



Rudolfo Anaya

Autobiography

As written in 1985



© Copyright: 1991 Rudolfo Anaya

TQS PUBLICATIONS

Post Office Box 9275

Berkeley, California 94709

Telephone (510) 655-8036

FAX (510) 601-6938



RUDOLFO ANAYA

1937 —

Autobiography

As written in 1985

Womb of Time

What is it I remember about the first stirring of my imagination? I pause and listen, and I hear the wind blowing across the empty stretches of the plains of eastern New Mexico. This harsh but strangely beautiful land is my home; it is a land dotted by ranch houses, herds of cattle, flocks of sheep, the tough vegetation of the plain, gnarled juniper trees, cactus, mesquite bushes. By day, the wind plays a sad and mournful symphony across the land. By night, the wind is a lullaby, a fitting accompaniment to the surge of blood which flows around me, nurtures me, speaks to me, as I grow in my mother's womb. I hear her voice as she speaks to the children around her, siblings who have preceded me into the world of sun and wind.

Her name is Rafaelita. She is the daughter of Liborio Mares, a farmer from the Puerto de Luna Valley, a small village nestled along the Pecos River just south of Santa Rosa. They are farmers, a Spanish-speaking people who have been in the valley for over a hundred years. They came from the Rio Grande Valley, to farm, to raise their families, to adore their Catholic God and venerate His Blessed Mother, as their forefathers had done in Spain and Mexico before them. They speak Spanish to the few Anglo settlers who begin to come into the valley from the East. The Anglos learn the rudiments of the language of Spain. All settle into the life of the valley. They grow their crops; they raise pigs and sheep for

meat, cows for milk. The horse is their beast of burden, their means of travel, the status symbol of the *vaquero*.

There are no pretensions on this land. The effort to survive cuts through all that, for this is not the land of milk and honey. My mother's family works from sunup till sundown. Life in the small village is difficult, but the joys of the *fiesta* sustain them. The feast day of the patron saint of the village, *Nuestra Señora del Refugio*, is celebrated. The men gather to clean the irrigation ditches that bring the water from the river into the fields. The harvest is abundant, the crops are gathered. They make *chile ristras*, the women boil jams and jellies, the men butcher their pigs to make the lard of winter, they store the meat in the *soterranos*, the cool earth pits. A good harvest sustains the isolated village through the winter.

My mother left the river valley to marry a man from the *llano*, a *vaquero*, a man who preferred to ride horseback and work with cattle, not a farmer. My mother's first husband was Solomon Bonney. She bore him a son and a daughter. He died only a few years after their marriage. The land was not always kind to my people. A mistake can be final; a frightened horse that rears and throws its rider can kill even the best *vaquero*. A winter storm roaring across the empty *llano* exempts no one, even the innocent shepherd caught unawares may freeze to death.

A widow with two small children has no time for a long romance. She married Martín Anaya, a man without pretensions, a man who knew how to work the cattle and the sheep of the big ranchers. The myth of the *caballero* courting the daughter of Spain was just that, a myth. For the workers of the *llano* there was survival. A man needed a wife; a woman needed the warmth and safety of a home to raise her children. Out of that union in the small village of Pastura, my brothers and sisters came, and in 1937, I was born.

My father, too, was married before he married my mother. He had a daughter from that marriage. Later I will know her as a sister; I know nothing about the first woman in my father's life.

A family was born to Rafaelita Mares and Martín Anaya, my older brothers Larry and Martin. I came sandwiched between the younger sisters, Edwina, Angelina, me, then Dolores and Loretta. My brothers were models for my manhood, but they were young men of sixteen and seventeen when World War II swept away the young men of the small towns of eastern New Mexico. I was in the primary grades while they fought the war. Awaiting their return, I grew up sur-

rounded by sisters.

Why do I remember the dreams of life in my mother's womb: Is it possible I felt the sting of the sun, heard the mournful cry of the wind, the lullaby of my mother's songs as she carried me in her womb? Why do I think I heard the cry of the *coyotes* at night, the bleating of goats and sheep? In the small village of my birth, Pastura, why do I remember the dim light the kerosene lamps cast on the adobe walls, the aroma of smoke from the wood stove where my mother cooked? Why do I remember the voices of the old women of the village as they visited my mother in her kitchen, drank coffee, smoked cigarettes, talked about the impending birth? The date was October 30, 1937, almost the eve of All Saints Day.

"You were born with your umbilical cord tied around your neck," my mother was to say many years later. "*La Grande* was there to help in your delivery...."

La Grande. That name will haunt my childhood. She was a woman of power, a power born of understanding. An intelligent woman who knew the harmony in nature. Some say she was a *curandera*, a woman who knew how to use her power and herbs to cure sickness. All my life I will meet such people, people who understand the power of the human soul, its potential. If I am to be a writer, it is the ancestral voices of these people who will form a part of my quest, my search. They taught me that life is fragile, that there are signs given to us, signs that we must learn to interpret.

That is why, if I am to write these short chapters of my life, I must go to the beginning. For me, it began there, with the blood of a farmer's daughter and a *vaquero*, commingling in the womb, to create a child who will come strangling in his own umbilical cord, pulled into the world by the strong hands of an old woman who understood life.

My father and his *compadres* got drunk that night and shot their pistols into the frigid night air of the empty plain. My mother groaned and made the sign of the cross. One more son was born alive. Strange signs were in the air. The owls hooted in the hills and flew away at the sound of gunfire. The *coyotes* lay quiet. Overhead the Milky Way was a river of sperm, a river of life shining down on the lonely planet earth. I will always wonder about the first stirrings of that journey to earth. Whence? Wherefore?

"When you were still a baby," my mother said many years later, "we sat you on a sheepskin on the floor. We put different things around you. Your father put a saddle. I don't remember who put a pencil and paper. Perhaps it was me, because I had always yearned for an education. I had a bright mind, but in those

days the girls remained at home. Only my brothers went to school. Anyway, you crawled to the pencil and paper...."

A silence fell between me and my father. Why? Did the familiar story tell him that to his way of life his youngest son was lost?



