



Sergio Troncoso is a writer of essays, short stories, and novels, and the author of five books. Among the numerous awards he has won are the Premio Aztlan Literary Prize, Southwest Book Award, Bronze Award for Essays from *ForeWord Reviews*, and International Latino Book Award.

literature.

The son of Mexican immigrants, Troncoso was born and grew up on the eastern outskirts of El Paso, Texas in rural Ysleta. He graduated from Harvard College, and studied international relations and philosophy at Yale University. He won a Fulbright scholarship to Mexico, where he studied economics, politics, and

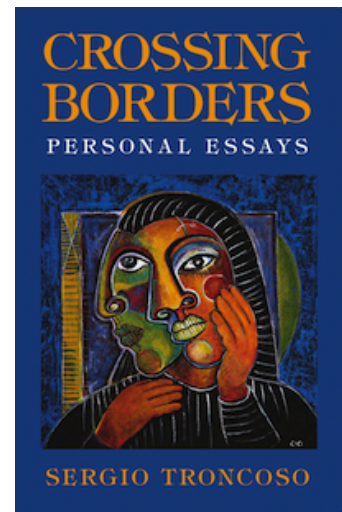
Troncoso was inducted into the Hispanic Scholarship Fund's Alumni Hall of Fame and the Texas Institute of Letters. He also received the Literary Legacy Award from the El Paso Community College. He is a member of PEN, a writers' organization protecting free expression and celebrating literature. The El Paso City Council voted unanimously to rename the Ysleta public library branch in honor of Sergio Troncoso. He served as one of three national judges for the 2016 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction.

He is currently an instructor at the Hudson Valley Writers' Center in Sleepy Hollow, New York and a resident faculty member of the Yale Writers' Conference in New Haven, Connecticut.

The El Paso Times said of Troncoso's book, *Crossing Borders: Personal Essays*, "These very personal essays cross several borders: cultural, historical, and self-imposed.... We owe it to ourselves to read, savor and read them again." *The Portland Book Review* said the book was "Heart-wrenching."

"Fresh Challah" is one of the sixteen essays in *Crossing Borders: Personal Essays*.

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Fresh Challah

As soon as I walked into the Royale Bakery on 72nd Street and Broadway, I knew I would get good Challah. The air was heavy with the aroma of freshly baked bread. A worker in a stained white apron marched with a metal sheet of braided bread loaves gripped in his hands and held above his head. With one swift motion, he slid the sheet onto the shelves against the wall. The loaves of Challah glistened under the bright white light, and seemed soft and steamy from the other side of the cash register. Arrayed behind a glass counter were vanilla crescents, lemon squares, *linzer törtchen*, dandies, hazelnut spirals, chocolate-dipped sables, and *rugelach*. I was in heaven, and I was not about to leave, so I slid into one of three Formica booths against the wall. An old woman, not higher than five feet, with a bouffant hairdo under a black hairnet, her skin a creamy pallid except for the smear of rouge on her cheeks, shuffled toward me. Her long, stiff apron seemed to snag her legs, and I worried she would tumble forward at any moment, but she did not. She asked me with a generous smile and a wink if I wanted a cup of coffee. I said that I did and felt immediately guilty for having sat down to be waited on by somebody whose bluish hair reminded me of my grandmother. She did not seem to notice my discomfort and brought back my extra light coffee with, to my surprise, two pieces of *rugelach* on a paper plate. She winked at me again. I was really in heaven at the Royale.

Tomorrow would be Yom Kippur in Manhattan. I decided to fast from sunup to sundown and reflect on the number and variety of my wrongs over the past year and what I could do to correct them and why it had taken Yom Kippur to focus on my problems and resolve them. Maybe I would not even accomplish what might become clear in my head. Thinking rightly did not imply doing the right thing. Aristotle had argued that point against Plato, and I knew it only too well. Yet as I relaxed at the Royale Bakery and stared at the customers waiting at the counter, sipping my coffee which slithered down my throat like a hot snake, I hoped that whatever failings I uncovered in my character, whatever festering wounds I found in my soul, could be changed, or at least better understood. I rarely had melodramatic crises. I mostly endured self-imposed irritations that coalesced into questions refusing to leave me and bedeviling my mind.

