

# **Butterfly Boy Study Guide**

**Butterfly Boy by Rigoberto González**

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## Summary

"Butterfly Boy" is a coming-of-age memoir that, unlike most memoirs that tell their story in past tense, shifts between a present tense when the author is turning 20 years old and his memories of his childhood, which are told in past tense.

As the story begins, it is 1990 and Rigoberto Gonzalez is a 19-year-old college student in Riverside, California. Gonzalez is in an abusive relationship with an older man. As the story opens, he is leaving his lover's apartment after having broken up with him for the third time in their one-and-a-half year relationship. Gonzalez's destination is the bus station where he will take a bus to Indio, California, pick up his father at his paternal grandparents' house and then continue with him on a three-day bus ride to Gonzalez's maternal grandparents' home. There, Gonzalez will celebrate his 20th birthday. Part of the reason for going to Mexico with his father is to mend their relationship.

While they are on their way to Mexico, the narrative switches to Gonzalez's childhood, told in past tense. During this time, as his family were migrant farmworkers, he lived in several places, most often with an abusive grandfather and an extended family who only lived together for economic reasons. In spite of pooling their resources, they were still poor. In addition to the household situation, Gonzalez realized that he was gay, something that shamed his father, and he had to deal with weight issues. Things got worse for him when his mother died and his alcoholic father left both him and his brother with his abusive grandfather to marry another woman and start a new family. Gonzalez's grandfather made him work in the fields in the summer where he had sex with men who had wives and girlfriends. His first lover was a fellow student who asked Gonzalez to tutor him. They had sex, but the boy never claimed to be gay.

The only bright aspect in Gonzalez's childhood and were his studies. A teacher's aid gave him his first book, he lost his fear of English, and he became his school's Spelling Bee champion. Gonzalez decided that he wanted to go to college and be a teacher, and his determination got him there.

Back in the present tense, in 1990, Gonzalez and his father arrive at their destination, but do not reconcile. When Gonzalez returns to Riverside, he also returns to his lover and receives one last brutal beating. Afterwards, Gonzalez resolves to leave for good and take ownership of his life.



# Section 1: Part 1 (Summer's Passage, Southern California, 1990 - Ghost Whisper to My Lover)

## Summary

In "Summer's Passage, Southern California, 1990" Gonzalez, who is a college student just about to turn 20, leaves his home in Riverside, California, to visit his family in Indio, California. Before leaving, however, he has a dramatic breakup with his lover. The two men have been together for a year and a half and this is their third breakup.

They have had a high-charged relationship. His lover has left hickeys on Gonzalez's back that they call butterflies. The making of the butterflies was painful, but Gonzalez endured it. He thought that the fact that the marks look like butterfly wings was a sign that he and his lover were meant for each other as he dreamed of having a tattoo with monarch butterflies on his back. This happened at the beginning of their relationship.

As time goes on, though, their relationship became more violent. His lover drank and did meth and sometimes he did not even realize the physical damage he inflicted on Gonzalez. During these periods, he would create a butterfly and think that that would be enough to appease Gonzalez. Usually it was, but this last time was different. The night before he was to leave for Mexico, Gonzalez accused his lover of cheating on him and his lover accused him of being jealous. They fought and then had sex. The next morning, Gonzalez gathered his things and left, locking himself out of his lover's apartment. He went back to his own apartment and expected his lover to call, but he did not.

Gonzalez goes to the bus station and heads towards Indio, California, where his family lives. He thinks about how quickly he goes from his college life and his secret relationship with an older man to the world of his family who are farmworkers who never hugged him. Still, he misses them. He is happy to have a place to go instead of contemplating suicide as he has done the two other times he has broken up with his lover. This time he has a direction to follow.

Gonzalez thinks about what he is facing as he goes to Indio in the chapter "Welcome to Indio, California, Pop. 36,793." In reality, he is not going to stay there for long. His final destination is the home of his maternal grandparents. His paternal grandparents live in Indio though and he is stopping there first to meet his father who also has to go to Gonzalez's paternal grandparents' town to join his second wife and their children. It was his father's idea that the two of them travel together even though they do not share a good relationship. Gonzalez accepted his suggestion thinking that the trip may lead to a reconciliation. Gonzalez also wants to retrieve a picture of his mother and father during the early days of their marriage that he has lent it to his father.



Gonzales' grandfather is the only one at the house when he arrives. They go through the rituals that take place every time he comes. His grandfather mentions that he needs a haircut (he usually cuts Gonzalez's hair) and he feeds him. Gonzalez eats even though he is not hungry. When everyone comes back from the fields (his grandmother, bother, and father) no one shows any emotion. This is normal in his family. In fact, the only person who used to kiss him was his mother who died when he was 12.

As others come home from work and his family settles into their after-work activities, Gonzalez starts to feel as if he does not belong. When his grandmother expresses interest in his trip, he gives her a snide remark that he even feels guilty for saying. He then focuses on getting the picture. When he finds out that it is ruined, he lashes out against his father. Even his grandparents find it surprising that Gonzalez and his father begin to fight so soon. Finally, his father tells him that he is even more upset about the picture than Gonzalez is. Gonzalez knows this is true, but cannot take it, so he leaves the house. No one comes to comfort him. He realizes the he has been dramatic and wonders if this is why his lover beats him. He also wonders why he is so mean to everyone else. While he is there, he also realizes that even though he wanted to leave Indio and his family, he has not gone far because he keeps on coming back.

He tries to explain why he keeps on going back in "Ghost Whisper to My Lover." His father was once a member of a band. He tells his lover about a time when he had tagged along to one of his fathers's performances. He had fallen asleep and had had a dream in which he was naked and everyone wanted him to speak when the music was over. His father had told him to say something. He had not because he had been scared. When he woke up, he realized the his father had not been looking for him. instead it was the audience that fixated him. Looking at his father filled Gonzalez with wonder.

Gonzalez and his father leave, taking the bus in the chapter "Now Leaving Mexicali, Baja California, Norte." In spite of Gonzalez's instructions, his father buys second class tickets to save him money. His father instigates conversation on several occasions and Gonzalez answers with negative responses including accusing his father of forgetting his mother. Finally, his father tells him that they are going to be traveling together for three days so they should start being civil with other. When his father tells someone that Gonzalez is studying letters, Gonzalez remembers when he had accompanied his mother to English classes. The fact that she tried to learn English was extra special because she was only functionally literate.

While they are on the bus, his father makes friends and Gonzalez finds himself becoming invisible. During the bus stops, his father gets him food. Gonzalez accepts it. One of the things that Gonzalez's father shares with him is the fact that he had wanted to be an electrician, but Gonzalez's grandfather had been against it because he had thought that Gonzalez's father would be better off as a farm worker. The bus breaks down at one point. Gonzalez's father organizes a team to push it. Gonzalez does not join the others and he realizes that nobody expects him to do so. After the episode, his father apologizes for drinking and tells Gonzalez that he wants him to be be happy. He notices, though, that Gonzalez is depressed. They sleep.



When Gonzalez wakes up the next morning, Gonzalez realizes his father is gone and knows that he misses something, but he does not know whether he feels sad because the seat holds the memory of his father or because he misses his lover. He thinks about his lover picking up another young man. Gonzalez wants to tell his father that he has learned about love and loss and this brings them closer together -- even closer than the grief they share due to his mother's death.

In the last "Ghost Whisper to My Lover" section, Gonzalez tells his lover, and readers, about his father's interest in extraterrestrial life. He had even fantasized about being abducted by a UFO. When Rigoberto had asked him why this was, his father had said that he just wanted to know and this explanation had been enough for Gonzalez who would look up at the stars with him.

## Analysis

The first part of the book introduces many of the memoir's main characters and gives readers a glimpse into their personalities. It also serves to set up the memoir's themes of sexual identification, tradition and culture, abuse and violence, choice and the thirst for acceptance. Several symbols appear in this section as well. Some of them are the monarch butterfly, the watches Gonzalez has owned, food and eating, and the bus journey. In addition, readers begin to learn about important places in Gonzalez's past and present.

Gonzalez quickly introduces to readers the fact that he is gay. The treatment he endures at the hands of his lover, though, makes readers wonder how happy he is with himself and his current life. His lover beats him and cheats on him. Gonzalez is leaving him now, but can he really stay away? Is this separation only because he is going to Mexico? There are signs that it could be, at least in Gonzalez's mind, because he thinks that his lover will call him before he leaves. The section also raises the question of why Gonzalez chooses to live with his lover's abuse. Does it have something to do with the his sexual identity and his acceptance of it? In the second chapter in this part, Gonzalez himself wonders whether it could be because he is so dramatic. Readers see that he is, indeed, dramatic by the extreme thoughts he has about his lover (first thinking that they belong together because he gives him hickeys that they decide look like butterfly wings and then wanting to commit suicide when they break up).

Readers also realize that Gonzalez comes from a family that is not good at expressing emotions (making him seem to be even more dramatic). There are signs of caring though. His grandfather mentions the tradition of him giving Gonzalez a haircut. He feeds Gonzalez. His grandmother inquires about Gonzalez's trip and it was his father's idea that they take the trip together. In addition, his father does seem to be hurt about what happened to the picture. Even Gonzalez says that he knows it is true when his father says that the fact that it is damaged hurts him as much as it hurts Gonzalez. On the bus, Gonzalez's father senses Gonzalez's depression and tells him that he wants him to be happy.



Even though readers know that Gonzalez and his father have an estranged relationship, they may be wondering what has caused it. At one time, Gonzalez respected his father. He had filled him with wonder and he had looked at the stars with him. Has his father become such a bad guy because of his drinking; has he really forgotten Gonzalez's mother; or is there hope that they can mend their relationship if Gonzalez only gives him a chance? Also, will a reconciliation with his father free Gonzalez from the grasp of his lover? At this point in their journey, readers do not know the answer to these questions, but as Gonzalez made the choice to go on this trip with his father, they sense that this is more than just a journey to Mexico.