The Child Rebels

In my childhood world the power of prayer was supreme. God listened. The saints came down from heaven to comfort those who needed comforting. The Virgin Mary would always intercede on behalf of those who needed help. But the demonic powers of the devil were also a truth in the world. The devil came to men, whether they had done evil or not, to tempt them and claim their souls. Witches rode across the open plain disguised as balls of fire, disguised as owls or coyotes. They could appear at any time. Their power was equal to the power of the saints. Only the Cross of Christ could save one.

We moved from that small village of Pastura to Santa Rosa when I was a small child. Our new home was perched on the edge of a cliff, below flowed the Pecos River. The wind blew around the edges of the house, along the dreary and lonely cliff. Here I first heard the cry of *La Llorona*, the tortured spirit of a woman who had murdered her children and gone insane. Now she was a witch who haunted the cliff of the river. With eyes burning with fire, claw-like fingernails, hair stringy, and her clothes torn and tattered, she came at dusk to haunt the river. Her cries were carried by the wind around the corners of our house. I felt a terror I had never felt before. *La Llorona* wanted me, she wanted my flesh and blood, she wanted my soul. She wanted to take me deep into her lair where she would consume me, as she had consumed her own children. I fled in fear into the arms of my mother.

Not yet a man, I found safety only in the arms of my mother. Later she, and the priest at the church, would move me one step further along the road to salvation. They would teach me that if I made the sign of the cross, *La Llorona* and all the witches and demons of hell could not harm me. Armed with the sign of the cross I could go out into the world and fear no evil. Ah, to be innocent again

and to believe those foundations of faith which protect us from harm.

If I am going to look squarely at the forces which have formed my life, then I need to look at the church. My mother was a devout Catholic, but I was never sure about my father. Although he prayed and came along to mass, I always suspected he was a rebel. He rebelled in his silence, he drank, the settled life seemed to torment him. He had lived life on the open *llano*, those men of cattle and sheep were his only real friends. Now he was a *vaquero* without a horse. In many respects, a broken man.

I understood that streak of the skeptic in him years later when I read Angelico Chavez's book on New Mexico families. There is a story of an Anaya who had a strong argument with the parish priest. His crime was serious enough to cause him to be sent to Mexico City to be tried before the church fathers. He was made to recant, to apologize, then he was sent back home to New Mexico. Upon returning to his village, he dressed in a most outlandish costume, probably to imitate the cassock of the priest, and he rode his horse down the village street. Sipping drinks from a bottle of *aguardiente*, I am sure, boasting to the people that he had never apologized.

Many years later, while I was traveling in Spain, a guide who studied genealogy told me that Anaya was originally a Basque name. It means something like "brotherhood" or "brothers of a clan." Knowing the anarchistic and independent nature of the Basque people has provided me as much of a clue to my father's nature as all the years I knew him. Perhaps I remember all this only because it sheds light on my nature. There is something of the rebel and the anarchist in me.

My mother taught me catechism in Spanish. I grew up speaking Spanish at home, as far as I knew all the world spoke Spanish. Even mass at *la iglesia de Santa Rosa de Lima* was said in Spanish. I was taught that the church was in charge of my salvation, that I needed the sacraments. I was molded into a good Catholic, insofar as any Anaya can be molded into one. I kept asking the sisters and the priest uncomfortable questions, questions which had to do with the nature of the Trinity and the geography of heaven. "You must have faith" was not an adequate answer for my inquisitive mind. I was breaking the chains of dependence, but I still feared the devil and his demons.

Years later when I read Dante's *Divine Comedy*, I discovered that his inferno was like my hell. I was thoroughly fascinated. If the sisters of Santa Rosa had read Dante, they would have been able to answer my questions about the geogra-

phy of hell.

Life in Santa Rosa was good. I had friends, I played all day. We wandered into the open plain country, hunting. We spent entire days along the river, fishing and swimming. We made our own toys, boats and wagons and airplanes and wooden guns. I went to school and learned English. Moving from a world of Spanish into a world of English was shocking. I had very little help, except for the teachers at school. I don't know how I survived. A lot of my classmates didn't.



The Voices of Childhood

The seasons of the llano are distinct. In the spring the wind blows, the dust clouds are thick, the tumbleweeds roll across the land. In the years of the late thirties and early forties I remember sandstorms that blocked out the light of the sun. Imagine, a small boy coming from school, leaving the warm safety of the school and entering the terrible windstorm that obliterated every familiar landmark. Down the town streets and toward the river, across the bridge and up the rocky path I struggled to reach the safety of home.

Outside the storm raged and tore at the tin roof, but inside was safety, warmth, hot tortillas with butter. Maybe I played paper dolls with my sisters, Edwina, Angie, Dolores, and Loretta, or I took out my marbles and trucks and played alone. Maybe I sat in the kitchen and asked my mother a lot of questions. Where does the wind come from? Where does it go? She always said I asked a lot of questions, that I was destined to go against the current of life.

The Chavez boys were my neighbors. We grew up like brothers, playing hide and seek, tag, football, fishing, swimming in the river, sitting around campfires at night where we told stories, sometimes fighting and swearing and tearing at each other like little animals. The town boys feared us. The battles we fought with them were fierce. Luckily no one was ever killed. I accidentally shot Santiago Chavez in the eye with a bee-bee gun during one terrible battle. It is a bad memory that haunts me still. I saw one boy's eye smashed by a rock from a sling-shot. A bloody mess.

How strange that I could grow up gentle, in a loving home, and outside the home I lived very much the life of a little savage. I grew tough and brown in the summer sun. No shoes, except for Sunday church and the movies in town on Saturday. My dog Sporty by my side, I feared no one. No one, that is, until the sounds and shadows of the ghosts in the bush reared their heads. I hated to travel alone along the river. In the deep brush lurked *La Llorona*. I heard her, I felt her, I saw her. As I cut wild alfalfa that grew by the river to feed my rabbits, it would suddenly grow dark, and I was alone, far from home, in a world full of strange powers.

