



Pat Mora

*Author*

## The seeds of stories

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*As human beings we crave for stories. Our curious souls listen with interest not only to tales about one another but also about our cultures, community, and family. We cherish our personal stories; as well we should, for they are part of our uniqueness.*

Each poem also has its story. Often, the story itself is the seed of the poem. Two of my most frequently anthologized poems are from my early books. These are poems I've read frequently to audiences through the years. "Elena" is about a woman from Mexico who worked in a nursing home in Los Angeles. She's the kind of woman who interests me deeply because she's one we might easily ignore due to her skin color and limited economic resources. We won't see Elena on talk shows. She might be viewed by some as a disposable person. I often ask teachers and administrators to think about her and to ask themselves how she might be treated if she came to their school or campus office. Would she be treated in the same manner as the president of a parent organization or the school board or as a university trustee?

### Elena

My Spanish isn't enough.  
I remember how I'd smile  
listening to my little ones,  
understanding every word they'd say,  
their jokes, their songs, their plots.

*Vamos a pedirle dulces a Mamá. Vamos.*

But that was in Mexico.

Now my children go to American high schools.  
They speak English. At night they sit around  
the kitchen table, laugh with one another.  
I stand by the stove and feel dumb, alone.  
I bought a book to learn English.  
My husband frowned and drank more beer.

My oldest said, "Mamá, he doesn't want you to be smarter than he is." I'm forty, embarrassed at the laughter of my children, the grocer, the mailman. Sometimes I take my English book and lock myself in the bathroom, say the thick words softly, for if I stop trying, I will be deaf when my children need my help.

(From **Chants**, Houston: Arte Público Press, 1984, p. 50)

I receive letters from students who identify with the poem either personally or because of family experiences. Sometimes students think that I am Elena, and they write to cheer me on and to give me advice. Recently a student in Connecticut comparing his family's experience with Elena's wrote of an uncle, "He is Elena who is from Korea." The letters I get are so moving that I've used them as the basis for a poem titled: "Learning English: A Chorus in Many Languages" to be published in my next book, **My Own True Name: New and Selected Poems**. This poem is dedicated to the brave students who wrote me after reading "Elena".

"Immigrants" is another poem that I wrote and grew out of a story my tall, redhead Norwegian friend told me. When we were fellow university administrators, he happened to mention his regret that his parents had not taught him Norwegian. He would hear them whispering the language to one another at night when they thought he was asleep. I'm sure we all have heard similar immigrant stories from our past.

### Immigrants

Immigrants wrap their babies in the American flag,  
feed them mashed hot dogs and apple pie,  
name them Bill and Daisy,  
buy them dolls that blink blue

eyes or a football with tiny cleats  
 before the baby can even walk,  
 speak to them in thick English,  
     halloo, babee, hallo,  
 whisper in Spanish or Polish  
 when the babies sleep, whisper  
 in a dark parent bed, that dark  
 parent fear, "Will they like  
 our boy our girl, our fine american  
 boy, our fine american girl.

(In **Borders**, Houston: Arte Público Press, 1986, p. 15)

An interesting way to explore our differences and our commonality is to have students or teachers write about the first immigrant in their family and to explore what s/he might have experienced and felt. It is amazing how our students can be led to discover both the humor and pain of personal stories, to play with language, and to experience the pleasure and power of that play.

Since I was born and spent much of my life in El Paso, Texas, it's no surprise that the borders interested me. I also realized that through literature we can cross the borders in our life-religious, age, ethnic, gender-and build community. My poem "Sonrisas" is reflective of my awareness of one of these borders.

### Sonrisas

I live in a doorway  
 between two rooms. I hear  
 quiet clicks, cups of black  
 coffee, *click, click* like facts  
     budgets, tenure, curriculum,  
 from careful women in crisp beige  
 suits, quick beige smiles  
 that seldom sneak into their eyes.

I peek  
 in the other room señoras  
 in faded dresses stir sweet  
 milk coffee, laughter whirls  
 with steam from fresh *tamales*  
     *sh, sh, mucho ruido,*  
 they scold one another,  
 press their lips, trap smiles  
 in their dark Mexican eyes.

