

The Last Tortilla & Other Stories

SERGIO TRONCOSO



“He makes art out of ordinariness.” —Ilan Stavans



*The Last Tortilla
& Other Stories*

SERGIO TRONCOSO

With an Introduction by Ilan Stavans

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“You don’t think the artist as near the center of things as the ordinary man, do you?” the opinionated G. K. Chesterton, who wrote detective stories and also biographies of Dickens, Browning, and Robert Louis Stevenson, was asked during an interview in 1912. To which he replied: “No, I don’t. Most people consider the joys and sorrows of the working-man chaotic and comic—only fit for a music-hall sketch. To me his emotions seem more permanent, less sophisticated than those of the artist.”

More permanent, less sophisticated . . . but only after the artist makes something out of them. Life, after all, is inconsequential until meaning is extracted from it; and the

Introduction

Ilan Stavans



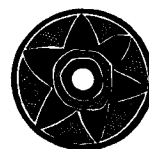
artist's duty is to always be in the hunt for that meaning. This, I acknowledge with pleasure, is what Sergio Troncoso does so fittingly and unglamorously in *The Last Tortilla and Other Stories*: he makes art out of ordinariness; he finds meaning in meaninglessness.

His style has the same breezy, light-handed quality one finds in Grace Paley and Raymond Carver: it is straightforward, unobtrusive, and, more important even, unexcessive. He is obviously allergic to that nefarious trend perfected by the ethnic writer that makes literature a servant of ideology. "No artist desires to prove anything," Oscar Wilde once rightly said. Troncoso doesn't hide anger behind words. His are not angry tales about segregation and social discomfort, saturated with sex, drugs, and incoherent slang. Instead, his El Paso, Texas, the theater where his dramas for the most part take place, is a "normal" town, one where Mexicans eat, sleep, fall in love, and undergo epiphanies just like everyone else.

The fact that they are Mexican is but an accident of destiny. Their odyssey is not a lesson on the uses of suffering. They are common middle-class people, unremarkable, people caught at some turning point in their lives.

All this makes Troncoso a traditionalist. He is constantly obsessed with plot. I say this without a hint of regret. Plot is no doubt the great casualty in postmodern literature. The lessons of Borges, Nabokov, and Calvino have been misunderstood to the point that novels are shaped today as mere sequences of unrelated episodes; and impressionistic snapshots, delivered in the most primitive of forms, are applauded as stories. But the unrepentant Troncoso belongs to the secret club of believers who won't give up: he knows from Chekhov—to whom Paley and Carver owe so much—that good literature, the literature that lasts, is neither about verbal pyrotechnics nor about the author as superstar; it is, and shall always be, about the everlasting themes of humankind: unworthiness, love, friendship, betrayal, and forgiveness.

Troncoso, in short, is an American writer of the oddest kind: he tells the truth. He is as near the center of things as artists are allowed to be.



She asked me if I liked them. And what could I say? They were *wonderful*. Her breasts were round and white and everything you'd expect from a beautiful woman. I couldn't believe she *asked* me, as if I could have thought otherwise. I'd never been with someone like her before. I was terrified. But she seemed shy and even unsure about herself. I didn't understand that at all. What did she see in *me*? She had of course looked at herself. Everyone I knew had looked at her. I heard all the comments about her, wishful comments. But with me she was just playful and tentative. I kissed her, looked out the window of my mother's Buick Regal. She pressed against me and unzipped her skirt. *She* unzipped her skirt

Angie Luna

Angie Luna

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She told me, after we were relaxing in the back seat, that she had had sex only once before. Only once. She told me that an older man, a semi-boyfriend, had forced her to do it with him, pushed her down, taken off her clothes. She said she didn't mind too much. She said she sort of wanted to. She wanted the experience with an older man. She wanted to be ready for when she got married. Now she wasn't sure she would ever get married. Now *she* was the older one, but she didn't really act that way. She was shy, I tell you. I didn't know why, but I got angry. Maybe the East Coast did that to you. I told her not to let a man do that to her again. Ever. It wasn't as if I had been trying to score PC points to "nail" her, as they said so crudely in Amherst. We were already completely naked, both of us quite happy. I told her it was terrible what he had done to her, I told her as vehemently as I could. She was way too shy for her own good. She became embarrassed, and I backed off. I told her it really wasn't her fault. But I also told her that anybody who did that to her was a fucking macho bastard. Was I going out of my mind? Mr. Goody Goody. Where did *that* come from? That's what a college education did to you.