Summer was the most joyous season. We could go into town and play baseball with the town boys, or go fishing in the lakes, streams, and rivers around the town. The town is unique in this part of the country, because it lay in a natural depression. Many springs and lakes are born out of the underground water. Clear, precious jewels of water in an otherwise arid plain. Some of these lakes had beautiful golden carp in the waters, all were haunted by sirens, frightful fantastical sisters of *La Llorona*. To fish in the day along the rivers and lakes was fine, but no one was brave enough to be caught there at night. Nothing is as lonely or frightening as one of those lakes out in the middle of the desolate plain, at dusk, when the bats and nighthawks begin to fly. Even the friendly shapes of cows became shadows of ghosts, and to get home one had to cross the cemetery.

An aunt who had come to live with us died of cancer. I had grown very close to her. My father made her a coffin from pine planks we bought at the lumberyard. We placed her in my mother's parlor, *la sala*, where the rosary was said at night and the family and friends gathered to pray. Coins were placed on my aunt's eyes, because they would not close. When the rosary was done a little girl and I were awarded the coins, and after that I had the gift of finding coins.

Death lurked in the bud and flower of summer. We accepted death as a fact of life. Like our destiny, it was there, waiting to manifest itself. It was a mystery, as the winds of spring were a mystery, but it was nonetheless a part of life.

There were only half-a-dozen *familias* on our little hill. I remember the Chavez family, my cousin Fio and his wife Amelia, the Giddings, the Gonzalez family. George Gonzalez and I became good friends. His father, who had been the sheriff of the small town, was tragically killed. George became a man at a young age. He had a ranch to run, and I spent summers with him there, helping as best I could. The ranch was a terribly lonely and deserted place, but the experience helped me along my road to manhood. Only by looking back do we see how cru-

cial are the steps that separate us from our mothers.

School was not difficult for me, but I was learning that I saw things in a different way. I would be running home and stop suddenly because I had heard a voice calling my name. I would stop and turn slowly around in a circle, looking for the source of the voice but seeing only the brilliant sunset, the red and gold and mauve which filled the large sky, the whirl of the nighthawks, the flutter of dusk. Who? I would ask. The sound would slowly fade, and I was alone, weak, wondering. The sun set, the clouds turned gray, the owl called on the hill. Was it the call of *La Llorona* along the river? Was it the call of my mother calling me to hurry home? Was it the mournful pleas of my dead ancestors asking me to remember them? Awakening from the brief trance, I would run home, still full of the mystery of that voice that called my name so clearly.

Winter on the plains is severe. The storms whip down from the northwest, there are no mountains to break their intensity. Sliding down the eastern slope of the Sangre de Cristo mountains they gather momentum, and by the time they reach Las Vegas and Clines Corners and Santa Rosa they are bellowing bulls of winter. The snows drift, the ice freezes everything solid, the trees along the river are transformed into ice palaces.

But the enchantment doesn't last long. The cold brought reality with it and the hardship of life. Our feet bundled in several pairs of socks and warm shoes wrapped in burlap (there was no money for the galoshes), we trudged to school. My mother was fanatic about school, not one day was to be lost. She knew the value of education.



A New Life

I attended school in Santa Rosa until the eighth grade. It was then that the gang of boys I had known began to fall apart. Some had moved away from the small town. Some began to fight with each other. Prejudices I had not known before appeared.

We, who had always been brothers, now separated into Anglos and Mexicans. I did not understand the process. I had always known I was brown, that I was *mejicano* in the language of my community, that we were poor people. But

those had been elements of pride, and now something had come to separate us.

We moved to Albuquerque in 1952. In a way I was glad to escape the confines of Santa Rosa. But how could I escape it? Being fifteen was the same in most places, the process of finding a new identity as young men is the same anywhere. The pain in the blood and flesh is a joy, a new awareness.

Albuquerque in the early fifties was a great place to be. The war was over, the boom was on. Cheap sand hills near the mountain became new and instant housing additions. The city was a young lady growing into womanhood, and I a young man ready to take her. We lived in the Barelás *barrio*, at 433 Pacific. There in the heart of the *barrio* I met new friends, and I quickly learned the rhythm of survival on the streets.

As before, life was easy, safe, sure, if I kept to the corners I knew, near the people I trusted. My brother Larry lived in Barelás, and he knew the people and the street gangs. He was respected, so I had no trouble. Still, life for my discarded and poor people was tough. Country people were entering the city in search of work. On the streets, the gangs of *pachucos* were vicious, deadly. Small drug traffic. Baseball in summer in the park, football in fall.

My friend Robert Martínez and I cleaned lawns in the Country Club for spending money. We stayed clear of the gangs, the *tecatos* on dope, but when we had to fight, we fought. I attended Washington Junior High, later Albuquerque High School. Cars came into our lives, without a car you were nothing. Games, bebop dances in the gym, James Dean, the State Fair in the fall and wild rides with wild girls, after-school rumbles, Bill Haley and His Comets, Fats Domino, customized '48 Fords, learning to French kiss and always wondering about going all the way, *macho* men, fifties-cool dress, ducktails, tapered denims and black shoes with double soles . . . we were all pretending, growing up and pretending we were as cool as Jimmy Dean. We pretended to know everything, and we didn't.



Not My Time to Die

There are events that change one's life forever. Each experience causes a perceptible change in the rhythms of the soul, and the ripples which flow outward

measure the degree of change. Slight or serious, the spirit adjusts and goes on.

It was a beautiful day, warm and carefree. The water of the irrigation ditch came through a culvert and created a deep pool. We had been there before, we knew the place. Laughing and teasing each other, we headed for the water, and I dove first. Then the world disappeared. The doctors would later explain that I had fractured two vertebrae in my neck and I had gone into instant paralysis. I could not move a muscle.

I floated to the top of the water, opened my eyes, saw the light of the sun shining in the water. I tried to move, I couldn't. Face down, my shouts for help were only bubbles of water. I felt a panic I had never felt before. Death was coming for me, and I could not move in protest. I struggled violently to move, to kick, to swing my arms, to turn upside down so I could at least breathe and keep from drowning, but I could not move. The panic closed around me, I knew I was about to drown. But my instinct for survival had been sharpened too well for me to give up without a struggle. It was not my time to die!

