



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 Aztlán 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

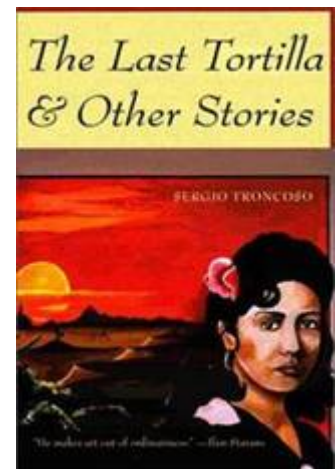
Troncoso was inducted into the Hispanic Scholarship Fund's Alumni Hall of Fame and the Texas Institute of Letters. He also received the Literary Legacy Award from the El Paso Community College. He is a member of PEN, a writers' organization protecting free expression and celebrating literature. The El 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.

*Booklist* hailed Troncoso's first book, *The Last Tortilla and Other Stories*, as "Enthusiastically recommended," and *Publishers Weekly* said, "These stories are richly satisfying."

"A Rock Trying To Be a Stone" is one of the twelve stories in *The Last Tortilla and Other Stories*.

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A Rock Trying To Be a Stone

We took Chuy to the ditch behind my house, Joe, me, and Fernández, and tied him up. We tied him up tight with a rope I found in the shed. It must've burned his wrists 'cause as soon as Joe yanked on the square knot Chuy yelped and started blubbering in the way he does when he's hungry, but I know he wasn't hungry. It hadn't been more than ten minutes since I had given him the Heath bar in front of his porch, right under his mama's eyes. Hell, I could smell the frijoles she was cooking in the kitchen just as I dangled the shiny wrapper under those stupid eyes. He followed me like a puppy, and then we tied him up secret-like.

Chuy wiggled his shoulders and stood up, his hands dangling in front of him like flippers, but Joe pushed him down hard into a tumbleweed still green from the rain. Nobody could see us in this thicket of mesquite, cattails, and garbage, the best of which was the rusted frame of El Muerto's Buick stationwagon which lay near the bottom of the ditch. When that stupid pothead had driven into the ditch drunk, he had left us a great place to wait for the bullfrogs to jump out of the mud when the rains came in the summer. And he also punched a tunnel through all the overgrowth and junk in the ditch, a tunnel that ended up at the stationwagon with the tinted moonroof, a tunnel we hid from the other pendejos in the neighborhood by covering it with dried-out tumbleweeds. This was our place, only the three of us knew about it, and we swore we wouldn't tell anyone else. Anyway, Joe would have kicked the shit out of anybody who told. He loved that tunnel more than anything else, more than being in his own house. Now we had a prisoner in our tunnel too.

"Now what?" Fernández said, staring at the slobber dripping down Chuy's lips. "I hope he isn't sick."

"Shut up. Get me that other wire over there," Joe demanded and pulled Chuy up to his feet and pushed him down the ditch tunnel toward the stationwagon and the slimy green water full of tadpoles and such. "We're gonna tie the re-tard to the Buick, we're gonna tie his legs." Joe slapped Chuy on top of his head, but it wasn't a hard slap.

"What for?" Fernández asked. "What are we gonna do with him?"

"So he can't run away. What good's a prisoner if he runs away?" I said, grabbing the tumbleweed stems behind me and closing up the entrance. The morning had been way too hot already, and there weren't any mosquitoes buzzing yet. But the ditch was full of big black shiny flies, the kind that land on dogshit and eat it. Two of 'em buzzed my head, and I jumped back. Hell, I didn't want any shit flies on me.

"Araaaayia! Araaaayia! Araaayiump!"

"Shut up, damn it. Shut the fuck up," Joe said.

"Araaaayia! Araaayiump!"

"Turi, shut him up! Somebody'll hear him," Joe said. He was getting angry. He had that bored look in his eyes, the one before he lunged at whoever was in his face. Steady eyes above a slight smile, his shoulders and arms straight like a tight coil.

"Araaaayia! Araa..." The last one died just after it left his lips. His eyes became distracted by the cinnamon jawbreaker I waved in front of him. I pushed it into the fat open mouth, and slobber got all over my fingers. I wiped myself on Fernández's T-shirt, and he slapped it away. Too late. The white saliva slobber was on him, a big foamy wet spot on his chest. I dragged my fingers through the Ysleta desert dust to get the rest of it off me. I had six more jawbreakers in my jean pockets.

Chuy was sitting in the backseat of the Buick, red foam dripping down his mouth. He seemed happy looking around the bottom of the ditch through the shattered windows, gawking up at the sun through the moonroof. He bounced his tied-up hands on his lap and looked at Joe fiddling with the copper wire around his legs. The wire wasn't long enough to fasten around both legs and the frontseat frame.

