

Mi Querida El Paso

by Karina Muñiz-Pagán

My most recent memoria of you
Frantic, the aftermath of the massacre lodged inside my throat
Texts and calls to familia y comunidad
The sounds of sirens and ambulances zooming by
Prayers whispered under breath held tight
El Paso etched across TV screens, heart breaking more with each second
Impossible to turn away

And while we know this recent memoria, mi querida El Paso, will not be our last
Each new story now spoken has a before and after filter of el 3 de agosto

Antes de que yo podría hablar, I had to sit in the swarm of fear and panic
Then anger and the immobility of grief, thick like molasses
Absorbing the pain of these undeniable times of war against our gente

I could not write about you, nor think of anything else, mi querida El Paso
Held contempt towards those who dared to carry on with their everyday lives
Prayed for las familias whose grief ran deeper than mine
For the beds that remained empty
Homes now filled with the flicker of candlelight and the scent of fresh cut flowers

I wanted an opening to this sadness
Una apertura para recordarme de tu belleza, fuerza y resiliencia

Lit my own candles to excavate
The ancestral bone whisperers' stories deep inside me
Returning to the mountains
And the silence of a sacred wounded desert terrain

They reminded me about who we are, what we've survived
To ebb and flow with la vida's dolor y alegría
Somewhere in between the space of the two, nuestra sanación y poder

Ay mi querida El Paso
Like so many others, my story begins en el mero Segundo Barrio
Donde se enamoraron mis abuelos
Where families formed and the border blurred

Our floriculto pulled me back to old documents from a trip I took
To uncover stories from generations past

Oral histories captured and scribbled on paper
Like that of my tío's compadre, Pary Miranda
One of the remaining pachuchos
Who lived with his high school sweet heart from 70 years ago
In an old home off Oregon Street with a rickety porch
And a shoeshine box from his days as a kid, polishing zapatos for the passersby
He shuffled around the house with his walker
Showing me faded photographs, newspaper clippings
And his 1943 Aztec Bowie High School yearbook
His memorias of the pachucho boogie days
Before enlisting, during times of war
Eager to have an audience who cared about our history
Toma, he said
Handing me a glossary he created of the Caló language of his borderland tierra
I turned the pages and saw new meanings of words
In Caló, raqueta was pura mentira
Catarin: borracho
Chicotéan: que apestan los pies
Bailar: morir
Toma, he said, ya mero me bailo...
And not long after that interview, sí bailó

On that same trip I learned about Carmelita Torres
A fierce Juarensé guerrera
On a cold winter morning in 1917
The day started off as any other for Carmelita
She crossed the Santa Fe bridge in a street car
Along with the other women of Juarez
Who cleaned homes and took care of children in El Paso
It was a day where a quarantine was required
The men and women of México forced to strip naked
And sit in baths of kerosene
Typhus epidemic, Tom Lea, the El Paso mayor with ties to the Klan, had said
Mexicans were to blame, he said
It wasn't just that the kerosene burned the eyes, caused rashes on the skin

Or that the hot dryers the clothes were put through,
scorched fabric and melted shoes
It was the violation of dignity, of body, of self, during times of war
American soldiers had taken pictures of the women's bodies
Passed the photos around in the bars
But not today, Carmelita said, on that winter morning
Convincing 30 other compañeras alongside her to block traffic on the bridge
They laid down on the railroad tracks
Staring down the barrel of the soldiers' pointed guns
A #MeToo direct action of the early 20th century
Within an hour 200 mujeres Mexicanas, trabajadoras joined them
Ya Basta, Carmelita Torres said, at 17 years old
Before long, thousands converged around the bridge
To. Shut. It. Down

And while Mexicans were blamed for the typhus epidemic
The truth... there was no epidemic
The Spanish flu soon flooded the city, thousands of lives lost in its wake
The source of the real outbreak?
Soldiers from Ft. Bliss

Mi querida El Paso, we remember
Uncover the stories they didn't want us to tell or know
Of the dangers faced in the crossing of the dividing river

I think of mi abuelita, Candelaria, who years later, washed the laundry of others
Just a few meters away from this site of resistance
Where now a home, Casa Carmelita, for migrants is being built
Las guerreras fronterizas of today pushing back against new narratives
Solidaridad en acción, during times of war

We need to remember
Lift up our how deep our roots run
Like today's floriculto, from East Los to El Chuco with love
It was here in the Eastside
I first learned about Ruben Salazar
Who he was and what happened
Reenacted in a play about that fateful day at the Silver Dollar Bar
I hadn't read about his story in school, our history left out
Not even my family told me
It wasn't until after the play did I learn he was my tío's best friend
Ruben from Juarez, my tío told me, taught me a poor Chicano from El Paso,
How to be proud to be Mexican

And with our memorias we confront the myth of this country
As artists, we excavate these truths
Pull back the veil
Tell our children the stories of who we are
The resiliency and beauty of our people, mi querida El Paso
To ebb and flow with la vida's dolor y alegría
Somewhere in between the space of the two, nuestra sanación y poder

From Page 11: Stage Play Adaptation of *Always Running* Is Premiered at Casa 0101

Costumed with period panache by designer Abel Alvarado, a wardrobe accessorized by flawless lighting design from Kevin Vásquez, *Always Running* runs through Oct. 20th with shows at 8 p.m. on Friday and Saturday evenings followed by a matinee at 5 p.m. on Sundays.

The language is occasionally adult and includes representations of physical violence but it suitable for children and the discussions of identity and ethnicity that the play will trigger

alone are worth the ticket price. The immaculate production values, oldies soundtrack by sound designer Joe Luis Cedillo are luminous frosting on an already enticing, historically significant slice Chicano literary art at its best in adaptation. Leaving the theater on opening night, it occurred to me that the play would have been right at home among those ABC After School Specials I was captivated by prior to, during and well after my own adolescence.



Joshua Nicholas (L.) as "Chente Ramírez" and Rufina Romero as Luis J. Rodríguez or "Chin" *Always Running*. Photo by Ed Krieger