

Excerpt from *Reminiscences on Migration: A Central American Lyric*

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Enflorar Al Muerto

When I arrived in the United States with my mother, I was only nine years old and I had to leave behind my favorite toy—a bicycle with red, white, and blue streamers and a banana boat seat. I had just begun to ride it without the training wheels. Slow at first, and then faster and faster down the hill of the *vecindad* where my mother and I lived.

And so, when I sat down for my first interview with Dania and her sixteen-year-old daughter Silvie, I began with a question about El Salvador and the people, spaces, and things the two had left behind.

The mother encouraged her daughter to reply first, “*Primero tú,*” she said, “*y luego yo.*”

Silvie began—softly at first—barely a whisper came through, her voice cracking sometimes, making me think that she might cry, but she never did.

“One of the things I remember about growing up there is my family. I was close to family that lived nearby—my aunts, uncles, and cousins—but others that lived far away, well they weren’t as close, but we all managed to get together for *Día de los Muertos.*”

In Spanish, she said, “*mis tías y mis tíos nos reuníamos para enflorar a los muertos.*”

“*¿Que quiere decir enflorar al muerto?*” I asked Silvie.

“*Es ponerle flores a la tumba. Ponerle flores para recordar a los muertos.*”

In English, “to put flowers on a grave” or the literal translation, “to flower the dead” or the act of “flowering the dead.”

But this does not translate well.

In English, Silvie’s response sounds like an explanation, perhaps even a justification.

In Spanish, however, “*enflorar*” is an active verb—one that evokes a sense of participation, an engagement with the dead. Not just to place flowers, but to embrace the tomb with flowers. To wrap around with flowers.

“*¿A quiénes enfloraban?*” Who did you flower?

“I remember that in one crypt there were four: my great grandfather, an uncle, my grandfather, and my great grandmother. I only had a relationship with my grandfather and my great grandmother. She was my only *abuela*.”

Cuatro muertos that belong to Silvie.

Four that were left behind.

Cuatro stuffed into crypts in El Salvador while mother and daughter try to stay warm in the basement apartment they now occupy in Long Island, New York.

Cuatro que Silvie tal vez nunca volverá a enflorar. Four that Silvie will never get to flower again.

Later, it occurs to me that cemeteries in the U.S. are blanketed with bright green lawns and grey tombstones etched with the names of the departed. The dead buried deep inside a coffin, inside a cement crypt, inside the earth.

Deep, deep in the ground. Discarded, abandoned, all too often forgotten.

In El Salvador, the dead are buried in crypts above ground, easy to reach, easy to *enflorar* when needed, perhaps subconsciously in the hope that one day, their spirit will rise and enjoy a few *pupusas* again with the living.

In that section of the world, on that sliver of land, this *Pulgarcito* as El Salvador is called, cemeteries don’t function as places to conceal the dead. Instead, they serve as communal spaces where life continues.

The ground in a typical cemetery in El Salvador is covered with brown, uneven mounds of dirt, the same brown color that covers the faces of the living.

On Day of the Dead, the tombs are freshly painted in bright green, purple, or yellow paint—hydrangeas and marigolds carefully arranged by friends and family. Afterwards, everyone grabs a chair to sit, some even arrange themselves on the crypt itself, like flowers, to sway to the tune of the songs they sing, or simply reminisce and exchange jokes about the dearly departed.

Some say that El Salvador today is a country filled with the soon-to-be-dead. It's all a matter of when and how—the who is already known.

Death is the *maras*, the gangs, the government, the impunity.

La muerte often trolls the *vecindad*. He sits and watches the house you live in from across the street, counting down the days when he will knock on your door, and demand an *impuesto de guerra*, a bribe that can delay death, but when the payments stop, the countdown to your last breath begins.

The only way out is flight, escape north, for a chance at life—any kind of life. To stay and fight is impossible.

Dania y Silvie may never have the chance to flower their dead again, and the basement apartment they now live in, an American crypt.



