

Into the Unknown

By Dawn C. González

She speaks to me in Spanish now, and there is no gracious way out of this predicament. I cannot respond to words I don't understand, and she can no longer find her English. She is blissfully unaware, and I pray *Lord, give me a word, just one word I recognize* that I might reply appropriately.

Is this what she does? Pray for a recognizable something to respond appropriately to, while she slips back into the pool of natal knowledge that was before the worldly connections were made in her brain? This world has become her womb in which to gestate until her birth into the next. All she knows from this world is liquefying into murky amniotic fluid that will carry her away from us. We her children cup our hands to collect it and gather it back to her in vain. It is slipping through our fingers. And even floodgates of love cannot keep her from leaking and seeping away. She is leaving us: Noemi, my mother-in-law.

I want to be Ruth, but she has been so much more graceful in this than we her children. We panic, prompt her, quiz her, frantic for her to remember, as if we can will a thing into being so. We want to keep her and have her, and desperate love spurs us to actions that are unbecoming and do not honor her. What would honor her is the patience, acceptance, and assurance we are wont to muster but can't. She is leaving gracefully, and how can we be gracious in our being left?

I want to be a going-away gift. But the gift is our not fighting that this is happening to her, and how on earth is that done by a child with fierce love for her mother? How does one lose for the sake of the one she loves?

Surely God knows something of this and will show us the way into the unknown.

So I help her find John in her bible, this woman who learned the books of the Bible together with her ABCs as a girl. This woman who has read it cover to cover every year for fifty, who can no longer find the gospel according to John.

Her son, our pastor, is a gentle instructor. "Turn with me to John Chapter 10," he says. All ninety-eight pounds of her, dignified beauty, sits beside me. She flips pages and fiddles, trying not to need help, but neither can she will a thing into being.

I much prefer to cast her Bible off her lap and shake her back to herself like an iPod in need of reorienting from landscape to portrait. Instead I gulp the cup of fear and heartbreak and insatiable desire to rescue her from her future. I swallow it all down and dutifully find *Evangelio según San Juan capítulo diez* in the worn Bible on her small lap.

She smiles demurely and averts her gaze, but I think I saw the longing for home on her face. I pat her hand and whisper, "It's fine."



Her eyes meet mine again, and she sees in me the truth, that I lie. We both want it so much to be true. We both know it is not. She doesn't say so for my sake, so I won't say so for hers. And the words that don't hang in the air between us are heavy anyway, the voice of her son, my husband, preaching God's word in the distance.

It is not fine; she can't find John, but she can't forget the truth of this. The irony hurts. We squeeze each other's hand with a last knowing glance, let go and look forward. Mother and daughter-in-law, sitting side by side, are left to our own devices, two brave faces turning together and alone into the unknown. **ROC**



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