(From **Borders**, Houston: Arte Público Press, 1986, p. 20)

"Tigua Elder" is a poem that also began as a story. When I served as director of a small university natural history museum in my home town, the staff and I had been working with an urban Native

American Southwestern community in town, the Tigua. One of the young men, the grandson of the tribal elder, told me that though his grandfather had been given pain medicine, he refused to take the pills. Thinking about that elder and his stubbornness led to the creation of this poem.

### Tigua Elder

How do I tell my children:  
 there is worse than pain.

I bury my pills.  
 Let my stomach burn.  
 I bury them in the sand by the window,  
 under the limp cactus.  
 Maybe it slipped into a long sleep instead of me.  
 I speak to my grandchildren in our language,  
 But they hear only television, radio  
 in every room, all day, all night.  
 They do not understand.

How do I tell my children:  
 forgetting is worse than pain, forgetting  
 stories old as the moon: owl, coyote,  
 snake weaving through the night like smoke,  
 forgetting the word for the Spirit,  
*waida, waida*, the sound I hear in shells  
 and damp caves, forgetting the wind,  
 the necessary bending to her spring tantrums.

Afternoons I limp like a wounded horse  
 to the shade of the willow and wait for sunset,  
 for wind's breath, familiar, cool.  
 She eases this fire.

There is worse than pain.  
 There is forgetting  
 those are my eyes in the mirror.  
 There is forgetting my own true name.

(From **Communion**, Houston: Arte Público Press, 1991, p. 61)

The poem "Sugar" was inspired by my desire for young people to be proud of their linguistic and cultural heritage. When teachers ask me why some of their Latino students are reluctant to speak Spanish, I remind them that only 2% of media images are about Latinos and most of them are negative. It is sad that our young people continue to experience racism. The following poem is based on an incident told to me by a single mother in Arizona, an elementary school clerk who will soon receive her degree in bilingual education.

### Sugar

“¿Quieren una Coka?” my father’s payday question. We slam the doors of our squeaky car and run into the store we pass daily on the way home from the fields, hungry for chocolate candy, cold drinks, ice-cream to melt in our mouths.

The store’s shade cools me after a bent day.  
The sun, a huge iron, pressed our backs.  
Behind the counter, the man watches our hands, empties our pockets with his eyes.  
Why do we come here?

Without looking, I see  
customers shrink from our brown skin.  
I slide my hands deep in my pockets,  
move away from my family, walk down  
the aisles studying the chipped floor, hoping  
my father won’t lay his English, a broken puzzle,  
on the plastic counter. Why do we come?

“Peek un cahndee, Tonya.” My father says,  
my name that doesn’t smell like Iowa  
where I was born. I reach for something sweet  
to melt the sour taste on my tongue.  
A woman with shoes white as her blouse,  
a shiny woman, nudges her friend,  
their eyes on my hands. “Dirty wetbacks,”  
she whispers. “Look at them. Do you think they ever bathe?  
The women just baby breeders. I hear  
fifty of them live in one of those shacks.”

I want to scream, “I belong here! I belong  
here!” a scream bursting from my lips  
smearing this dumb store with a smell  
soap can’t clean.  
In the car, I try not to listen  
to my family laughing while they rip open  
the packaged sugar, stuff their mouths to forget.

I scrub her words away in the shower, scrub  
my skin till it burns, let the water run  
down my back and my dark American legs.

(From **My Own True Name: New and Selected Poems  
for Young Adults**, Houston: Arte Público Press, 2000)

Just as our young adults struggle with issues  
of identity, we struggle with the issue nationally.  
Who are the real Americans? What do they look  
like? What do they sound like? What is the col-  
lective story we harvest? And what of our inter-  
national connections as humans, not just the eco-

nomie aspects of globalization, but the shared,  
laugh-laced rituals of the young, for example. I  
enjoyed writing an “Ode to Pizza” for teens, think-  
ing of them pulling at the warm cheese around the  
world. I included translations of the word cheese  
in many languages. The cheese in this case became  
the international glue \_ or goo. Here’s a taste of  
the ode.

### Ode to Pizza

Yeast pillow  
sailing  
through the green  
oregano air, floats  
down into the bubbling  
rumors of tomatoes,  
the gossip  
of basil and bay leaves,  
stretches at the red  
aromatic massage,  
dreams in layers  
of mozzarella, the black  
oval dozings of olives  
humming in the sun,  
....  
grins  
that pull the melted  
cheese, ...  
from country  
to country,  
wrapping around us and  
our gold floating globe.

