

**No Puedo Bailar**

*Ahi está la pared  
Que separa tu vida y la mía  
Ahi está la pared  
Que no deja que nos acerquemos*  
from the song *La Pared* by Roberto Angleró

When Los Reyes hit the first chord of their signature bolero rítmico, *La Pared*, Orquidia jumped to her feet from the rickety folding chair in the basement apartment of an old building on the main drag of southwest Detroit. It was her favorite tune on the CD because it could stand for many different walls of love, for example bitter sweet emotional walls might make lovers fear intimacy or their vulnerability in a love relationship. Or the song could stand for all of the misery she and her compañeros in the room with her right then had experienced just trying to come to the city from across many borders and over real walls. Or it could stand for all the love of familia – children, spouses, parents, cousins - left behind. Maybe that was the worst part, leaving lovers and loved ones, leaving all those parts of self behind. Or maybe the fear to immerse oneself in new love because of the walls that surround you as you move about the city to work or gather with new friends similarly situated.

The others tapped their feet and snapped their fingers to strengthen tempo, the men in the group waiting to see who was the brave one that evening with enough energy to take on Orquidia.

*mía nada más  
mía mía nada más*

And then their voices joined those of Los Reyes.

*¡ah zi!  
esa maldita pared*

As the song began its crescendo, Carlos lined up shots of tequila on a tall bench that served as a counter for drinks and Joaquin flipped open caps on bottles of Corona. Orquidia was winding up her still soft and supple body, all the while recalling one live and magical performance of Los Reyes in the Plaza de Armas in San Luis Potosí, where she had traveled from Oaxaca to spend the summer with her uncle who was also her padrino. That was all so long ago in another gentler period of time in her life on one special Sunday, in a special plaza on el día de los padres. Orquidia found herself transported to the plaza in San Luis Potosí on a hot night. Many in the city were drawn to Plaza de Armas just to hear Los Reyes, the live band for the evening. They provided music for the danzón performance where those in the crowd craned to see each elegant couple, a don y doña, gliding under the porticos of

the town hall. After the danzón they performed their own music, boleros from her grandmother's era, music untainted by yanqui border influence

Earlier, the plaza was electric with activity. Groups of men and young boys practiced drumming in a military style while buglers blew and marched around as if they, too, were military. Clowns cajoled the crowd into buying jewelry from the various Indian vendors from the mountains or elote mixed with peppers, mayonnaise, and cheese from the many carts that ringed the plaza. The air smelled of sun and corn. Later, hundreds and hundreds of people gathered for the danzón festival in honor of father's day. Some influential people in the city were honored guests. At least a dozen couples all dressed alike - the ladies in beige sequined tops with fringed bottoms and high heels, the men in black tuxedos - performed the formal Cuban-inspired danzón in front of the Government Palace. Orquidia and her cousins squeezed through the crowd to climb on a band shell where they could only see the crowd - the dancers were now mere specks - but could sway their bodies back and forth arms interlocked in time to the music. Then as now her mother's medallion gently shifted from one side of her chest to the other, also in time to the music. She wore the medallion always to keep close the spirit of the mother who died birthing her. Her uncle in San Luis Potosí was her mother's oldest brother and the one closest to Orquidia.

Eberardo gazed longingly at the glittering medallion, watched Orquidia's hips as she dipped and rose to the music as if climbing the wall referenced in the song. He smiled almost lasciviously, well not quite because he was too young for that, but he was rubbing his hands in anticipation of holding hers in dance. Almost every Friday evening anywhere from eight to twelve of them celebrated life with tequila, Corona and a variety of botanas in Radames' sparsely-furnished basement apartment. Always they dressed their Sunday best. Usually the men outnumbered the women, but on this night they were even seven, five of each, not quite partners. Carlos and Joaquin were being faithful to their women back home. But at least two of the men, Eberardo and Radames, had eyes for Orquidia. For sure, Radames yearned for Orquidia's hot body next to his. At work the gringos called him Radman: *Hey Radman bring that box over here, and then take it over there! Radman, yeah, that's a good boy.* For her part Orquidia thought Radames had good possibility - plenty man as far as she could tell from the bulge between his legs. And, of course, Eberardo wanted her in the worst way. But as life would have it, Orquidia was most interested in the least attainable of the men there - César. He normally occupied a corner seat in the room, smiling always. He was the one most preoccupied with his former life in Chiapas and what was happening with his children there. Of all in the group he had come from the furthest away, and he was the one least tied to Detroit, in spite of the

