

## Mining the Harvest

In Latino writing (and perhaps in all writing), the questions "Who am I?" and "Where do I belong?" lead directly into explorations of the family and family heritage. As anyone who has pursued genealogy studies knows, it does not take long for a family tree to become entwined in a chaos of complications. When the roots and branches cover large families in which ancestors traveled back and forth between countries and there were frequent relationships between indigenous and African slave populations, the lines are particularly complex. Latino writers cannot easily avoid the connections that result from tracing back to their ancestors, and once they embark on such examinations, all sorts of questions and problematic issues arise. Which pieces of a family history and which government systems deserve allegiance? What form of spiritual belief is legitimate? What separates superstition from truth? Which cultural rituals, customs, and traditions are antiquated or sexist? Which merit protection? What is the Latino's relationship with ghosts and the dead? Are music and dance somehow inherently tied to the orishas of Africa? What links the *abuela* with the *curandera*, the herbalist with the midwife? What remnants of the conquistador's brutality resurface in family members? What foods are bridges into the Latin American world families are striving to preserve? The answers are the subjects of countless works as Latino writers struggle to juxtapose the flavors of the past with the practical reality of North American mainstream life. These artists journey south to gather the fruits of their cultural past to make sense of the present, to deal with the dualities of living as Latinos within U.S. borders.

## FICTION

## Rudolfo A. Anaya

Rudolfo Anaya is seen by many as the godfather of Chicano literature. He was born into a large family on October 30, 1937, in Pasturas, New Mexico, and later moved to Albuquerque. His first novel, *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), is his most famous. Critic Ramón Saldivar has called the book a "New Mexican portrait of the artist as a young boy." Until the recent success of several Latina writers in the 1980s, no Latino work of literature was more highly praised. Besides teaching at the University of Mexico, he has written an extensive number of novels, short stories, essays, and stories for children. Anaya was one of the first Chicano writers to veer away from straight realist, urban portraits of Latinos and structure his work on literary and mythic patterns.

## In Search of Epifano

She drove into the desert of Sonora in search of Epifano. For years, when summer came and she finished her classes, she had loaded her old Jeep with supplies and gone south into Mexico.

Now she was almost eighty and, she thought, ready for death but not afraid of death. It was the pain of the bone-jarring journey which was her reality, not thoughts of death. But that did not diminish the urgency she felt as she drove south, across the desert. She was following the north rim of El Cañon de Cobre towards the land of the Tarahumaras. In the Indian villages there was always a welcome and fresh water.

The battered Jeep kicked up a cloud of chalky dust which rose into the empty and searing sky of summer. Around her, nothing moved in the heat. Dry mirages rose and shimmered, without content, without form. Her bright, clear eyes remained fixed on the rocky, rutted road in front. Around her there was only the vast and empty space of the desert. The dry heat.

The Jeep wrenched sideways, the low gear groaning and complaining. It had broken down once, and had cost her many days' delay in Mexicali. The mechanic at the garage told her not to worry. In one day the parts would be in Calexico and she would be on her way.

But she knew the way of the Mexican, so she rented a room in a hotel nearby. Yes, she knew the Mexican. Part of her blood was Mexican, wasn't it? Her great-grandfather, Epifano, had come north to Chihuahua to ranch and mine. She knew the stories whispered about the man, how he had built a great ranch in the desert. His picture was preserved in the family album, at his side his wife, a dark-haired woman. Around them, their sons.

The dry desert air burned her nostrils. A scent of the green ocotillo reached her, reminded her of other times, other years. She knew how to live in the sun, how to travel and how to survive, and she knew how to be alone under the stars. Night was her time in the desert. She liked to lie in her bedroll and look up at the swirling dance of the stars. In the cool of evening, her pulse would quicken. The sure path of the stars was her map, drawing her south.

Sweat streaked her wrinkled skin. Sweat and dust, the scent comingling. She felt alive. "At least I'm not dry and dead," she said aloud. Sweat and pleasure, it came together.

The Jeep worried her now. A sound somewhere in the gearbox was not right. "It has trouble," the mechanic had said, wiping his oily hands on a dirty rag. What he meant was that he did not trust his work. It was best to return home, he suggested with a shrug. He had seen her musing over the old and tattered map, and he was concerned about the old woman going south. Alone. It was not good.

"We all have trouble," she mumbled. We live too long and the bones get brittle and the blood dries up. Why can't I taste the desert in my mouth? Have I grown so old? Epifano? How does it feel to become a spirit of the desert?

Her back and arms ached from driving; she was covered with the dust of the desert. Deep inside, in her liver or in her spleen, in one of those organs that the ancients called the seat of life, there was an ache, a dull, persistent pain. In her heart there was a tightness. Would she die and never reach the land of Epifano?

