



Leaving Xelajú

felipe bomeny



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Guatemalan, active in Mexico, 1891-1985
Abstraction: Mayan Theme
1934

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migration
stories

The Migration Stories Chapbook Series, 2019

Drawn from the community at and around the University of Chicago

Edited by Rachel Cohen and Rachel DeWoskin

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I. Childhood

In the house with the big red door, José's grandfather picks him up and teaches him how to see. An idyllic country scene hangs on the wall: a volcano rises above the lake; a Mayan woman weaves tiny dyed ikats on her backstrap loom. This painting, including its wooden frame, was probably no larger than 8 x 10 inches. But in childhood, it felt as expansive as a mural. José's grandfather, Pin, points out the elements: the triangle, *el volcán*; the blue, *la agua*. Pin's voice – José imitates it – is grizzled, almost beleaguered.

"This," José tells me, "is my first memory." We meet for various months in different coffee shops and workspaces in Chicago, recording childhood anecdotes and swapping immigrant stories.

He tells me he wants to preserve a record of his childhood during the Guatemalan Civil War to share with his children and, eventually, his grandchildren.

José was born in 1972 in Xelajú. On some maps, Xelajú – now the second-largest city in Guatemala – appears as Quetzaltenango. When the conquistador Pedro de Alvarado arrived in 1521, the Spaniard and his Mexica army clashed with the Mayan chieftain T'ecun Umán. Alvarado, a soldier of fiery hair and temperament, defeated T'ecun Umán in combat. As the victors, José explains, the Mexica interpreters named the city Quetzaltenango: in Nahuatl this means "the place of the quetzal." With its Aztec flavor, Quetzaltenango remains the placename of choice on maps and CIA factbooks; Xelajú, however,

is the local preference. In a final act of resistance by the martyred T'écun Umán, both toponyms remain locked in eternal battle.

José grew up when the mountain highlands were still thickly forested and the aroma of evergreens led to his maternal grandfather's house, guarded by two stoic pines. The house was big. Not palatial or wealthy, José clarifies, but comfortable: typically *ladino*, middle-class. Hallways wrapped around an airy courtyard littered with pine needles and figs and apricots. Pin built the house (one of eight, one for each of his children) in Xelajú after fleeing Guatemala City. In lowland Retalhuleu – “thirty minutes from Xelajú, as the crow flies” – one uncle maintained a tropical plantation by the southwestern coast. That relative and his family joined the revolving door of maternal uncles that came to share the house in Xelajú.

José's grandmother Mama Amandi ran the household, commanding a legion of aunts and great-aunts. José lived with his mom. His father left shortly after José was born, working odd jobs in the United States and sporadically reappearing throughout José's childhood.

“I was a troublemaker,” José grins. “I'd steal a choca from Mama Amandi's room and buy *espumillas* – which were like these little merengues –

at the newsstand. One choca could get you fifty *espumillas*, so I'd get all fifty. And then I'd hide in the fruit trees with all the *espumillas*.”

Early on in elementary school, José was expelled for crawling under desks and trying to sneak upskirt glances. He recalls darting from desk to desk, threatening to dangle off the second-story window once his teacher caught him.

“No kindergarten wanted me. So my mom said I had to go the public elementary school where she taught in Cantel.” Cantel was a fabric manufacturing town on the periphery of Xelajú. All the schoolchildren there were *indios*. José's family were not *indios*: in Xelajú, you were either *ladino* or *indio*. The terms, holdovers from the colonial caste system, were reminders of a society still trapped in quasi-feudalism. In 1970s Guatemala – sandwiched between McCarthy and Che – the distinction between *ladino* and *indio* was the distinction between have and have-not. *Ladinos* had clothes and sneakers for school instead of rags and bare feet. *Ladinos* attended schools with running water and electricity. *Ladinos* spoke Spanish at home instead of K'iche', a Mayan dialect.

Xelajú is filled with reminders of its Mayan past. Encased in stone, T'écun Umán guarded the north side of Xelajú. He stood on a

stone brick pedestal in a defiant lunge: one arm held a shield and the other, outstretched, wields a massive club. When José asked his mother about the rumbling sound in the mountains, she told him it was Técun Umán himself, untethered from his pedestal of stone. That sound you hear, she explained, is his club rattling against the highway. Every night Técun Umán trudged two miles to the Monumento a la Marimba at the roundabout to dance. There, a woman swayed her stone hips in the nighttime.

II. Pin

“The way I envision my story, it begins with the grandfather.”