intense friendship of those who gathered on Fridays. True the brothers Carlos and Joaquin had wives back home, but at least they had each other and their mother's secret tamale recipe – always in the masa, she said, the masa. César had told Orquidia several gatherings ago when she invited him to dance that he could not. *No puedo bailar hasta que pueda ver otra vez a mis hijos*. He could not or would not dance until he could see his children again. Orquidia, who had no children, sympathized with him anyway, but thought that one little salsa wouldn't hurt the memory of his children and might even revitalize him for the long time ahead before he would be able to see. Still, although she did not take his rejection of the opportunity to dance with her personally, she accepted César as a personal challenge.

This is how it was every Friday. Carlos, who made and sold tamales as a business with his brother Joaquin, often cooked nopales y huevos at the gatherings to the delight of his compañeros. Joaquin, as usual, assisted. The brothers were from San Luis Potosí, the area where cactus grew as far as the eye could see. All came to wash down the sweat and dirt from their various occupations during the week, although almost all of them still would find themselves on Saturday or even Sunday scrubbing restaurant dishes, stamping out an automobile part or arranging fruits and vegetables in one of the large markets in the city. But Friday evenings were theirs in amistad and mirth. Time to forget everything: immigration problems, familia en la patria and utilities that may be cut off at any moment. If anyone should want to forget troubles, certainly Orquidia would top the list. She was the one who experienced the toughest crossing, a textbook horror journey north from Oaxaca to Arizona and then across to Detroit. Whoever wants to come to Detroit? Especially after nearly losing a foot in the desert running from the local militia and the dogs. But Detroit was where she landed full of tales about the cabrones in Arizona and laughter in awe that she had survived, so far.

An Arizona dog may have two of her left toes but no mind; she still had enough of the left foot to assist the right in twirling and stomping her way through the CDs Radames contributed to the Friday gatherings. He had papers of a sort, at least enough documentation to provide him with cover for the odds and ends jobs he hustled reconstructing kitchens and bathrooms, as well laying tile and other flooring. The papers also protected him for jobs in stamping plants that made parts for larger union organized auto assembly factories. None of them in the room, no matter what work they did, were in any kind of union. They were their own informal self-help organization. Because of their papers, Joaquin and Carlos were able to get drivers licenses, a major boon because they were often called upon to drive others without any kind of documentation to various appointments. These runs occurred between tamale drop-offs during which their passengers often arrived to their destination filled with tasty tamales. Radames

provided the same service, especially helpful for Orquidia because she didn't know how to drive anyway. ICE, the immigration authorities who prowled the streets of southwest Detroit looking for paperless people, would demand identification of Joaquin, Carlos, their friends and anyone else looking like them, whether walking or driving, or in their homes, for that matter. So having the ability to drive legally was a little bit helpful for necessary trips that people could not make by bus or taxi. That was the reality of the world out there every minute of every day, except Friday evenings when the crew gathered, each breathing a sigh of relief as their members entered, still free people, for at least that moment.

*Esa maldita pared  
yo la voy a romper algún día*

At this, Orquidia stomped her cowboy-booted right foot to emphasize her intentions to break a wall one day, however it would present itself, wherever, alone if necessary. Another foot stomp and she pulled Eberardo up from the corner, he sheepishly grinning at the opportunity to dance with this woman of desire. He rose singing with her the chorus

*no puedo mirarte  
no puedo abrazarte  
no puedo besarte  
ni sentir de mía*

As he pulled her closer to him their lips nearly touch, the song ended and Eberardo held Orquidia a moment longer as the melody lingered in the air and in the hearts of those gathered. All eyes were on the couple, the only ones on the dance floor, established by moving a couch and a few folding chairs closer to the wall.

