

GLORIA ANZALDÚA

## People Should Not Die in June in South Texas

PRIETITA squeezes through the crowd of mourners and finds a place near the coffin. She stands there for hours watching relatives and friends one after the other approach the coffin, kneel beside it. They make the sign of the cross, bow slowly while backing away. Even a few Anglos come to pay their respects to Urbano, loved by all. But after two and a half days, her father has begun to smell like a cow whose carcass has been gutted by vultures. People should not die in June in south Texas.

Earlier that day Prietita and her mother had gone to the funeral home, where in some hidden room someone was making a two-inch incision in her father's throat. Someone was inserting a tube in his jugular vein. In some hidden room *una envenenada abuja* filled his *venas* with embalming fluid.

The white undertaker put his palm on the small of her mother's back and propelled her toward the more expensive coffins. Her mother couldn't stop crying. She held a handkerchief to her eyes like a blindfold, knotting and unraveling it, knotting and unraveling it. Prieta, forced to be the more practical of the two, said, "Let's take that one or this one," pointing at the coffins midrange in price. Though they would be in debt for three years, they chose *un cajón de quinientos dólares*. The undertaker had shown them the back-

less suits whose prices ranged from seventy to several hundred dollars. *Compraron un traje negro y una camisa blanca con encaje color de rosa*. They bought a black suit and a white shirt with pink. "Why are we buying such an expensive suit? It doesn't even have a back. And besides, it's going to rot soon," she told her mother softly. Her mother looked at her and burst out crying again. Her mother was either hysterical or very quiet and withdrawn, so Prieta had to swallow her own tears. They had returned in the hearse with the coffin to a house filled with relatives and friends, with tables laden with *comida* and buckets overflowing with ice and *cerveza*.

Prietita stands against the living room wall watching the hundreds of people slowly milling around. "*Te acompaño en el pesar,*" dice la tía as she embraces her. The stench of alcohol enters her nostrils when male relatives pay their condolences to her. *Prieta se siente helada y asfixiada al mismo tiempo*. She feels cold, shocked, and suffocated. "*Qué guapa. Es la mayor y se parece mucho a su mamá,*" she hears a woman say, bursting into tears and clutching Prietita in a desperate embrace. Faint whiffs of perfume escape from the women's hair behind their thick black mantillas. The smells of roses and carnations, *carne guisada*, sweat and body heat mingle with the sweet smell of death and fill the house in Hargill.

*Antes del cajón en medio de la sala aullando a la virgen su mamagrande Locha cae de rodillas persinándose*. But Prieta does not cry, she is the only one at the *velorio* who is dry-eyed. Why can't she cry? *Le dan ganas, no de llorar, pero de reír a carcajadas*. Instead of crying she feels like laughing. It isn't natural. She felt the tightness in her throat give way. Her body trembled with fury. How dare he die? How dare he abandon her? How could he leave her mother all alone? Her mother was just twenty-eight. It wasn't fair. *Sale de la casa corriendo*, she runs out of the house, *Atravesó la calle*, she crosses the street, *tropezándose en las piedras*, while stumbling over rocks. *Llegó a la casa de Mamagrande Ramona en donde estaba su hermanito, Carito, el más chiquito*. She reached her grandmother's house, where her little brother was hiding out. His bewildered face asks questions she cannot answer.

Later Prietita slips back into the house and returns to her place

by the coffin. Standing on her toes, she cocks her head over the casket. What if that sweet-putrid smell is perfume injected into his veins to fool them all into thinking he is dead? What if it's all a conspiracy? A lie? Under the overturned red truck someone else's face had lain broken, smashed beyond recognition. The blood on the highway had not been her father's blood.

For three days her father sleeps in his coffin. Her mother sits at his side every night and never sleeps. *Oliendo a muerte, Prietita duerme en su cama*, Prieta sleeps in her bed with the smell of death. *En sus sueños*, in her dreams, *su padre abre los ojos al mirarla*, her father opens his eyes. *Abre su boca a contestarle*, he opens his mouth to answer her. *Se levanta del cajón*, he rises out of the coffin. On the third day Prieta rises from her bed vacant-eyed, puts on her black blouse and skirt and black scarf, and walks to the living room. She stands before the coffin and waits for the hearse. In the car behind the hearse on the way to the church Prietita sits quietly beside her mother, sister, and brothers. Stiff-legged, she gets out of the car and walks to the hearse. She watches the pall bearers, *Tío David, Rafael, Goyo, el compadre Juan*, and others, lift the coffin out of the hearse, carry it inside the church, and set it down in the middle of the aisle.