"Just tie up one leg to the bar," I said, "'cause if he can't run with one leg he can't run with two." Joe looked up and glared at me, but he tied a one-legged tie. We had ourselves a prisoner, if only a happy moron at that.

"Now what?" Fernández asked again, sitting up on the slope of the ditch with his hands on his lap.

"Shut up with your 'now what.' Can't you say anything else?" Joe said, exasperated, just about to pop Fernández one. "I have an idea."

"What?" I said, cutting a cattail off its stalk. It was about the longest I'd seen this summer, longer and thicker than the ones I already had drying on our garage roof for the Fourth of July. As long as a giant Cuban cigar and about as good for lighting firecrackers.

"Let's read the pecker his rights," Joe said, smiling widely.

"His what?" Fernández asked, stupefied. He didn't get it. When he didn't get something, he put on this scrunched-up face as if we were responsible for his mind not grasping what a normal one would. Fernández didn't have much on Chuy, nothing much at all.

"His rights, idiot. Like Dragnet," I said.

"Fuck Dragnet," Joe said, standing up next to me and reaching for something in his wallet. He was bigger than both of us, older too. No other boys in the neighborhood were friendly with him. My mother had warned me not to hang around Joe. He was a cholo, she said, his family was cursed with the malignant spirit. But I knew he was lonely sometimes, and I knew I was his friend. "I'll read him his Miranda shit."

"What's that?" Fernández asked, standing up and peering at a piece of paper in Joe's hand.

"You have a right to remain silent...."

"It says 'Miranda Rights' on top," I said.

"Anything you say can and will be used against you in a fucking court of law...."

"Who the hell is Miranda? Is it the chick who wrote that?" Fernández asked with his scrunched-up face again. "Who is it?"

"You have a right to an attorney, you have a right to be a re-tard, you have a right to be my slave forever."

"Araaaayia! Araaaayia!"

"Give him another one, Turi. Shut him up. You don't have a right to breathe unless I say so," Joe said loudly, stunning Chuy into silence with a raised index finger in his face. I popped another jawbreaker into the fat mouth, a lime-flavored one, and Chuy's face turned up toward the moonroof in beatific happiness again.

"I'm gonna start a fire. I need a smoke," Joe said, stepping away from the stationwagon, bored with the game. He strode to an open space among the weeds in the ditch and put his lighter to a dried-up tumbleweed. He threw a piece of cardboard on it and a plank and some scraggly branches. Soon there was a blaze in the open space of our tunnel, about waist-high. Fernández threw rocks at the puddles of slime in the ditch, aiming for two empty beer bottles floating above the water line. I watched Joe roll out a tiny sheet of paper on his knee, sprinkle a sliver of marijuana from a plastic zip-lock bag onto the sheet, and roll it back up tightly into a crooked, lumpy roll. He licked the edge of it before pressing it together.

"Ese Turi, do you want some?" Joe asked, taking his first long inhale of the lighted weed.

"You know I don't. I don't like it," I said. I felt a little stupid myself.

"Well I thought you changed your mind," he said.

"No I didn't," I said.

"I'll smoke it, give me some," Fernández said, looking at me with a smirk. Now I felt ashamed. Fernández was usually a coward.

"Since when are you smoking pot?" Joe challenged, almost like a big brother.

"Since about a week. Roberto Luján gave me some behind the stadium, when I went to play basket at Ysleta High," Fernández said triumphantly. All of a sudden the little thirteen-year-old I knew from down the street, the runt I used to pound into submission with my fists, seemed older, worldly, threatening. I popped a cherry jawbreaker into my mouth.

"Here then," Joe said, holding up the crude cigarette. He didn't seem to care one way or another. Joe was content to sit under the sun quietly, smoking his cigarette with or without company.

Fernández put the cigarette to his lips and expertly inhaled the acrid smoke slowly into his lungs. He didn't move his face on purpose, like a rock trying to be a stone. Fernández handed the cigarette back to Joe, who didn't even look up from scrutinizing the fire. Joe took a toke and suspended the weed between his fingers. Fernández tried to suppress a cough, but he still coughed up a huff of air. I gave him a big smile.

"I know. Let's torture el pinchi Chuy. Let's torture the re-tard," Fernández said, striding down the ditch toward the stationwagon. Chuy seemed asleep, his face reclined against the seat, his eyes closed.

"Leave him alone," Joe snapped, his eyes still on the fire. "If he wakes up and starts hollering again, I'm gonna tie you up."

I heard my mother calling me from our backyard. The ditch was behind it, running alongside San Lorenzo Street. I could see her peer over the rock wall and search for me up and down the banks of the ditch. My mother went back into the house, and I heard the screen door slam shut.