When I took Angie back to her house just over the Free Bridge, off 16 de Septiembre, I noticed that the streets were quiet and empty and shiny from the rain that had fallen earlier. Whenever I had gone to Juárez as a kid, with my parents for dinner, I had thought Mexico was such a crowded country. Always packed and busy. A lot of sun and too much traffic. I almost never went to Juárez at night, and I had never been to Juárez at three in the morning. There was no one around. Angie said I could meet her sisters next week. They'd already be asleep by now. Three sisters alone in Mexico. Probably all gorgeous. At the Popular, she had told me that her older sister had left Chihuahua City for la frontera about five years ago. The reason? Rocío

wanted to get away from her father, who wanted her to be a nice little girl and marry one of his friends. Shit. Can you believe that? That sister left, got a green card, found a job in El Paso as a secretary with the help of a woman she met at Cielo Vista Mall. Rocío then offered to put up Angie and Marisela if they also wanted to come to Juárez, but told them they'd need to get jobs. And they did. What a life! The three sisters had all pitched in for a down payment and had just bought this little house, in a clean neighborhood. And they were still saving money. Their goals were to become American citizens, buy a house in El Paso, and learn good English. My Spanish was perfect, Angie said, except that sometimes I would screw up the counter-factual with weird concoctions. She said my parents had done a good job teaching me about my heritage. I wasn't a gringo yet, she said. She hadn't met my parents. I wasn't sure what my mother would think of Angie. Or maybe I was.

I saw Angie at the Popular on Monday again, after I had finished putting out the cotton briefs for boys, all colors, size 6 through 20. I had already dumped all the designer jeans out, for the back-to-school sales. Joe was off my back. He was somewhere in the back room yelling to a supplier who had brought in the wrong stuff. That's what you get when you don't plan your summer job: a frenetic boss who's under pressure himself and vents it on the stock boys. At least I had met Angie Luna there. That made the entire summer. In two weeks I'd go back to Massachusetts. She was coming down the escalator, from the mezzanine bookstore and music shop where she worked one of the cash registers. God, she was a vision! She was wearing a tight black dress down to her knees so it wouldn't look like too much. But still, it was enough. She had Marilyn Monroe's body, with short, jet black hair. As she rode down the escalator, she leaned slightly back on one foot, the fabric pressed against her thighs. I almost fainted.

She didn't kiss me, and I guess I didn't expect to kiss her, not in front of all the idiots in the store. It might even be a good idea just to be seen as "friends," and that's what we did. She asked me if I wanted to have dinner at her place next Saturday night, and I said that I did. I don't care what anyone else says: women in their thirties can look *great*. I was having trouble breathing. She had on her confident look, the one she pushed like a shield against all the stares from the old men in the shoe department and the hungry male managers and assistant managers. The other stock boys just winked at her and asked her out brazenly and tried to get real close to her, but she didn't bite. Up to this day, I still don't know why she asked *me* out. Maybe to her I was an oddity. Born in El Paso, but on my way out. Just as soon as I finished my B.A. in economics. As we walked to the perfume counter of Estée Lauder, she said that she wanted to see me before Saturday. I was going back to school in two weeks, right? I said that I was. She said she wanted to get to know me better, to talk about what I was studying and how it was to live up there alone, without your family. I said that maybe we could see a movie, have dinner, spend a few hours just hanging out. She liked the idea. Before she turned around and went up the escalator, she asked me if I was coming home for Christmas, and I said that I was. She smiled and winked at me and marched up the escalator. Did she know how *fantastic* she looked just walking like that? She was really way too sweet for her own good.

"Ese Victor, did you plug her, man?" the voice of Carlos Morales hissed from behind me. I turned around. The fat bastard was wearing a dirty white T-shirt, his coiffed hair almost to his shoulders.

