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Translation of “La niña de Guatemala” in “Francisco Goldman interview by Esther Allen”

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Esther Allen: How did the new novel, *The Divine Husband*, originate?

Francisco Goldman: Many years ago I was sitting at a bar in Guatemala City, and a guy sat down beside me, and it turned out he was from my hometown in Massachusetts. That was already coincidence enough. Then he said, "My parents always worked at the

La niña de Guatemala

José Martí

Quiero, a la sombra de un ala,
Contar este cuento en flor:
La niña de Guatemala,
La que se murió de amor.

Eran de lirios los ramos;
Y las orlas de reseda
Y de jazmín; la enterramos
En una caja de seda.

... Ella dio al desmemoriado
Una almohadilla de olor:
El volvió, volvió casado:
Ella se murió de amor.

Iban cargándola en andas
Obispos y embajadores:
Detrás iba el pueblo en tandas,
Todo cargado de flores.

... Ella, por volverlo a ver,
Salió a verlo al mirador:
El volvió con su mujer:
Ella se murió de amor.

Como de bronce candente,
Al beso de despedida,
¡Era su frente—la frente
Que más he amado en mi vida!

... Se entró de tarde en el río,
La sacó muerta el doctor:
Dicen que murió de frío:
Yo sé que murió de amor.

Allí, en la bóveda helada,
La pusieron en dos bancos:
Besé su mano afilada,
Besé sus zapatos blancos.

Callado, al oscurecer,
Me llamó el enterrador:
Nunca más he vuelto a ver
A la que murió de amor.

Tillotson Rubber Factory." That was this enormous red brick monstrosity, with towering smokestacks, that I grew up some hundred yards away from. It was *the* landscape of my childhood. In the swamp behind the factory we used to ice skate and play around in the winter; the ice would be tinged odd colors from all the dyes leaking out. We'd go behind the factory and dip our sneakers into the puddles of dye, making them psychedelic. Anyway, the guy says, "My parents told me, 'Whenever you get down in life and need a hand up, go and look for Mr. Tillotson in Guatemala.'"

It was like a joke of fate: my partly Guatemalan family lived a hundred yards away from this place, and its owner lived in Guatemala and I'd never known that. At that point, the idea for *The Divine Husband* first lodged in my brain. I didn't care about the real Tillotson family, I wanted to make up my own family. Though the Tillotsons really were balloon pioneers—one invented the first specialty balloon, a balloon in the shape of a cat's head. They had rubber plantations in Guatemala. In Colombia last year I went to the most important balloon factory in all of South America, and they get all their natural latex from Guatemala.

That kind of perhaps strange, peripatetic research maybe isn't necessary, but when I write a novel it seems to become this obsession that goes on for years and years: you're constantly strategizing like that, living your life in sync with the book, doing all kinds of things you really don't need to do. Maybe it's a way of burning off energy.

So running into that guy in the bar just gave me the idea: "Ah, I'm going to invent a family with roots in the nineteenth century that unites New England to Guatemala." But here's what was most crucial in that whole process. Around that time I'd really been immersed in the wars of Central America, for years and years, as a journalist, as a writer, as a human being, as a person who lived with this sense of obligation, and so forth. But that wasn't necessarily what I had ever foreseen for myself when I first started writing. When I got out of college I thought my own strengths as a writer were different from the kind of strengths that were maybe brought out by engaging so directly in a war, in such a political and human tragedy, like that of Central America in the '80s.

EA: What did you think your strengths would be?

FG: I thought of myself as a sort of postmodern fantasist or fabulist—like a Calvino. No kidding. And I wanted to write anti-realism, as opposed to, say, even a magical realism. I was dreaming of going hunting for that strange

La niña de Guatemala

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I tell the following tale
With a sheltering wing above
"La niña de Guatemala"*
The one who died of love.

Clusters of iris adorned her
And fringes of mignonette
Her body adorned with jasmine
In a silk-lined bier was set.

She gave him a fragrant pillow
Her own devotion to prove
He returned a married man
And "la niña" died of love.

Honored by town and church
Her body was borne on high
Simple folk followed rank
Bearing flowers to say good-bye.

She had looked to see him again
From her window high above,
He came back a married man
And "la niña" died of love.

Her brow was a dazzling bronze
At the kiss of my farewell call,
Her forehead—the forehead, I think,
I have loved the most of all!

She threw herself in the river
In a tragic, deathward shove:
They say that she died of cold
But I know that she died of love.

There in the frozen vault
She was placed for the final views.
I kissed her thin-drawn hand
And I kissed her ivory shoes.

At nightfall, the vault was closed;
They insisted that I depart.
And I've never returned to the one
Who died of a broken heart.

**Niña* in Spanish means more than simply *young girl*. It also implies familiarity and affection and I have retained its use to convey this feeling.