(From **My Own True Name: New and Selected Poems  
for Young Adults**, Houston: Arte Público Press, 2000)

Clearly, poetry has its aesthetic and cultural  
work to do in the world. It can help us create safe  
classrooms for writing. When we include an array  
of voices in our curriculum, when we present the  
true richness of American literature, we create in-  
clusive schools, colleges, or universities. I want our  
students of all ages to believe that they can add their  
voice to our national literature. It’s hard to believe  
if you don’t see yourself in the literature presented,  
promoted, and honored.

In part I write picture books to help Latino  
youngsters see their lives reflected in them. About  
5,000 children’s books are published each year but  
only about 2% are by or about Latinos. Our young  
readers, all our young readers, deserve children’s  
books that illustrate who we truly are as a nation  
including the diversity of the Latino population in  
religion, skin color, country of origin, and class.

Some of us including the National Association of Bilingual Education (NABE) and librarians serving Latinos (REFORMA) are thus urging schools, libraries and book stores, urging you, to join us every year on April 30th to celebrate *Día de los niños/Día de los libros* (Children's Day/Book Day), a celebration of a yearlong commitment to link all children and books. More information about this observance that began in 1996 is available on my web site at [www.patmora.net](http://www.patmora.net).

Other literacy events and observations exist but many have not yet reached children and families who do not speak English at home. If they had, the need for *Día de los niños/Día de los libros* or for older students *Día de los jóvenes/Día de los libros* would not be necessary. Sometimes it's easier to promote international diversity and cooperation than it is to embrace it at home. One of my dreams is to see April 30th celebrated in every school, library and book store by including the languages that enrich us as a country, to connect our cultural diversity to our literature. We've offered our children a fairly distorted mirror for gazing, but we

can change that, you and I.

I believe we need teacher-leaders who are effective advocates for inclusive classrooms, advocates with publishers, book stores, professional organizations, parents, the media; teachers willing to confront the foolish notion that equity in some way threatens quality. We need teacher-leaders who remember Gandhi's words, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world," educators who won't be satisfied until our literature and our award committees and educational organizations reflect our grand plurality. Together, we may surprise ourselves by the depth and creativity of our commitment to all children.

We have much to be thankful for in these United States as we explore living in the year 2000, in the new century. Among America's blessings are its many cultures and languages. They can delight us as does the diversity of a garden or forest.

To conclude, let me leave you with **Tree-wisdom**, a poem inspired by the natural world which often provides me with occasions for reflection, meditation, and renewal.

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### **Tree-wisdom**

Its steady claws dig  
deep. Center it.  
Ten of us can't budge  
its weathered,  
stubborn trunk.

Yet its limbs are moved by every brush of flesh,  
feather, fur. Even a baby's breath starts a shiver  
shimmering into the drowsy steam.  
Those limbs, like moon-drunk flamenco gypsies, stretch their gold,  
green, and garnet bangles into wind  
wails, whirl wild when thunder claps.

Still, a tree moves, trembles  
at the invisible. Without lungs or lips,  
whispers and howls.

In wise rhythm, a tree retreats,  
strips to feed itself.

But when the sap springs, a tree's bones burn  
green. How it swells, then, a mass of praise.  
A tree surprises itself, year after year,  
climbs its rings,  
climbs itself.

(From **Communion**, Houston: Arte Público Press, 1991, p.85)

**BOOKS BY PAT MORA**

**Poetry**

- Aunt Carmen's Book of Practical Saints.** (1997). Boston: Beacon Press. (33 color folk art images).
- Agua Santa: Holy Water.** (1995). Boston: Beacon Press.
- Communion.** (1991). Houston: Arte Público Press.
- Borders.** (1986). Houston: Arte Público Press.
- Chants.** (1984). Houston: Arte Público Press.