Readers also realize that Gonzalez travels between two cultures when he leaves school and goes back home. He does this quickly, but is it easy for him to do so? He says he misses his family and is happy to leave Riverside, yet as soon as his family members come home from work and settle down, he feels as if he does not belong. At this point in the story, Gonzalez exhibits mixed feelings about everything. The only person he seems to be clear about in terms of his feelings is his mother, who is dead. He cared for her. When he thinks about her upon his arrival in Indio, though, he thinks about times when he observed her, unnoticed.

This memory is just another time when Gonzalez is unnoticed. When he is on the bus with his father, his father makes friends, but Gonzalez feels invisible. The people on the bus do not even expect him to help when the bus breaks down. Could this feeling of being an outsider also be something that Gonzalez is trying to come to terms with on this journey?

People around Gonzalez and even Gonzalez himself use abuse and violence as a means of control and to show others that they have power over them. Gonzalez's lover uses it to show that he has control and power over Gonzalez. Gonzalez lashes out verbally at his grandmother to make the point that he can come and go as he pleases while she cannot because his grandfather will not let her. The fact that Gonzalez uses the word "prisoner" to describe his grandmother's state implies that she may also be the victim of abuse and violence at the hands of his grandfather. At the same time, the abuses can show tender feelings. Gonzalez feels bad after lashing out at his grandmother. His lover tries to make him feel better at times after abusing him. His grandfather feeds him and mentions the fact that he needs a haircut, thus offering to give him one, as soon as he arrives in spite of not being emotional in any other way.

One other person readers meet is Gonzalez's younger brother, Alex. They learn that he made the choice to drop out of school and become a migrant farmer like the rest of the family. He wonders whether Gonzalez has made the right choice in deciding to take the trip with their father.

## Vocabulary

spiraling, declaration, incontestable, convex, manacle, defiance, lament, angst, humiliating, drone, panorama, reconcile, spasms, gravitating, obnoxiously, seize, collapsing, vulnerability, endeavor, surreal





## **Section 2: Part 2 (Childhood and Other Language Lessons (Bakersfield, California, 1970-72 -Thermal, California, 1979-80))**

### **Summary**

Bakersfield, California is the birthplace of both Gonzalez and his brother. In the chapter entitled "Bakersfield, California, 1970-72" Gonzalez tells readers how his father courted his mother, how he and his brother came to be born in Bakersfield, and why the family ended up leaving Bakersfield. Gonzalez's father had boxed before Gonzalez was born. He had tried to use his skills to woo Gonzalez's mother's family while he and Gonzalez's mother were dating. He had lost the fight almost as soon as it began, however. Gonzalez's mother's family still made fun of him because of that. This setback had not deterred Gonzalez's father, though. He had still pursued Gonzalez's mother in spite of the fact that her family had not approved of him. Finally, the two had eloped.

Afterwards his father had worked hard to get his mother across the Mexican border to the United States. The desire to get there became even stronger once she had realized that she was pregnant. His father's family was already traveling into the U.S., but according to his father, Gonzalez's mother had wanted to set up a household independent of her in-laws. So, once she could enter the U.S. (thanks to the fee paid to borrow a passport) they had gone to the States and when they got to a fork in the road, they arbitrarily chose the one that led to Bakersfield. For various reasons, after Gonzalez and his brother were born in the United States, the family had left Bakersfield and returned to Zacapu.

In "Zacapu, Mexico, 1972-79," Gonzalez relays some of the events of his life in Zacapu. The family moved into a house that was only partially finished. The bottom floor was complete enough, though, for them to live their with other family members from his mother's side of the family. It also served as the basis for several businesses including a storage space for corn, a small bodega, and his father's rehearsal studio for a band that he belonged to for a short period of time. None of the ventures had worked, but Gonzalez called the house his world.

Everyone in his family had been born in that town or nearby, with the exception of his paternal grandfather. It had a nice garden and beautiful surroundings. The monarch butterflies, that he loved were also there. The place had dark memories as well. His father started drinking more and more and he used hunting trips in the mountains as a cover. He was particularly cruel to Gonzalez after one of the outings. Gonzalez learned that threatening his father to tell his mother that he was drunk was a way to control his father. Later he found out that his mother already knew about the cover-up.



Everyone started to move out of the house leaving only his parents. As it was just the two adults, Gonzalez's father had to watch the children when Gonzalez's mother and his maternal grandmother went shopping or to church. He would let the children play while he was at the bar. One day, Gonzalez hurt himself. His father showed concern, but Gonzalez's mother chided him for letting the incident happen anyway. Soon afterwards, Gonzalez's father went to the States to work. He did not send money back, however, and the family went hungry. His mother finally told her parents. They sent word to his father that she was leaving him and he returned to Zacapu. He brought candies with him. Gonzalez ate so many at once that he got sick. His grandmother told his father that even his candies were worthless. Finally, Gonzalez's father family convinced his mother to move north. The family finally sold the house and to Gonzalez it is the clearest proof that he would never live in Michoacan again.

From 1979 until 1980, Gonzalez lived in Thermal, California with members of his extended family on his father's side. Even though they lived together purely for economic reasons, they found it hard to make ends meet. There were times when Gonzalez's father and uncle were out of work. During that period, Gonzalez's stingy grandfather, who did have money, reluctantly helped them out. He made sure everyone knew that he had power over them by putting down Gonzalez's father and other family members. Once, when his father was talking about job options, his grandfather cut him down by dismissing all of the possibilities. His action had left Gonzalez feeling defeated and he left the table. He admitted to readers that he had a fantasy that his grandfather died from a heart attack and left his money to them. His grandmother had shown him where he kept his savings in case his grandfather did suddenly die, but it was not really that much money anyway.

As Gonzalez did not like spending time in the evenings with his cousins, who spent their time taking about girls and sex, he spent his time alone peeping through a hole in his parents' bedroom that allowed him to see into the apartment next door. He enjoyed learning about the different neighbors. One of neighbors was a couple with a child. Everyone could hear that the husband beat his wife. At the urging of Gonzalez's mother, both his father and his uncle had talked to him. When his father reported what they said, Gonzalez's grandfather was silent for once because everyone knew that he beat Gonzalez's grandmother. Gonzalez could not see the couples's heads through the peephole because they had placed a table against the wall, but he saw the man's penis one day. It was the first real one he had ever seen. He felt embarrassed for the man and did not look through the peephole again until a new tenant moved in.

The next tenant was an old man who got sick, but did not have a phone or any way that Gonzalez knew of to contact others. Gonzalez found himself in a predicament. If he told others about the man's illness, they would know that he had been spying on him. He decided to keep quite and punished himself by sitting under an infestation of cicadas. This was one moment when his mother, who saw something was wrong, showed him tenderness. She did not do so often because the apartment was so crowded and his cousins made fun of him when he garnered her affection. Gonzalez still decided keep his secret. He did not want to ruin his image as the good boy. He decided, though, never to look through the peephole again. However, when he went to plaster it over, he



took one final look through it and saw his aunt caring for the old man. Rigoberto continued to watch on other days. He noticed how tender his aunt was with the man. Her behavior was in sharp contrast to the way she treated everyone in his family. The day came when the old man was no longer in the apartment and a young couple came to remove his belongings. The apartment remained empty for a long period of time. There was no incentive for Gonzalez to look through the peephole, so he never plastered it. One day, though, he heard a noise. He looked through the hole to see what was going on and discovered his aunt in the room. Then he found her looking at him through the other side of the peephole. Both Gonzalez and his aunt remained silent, though, as if they had an agreement to share the private moment of being in a quite place.

## Analysis

This section dives deeper into the character portrayals of Gonzalez's father, grandfather, and Gonzalez himself. Readers also learn about Gonzalez's mother. The theme of choice appears in this section, as does that of abuse and violence, and readers once again see Gonzalez not fitting in with others and observing from the outside.

Readers can begin to understand what Gonzalez means in the previous section when he says that what gives him courage is remembering the man his father used to be, but what disheartens him is seeing the man he has become. Gonzalez's father has spunk when he first meets Gonzalez's mother. He is a boxer, listens to Gonzalez's mother, and helps ensure that Gonzalez and his brother are born in the States. The family lives on their own. Even when they leave the United States, Gonzalez's father starts a band. Things change once he starts drinking, though. In reality, something may have begun to change in him earlier. He fails to prove his manhood when he loses the fight. His early loss may be due to nervousness due to the pressure of trying to look good in front of Gonzalez's mother's family or due to a lack of confidence.

When readers read how Gonzalez's father belittles him when he is trying his best to get work, they can understand how Gonzalez could lack confidence. When Gonzalez gets hurt while his mother is away, Gonzalez's father feels bad, but Gonzalez's mother yells at her husband and he retreats. He chooses to become the loser everyone expects him to be and does not even send money back to the family. Perhaps he does not realize that Gonzalez's mother still views him as the head of the family. Perhaps he thinks at that time that her family is taking care of them. However, once he finds out that his wife might leave him, he wakes up and goes back to get his family. Once again, it is hard to know if it is because he does not want it to be known that his wife left him or because he truly cares, but either way, he lives up to his responsibility. He even thinks about the children and brings candy for them. He is blamed for Gonzalez getting sick, though.

Gonzalez's grandfather uses abuse and violence to control others in the household and show that he is the boss. He brings Rigoberto's father down so low as he talks about job opportunities that even Gonzalez feels defeated and he beats Gonzalez's grandmother. He is not the only one who beats their wife, though. The neighbor does the same.