Carlos called out, vamos a cenar, indicating that his specialty was ready and that the assorted chips and salsas and frijoles were arranged buffet-style on the tiny counter in the kitchen. Eberardo rushed to fix a plate for Orquidia, indicating his intention by a look and the slightest touch on her elbow, not a direct connection to her bare skin, but just close enough to allow the electricity from his body to cross over to hers through an invisible channel moistened by anticipation and possibility. In this way he escorted her to a seat at the table to wait for her plate. Conchi, a woman who lived with a family in Birmingham during the week as the nanny for two little girls, eyed the exchange between Eberardo and Orquidia with glee. He was her cousin and best friend. She knew he suffered from having to leave his novia in Monterrey and who knows if they would ever be reunited. She linked her arm in his and kissed him gently on the cheek as the two entered the kitchen for food. Radames grunted at Eberardo before entering the kitchen.

By the time everyone had a plate of food in front of them, including César who normally waited last, even after Carlos the chef, it was time for the first toast of the evening. Eberardo, as usual, jumped up with a wish for good health to all, especially to Orquida, May she keep dancing to bring light and love to our lives. He was a bit of a poet. That initial guzzle of Tequila 1800, washed down by a few sips of Corona followed by the nopales y huevos, chips and so on, fueled the first round of discussion – always about work. These weren't typical whiners, complaining of too much work and too little pay. They, indeed, worked too much for way too little money in jobs that were unsafe. César was probably in the worst situation of all of them because he worked for an asbestos removal firm that provided the worst masks and protective equipment of all similar businesses in the area. If it weren't for a guy there, a worker like him, who spoke fluent English and Spanish and who fortunately would speak up for his undocumented compañeros de trabajo, César would never have received decent equipment nor would he have understood the cleansing procedure after each day of work. Even with those precautions, César wondered if he would return to his homeland, the lush but troubled state of Chiapas, with any lungs left with which to once again hurl laughter at his children and dance in celebration of his return.

Next on the list of topics was always always a thorough and lively exploration of what they could do to improve their lot. Past discussions included door-to-door approaches to targeted areas in the barrio to discuss migration actions. This they eventually deemed too dangerous; their undocumented selves would be too exposed. For all they knew they could just as easily knock on the door of immigration officer as that of a sympathizer. The discussion this evening in Radames' basement apartment took an unusual turn perhaps because of a brand new portrait of la Virgen in the form of a banner Joaquin had been eyeing ever since he arrived. This is what he proposed: We must warn everyone about la migra, Joaquin proclaimed with only the leading edge of tipsy informing his discourse.

¿Como? asked everyone.

La Virgen, he replied, pointing to the banner hanging prominently in the room. This led Orquida's fingers to caress her medallón of la Virgen de Guadalupe while others scratched their heads in confusion. Joaquin continued explaining the overall intent of his plan for leaving messages from la Virgen to everyone in the barrio.

Radames, demanded to know, ¿Y como le vamos a hacer? How are we going to do this?

That discussion would call for at least two more shots of 1800 and another bottle of beer per discussant. Conchi could handle only one shot of tequila, but she was good for at least two beers. Orquida varied her intake, depending on her engagement with the direction of the discussion. On this night tequila passed her lips almost

without touching them for Joaquin had proposed an adventure that the ten compañeros would debate back and forth with unbelievable passion.

I'll tell you how, said Joaquin, who was now feeling free enough to trot out the English he had to learn in order to sell tamales to the gringo tourists who crossed over from Canada on the Ambassador Bridge. We are going to make up signs in the form of dichos from la Virgen, avisos warning our people about certain things to do if confronted by la migra.

