

emphasize the nobility of Cortez as he is said to have surrendered to spare his people further suffering.

George Washington Gómez (1990) traces the life of the title character whose immigrant father names him after the most famous American in the hopes that his son will become a great American too. Ironically, young George or Guálinto, which is a Spanish version of his middle name, embraces the American ideal and in so doing betrays the memory of his father who was shot by Texas Rangers. The struggle that leads to this eventual transition is the focus of the excerpt that follows.

From George Washington Gómez

In later years George W. Gómez would remember his childhood home as an enchanted place. The porch of the blue frame house was covered with honeysuckle vines that screened a corner of it entirely from view, forming a fragrant, shady cave. The front yard was full of rose bushes with flowers of many colors, which he scrupulously avoided for fear not only of the thorns but of his mother's wrath as well. Then there were the figs, the papayas, the guayabas growing by the sides of the house.

But it was the vast jungle of banana trees choking the backyard that fascinated him. Here he loved to wander in the cool sunny mornings and the drowsy silent afternoons when everybody else who was not at work slept the siesta. The green stalks, waving ten or twelve feet above the ground, looked like forest giants to him, and he would swear when he was a man that they were at least twenty-five feet high. Here Guálinto hunted tigers and engaged pirates. Here he became a lone Indian tracking the wounded deer. Here he was first startled by beauty in the brilliant red of a cardinal bird against the wet-green leaves and saddened by the cool, gentle whisperings of the evening breeze.

But night changed the world. With darkness the banana grove and the trees beyond it became a haunted wood where lurked demons, skeletons and white-robed women with long long hair. The city's stormy politics had thrown up a vomit of murders and gun battles. Guálinto's immediate neighborhood, being at the edge of town, had seen more than its share of bloodshed. By that tree a man was killed by his best friend. Politics. Over there a woman was attacked and murdered. On a big hackberry beyond the backyard fence was a cross made of big nails driven into the trunk. Nobody knew exactly why the cross was there, but there were many stories explaining it. Here, there, everywhere were memories of the unhallowed dead. They haunted the night. They made the darkness terrible. So Guálinto's nights were filled with delicious thrills and wide-eyed terror. His mother tried to calm his fears with religion. Everybody believed, with the possible exception of his Uncle Feliciano, who seemed to believe in nothing. However, he did not interfere with his mother's teaching religion to her son. So the boy learned a whole rosary of paternosters, aves and credos to protect him from evil.

He wore a tin likeness of the Virgin hung around his neck on a string, and he was taken to church on Sundays, where he learned more about Hell than about Heaven. And when he went to bed every night he said a prayer along with his mother:

"I must die, I know not when,
I must die, I know not where,
I must die, I know not how.
But this I do know:
If I die without the grace of God
I shall burn in Hell forever."

Then his mother put him to bed, satisfied she had done her duty toward making him an upright, God-fearing man. But after the lamp was blown out he feared sleep, for it might bring death silently on its wings. He hated God for being so cruel. That gave him a terrible sinking feeling and he started to pray, fervently and with trembling lips, for God had heard his thoughts and even now He was frowning in rage.

But sleep would take hold of him unawares. When he woke, the blessed sun was shining, and the only feeling in his stomach was hunger. "Mama," he asked one morning after breakfast, "why can't I remember things when I was little like you do? You can tell the prettiest stories about the time you were little."

"Because you are still little, *hijito*,"¹ his mother replied.

"Oh," he said, not understanding at all. After a short silence he came back to the question. "But Mama, why can you remember so many things while I can't? You can remember back to ten years ago."

"Ten years ago you weren't born yet." His mother was silent for a while. Then, "Ten years ago you were in Heaven with the little angels."

"But I don't remember."

"Of course you can't, silly. Nobody can."

He was silent, thinking. Thinking, thinking. If I was up there I ought to remember, just like I remember I was in the banana grove yesterday because I was. I was born but I don't remember that either. And she says I was up there. Was it me? With wings? How can Mama know? If nobody can remember. Maybe it wasn't me at all. Maybe it was somebody else. Maybe I'm somebody else!

A cold emptiness settled into his stomach. Familiar objects suddenly looked strange to him, as though he were out of his body and looking at himself and all other things from a distance. Strange, terrible questions surged inside of him, questions for which he had no words, no concrete form, so that they floated around in his head like little clouds. Why am I, I? Why am I not somebody else? This was as close as he could come to expressing them. Why is my mother my mother? Why are things things and how do I know that they are? Will they be the same when I die like the prayer says, and how will I know they will be the same when I am dead and can't see them any more? A numbing loneliness seized him and he felt like crying out. Then, for a moment, he almost grasped and put into solid thought the vague and desolating questions which floated inside his head. But as his mind reached out to hold on

¹ son

to them they dissolved like spots before his eyes. His mother was his mother again, and she was asking him if he wasn't feeling well.

"No, Mama," he replied. "I'm all right."

Thinking, remembering.