As I chewed on a raisin of the *rugelach*, I thought about one question that had perplexed me for months. I was not Jewish, but in some sense wanted to be. True, the woman I loved was Jewish. But that did not explain how I felt. I also loved *rugelach*, Challah, *kasha* knishes, Passover *tsimmes*, and matzoh ball soup, my favorite. Yet I would also travel many miles for white-meat mole *poblano*, deep-fried *carnitas* from a Juárez bistro, my mother’s fresh flour tortillas, and succulent, tangy *asaderos* from Licon’s Dairy in Clint, Texas. It was invariably true that my religious and cultural epiphanies contained a culinary *sine qua non*. I often became a believer in a cause or a country through my stomach.

But in what other sense did I want to be Jewish? I could only explain that feeling by describing how I wanted to be Mexican like my grandmother, Doña Dolores Rivero. Whenever I looked at my *abuelita*, I wanted so much to protect her. Even if her dark brown eyes were downcast and weary, she was poised for a fight. I wanted to ensure she did not have a hard life anymore; I wanted her to enjoy an elusive peace in her soul. Most of all, I wanted her steely optimism never to be crushed by evil. She had always been tough, and she also knew how to hurt her toughest grandchild, the one with such a sharp tongue. So we understood each other only too well.

My *abuelita* often told me about her life as a child on a Chihuahua ranch, yet I could tell she often kept many things from me. She spoke of her childhood as if a type of pain was too vivid to explain with mere words and too personal to confess to someone you loved. So the stories she recounted were always haunted with what was not said. Around every dark turn in her stories, I could palpably sense how lucky she felt to have survived. Maybe she believed the explicit details of her history would expose her as something less than human. Maybe she thought she had lived a life so painful from where she was now in El Paso, on her shady porch drenched with sunlight on Olive Street, that it was better to keep those ghosts in the past. Perhaps Doña Dolores did not want to reveal how human beings could be so cruel to each other, and so she would keep her grandchild hopeful.

This was what I knew of my grandmother’s life, from her stories to what my parents and their friends had said about Doña Dolores Rivero. She had grown up poor in rural northern Mexico during the social chaos of the Mexican Revolution. Several uncles and brothers perished in a civil war in which over a million Mexicans died. Those who survived were refugees for years, with little food, dying of disease, alone to fend for themselves, and without any real local authority to protect them. I had the suspicion that my grandmother might have been raped when government soldiers and gangs of armed horsemen swept through small hamlets scattered across the Chihuahua plains. No one in my family would utter the word “rape,” although my *abuelita* said in a whisper that no law existed in the middle of the desert with a war raging behind every hill and valley. I did know my grandmother had in fact shot men with a rifle, and maybe that was the truth: she had shot and killed the men who had wanted to abuse her. I knew that as a child my *abuelita* had defended her mother from being beaten by her husband, and placed herself between her parents.

As a young girl, Doña Dolores had been known for her strength. Not only was she tough-minded, but she was also physically tough. She could sling a 50-kilo sack of beans over her shoulders and toss it into the back of a grain truck. I knew working men would be embarrassed to be near her, because she was often stronger than they were. I also knew my *abuelita* possessed a sympathetic heart, perhaps a bit too vulnerable for her own good. She fell deeply in love with a man who is hardly spoken of in my family. She had three children by him, but he never married my grandmother. She alone raised two daughters and a son in the

Chihuahua desert. My mother told me she did not own a single pair of shoes until she was a teenager. I was also told that many men, seeing my grandmother with children but not married, assumed they could have their way with her, that she was available for the taking. Bad assumption. That was when my grandmother learned to shoot a rifle.

When Doña Dolores was older, in her forties, she met the man I would know as my grandfather. Don José Rivero was a good man, quick with a smile, loyal, and tolerant of my headstrong grandmother. I loved my grandmother (and, of course, my grandfather), yet I knew she was difficult to live with. Perhaps this was due to the many deep scars from her life (“Dolores,” in Spanish, means sorrows), or perhaps she already possessed that incredible will that was ready to die rather than be defeated. In any case, she would do what she wanted to do, or else. Doña Dolores ran her household with an indomitable spirit. My mother and her siblings were put to work to pay the bills. My grandfather handed over his check to my grandmother, although I also knew he secretly stashed a few dollars for his small pleasures, beer and cigarettes.

