

TRAVELS WITH MONA: *TWIN TIME: OR, HOW DEATH BEFELL ME*

Whoever hears me assert that the grey cat playing just now in the yard is the same one that did jumps and tricks there five hundred years ago will think whatever he likes of me; but it is a stranger form of madness to imagine that the present-day cat is fundamentally an entirely different one.

Arthur Schopenhauer

The first ambiguity among many in this intense and brilliant first novel by Veronica Gonzalez appears in the title: If death had befallen the narrator herself how could she speak of it in a past tense? Twins set off a host of literary associations from Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* to Dostoevsky's *The Double*. Tragedy and The Absurd are a given. But the doubling also suggests the state of immigrant lives – perhaps the condition most characteristic of the 20th century – that experience of living between two cultures and the torments and confusions that follow; that there is also a sense of liberation and cultural richness in that doubling is inevitably part of the package. Immigrants tend to be haunted by home, the past, and family intimacies in a way that is peculiarly intense and distant at the same time: memories and the present are in counterpoint to a degree of pathological keenness. The unsettling cover of this book, a photo by Enrique Metinides of a woman – dying or already dead, a part of her insides already lying on the street in Mexico City - conveys some of those ambiguities in a single haunted image. Her well-manicured hand rests on a slab of granite and her well coiffed head stares up to the sky in what looks to be reflective thought. Behind her a dark skinned medical worker is about to cover her with a sheet. The image could be a scene from the film of the book but, in fact, it's a documentary shot. So that the ambiguities begin with the title and the cover, but unlike much post-modern fiction which generates ambiguities presumably to subvert conventional “dominant” narratives Gonzalez uses them selectively to create a

polyphonic narrative that takes us from Mexico City in the sixties to Los Angeles and New York at the end of the century. In that sense the novel is closer to Cortazar's playful and dark narratives than to the meta-fictions of Kathy Acker. The novel has three sections: *Mara and the Baker*, *How Death Befell Me* and *Manolo Makes Shoes*. Within these are a series of short chapters, titled but unnumbered - some only a page in length. The variety in the tone of the chapter headings mirrors the intensely felt displacement of the main character - from her two social worlds: the United States and Mexico, her two families: biological and adopted, and even her own body: split into female and male twins who don't know who they are. In a sense Mona is not so much in search of the past - of lost time - but of that particular time/place that has become a repetitive motif - a musical trauma of separation that repeats in her interior life until the narrator must search for its source. The novel is a detective story in which the character of Mona sets out on a quest that is both an act of reclamation and understanding.

Mara and the Baker - much of it told in the second person - is an account of Mona's mother and her terrifying brief encounter with the man who impregnates her and then her relationship with the baker who helps her escape a life of abuse. The sense of detachment which results from trauma is there in the staccato rhythms of the prose:

And in these rides through the city you sometimes see it from above like a French film as you sit in the back and you just look down, way way down from up there, at your mother where she sits in the front seat with that one man's arm tight around her shoulder sounding phony laughing too hard, and smoking cigarettes and then again laughing a fake laugh which goes on for way too long and then she holds her head back in guffaws so that you see her teeth, her ugly teeth; and you will not ever hold her hand, or anyone's hand, not ever, not ever again. (18)

Embedded in the language is a tension between the distancing second person and the profound alienation from intimacy that the character senses without being able to articulate it – except through the beautiful description of French films and their shots from above and at a distance. As in those films of the New Wave, whose documentary long shots were a counterpoint to the intimate moments that followed, *Twin Time* uses the second person to distance us only to achieve greater emotional impact for the close-ups that follow:

You are dead. And tonight you don't know what things mean. In this taxi as it speeds you home, you have no idea of what things are. You told him to go fast, your mother left behind, asleep now, like so many other people in the middle of this night, your mother asleep like a million other people in this city, in the middle of this night. As soon as she fell into her slumber, as soon as your mother and those two men all fell into their slumber—you there pretending to sleep too, your eyes shut, trying not to even breathe – as soon as they fell you snuck outside. Quiet now, you snuck, until you were outside. Then you ran, crying, and in the middle of your running you found a taxicab, and this man scared you too, it was a man driving that cab, a *man*, but he didn't even ask you why you cried. Where are you going? Is all he asked. (25)