Alligators in the *Suchiate*

Three cars dropped Dania and Silvie off at the shores of a river. Neither mother or daughter can remember its name. Yet, in that moment, both were distinctly aware that their journey was forcing them to let go of their umbilical connection to earth. The feeling of the gravel and dirt roads under their feet was temporarily suspended, replaced by the dark and dirty waters of the Suchiate River.

Dania's eyes followed the movement of the lapping waves, squinting to see.

Are those alligators?

She could not differentiate the waves from the flotilla of rafts that made their way from the Guatemalan shore to the Mexican one. She stared long and hard. Surely there are other things moving through these waters, she thought.

Could they be alligators?

Each black-tubed raft carried five, maybe ten, people across. Men, women and children floating to the other side. This is where Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans converge onto the Suchiate, like the rivers Styx, Phelegethon, Acheron, Lethe, and Cocytus converge at the center of the underworld in classical Greek mythology. In those stories, the river Styx forms the boundary between Earth and the Underworld. Here, the Suchiate River is the same, the space between the death of one's former life and into the unknown.

This is where Central Americans spill into an Aztec landscape. Here, Dania and Silvie said one final goodbye to their isthmus.

No more *centroamerica*.

Adios. Se acabo el pastel.

No more *flor de izote* dripping from the trees, *adios a Tikal* for the Guatemalans, and for the Hondurans, *nunca jamas volver a ver al Ulua desparramar sus aguas durante una tormenta*.

If they wanted to turn back, this was the place from where they could do so. But instead, Dania and Silvie huddled close to the motorcade that had just unloaded them onto the shore of this river.

Is it possible that those things are alligators?

Dania thought she could see them, there, just there thrashing about in the water. Close to the shore, near the flotilla of rafts, near one of the ones that she was about to climb onto.

But then she hears the voice of the *coyotes*, shaking her from her reverie. They seem far away, but they are right in front of her. Their mouths moving, gaping open like fish out of water, drowning in air.

The *coyotes* negotiate the price of the crossing, “*Cuanto por estas diez almas?*”

Dania and Silvie turn back to look at the eight others they have been traveling with since they left El Salvador.

One of the ferrymen of the Suchiate, while standing on a raft, jabs the river waters with a long, thin stick, and points north. He says, “Mexico is beyond those mountains.” He meant it as an incentive, but Dania and Silvie only hear menace.

“Are those alligators in the water?” Dania finally asks.

No one answered.

“Will you provide us with life jackets?”

The man said, “We have no life jackets to give you.”

He said it so definitively that she thought, “Well, it’s better that they don’t give us a life-jacket, because if I fall, the alligators will eat me in just one bite!”

Dania laughed. But then, she started to feel something else.

The fear rising to her throat. She imagined alligators tearing at her flesh. She imagined the souls

of dead migrants reaching through the waters to pull her down, envious that she might make it across, while they were left behind in the dark waters of the Suchiate.

This is the moment when she started to pray with all the strength in her soul. “I want to leave. I want to go back,” but her second thought was, “How do I go back? Will the hidden money I’m carrying with me be enough to get Silvie and me back to El Salvador?”

“My God, we don’t even know where we are! We don’t even know what this place is called. What do we do?”

“Que hago?”

She struggled to catch her breath. Panic threatened to drown out her courage. Her eyes darted back and forth from the shores of the river to the black tubes sinking under the pressure of brown bodies.

She looked at her daughter for a long time too.

And finally, and resolutely, “We are already here. We need to keep going, and not turn back.”

She took Silvie’s hand and climbed aboard.



Dania and Silvie in the *Hielera*

They call it the Rio Bravo, and that day, when we crossed, it was angry. So terribly angry. Water poured down on us on that day. We didn't just float on this *neumatico*, this rubber raft we climbed onto, we bounced up and down, on the turbulent waters.