Yet my *abuelita* was also loving and needful. She would stack the record player with her albums of polkas and *corridos*—her favorites were from Los Coyotes del Río Bravo—and twirl my rickety grandfather around the living room on an afternoon so hot you thought your skin would melt. When I saw them dance in their apartment in El Paso’s El Segundo Barrio, I often wondered if this was how they met, since my grandfather had played a silver-and-black accordion with a *norteño* band.

My *abuelita*’s home, in front of a red-brick halfway house run by the Catholic Church, was often full of *viejitos* on a Saturday night. All sorts of characters came over to see her and sit on her porch and smoke cigarettes. They would talk about God. They would laugh until the desert night became too cold. They would ask her for advice on their problems and rediscover the laughter that kept them happy and alive. I loved those nights. I was the only child among them, and I remember hearing about a great faith in God and about what was important in life and what did not matter. I remember my *abuelita* saying to keep fighting for what was right and never give up on life even if others despoiled it. When Doña Dolores died a few months after my grandfather’s own death, I felt alone in the world for the first time. But then I remembered what she had said and what she had done, and I resolved to fight for what was right, to seek a critical faith, and to defend others who had the courage to better themselves.

In my grandmother, I saw someone with a great spirit to live. She was a person who found meaning in life despite, and because of, her pain. Of course, my *abuelita* did not desire her trials, but her character survived and surmounted her bleak history. By meeting the tribulations of history with flinty courage and skill, she created her destiny. Doña Dolores possessed a character that pushed her forward to willing what she thought was right. It was never an easy road, yet her willfulness was a method of illuminating her self. That Live-Free-Or-Die attitude guaranteed Doña Dolores would face many obstacles and naysayers. Many

thought my *abuelita*, with one lazy eye askew and the other glaring at you, was just stubborn beyond belief.

But those who confronted my grandmother misunderstood her and misunderstood being willfully right. Many of my grandmother’s challengers simply did not like the idea of a willful woman. Other Mexican machos were accustomed to getting their way, and when they fought with Dolores Rivero the exchange was a violent clash of wills. But my grandmother was more than just willful. When a bully wanted to abuse another victim, my grandmother would defend the weak. When a man puffed himself up at another’s expense, my grandmother deflated the braggart. She was not just contrary. She tried to be right.

How did Doña Dolores determine what was right in her own mind? She began with self-worth. She always reminded me, in her warbled, adamant voice, that you could never achieve self-worth by putting others down. I saw that she achieved it by respecting herself, by struggling to improve her behavior, and by criticizing her faults. That clear-eyed self-reflection was her way of developing standards for her willfulness. My *abuelita* believed in God and tested her good actions everyday. In this manner, she gained a sense of what was possible, what was stupid, what was unjust, what was a real achievement, and what was a waste of time. Yes, my *abuelita* was willful, but she also fought to understand what was right.

My grandmother never confused her sense of righteousness with selfishness. She did not try to dominate an individual even if she could. Rather, her unflinching self-reflection engendered a simultaneously fearless and a vulnerable self. If Doña Dolores was familiar with her demons, if she conquered them, then she expected others to do the same. She would repeatedly give herself up, to trust again. She would offer a helping hand to a stranger at her screen door. She would say what everyone had been avoiding at a family dinner. Over the phone, she challenged me to conquer my fears at Harvard, a school with but a handful of Chicanos, in the distant and forbidding cold of New England. Or she might empathize and laugh with me at a disaster. I remember not only that strength of will, but also her hard-edged kindness. After Doña Dolores picked you up from a ruinous fall, she pushed you to get going again. The great fighters, she said, became great by what they did after being knocked down.

That vulnerable self-confidence my grandmother possessed was sometimes fraught with danger. When she criticized herself, she was harsh and even self-destructive. When my *abuelita* offered somebody a second chance, she left herself open to disappointment, or worse. Yet she always believed a person could rise from his miseries if he was willing to be honest about his problems. Opportunistic strangers took advantage of my grandmother, but at least they never did it for very long. I knew her trust had been shattered a few times, yet I never saw her retrench into hate. I never understood where she could find that reservoir from which to gather the strength to deliver herself to kindness again. But I believed she knew that if she did not open herself to new disappointments, she would also never trust anyone again. She refused to allow

the ignoble world to win the war inside of her.