Mario Francisco Orellana was born in Guatemala City in 1917. He earned his chopstick nickname, Pin, on account of his Asian features: one of his ancestors was said to be a *chino*. (Consulting the family lore, José hints that Pin’s ancestor may in fact have been Indigenous). Pin came of age during the Jorge Ubico regime, which began in 1931 with a coup and more concessions for the United Fruit Co. (UFC), and ended with the 1944 October Revolution. The events of 1944 promised the first democratic elections for an agrarian state up until then ruled by various pliable dictators, all caricatures of banana republic strongmen.

Then a university student, Pin was swept up in the revolution. Teachers and a disgruntled, nascent bourgeoisie led the movement. A year after Juan José Árevalo was elected president in 1945, Pin obtained a PhD in economics and married Amanda Ortiz Amiel, also from Guatemala City. The couple had two daughters by the time Jacobo Árbenz Guzman was elected president in 1951. A former military officer and classmate of Pin’s brother, Árbenz promised to modernize Guatemala into a capitalist welfare state that could stand up to American interference in Central America. Pin’s brother, Carlos Gonzalez – the founder of the national Communist Party and a member of the new presidential cabinet – tapped Pin to be the economic architect behind Árbenz’s hallmark campaign promise, Decree 900. Decree 900 aimed to dismantle the *latifundios* (private plantations) by expropriating unproductive land on the largest plantations and redistributing ownership to landless peasants. Pin’s role was to map the land, including the percentage of arable and unproductive land, and then calculate payment processes for land titles.

While moderate compared to its inspiration in the Cardenista land reforms in 1930s Mexico, Decree 900 nonetheless alarmed American top brass. The United

Fruit Company, which had consolidated a regional empire of banana republics, already controlled most of Guatemala's railroads and jobs. In *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*, historians Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer estimate the UFC's investments in Guatemala to have exceeded \$60 million. Despite Árvalo and Árbenz's successive promises to restrain the outsized foreign policy of the UFC, the corporation had further enmeshed itself within the American federal government: CIA Director Allen Dulles and his brother, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, were both major shareholders.

Democracy was always a slippery promise in Guatemala. With Decree 900 and other modernization efforts threatening the UFC's stranglehold, Washington intervened, this time more directly. In 1954 the CIA engineered a coup d'état in Guatemala. Bomber planes harassed the presidential palace under the familiar pretext of containing the spread of international communism. Like later assaults on democracy under the Monroe Doctrine – Goulart in Brazil, Allende in Chile, Perón in Argentina – the coup thrust Guatemala back into dictatorship. Some revolutionaries and communists disappeared into the mountains, waging small guerilla attacks. Che Guevara had

urged Árbenz to take up arms, but the ousted president refused. Árbenz died in exile in Mexico in 1971.

Pin was also sent into a sort of exile. The newly installed Castillo Armas regime promised to leave the Orellana family alone if Pin left the capital and agreed to retire from politics indefinitely. So Pin moved to Xelajú. There, as president of the Banco Occidente, the embittered former revolutionary restarted life in a bourgeois setting – an irony not lost on José's family.

"Pin was still the most revolutionary person I've ever met in terms of his thinking," José recalls, "even if he could only think in left/right and right/wrong binaries." He remained bitterly nostalgic for the Árbenz years.

One anecdote sticks out for José.

"One time, he walked over to me while I was doing homework. It was this assignment where Christopher Columbus was credited with discovering America. He pointed to the picture and shook his head: 'Don't believe everything they tell you,' he said, and walked away."

III. The War

The Guatemalan Civil War featured ingredients similar to other Cold War conflicts in Central America: banana plantations, a CIA-backed coup, a disenfranchised

Indigenous population, a quasi-feudal economic structure, and Israeli firearms. It began a few years after the coup with small rebel factions in the highlands and escalated in the 1970s under Colonel Carlos Arana Osorio, whose regime oversaw a massive surveillance state apparatus responsible for over 7,000 disappearances and civilian assassinations in the so-called White Terror. The Guatemalan Civil War reached a feverish crescendo in the 1980s when Efraín Ríos Montt assumed power. Montt waged a blatant war on human rights: concentration camps, extrajudicial death squads, and the genocide of indigenous Guatemalans, all bankrolled by Reagan.

In the late '60s and throughout the '70s, the combat unfolded away from Xelajú. Indigenous peasant-led guerilla clashes, and kidnappings and death squad assassinations occurred in the capital and the resource-rich northern belt of Guatemala.