This macho world is what Gonzalez grows up in and it is the world he enters into with his lover. He thinks he deserves the beatings and shows in this section that such thoughts of punishment are not new to him. When the neighbor gets sick and Gonzalez decides not to tell anyone, he punishes himself by sitting under an infestation of cicadas. Gonzalez also displays his thirst for acceptance. He is the good boy, and he does not want to ruin that image, even if it means a man getting sicker or possibly dying because he does not want to tell anyone that he has been spying through the peephole. It is understandable that he strives to keep his reputation because in this section readers realize that he already does not fit in with his cousins. He does not like to spend time with them in the evening. This is what draws him to the peephole to begin with.

Other members of Gonzalez's extended family, such as his aunt, are abusive and violent as well. There is another side to her personality, though. When she does not have to exhibit control and power, like she has to do in a household full of people, she is caring and nice. In addition, she, like Gonzalez, enjoys time alone.

Gonzalez portrays his mother as a gentle and quietly strong person. She is the only one who kisses him. She shows concern when she senses that something is wrong. She is not afraid, though, to speak up when necessary. She chides Gonzalez's father when Gonzalez gets hurt. She speaks up when it comes to the sound of the beatings next door. In addition, she makes choices that are for the good for the family. She wants her sons to be born in the United States, hoping to give them a better life. She also wants to live independently of extended family members.

There is a contrast to Gonzalez's early life in Zacapu compared to his life with his paternal grandparents. Gonzalez is happy in Zacapu. The place is beautiful and everyone seems to work together, at least at the beginning. His paternal extended family only lives together for financial reasons and everyone is under the control of his paternal grandfather. There, Rigoberto feels separate from everyone except for his mother and the people he watches without their knowledge.

## Vocabulary

contender, humiliation, nudged, scheming, desperation, rambunctious, plundering, consternation, fertile, spectacle, submerged, intoxicated, sallow, collisions, wrath, hollering, conviction, absolved, perched, scurried



## Section 3: Thermal, 1981-82 (Our Little Home on Top of the Garage) - Summer's Passage

### Summary

Bad financial luck continued to strike the family. There was a lack of work due to a succession of bad seasons and even when Gonzalez's father and uncle ventured into construction work, the rich family they worked for went bankrupt. This event caused massive layoffs. According to Gonzalez's grandmother, the family's bad financial luck was due to an ancestor's deal with Satan which he lost - dooming the next five generations to poverty and bad luck. Gonzalez and his cousins made up the fifth generation. Even though times were hard, Gonzalez's grandmother tried to make the children feel better during Christmas by giving them candy and putting money in the bags. She could not afford to give each child a \$5, though, so she cut them in half, unintentionally forcing the children to share their money with each other.

The family also suffered under the strain of bad interpersonal relationships. Gonzalez's grandfather beat Gonzalez's grandmother and the children in the household. During this period of time, he also began to threaten to beat his daughters-in-law because he wanted to control the money they made but kept from him. One day Gonzalez saw his mother stand up for herself and defend her money from his grandfather's grip. His grandfather raised his hand to hit his mother, but refrained. Later, though, he took out his rage on Gonzalez and beat him. No longer able to deny how bad the situation was in the house, the separate families began to move out. Gonzalez's family left first. His grandfather did not allow anyone to help them or see them off.

After first living in a trailer park, the family moved to an apartment on top of a garage. It was not perfect, but the family's new situation excited Gonzalez. He even bought a journal to write about their life there. He knew that this was the beginning of a better life. Indeed, his family was able to celebrate Christmas and eat at McDonalds once a week. His father's work in construction and his mother's work in the fields (in spite of her frail health) brought in the money which afforded these activities. Gonzalez's fortunes at school also elevated him. Dolly, a teacher's aid employed to help him improve his pronunciation, gave him his first book. With her help he lost his fear of English. In fifth grade, another teacher, Ms. Burnett, took an interest in Gonzalez because of his spelling skills. She thought that he could be a spelling bee champion. Gonzalez also liked her and used his journal to discuss issues with her. The other students even accepted the fact that he was her favorite pupil. Gonzalez won the school spelling bee and became a hero. He did not fair as well in the district championships. Even so, he got a write-up in the newspaper that even made his parents proud.



Just when Gonzalez started to think his life was going well, his mother got sick. He lost faith in Ms. Burnett because her response to his entry about his mother's illness disappointed him. He also began to exhibit behavior that disappointed his father. He could not play the guitar, sang with a feminine voice, and could not hide the fact from his father that he had painted his nails with his mother's fingernail polish. He knew that his mother spanked and scolded him when he acted like a sissy because such behavior was not acceptable in his household. He also knew that that was the way he was. Gonzalez tried to get answers by asking a school friend, Carlos, who also did not like sports and had only girl friends, about their behavior. Carlos did not understand what he meant though. People called him Carla and he liked it. He told Gonzalez that his family loved him and they did not care how he was. Gonzalez observed the truth in his statement when he went to Carlos' birthday party. Carlos was in his glory, his father was indifferent and his mother encouraged his behavior. Gonzalez found all of this to be too much even for him.

As his mother got sicker, Gonzalez came to realize that his brother was his father's boy and Gonzalez was his mother's. He and his mother became closer. He went to night school with her and waited up for his father with her. Meanwhile, his brother moved away from academics. Gonzalez moved in his own direction. He developed a crush, through a picture, on one of the members of his father's old band and wondered whether he was looking at him, too.

"Summer's Passage" takes readers back to the present day on the bus. Gonzalez's father tries to get him to talk about his friends, especially his "special friends." Gonzalez gives short, vague responses, but the conversation makes him long for sex with his lover. In order to curb his feelings, he looks at two scars on his hand. His lover had given them to him after telling him about the time his father had raped him. After hearing the story, Gonzalez had asked his lover whether he had told anyone. As a response, his lover had burned his hand with a cigarette as punishment for asking stupid questions. Now on the bus, Gonzalez sits rubbing the scar. His father notices this action and puts his hand over Gonzalez's. He is willing to listen to Gonzalez's story, but Gonzalez says that he just wants to sleep.

As the bus continues on its route, Zacatecas, a friend his father made on the bus whom Gonzalez does not like, leaves and says goodbye to everyone. The bus passes the plant that makes Tequila prompting Gonzalez to ask his father whether he is thirsty. His father seems not to understand. Gonzalez regrets having asked the question. He realizes that it is a low blow and it makes him feel like a hypocrite, as he also gets drunk when he is with his lover. Gonzalez rationalizes that he and his father are different though because his drinking is glamorous and he does it to fit into his lover's world, while his father's drinking is sloppy and embarrasses the family. Gonzalez also does Chrystal meth with his lover. It allows him to stay up all night and read. Thinking of the drugs makes Gonzalez's body tense.

Then Gonzalez starts thinking about when his grandparents told him that his father had left to marry a woman who was pregnant with his child and already had three other children. The news had sent him into a fit, but what made matters worse was the fact





that the night before his father had pinned him down on the floor while he was doing sit ups and given him an erection. Then his father had gotten up and gone back into his room. Gonzalez did not know what had just happened and now his father was gone. The events had caused Gonzalez to have a nervous breakdown and he had stayed out of school for two months. His father had never visited him.

Now, on the bus, Gonzalez wishes he could confront his father and tell him about his resentment for having been left and the fact that he's gay (although he knows that this is not his father's fault), but he cannot say anything. Other passengers realize that something is going on, but Gonzalez continues to push his father away as he tries to comfort him. He refuses to eat real food for the rest of the day. His father buys him juice and moves to another seat so that Gonzalez can stretch out and sleep. When he wakes up, he realizes that he has been dreaming about his mother's funeral, something that he always does when he goes to his mother's burial place, Zacapu.

The chapter ends with the breakdown of the bus. The passengers get vouchers for tickets on another bus. While Gonzalez's father checks the bus schedule a man approaches Gonzalez asking if there are any American cans on his previous bus. Gonzalez finds the man attractive, and when he leaves, Gonzalez feels like running after him. His father returns and Gonzalez tells him that he regrets having made the trip with him. He does not blame his father for the bus' breakdown, he blames him for the fact that they are on the bus at all. When he walks away, his father tells him which bus to go to.

## Analysis

One of the elements to note in this section is the fact that members of Gonzalez's family are now making choices in an effort to move forward. Some of the choices will help them personally while others function as sacrifices that are made to improve the lifestyle of the family as a whole.

Gonzalez starts making choices at the point of his childhood remembered here that will alter the rest of his life and cause him to go against his tradition and culture. He decides to pursue his academic talents. Dolly is there to help him, but he is not the only child who has a teacher's aid who is helping him or her with pronunciation. He chooses to work hard enough for Dolly to see something in him and to give him his first book. At this point, he could have chosen never to read the book, thus altering his fate. Instead, he reads it and discovers that he likes reading. Reading is foreign in his culture, however. The adults in his family are only functionally literate. Most of the children drop out of school. The family does not value education. They follow the tradition of becoming migrant workers. Reading is so foreign in Gonzalez's family that at first he becomes a closet reader. As he gets more comfortable with his choice, he starts reading in public. Still, he does not tell his parents about the spelling bee, once again knowing that he is going against tradition and culture through his study of letters. His mother, though, thinks it is strange that he is trying to hide it when Ms. Burnett comes to talk to her.



Gonzalez makes another choice as a youth that goes against tradition and culture. That is to act upon his feminine ways and dress in his mother's clothes and paint his fingernails. This choice makes it obvious to his father, who catches him wearing fingernail polish, that Gonzalez is gay. This is a choice that does not lead to acceptance, at least not in his macho tradition and culture. His mother spansks and scolds him when he acts "like a sissy." Gonzalez learns that she does this to protect his father.

Gonzalez's mother also makes choices in this section. She chooses to stand up to Gonzalez's grandfather and not give him her family's money. She chooses to finally tell Gonzalez's father what is going on in the household. She also chooses to go to work in the fields to bring in more money for the family despite her frail health. Even Gonzalez's father warns her against doing this. In making this choice, she sacrifices herself for her family as the work does ultimately contribute to her early death. Gonzalez's father also makes the choice to move his family out of his father's house against his father's will.