She slept while she waited for the Jeep to be repaired. Slept and dreamed under the shade of the laurel in the patio of the small hotel. Around her, Mexican sounds and colors permeated her dream. What did she dream? That it was too late in her life to go once again into the desert? That she was an old woman and her life was lived, and the only evidence she would leave of her existence would be her sketches and paintings? Even now, as weariness filled her, the dreams came, and she slipped in and out of past and present. In her dreams she heard the voice of the old man, Epifano.

She saw his eyes, blue and bright like hers, piercing but soft. The eyes of a kind man. He had died. Of course, he had died. He belonged to the past. But she had not forgotten him. In the family album, which she carried with her, his gaze was the one that looked out at her and drew her into the desert. She was the artist of the family. She had taken up painting. She heard voices. The voice of her great-grandfather. The rest of her family had forgotten the past, forgotten Mexico and the old man, Epifano.

The groaning of the Jeep shattered the silence of the desert. She tasted dust in her mouth, she yearned for a drink of water. She smiled. A thirst to be satisfied. Always there was one more desire to be satisfied. Her paintings were like that, a desire from within to be satisfied, a call to do one more sketch of the desert in the molten light before night came. And always the voice of Epifano drawing her to the trek into the past.

The immense solitude of the desert swallowed her. She was only a moving shadow in the burning day. Overhead, vultures circled in the sky, the heat grew intense. She was alone on a dirt road she barely remembered, taking her bearings only by instinct, roughly following the north rim of the Cañon de Cobre, drawn by the thin line of the horizon, where the dull peaks of las montañas met the dull blue of the sky. Whirlwinds danced in her eyes, memories flooded at her soul.

She had married young. She thought she was in love; he was a man of ambition. It took her years to learn that he had little desire of passion. He could not, or would not, fulfill her. What was the fulfillment she sought? It had to do with something that lay even beneath the moments of love or children carried in the womb. Of that she was sure.

She turned to painting, she took classes, she traveled alone. She came to understand that she and the man were not meant for each other.

She remembered a strange thing had happened in the chapel where the family gathered to attend her marriage. An Indian had entered and stood at the back of the room. She had turned and looked at him. Then he was gone, and later she was not sure if the appearance was real or imagined.

But she did not forget. She had looked into his eyes. He had the features of a Tarahumara. Was he Epifano's messenger? Had he brought a warning? For a moment she hesitated, then she had turned and said yes to the preacher's question. Yes to the man who could never understand the depth of her passion. She did what was expected of her there in the land of ocean and sun. She bore him a daughter and a son. But in all those years, the man never understood the desire in her, he never explored her depth of passion. She turned to

25

her dreams, and there she heard the voice of Epifano, a resonant voice imparting seductive images of the past.

Years later she left her husband, left everything, left the dream of southern California where there was no love in the arms of the man, no sweet juices in the nights of love pretended. She left the circle of pretend. She needed a meaning, she needed desperately to understand the voices which spoke in her soul. She drove south, alone, in search of Epifano. The desert dried her by day, but replenished her at night. She learned that the mystery of the stars at night was like the mystery in her soul.

20

She sketched, she painted, and each year in springtime she drove farther south. On her map she marked her goal, the place where once stood Epifano's hacienda.

In the desert the voices were clear. She followed the road into Tarahumara country, she dreamed of the old man, Epifano. She was his blood, the only one who remembered him.

At the end of day she stood at the side of a pool of water, a small, desert spring surrounded by desert trees. The smell of the air was cool, wet. At her feet, tracks of deer, a desert cat. Ocelot. She stooped to drink, like a cautious animal.

"Thank the gods for this water which quenches our thirst," she said, splashing the precious water on her face, knowing there is no life in the desert without the water which flows from deep within the earth. Around her, the first stars of dusk began to appear.

She had come at last to the ranch of Epifano. There, below the spring where she stood, on the flat ground, was the hacienda. Now could be seen only the outlines of the foundation and the shape of the old corrals. From here his family had spread, northwest, up into Mexicali and finally into southern California. Seeds. Desert seeds seeking precious water. The water of desire. And only she had returned.

She sat and gazed at the desert, the peaceful, quiet mauve of the setting sun. She felt a deep sadness within. An old woman, sitting alone in the wide desert, her dream done.

A noise caused her to turn. Perhaps an animal come to drink at the spring, the same spring where Epifano had once wet his lips. She waited, and in the shadows of the palo verde and the desert willows she saw the Indian appear. She smiled.

She was dressed in white, the color of desire not consummated. Shadows moved around her. She had come home, home to the arms of Epifano. The Indian was a tall, splendid man. Silent. He wore paint, as they did in the old days when they ran the game of the pelota up and down las montañas of the Cañon de Cobre.

"Epifano," she said, "I came in search of Epifano." He understood the name. Epifano. He held his hand to his chest. His eyes were bright and blue, not Tarahumara eyes, but the eyes of Epifano. He had known she would come. Around her, other shadows moved, the women. Indian women of the desert. They moved silently around her, a circle of women, an old ceremony about to begin.