There were hints, overt and subtle, about the extent of war and terror in Xelajú. War found a way to infiltrate bedtime stories and household gossip. What José thought was Têcun Umán's club rattling along the highway was actually the sound of mortars pummeling the rebel strongholds in the mountain. And when José was warned *las parejas tiene orellas*—literally, the

walls have ears—it wasn't only a metaphor about nosy aunts and grandparents eavesdropping, but a warning about the sprawling police state.

"Historians divide the period into different eras, different nicknames for counterinsurgency strategies: the White Terror, Bullets-and-Beans, et cetera. But to us, it all felt the same: it was generalized, institutionalized terror."

Tío Roberto, the youngest of José's paternal uncles, became a cautionary tale in the family. Roberto was a university student when he attempted to unionize the local brewery where he worked between classes. He was whisked off the streets into a *panel blanca*, the ubiquitous "torture van" of the secret police.

"Once you were in the van, you were done for," José shakes his head. He retraces familial arguments, different approximations at truth: each aunt and uncle maintained different variations of what transpired that day. Either Tío Roberto drunkenly divulged the names of union organizers to secret police posing as sympathizers, or they extracted it in the van with pliers and live wires. Or perhaps—perhaps, one uncle maintained, unwilling to believe Roberto was spearheading the unionization effort—it was just a case of mistaken identity, an

unfortunate case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The family agreed he had been too loudmouthed on the day he was abducted, but disagreed on the extent of Roberto's involvement as an organizer, a student activist, or both. I think of an infamous aphorism a high school teacher of mine always recited: that history is something in between what you read happened, what you think happened, and what *actually* happened. In the case of Tio Roberto and all the other disappearances, the police state was the gatekeeper of that truth.

During this spike in extrajudicial killings, Pin feared his daughter was especially at risk. She was headstrong and caring; she had inherited his revolutionary penchant for social justice. *Ladina* and educated, the elementary school chose her to bargain with the local government for improved facilities and utilities at Cantel. Pin's promise to refrain from politics echoed like a cruel reminder. The family warned her not to get too involved with the local government and the dictatorship: to be branded a communist was to be branded a witch. José's father – apolitical and briefly back in the picture – asked why she was getting so involved.

“How are you going to stand by and watch?” she protested. She had grown up listening to stories

about Árbenz, the quasi-martyr. She remained steadfast.

Small disasters amassed. The same year José's uncle disappeared, his mother's friend was kidnapped as a warning. José's maternal aunt was killed in guerrilla combat, probably in Nicaragua. The deceased aunt's baby and husband, Klirking Espinosa, escaped. One year later, Klirking began dating José's mother. They eventually married: Klirking, the Honduran-born intellectual and revolutionary, went from being José's distant uncle to his stepfather. Klirking also disappeared and reappeared sporadically, hiding in the mountain strongholds. The wedding took place when José was 12; by then, tanks and firefights engulfed the capital and in Xelajú.

During an excursion to his aunt's house in Guatemala City, José and his younger cousins were tossing a Frisbee on the rooftops. José overthrew the Frisbee and his cousin Otto went to retrieve it from the street below. “Once he was outside, these two guys approached them and said, ‘Hey kid, you should go inside.’” Otto picked the Frisbee up and shrugged.

“Suddenly one of the men pulled out a gun and started shooting behind him as a military jeep rolled right in front of my aunt's house. At first, my aunt thought it

was us – we were always playing with firecrackers. But we all ran to the door, and hid under the bed for three hours.

“The military knew that the house across the street was a safehouse, and so they raided the safehouse. And some of the guerillas that were there got out. They escaped to a *barranco* – a ravine – at the end of the street, and they disappeared. Two of the guerilla fighters basically sacrificed themselves in the house; there were bullets all over the house and grenades on the roof.”

The firefight lasted three hours. José admits that despite the crossfire, he was fortunate: his aunt was a medic. She was equipped to deal with flesh wounds and tear gas. She soaked rags in vinegar to offset tear gas canisters. A ricocheted bullet pierced the wall centimeters from where his aunt was crouching. José compared the experience to a lethal game of hide-and-go-seek.

“I have horrible memories of the war, but that was not childhood. I don’t feel like I lived a miserable existence as a result of the war. But it’s different for adults. I think it’s because my brain was young enough that it felt more like a game and less like imminent danger. Even in moments where I felt like ‘that could be it,’ I didn’t feel that same finality of death

that comes when you get older.”