Gonzalez's search for acceptance and understanding is also outlined in this section. In the academic world he has acceptance and support from Dolly and Ms. Burnett. The other students even accept the fact that he is Ms. Burnett's favorite student, and he is a hero when he wins the school's spelling bee. His parents are proud of him when he gets a write-up in the newspaper. He does not receive the same acceptance when it comes to his "sissy" behavior. What makes matters worse for him is the fact that he knows someone - Carlos - who does get support from his family. Carlos says that his family loves him the way he is; his mother encourages his behavior and his father does not run away when he sees Carlos acting like Carla. Carlos does not even mind students calling him Carla. This is in direct contrast to the reception of Gonzalez's behavior in his household. When Gonzalez goes to Carlos' birthday party, he says that Carlos' behavior is even too much for him. In reality it is possible that he simply cannot take the fact that Carlos has acceptance while he does not. He cannot even talk to Carlos about their femininity because the two of them have opposing experiences regarding it. The fact that Gonzalez gets spankings for behaving like a "sissy" helps readers understand why he thinks he deserves, and tolerates, beatings from his lover as an adult.

In terms of his search for understanding, Gonzalez faces another disappointment in this section, as he feels that Ms. Burnett really does not understand his situation when she responds to his mother's illness by saying that she may just be homesick.

Gonzalez's father's actions after his mother dies do not help Rigoberto feel accepted at all. His father leaves to marry another woman who is pregnant with his child without even saying goodbye. What makes matters worse is the fact that the night before, his father jumps on top of Gonzalez causing Gonzalez to have an erection and then never explains his action. This leads to Gonzalez having a nervous breakdown. His father never visits him during his recovery. Gonzalez's grandfather says that there had never been any mentally ill people in the family and only reluctantly tries to get help for Gonzalez. In the end, Gonzalez lives with his aunt and has to stay out of school, the only place where he does find acceptance.





Readers now begin to fully understand why Gonzalez is so angry with his father. While he does not blame his father for the fact that he is gay, he does blame him for leaving him and for creating the life he has had. If his life had been different, they would not even be on the bus at all. The breakdown of the bus occurs at the point of a breakdown in whatever form of communication Gonzalez has had with his father thus far. Gonzalez has a multitude of things that he wants to say to his father, but cannot say anything.

Gonzalez's search for understanding and acceptance is so strong that he even finds a stranger attractive and makes his feeling of lust so obvious that the stranger retreats. Gonzalez feels like running after him and telling him that he understands him and that the two of them can search for cans together.

In addition, readers discover that Gonzalez is not the only one with father issues. Gonzalez's lover's father had raped him. While it does not excuse his actions towards Gonzalez, it could begin to explain his psyche.

One thing about Gonzalez's father's character that appears again is the fact that he basically tolerates Gonzalez's behavior. He never raises a hand to him as Gonzalez's grandfather may have done. Even when Gonzalez tells him he should not have agreed to take the bus trip with him, Gonzalez's father simply points to their next bus.

Now that Gonzalez has moved away from his culture he rejects parts of it. The friend his father makes on the bus represents some of the elements Gonzalez does not like; however, even though Gonzalez rejects him, the man proves to be a nice person, wishing everyone well when he gets off the bus. Gonzalez also thinks that drinking in his world is glamorous while doing so in his culture is sloppy and disruptive. Drinking in Gonzalez's world, however, leads to the same violence and embarrassing behavior as it does in his father's world.

## Vocabulary

humble, desecrating, progeny, farce, coaxed, disconcerting, jinx, disdainfully, escalating, aggravating, meticulous, linguistic, pantomimed, commemorate, impertinent, endearment, ineptitude, dismayed, hypocrite, venture



## Section 4: Part 3 (Adolescent Mariposa, Ghost Whisper to My Lover - Indio, 1983-88 ("ElCampo" Years))

### Summary

In "Ghost Whisper to My Lover," Gonzalez tells his lover about his communion and the time that he had first acted on his lust. While he did experiment with a girl, as other school children did, he also experimented with boys and enjoyed the latter more. He could not tell any of this to his father confessor and realized that he would have to carry this to his death and into the after life.

In "Indio, 1983 - 88 ("El Campo" years)," Gonzalez tells readers that his mother had a stroke while she was working. She could have surgery, but it would only extend her life for a few months, so Gonzalez's father allowed her to go with the boys to her family's home. She died while she was there. This was the only time he had seen his maternal grandfather cry. His father kissed and hugged the boys during his period. When it was time for him to leave, the boys decided to return to the States with him. The decision to take them away infuriated Gonzalez's maternal grandparents who still did not like his father. He said that they were his sons and he told the boys that it was just the three of them now and they would be together forever. When they got back, however, they moved in with his parents because he could not take care of them alone and he started looking for a new wife. The adult members of the family approved of this move, as his drinking had gotten worse since the death of Gonzalez's mother. Gonzalez had to pick him up several times to bring him home and started talking to him the way his grandfather did because it was the only way to make him listen.

A point in time came when family members who lived with them started to leave. Gonzalez left to live with his aunt when he had his nervous breakdown, but his grandfather came to pick him up to work in the fields during the summers. This depressed Gonzalez who felt that he was back where he started.

Gonzalez got closer to his grandmother during his high school years. He learned to laugh at his grandfather with her. He also had his first lover while he was in high school. It was a boy that he knew from Thermal who was put in one of his college prep classes due to a lack of space in the other sections. He asked Gonzalez to tutor him. Gonzalez agreed to do so, but when he got to Gonzalez's house he kissed him and their relationship began. It did not last long as one day the boy, Gerardo, said that he was leaving school to sell drugs. Gonzalez was used to passing relationships with the men he had sex with. He has had other experiences with men while working in the fields. Many of them had wives or girlfriends and none of them proclaimed to be gay. Neither did Gerardo. For a while, Gonzalez even wondered whether he was truly gay. He saw Gerardo again years later, but Gerardo ignored him.



This was also a period during which Gonzalez fought a battle with weight gain as he was a fat child. His weight even worried his father. His mother was also overweight, a contributing factor to her ill health. For a time, Liberace became a role model for him. He was what he was and he was fat, but everyone loved him. Rigoberto became disenchanted with him, however, after his death and his legacy became tarnished by AIDS and his gay lover who sued for his estate. People associated Gonzalez's own weight loss either with drugs or AIDS because they thought that only girls actually tried to lose weight. If a boy lost weight, it had to be for one of these reasons.

When it was time to apply to colleges, Gonzalez did so without letting anyone know. He not only got accepted, but he also won a scholarship. Still he hid his accomplishment. He knew his family would not support him. His father did not even attend his high school graduation even though Gonzalez graduated with honors. In the end, Gonzalez did not go either. Finally, though, the day arrived when he had to leave. He told his family, but only got help from his brother after his grandfather had made fun of the opportunity and his father had not show support. The two of them planned to sneak out, but Gonzalez's father caught them. Seeing Gonzalez's determination to go, his father agreed to drive him there. His brother rode along, but they left without going to his dorm room. As he settled in, Gonzalez thought about how lucky he was to have gotten out of Indio. He was now in a place where there were many directions to choose from.

## Analysis

The first point to note about this section is that Gonzalez is giving his lover information that he hopes will help make his lover understand him in his ghost whisper. The information he provides also helps readers understand him. He is carrying a lot of guilt with him, not only for being gay, but also for not confessing it to his father confessor. Once again, readers understand why he thinks he deserves punishment.

In addition, the reasons for Gonzalez's anger towards his father are becoming clearer and clearer. After Gonzalez's mother's death, Gonzalez's father woos him and his brothers. He kisses them and hugs them. He tells them that they will be together forever - but then he leaves them to start another family. As if his desertion is not bad enough, he leaves them with Gonzalez's abusive grandfather. Gonzalez learns to stay clear of his wrath, but his grandfather is still not an optimal guardian. It is no wonder that Gonzalez searches for acceptance. He mother leaves him due to death. That he can understand, but his father leaves on his own accord. To Gonzalez, this is rejection.

Gonzalez cannot even find acceptance though his lovers. They literally love him and leave him. The fact that none of his lovers in his youth admit to being gay makes Gonzalez even wonder about his own sexual identity. This point reflects the theme of gender and sexual identity. Gerardo is Gonzalez's first lover, but he never says he is gay. Gonzalez has sex with other men, but they have wives and girlfriends and never claim to be gay. In Gonzalez's world, it seems as if one can be not gay, but still have sex with their own gender - even macho men. This happens so often that Gonzalez, who knows that he is gay, even wonders whether he really is.



As he works through gender and sexual identity issues and tries to find acceptance, Gonzalez thinks he finds a role model in Librace. Here is a flamboyant, fat man who people accept. They see the man as himself and do not identify him through his sexual preference. Gonzalez believes briefly that he can walk in Librace's footsteps. Alas, events after Librace's death dash Gonzalez's hopes. The manner of his death and the actions of his lover, simply leave people using his sexual identity to define the man.

There is still a place that accepts Gonzalez based on his abilities and that is the academic world. In this section, Gonzalez makes another life-defining choice. He applies to college. He knows that, once again, he is going against his tradition and culture. His father does not even think that Gonzalez's high school graduation is important enough to attend even though Gonzalez is the first person in the family to graduate from high school. Gonzalez keeps his college application and acceptance a secret, only telling his family when it is time for him to go. As he suspects, he does not get support from anyone but his brother who he is able to convince to help him. Sheer determination get him to college. It is interesting to note that his father finally gives in and drives Gonzalez to the college campus once he realizes how important it is for Gonzalez to go. Maybe it is true that he just wants his son to be happy. Maybe he does not want to keep Gonzalez from achieving his dreams as his father had done with him. Still, Gonzalez's father does not completely accompany Gonzalez into his new world and culture as he drops him off. Gonzalez's brother does not even cross the line of helping Gonzalez move into his dorm.