The repetition of “sleep”, “this night” and “slumber” brilliantly create the sense of somnambulistic wandering in the back of a taxi at night. One can almost sense the street lights and the shops passing by in slow motion – then a paragraph isolated from the rest: “And now, safely off the street, safely in your ride, you think that it should never have occurred. Did that really happen? Your legs sore, the insides of your thighs” (26). The word rape has not been mentioned but its absence is the black hole that pulls the language which surrounds it towards it and gives everything that we have read another meaning – the isolation of the character, her intense introspection, and the distancing devices used acquire a depth. Nevertheless this voice refuses to become didactic or to congeal into the moralizing metaphors that we've all seen before. The night drive home seems fraught

with danger and possibility – and we understand, as Borges puts it when writing about narrative art and magic, that: “every episode in a careful narrative is a premonition”.

The car accident that ultimately kills Mara many years later is already felt in the early portion of the book, most pointedly when Mara sleeps at her grandmother’s house where she sees a guardian angel above the bed:

In the picture the angel is huge with long golden hair and big white wings and her large hand sits under the slats of a high bridge a boy and a girl are crossing. Her hand saves them, keeps them from falling...and her mother looked over from in front of the mirror, through the mirror, so that it was the back of her head and her face both which Mara turned and saw when she began to speak.

‘She pulls her hand back sometimes,’ her mother said.

‘What?’ Mara asked confused.

‘Just to see what will happen. She pulls her hand back. Otherwise how would people ever die?’

Mara stared through the mirror, deep into her mother’s eyes, not understanding and terrified, unable to talk. And then that night in bed, her own eyes looking past the picture and at the ceiling, no longer able to focus her gaze on that scene she wondered if she was a girl from whom an angel would pull back her hand. (67)

The scene is beautifully cinematic – we see from Mara’s POV her mother doubled due to the mirror – a scene that might be in Bergman. As Mara’s section of the book closes the language begins to mimic her consciousness while describing an overwhelming sensory experience in the manner of Joyce:

It was not so unclear. Her mother had done this to her. And, her mother had pushed her on the old man. Her laughing mouth, that strong womanly stench. Overpowering all her senses. Loud in public but low, controlled and convincing when at home, and wicked too, dangling presents like carrots. And she a dope. A stupid Mara. Stupid stupid fish. A great big swallowed up she....and then her tears at leaving her mother. Driving in the night. In that car. Her head confusedly sifting previous dream of fleeing and the actual in the car of that night. Her mother. She was her mother. The baker. There he stood in the kitchen. That baker. That man. (75)

Her fear and contempt are palpable in those staccato rhythms without being directly expressed, and they move from her mother to the baker in an instant. The nuances of the characters' emotional states are manifested while wandering the urban landscapes of Mexico City and Los Angeles in a way that recalls Mrs. Dalloway as much as Monica Vitti in Antonioni's *La Notte* – women on epic expeditions around the corner.

Mona's first person narration of *How Death Befell Me* begins "I walked numb..." as Mona attends to her father, the baker, while he dies in a hospital in Los Angeles in 1997. We then flash back to Mona's upbringing in the suburbs of LA, her anger and frustration at her father's version of the past, and we are reminded of the "family histories" that are repeated like mantras in immigrant homes as if to keep the houses from imploding. Her father's passivity, his saccharine history of a "mother dead in childbirth" are, like his sweets, unpalatable to Mona. In the literature of immigration – Cortazar's *Hopscotch*, Burgess' *Beard's Roman Women*, Camus' *The Fall*, V.S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* characters are invariably haunted by specters of the past in various forms. In one of the most beautiful passages reminiscent of Isabel Allende's family histories Mara notices "these dark colored paintings...painted by her now dead great grandfather Andres. They were of a brother and sister he had left behind in Spain; their creepy green eyes followed you wherever you went. They had both died of fevers the year after he left. She had had fevers, and she wondered how hot you had to get before a fever could make you dead" (69). Always those left behind and the dead that haunt the present in ways that rational discourse cannot cope with. Mona later in the book rails against those

limitations of time and place in the form of her father: After fighting a girl in school over her mother she comes back home:

...my heart still racing, and there he was in the kitchen baking, so calm, happy, serene, so outside of everything, life for him just flour and eggs; and I wanted to hurt him. I wanted my father to weep. How, how do you not know anything? I wanted to yell. Though of course, when his hands began shaking, I couldn't keep going; my anger could kill him, I knew. I don't know, he'd repeated and I pulled out of it all. Took it off like a coat. (107)