I held my breath, but I knew I could not hold my breath forever. Panic turned to dread, then into a strange acceptance of my fate. I began to breathe water, felt it sting my lungs. A strange peace came over me, I prayed, surrendered my soul to God. My soul seemed to ascend into the air. Beneath me I could see my friends jumping and swimming in the water. Then I saw Eliseo tentatively approach my floating body. He thought I was playing, but I had been down a long time. He turned me over. I remember smiling and laughing at him, and with that I returned to earth.

I had pulled away from the first step toward death.

I have not spoken or written about this accident before because I learned during the ensuing years that pity did not help rebuild my world. I learned that indulging in confession did not really help me. Perhaps it was that I withdrew too much into myself and refused to share that experience with others, perhaps I learned too quickly that most people really do not possess the sensibility we call empathy. Most people are too much in their world, then find it difficult to understand the world of others, they do not have the sensibility to understand the feelings of others.

In later life I would meet friends and acquaintances who did not know my past and thus could not know or guess my pain. We learn very well to hide our disabilities. It is only when we are asked to do something we cannot do, like play baseball or volleyball or run, that we are painfully reminded of our limitations,

and worse, because we have learned to live with those limitations, we are reminded how little our friends know us, how cruel the simplest invitation may sound. We learn to hide our pain, to live within, to build a new faith inside the shell of bones and muscle.

For the following weeks fever and fantastical monsters filled my tormented days and nights, leaving in the wake of pain the scars I still carry.

But I lived, and I vowed to move again. I found slight movement in my fingers, worked from there to regain the use of my legs, then my arms. I spent that summer at Carrie Tingley Hospital, and when I returned home I was walking with a cane, stiffly, but walking. Most of those with similar neck injuries never regain any movement. I had been saved for a new role in life.

One of the first things I did on my return was to go down to the YMCA, alone. I waited until the pool was deserted, then stepped to the edge of the pool. I did not know if I could swim. My muscles were stiff, very weak. But I dove into the water, floated to the top, smiled, dog-paddled out, got out as well as I could, sat panting on the side of the pool.

I had conquered one fear within.

I walked stiffly through those following years, turning into myself, protecting the soft spot within. I learned the true meaning of loneliness, that is, how it feels to be alone. I had the support of my family, my mother nursed me through the worst part of the paralysis, daily massaging the stiff limbs back to life, and my friends never wavered. But I was alone, alone and wondering: Why me?

But I was so strong, or had been so strong, that I survived. I exercised, swam, re-entered the rough and tumble of life. I accepted no pity, and really moved out determined to do more than my more abled friends ever had done. I fished, scaled the mountains of Taos, hunted with Cruz from the pueblo, finished high school, entered the university, married, and began to travel. I climbed mountains and crossed oceans and deserts in foreign places my old friends back home didn't know existed. So who is to judge whether an adversity comes to crush us or to reshape us.



Self-Discovery

I attended Albuquerque High School and graduated in 1956. I did nothing to distinguish myself at school. My grades were good, but there was little to challenge the imagination. Reading the *Reader's Digest* during free period in English class doesn't make for producing a writer. Anyway, a writer learns to live beyond his circumstance, he learns to be in touch with a stream of active imagination which is fed from deeper, internal sources.

The fifties, as we are being told by the historians of popular culture, were a great time. They were. We had the king, Elvis. John Wayne was still shooting them up at the Kimo theatre every Saturday afternoon. Stolen hubcaps adorned our cars. Rock-and-roll and bebop liberated us musically. *The Blackboard Jungle* and *Rebel Without a Cause* reflected part of our youth. We rocked around the clock, hung out at Lionel's, the local drive-in, and went to dances at the community center, always following the sweet fragrance of blossoming girls. But all times come to an end, and even heroes die.

Yes, the fifties were a good time, but one has to remember that historians do not see everything. There are huge pockets of people whose history, at any given time, is never told. The large Mexican-American population is a case in point. Moving through high school without purpose, never seeing Mexican teachers, never reading the history or the literature of the people, created in us a sense of the displaced. We knew our worth. It was reflected in our families, in the *barrios*, in the cities and ranches. We knew there was a long history of the Hispanic presence in the Southwest United States, but the education we received did not reflect this. Society's melting-down was at work, but the idea of the melting pot was a myth. Society did not accept, as equals, the black and brown people of the country. Prejudice did exist, racism was thriving.

Small wonder any of us entered professional fields. People ask me why I became a writer. My answer is that I became a writer in my childhood. That is why that time has been so important to me. The characters of my childhood, the family, friends, and neighbors that made up my world, they and their lives fed my imagination. All cultural groups develop an oral tradition, and the tradition of the Mexican-Americans is immensely rich. The stories of characters, fanciful and real, constantly filled my life. In the circle of my community, my imagination was nourished.

There is something in the Mexican character which, even under the most op-

pressive circumstances, struggles to keep art and its humanizing effect alive. I have seen this in the simplest details carved into door frames, the brightly painted walls, the decorative altars in the homes, the gaiety of the music, the expressive language. The Mexican possesses a very artistic soul; I am heir to that sensibility.

My discovery of my past should not seem so profound, but it was, because nothing of that past had been intimated in the schools. We studied no Mexican history or art, no Indian religious thought or art. Even during my undergraduate days at the University of New Mexico, not a word or a suggestion that the cultures of these two groups existed. Of course, I could have studied in the Spanish department, but in those days those scholars were *too* Spanish. Their concern was for the literature of another time and place, and rightly so, for every discipline needs its scholars. But in their assistance or encouragement, there was no sense that they either understood or cared about our needs.

I cannot say I found a more welcoming home in the English department, and yet, taking Freshman English as it used to be taught, as the building block of a liberal education, I was suddenly turned on to literature. It was not easy. I had attended business school for two years, I was good at the work. More study and a CPA could have been my vocation. Even that would have been more than many from my neighborhood aspired to in those days. But the study of business was unfulfilling, so I dropped out and enrolled in the university. I didn't have the money, but I worked every odd job imaginable. I kept books for a neighborhood bar, I worked for a state agency, anything to pay my way. Long hours of work by day, fitting classes into the schedule, and reading into the night became a way of life.