Gonzalez regards his arrival in the dorm as an escape from Indio and his family's tradition and culture. As he looks around he sees a world full of choices. Knowing Gonzalez's present situation shows that just because one can make choices does not mean that one will make good choices.

## Vocabulary

absolved, contagious, parochial, abomination, reconnaissance, impaired, ramblings, audible, intolerable, congregation, anonymous, bandannas, methodical, myopia, elusive, recuperated, permeated, explicit, utensil, depictions



## Section 5: Part 4 (Zacapu Days and Nights of the Dead, Summer's Passage - Zacapu, July 1990 (Imago))

### Summary

In the memoir's third chapter entitled "Summer's Passage", Gonzalez and his father are on their third bus. Gonzalez decides not to antagonize his father on this one. He imagines that he will not be up to it anyway because they have seven hours to go on a route that will cause him to experience motion sickness. His father stills talks to him though. His father retells a story about an old lady who died while sitting next to him on the bus - a story that changes every time he tells it. Gonzalez keeps quite as his father speaks, though, only asking questions at the end. One question regards something that he could not remember from before and another to jog his father's memory about a key story component that he does not mention in the current version. His father's response frustrates Gonzalez. As his father continues to talk, he smiles at Gonzalez. Gonzalez admits that he loves his father's smile. He then reminds his father that they are going to go their separate ways when they arrive and forbids him to come and ask for money. The two passengers look at the scenery and Gonzalez's father mentions how nice it would have been to have had a steady home. Gonzalez thinks that their thoughts match, for once.

The thought that he is at the furthest point he has ever been from his lover also crosses Gonzalez's mind. His lover's image is even beginning to fade. He wonders if this fact is what keeps bringing back the memory of the game he and his lover played called Ghost Whisper. He decides, even though he knows it is a foolish act, to return to his lover when he returns. Then he goes to sleep.

He awakens refreshed enough that he agrees to buy breakfast for his father. During the meal his father tells Gonzalez that he thinks of him more as a friend than a son. Gonzalez tries to get him to stop talking, but he continues. He makes a statement that causes Gonzalez to accuse him of wanting money. His father tells Gonzalez that he does not like the way he talks to him. His tone is full of anger and disrespect. Then the two have a heated discussion about the past focused on Gonzalez's father leaving him and his brother with their grandfather. As it turns out, his father did not want to be stuck with his own father if Gonzalez and his brother ever decided to move out. Finally, his father admits that he does not expect Gonzalez to forgive him, but he wants him to know that he loves him no matter what. He claims to know how Gonzalez feels, but Gonzalez does not believe him. They finish their breakfast and go their separate ways.

In the next "Ghost Whisper to My Lover," Gonzalez talks about grieving. When a neighbor had died, his family had discussed the cost of his burial plot. His grandfather had announced that if any of them should die, they should be cremated. His



grandmother had decided that they would remember their neighbor on the Day of the Dead. In the United States, his family did not have any reason to celebrate the Day of the Dead. When the day had come up after his mother death one of his cousins had suggested that they do something to honor her. To his surprise, his uncle had agreed. They performed a ceremony that ended with all of them in tears.

Back in Zacapu ("Zacapu, July 1990 (Imago)") Gonzalez arrives at his maternal grandparents' house. They show their pleasure in seeing him. They ask a lot of questions, but Gonzalez still feels uncomfortable as they seem to always be having a secret conversation that only the two of them are privy to. After they settle down, Gonzalez takes stock of his surroundings and realizes that they are the same as those of his paternal grandparents. Evidence exists of his past, but not his present. He goes outside, and while he is there a truck that the neighbor's son is driving goes by. When he gets out of the truck, the neighbor's son acknowledges Gonzalez. Gonzalez has always had a crush on him, but nothing has ever taken place between the two of them.

That evening, Gonzalez's grandparents give him their bed because it is the most comfortable bed in the house. He likes to sleep in the room because it is the place his mother had spent her last night alive and is also the place where they had placed her body after she died. His main goal while in the room is to find more information about her illness. He does not find that, but does find pictures and letters his grandmother had written to his mother, the newspaper article about his participation in the District Spelling Bee contest and his mother's union badge.

The next day, Gonzalez visits his mother grave. He had been born when his mother was 19 years old and now he is honoring her pain by visiting her grave as he turns 20. Whenever he goes back to visit his maternal grandparents he pieces together more information about his mother. He wonders whether she would have accepted him as a gay man. From what he has gathered thus far, she saw him only as her son. Gonzalez remembers a time he had accidentally found her naked. She did not seem to mind and asked him to fasten her bra. He saw this event as evidence that she accepted the fact that he is gay.

Gonzalez's birthday meal awaits him when he returns to his grandparents' house. However, his father is there as well. His grandfather has a worried look on his face when Gonzalez's father presents himself. His grandmother tells Gonzalez to hug his father. Gonzalez's father gives him cologne for a birthday present even though he knows that he is allergic to colognes. His father tells him that it is the good kind. Gonzalez thanks him. Gonzalez is happy that his father does not stay for long. When he announces that he is going back by train with his new family, Gonzalez says that that is okay, although he is a bit nervous about making the trip back to California alone. Then, as he leaves, his father asks for money for the train tickets - a question that enrages Gonzalez. When his father leaves, Gonzalez tells his grandparents that he is leaving the next day. The news does not please them, but they know that they cannot change his mind.





As a ceremonial farewell, Gonzalez goes to the roof of his grandparents' house, but ends up on the roof of the neighbor's house with the neighbor's son. Gonzalez's aunt sees and ignores them. When it starts to rain the neighbor's son shows his weakness by shielding himself with his hand. He goes inside, leaving Rigoberto alone on the roof.

## Analysis

The distance between Gonzalez and his father becomes even more apparent in this section. Just when readers may think that the two of them will depart on speaking terms (they are having a meal together and Gonzalez even agrees to pay for it) the situation explodes. The two finally express the feelings that have been boiling under the surface the entire bus ride. Even Gonzalez's father stands up to him, saying that he does not like the way Gonzalez talks to him. It is interesting to note that Gonzalez talks back to people who never lay a hand on him. He never talks to his grandfather in such a way, even though his grandfather beats him, and Gonzalez always lets his lover show his power. It is also interesting that Gonzalez's grandfather is the only family member, other than Gonzalez and his brother, who was born in the United States. Could it be that Gonzalez carries some hidden prejudice that makes him lash out against those born in the culture of a tradition that he now rejects?

Even after they have their fight, Gonzalez's father appears on his birthday. His grandmother makes him hug his father. Once again readers may think that the two will call a truce. Then his father does two things that prove just how far apart they are from each other. He gives Gonzalez cologne for a present, knowing that he is allergic to it and then asks for money. His request for money is even worse because he is using it to buy tickets for his second family who he is going back with. Once again he is deserting Gonzalez for them, this time using Gonzalez's own money to do so. There will be no chance of a reconciliation now.

Even so, readers may be able to understand Gonzalez's father's actions in some small way. The fact that he tells the same story in different ways shows that his memory of the past may not be what others remember. He does not expect forgiveness, as he always had wanted from Gonzalez's mother. He just wants Gonzalez to know that he loves him. Also in his mind, he had a perfectly good reason for leaving. His children would be leaving home soon and he would be left with his terrible father. He takes the first opportunity out that he can find, albeit a selfish one. It is a choice that he has made and now he has to live with the consequences. Gonzalez's mother's choice to work for the good of the family ultimately kills her. His father's choice to leave, kills his relationship with his son. Still he continues to say that he loves Gonzalez. In the end, Gonzalez's father goes back to the behavior people expect of him, just as he does many years prior when, as a child, Gonzalez hurts himself while his father is not watching. He not only brings Gonzalez a gift he knows he cannot use, but he also asks for money knowing that Gonzalez has expected him to do so throughout the entire trip. This is his tradition and culture. It is all interesting to note that once again, he gives Gonzalez a gift that makes him sick. Even when he tries to do the right thing, he makes a mess of the situation.



Another point to note is the pain Gonzalez continues to carry surrounding his mother's death and his search for her acceptance. When he goes to her grave, he says that it is a way for him to honor her pain, but it is also a way for him to come to terms with his pain. Once in his grandparents' room, Gonzalez looks for keys to understand her illness, just as he had hoped Ms. Burnett could have helped him understand the same thing. He does not find answers here either. Each time he goes to his maternal grandparent's house, though, he does learn more about his mother. He wonders whether she would have accepted him as a gay man. From what he has learned she saw him as her son. Like Liberace in his life, she did not create an identity based on his sexual preference. He looks to the memory of the time he had seen her naked as proof that this is true.

Gonzalez also looks for acceptance in the arms of his neighbor's son, but only finds disappointment. It is no wonder that he decides to go back to his lover. Even though their relationship is bad, it is still a relationship.

In addition to these points, this section continues to characterize Gonzalez's mother's side of the family as more humane than his father's side. His maternal grandparents are happy to see him when he arrives, while his paternal grandparents had shown no emotion when he arrived. They prepare a birthday meal for him. His grandmother encourages him to hug his father. They are sad to see him leave. It is also interesting that in her death, Gonzalez's mother evokes emotion in his father's side of the family when they celebrate her on the Day of the Dead.

## Vocabulary

ramblings, moribund, sentimentality, affectionate, elevated, unhindered, irreverent, sincerity, maneuvered, pirouettes, clan-destine, downtrodden, stunned, chatter, pilgrimage, anecdotes, deciphering, coaxing, slurring, disintegrating





## Section 6: Part 5 (UnPinned, Riverside California - Ghost Whisper to My Lover)

### Summary

As soon as Gonzalez returns to Riverside he calls his lover. His lover answers the phone after only a couple of rings. He asks Gonzalez whether he is hungry and the two resume their relationships on the same terms as before. Gonzalez believes that he deserves the treatment his lover inflicts upon him. His lover does not, however, ask him to ghost whisper. Ghost whispering is the only thing that felt intimate about their relationship. The lack of this act infuriates Gonzalez. He begins to feel trapped and restless. He and his lover fight, his lover invites him to a party and then does not show up. Two days later, he tells Gonzalez that they are going on a boat trip around Catalina. Most of the guests are gay men. During the evening, each couple takes their turn going below deck. When it is their turn, Gonzalez's lover tells him that he is tired and only wants oral sex. Gonzalez complies. Later that night, after the bartender has too much to drink, Gonzalez's lover volunteers Gonzalez to do the job. He says that Gonzalez is Mexican so he knows how to make margaritas.