"What?" I said. I wanted only to get away from him, so I started walking quickly toward a Dumpster in a corner filled with boxes of belts, dress shirts, polo shirts, and socks. He'd run back to the employees' lounge as soon as I started unloading this shit.

"You know, man. No te hagas pendejo." He plunged his hips forward and swung his arms back in a motion more vulgar than I can ever describe, all the while grinning stupidly.

"Shut the fuck up, man. What are you talking about?"

"You went out, didn't you? I heard about it already. From Cindy in Women's Wear."

"Yeah, so what? It's none of your business."

"It's none of your business," he repeated in an exaggerated, snotty whine. "What a *man* you are!"

"Shut up, cabrón. You better get your ass to work. Guess who's coming down the aisle." Joe was whizzing by the dress shirts, and he didn't look too happy. Just as Carlos was stacking four cardboard boxes up to his chest, Joe almost slid to a stop right in front of him. He didn't say a word, but wiggled his finger in the fat boy's face, and Carlos waddled after him. He glanced back at me, raised his arms in bewilderment, and pretended not to know what the hell he had done wrong this time. Damn. The whole store knew about us now. I was glad I was only going to be there for a few more days. Doña Leticia Jiménez, the soft-hearted battle-ax who really ran the whole place from her perch in Women's Lingerie --42 years of selling panties!-- rushed by me as I emptied the Dumpster and gave me a thumbs-up and grinned. Shit.

By Wednesday I had already dreamed of Angie Luna twice. Once on Monday, in that black dress, on the escalator. And again the next night. A more complicated dream. We were in Central Park, in the Ramble. Doing it. I hadn't ever been to Central Park! I once read about it in a magazine, however. This woman was really getting inside my head. I told my mother I was going out with some friends, and she just kissed me on the forehead and told me not to drive too fast. She said she was going to send me back to school with a box full of flautas, some cookies, and a brick of Muenster cheese and tortillas, for making quesadillas. Did I have any requests for food? They might be going shopping later. I said that I didn't. As I was cruising down the Border Freeway toward the downtown bridges, I remembered how I had never really gone to Juárez in high school, not by myself. I always heard, mostly from my parents, how you could get pulled

over by a Mexican cop who'd just want a mordida. And if you didn't have enough money or didn't play it savvy enough, if you made him feel like the asshole that he was, then you might wind up in a Mexican jail, and no one would know where you were for a while. Maybe you'd escape only after you tasted your own blood. So I never went alone. That is, until now. And it wasn't that bad. I'd never been stopped at all. Sure, the traffic up the bridge was a mess during rush hour or a weekend night, but you'd sit and wait until you got there, that was all. I knew where to turn, I started recognizing the main streets, Avenida Juárez, 16 de Septiembre, Avenida Lerdo. I had even been on Avenida Reforma with Angie one day, the big boulevard that takes you south, outside the city, deeper into Mexico. We went to visit one of her friends who lived in a neighborhood where all the houses were freshly painted and neat but the streets were dusty, unpaved, full of swamplike puddles big enough to swallow a pickup. I wondered if my parents had always warned me about Juárez, their own hometown, because they really thought it was dangerous, or because they thought I couldn't hack it outside of gringolandia. I knew what to do on these streets.

When I finally got to Angie's house, it was just getting dark. The desert sun was just a faint crown of orange and yellow lights peeking out from the mountains. Angie had told me to be there by eight o'clock, and I was early. If I had waited any longer at home, my little brother might have taken off with the car. Anyway, maybe I could hang around and see what her house was like. I didn't mind. Angie answered the door, wearing an apron and looking like a voluptuous version of Ozzie's Harriet. An apron over a sharp party dress. She said she was glad that I was early, gave me a real wet kiss right on the mouth, and told me her older sister would be back in a second. Rocío had gone to the grocery store. Angie told me to relax and asked me if I wanted a beer, and I said yes. She said she was angry with her little sister, who had promised to be there to meet me but had then taken off with her boyfriend and probably wouldn't be back until late. Her little sister, Angie said, was a problem. A couple of months ago, Marisela had stopped going to nursing school. Now she had quit her job and was looking for a new one, and her novio would take her out dancing and drinking every week until the wee hours of the morning. Marisela did nothing around the house, and the two older sisters were having trouble controlling her, getting her on the right track.