Childhood was running away from snarling dogs and imaginary monkey-warriors, feeding chicken bones to German shepherds, wallowing in cornfields. Mama Amandi’s *tres leches* and an exploded can of condensed milk; enlisting younger cousins to set fires and to steal bullets from an uncle’s bedroom – and getting caught.

But the war encroached on childhood in even more visceral ways than the firefight. José recalled playing in a cornfield behind his house and tripping down the hill. At the bottom, his clothes were wet. He recalls the sour, suffocating odor of the corpse he had landed on, and his mother rinsing the bloodstains out of his clothes the following day. José – a remarkably honest and charismatic storyteller – breaks eye contact during that anecdote. The hiss of a coffee machine punctuates the silence.

“By 1984, we decided we could not live in Guatemala.” Klirking’s revolutionary activities marked him as a wanted man. The family briefly fled to Honduras, where Klirking’s parents still lived. During this brief exile, the United Nations declared the situation in Guatemala to be genocide. The UN report identified 713 extrajudicial killings and upwards

of 500 disappearances in less than a year. The Reagan administration, which had praised Rios Montt and supplied arms to his army, feigned ignorance. Thirty years later, amidst a discourse of bad hombres and shithole countries and Central American refugees at the border, the United States has still never publicly reckoned with its outsized role in the “Silent Genocide” of Guatemala.

IV. Escape

After a few months, the family snuck back to a nightmarish version of Xelajú: burning buses, tanks, rubble. This was after all the deaths in the family, all the disappeared uncles and aunts, the encounters with corpses and cadavers floating in the river.

The family decided to leave Guatemala, if only until things calmed down. Shortly after the latest firefight they boarded a bus to Guatemala City with a last-ditch plan to request asylum at the Canadian Embassy. Halfway there, a military convoy stopped the bus. The soldiers were looking for a wanted insurgent.

“That was our ‘this is it’ moment,” José recalls. But in anticipation, Klirking had changed his appearance and provided himself with a passable fake I.D. José could see Klirking’s face on a piece of paper in the soldiers’ hands.

After a sustained pause, the soldiers left the bus empty-handed: the disguise and ID had worked.

“It was miraculous,” José says, shaking his head. “I still don’t know how we escaped.”

The bus continued on the pockmarked route to the capital, which was disfigured from the worst fighting of the war. At the Canadian Embassy, a line of asylum seekers snaked around the block.

“My parents’ plan was to file for asylum in Canada, go to Canada, lay low for a while, and then go back to Guatemala.”

A Canadian consul warned that the family could not escape through asylum because the embassy was already backlogged with applications, and that the Americans— who had not yet recognized their war in Guatemala— could not offer it either. “Your best bet,” José recalls the consul saying, “is to go to the American embassy and ask for a tourist visa.” He then advised Klirking to show off the family’s middle-class credentials (here, he pointed to Klirking’s wristwatch) and convince the Americans they had a reason to return.

“Now, the Canadian embassy was easy to get into. The problem with the Canadian embassy was

that outside, there were agents watching everybody that came in or out of the embassy. And they knew – the embassy knew – that they were out there.”

The Canadian – a “guardian angel” – escorted the family to the American embassy in a consular BMW. Klirking followed the consul’s advice. A few days before leaving for Guatemala City José saw his neighbors retrieving corpses from the river. Less than a day after visiting the American Embassy, he was posing with Minnie and Mickey Mouse by Cinderella’s Castle.

V. Epilogue

José is a labor organizer in Illinois. He organizes on behalf of undocumented immigrants: in this way, he preserves his grandfather and mother’s legacies and their commitment to social justice. After fleeing Guatemala and overstaying his tourist visa, José spent his adolescence and early adulthood as an undocumented immigrant. (He clarifies that his misadventures as an undocumented immigrant are stories for another time). José is now happily married. He shows me pictures of his son smiling in front of Cinderella’s Castle, where José had once posed after the family’s escape. There are also photos of his son observing an exhibit at the Museum of the Holocaust in Guatemala City, as well as photos

of his son smiling by the statue of Tēcun Umán in Xelajú, where much of José’s family still lives.

José tells me about his uncle Gustavo – Roberto’s older brother, a pharmacist – who lives in a walled compound. “Past the security check, it looks just like an American suburb.” And he tells me about his father, who cleaned up his addiction at AA but lived like a hermit in a shack in the woods, where he died of a heart attack. A lot of the men in the family, José reflects, held on to the bitterness of the war and internalized it in unhealthy ways. Unlike José, his uncles never consulted therapists, never relinquished that suffering. Because he was too young to understand the nuances of the conflict, José considers himself one of the lucky ones.