*El cuerpo de su padre está tendido en medio de la iglesia.* Her father's corpse lies in the middle of the church. She watches one woman after another kneel before *la Virgen de Guadalupe* and light a candle. Soon hundreds of votive candles flicker their small flames and emit the smell of burning tallow.

"*Et Misericordia ejus a progenis timentibus eum,*" intones the priest, flanked by altar boys on both sides. His purple gown rustles as he swings his censors over her father's body and face. Clouds of frankincense cover the length of the dark shiny coffin.

At last the pall bearers return to the coffin. Sporting mustaches and wearing black ties, *con bigote y corbata negra*, they stand stiffly in their somber suits. She had never seen these ranchers, farmers, and farm workers in suits before. In unison they take a deep breath and with a quick movement they lift the coffin. Her mother holds Carito's hands and follows the coffin while Prieta, her sister, and brother walk behind them.

Outside near the cars parked in the street, Prieta watches the church slowly emptying, watches the church becoming a hollowed-out thing. In their black cotton and rayon dresses, following the coffin with faces hidden under fine-woven mantillas, the women all look like *urracas prietas*, like black crows. Her own nickname was *Urraca Prieta*.

From her uncle's car en route to the cemetery, Prieta watches the billows of dust rise in the wake of the hearse. Her skin feels prickly with sweat and something else. As the landscape recedes, Prietita feels as though she is traveling backwards to yesterday, to the day before yesterday, to the day she last saw her father. Prieta imagines her father as he drives the red truck filled to the brim with cotton bales. One hand suddenly leaves the wheel to clutch his chest. His body arches, then his head and chest slump over the wheel, blood streaming out through his nose and mouth, his foot lies heavy on the gas pedal. The red ten-ton truck keeps going until it gets to the second curve on the east highway going toward Edinburg. "Wake up, Papi, turn the wheel," but the truck keeps on going off the highway. It turns over, the truck turns over and over, the doors flapping open then closing and the truck keeps turning over and over until Prieta makes it stop. Her father is thrown out. The edge of the back of the truck crushes his face. Six pairs of wheels spin in the air. White cotton bales are littered around him. The article in the newspaper said that according to the autopsy report, his aorta had burst. The largest artery to the heart, ruptured.

She had *not* seen the crows, *las urracas prietas*, gather on the *ébano* in the backyard the night before that bright day in June. If they had not announced his death then he couldn't be dead. It was a conspiracy, a lie.

*Ya se acabó; ¿qué pasa? Contemplad su figura  
la muerte le ha cubierto de pálidos azufres  
y le ha puesto cabeza de oscuro minotauro.*

*Is it over? What's happening?*

*Reflect on his figure.*

*Death has covered him with pale sulfurs  
and has given him a dark Minotaur head.*

The *padrinas* place the coffin under the ebony tree. People pile flower wreaths at her father's feet. Prietita shuffles over to her father lying in the coffin. Her eyes trace the jagged lines running through his forehead, cheek, and chin, where the undertaker had sewn the skin together. The broken nose, the chalky skin with the tinge of green underneath is not her father's face, *no es la cara de su papi*. No. On that bright day, June 22, someone else had been driving his truck, someone else had been wearing his khaki pants, his gold wire-rimmed glasses — someone else had his gold front tooth.

Mr. Leidner, her history teacher, had said that the Nazis jerked the gold teeth out of the corpses of the Jews and melted them into rings. And made their skin into lampshades. She did not want anyone to take her *papi's* gold tooth. Prieta steps back from the coffin.

The blood in the highway could not be her father's blood.

*¡Qué no quiere verla!  
Dile a la luna que venga,  
que no quiero ver la sangre*

*I don't want to see it.  
Tell the moon to come  
that I don't want to see the blood*

As she watches her father, a scream forms in her head: "No, no, no." She thinks she almost sees death creep into her father's unconscious body, kick out his soul and make his body stiff and still. She sees *la muerte's* long pale fingers take possession of her father — sees death place its hands over what had been her father's heart. A fly buzzes by, brings her back to the present. She sees a fly crawl over one of her father's hands, then land on his cheek. She wants him to raise his hand and fan the fly away. He lies unmoving. She raises her hand to crush the fly then lets it fall back to the side. Swatting the fly would mean hitting her *papi*. Death, too, lets the fly crawl over itself. Maybe the fly and death are friends. Maybe death is unaware of so inconsequential a thing as an insect. She is like that fly trying to rouse her father, *es esa mosca*.

