

# Confessions of a Book Burner

PERSONAL ESSAYS + STORIES

LUCHA CORPI



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**LUCHA CORPI**



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*Recovering the past, creating the future*

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In memoriam: to my parents, Miguel Ángel Corpi and Victoria Constantino Ramos, and my grandmother, Nicolasa Aguirre

And to:

My son Arturo Enrique Hernández, my daughter-in-law Naomi Madell and my grandchildren, Kiara, Nikolas and Kamille Hernández

My husband, Carlos Medina Gonzales

My siblings, Víctor Miguel, María Concepción, Miguel Ángel, Guillermo Alonso, Jorge Alberto, Francisco Javier and Luis Enrique Corpi Constantino, and their respective families

My niece Frieda Molina, her husband Craig Howard and my grandnephew-nieto, Quincy E. Howard

## REMEMBRANCE, POETRY AND STORYTELLING

NINETEEN FIFTY-TWO was a frightening year, yet one of the most memorable in my life. I discovered poetry and learned to memorize poems and recite them in public. It was also the year I began to remember my dreams, especially my recurring nightmares. Learning poems or songs by heart and being able to recall them at will were activities that brought me great pleasure. Memorizing multiplication tables wasn't exactly a thrilling activity. According to my parents, however, learning them was a life skill that would come in handy every day of my life. But what good was there in remembering nightmares? I tried to figure out how remembering happened, sure that if I could get that knowledge, I would also find out how to unlearn terrifying memories.

One day, I was watching my friend Marta ride her brother Paco's bicycle backwards without looking back or at the mirror. At times, she would land on her butt. After rubbing it, she would again mount the bike. It occurred to me that maybe unremembering was similar to learning how to pedal a bicycle in reverse but with eyes always fixed on the road ahead. I would simply follow the same course, first forward then backwards. But didn't that mean that I would have to make an effort to

remember the bumps on my path in order to avoid them? Just like learning multiplication tables, always the same result, I thought in frustration. In a few weeks, my friend Marta had mastered the reverse-pedaling skill, without further damage to her butt. On the other hand, I wasn't any closer to figuring out how remembering or un-remembering happened, and my nightmares still plagued my nights and days.

Decades later, I would smile as I recalled the foolish notions of the child in me, who could only sense the importance of memory, or its undoing, as a means to survival. Studying the inner workings of my unconscious and subliminal minds for a story I was writing, I became aware that sensual and sensory memories share a space in the unconscious mind, where metaphors and dreams alike take substance from the deeper layers of intuition, emotions, sensations and perceptions of colors. Sometimes, these random memories trigger the release of experiences associated with them and clustered together to form a poem or to provide the setting in a story with the colors it needed to create mood.

In many ways, our sense of vision is the most discriminating, and we largely rely on it for survival, but nature regales us with a colorful world from the first moment our eyes open to light until they shut it out for the last time. Thus, it seems only natural that colors are among the earliest subliminal memories most of us have and hold onto from infancy to adulthood. More often than we care to admit, they determine our choices in many subtle and insidious ways, and for reasons of which we are hardly aware.

In *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*, Norma Elia Cantú uses a series of photos as the focal points of narratives and stories about the narrator—perhaps herself—at different ages, alone or with friends or members of her immediate and large extended families, who live on both sides of the

United States-Mexico border. Cantú calls this multi-layered rich narrative “ethnography.” One of the snapshots shows a baby in a stroller being pushed by her grandmother. The narrator-writer says about it: “My memory for everything but the stroller is like the photo, black and white; the stroller is the blue of my winter coat when I was sixteen. When I saw the coat on the rack at J.C. Penney’s, I had to have it . . . Years later I realized it reminded me of that stroller. Painted blue, made of metal and wood. I remember it well . . .”

Cantú’s snapshot text is a vivid example of how the unconscious mind shapes our sensory perceptions of colors and influences our predilections. Eventually, these unconscious memories inform and re-form the stories we have lived and told. Thus, at times, our reactions to colors depend on the circumstances at the time we first come to perceive them as being positive or negative. At other times, we learn not to fear or to consider a certain color normal or tolerable, simply by the preponderance of that color in our immediate environment.

Since I was born in the tropics, inescapably but fortunately for me, my unconscious mind was flooded with green the very first instant my eyes opened to light. My oldest and first memory is of green. Thereafter, anything green became an object of contemplation everywhere in my small tropical world:

*Slithering green and mimetic green sunbathing on a blade of grass, or a tree branch—loud parrot green—lemon green—lime green—ceiba green—golden-avocado green—green-papaya and green-mango greens—cool green of tranquil river pools. Green the light filtering through the canopy of tropical trees, of leaves floating downstream after a storm. Green the aroma of banana leaves wrapped over tamales de presa or around Mexican beef barbecue baked in underground earth ovens. Green, as hope is an evergreen, like it was in my father’s hazel eyes as he sang me to sleep.*

If you open my closet, you'll hardly see any green garments among the clothes there. But my writing space, even when it has been only a narrow table in a corner of the living room, has always faced a window with natural greenery beyond it. Green is the way my spirit spells constancy and harmony. It's at once the familiar present and the connective tissue between my past and future.