The "I knew" and the "I don't know" - so close! - challenge each other without resolution. It's then that Mona realizes there is a twin, a brother "still out there somewhere." After her father's death, she goes in search of the brother by packing "some gingham fabric tied into a little hobo pack full of my belongings, and some biscuits for the trip..." (114). She also takes her father's ashes (in a Ziploc bag) and goes off on her journey. At first we are given an ironic reference to the well known formula of fairy tales: "The woods were dark, as woods so often are" (130). Then there is a beautiful shift in tense and thus time:

I pushed through the low branches of an oak tree and saw them there in the distance, coming my way. I knew them, I felt. I worked hard to recall and it was only minutes before I placed them: It was the group from that day two and a half decades back. On that day, the woman who'd sold us our house had just walked in the back door; I'd stood for a moment of quiet reflection there with my dad, that group had appeared walking toward the path. My heart lifted now as I recalled it, *On an adventure*, my father had said, and here they were; it turned out he was right! (133)

The quotidian and the eternal meet "on an adventure" – significantly promised by the father. The site of the "adventure," the purchase of a new house, a new beginning, comes again full circle as Mona leaves the house to find her own way. She then runs across twelve Nordic young men who demand that Mona "Cook us food that makes us sweat; make it so hot we hallucinate....We want to have a Mexican feast tonight. We are going

to have an Aztec party... Sing to us in your sweet Mexican voice. Yes, yes, teach us how to dance!” Mona explains that “she really can’t hang out here in your cave. And besides ... I usually just do take-out; surely someone must deliver up here?”(135). After evading the twelve men who have passed out from drinking Don tequila (Don being Spanish for “gentleman”) Mona goes on her way. When it comes time for her to sleep she uses the Zip-Lock bag with her father’s ashes as a pillow. Upon waking she finds a young Chinese woman named Lily looking for her father. When Mona assumes the girl is Japanese, Lily curtly corrects her. Mona replies that people always assume that she’s Mexican without asking, as if there are no other south of the border cultures. Lily nibbles her biscuits rather than ponder the complexities involved. Cultural heritage, even in an enchanted forest, can be overwhelming. And as in Mona’s offer of bringing some “Take-Out” to the young Nordic men, the world of quotidian reality keeps bringing the fairy tale into contact with the world of everyday life. They are not so much next to each other as overlaid as in a palimpsest. When Lily explains that she has also met the twelve Nordic men who forced her to cook a huge Chinese feast and serve it wearing a silk dress and that she then had sex with “the best looking one” Mona excuses herself and continues on her journey. It is then that she imagines how her mother and father must have courted. The scene has them eloping as the father bakes a meal that puts a party into a deep sleep that lasts for days enabling the young couple to elope. And at that point Mona’s parents in flight become a mirror image of Mona herself as the sleeping guests mirror the Nordic men. Throughout the novel stories and characters mirror each other or complete each other, bringing various aspects into contact, past - present, quotidian - fairy tale, and a myriad of characters, all double and converge.

As Mona goes deeper into the woods she encounters four feral children. One of the girls is named Mona and she is henceforth called little Mona. They all play “The Enchanted” a game where one child is “it” and has to catch the others who then have to stop and freeze “and like this it would go on until all the kids were caught, frozen stiff, dead in their tracks” (172). This game in which children become a tableau of “childhood” is both sinister and symbolic of Mona’s own predicament. Her childhood is frozen until its traumas are unlocked and made to play themselves out in a narrative that can be understood; in a sense little Mona has to touch big Mona to set her free so that the “enchantment” is itself doubled. This scene ends when the feral children chide big Mona for having hair on her pee and Mona hears their “piercing laughter following me back into the depth of the dark woods” (182).