¿Por ejemplo? This was Eberardo's question.

For example, la Virgen dice no abra la puerta. Nunca. Don't open the door for la migra. Never. Joaquin fully showing off his English now. Orquidia and others nod. They understand.

Laritza, who worked in a Birmingham house next door to Conchi, piped up, A si, la Virgen dice no firme nada.

Conchi chimed in, No conteste ninguna pregunta. Tell them nothing.

Everyone got the idea. Soon instructions from la Virgen even touched on health issues such as – don't smoke or have unprotected sex. Those were proposed by the two cousins, Adela and Adriana, often lovingly called the "A Team."

The rest of the discussion focused on logistics – how to create the signs, how to post them, both of which could possibly engage several Fridays.

The last of the nopalitos y huevos disappeared along with the first bottle of 1800. The Corona was holding strong on this particular night when emotions peaked at the possibility of a solution. Maybe not a solution but something to do besides commune by themselves and hope alone. La Virgen could be their public show to others, and they would have her power behind them. Maybe they could unite and become something, some people in this land, this crazy city where people who think they are somebodies, have no real power anyway. That's what they wanted to say to the world they were in now. You're no better than us. Remember that. But they had each other and la Virgen and a fresh bottle of 1800, a few Coronas and lots of memory. Orquidia was still going strong. She had placed her medallion inside her shirt for some strange protectionist reason. She had a feeling they had reached a turning point, this grupo, her compañeros in misery and faith and hope, and she needed la Virgen of her mother to be closer to her than ever.

Los Reyes recycled on Radames' one extravagant purchase, a five CD changer. The selection had now returned to La Pared. Orquidia perked up immediately and decided that the smiling silent César needed to get up from his seat and dance. Why not? You can only hold things in for so long. You must let go if only for a moment. Didn't he have a moment for her? Just a moment for her to feel fully herself minus a few toes. He didn't look like a man who cared about toes. The other two did. Maybe. But, of course, she hadn't tried any of them out. But tonight was the night. Maybe. She carried more scars besides her missing toes. César looked more genuine, more forgiving, as if she could take off her blouse and the scars wouldn't offend him. As if he might find a way into her interior past the wounds on the route up her vagina. She wasn't even sure if it could function anymore. There were more than four-legged dogs after her on the trip through Arizona.

So, sure in the protection and wisdom of la Virgen, she got up again to dance. By this time she was full of 1800 and nopales probably originally from San Luis Potosí. She was feeling the power and support of her tío and padrino and all of the familia over there. Los Reyes hit her favorite section of the song.

*mía nada más  
mía mía nada más*

And Orquidia slapped her hip. The others laughed and clapped.

*¡ah zi!  
esa maldita pared*

She plopped herself in front of César, folds of her long multi-colored skirt draped in her right hand, her eyes intent on his. He looked up, startled in a way, but understanding that it was time for him to make some kind of move. You can't get from Chiapas to Vernor Avenue in Detroit, Michigan in zero to five, no matter what they say. There has to be time for reflection, time to search out truth, time to figure out what is real. Now he was being called upon to place all of that in order and then dance?

Orquidia swayed to the bolero rítmico as she never had, harking memories beyond what she ever experienced personally. How would her mother have done this? That's what she was thinking. But she saw this intense hombre, Don César, the most guapo of them all, guapo in her eyes beholding him sitting there, and she knew she had eight-toed power to get the man up.

And he got up. No he jumped up. Arms, covered as usual in a long-sleeved black shirt, wide like an eagle's wings, eyes closed and one huge smile spreading across his face. Orquidia, in truth, didn't know what César was about to do at that moment. No one in the room knew. The other women grouped close to each other. Radames and

Eberardo furrowed their brows in amazement. The brothers shifted to the rear of the room smiling. But they all watched his outstretched arms, his taut body, his apparent ecstasy and waited for the performance.

*jah zi!*  
*esa maldita pared*