I felt that we would never reach the other shore. We got off the car near the bank of the river and then a man appeared. I do not know how he appeared there, he arrived from nowhere, from the thin air, from the space between there and nothing.

And he told us, "I'm going to show you how to sit on this tire." And then out of nowhere, two other women appeared, in the blink of an eye, one second it was just me and Silvie and the man, and then the next two other women with their children joined us.

And the man began to explain to us how we had to sit on this *neumatico*—with our legs folded underneath us and our butts resting on the soles of our feet. None of us carried a suitcase. I only brought a small wallet and a small bag, and in that bag, I carried a book from my daughter. We laugh about this now. She thought she was going to have time to read the book along the journey! She never did. I tried to throw out that book so many times. It was so heavy and cumbersome, but Silvie did not want to get rid of this book.

So many times, I told her, "This book weighs a lot, I want to throw it!"

Silvie screamed, "No, my book, not my book!"

I told her, "In the United States, I can buy you more books, and others better than this one!"

She begged me, "No, no, no! Not my book!"

Well, we didn't toss it and that book made it all the way to the U.S. with us. I don't know if she has gotten around to reading it, but it is here somewhere.

In the small bag, the one that carried the book, we also had two toothbrushes, some toothpaste, *pastillas* for headaches, and that's it I think.

I carried money but that was in a Ziploc bag in my underwear. In that plastic bag, I also had my daughter's birth certificate, and my DUI identity card which we call a "dooh-ee" and stands for *Documento Unico de Identidad*. I carried this bag in my underwear, inside my pants, rolled up, in a plastic bag, tied so that if I wanted to pee and if I had to take off my underwear off to pee, it would not fall.

I was told to do this with my money because we had been warned that the ferrymen who help you cross the river, they throw your things into the water, or they keep your valuables. I didn't want to risk this, so I kept all my money and my documents in my underwear and in my pants. Always.

When we crossed the river, we were three women in total. Each of us with our children. My daughter was the oldest. There was woman with a little boy that was about five years old, and another woman with an eight-month-old baby. And when they crossed the river, I saw that baby get wet. The mother tried to cover it but the baby was soaking wet from both the rain and the river waters which flooded the *neumatico*. None of the men seemed to care that the baby got wet. That baby screamed the whole time we crossed. He never stopped screaming.

I began to pray. I prayed out loud, *en voz alta*. I did not pray in my heart, or an inner or personal prayer. I wanted God to hear me, and so I prayed out loud.

"Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, if you care about me and my daughter, please keep us safe. Take care of my daughter, *Dios mio por favor, te lo suplico*.

The *coyote* only had one oar and with that, he rowed against the current, and when we arrived he hurried us off the *neumatico*.

"*Rapido, rapido! Para afuera, GET OFF!*"

I heard myself ask, "Where do we go?"

"I don't know. Just walk, go! FASTER!"

We were already on the other side, we were already in the United States, in Texas, but we did not know which way to go.

We had heard stories on the way, from other people traveling, that there, on the shore of the river, there were *coyotes*, but real *coyotes*, the kind that will eat you.

Someone also told us that sometimes you walk for days across the desert, near the river and you might never encounter a Border Patrol agent, and so you never get the chance to turn yourself in, to ask for refuge, and asylum.

You just have to keep walking until you find *la migra*, and then turn yourself in.

I forgot to tell you that when we got off the *neumatico*, we had to climb a really steep slope, and the rain had turned the ground into mud. At first, we climbed, but pretty soon we were crawling up this steep embankment, and we would slip, and crawl back up on our hands and knees, and even slithered up on our stomachs until we reached the top.

Our clothing was completely covered in mud. We were wet and cold, and even our socks were heavy with mud. Our fingers were raw, our nails chipped and thick with dirt because we had clawed our way up the banks of the river. As much as I could, I pushed my daughter forward so that she could climb.

I wanted to help the woman with the baby behind me, but I couldn't because it was either her or me. If I helped her, I would fall behind, so I kept climbing.