Armed with the ammunition to antagonize his lover, the next day Gonzalez starts kicking a large vase that is in the corner of his lover's living room. His lover tells him that he will break his face if he breaks it. Gonzalez goads him on, finally biting his lover's finger. This act causes his lover to beat him up. When he comes to, Gonzalez decides to call Indio and make his lover pay the expense. His grandfather normally turns the ringer off so that he can sleep, so there is no answer. Gonzalez knows that he cannot reach his father. Not being able to contact his family members is fine with him, though. In fact it is a relief as it frees his family from responsibility. He acknowledges that he has brought his current situation upon himself and that he, alone, is responsible for himself as he takes the journey into adulthood. His lover looks small to him as he hunches over the side of the bed. When his lover slams the door shut, Gonzalez only chuckles, stopping due to the pain it causes. It takes about an hour for him to feel well enough to walk away. Then he does.

In his final ghost whisper to his lover, Gonzalez relays a story that he had wanted to share with his lover for a long time. He had wanted to do so because he wanted to give all of himself to his lover so he could turn the page of his childhood and put it in the past. He had wanted his lover to be his future. He now knows that this is not possible, but he still gives the lesson to his lover as a gesture of forgiveness, as his lover also has a father issue he needs to deal with for the rest of his life.

The story takes place when Gonzalez was a senior in high school. He was taking college prep and honors classes and his classmates were white. Even though the brown-skinned children were not his friends, he did not feel comfortable among the white students. As he had not lived the same life as they had, he felt uncomfortable



talking to them. Things got worse for him when his classmate asked him whether the Mexican janitor was his father. Gonzalez felt as if his classmates were making fun of him. Gonzalez started studying him to see whether they looked alike and that was why his classmates had raised the question. Matters got even worse, in Gonzalez's mind, when the janitor started waving to him. Now Gonzalez feared that his classmates really would think that he was Gonzalez's father and that he had denied the fact because he was ashamed of him. So, Gonzalez started hiding behind his book whenever the janitor came by. The janitor stopped waving to him.

Another brown-skinned student joined Gonzalez's class at the beginning of the second semester. At first Gonzalez decided to ignore him, but when the new student approached him, he changed his mind and decides that they should become friends and allies against the white students and their mysterious world. So, Gonzalez was at first happy when the new student joined him in his spot. Now he could belong like the other students. His joy dissipated though when the janitor waved and his new friend waved back. Gonzalez felt as if he had to stop this behavior right away and was about to tell the new student that now they were joined by their intelligence and had to be discrete about their background when the new student told him, with a smile on his face, that the janitor was his father.

The comment made Gonzalez think of his father. He realized that he could not tell anyone where his father was now because he did not know. He also realized that his father had moved so far away from him that he would not even know where to start looking for him and, likewise, he had also moved far away from his father.

Gonzalez ends his ghost whisper with the sentiment that it must be a great feeling to love a father so much that the simple act of him passing by reminds you that you are not lost and if you do ever have a problem, a wave is all you need to get assistance.

## Analysis

This final chapter shows that sometimes people make choices that are hard for people to understand, but are a necessary part of the journey of the people who make them. When Gonzalez goes back, he makes the choice to return to his lover still thinking that they may have a future together. On the surface they fall into their habitual way of doing things. In reality, though, things are different. Gonzalez's lover no longer asks him to ghost whisper. Readers do not know why his lover stops. Maybe he sees a change in Gonzalez or maybe he has found someone else. Readers do know that this fact makes Gonzalez mad. He has been ghost whispering to his lover during the entire time that he is away and now his lover stops this intimate part of their relationship.

Throughout the memoir, Gonzalez has spoken about wearing glasses. He cannot see well at all without them. At times it has seemed as if he cannot see reality with them either. Now however, he begins to see that his lover is not his present or future - he is Gonzalez's his past. Gonzalez needs, and deserves, more than his lover can offer. He cannot just walk away though because he needs one more thing to close the book on



his own past. Gonzalez decides he needs for his lover to beat out of him all of the things he hates. Thus, he looks for an excuse for his lover to brutally beat him. He uses the night on the boat as an excuse to start an argument and makes the choice to bite his lover's finger, knowing what the consequences will be. As sad as readers may see this act, it is what Gonzalez needs. Afterwards, he accepts responsibility for his situation instead of blaming others. He has to rely on himself to become an adult. This shows his growth from the child who looks to please others and blames his family for his lot in life.

Gonzalez is now also able to forgive. His last ghost whisper to his lover is a gesture of forgiveness. Forgiveness is something Gonzalez's father did not expect from him and Gonzalez did not give. Gonzalez's mother was able to forgive his father though. Gonzalez accepts that he and his father are far away from each other. Maybe at this time it is how he needs to see their relationship. At least though, he has taken a step towards forgiving another person instead of blaming them.

Another point to note about the final ghost whisper is its content. It shows that as a senior in high school, Gonzalez feels stuck between two worlds. He might be able to go back and forth quickly, but not easily. Still, he wants to belong in the world of education. His way of dealing with this is to turn his back on his culture. Still, he wants to find acceptance from another human being, so he decides to become his new classmate's friend. In the end, it is his classmate that teaches him a lesson. In a way it is similar to the one Carlos teaches him about love. Carlos has parents who accept him and love him. The new student loves his father. He is proud of his father and just watching him go by is enough for him to know that he has support if he needs it. Gonzalez can now accept the fact that this is a great feeling, but he knows that it is not something he can get from his father. This fact does not even have anything to do with Gonzalez. It is due to his father's character - his tradition and culture. Accepting this reality makes it possible for Gonzalez to move on.

## Vocabulary

stunning, awestruck, inebriation, ascend, catharsis, admiration



# Important People

## Rigoberto Gonzalez

Gonzalez is the memoir's central protagonist. He is just turning 20 at the present tense time of the story. The narrative reveals that he is Mexican-American, gay and that his mother died when he was young. He has an estranged relationship with his father. As a gay man raised in a macho society, Gonzalez has never felt acceptance from his family even though he is the first member of his family to graduate from high school. He is also the first member to go to college. His circumstances have left him in a fragile state. He does not know where his true identity lies. As a result, he makes bad choices in his personal life such as staying with a lover who beats him and loves to show his control over him in other ways as well.

At the beginning of the story, readers realize that Gonzalez has a lot of growing up to do. Gonzalez is full of contradictions. He is going to turn 20 in a few days, yet he becomes dramatic and acts like a child when things do not go his way or when he is wrong. He seems to be out of place, looking forward to leaving Riverside, but not feeling comfortable with his family, whom he claims to miss. He decides to take the road trip with his father in the hopes of mending their relationship, yet he is not receptive to any of his father's attempts to talk to him, relate to him, and learn about his life. Instead Gonzalez talks to his father using an angry and disrespectful tone. At the same time, Gonzalez mentions that he loves his father's smile and he takes the food his father offers him. Gonzalez also does not complain when his father moves so that he can sleep.

Readers also realize that in order to grow up, Gonzalez is going to have to come to terms with more than just his relationship with his father. He is going to have to learn how to accept himself and not only look for acceptance in others. This includes his sexual identity. Gonzalez is also going to have to become comfortable with his choice to attend college instead of feeling guilty for leaving his family and making his father drive him to his campus on his first day. Making better choices, those that propel him instead of punishing him, is something else that Gonzalez has to learn to do.

Even though his journey is not an easy one and culminates in a final beating at the hands of his lover, at the end of the memoir Gonzalez seems to have come to terms with the fact that he is responsible for himself and that he and his father will not have the same type of relationship that his classmate and his father, the janitor, had. Gonzalez also learns how to forgive - Not only his lover, but possibly himself as well for not telling the truth to his father confessor and for being himself.



## Gonzalez's Father

Gonzalez's father is a man who has dreams as a young man, but succumbs to the life of a migrant worker basically because his father thinks it is a better profession. He is charismatic, but can also be irresponsible in spite of his intentions. He does not have a good relationship with Gonzalez. As he learns that Gonzalez plans to visit his maternal grandparents and he has to go to the same town, he suggests that the two of them take the bus together in hopes of mending their relationship.

He is a man who seems to try, but just cannot rise to his potential. As a young man, he chokes in a boxing match that he plans to use to impress Gonzalez's mother's family before they get married. He works hard, but is unlucky at times with getting work. Also as a young man, he has a band that people remember for many years, but he gives that up too. He originally has dreams of becoming an electrician, but his father forbids it, so he settles for the life of a migrant farmer. The fact that his father always puts down his efforts is likely also a contributing factor to these failures.

His biggest problem, though, is the fact that when he disappoints someone, he becomes the loser people expect him to be. He starts drinking when he is living in the same town as his wife's family, because none of them like him. When Gonzalez's mother gets mad at him for not keeping an eye on Gonzalez he leaves to work in the United States, but he does not send money back home. Subsequently, his family almost starves. At the end of the story, when he sees that he has not made progress with Gonzalez, he asks Gonzalez for money knowing that Gonzalez has expected him to do so for the entire trip and will hate him for doing it.

In spite of his shortcomings, Gonzalez's father does love his son. He tells him this over and over again and he has not forgotten Gonzalez's mother, his first wife.