So, at eight years of age, after having finished low first with Miss Josephine, Guálinto passed to high second with Miss Huff, and in so doing entered American school at last. Under Miss Huff's guidance he began to acquire an Angloamerican self, and as the years passed, under Miss Huff and other teachers like her, he developed simultaneously in two widely divergent paths. In the schoolroom he was an American; at home and on the playground he was a Mexican. Throughout his early childhood these two selves grew within him without much conflict, each an exponent of a different tongue and a different way of living. The boy nurtured these two selves within him, each radically different and antagonistic to the other, without realizing their separate existences.

It would be several years before he fully realized that there was not one single Guálinto Gómez. That in fact there were many Guálinto Gómezes, each of them double like the images reflected on two glass surfaces of a show window. The eternal conflict between two clashing forces within him produced a divided personality, made up of tight little cells independent and almost entirely ignorant of each other, spread out all over his consciousness, mixed with one another like squares on a checkerboard.

Consciously he considered himself a Mexican. He was ashamed of the name his dead father had given him, George Washington Gómez. He was grateful to his Uncle Feliciano for having registered him in school as "Guálinto" and having said that it was an Indian name. He spoke Spanish, literally as his mother tongue; it was the only language his mother would allow him to use when he spoke to her. The Mexican flag made him feel sentimental, and a rousing Mexican song would make him feel like yelling. The Mexican national hymn brought tears to his eyes, and when he said "we" he meant the Mexican people. "*La Capital*"² did not mean Washington, D.C., for him but Mexico City. Of such matter were made the basic cells in the honeycomb that made up his personality.

But there was also George Washington Gómez, the American. He was secretly proud of the name his more conscious twin, Guálinto, was ashamed to avow publicly. George Washington Gómez secretly desired to be a full-fledged, complete American without the shameful encumbrance of his Mexican race. He was the product of his Anglo teachers and the books he read in school, which were all in English. He felt a pleasant warmth when he heard "The Star-Spangled Banner." It was he it was who fought the British with George Washington and Francis Marion the Swamp Fox, discovered pirate treasure with Long John Silver, and got lost in a cave with Tom Sawyer and Becky Thatcher. Books had made him so. He read everything he could lay his hands on. But he also heard from the lips of his elders songs and stories that were the history of his people, the Mexican people. And he also fought the Spaniards with *Hidalgo*, the French with *Juárez* and *Zaragosa*, and the

² The Capitol

Gringos with *Blas María de la Garza Falcón* and *Juan Nepomuceno Cortina*³ in his childish fancies.

In school Guálinto/George Washington was gently prodded toward complete Americanization. But the Mexican side of his being rebelled. Immigrants from Europe can become Americanized in one generation. Guálinto, as a Mexicotexan, could not. Because, in the first place, he was not an immigrant come to a foreign land. Like other Mexicotexans, he considered himself part of the land on which his ancestors had lived before the Anglotexans had come. And because, almost a hundred years before, there had been a war between the United States and Mexico, and in Texas the peace had not yet been signed. So in assembly, while others were singing, "We're proud of our forefathers who fought at the Alamo," Guálinto and his friends would mutter, "We're proud of our forefathers who killed Gringos at the Alamo."

In all this he was no different from other Mexicotexan school children in Jonesville. They came to school and were placed in "low" first and second grades. This, said the Gringo school board, is a pedagogical necessity. The little Latins must learn the English language before they can associate with the little Anglosaxons. But wouldn't they learn English quicker if they were in the same classes with English-speaking children? No, that is a pedagogical fallacy. So the Society for the Advancement of Latin American Voters makes an issue of it in the next elections and succeeds in electing their candidate precinct chairman. *Ya estaría*,⁴ as Mexicans say.

Meanwhile, the little Latin, if he is lucky, has struggled through the highs and the lows of first and second grade and has fallen into the hands of one of those earnest young women from up north, too religious to join the CPA and too inhibited to become a vocal social reformer, but still entertaining some ideas about equality and justice. She gets a Bachelor's in Education and comes down to the Delta to teach little Latins at fifty dollars a month. Within a week she will declare she loves the little things and that their wide-eyed admiration touches her heart. She becomes the mother of the Mexicotexan's American self. She nurses that self along, shielding it from damaging influences as one would a sickly plant. She is gentle and understanding. She is patient with the struggling limitations of a new language and the barriers raised by different, customs and beliefs. She sets out optimistically to undo the damage done

³ *Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla* (1753-1811) was a Mexican priest and revolutionary. On January 11, 1811, his army was completely routed near Guadalajara by a small force of Spanish soldiers. *Benito Pablo Juárez* (1806-1872) was a national hero and president of Mexico. Juárez became governor of the state of Oaxaca and was imprisoned when the Mexican general Antonio de Santa Anna seized the national government. He escaped to New Orleans, Louisiana, but returned to Mexico in 1855 to take part in the revolution that overthrew Santa Anna. General *Ignacio Zaragosa*, the leader at the battle at Puebla, Mexico, was born in Texas while it was still part of Mexico. Despite being outnumbered and underequipped the French were forced to retreat to Orizaba. Captain *Blas María de la Garza Falcón* (1712-1767) was the first settler of Nueces County, Texas. However, this reference may be to his father, General *Blas de la Garza Falcón*, twice governor of Coahuila. *Juan Nepomuceno Cortina* (1824-1894) was a Mexican folk hero who ignited the so-called Cortian Wars. When Cortina saw the Brownsville city marshal, Robert Shears, brutally arrest a Mexican-American who had once been employed by Cortina. Cortina shot the marshal in the impending confrontation and rode out of town with the prisoner. Early on the morning of September 28, 1859, he rode into Brownsville again, this time at the head of some forty to eighty men, and seized control of the town. Five men, including the city jailer, were shot during the raid as Cortina and his men raced through the streets shouting "Death to the Americans" and "Viva Mexico."