Angie told me, as she was putting away a bucket and bottles of cleaning fluids, that they were planning a big get-together for Saturday. Could I still come? Sure I would. A couple of their friends would be over for dinner, including Rocío's boyfriend. After dinner they'd sit around and have a few beers and Cuba libres and maybe play the guitar and sing a round of old and new Mexican songs. One of the guys coming was an excellent poet at the Universidad de Juárez, and he might read some of his poetry. I never did any of that stuff at the Amherst parties I went to, except the drinking of course, so I was a little nervous about being out of place. A Chicano americanizado. But Angie had always made me feel right at home, so I quickly forgot about my fears.

"Oye, Victor," she whispered in my ear, catching me by surprise from behind as I strolled around the living room, "eres un amor," she said sweetly, kissing my earlobe. I shivered.

"Angie. What if I got a room for Saturday night after dinner?" I said, having thought about this now for hours, my shoulders and back still sore from pressing against the Buick's door handles.

"Perfecto. ¿En donde?"

"Maybe Motel 8 or the Holiday Inn. Something nice."

"Muy bien. You know, I'm going to miss you so much."

"Me too. I can see you en navidad, right?"

"Sí. Ay, mi rey, why do you have to go study in Massachusetts? Te vas a poner triste allá tan solo," she said, stroking back my hair so gently.

"Entonces dame algo para soñar en ti," I said coyly, finding everything I wanted in her dark brown eyes.

"¡Ay, diablo!" she said and kissed me so softly, her lips lingering over mine and opening up into a chasm and taking me completely in. I couldn't believe what I felt. I took a step back to kiss her hand, but it was really to calm down so I wouldn't be completely horny the entire evening. Jesus, she was incredible.

As we were about to walk out the door, Rocío stepped inside and said hello and asked what movie we were seeing. I said we weren't sure yet. She asked me if I was coming to the Saturday night reunión, and I said that I was. I didn't think I was too articulate, in fact I thought I was stammering. If Angie was voluptuous, Rocío was downright elegant. Like an Isabella Rossellini: reserved, confident, playful. When Angie and I finally got into the Buick, I kept thinking that in a weird way I could understand why they had had so many problems growing up, with their father and his friends and whoever else had tried to dominate them. These sisters were resplendent in a rough and unforgiving world. But I didn't get the sense, from that first and very brief meeting, that Rocío was shy like Angie. The older sister seemed capable of being tough and even competitive. I now knew where Angie had gotten her own confident look, the one she plastered on her face like a mask when she was at the Popular. What would have happened to the two other sisters without an older sibling like Rocío? In the cowboy country of Chihuahua City? Maybe El Paso wasn't that different from Chihuahua. Maybe here they just screwed you in English instead of Spanish. At least the sisters seemed in good shape now. At least here their father wasn't breathing down their necks.

We drove to the State Line, an expensive restaurant, at least for El Paso, which served steak and ribs and even barbacoa. Nothing here for a celery-chomping Yankee. I didn't mind blowing a big chunk of my paycheck on Angie; I really loved being with her. After last Saturday night, I felt as if the summer had been more than just a terrible blur of time passing away, and it had taken just her touch to do it. We got a cozy booth overlooking the lights of I-10. The young waitress brought us water and our menus. I didn't know if I could just reach out and hold Angie's hand. While I was thinking about it and pretending to look at my menu, she scooted over to my side and kissed me on the cheek. Maybe she could read my mind. That thought seemed frightening to me, and even more exciting than her holding me tightly in the back seat of the Buick. Finally the waitress came over and took our orders: barbecued baby back ribs and a Corona for me, and a Texas T-bone and a Dos Equis for her. There were only a few couples generously scattered around the restaurant. Once in a while you could hear the boisterous and arrogant laughter from a group of businessmen in a faraway corner, some of them struggling to understand the Spanish of the big Mexican client they'd been entertaining for the day. I took her hand and kissed it and thought about why I had been born when I was, and not ten years earlier, and why the hell I was up in bucolic New England studying how to calculate the present value of projected cash flows and the like. The beer had just the right cold sting slipping down my throat, and I knew then I didn't want to be anywhere else in the world.