She stands looking by the coffin at her own small hands —

fleshy, ruddy hands — and forces herself to unclench her fists. A beat pulses in her thumb. When her hands are no longer ruddy nor pulsating she will lie like him. She will lie utterly still. Maggots will find her hands, will seek out her heart. Worms will crawl in and out of her vagina and the world will continue as usual. That is what shocks her the most about her father's death — that people still laugh, the wind continues to blow, the sun rises in the east and sets in the west.

Prieta walks away from the coffin and stands at the edge of the gaping hole under the ebony tree. The hole is so deep, *el pozo tan hondo*, the earth so black, *la tierra tan prieta*. She takes great gulps of air but can't get enough into her lungs. Nausea winds its way up from the pit of her stomach, fills her chest and becomes a knot when it reaches her throat. Her body sways slowly back and forth. Someone gently tugs her away. *Los hombres* push a metal apparatus over the hole and *los padrinos* place the coffin over it.

Under the *ébanos*, around the hole, a procession forms. The small country cemetery, with Mexicans buried on one side and a few Anglos on the other, is now bulging with hundreds of cars *y miles de gente y miles de flores*.

Prieta hears the whir of the machine and looks back to see it lowering her father into the hole. Someone tosses in a handful of dirt, then the next person does the same, and soon a line of people forms, waiting their turn. Prietita listens to the thuds, the slow shuffle of feet as the line winds and unwinds like a giant serpent. Her turn comes, she bends to pick up a handful of dirt. She loosens her clenched fist over the hole and hears the thud of *terremotes* hit her father's coffin. Drops fall onto the dust-covered coffin. They make little craters on the *cajón's* smooth surface. She feels as though she is standing alone near the mouth of the abyss, near the mouth slowly swallowing her father. An unknown sweetness and a familiar anguish beckon her. As she rocks back and forth near the edge, she listens to Mamagrande's litany: "*Mi hijo, mi hijo, tan bueno. Diosito mío, ¿por qué se lo llevó? Ay mi hijo.*"

Next Sunday the whole family has to go to mass, but Prieta doesn't want to attend. Heavily veiled women dressed in black kneel on the cement floor of the small church and recite the rosary

in singsong monotones. *Llorosas rezaban el rosario*, hands moving slowly over the beads. "*Santa María, madre de Dios, ruega por nosotros* . . . Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us now and at the hour of our death." Her mother and Mamagrande Locha dedicate Sunday masses to her father, promising *la Virgen* a mass a week for the coming year. They pay a small fee for each — all for a man who had never entered church except for the funeral mass of a friend or relative.

Her mother wears *luto*, vowing before a statue of *la Virgen de Guadalupe* to wear black for two years and gray for two more. In September when school resumes, her mother tells Prieta and her sister that they are to wear black for a year, then gray or brown for another two. At first her classmates stare at her. Prieta sees the curiosity and fascination in their eyes slowly turn to pity and disdain. But soon they get used to seeing her in black and drab-colored clothes and she feels invisible once more, and invincible.

After school and on weekends her mother shushes them when they speak loudly or laugh, forbids them to listen to the radio and covers the TV with a blanket. Prieta remembers when her father bought the TV. The other kids had been envious because hers had been the first Mexican family to have such an extravagant luxury. Her father had bought it for them saying it would help his *hijitos* learn to speak English without an accent. If they knew English they could get good jobs and not have to work themselves to death.

*Pasa mucho tiempo*. Days and weeks and years pass. *Prieta espera al muerto*. She waits for the dead. Every evening she waits for her father to walk into the house, tired after a day of hard work in the fields. She waits for him to rap his knuckles on the top of her head, the one gesture of intimacy he allowed himself with her. She waits for him to gaze at her with his green eyes. She waits for him to take off his shirt and sit bare-chested on the floor, back against the sofa watching TV, the black curly hair on the back of his head showing. Now she thinks she hears his footsteps on the front porch, and turns eagerly toward the door. For years she waits. *Four years* she waits for him to thrust open the sagging door, to return from the land of the dead. For her father is a great and good man and she is sure God will realize he has made a mistake and bring him back

to them. *En el día de los muertos*, on the day of the dead, *el primero de noviembre*, on the first of November, *ella lo espera*, she waits for him. *Aunque no más viniera a visitarlos*, even if he only came to visit. *Aunque no se quedara*, even if he didn't stay — she wants to see him — *quiere verlo*. But one day, *four years* after his death, she knows that neither the One God nor her father will ever walk through her door again.

*pero nadie querrá mirar tus ojos  
porque te has muerto para siempre . . .  
como todos los muertos de la Tierra.*

*but no one will want to look at your eyes  
because you have died forever . . .  
like all the dead on Earth.*