During those few minutes that it took us to climb up the riverbank, I became selfish. In that short time, it was either my daughter's life and mine, or it was that woman's life and her baby.

She was the only one that was allowed to carry a backpack and inside, she carried her baby's diapers and his bottle, and maybe one toy. After I reached the top, my conscience weighed heavily on me, and I turned back to help her with the backpack.

We walked for about two minutes before we encountered a woman from Border Patrol. She was a very pretty woman—tall, white, blonde hair. The first thing this woman did was take off her jacket and she gave it to the woman so that she could cover her baby. And then she asked us for our documents.

So then out of the lining of my underwear, I pulled out the plastic bag with my documents and my daughter's birth certificate. We handed them to her. We climbed into a car. It was a big car with metal fencing and she asked us where we were going.

"To the U.S.," we all said.

She didn't say anything else to us that was important.

Or maybe we didn't hear anything else. Perhaps I have forgotten.

When we climbed into the car with my daughter, I grabbed her hand really hard, tightly, and in the distance, I saw the United States flag waving and when I saw that United States flag I felt

happy because I said, “Thank you God, we arrived safe and sound.”

Nothing happened to us.

I told myself that the sacrifice was worth it. This moment was worth the nine days of travel. We had arrived well. You could see big buildings through the area where we were driving through. I could see different types of cars—a modern city, a beautiful city, and I felt content. I felt happy.

I tightened the grip on my daughter’s hand and I told her, “We did it!” and I made the sign of the cross.

But, I didn’t know then what we were getting into.

That happiness only lasted for five minutes, which was the time it took from the border—at the river where we had crossed, or I don’t know, I estimate about five minutes but I don’t know if maybe it was a longer or shorter timeframe.

Maybe I have lost all sense of time. I don’t know.

We arrived at a place that looked like a type of garage to store cars, but it was enormous. I saw Border Patrol men in green, and they were all wearing gloves, plastic gloves. And they started lining us up, and calling out orders, telling us to turn in all our belongings.

They told us to remove the laces from our shoes, and our waist belts, and anything that functioned as a belt. Hair ties too.

The men checked our hair. They asked if we had lice.

We turned in everything, and when I say everything, I mean our small bag, the one that carried my daughter’s book, and our toothbrushes.

We kept nothing except the clothes we wore. Afterwards, our shoes did not fit well, they were loose because we had turned in our shoelaces.

I kept my money though. They didn’t take that from me.

Afterwards, we entered what looked like offices, but the seats were made of concrete. They were not chairs, more like block benches that you might see at a park. I began to notice a bunch of little rooms. They were jail cells, on my right side was where the men were housed, and on the left, the women and children.

They put us in one of those cells. I entered one of the ones where women were housed with their children, all of them younger than fifteen years old.

Here, I got to stay with my daughter because she was a girl, but the women who had sons, they were separated from them. They placed their sons elsewhere. And in another jail cell, only men.

These rooms were so cold—freezing. I can't even describe this cold, the floor was made out of what looked like the floor of an ice rink. My daughter and I were still wet from crossing the river and the rain. We were caked in mud, and we couldn't wash our hands. There was a sink, but no soap and no towels. There was a bathroom, or toilet, but it was in the middle of this place, and it didn't have doors or even a curtain. Everyone could see you using the bathroom. There was a water cooler, but the water had the taste of chlorine, so my daughter and I didn't drink any of it.

We were there for more than a day, and neither of us drank any of the water because we didn't want to use the bathroom, because there was no privacy. We just held it for hours.

In this room of about sixty women, some of us, not all, received a space blanket, one of those that look like a piece of aluminum. It was so packed full of people that where you stood was also where you slept. We were squeezed in together, all of us, strangers, right next to each other, our elbows touching, our bodies against each other. We were so tired from days and days of travel and the river crossing, and the climbing, that all we wanted to do was just lay down and stretch our legs but we could not. We had to sit on the floor with our chins on our knees. This was not the place for rest.