My own sense of self as an individual is as fluid as the sound of the wind moving through foliage, and teeming with possibilities in the deep pools of streams and estuaries, beneath all the greens of my memory. My poetry flows from one of those streams. But the writer in me learned her craft by navigating another current, the stream of the oral tradition of storytelling.

In Jáltipan, Veracruz, every family had a number of storytellers of both genders. They were usually the older relatives—not to say that younger people weren't also fond of telling a story. The difference between the older and younger storytellers was the subject of their stories, and the treatment of them. In my family, both my father and mother told us stories. With few exceptions, my dad's stories were humorous and told about his and his friends' misadventures in search of buried treasure, and as a member of a short-lived theater company in Jáltipan. My mother's life stories were for the most part sad and underscored by her tears and sighs. But the storyteller per excellence was my paternal grandmother, Nicolasa Aguirre—Abuelita Nico—who was able to bring together all kinds of disparate elements and make familial and other stories work as oral units at once seamless and self-sustaining, scary or amusing yet educational, and dealing with subjects of interest to a varied, larger group of people.

Images of my grandmother braiding her hair, singing, looking at treasured mementos in her cedar trunk, talking with my father or mother, my aunt Pancha or cousins, answering my

questions while she worked a wire to make or fix a piece of jewelry, feeding the chickens in the backyard, drinking hot black coffee, slicing pomelos in half and squeezing their juice out, then adding it to pre-sweetened water to accompany the afternoon meal. I can feel the softness of her cotton garments and smell their clean fragrance, just as when I used to rest my head on her chest and listen to the crescendo of her heartbeat as she talked about the impossibility of attaining true justice in this world.

If I sit in absolute silence, I can hear the sound of her cascading laughter when something tickled her fancy and a bit of wickedness in her soft chuckles when she talked about her own or other people's foibles. I can also see the frown and hear the sigh when she looked into the bottom of the cedar chest in her room. I wondered what it was that she kept hidden there. Was it the memory of hooded and unruly creatures, like those in my nightmares, perhaps, lying in ambush at the bottom of the cedar chest her heart had become? Was it the flitting memory of her mother, who died young, leaving her heart orphaned, or perhaps the memory of Víctor Corpi, my dad's dad? I never knew because she never told me the story of her life with him.

Sometimes, when I can't find my way out of a problem or mend a snag in the writing, I purposely bring to mind the way she told various kinds of stories. Some were linear, others uncoiled horizontally like a wire spring, while still others spiraled down to a dark place where fear reigned seemingly unchallenged, but also where goodness somehow always managed to thrive. I am grateful I was in her company frequently for nineteen years and am able to recall images and conversations at will.

For the story of my maternal grandmother, Manuela Ramos, who died seventeen years before I was born, I've had to rely on my mother, whose memories of her mother are the aggregate of only a few of her own plus other family members'

recollections of her mother. When I think of my grandmother Manuela, it is the picture of my mother I recall.

*She twiddles her thumbs. She looks like she's just tasted a lemon. My mom always does that when she tells us how she lost her mother at age five. How she and my dad want the best for us, their children. We are the most important people in the world to them. Nothing can be worse than to feel like an orphan when your own father is alive but doesn't come to see you. She looks at my dad. He tries to smile, but his eyes get teary. My dad loves my mom very much. Remember this, my mother says: family is everything. I look at my brother, Víctor. He's crying, too. We sympathize with mom. We don't want her to cry, but she does it every time. I cannot understand why. We love her. My dad loves her. Isn't our love for her enough? She insists on telling us her sad story. I don't want to listen, but I do. I do listen.*

In 1923, Manuela gave birth to Victoria, my mother. My aunt Ole arrived three years later, and my aunt Hilda two years after Ole's birth. Baby Hilda survived the ordeal of childbirth, but Manuela died. My mother was a little over five years of age by then. They lived in Ixhuatlán, a municipality in southern Veracruz, near the town of Acayucan, where the Constantinos, my grandfather's siblings, *tías* Adelita and Juanita, and *tío* Gilberto, lived.