## Gonzalez's Lover

Gonzalez's lover is an older man who has issues that he has never dealt with. He was raped by his father when he was young. He is an angry man who tells Gonzalez that he loves him, but likes to control him. He shows his power over Gonzalez by making him wait late at night for his call saying that it is okay for him to come over. He also beats him. In addition, he is the person who created the term "ghost whisper." At the end of the story he orders Gonzalez around, even volunteering him to take over as the bartender and brutally beats up Gonzalez after Gonzalez antagonizes him.

## Gonzalez's Mother

Gonzalez's mother dies when he is 12 years old. Even though she dies when he is young, she leaves a big impression on Gonzalez and his family. In life, she is frail in health, but has a quiet strength when it comes to her personality, and she is not afraid to make choices. As a young woman, she chooses to elope with Gonzalez's father. She



choose to have her children in the United States. She also chooses to work for the good of the family even though she knows it is bad for her health. After she dies, the usually unemotional side of Gonzalez's family (his father's side) remembers her on the Day of the Dead. The ceremony brings them to tears. While Gonzalez learns that she always thought of him as her son, she spanked him when he acted like a "sissy" as a child, not to protect him, but to protect his father.

## Dolly

Dolly is a teacher's aid Gonzalez has early in life. She works with him to help him get rid of his accent. In doing so, she gives him his first book - a book of poetry. This ignites his interest in books and aids in getting rid of his fear of English. He feels that Dolly understands him and he understands Dolly.

## Ms. Burnett

Ms. Burnett is Gonzalez's fifth grade teacher. With her help, he wins the school's spelling bee and enters the one for his district. He does not win that one, but the entire experience encourages him. Gonzalez is her favorite student and she is his favorite teacher for a period of time because she responds to his journal entries with wise words and information. This is their form of communication. His opinion of her changes, though, when she cannot explain why his mother gets sick, and the response she does give makes him think that she does not understand him at all. On the day that he loses faith in her, and he leaves home on his bike and almost gets hit by a car. The driver is Ms. Burnett. Instead of waiting for her to console him, Gonzalez rides away.

## Gonzalez's Grandparents

Gonzalez's paternal and maternal grandparents are still alive and he visits both sets in the story. During his early life, he lives in the same town as his maternal grandparents. Gonzalez depicts them as kind people, although they never like his father. Gonzalez is ultimately sad to move away from his maternal grandparents.

It is a different situation with his paternal grandparents. His grandfather keeps control of people in the household by beating them. He belittles Gonzalez's father. He even once threatens to beat Gonzalez's mother. He has more money than anyone, but does not want to share it. Instead, he wants to control the money the other family members make. He does not understand Gonzalez when Gonzalez has a nervous breakdown, and his grandfather does not understand why Gonzalez wants to go to college. Gonzalez grows close to his paternal grandmother, however, when he was in high school. They learn to laugh together at Gonzalez's grandfather, but she is still, ultimately, his prisoner.



## Alex (Gonzalez's Brother)

Like Gonzalez, Alex is born in the United States. He is Gonzalez's younger brother and only sibling. He drops out of school, however, and follows the family tradition of becoming a migrant farmer. Even though Gonzalez basically leaves him behind, the two talk to each other, and Alex agrees to drive Gonzalez to his college when Gonzalez does not get support from his grandfather or, initially, his father. Gonzalez realizes that Alex is his father's boy.

## Carlos

Carlos is a boy in Gonzalez's class who is also gay. Gonzalez talks to him about it and Carlos responds that it is not a problem for him because his parents love him. Later, Gonzalez attends Carlos's birthday party and witnesses how his mother encourages his behavior. For Gonzalez, whose mother discourages his feminine ways by spanking him, this is too much.

The contrast between Carlos and Gonzalez shows a person who is comfortable with their identity and accepted by their family versus someone who is not; Carlos has acceptance while Gonzalez does not. As a result, Gonzalez turns away from Carlos, saying that it is all too much for even him. In reality, though, it may be that he cannot stand to see the love Carlos's mother gives him.

## Boy At The End of The Book

The boy at the end of the book is one of Gonzalez's classmates. The high school-aged Gonzalez thinks that it is his job to take the boy under his wing and teach him how they should to behave as minority students in the honor class. This is especially true when the boy starts being friendly with the janitor, who Gonzalez has done his best to ignore because he does not want the kids to think the janitor is his father simply because they are both Mexican.

In the end, however, it is the boy who teaches Gonzalez a lesson regarding how great it is to have a father who loves you and that will always be there when you need him. The janitor actually IS this boy's father, and the boy is proud of his father. Gonzalez realizes that this is a relationship that he will never have with his father. This realization seems to bring Gonzalez peace.

## Gerardo

Gerardo is a classmate of Gonzalez's who is put in his higher-level class because the other levels are full. The class is difficult for him, so he asks Gonzalez to tutor him. Gonzalez already knows him from Thermal. He agrees. In the end, however, the two become lovers. He is, in fact, Gonzalez's first lover. He is also a lover of a special kind



because he never says that he is gay. In this way he is like a lot of other men Gonzalez has sex with later who have wives and girlfriends.

Finally, Gerardo leaves Gonzalez, and school, to sell drugs. Gonzalez sees Gerardo years later when they are adults, but Gerardo pretends that he does not see Gonzalez.





## Objects/Places

### Gonzalez's Watches

Readers learn about two watches that Gonzalez has had: one from his father, and one from his lover. Gonzalez ultimately loses the one from his father, telling readers it was tacky and he is happy to have lost it. The watch from his lover, however, is described as elegant but beginning to feel like a handcuff.

In both instances, the watches symbolize a need to move on. It is literally time to go. Gonzalez has to move on and come to terms with his relationship with his father and then his lover. Once he does, his time will have come. Gonzalez realizes this, thus he takes the journey to reconcile his past with his present and move towards maturity.

### The Monarch Butterfly

The Monarch Butterfly, known to have a seasonal migration from Mexico and the U.S., symbolizes the migration of the Mexican farm workers, like Gonzalez's family, who migrate back and forth from Mexico to the U.S. every season.

"Butterfly" also has two meanings in Spanish; the first meaning is the winged insect that probably comes first to mind, but a second meaning in the Spanish culture is also a label for gay men.

The hickey's Gonzalez's lover leaves on his body, which they call butterflies, remind him of his family due to the migration of the Monarch Butterflies and they are part of their relationship because he and his lover are gay. The title of the book, "Butterfly Boy" also carries the same double meaning.

### Cologne

Despite Gonzalez's known allergy to cologne, two important men in his life use this knowledge to offend him. First, Gonzalez's lover wears cologne in defiance of him when the two break up at the beginning of the book. At the end of the book, Gonzalez's father gives him cologne as a present. This act represents just how far apart the two of them really are, since his father is well aware of Gonzalez's allergy to the gift.

### Riverside, California

Riverside is one of Gonzalez's two worlds and an integral part of his identity. It is the world in the U.S. where he lives in the present, studies and has a secret relationship with an older man, his lover. This is a world that he is happy to have escaped to (leaving his family's migrant farmer life). At the same time, he misses his family at times and



hopes to find solace with them when the situation with his lover deteriorates. At the end of the book, Riverside is the place he returns to in order to close the door on his past and come to terms with his present.

## Indio, California

Indio is where Gonzalez's paternal grandparents live at the beginning of the book. It is here that he goes to meet his father and readers get a glimpse of the life of the migrant farm workers. It is not long before Gonzalez feels that he no longer belongs there. It is also where he lives after his mother's death and the place he was living when his father left him.

## The Bus Journey

The bus journey represents Gonzalez's coming of age journey. He starts out a teenager (19) and returns as an adult (20). By the time he returns home he has grown and learned that he is responsible for himself and the road to maturity is something that he has to undertake alone.

## Food

Food represents nourishment and life. There are many offers of food in the book, but this does not mean that the food nourishes those who eat it. When Gonzalez first arrives in Indio, his grandfather gives him food. Gonzalez eats it, even though he is not hungry. He does want to to be polite, but there is no nourishment.

On the bus, his father buys food for Gonzalez and he takes it. But the end of the journey, though, Gonzalez takes only liquids, symbolizing that he is no longer open to the nourishment his father is trying to provide. When Gonzalez and his father finally arrive there is hope that things will end well because the two of them share a meal together. The result, however, is just the opposite. The two men fight. Instead of bringing them together, it pulls them away from each other. Gonzalez's father even ruins Gonzalez's birthday meal by showing up and asking for money.

With Gonzalez's lover's there is always a play on words when it comes to the word "hungry." The question readers ask themselves is whether Gonzalez is getting the right kind of nourishment.

## Thermal, California

Thermal is where Gonzalez lives at one point with his paternal grandparents and his external family on his father's side. This is where he lives as a child and spies on the apartment next door. It is also the place in which he lives with his mother, father, and brother in the home on top of the garage. Here, at John Kelley Elementary school, he



receives his first book from Dolly, learns to love reading, and loses his fear of English. Gonzalez is in the fifth grade in Thermal when he becomes the spelling bee champion. Gonzalez also lives here when his mother begins to get sick, his father tries to teach him to play guitar, and his father catches him wearing fingernail polish.

## The Guitar

Gonzalez's father guitar represents two things: their homeland (tradition and culture) and the tool of a lover. Gonzalez's father believes that wanting to be in a music group is the same as desiring to be a lover. Considering what the guitar symbolizes in Gonzalez's family, the fact that he cannot play it is equally symbolic. He does not want to attract girls, he is happy when he escapes his family tradition and is at times ashamed of both their tradition and culture, and in a way, it is a rejection of his father. He is his mother's boy.

## Ghost Whispers

The ghost whispers, first introduced by Gonzalez's lover, represent memory, purity, and honesty. Gonzalez sprinkles them throughout the memoir in hopes of getting letting his lover into his memories so that he will understand him better. In the end, they help readers understand him better.