⁴ roughly the equivalent of "mission accomplished" but in a sarcastic tone

by poverty and prejudice. She teaches him that we are all created equal. And before he knows it the little Latin is thinking in English, and he can feel infinitely dirty if he forgets to brush his teeth in the morning.

This is also the time when the little Latins come in direct contact with the little Anglosaxons. On the playground Gringo and Greaser have played in separate groups. But now they are in the same classes and they must mix because they are seated alphabetically. Out of this proximity, classroom friendships sometimes develop. But the Mexican soon learns that such friendships do not extend beyond the classroom door. He will see a classroom friend on the playground, surrounded by several other Anglos. When the dark-skinned boy approaches, the American boys stop talking, and not all of them return his greeting. They will resume their conversation, but guardedly now, without including him in it. The Mexicotexan learns to stay away; he makes them uncomfortable. And one day he learns at least one of the reasons why. He will be walking past a group of Anglo boys playing marbles, let us say.

"You're fudging!" one of them shouts.

"I'm not."

"You were!"

"I wasn't!"

They stand up and face each other, their red faces almost purple with rage, their hands balled up into fists. The Mexican stops; he has never seen a fight between two Americans. But the two just stand there, until one of them says, "You—German!"

The other answers, "You—Mexican!"

They see the Mexican standing close by. They smile, embarrassed, and go back to their game. The Mexicotexan walks away, thinking, "Gringos *sanavabiches*."

No, the Mexicotexan is not as ignorant as Calvin Coolidge, who once said, "The Alamo? What's the Alamo?" The Mexicotexan knows about the Alamo, he is reminded of it often enough. Texas history is a cross that he must bear. In the written tests, if he expects to pass the course, he must put down in writing what he violently misbelieves. And often certain passages in the history textbook become subjects of discussion.

"Isn't it horrible what the Mexicans did at the Alamo and Goliad? Why are they so treacherous and bloody? And cowards too?"

"That's a lie! That's a lie! Treacherous? That's you all over!"

"It's in our textbook. Can't you read?"

"Children, children. Let's get back on the subject."

"But he's saying things about us!"

"It's the book that says them."

The teacher smiles. "That was long ago," she says. "We are all Americans now."

"But the book, the book! It talks about us today! Today! It says we are all dirty and live under trees."

The teacher cannot criticize a textbook on Texas history. She would be called a Communist and lose her job. Her only recourse is to change the subject, telling a joke, something to make her students laugh. If she succeeds the tension is over, for the moment at least. Despite the textbooks, she does her best and that is often good enough. In her classes at least, democracy exists. There, often enough, the Mexicotexan is first instead of last. If the teacher is young and pretty he will fall in love with

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her, in such an obvious way that it embarrasses her. But if in some instances she represents for him Beauty itself, in many more she is for him Justice, Equality, Democracy. The embodiment of all that is supposed to be good in the American people.

It was in this kind of schoolroom environment that Guálinto Gómez approached puberty. Hating the Gringo one moment with an unreasoning hatred, admiring his literature, his music, his material goods the next. Loving the Mexican with a blind fierceness, then almost despising him for his slow progress in the world.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the tone of the beginning of the first excerpt? How does the idea of memory aid in providing that tone?
2. Describe Guálinto's identity crisis as set forth in the second excerpt.
3. Compare the thoughts Guálinto has at the end of the first excerpt to Gary Soto's in *Living Up the Street* on page 12.
4. On page 83, Guálinto describes his feelings when hearing the National Anthem. How are those feelings different and/or similar to the young boy's in Abraham Rodriguez Jr.'s *The Boy Without a Flag* on page 420?

Poetry

Pat Mora

PAT MORA's distinguished literary and academic career began as a high school teacher in her hometown of El Paso, Texas. From there she taught at both El Paso Community College as well as The University of Texas at El Paso, and most recently she has been a Distinguished Visiting Professor at the University of New Mexico. Her awards include the New America: Women Artists and Writers of the Southwest Poetry Award (1984), a Kellogg National Fellowship (1986-89), a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship (1994), and a 1999 Premio Aztlan Literature Award.

Her poems, which have been translated into several languages, have been published in the following collections: Chants (1984), Borders (1986), Communion (1991), Agua Santa/Holy Water (1995), and Aunt Carmen's Book of Practical Saints (1997). She has also published several illustrated books of poetry for children, a series of essays, a book of memoirs, as well as contributing to various literary magazines and journals. Mainly focusing on Mexican-American women, Mora's poems often explore the theme of alienation and the stark contrast between two cultures.