We heard an announcement, that they were going to take our declaration. The agents came through these metal doors, and they made all this racket when the doors closed. The lights were always on. This bright, fluorescent light constantly in your face. I could never tell if it was day or night. I never saw a sunset, or a sunrise when I was there.

About five or six times, they took us out of the rooms to take roll call. To make sure that we were still there, or to give us something to eat—sliced bread with processed meat, and this was cold too. They only fed us twice. The first day, I ate the whole thing. I was so hungry, but the rest of the days, I only ate the bread. I just ate it to give my stomach something to work with, but it was not very appetizing.

Every few hours or so, the agents walked among us asking, “Are you going to sign your order of deportation voluntarily?”

They tried to trick you by calling out your name, and when you said, “Yes, that's me!” they would say, “Are you going to sign?” and that confused everyone.

Being in that place was a form of torture. It was designed to limit and control all your basic needs, so that under duress, you would say, “Yes, I'm leaving, deport me, get me out of here.”

I was in the *hielera* a day and half, and when you are in there, you don't know what's going to happen. Nobody tells you anything. No explanations. I thought I was going to arrive at a place, and that I was going to give my name, and the name of my family, or the person that was expecting me in the U.S. and that they were going to call this person, and that my family would come and pick me up at this place.

I thought that's how it was going to be.

When they called our names the second time, my name and my daughter's name, they put us on a bus. I was so happy because I could not wait to get out of there, and I thought we were free, but I didn't realize that they were just moving us to a detention center. There were more than seventy people on this bus, and this bus was a prison bus, it had bars on the windows, bars on the doors, bars to separate us from the bus driver, to prevent contact between us and them.

Each seat on the bus had a brown paper bag, and in each bag, a small bottle of water, an apple, and a small bag of pretzels. That apple was the most delicious apple that I have ever eaten.

Super deliciosa, despues de haber comido solo pan y agua.

They never told us where we were going or how long it would take to get there, but I calculated that we spent about four hours on that bus.

When we finally got to the place, I could not see anything through the windows because the bars covered the view, but I remember getting a glimpse of barbed wire, the same type that I had on the wall surrounding my house in El Salvador to keep out thieves. I am not a thief.

The air outside the bus was freezing cold, and we entered these trailer buildings, and inside were a lot of chairs. Each chair had a box on it, and just as I started to open it, we were greeted by two women and they were so cheerful!

It was such a contrast with how we were feeling—herded from place to place and these women were so happy. All of us were immediately suspicious.

We all sat and inspected our boxes. Inside, another small bottle of water, an apple, a granola bar, and a sandwich with processed meat. This sandwich was on a piece of bread with square edges though, so the presentation had changed, but it was essentially the same food we had received when we left the *hielera*.

I ate everything in that little box. This was the first time that we were able to take a shower, to brush our teeth and comb our hair. To feel normal again. Forty-eight hours after we had crossed the river, we were finally feeling human once more.

They gave me a change of clothing—sweatpants with a t-shirt, everyone wore the same thing. It was a uniform that we had to wear inside. That's when we realized that we were in a detention center.

This was our punishment. This is where every day we were harassed by ICE, by the people that guarded us, the ones that wore the ochre-colored polo shirts. This is where I spent almost three weeks. I could communicate with Carlos, my partner, but only by phone. I would always try to call him at night, because I knew he worked during the day. I needed to hear his voice every night because it was familiar, and in the detention center everything was alien and dissonant.

Inside, everything was new and polished but not in a good way. Everything was new in a

terrifying, unhinged kind of way—new in an antiseptic kind of way.

Everything came to us in English. Even the documents, the information they provided.

My daughter served as my translator. Sometimes she would hear complaints about us.

Like, “What are these women doing here, what do they want? Why don’t they get tired of coming?”

Things like this. They probably called us other names, but my daughter didn’t translate that for me.