On the surface there was nothing new here in the life of a student, but there was a difference for us. We were Mexican students, unprepared by high school to compete as scholars. We were tolerated rather than accepted. The thought was still prevalent in the world of academia that we were better suited as janitors than scholars. English was still a foreign language to us; I had to work hard to dominate its rules and nuances. Even in university classes, I was still corrected for allowing my Spanish accent to show. We were different, and we were made to feel different. It was a lonely time; many of us did not survive.



A Faith Shaken

The friendship of other Chicanos helped me survive in the university. Dennis, who later became my *compadre*, was there. Jimmy, who was studying Spanish and Latin American literature, was there. On weekends we got together, went out drinking, played pool, met girls. Dennis and I fished a lot up in the Jemez Mountains. The *barrios* of the city were always there to welcome us home. We knew we were moving out into a bigger world, but it was the old world we knew which provided our stability.

Reading created a new, turbulent world with ideas that challenged the foundations of my faith. I began to write poetry to fill the void. It is a terrible thing when the foundations of faith fall apart. A great vacuum opens up, one wanders lost in that void. There is little meaning to life. Suicide becomes a perverse companion. I felt betrayed. Life and the church had betrayed me. I lost faith in my God, and if there was no God there was no meaning, no secure road to salvation. All this may sound like the retelling of the crisis of faith which many young people experience, but it is important to verbalize these feelings. The depth of loss one feels is linked to one's salvation. That may be why I write. It is easier to ascribe those times and their bittersweet emotions to my characters.

Love is most poignant when we are young. I fell in love with a young artist at the university, but in the tradition of that beatnik generation which was moving around the country, she moved away. I was shattered. My religious beliefs were being assaulted from every side. I think it is precisely those two elements which are the most difficult for young people to deal with: the loss of love and loss of faith.

What saves us? Something in the fiber of the soul will suffer the loss of meaning, be dragged to the depths of despair and depression, and still find threads which will not snap. Love is such a thread. Forgiveness is another. The will to *be* in the face of nothingness. The will to reconstitute the faith. Something in the stream of my blood and the blood of my community gave me the strength to begin my search anew. I can rebuild the foundations of my faith, I said. A realization slowly arrived at, one that came out of the difficult years.

I began to write novels of young people caught in the same despair which seemed to drown me. I wrote exclamatory poetry. "Man is born free! But everywhere he is in chains!" Reams of manuscripts. One novel, I remember, ran nearly a thousand pages. I burned all those old manuscripts. It was a necessary phase

for the budding writer, but no need to trouble the world with pure emotion regurgitated.

I received my degree and accepted a teaching position in a small town in New Mexico, later I taught in Albuquerque. So, I still had not left home except for brief journeys to New York, into the south, to St. Louis. Always in search of something, something I thought the eastern part of the American continent could give me but did not.

I married a woman from Kansas. Patricia. I think she was the one person who truly believed I could be a writer. Her encouragement was a new pillar in the foundation I was building. She became a good editor who could read my work and respond to its strengths and weaknesses.

Every writer needs a relationship with an editor, a sort of mentor. In our formative years, especially, we need to see our work reflected in the eyes of another person. That person somehow represents our eventual readership. If he knows our desire to write, that person will quickly go to the strengths and the weaknesses, saving the writer time by focusing on areas that need revising.

For many writers, marriage is difficult. It seems to add to the storm of emotion which is the baggage of our work. I have needed a stable base from which to write, so for me marriage and home have been positive. Two miscarriages were the most difficult experiences of my married life. The flushing of one's own blood hurts more than anything I know. But time softens the memories and images and teaches us to forget and forgive. Still, the image of that loss remains sharp and clear in my mind, painful. Perhaps the writer or artist is a person who is damned not because he or she writes, but because those sharp and poignant images of joy and pain remain so clear in our mind and soul that we must flee into writing to assuage the pain.

In the sixties I had thrown out all my old work and I began work on my novel, *Bless Me, Ultima*. I would teach by day, come home and write in the afternoons and into the night. It was a simple story, the story of a boy growing up in a small New Mexico town. I was still haunted by the voices of my childhood, and I had to capture the memory of those times and people. But I was still imitating a style and mode not indigenous to the people and setting I knew best. I was desperately seeking my natural voice, but the process by which I formed it was long and arduous.

Literary historians have not been kind to the literature of the Mexicans in this country. In many ways, *their* history has cheated us. It has not reflected the

true accomplishments of this cultural group. This slight we are just now setting right. But in the sixties I felt I was writing in a vacuum. I had no Chicano models to read and follow, no fellow writers to turn to for help. Even Faulkner, with his penchant for the fantastic world of the South, could not help me in Mexican/Indian New Mexico. I would have to find my way alone. I would have to build from that which I knew best.



Ultima Appears

I was working late one night, trying to breathe life into the novel that would one day be known as *Bless Me, Ultima*. The *curandera* Ultima had not yet entered the story. One light was on, a desk light near the typewriter. I heard a noise and turned to see the old woman dressed in black enter the room. This is how Ultima came to me, while I struggled with the story. Old and bent, the fragrance of sweet herbs clinging to her dress, wrinkled but with the fire of truth and wisdom burning in her eyes, she moved toward me.

"¿Que haces, hijo?" the old woman asked. "I am writing a story," I said. Her presence in the room was strong, palpable. She laid her hand on my shoulder and I felt the power of the whirlwind. I closed my eyes and saw into the heart of the lake, the deep pool of my subconscious, the collective memory and history of our people.

One thing should be made clear about my meeting with *Ultima*. Those who don't know me may smile and suggest perhaps I had a little too much to drink, and in a state of weariness I was hallucinating. No doubt about it, I do enjoy good bourbon or scotch. Most writers I know are hooked on something or other, or it may be that as writers acquire fame they think they have to keep up their notoriety. But I trained myself from the very beginning never to drink when I am writing.