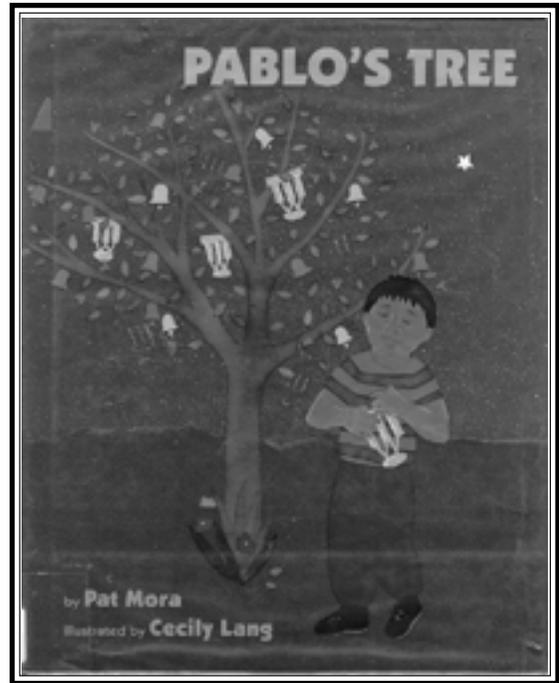
**Nonfiction**

- House of Houses** (family memoir, photographs). (1997). Boston: Beacon Press.
- Nepantla: Essays from the Land in the Middle** (personal essays). (1993). Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

**Young adult and children's books**

**Poetry**

- My Own True Name: New and Selected Poems** (a collection and a letter for young writers). (in press). Houston: Piñata Books/Arte Público Press.
- Delicious Hullabaloo: Pachanga deliciosa** (bilingual, desert animals make merry). (1998). Illus. by Francisco X. Mora. Houston: Piñata Books.
- This Big Sky** (desert landscape and denizens). (1998). Illus. by Steve Jenkins. New York: Scholastic Press.



**Pablo's Tree** (grandfather celebrates grandson's adoption). Illustrated by Cecily Lang. Copyright ©1994. Jacket illustration reprinted with permission from Macmillan Publishing Company.



**Confetti: Poems for Children** (Southwest culture and terrain). Illustrated by Enrique O. Sánchez. Copyright ©1996. Jacket illustration reprinted with permission from Lee & Low Books, Inc.

**Listen to the Desert: Oye al desierto.** (bilingual, desert sounds). (1994). Illus. by Francisco X. Mora. New York: Clarion Books.

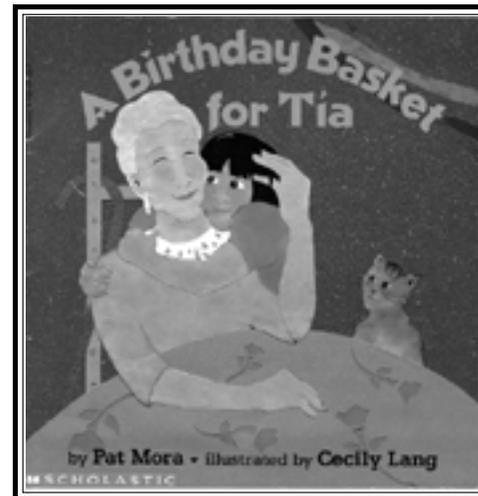
**Agua, Agua, Agua** (board book, Aesop's fable set in the desert). (1994). Illus. By José Ortega. Glenview, Ill.: GoodYearBooks. (also **Agua, Agua, Agua** [fabula de Esopo], 1995).

**Tomás and the Library Lady** (migrant story based on life of Dr. Tomás Rivera). (1997). Illus. by Raúl Colón. New York: Knopf.

**The Desert Is My Mother: El desierto es mi madre** (bilingual, gifts of the desert). (1994). Illus. by Daniel Lechón. Houston: Piñata Books.

**Picture books**

- The Rainbow Tulip** (family story about Pat's mother in first grade). (1999). Illus. by Elizabeth Sayles. New York: Viking.
- Uno, Dos, Tres: One, Two, Three** (counting book). Illus. by Barbara Lavalee. (1996). New York: Clarion Books.
- The Race of Toad and Deer** (Guatemalan folktale). (1995). Illus. by Maya Itzna Brooks. New York: Orchard Books. (temporarily out-of-print)
- The Gift of the Poinsettia: El regalo de la flor de nochebuena** (with Charles Ramírez Berg) (bilingual, Mexican folk tale). (1995). Illus. by Daniel Lechón. Houston: Piñata Books.



**A Birthday Basket for Tia: Una canasta de cumpleaños para Tia** (surprise ninetieth birthday). Illustrated by Cecily Lang. Copyright ©1992. Jacket illustration reprinted with permission from Scholastic Inc.