Mona then inches along and imaginatively conjures her father as a young man among his peers working and playing in Acapulco and planning a future that seems large and full of possibility. Significantly this insight is gleaned after she imagines her father floating up away from her along with the feral children and the Nordic young men. A similar scene occurs near the end of Bergman’s *Wild Strawberries* in which the old professor imagines his parents as young adults in mid-summer swimming in a lake beckoning him to join them. In a sense it is only this memory – or this re-creation – that both joins the Professor to his parents – he meets them as equals – and liberates him from the guilt of their mistakes. Mona likewise tries to understand her father’s past:

By the time he was fourteen my father had made it to Acapulco on the back of a truck with two or three other boys from his small town, the one of the magic tricks and permanent sneer having convinced them all to hitch along...The sneering magic trick boy’s older brother was a front desk clerk at one of the big hotels and he got them all jobs as bellhops, feet trained to run forth at the sound of

clink clink... Learning broken English from the tourists and drinking in the sun and the cheap beer. My father having reached the ocean on his own, running around with other bellhops, wild with the breath of possibility and his own strength at having reached. (187)

As in the Bergman film the empathic image is one that frees Mona from the psychological weight of her father's failures.

In *Manolo Makes Shoes* Mona hires a detective to find her brother. Through the detective she learns that his name is Manolo and that he's living in New York making shoes after having spent a life growing up in London. She writes him an introductory letter: "I am your long lost sister. Did you know you had one? A twin. And now it is twin time. Love, Mona" and they finally meet in New York (218). Manolo tells her his story and Mona – on seeing pictures of Mara across the years - now can see her mother through his eyes – a young woman going with her son to see the films of Cocteau, Godard and Fellini – films to which she had been introduced by a boyfriend before she ran off with the baker. The father Manolo grew up with, and with whom Mara left for London in 1967, abandoning Mona in the process, had a great talent for cutting hair and so got to work with John Cowan (the inspiration for Antonioni's photographer in *Blow-Up*) and the other fashion photographers of the period. One of David Bailey's pictures has their mother in it: "...and there she was with some man, doing the twist perhaps, her hair shoulder length and spinning around her face so that you couldn't see her features...He told me the picture was reproduced in a David Bailey book with a caption that read: couple dancing" (237). Mara wonders at the stories of her mother that no one will ever know when they see that picture – and by inference of all the photographs and

their intersecting destinies – narratives that weave a vast fabric that no one can see except in small segments that pertain to their own personal lives and perhaps those they get to know along the way; and Mara knows that there are always gaps; she starkly sees the gaps between herself and her mother in those pictures: “He picked up another one, this one of a blond girl in a bikini standing atop a table in a dark pub” (238). Cowan’s shot from the early sixties was one of the first to break open the taboo of class distinctions and segregation of the sexes in pubs by having women pose with self-confident non-chalance in male working class environs. London would never be the same – and in a real sense Mona’s mother had participated in that mixing, the breaking down of two separate worlds, in London but also in her earlier life in Mexico City, when she, the uneducated daughter of a woman who used her to tempt men learned about film and music from an educated young historian and writer.

Mona shows Manuel the ashes in the Zip-Loc bag and introduces him to her father. Manuel puts the bag alongside the pictures – the black and white photos and the ashes together sum up beautifully the baggage that each twin has brought with them. Later on they take the ashes to the cloisters in Fort Tyron Park where Mona reads a plaque commemorating the first American woman soldier overlooking the Hudson River before they bury the ashes, and a part of Mona’s baggage in the process.

There have been a series of brilliant novels that have come out at the turn of the century that deal with characters coming to terms with the past. Among others: Edward Said’s *Out of Place*, Joan Didion’s *Where I Was From* and *The Year of Magical Thinking*,

Vargas Llosa's *The Bad Girl*, Martin Amis' *Experience* and Philip Roth's *Exit Ghost*. Gonzalez's *Twin Time* tells the story of people caught between places, haunted by a traumatic past that seems disconnected from the present and by what Proust called "the tyranny of the particular." Exiled lives always seem self-consciously provisional, in transit, always looking back as much as forward and conscious to a high degree of the evanescence of particular moments and places. For that reason the pacing of their movements and their speech – even if there is no accent - is different. Gonzalez's writing captures all of that in her novel of one woman's journey from a past disconnected from its own history – from the social – from History, so that the past is seen as a prison, (which is how Nabokov saw time); yet by the end of the book – after finding her twin and seeing those pictures of her mother in the context of her own time she begins to see herself differently – discovering the interconnections of her own pasts: personal, familial, historical, anthropological, cosmological. Those connections are in brilliant counterpoint in *Twin Time: Or How Death Befell Me*.

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