I’ve been searching for ways to tell his story. I keep returning to an anecdote he told about a quetzal singing in the pine forest. In a rare moment of childhood solitude, José escaped to the forest. A quetzal was perched on a branch. José gently rested his bike against a pine tree: the scuffling of a tire could betray his presence. For ten minutes they shared the forest. The bird concluded its doleful song and José tiptoed too close. Like a whispered thunderclap, the quetzal disappeared into the canopy. When José returned to Xelajú in 2007 with his son, they

visited that exact spot. The pine trees were missing. Amid rapid deforestation, the constellation of hamlets surrounding the stone statues have been absorbed into Xelajú. On the outskirts of town—where the UFC waged an American war in Guatemala, where T'ecun Umán came to life amid mortar-fire, where quetzals offered recitals in the wood—a Walmart now stands.

At our last meeting, we meet at a café in Humboldt Park. Celia Cruz blares over the loudspeakers. Between childhood anecdotes, José checks his watch: soon he will pick up his son from a summer day camp.

“I have friends that were there at the same age that I was— and a lot of them, the ones that were slightly older, are fucked up.” José is feeling decidedly philosophical, but he’s in good spirits. I think back to all of our meetings, all of the threads of family histories and geopolitics and boyhood intertwining, all of the anecdotes about firecrackers and grenades, of mischief and corpses. He zooms in on a photo of his son standing in front of a sawdust carpet.

The photo is from the Day of the Dead, from his last visit to Guatemala. Sawdust carpets are extraordinarily intricate, ceremonial installations of kaleidoscopic wood shavings piled until almost fuzzy

and arranged in intricate patterns: ikats, parrots, quetzals, zigzags, spirals, flowers. The colors are vibrant, overdye; the yellows as bright as turmeric. Such carpets are temporal: seemingly perfect for a moment until a parade tramples on the carpet and the dust scatters.

“The themes are almost Buddhist,” José says, “because there’s this idea that you have to be able to allow things to change and change you, even when those things seem perfect.... That thing may have seemed better when you made it, and then it may look like shit for a while, but it won’t stay like that— things are always in a process of transition.”



José and Minnie Mouse at Walt Disney World, 1985.

About the Author

Felipe Bomeny is a recent graduate of the University of Chicago, where he studied History and Creative Writing. His work has previously appeared in *Migration Stories*.

Afterword

We are proud, pleased, and grateful to present this series of five chapbooks as part of the ongoing Migration Stories Project at the University of Chicago. We decided to introduce a chapbook series because it feels important for writers in our community to have a place for longer reflections about histories and experiences of migration. In these pages, Tanya Desai writes on animals shipped across oceans and among royalty in the early modern period; Tina Post traces movements of paper and people through the *Chicago Defender* and the Great Migration; Felipe Bomeny pieces together one man's experience of leaving Xelajú during the Guatemalan Civil War; Liana Fu uses poetry, prose, found texts, photography and two languages to think about coming of age in the Hong Kong diaspora; and Susan Augustine chronicles the work of the Hyde Park Refugee Project to support two Syrian refugee families arriving on the south side of Chicago. Each piece illuminates another moving line in the vast map of the history of migration, and helps us to see more clearly how these lines shine through the life of our shared neighborhoods.

The Migration Stories Project began in November of 2016 as a project of the Creative Writing Department in the hopes of making more spaces to tell and listen to migration stories, and to help elucidate the collective history of migration in the community at and around the University of Chicago. Over the last three years, the Migration Stories Project has created or co-hosted nine public readings, and has collaborated with the Smart Museum, Student Support Services, and the Regenstein Library. In 2017, we published an anthology of migration stories, written by people from all around our community, now accessible at <https://knowledge.uchicago.edu/record/1236>. We are glad to be a part of the new Migration Studies Cluster hosted jointly by the English Department and Creative Writing, which creates research opportunities for our students and fosters new collaborative relationships among our faculty. More information on Migration Stories Projects can be found at <https://creativewriting.uchicago.edu/>.

We hope these chapbooks inspire new readers as they have inspired us, to keep reading, writing, and imagining stories of migration.

Rachel Cohen & Rachel DeWoskin

Creative Writing
University of Chicago

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Migration Stories Chapbook Series

Susan Augustine, *Jumping In*

Felipe Bomeny, *Leaving Xelajú*

Tanya Desai, *Dürer and the Rhinoceros*

Liana Fu, *Origins*

Tina Post, *Paper Trails*