Angie told me that she had just been promoted to "Assistant Manager" of her small department in the mezzanine, so I made an impromptu toast to her success, which made her eyes become even brighter and more loyal. I was really happy for her. She deserved every good thing she got. She said the new position meant more work and just a few extra dollars at the end of the week, but maybe she could eventually move up even higher. She said she was a little apprehensive about some of the things she would have to know in her new position. She was afraid the other cashiers would be jealous of her promotion and would jump on her mistakes when and if she made them. Up to this point, the manager in charge had been supportive and had told her she deserved a shot because she had worked so hard, without ever being absent. But she did have to master certain skills. I asked Angie what these things were. She said the most difficult one was something called "Inventory Accounting," something she had never had in school in Chihuahua. I laughed. She glared at me. For the first time, I knew she wasn't just sweet and shy but also proud. I told her I wasn't laughing at her.

"Entonces, what are laughing at?" she asked, still serious and stealing a pair of ribs from my plate.

"I just finished my second course in accounting. Got an A minus. I'll help you with inventory accounting if you want me to."

She smiled hard at me, in a friendly sort of way but still prideful. "Well," she snorted, "as

long as you teach me so that I can get an A because I don't want any A minus." This Angie girl was something else.

So instead of going to the movies, we drove east on I-10 to the UTEP library, which I knew was open until midnight. She had never been there before. I told her anyone could just walk right in, find a comfortable sofa overlooking the atrium, and read or relax. I showed her where she could get snacks, where the newspaper room was, and where she could make copies of whatever book she wanted. I found old editions of the accounting books I had used at Amherst and took her to the bank of conference rooms with chalkboards on the third floor. It was hard enough getting through the basics of debit and credit and assets equals liabilities plus equity without having the titillation of Angie's turquoise dress rubbing back and forth over her thighs every time she crossed her legs. I kept my focus, however. She seemed mysteriously captivated by the provisions for uncollectible accounts and merchandise returned. She asked whether these things might vary by store because she knew from experience that many customers would buy a load of goods on credit but list fake addresses. Others would routinely return half of what they had bought the previous week. I said that the company probably had a rough idea of what these percentages were, and she could tell them if these numbers didn't really apply to the Popular downtown.

After a couple of hours, we drove back to Juárez. I promised to help her a couple more times so that she would be ready to get the specific information she needed for her new assignments. When I pulled the Buick up to the front of her house, she slid closer to me, to the middle of the front seat, and kissed me and stroked my neck and chest until I told her I was going to rip her clothes off if she didn't get out of the car. Before she opened the door and stopped tormenting me, she whispered in my ear that I shouldn't forget the room for Saturday night. I could hear her black pumps clicking on the sidewalk as she walked to the front door, each click opening up and pinning back my heart to the wall of a blissful hunger.

The next day I finally got my airline tickets in the mail, and it suddenly dawned on me that I would be leaving next week. I had already told Joe that this would be my last week, and he had grunted a thank you and told me to come back if I ever needed a summer job. Sure I would, I said, thinking that if I ever needed another mindless stint of time I might instead opt for a temporary lobotomy if there was such a thing. I didn't bother to say goodbye to anyone at the Popular except Doña Leticia and the rest of the "girls" in Women's Lingerie, none of whom was younger than fifty. I had always liked their raucous free-for-all and the fact that these ladies could talk enough trash to make me blush and then turn on a dime and face a waiting customer with the most serious of faces. Angie Luna I didn't need to say goodbye to because I would be seeing her on Saturday. I'd also see her a couple more times next week so that she could get a good sense of accounting, or at least enough for her to find, on her own, the answers to any questions that might come up. It occurred to me that I was teaching accounting to Marilyn Monroe's Mexican double and that somehow I should feel stupid about that. But I could never

figure out where exactly the stupidity was in that situation. My mother, in another of her prolonged goodbyes, was already hugging me and kissing me whenever I walked through the house, imploring me to write and telling me not to walk alone at night in Amherst and to make my reservations for Christmas with enough time to spare. My father didn't say much except to point out that he was glad I had worked all summer and saved money for school. He said they, too, would add to the pot before I left. I thanked him.

