

## Visiting Your Grave

Ilan Stavans

“We left a few things unfinished...”

—Judith Ortiz Cofer

In this late summer day, I think of our joyful, supportive friendship that lasted years. We didn't see each other often. But I always knew you were on the other side, waiting to say something resonant, something I would carry with me.

I met you in New York City, in the early 1990s. Sometime earlier, I had read your reminiscences of Paterson, where you moved in 1956. I forget what it was that brought us together. It isn't important. What matters is that I remember walking slowly together along the mid-town Manhattan streets, disregarding the frenzy around us. Along with us was the spirit of William Carlos Williams, about whom I knew little at the time. It was thanks to you—though I remember your ambivalence—that I discovered him. “I have eaten the plums that were in the icebox...”

You talked to me about your family's immigration, about the eternal longing for “*la isla*,” and about your quenching belief that a writer's message isn't contained in one book, but in a composite weaved together in unforeseen ways. One single line still resonates: “Literature is like wings. It allows me to fly.”

After we said goodbye, I thought back about our encounter. Your face accompanied me for months. There was something unique in it, something melancholic. You seemed like one of Federico García Lorca's characters in *The House of Bernalda Alba*. Your eyes, surrounded by a dark aurora, gave me the impression you existed in a permanent state of mourning, not for anyone in particular (a relative, a friend, an unknown) but for your own heart.

Death was your life-long escort.

Although I didn't see you again for a while, our conversation had marked me deeply. Soon after, I delved into your oeuvre, reading every word of it. I called you again, perhaps even sent you a letter. Soon after, you mailed me a copy of *The Latin Deli*. There was something in its tone at once traditional and cutting-edge, a recognition that Nuyoricans were an integral part of complex, multifaceted civilization and irremediably outcasts of their own condition. At the core of the book was a spark that was at once magical and suiting. Again, one line caught me off-guard: “Today it will rain toads.”

I told myself: I want to live among these toads.

Finally overtaken by your syncopated style, by the *viavén* of your languages, I wrote an essay in which I tried to map out my reaction to what I read. I compared you to another writer whose literature is designed to explode in one's face. I said that this writer might receive more attention than you from the present but that your calm, patient voice is likely to survive on the shelf of the future. My essay was called “Art and Anger.” It was eventually collected in a volume of the same name (*Art and Anger*, 1996).

After you read it, you said it was a clarion: “If ever I lose sight of where I’m going, I will go back to it to find my way back.”

Back to death, though. Back to its instance. I am struck by the constant dialogue you established with it. Did you know you would die at middle age? Were you eager to see the spirit of your ancestors face to face? Yesterday, before I went out in search of your grave, I stumbled upon a poem that calls me directly:

I have always known  
that you will visit my grave.  
I see myself as a small brown bird,  
perhaps a sparrow, watching you  
from a low branch as you pray  
in front of my name.  
I will hear you  
sound out my epitaph: *Aquí descansa  
una mujer que quiso volar.*  
You will recall telling me  
that you once dreamed in Spanish,  
and felt the words  
lift you into flight.  
The sound of wings  
will startle you when you say ‘volar,’  
and you will understand.”

I didn’t know it. I didn’t know I would visit your grave at the Louisville, GA cemetery. I didn’t know that standing by your grave I would feel the *vaivén* between this world and the next.

I remember once asking you if it was strange to come from a place called Hormigueros, Spanish for ant colony. You said it allowed you to connect with nature in a distinct way. And nature, of course, features prominently in your work, most distinguishably the rays of the Caribbean sun you longed for in grayish Paterson.

In subsequent decades, we managed to coincide in a few places. You invited me to Augusta, Georgia. It was on that occasion that I had an embarrassing moment. My phone rang in the middle of a lecture in front of an audience of several hundred. At first I was paralyzed. But then I looked at you. You were sitting on the front row, smiling. “Go ahead, Ilan,” you told me. “Answer it... It could be someone you love.”

I answered the phone. And it was my wife. “Guess where I am?” I said to her. “Among the toads.”

Now it is me who is in mourning. For me, this is your epitaph: “*Aquí descansa una mujer que quiso volar.*” The time we spent together feels insufficient. I loved your nostalgia, your honesty, your demeanor. You’re gone, but your companionship is still with me. It fortifies me. There is more that I want to add to our conversation.