In the process of writing, the serious writer enters planes of vision and reality that cannot be induced with alcohol or drugs. And in that stage of creativity, when the juices flow and the story begins to write itself, the soul of the writer seems to enter the story. The trance can only be explained as a kind of spiritual

high. The writer's materials may be from the world of the profane, but in breathing life into those materials the writer enters the world of the sacred. Even the most simple and mundane story might at any moment transport the writer into that flow of creativity which seems to connect him with the world of the story. At that moment everything is in balance, in harmony. The mind and the body keep pace with each other, the words flow, the story grows. I feel that connection right now as I write. The flow is natural. Life itself.

I respect my work. I want nothing to get between me and the natural, creative high I discover there. So it was the night Ultima appeared. I told her about the story I was writing, the setting, the characters. I told her I wasn't satisfied with the story, that it lacked soul. I could imitate the writers I had read, but I couldn't write like me, Rudolfo Anaya, a *Nuevo Mexicano*, *hispano*, *indio*, *catolico* son of my mother and father, son of the earth which nurtured me, son of my community, son of my people. Ultima opened my eyes and let me see the roots of my soul.

I worked for seven years on *Bless Me, Ultima*. The process of discovery continued. Those realizations we later see so clearly actually come in small steps, and that's how it was for me. I began to discover that the lyric talent I possessed, as the poet I once aspired to be, could be used in writing fiction. The oral tradition which so enriched my imagination as a child could lend its rhythm to my narrative. Plot techniques learned in Saturday afternoon movies and comic books could help as much as the grand design of the classics I had read. Everything was valuable, nothing was lost.



The First Novel is Born

The sixties were turbulent years. The war in Vietnam created a national debate which tested the nation, tested communities and families. Most of the people I knew in education opposed the war. I circulated petitions to end the war, and I worked hard to organize the first teachers union in the Albuquerque school system, an alternative voice to the lame classroom union that was in place. Around us the winds of the Chicano movement, which were later to sweep me up, blew

across the land. In California Cesar Chavez led the first organized *huelgas*, and the farmworkers union was born. In New Mexico Reyes Lopez Tijerina led a group of private citizens to arrest the district attorney. A shooting incident erupted, the now famous Tierra Amarilla courthouse raid became a national incident around which Chicanos rallied, especially those who knew the meaning of having lost the ancestral lands of the old Mexican and Spanish land grants. Corky Gonzalez organized the Crusade for Justice in Denver and La Raza Unida Political Party was born in Texas. Bobby Kennedy broke bread with Cesar Chavez. The political activity of the Chicano Movement was spreading. The assassination of President Kennedy was deeply felt in the Chicano community. Black Friday was viewed as a symbolic striking back of the reactionary forces which guarded the power in the country, a power they did not want to share with the oppressed.

In the midst of these turbulent years, I struggled to learn the intricacies of writing a novel. I wrote incessantly, exhausted though I might be, I pushed myself to develop a strict schedule of writing. I knew the only difference between me and the other young writers of my university years was that they wrote sporadically, when the spirit moved them. I wrote every day. I created my own spirit.

I completed *Bless Me, Ultima* and began to circulate it. I started the only way I knew how, a slave to that American myth which deludes us into thinking that the only place for a young writer to begin is with the big publishers of the east. Little did I know that many of the giants of the publishing world were dying, that American publishing was changing, that the small presses of the country were on their way to creating a publishing revolution. I went the old route, with dreams of New York, Boston if need be, sure that *Bless Me, Ultima* was a good novel, perhaps a great novel.

I approached dozens of publishers, the result was always the same. I collected enough form letter rejections to wallpaper the proverbial room, but I was undaunted. Sometime in 1971 I was reading a literary journal published in Berkeley, California. It was *El Grito*, a Chicano quarterly, one of the first and finest of the early Chicano movement. It was founded by Professor Octavio Romano and several Chicano students, at the University of California at Berkeley, and it called for manuscripts. I sent the editors a letter. They would like to see my novel. Months later they responded. They wanted to publish the novel. Then came the crowning achievement. My novel was to be awarded the prestigious Premio Quinto Sol Award for the best novel written by a Chicano in 1972. I

went to Berkeley and met Octavio Romano, Herminio Rios, and Andres Ybarra, the movers behind the fledgling Quinto Sol Publications. *Bless Me, Ultima* became an instant success.

It was a fabulous time to be alive. I was a novelist, a novelist whose work had been awarded a literary prize, an honor which carries great distinction in the Latino world. Everywhere I went I was lionized. It was exhilarating. The sense of feeling destined to complete a purpose in life, the sense of being chosen, is not as egotistical as it sounds. Every person who develops a healthy sense of self feels important, unique, chosen. Those who do important work in life have the feeling of heightened destiny .

Bless Me, Ultima had touched a chord of recognition in the Mexican-American community. Teachers and professors were reading it, but most rewarding of all, the working people were reading it: "I gave it to my aunt, my uncle, my cousin." "I gave it to my neighbor." "The bus driver was reading it at the stop." "I saw it in a bookstore in Alaska" My novel was moving out into the world. Most of the Chicanos who had lived the small town, rural experience easily identified with it. Everybody had stories of *curanderas* they had known in their communities. The novel was unique for its time, it had gone to the Mexican-American people as a source of literary nourishment. It became a mirror in which to reflect on the stable world of the past, a measure by which to view the future. I traveled all over the country, from California to Washington to Texas and Colorado, into the Midwest in Ohio and Michigan, and everywhere I found large communities of Chicanos. The Chicano Movement and the artistic work we were producing united us all and gave us a sense of worth and destiny.

I had made my connection to the Chicano Movement. The winds of change, which before had only been felt as the stirring of the storm, were now a gale of commitment to our people. The Mexican-American people, long suffering under their economic, political, and educational oppression were moving to change their destiny. In the universities, Chicano Studies classes and programs were created. Never again would we be denied a study of our history, literature, and culture!