On Saturday morning I got up early and told my mother I was going over to Grandma's to say goodbye in case I didn't get a chance next week. I had breakfast with my abuelitos, who were always early risers, and then drove my grandfather to his favorite store, the Western Auto on Paisano Street. I think he was looking for a new lawn mower bag. He told me he'd walk back the ten or so blocks because his legs were getting stiff from lack of exercise. As soon as I returned to their house, my grandmother said she needed a ride to El Centro, a community center for senior citizens. She said they were in the middle of a food drive. As soon as I dropped her off, I knew I was free for an hour or two before I'd have to pick her up. I went back to their house and dialed a couple of hotels and motels on I-10, the ones I had driven by many times before. I had never really done this before, yet I didn't think it would be a big deal, and it wasn't. Last year I had gotten a credit card from the tons of solicitations I always got in the mail at Amherst, a Visa with no annual fee ever. I got room rates, checkout times, and finally settled on the Holiday Inn next to the airport because it was convenient and probably nice. It wasn't the cheapest one, but I thought it would be worth it to be comfortable with Angie. I told the reservations desk that I was visiting relatives from out of town, made a one-day reservation for a junior suite, and told them I'd be arriving late today, probably around ten o'clock. No problem. Angie and I would spend part of the night there, I would drive her home whenever she was ready to go, and early on Sunday I would go back to the Holiday Inn and check out. Simple. As soon as I clicked the receiver down, I felt a great elation come over me, like a gust of the desert wind that sweeps through Transmountain Road. I couldn't wait.

I finally took off in the early evening, after renewing my lease of the Buick with my mother. Be careful, she said, don't get too crazy with your friends. She didn't know I was going to my first Mexican party. The whole scenario made me a little nervous. All of a sudden I thought I'd forgotten my Spanish. I didn't know if they would just hang around, drink some beers, or dance. What music would young Mexicans dance to? I didn't know if I'd feel too young among Rocío's friends or if they'd think I was just a quasi-gringo invading their territory. I wasn't a real Mexican, and I wasn't an American either. At least not at Amherst where everyone just assumed I was the expert on the best place for Mexican food. I was more like a shadow playing both sides of the game. I didn't mind. I knew Angie would be there and we would have a good time. When I arrived at Angie's house, Rocío answered the door, kissed both of my cheeks, and introduced me to a few people who were already sitting on the couch and on the floor. The other women kissed me on the cheeks too --I thought this kissing was terrific, for its immediate friendliness and sophistication-- and one of the guys handed me a beer and scooted over so I'd

have a good spot on the couch. Angie came in, I stood up, and she planted a big one right on my lips and sat next to me, her hand curled around mine. I was in a semi-state of shock, smiling stupidly in the face of this unabashed, almost bohemian warmth.

It was unlike any party I had ever been to. The first thing that struck me was that this crowd was slightly older than me, in their thirties. A few were at the university, as instructors, others worked in Juárez, only one other person worked in El Paso besides Angie and Rocío. Only Marisela and her boyfriend --she, by the way, was just as beautiful as her sisters, if only a little runty-- were close to my age. Since I was 6' 3", I didn't really stand out, at least I hoped I didn't, and no one even bothered to ask how old I was. After the initial flurry of kisses, I felt immediately comfortable being there. The other thing I liked was that they mostly sat around smoking and talked about politics and ideas, about the differences in American and Mexican cultures, about sexual politics and the differences between men and women, and even about sex itself, in an affectionate and open way, not in raunchy terms meant to shock or brag. Sure, I didn't like the smoking part, but even this seemed different than at Amherst. You weren't a pariah if you did it, and if you didn't smoke you didn't have that look of utter disgust. You just accepted it as being a part of this group of friends. There was also none of the paranoia of being checked out or the strange hope of checking someone else out. Just about everyone was part of a couple. This seemed the most natural thing in the world. It wasn't a room full of lonelies.