My grandfather, *el Chato* Constantino, mourned Manuela's death and contemplated taking his daughters to live with him. He was overwhelmed by the responsibility since he knew nothing about bringing up girls, what with their female problems and having to be protected and supported. Had they been sons, well, that would have been a different story. The girls stayed with their maternal grandmother for a few months. Then my grandfather took the girls to Acayucan to stay with his youngest, unmarried sister, my grandaunt, Adela, and talked her into taking care of his girls. Had she

lived in modern times, being in her early thirties, Adela would have been young enough to marry and still bear children. Given the life expectancy at the time, she was already considered middle-aged, therefore, an “old maid.” Men preferred wives much younger than them. Younger women were more malleable and physically better able to take care of their ailing husbands in their old age. Sometimes, men waited for the girls to have their first menstrual period and shortly thereafter married them, with the girls’ parents’ permission, of course, but not with their child-brides’ consent.

Perhaps responding to her maternal instinct or because she truly loved the girls, Aunt Adela agreed to look after my mom and my aunts. El Chato provided some financial support, but contact with his daughters was sporadic, partly because his business took him away from home for many days at a time. Many years after Manuela’s death, he’d finally taken a second wife in Jáltipan and had two children with her. Whenever Adela reported what his daughters were going through emotionally, how much they needed him, how difficult it became for them when he was late with the money he sent, he simply shoved his sister’s concerns aside. No one was going to tell el Chato what to do, or how to conduct his affairs.

Teary-eyed, my mother used to tell us how hard her and her sisters’ lives were. How unsympathetically people, including better-off relatives, behaved toward them, scolding them all the time, locking the pantry so the young girls—the “orphans”—would not “steal” their cousins’ snacks. Even though my mother had a father, she felt as if she were really an orphan. Being the oldest, she also felt responsible for her sisters’ care and emotional well-being, protecting them from school bullies, being their champion when anyone else mistreated or tried to humiliate them. Uncle Gilberto, el Chato’s brother, was kind to them and made sure they had at least enough to eat.

Aunt Adela was a good surrogate mother and did the best she could for the girls. All of them finished elementary school. They learned to cook, keep house and make their own clothes. Adela made it possible for my mother to enroll in teacher-preparation and clerical vocational programs in Córdoba, a much larger city. She was sixteen when she graduated and was getting ready to look for a job, at either a school or an office, when el Chato summoned her to his side for the first time in her life. Perhaps he wanted to get to know her better, Aunt Adela told my mom.

My mother didn't want to be away from her sisters and from the only parent she had ever known, but she agreed to move to Jáltipan. Soon, she found out el Chato's main reason for wanting her close by. She was to look after her younger half-brother and half-sister and teach them everything she knew. After all, it was time that she paid him back for the education he'd made possible for her. My mother wanted a chance to live with her father, perhaps to find out if he really loved her and cared what happened to her, despite his earlier neglect. She moved to Jáltipan. Not long after settling in, she met my father at a party she attended with a couple of new girlfriends. Living in the same small town, my grandfather had had occasion to meet Abuelita Nico and had heard things about my father. What he had heard didn't make a difference to him until my father became interested in my mother.

At age 27, my dad was nine years older than my mother and was also the most sought-after bachelor in town. A self-made man, and a great dancer, he was also affable, charming, and had a good sense of humor. He wasn't a drinker or prone to violence. In fact, he would always try to talk feuding individuals out of a fight. No doubt, parents of teen-aged daughters in town thought he would make an excellent husband and father. He had a secondary education, and whatever else he

knew he had taught himself by reading or apprenticing on his own—one of his lifelong trademarks. His having a steady job and already moving up the ladder at work was a great incentive for parents to, subtly and overtly, let him know that he'd be welcomed as their son-in-law.

My grandfather's objections to my dad were many, but he summarized them in the single expression: "*Es un gallo ya muy jugado*" (He's a rooster who's already been around a lot). When my dad began to show interest in my mother, the whole town watched their every move. Often, other young women, competing for my father's heart, would stand behind my mom and pull her hair or ruffle her clothes as a warning for her to stay away from him. They made comments about my dad's former love interests around town. In short, they tried every trick in the book to make her reject him. But my dad had fallen in love with my mom, and she with him. So he proposed marriage to her only twenty-four days into their formal courtship. As tradition required, he talked to el Chato and asked for my mom's hand in marriage.

At first, my grandfather came up with an objection: "I don't have any money to pay for a wedding." My dad countered: "I've been working for many years and I have managed to save some money. I will pay for everything, including her wedding gown." The game went on until my grandfather perfunctorily stated, "I don't approve of your family."

My father said nothing to that final statement, turned around and left. He made sure my mom could live for the rest of her life with the decision he asked her to make. Despite her father's efforts to keep them apart, my mom went on with her plans to marry my dad. They set a date for their wedding, hoping that my grandfather would finally come to terms with the inevitable. He didn't. On the eve of my parents' wedding, el Chato drank one too many and came home with a crow bar.

