quickly as I could, checking to see how many had followed me into the house. There were none.

Though it drew them to the glass, so that I heard their hard patter on the window, I felt unable to turn out the bedroom light. I wouldn't have been able to sleep regardless. Instead I sat in bed reading until the sky lightened behind the curtain.

The walkway was clean in the morning when Luz knocked with the breakfast tray. I thanked her, and she smiled and told me I would get used to it. "I hope you don't mind," she said. "I threw your papers away." She looked down at my feet as she said it. I thanked her again, and she waved me off as if it had been nothing. "And someone left these for you." She handed me a plastic bag with oranges, their navels marked with crosses.