Someone brought in a tray full of little tostadas topped with pinto beans and a tangy white cheese, they called them "sopes," and there was a huge bowl of guacamole, extra-spicy, and another bowl of tortilla chips on the coffee table. More trays of hot food would just suddenly appear in front of the small group. Angie and Rocío kept shuttling to and from the kitchen without missing a beat of the conversation and laughter. After a while, a friend of theirs walked in, Fernando, and he was carrying a guitar which he started strumming and tuning before he sang a Mexican ballad, very softly at first, until the rest of us joined in. I felt a little stupid because I didn't know the words, but everyone was smiling and having a great time, and after the second verse I knew most of the refrain. Fernando sang for a while, one or two or three would join in, sometimes he'd just play without singing, letting us decide whether to join in or just listen to the guitar. I laughed a lot with Angie because she would keep whispering all sorts of things in my ear. We were both a little drunk. Everyone else was too. They only got friendlier with each other, arm in arm at the sound of their favorite rancheras, singing and swaying and declaring to the world that they were Mexican and proud of it. There were serious discussions about death and the purpose of life. We also laughed wildly, at the simplest things. One of them suddenly stood up, took out some papers from his coat pocket --he was the only one wearing a jacket, but no tie-- and demanded silence and was greeted first with hoots of excitement and then with a quiet so unnerving I thought I could hear myself perspire in the alcoholic heat. He recited some of his own written words in a voice at once passionate and then vulnerable. Poems about love and affliction and not knowing exactly who you were. Poems about courage and even the wretched life of the poor. I saw Angie shed a tear, and others too, including the men, whenever something

struck them deeply in the heart. Instead of feeling embarrassed, they were comforted and held by their friends, and I thought I was a part of them. After what seemed centuries of time gone by, Angie squeezed my hand and said we had to go. I stood up, kissed the women goodbye, and shook hands with the men. They asked me to come back, and I said that I would.

As we drove across the international bridge, I could feel Angie's head resting on my shoulder, her hand on my lap, her slow and warm breathing. I thought she might be falling asleep, but when I glanced down she smiled at me and nuzzled my neck. I exited at Airway Boulevard and pulled into the Holiday Inn. Angie said she would wait in the car. When I came back with the room keys, she was combing her hair in the rearview mirror and touching up her lipstick. We drove around and parked facing I-10, right at one of the entrances to the main part of the building. Our room, on the second floor at the end of a long hallway, was huge, with two queen-size beds, a small denlike area with a couch, a writing desk, a bathroom almost as big as my dorm room, and the perfect quiet we had been looking for. She said it was tremendous, and I agreed. She asked me if I minded relaxing and talking for a while, and I said that I didn't mind at all. I put the chain on the door, found a small radio and turned it to a jazz station from Las Cruces, and sat down with her on the couch. She had already slipped off her shoes so I did too. We talked about everything. When I would come back to El Paso, and for how long. How many years I still needed to finish my studies. Whether I liked her sisters, and how many brothers and sisters I myself had. If she could save enough money to buy a new car, since her old one was giving her so much trouble. How she would do in her new position, and with what allies and avoiding which enemies. Whether I wanted to come back to El Paso forever. I told her that I wasn't sure. She reached over and took my hand, pulled me closer to her side. We kissed and caressed each other until nothing seemed to matter anymore, not our distance from each other, and not the futility of our love, which wandered far away into the deepest part of my mind. Her perfume enveloped me, took me in, and carried me up. I asked her if she still wanted to be with me. And she asked me if I could turn off the lights.

I held Angie Luna in that room for hours, and I remember the different times we made love like epochs in a civilization, each movement and every touch, apex upon abyss. In the luxury of our bed, we tried every position and every angle. I explored the curves of her body and delighted in seeing the freedom of her ecstasy. Her desperate whispers and pleas. I told her I loved her, and she said she loved me too. We lay in bed with our limbs entangled, in a pacific silence that reminded me of existing on a beach just for the sake of such an existence. I couldn't imagine the world ever becoming better, and for some strange reason the thought slipped into my head that I had suddenly grown to be an old man because I could only hope to repeat, but never improve on, a night like this. I finally took her home sometime when the interstate was empty, and the bridges seemed to lead nowhere, for they were desolate too.