"I better go. La jefa is calling me," I said, turning to Joe. I could see Fernández stalking the perimeter of the stationwagon, jumping over the puddles of water. His eyes were fixed to the ground.

"Ese Turi, can you give me some of your mama's enchiladas again? Just like last week?" he asked quietly, glancing up toward the stationwagon to see where Fernández was.

"Well, we might be having flautas tonight," I said.

"Hey, I love flautas. Anything, you know. Just through the back of the fence, just like last week, okay?" he said.

"No problem," I said. I saw that Fernández had gotten a stick, about three feet long, and was taunting Chuy with it, poking him in the stomach.

"Mi jefe beat the crap out of me last night," Joe said, his head down again, his eyes on the fire. "Estaba borracho." I had noticed the welts on his face, his black eye, which was blood red and terribly swollen. I had thought that Joe had been in a fight again, that the other guy must've been dead 'cause Joe could be tough, muscular, mean. I knew Joe always carried a knife in his boot pocket.

"What did you do?" I asked stupidly.

"I let him hit me. He's my father," he said. "I just tried not to get hurt too much. I'm staying here tonight."

I heard the screen door slam shut again. "I'm going. Around seven, okay?" I said and started up the ditch toward the tumbleweed entrance of our tunnel. I remembered, as I walked out onto the ditch bank, that I didn't even know if Joe had a watch. I didn't know if he had ever had one.

Now I didn't see first-hand what happened between the time I left the two of them with Chuy and when I heard the commotion in the ditch behind our backyard, with the ambulance siren wailing in the late afternoon and the police cars roaming the neighborhood until dark. Joe told me about it later. This is what he said, as near as I can remember it.

After I left, Joe got up and went to buy a six-pack at Emma's. That's about a twenty-minute walk round trip from the corner of San Lorenzo and San Simon. That is, if old man Julian isn't asleep in the backroom and answers the door right away. Joe didn't say anything about the old geezer, so I assume he was sitting on the porch waiting for anyone to show up. Joe showed up, and he bought what he always buys, a six-pack of Coors. By the time he got back to the tunnel in the ditch, he had already drunk a can of beer and stopped to piss it off behind the González house. I think he had once gone out with Leticia González, and maybe the place seemed familiar to him. Anyway, that's where he pissed.

So he returned to the tunnel in what couldn't have been more than an hour. And guess what the idiot Fernández had done? He had set fire to the tumbleweeds and the grass around the stationwagon, he had thrown wood and shit onto it to make it as if he were roasting poor Chuy alive, like a luau pig. He was just fucking pretending, he said, pretending to put the fire all around the other idiot and burn him up. By the time Joe was walking down the tunnel of brush toward the stationwagon, Fernández was trying to stomp the fire out. His sneakers were melting, his pants caught fire, and Joe pushed him away and into the slimy water. Then Joe tried to beat the fire with an old coat somebody had left behind. Chuy was screaming wildly. He screamed and shrieked although the fire still wasn't on him. But it was all around him. The fire was burning up the front seat. The moonroof cracked in the heat and crashed down on Chuy's face. Joe took an empty can of paint and was pitching water into the blaze in the backseat, as much as he could with each canful. Fernández ran up the ditch bank and ran home. Chuy was jumping up and down and holding his tied-up hands to his face, against the flames in front of him. Jumping up and down and yelling a long scream that Joe said sounded like a freight train's whistle. Joe reached in and pulled Chuy's tied-up foot for a second, pulled it so he could free the other idiot and maybe snap the goddamn wire, but he couldn't. The fire scorched Joe's hand and forearm, burned it like a steak so that his skin wrinkled up and hissed and stung with such a deep pain that he wanted to cut it off to free himself of the agony.

Chuy must've felt the tug at his leg. For as soon as Joe fell back and dunked his fiery arm in the algae water, Chuy jumped off the backseat and discovered his legs and took a step out of the stationwagon as if someone had tied his shoe laces together secret-like. Plop. Chuy fell right on top of the blaze outside the car door, his leg still tied up to what was left of the front seat, and the poor bastard wiggled crazily on top of the fire, and hissed and screamed until his burned-up flesh stunk so much that you couldn't smell the slimy water in the ditch anymore. Then he stopped moving and fired up like a Duraflame.