The farmworkers organized across the Southwest. Years of frustration erupted in riots, some of our people died. But their efforts, the efforts of all, were to be rewarded. The movement changed the destiny of the Chicanos, changed in small part the way society looks at this cultural group. The country was not completely changed, but a significant beginning was made. A feeling of renewed pride flowed in the people. Everywhere I went, the message was the same: It is good to be a Chicano!



The Search for Aztlan

During the sixties I was teaching junior high school, then later, high school in Albuquerque. My wife's parents had moved from Kansas to Taos where they built their retirement home. I had been to Taos, had stayed in the pueblo with Cruz and Tonita. I learned to hunt with Cruz in the mountains. I was also doing a lot of fishing in northern New Mexico. Growing up in rural New Mexico I had hunted rabbits, *coyotes*, small game, but with Cruz the hunt took on a deeper meaning. The deer was a source of nourishment for the pueblo, the deer is also a brother. The hunt is a ceremony involving the energies of life: man and animal. I had been privileged to understand the delicate balance of nature from Cruz, something which bordered on the sacred. More importantly, the time I spent with him began to reveal to me the vibrations of my Native American soul.

Patricia and I began to take trips into Mexico. At first we went as tourists, down the western coast to Mazatlán and Guaymas and later into Mexico City. As we became drawn to the country, the tourist baggage dropped away. I was on the trail of clues or roots which seemed to speak to my identity. We had no family in Mexico, the Anayas had been in New Mexico for centuries. My father's father had been one of the incorporators of a land grant in Albuquerque: *La Merced de Atrisco*. So our roots were New Mexico, but now I was making my connection to other, more distant roots in Mesoamerica.

The land grant which my father's family had helped incorporate consisted of a huge area of land stretching for miles along the Rio Grande in Albuquerque's south valley, and then for miles west into the desert as far as the Rio Puerco. The land grant had always been a bone of contention between my parents. My father, as heir to the land grant, had received some lots in the forties and sold them very cheap. My mother, having that peasant *Nuevo Mexicano* instinct and love for the land, saw the land grant as a source of our values. Take care of the land and it takes care of us. She believed that someday we would all own a piece of that land grant which had been handed down for generations. The real history of the Spanish and Mexican land grants of New Mexico would prove her wrong. Most of the big land grants were stolen away from the true inheritors.

It was part of those themes which I incorporated into my second novel, *Heart of Aztlán*, a novel about people living in the Barelás barrio in the early fifties. It was an exploration of the relationship that the *Nuevo Mexicano* of New Mexico has to the land. How did the relationship change as the old communal villages lost their sons and daughters to the cities? How were we affected by the symbols and knowledge of Mesoamerica which the poets and artists of the Chicano Movement were finding in Indian Mexico? I knew I was discovering an association to Indian Mexico. At the height of the Chicano Movement the myths, legends, and symbols from Aztec pre-Columbian Mexico began to be a very important ingredient in Chicano poetry and thought.

The artistic arm of the movement also aligned itself with the farmworker who became the symbolic hero of the young activists and artists. The three-headed figure of the *mestizo* appeared in posters everywhere. The eagle of the farmworkers became the flag of the movement. The Teatro Campesino used people and experiences from the farmworkers' community to reflect the reality of people's lives. Everywhere there was a feeling that the artist had to return his art to the people, to the pueblo.

From the cave man, whose art on the wall of the cave is partly inspired by the need for communal food, to the priests past and present, who pray to the gods for the community's spiritual well-being, man has developed his spiritual and artistic self as a reflection of the group's needs. Writers have always reflected on their life in the group. By extolling the virtues of the heroes of the group or by challenging the pettiness of restrictive group rules, they have been the mediators between what is and what can be.

But all social and political and artistic movements have shortcomings. All movements have individuals within their ranks who want to dictate the role of each person in the context of the movement. Within the Chicano Movement there was a small band of Marxist-Leninist critics who insisted that Chicano writers had to follow their ideology. The struggle was of a working people against capitalistic oppression, they said, so the role of the arts was to present that theme and nothing else. That, to me, was a limited perception of what I felt to be the creative spirit. *Bless Me, Ultima* was attacked by the Marxist critics as having no relevant social value to the working class. Yes, I had many defenders of my work, but I also had to face the few detractors.

In *Heart of Aztlán* my inclination was to follow the symbols I was encountering. The concept of Aztlán began to dominate my thoughts, and the novel re-

flected this obsession. By now I was reading about the Indian history of Mexico. I had visited the ruins at Tenochtitlán, Cholula, and Monte Albán. I was discovering the grandeur of power which those ancient people had felt in their relationship to each other and to the mystery of the cosmos.

I was in Mexico City in the summer of 1974 when I received a call from the chairman of the English Department at the University of New Mexico. Would I come and teach creative writing for them? I left to take up my new position, but I would return to renew myself in my spiritual homeland.



Tortuga, A Trilogy Completed

The seventies were busy but rewarding years for me. I traveled extensively throughout the country, lecturing, reading from my work. Patricia and I traveled twice to Europe. Our world was growing, and we loved and appreciated it. At the university I worked hard to help develop the creative writing program, and I helped to found a state-wide writers association. Those were good years, the writers in the state and the region came together. We sponsored conferences and readings, we developed a summer writing workshop. The Rio Grande Writers group grew. We looked seriously at the problems inherent in distributing small press works, and we began a distribution project.

In 1974 I was invited to serve on the board of the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines (CCLM), with offices in New York. It was an excellent opportunity to serve the community of writers I knew and had faith in, the small-press editors and writers of the country. I met a very important group of writers, writers like Ishmael Reed, Ron Sukenick, Toni Cade Bambara, among others. Twice a year the board held regional workshops around the country, so I not only got a good sense of the country, visiting places I normally might not have known, but I also met many writers and felt close to the grassroots writing of the nation. From the Carolinas to Atlanta, from Seattle to Los Angeles, from Buffalo to Albuquerque, we took our show on the road and became a very active part of one of the most phenomenal literary movements in the country: the small-press revolution.