I saw her a few more times before I left for Massachusetts, but nothing shattered me like that particular night, the night of my first Mexican party and my first teary-eyed ranchera, the

night when I knew nothing would stop us, and then nothing did. And I just slammed into that black wall. I came back to El Paso for Christmas, having written to her but having received only one brief letter in return. She had returned to Chihuahua, her sister Rocío confirmed this in the empty coldness of a desert winter. Angie had returned to take care of her ailing father when nobody else would. I had never bothered to ask Angie about her mother, and I felt like an idiot. Rocío said that indeed their mother had died many years ago, of breast cancer and its neglect. She told me not to feel guilty about it, most of their friends didn't know either. She told me that Angie had made the decision to go back to Chihuahua, freely and without any remorse. Rocío asked me if I wanted to stay for a drink. I told her I couldn't but only because I thought I was going to choke. She said she would tell Angie I had stopped by. I thanked her for being so kind.

Discussion questions for *The Last Tortilla and Other Stories* (University of Arizona Press: 1999, ISBN: 0-8165-1961-7), by Sergio Troncoso.

<http://sergiotroncoso.com/tortilla/questions/index.htm>

1. In the story "Angie Luna," Victor says: "I wasn't a real Mexican, and I wasn't an American either. . . . I was more like a shadow playing both sides of the game." How is this a story about self-identity, not only for Victor but also for Angie? How are they pulled toward different cultural identities as they live, literally, on the border between two worlds? Do they each resolve the struggle to define themselves? What do you think of the choices that Victor and Angie make?

2. "Angie Luna" is also a love story. What does this story say about love? Is there an 'ephemeral' quality to love affairs that dooms them from the start? Or is it this heightened passion --which just as easily can lead to a long-lasting relationship as it can to heartbreak-- that makes love an unforgettable experience? Why do Victor and Angie love each other? Would they have to change to stay together? Why or why not?

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We took Chuy to the ditch behind my house, Joe, me, and Fernández, and tied him up. We tied him up tight with a rope I found in the shed. It must've burned his wrists 'cause as soon as Joe yanked on the square knot, Chuy yelped and started blubbering in the way he does when he's hungry, but I know he wasn't hungry. It hadn't been more than ten minutes since I had given him the Heath bar in front of his porch, right under his mama's eyes. Hell, I could smell the frijoles she was cooking in the kitchen just as I dangled the shiny wrapper under those stupid eyes. He followed me like a puppy, and then we tied him up secret-like.

A Rock Trying to Be a Stone

chievous smile. Her mind was rolling again, but we hadn't been talking about anything funny. I reached out and held her hand. She put her hand around my waist and kissed me. And I kissed her. It was really the most delicious of kisses. Wet, but not slimy. Our lips playing off each other so easily. A sort of rhythm building up, like a crescendo, and dropping off to stoke our desire. Becky became much more beautiful to me when I kissed her. What she could do and what I felt seemed to flash over me like a new kind of light that transformed what I saw in front of me. I touched her face and stroked her shoulders and gently rubbed her legs as if to confirm this strange and wonderful metamorphosis. This was the same face, and yet it wasn't. Her body had been pretty, but now when I touched it, when she let me touch it, it seemed I was touching a star exploding alone in the abyss of the universe. I was short of breath, and it wasn't simply because I was excited to be with her. The hard reality of this City, this black pavement, seemed suddenly alive like skin. I was crashing through this surface into—what?—the vibration of life. It was better than walking down Broadway at night, the cold on your cheeks. It was like walking, and then levitating into the lights.

I am grateful to the following publications for publishing my stories first. "Remembering Possibilities" originally appeared in *Other Voices*; "Angie Luna" in *New World: Young Latino Writers* (Dell Publishing, 1997) and *Electric Mercado*; "A Rock Trying to Be a Stone" in *Blue Mesa Review* and *Electric Mercado*; "The Snake" in *Blue Mesa Review* and *Electric Mercado*; "The Abuelita" in *Río Grande Review*; "The Gardener" in *American Way*; and "Espiritu Santo" in *Electric Mercado* and *T-Zero Writers' Annual*.

Acknowledgments



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