When I said I wanted to be Jewish, this was what I meant. In the Jewish community, I often found those who reminded me of my grandmother. I wanted to defend them from evil in the world, because I could see myself as that kind of person. I wanted to help good people who opened themselves to push beyond where they were, who had the character to overcome discrimination and alienation; I wanted these people to win in the world. In that sense, I wanted to be Jewish and I wanted to be Mexican.

I knew that in many respects I could never really be Jewish. My mother was not Jewish. I had not converted to the Jewish faith. Even if I had, I would probably never understand what it meant to be Jewish. How could a non-Jew ever comprehend 5,000 years of history and culture? The struggle against countless oppressors? Or the hermeneutics of the Torah? So there existed many ways in which I could never be Jewish. I imagined all the disparate strands of my life might come together one day if it were discovered that my ancestors were Spanish Jews expelled during the Spanish Inquisition to Mexico in the New World. I did not research this possibility, but maybe I should. (Recently, an engineer whose last name is also Troncoso sent me a research paper which described his work in Galicia, Spain and neighboring Portugal, at the Castle of Troncoso. His conclusions? Troncoso and Troncoso were the same name, in different languages. More surprisingly, he found that “Troncoso” originated from the Ladino dialect and that the surname was Sephardic Jewish, as recorded in the census records of the Catholic Church in Spain. Troncoso was the name of one of many Jewish families banished to the New World in 1492.)

I also knew that not all Jews were Jewish in the sense I described, nor were all Mexicans like my grandmother. Many did not struggle against oppressors and against themselves, with a character that would not give up to defeat but that, instead, chiseled their form of human progress with self-respect and self-criticism. Maybe what I was thinking about was not ultimately Jewish or Mexican at all but, somehow, deeply human. I knew this humanity was not a niceness that the word nowadays connoted. The humanity I described was not blind acceptance of whatever was done. My humanity was hard-edged. It was a challenge to better yourself by making yourself vulnerable, to engage in making standards by asking yourself difficult questions. It was an exhortation to defend others in their quest for self-determination, because you grasped why life should be this way.

You gained respect for life by knowing what was possible when you were truthful and critical toward yourself. Nothing was long hidden from you. You knew exactly your good and evil. You nurtured the courage and stamina to keep improving yourself the more you lived such a vibrant life. I believed you finally developed the character to live with yourself, but this was anything but a complacent acceptance of who you were and what you did. Living with yourself created a gauntlet in front of you, because only that could truly respect life.

The best I could do now, after many years away from home, was to remember my *abuelita* Doña Dolores and what she taught me. I could struggle hard just as she did. I could remember how the heart of life was this struggle. When I brought home friends from the other side of the world, I could remember how this poor Mexican woman quickly identified with them after a few hours of coffee and conversation. It was as if these young strangers were also her grandsons and granddaughters coming home. Years after they had met her, my friends had not forgotten this grandmother in the desert who had so quickly and sympathetically reached the core of who they were.

The old woman at the Royale Bakery finally returned with a round raisin Challah enough for six and a fresh plain Challah smaller than the first. She had convinced me to take the second one so that I could eat it before dinner. I also bought one half pound of rugelach, although after she dropped extra pieces into the box for free I had almost three quarters of a pound. She asked me if I lived on Manhattan’s Upper Westside, and I said that I did, about ten blocks away. She told me she was happy to see the new faces at the Royale particularly during the high holy days. Then the place would bustle quite unlike the rest of the year. She appreciated the regulars who stopped in for their Challah every Friday. Yet she eagerly awaited the new, unfamiliar faces. Then she knew the high holy days were near and she would soon see her grandchildren.

Discussion questions for *Crossing Borders: Personal Essays* (Arte Público Press: 2011, ISBN: 0-8165-1961-7), by Sergio Troncoso.

<http://sergiotroncoso.com/borders/questions/index.htm>

In “Fresh Challah,” the author describes his abuelita as having not just a contrary character, but also a righteous one. Explain the difference. How is self-reflection and humility important in being righteous? How does self-criticism help you to empathize with others?

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