In retrospect, it seems I have been in the right place at the right time to see at least a few literary movements born. Certainly, the small-press movement of those years changed the course of publishing in this country. As more and more of the older, established publishers went under or were lost in the mergers of the multinational corporations, the small presses established themselves as logical heirs to publish the serious first works of many of the country's young writers.

Before I joined CCLM I had taken part in a conference held in Ellensburg, Washington. Frank Chin, Lawson Inada, Leslie Silko, Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, Ishmael Reed, Victor Hernandez Cruz, and others were there. We were there to discuss minority writing in America. The ever-growing number of writers in the Native American, Asian American, Black, and Chicano communities was a phenomenon destined to change the face of American literature. We were the vanguard of something new and exciting, as was the women writers movement. Many of us would remain friends for life.

During those years I was working on *Tortuga*, the third novel which I felt would complete my trilogy. *Tortuga* was my hospital story, and thus a very difficult novel for me to write. Yet I believe it to be one of my best works. The novel is loosely based on my experience in a hospital, but it quickly became more than that. The theme of healing still occupied my thoughts. How do people get well? I looked around and saw that we had created a society that was crushing and mutilating us. People were sick, physically and spiritually. How could those people be helped? The hospital I created became an existential hell, symbolizing our own contemporary hell.

In *Tortuga* I took my characters to the depths of despair and human suffering, and they find in their hellish existence the faith they need to survive in the world. Perhaps I was finally bringing together my own foundations of faith, finally regrouping from an existential wasteland and giving form to my own credo.



Heirs to the Dream

My discipline as a writer evolved from early training. I would write every morning, and I still do. I traveled to explore the world and ventured out to do readings, but I would always return to home base. The old *Hispanos* and Indians

of New Mexico knew that to be without a land base is to be cut away from the center of the universe. I feel the same about my home. In New Mexico I can connect to the people and the sustaining energy of the earth. We built an adobe home on the west mesa of the city in 1974. From there I can see the Sandia and Manzano Mountains across the valley, I can watch the seasons change the character of the Rio Grande Valley below. I can watch as my city grows.

I embarked on a long novel, a novel about the city. In the meantime I had followed other literary paths. I had been writing short stories throughout, somewhere in between novels I squeezed out short stories. I also did translations of old Southwest Hispanic folktales, and these *cuentos* were published in 1980. Working with the old oral materials which had been collected by folklorists renewed my connection to that exciting and magical stream of the oral tradition. The magical realism, which the Hispanic writers of the region were weaving into the soul of their writings, was the historical inheritance which gave those *cuentos* life.

For those who had lived close to the oral tradition of the people, the literary inheritance was clear. From Spain, from the Mediterranean world of Catholics, Jews, and Arabs, from the borrowing of medieval Europe, from the dozens of waves which swept over the peninsula of Spain to evolve the characters of those groups, into the Mexico of the Americas with Cortes, to be enhanced with the serious magic of the pre-Columbian Indians, north into the heart of New Mexico, north up along the Rio Grande, a rich world view came to sustain the people. In the *cuentos*, in the oral tradition, the view of the world was kept alive, and it was fed to us with *atole* and *tortillas*, filling us with the wonder of creation. The old people respected the mystery of the universe, the awe it inspired in the individual, and they passed some of that wonder down to us.

But the inheritors of this fantastic world view and heritage were most often at the bottom of the socio-economic system. We resolved, in those years, always to fight to better the life of the Hispanics and Mexicans of the Southwest. That is why we called ourselves Chicanos. To be a Chicano was a declaration of independence, to be free to create our destiny, to announce to the world that we would not live intimidated under injustice and prejudice. That movement we created is now a historic ripple in the stream of our time. Perhaps to declare to be Chicano, with that pride which we felt in the sixties and seventies, will pass away and the contemporary generation will move to join the mainstream culture of this country, but certainly the ideals of our movement will never be forgotten.

My interest with Mexican thought continues to grow. I will not rest until the people of Mexican heritage know the great cultures and civilizations they are heirs to from that country to the south. I've written a few stories with Mexico as the setting, and the story of La Llorona I also placed in Mexico. To write her story I went back to the Mexico of Cortes and the conquest of Mexico. The heroine becomes Malinche, a young Indian woman who befriends Cortes and is later betrayed by him. Using the scant details of legend, I wrote a novel about Quetzalcóatl, one of the most interesting deities of Mesoamerica. A redeemer and savior, Quetzalcóatl is the god who brought wisdom and the arts to pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. He represents the wise men and philosophers of Mexico, perhaps a new age of awareness, perhaps a god who walked among men, as Christ walked in Jerusalem.



And now, how do I summarize this short, autobiographical view of my life? How can one truly explore, in such a short space, the details of sights and sounds and moments of poignant love and sadness? I wish I could acknowledge all the people who have helped me in my journey, those who have affected my life. The list would be long. I wish I could allow the reader into other corners of my heart, those darker niches where the view would be more profound and complex. Each of us is neither all good nor all bad, we share the natural human emotions. A writer is no different from the vast swarm of mankind, only in us something is heightened, that vibration of creativity forces us to look closer into the lives of our brothers and sisters.

I am now spending more time writing plays, learning the techniques of writing drama. I also allow time to edit the work of other writers and try to encourage and guide those young writers who are developing. I continue to read from my works and to lecture around the country; the public continues to be interested in my work and in Chicano literature. Quite recently my wife and I returned from a trip to West Germany, where we met the publisher who is to publish German editions of my novels.

I traveled for a month in China in 1984 and the University of New Mexico Press is publishing my journal, *A Chicano in China*. During the past few years

trips have taken me not only to Canada and Mexico but to China, Brazil, Israel, and to Peru where I visited the incredible Machu Picchu. My interest in exploring the world continues.

My writing is ongoing; it fills my life. I have many projects and planned novels, and teaching continues to be rewarding. I am forty-eight, and now time is the most valuable element; there is so much to do in life. Day-to-day relationships become more important, what one shares and gives is more important than the taking. One's life does not end with an autobiography. It moves on to a new, and hopefully, exciting plane of living.

