



Aguila

by Marisol Cortez

for my grandfather,

RAMIRO GARCÍA CORTEZ

April 30, 1922 - January 13, 2014

fierce eagle, aguila
i wake up early, the morning of
your burial
seized with these words
that no one dare write

you were born in 22
the eldest of 10
son of a barber,
alcoholic, violent to
your mother, antonia.
forced to be father
early, on the streets with newspapers,
shoe shines. the softness beaten
out of you. that is the reality
of colonial city
of westside segregation
that you lived.

child of Lanier
where you met my grandmother
quiet solemn
says mrs sanchez
bringing yearbook to show me
una güera in a sea of brown faces
slavic mexican
mexican jew
ashamed to be both
ashamed to be born
outside the circle
of matrimonial sacrament
calling herself spanish
instead.

but that was after you dropped out
and returned to school
i saw the video UT did
when they filmed you talking
about your growing up times
about your war experience
for their oral history

of mexican veteranos
from the second world war

one of the times you cried
was when you recounted a friend
who came to your door
to insist you go back to school:
rudy cortez was his name,
no relation

you had dropped out to follow
your parents your sisters
up to arkansas
for the cotton crop:
your father had pulled the girls
out of school
how could you stay in school
without helping too

you cried then
remembering how your friend
six months later
when malaria sent you all packing
home, back to san anto
came to your door to persuade you
you had to be persuaded
to return and graduate
but you did

you did
and you cried
and so did i

the other time
was when you told your story
of war—we were so naive, you say,
remembering.

they draped your coffin with american flag
but you didn't want to go to war

you signed up not wanting to be
drafted, sent anywhere
you thought by signing up
on your own
you could stay
at home, in san antonio--
of course, of course,
said the recruiter
before shipping you off
to colorado, new york, germany
to sit in the tail of a plane and
shoot. when you heard that pilots
were paid more
survived more often
than tailgunners
you and your friend
sprang to sign up,
to train and then test





*Ramiro García Cortez (right)
walking with his father
Hernan Cortez, 1944*

to this day you feel
they flunked you
not because you were not
coordinated enough
like they said
but because of who you were,
where you came from.
race the unspoken
inbetween lines,
race what assigns
who steers at the front
who shoots at the back
who lives who dies
without speaking

but you survived

you cried

remembering the cost
of survival, remembering
hiroshima, how
they dropped the bomb
on the eve of being
shipped out again,
this time to pacific theater--
we're gonna die,
you told your friend,
this time

we won't make it back
home, and you knelt down,
made a bargain with god:
please if you let me live
i'll live my life upright
—but they bombed hiroshima
and nagasaki

in the nick of time:
remembering, knowing
the enormity of
what saved you,
the outline of bodies
vaporized against a wall,
which allowed you
to go home to san antonio
to marry grandma
to raise fourteen kids
on postman's wages
fourteen kids, hijole,
what were you thinking

remembering what it cost
to survive
you cried

and so did i,

not understanding fully
until then
on whose shoulders i stood
the great historical vehicle

of mexicano mobility
postwar, catching all of us up
in its indifferent trawl.
bittersweet upswing
out of that westside barrio.

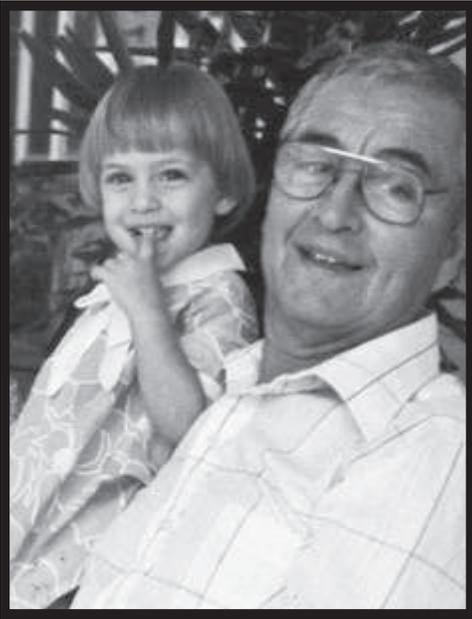
but you hadn't wanted to go to war.
never forget that.

so you led an upright life
so upright it could hurt
like when my sister sat crying
before you
when you commented on her weight:
did you not see her or did you pretend?
like when you wrote me lamenting
my daughter's unwed conception
like when i went to your house
to see you, to interview you
for our westside history project
you knew where to cut me
right where
it hurt the most:
i don't know why you're doing this
you said after we spoke.
i can remember when
you didn't even want
to think of yourself
as mexican

at the time i challenged you: oh yeah?
when was that? how do you know?
there has never been a time
when i have not thought of myself
as mexican.

but after i left your house
i sat in the car and cried,
furious at the license of your tongue
ashamed as my grandmother
in who i was, inbetween,
belonging nowhere,
not even in my own family:
is that really how you saw me?
is that really what you thought?
did you really think i saw myself
as not part of you, not coming
from you, where you came from,
even as i came to you
to love and honor
your struggle, your suffering
your survival
and my own?

no le hace: when i went
to visit you again
this time in the hospital
right after this last stroke
that would eventually kill you
but before your vocal chords



Marisol with her grandfather, Ramiro García Cortez.

collapsed, before
 the feeding tube inserted
 when you could no longer swallow
 without choking,
 before you could no longer
 get out of bed
 or move. your body slowly
 shriveling, frozen rigid
 until all that was left
 was the spark and barb
 of your mind, ever sharp
 wagging a finger in warning
 when they tried to get you
 to sign the will.

someone else's will,
 not your own.

you were surprised to see me.
 mi'jita, i didn't think you'd come.
 it's true i'd been angry.
 for your words to me and to
 my father and to all of us
 wounded by your severity
 without speaking back

because you were the elder,
 you were the one who'd had to survive.
 but i came. and none of it mattered.
 i held your hand and you asked me
 about my daughter
 and if i was still riding my bike
 and if i was still working at that esperanza.
 i like your blouse, you said, with knowing:
 i had bought it just a few days before,
 huipil from a mexican vendor
 at el mercado de paz,
 like the embroidered dresses
 my grandmother would wear.

and will you go back to kansas?
 you wanted to know, though
 i've been home going on
 two years now. just making sure.
 no, no more kansas,
 i tell you. san antonio
 is my home.

1.16.14

Holiday Gift Haikus



*The most priceless gifts
 are generously given
 from our open hearts.*

—Marilyn Wallner
 Carmichael, CA



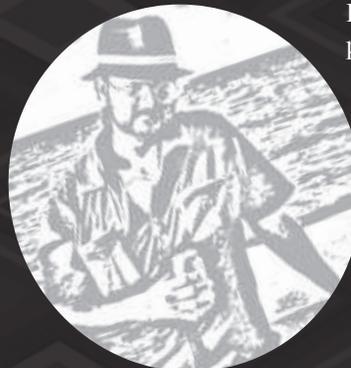
Kamala Platt, Lord!
 She's a woman I've adored.
 She moves us forward.
 —Rachel Jennings

Dear **Kamala Platt**
 pins injustice to the mat,
 swats ignorance flat.
 —Rachel Jennings



For Rudy Rosales
 Rosales, that man,
 helps to give my life a plan,
 tells me, "Yes, we can!"
 —Rachel Jennings

Rosa Rosales
 at organizing is best.
 She never does rest.
 —Rachel Jennings



Profe Ben Olguín
 pretends to be mean.
 sweetest man I've seen.
 —Rachel Jennings

Ben Olguín: pinko,
 feminist, and Chicano.
 He brings books in tow.
 —Rachel Jennings