"I'd rather see you dead, than married to a son of Nicolasa Aguirre," he announced. He lanced the floor a couple of feet from her feet with the crow bar. My mother ran out of the house and took refuge with a family in town that was very fond of her. She sent a telegram to my uncle Gilberto Constantino in Acayucan asking him to go to Jáltipan and give her away. He showed up, and the next day my mom and dad were married.

Even though they both lived in Jáltipan, my grandfather and my mother did not talk to each other for years, not even after my brother Víctor and I were born. He was as "stubborn as his mules," my mother used to say, although she herself didn't make an effort to reach out to him either. He lived across from the marketplace and would watch my brother and me from his front door whenever our *nana* Paula took us shopping. One day, he decided to approach Paula and asked her to take us to his home. He promised to give her kilos of rice, corn and beans and bunches of bananas in exchange for the favor. Paula agreed. The memory of that visit with my grandfather is the only one I'm able to recognize and accept as mine:

*I'm looking at him, a man in a white sleeveless undershirt and black pants. Thick eyelashes hedge irises the color of brown-veined emeralds. Straight black eyebrows, low cheekbones and thin lips frame a short and flat nose. People call him "el Chato" because of that flat nose. He doesn't smile or laugh. I feel the soft skin on his arms, in contrast with the rough, sandy hands that pick me up. He gives me a peeled tiny banana to eat. I show four fingers to tell him my age and say "cuatro—four," then pull my thumb out and add, "Casi cinco—almost five." He peels four more tiny bananas for me. They melt in my mouth like dulce de leche—milk candy. "Toyita—little Toya," he calls me, after my mother's nickname. He gives Víctor the marble-size balls of cocoa rolled in coconut and sugar my brother loves. El Chato calls my brother by the diminutive of my father's name: "Miguelito."*

In this recollection of the day we visited my grandfather, I am certain I'm there. I have a sense of myself, but I cannot see my face, nor do I remember the clothes or shoes I wore. I see my fingers. I see the tiny fruit. I see el Chato. The only way I could have seen my face and my clothes, and being in the arms of el Chato, would have been possible if I had seen our images reflected on glass or a mirror in the room, or in a photo of the reunion. There was no mirror and no camera, and my face is not there. To the extent that I can, I trust that this is my own memory and not what someone else has told me about my grandfather.

The rest of my grandfather's story, as told here, is family lore. Some relatives believe that this story my mother told us is not entirely true. What part of any story that has gone through rumination and reflection, or that imagination has chewed and spat out, is or isn't entirely true? Since the events described happened long before I was born, I cannot attest to their truth. All I can do is to quote my mother, who believed this episode in el Chato's life was true. According to her:

Diódoro "el Chato" Constantino, my maternal grandfather, was a grain broker and often traded for dry goods with the *serranos*, mountain folk who lived in remote villages in the coastal range of Mexico's Eastern Sierra Madre. Traveling in the sierra in the 1930s implied spending the night anyplace safe. Most people planned their journeys so they would be close to or in a village by sundown. The southern half of the state of Veracruz is on the Tropic of Cancer, thus closer to the equator. Days and nights there are almost equally long year round. Depending on the season, sunsets in the Jáltipan of my childhood were consistently between six and seven in the evening; the sun rose any time from five to six in the morning.

In the sierra, it was a good idea to have found shelter by six in the evening. Darkness was the dominion of wild jungle cats, coyotes and other night predators looking for supper, whether

human or animal. Village people usually opened their barns to travelers or welcomed them to share floor space on *petates* (grass mats) or cots in a single large room detached from the main house; sometimes free of charge, at others in exchange for grain or other goods.

Over the years, I heard many stories about el Chato's dealings with the *serranos*, who were fierce, rugged people. Like most children, I loved hearing scary stories, as long as I could take refuge in an adult's arms when fear became unbearable. One of those stories about el Chato involved his dealings with a family of very strange *serranos* on a very dark new-moon night, on his way back from Mount San Martín, a dormant volcano at the southernmost tip of the coastal Sierra Madre.

Night was falling fast when el Chato reached an isolated village he'd never visited before. He'd been away from home for almost two weeks. Looking at the few stars already shining made him homesick. Although he would have preferred reaching flat terrain, he was exhausted and the grumbling in his stomach reminded him he hadn't eaten since noon. If he left at dawn the next day, he could be setting foot on the lower tropical savannahs by that day's end.

El Chato knocked on the door of a home on the outskirts of the village and asked the lady of the house if he and his three mules could spend the night there, or if not, at least be allowed to wash up and rest a little. She smiled but didn't ask for his name or give hers. Trying to sweeten the deal, he offered the lady of the house a kilo each of rice and coffee beans. She not only accepted the exchange for sleeping space, but invited him to have supper with her and her husband in a half hour. The aroma emanating from the kitchen was enticing.

Once his beasts were fed and their burdens removed, he went back to the house. His mouth watered when the smell of fresh-made corn tortillas and roasted peppers reached his nos-