The sadness left her. She struggled to rise, and in the dying light of the sun a blinding flash filled her being. Like desire, or like an arrow from the bow of the Indian, the light filled her and she quivered.

30 The moan of love is like the moan of life. She was dressed in white.

## Daniel Chacón

Daniel Chacón was born in California and graduated from the University of Oregon. He has published a single collection of short fiction, *Chicano Chicaneery* (2002). His stories concentrate on the quirky male characters of the Latino working class in a wide variety of situations. He has also written a novel entitled *and the shadows took him: A Novel* (2004). Like Dagoberto Gilb, and to some extent, Oscar Hijuelos, Chacón is unafraid to sound sexist or politically incorrect, and his biting, sometimes sarcastic humor is uncommon to Latino fiction.

## The Biggest City in the World

Harvey Gomez stepped off the plane in Mexico City and couldn't believe what he saw: Among the multitudes of *metizos* walking through the airport was Professor David P. Rogstart, followed by a little Mexican boy carrying his luggage. Gomez quickly showed his papers to the Mexican official and ran through the crowd to catch the professor. When he got close enough to where he could see the familiar red-orange shine of Rogstart's bald head, he yelled, "Professor Rogstart! Professor Rogstart!"

The professor, at least a foot taller than almost everyone else in the airport, turned around, not as if surprised to hear his name, but with impatience, as if to say, "What do you want now?"

Gomez jumped on his toes as he walked, trying to show himself above the heads of the Mexicans. He raised his hands and yelled, "Here, Professor, here!"

Gomez tried to move faster, but the crowd was too dense. Then a little Indian woman, even shorter than him, stood right in front of him with sad eyes, a wrinkled face, and an empty palm extended for alms. "*Por favor, joven, regálame un taco.*"<sup>1</sup>

5 "Yeah, right," he said to himself as he twisted around her like a matador.

Finally, he reached the professor.

"Professor, it's me!"

Rogstart stopped and looked around, but his gaze was high, so Gomez, feeling a little silly, had to raise his arm, as if to say, "I'm down here."

"Oh, hello, Harvey," the professor said, as if running into him were something ordinary.

But Gomez didn't think it was ordinary, so he spilled out his words like a child: "Imagine you and I seeing each other in the world's biggest city! How weird! Isn't that the weirdest thing in the world?"

<sup>1</sup> "Please, young one, let me have a taco."

10 "Actually, no," said the professor, quite calmly. "In fact, it makes a lot of sense that we would run into each other."  
"How's that?"

The professor, removing the specs from his pale blue eyes, spoke with a hint of impatience, like professors sound when asked questions that have already been answered. "You're a graduate student," he said, "who studies Mexico. I'm a professor and scholar of Mexican history. It's winter vacation, so we have a month off. This is an historically important city. In fact, the only thing that might surprise me is that we weren't on the same flight."

"But Mexico City's the biggest city in the world!"

"It makes complete sense," Rogstart said, the subject closed.

15 A Mexican man in rags came up and asked something of the professor, but he spoke so fast that Gomez could hardly catch it. The professor pulled some change from his pocket and gave it to the man, who bowed "thank you" and then looked at Gomez with begging eyes. The man's teeth were rotten and he smelled like mildew and motor oil. Gomez felt in his pocket for his roll of bills. After having saved money for years and having won the Hispanic Scholarship Award from the Grape Growers of America Association, this was the first time that he was able to travel. His father, a postal worker, never had enough money to help him with school, and, in fact, spent most of his life in debt. This began must have seen a rich man when he saw Gomez. Although the student was simply dressed in black canvas slacks, a pullover shirt with the Polo emblem at the breast, and comfortable black shoes, each item of clothing, Gomez figured, probably cost more money than the man earned in a year. Still, he wasn't rich, and it seemed a crime to just give money away to this stranger. He felt the roll of bills in his front pocket.

"I don't have any change," he said.

"Anything will be fine," the man said, his eyelids collapsing with sadness and fatigue.

Gomez looked up at Rogstart, who turned away.

"Just go," Gomez said softly.

20 The man made a show of thanking Rogstart again, looked at Gomez one last time through the thick hair that hung over his face, and then walked off with as much dignity as he could muster.

"Well, Harvey, I hope you have a fine vacation," said the professor.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, sir," Gomez said, as the professor walked off.

At baggage claim, he found the worn, vinyl suitcase that had belonged to his grandparents and dragged it through the airport which seemed to grow bigger and wider with every step, like a coliseum flooded with lights. A boy came up and asked him something, but Gomez didn't understand because he spoke too fast, so the boy asked in English, "Carry your bag, *joven*?"<sup>2</sup>

"Oh, I speak Spanish," Gomez said in English. "I just didn't hear what you said. And no thank you. I'll carry my own bag."

<sup>2</sup> young one