Joe walked home holding up his arm just as the fire raced up the ditch banks in a cloud of black smoke high above Ysleta. The neighbors had seen the smoke and called the fire department, and they had seen Joe but didn't pay him no mind then. That ditch went up in flames at least once a year for as long as I can remember, so whoever happened to junk his cigarette in the tumbleweeds just started what was going to happen sooner or later anyway. It's just that the ditch never burned with some idiot in it before. So after the firemen rode in from Alameda Street with all of their commotion, they started hosing down the grass and the pile of tires and the like. The little cabrones in the neighborhood probably ran after the fire truck like they always do, and climbed on the truck when the firemen weren't looking. And the gringo firemen patted the kids on the head and went about their business stomping the bushes and spraying their waterhoses with that deafening drone from the fire truck. Then, at the bottom of the ditch, I'm sure one of them got real curious. Next to El Muerto's stationwagon was something round and blackened and wearing sneakers. They didn't know it was Chuy yet. They just knew it wasn't a charred-up Michelin man.

Joe said he went home. His father wasn't there; the house was empty. With his free arm, Joe broke open a couple of eggs in a dish and patted the egg whites onto the burnt skin on his arm. This made the pain recede. He said he wrapped it up in gauze and sat down to drink a beer before he packed up some clothes in a Safeway bag, his father's Raven MP-25, and whatever cash he could find. Joe never showed me the Raven, but I didn't think he was lying. He didn't care enough to lie. He just did what he did, and that's how he said it. He hid for a while in the ditch behind Carl Longuemare Road. That ditch's actually an irrigation canal for the cotton fields on Americas Avenue and for the fields beyond the maquiladoras, unlike the ditch behind my house which is mostly ornamental, good for draining off the two or three summer downpours we get in the El Paso desert. But ours is still a good ditch to play in, even after Chuy got himself killed in it.

I knew the police were looking for Joe; they knocked on all the houses on San Lorenzo Street, including mine. Luckily my mother wasn't there. Doña María had called her, and together they had walked down the street to see Doña Lupe, who was hysterical, my mother said later. She loved her little re-tard. So the police came, and I walked out to the fence with Lobo growling and jumping against the chainlink, and I told them my mother wasn't home. They asked if I had seen a José Domínguez of the neighborhood, and I said I hadn't. They went next door with that shithole Don Eugénio, who never returns any of my baseballs, and so on down the street. I never told them anything, and that includes my mother. I should've told them that there was still another stupid idiot in the neighborhood and that his name was Horácio Fernández. But I didn't.

After I ate dinner, I went out back with a plateful of flautas, frijoles, and rice. My mother didn't see me, and my dad was watching TV. I also took some scraps for Lobo, mainly a thick round bone from the brisket for the flautas. This way the dog wouldn't keep begging for what I carried up high on the plate. That was for Joe, if he was still alive and not with a bullet in his chest. I waited out there for a long time. I waited in the dark until I couldn't smell the frijoles anymore, until everything was dead cold. Nothing. I figured the police had already arrested Joe for the fire, but I didn't want to believe it. So I waited some more until I got tired. Then I started feeding a flauta to Lobo in the dark, and the stupid mutt gnawed on one end of it as if it were a giant jawbreaker. The wetness of the muzzle reminded me of Chuy's slobber. I heard 'Ese Turi' from behind the rock wall. It was Joe, just another shadow in the darkness. I handed him the plate, and he told me what happened, and I told him that the cops were looking for him, and he said he knew that already. 'Munch Munch Munch' I heard from somewhere just beyond me, over the fence. I didn't tell him anything about the half-eaten flauta, and he didn't seem to notice 'cause he left the plate clean. I figured I didn't want to add to his troubles. Anyway, he said he was starving, and the dog already had a bone.

That's the last time I ever saw Joe. I don't know what happened to him after that, whether



he got to Mexico like he said he wanted to. I'm gonna be a reverse wetback, he said, a mojado without a country. He said that he had some cousins in Delicias who had a farm, that the Chihuahua girls he knew were extra nice. I don't know if he ever got himself a Chihuahua girl. I never saw him again. But I did see el pinchi Fernández again. About a week later. The runt had been playing basket behind Ysleta High again. He was sitting smoking pot behind the stadium with another idiot whom I didn't recognize. I walked up to him, and he was inhaling the stub of a cigarette. The fire glowed brightly in the afternoon shadow of the stadium. His stupid face was lit up. I punched him right in the mouth with my fist exploding with a hardness I don't remember ever having again. Fernández rolled in the dust and still didn't recognize me. He couldn't even stand up, lost in the stupor of the drug. After that, I never talked to him again either. But I still have a neat round burn scar between the middle knuckles of my left hand, right where I crushed the cigarette on his face.

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Discussion questions for *The Last Tortilla and Other Stories* (University of Arizona Press: 1999, ISBN: 0-8165-1961-7), by Sergio Troncoso.

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

How is "A Rock Trying to be a Stone" a story about moral character and moral choices? The three boys, Turi, Fernández, and Joe, face crucial choices at different points in the story. What are those choices? How do those choices reveal their moral character? How are appearances deceiving when one is trying to determine somebody's moral character?

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