# Themes

## Gender and Sexual Identification

Besides being a memoir, "Butterfly Boy" is also a coming-of-age story exploring gender and sexual identification issues. It is not uncommon for such stories to encompass the theme of sexual identification. After all, protagonists often experience the passage from childhood to puberty. During this time they undergo sexual urges, start to think about how they view themselves in relationships, and realize who they find sexually attractive. "Butterfly Boy," however, forces readers to wonder whether one's sexuality is really tied to one's gender. The author, Gonzalez, raises question such as, what makes someone a homosexual? Is it someone who likes to have sex with their own sex or can someone have sex with their own sex, but be married or have a girlfriend and not be a homosexual? How does one truly define their sexual identity and how should the world do so? Is there a clear line?

There are many instances in the book where Gonzalez has sex with men who never claim to be gay. One such relationship is with Gerardo, the boy he tutors. Other relationships happen with older men he encounters in the fields. This is a macho society that doesn't accept someone being obviously gay, but seems not to mind the fact that men have sex with other men, as long as it is done in secret. Gonzalez even has a traumatic experience when his father jumps on top of him in such a way that arouses Gonzalez. Nothing happens between the two of them, yet the event leaves such a negative mark on Gonzalez that he has a breakdown and has to go to a psychiatrist. It is so common for men who are not openly gay to have sex with other men that for a time, Gonzalez wonders whether he is really gay.

Still, Gonzalez has feminine ways. His mother has tried to get him not to behave like himself, as his actions bring shame to his father. This shame of being outwardly gay causes him to reject the behavior of a gay friend of his, Carlos. Shame does not choke Carlos because his family loves him and accepts him as who he is. Gonzalez even thinks that Carlos's mother goes too far when he attends Carlos' birthday party. The only person who Gonzalez identifies with in a positive way is Liberace, until he dies due to an AIDS-related illness. After that, Gonzalez's sexual orientation is such a bases of how other's identify him that people think that he might have AIDS when he starts losing weight, because men don't go on diets.

Gonzalez's attempt to come to terms with his sexual identity explains why he is willing to succumb to his lover's beatings. He thinks he deserves it. His mother spans him to stop him from acting like a "sissy" in the house. He does not confess that he is gay when he has his confirmation. Thus, he believes he has to pay for his sins. He sees himself only as being someone who encompasses shame and sin. This is how some members of society see him. This is not true of everyone though.



His teachers recognize Gonzalez's intelligence and abilities. They do not define him by his sexuality. It's their view of him that allows Gonzalez to rise above the gender and sexuality confusion. This fact leads readers to wonder whether this is the way it should be. Why not look beyond one's sexual orientation and judge the person by his or her abilities and personality (especially since one never knows what happens behind closed doors)?

## Tradition and Culture

Facing confusion due to one's tradition and culture and finding one's own identity in the midst of all that is going on around one as he or she grows up is a common theme in coming-of-age stories. Gonzalez's tradition and culture leads to a bleak future. Yet, pursuing his educational goals means literally lifting himself out of his culture. He attends classes with white students. If there is another Mexican in his class, the schools expects that the other student will fail or drop out. Gonzalez works to lose his accent when he speaks English. He reads in secret and applies to college in secret. He is the first person in his family to graduate from high school. He chooses a college in the United States, taking him another step away from his culture and tradition.

The book is full of evidence that Gonzalez's family does not understand him, and when support does come, it is reluctant. He attends the spelling bee finals without them. His father shows no interest in attending his high school graduation. In the end, Gonzalez does not go either even though he is a top student. He applies to college in secret and has to explain why he wants to go to his grandfather. Doing this proves difficult though and this incident is an example of the tension Gonzalez feels towards the tug or war of being true to his own identity and his tradition and culture, represented by his grandfather.

Readers also see Gonzalez struggling with his identity in school. He does not fit in with anyone, so he simply becomes invisible behind his books. His books do start carving an identity for him though. The students on the bus realize that he is intelligent, give him a nickname and, leave him alone. He even ignores the janitor at the school, not wanting to identify with a member of his culture from a "lower" class. Once, however, his new classmate, who is the janitor's son, helps him realize how special it is to have a good relationship with one's father, no matter where you are now and where you came from, Gonzalez's sentiments change. He also comes to terms with the fact that he will never have such a relationship with his father and that is just the way it is.

## Abuse and Violence

Abuse and violence is everywhere in Gonzalez's memoir. He suffers violence and abuse at the hands of his lover. The family suffers abuse and violence from his paternal grandfather. Cats suffer violence under the hands of both his paternal grandfather and grandmother. The book explores the impact of living under the umbrella of such attacks.



What is interesting is that it seems to have a more negative impact on the men in the family than the women. Gonzalez's father turns to alcohol and cowers in the shadow of his father. Gonzalez's mother is frail, but she stands up to Gonzalez's grandfather when he tries to take her money. Finally, when she decides that enough is enough after Gonzalez's grandfather beats Gonzalez, she initiates the family's move. Gonzalez's grandmother also knows how to deal with his grandfather, even though he beats her. She does not let him get the best of her. In fact, she and Gonzalez make fun of him behind his back. Still, Gonzalez carries the legacy of cowering, as his father does, under the violent control of another man. It is even strange that Gonzalez calls him his lover, considering how his lover treats him.

Gonzalez's willingness to suffer his lover's abuse and violence could also come from his shame. When he is young his mother gives him spankings when she believes he acts like a "sissy" in the house. These spankings teach him that his household does not appreciate such mannerisms. She is no longer there to punish him as an adult, so now he lets his lover do it. In fact he instigates it, as he does in the last scene with his lover when he bites his lover's finger. In this way Gonzalez abuses himself.

All of the abuse that takes place is not physical and Gonzalez is not always the victim. He inflicts mental abuse on his father. During the bus ride, his father tries to talk to him, asking Gonzalez questions about his life. He offers Gonzalez food, but Gonzalez recoils from him and says things that he even admits are low blows.

## Choice

When it comes to the question of choice, the memoir makes two statements. The first statement is that people have the power to make choices. These choices may enhance the lives of others instead of their own lives, but they can still choose. The second statement this memoir makes about choice is that choices people make in the present can be traced back to their past.

Gonzalez's choices dominate the book. He chooses to follow his love for education even though his family does not appreciate it. He also chooses to follow his sexual orientation, even though during the time that the memoir takes place, he seeks punishment from his lover. He also chooses to return to his lover at the end of the memoir, knowing what the outcome will be. All choices are not good ones, but they may be necessary. This last stand with his lover is what Gonzalez needs in order to move on.

His mother chooses to have her children in the U.S., hoping to give them better lives. She also chooses to work to help the family financially in spite of her ill health. Gonzalez's brother chooses to quit school, thus setting the stage for his life.

Perhaps even more notable than the notion that everyone has the ability to make choices is the idea that the choices one makes in the present reference one's past. Gonzalez's narrative starts and ends with his violent lover. Would he have chosen such a man if he had grown up in a household like Carlos' whose parents loved him and



whose mother even encouraged his behavior in contrast to Gonzalez's mother who spanked him to discourage it? Would he have turned to a man like his lover if he had felt close to his father as the janitor's son did? Would his present have been different if his mother had lived? The answer is probably yes and this is something that Gonzalez knows himself. In order to break the destructive path he is on, he has to make another choice. That choice is to come to terms with his past. It is only then that he will be able to make good choices in the present which will positively influence his future.

## The Thirst for Acceptance

In his memoir, Gonzalez tells readers about his admiration of Liberace. At the root of his admiration is the fact that people accepted Liberace as himself, despite him being flamboyant and he was fat. Instead of singling out something about his personality to criticize him for, people embraced him as he was. Gonzalez yearns for the same type of acceptance Liberace had during his lifetime. In Gonzalez's yearning, he is no different from people in general. People want others to accept them for what they are.

Gonzalez does not find this acceptance in his family. They do not understand or appreciate his love for academics and his success in school. His father does not even see the importance of attending his high school graduation, and Gonzalez applies to college in secret, only telling his family about it when it is time for him to go. Even then he has a hard time explaining his decision to his grandfather. He has an even harder time finding acceptance for his feminine ways and sexuality. He knows that his father is ashamed of him, and his mother tries to protect his father by whipping him any time he acts like a "sissy." Gonzalez's household does not accept such behavior.

As his family members do not accept him, Gonzalez thinks that he deserves the beatings his lover gives him. Thus he seeks him out, knowing the result. As Gonzalez is growing up, he is also willing to have sex with anyone who initiates sex with him. He says that during these times, he feels in control.

There is one area that others do accept Gonzalez - the academic world. While he feels uncomfortable because he is the only Mexican in his classes, his teachers recognize his abilities and encourage him. They do not expect him to drop out. He even gets a college scholarship due to his talent. Once he comes to terms with the lack of acceptance he felt from his family as he was growing up, he is able to find his place in the world of academia. No longer does he have to hide his academic interest nor his sexuality. While readers do not know for sure, as his memoir ends at the age of 20, they sense that he now has found the acceptance he thirsted for growing up.



# Styles

## Structure

This book's distinctive structure features five parts with headings that tell readers the overall feelings or topics that the author plans to express in the chapters that follow. The chapters freely switch between the present, the past, and pure, honest memories called "ghost whispers" which the author writes to his lover. The ghost whispers are in italics using a font that looks more like handwriting. Perhaps this is done to imitate handwritten letters to his lover and the fact that they are a different type of memory than the memories relayed in the other chapters. The chapters about the past have titles based on where the author lived and the years he lived there. This is fitting as he moved a lot and his constant movement, between the United States and Mexico reflects his family's work as migrant workers. Many of the chapters dealing with the present deal with him on the bus with his father. These chapters are fittingly called "Summer's Passage" because his journey represents his passage from a teenager to a more mature person in a figurative sense and also literally as he will be turning 20 years old during the trip.

## Perspective

As with most memoirs, the narrative is written using the first person point of view. This is a fitting point of view for the author's story as it is the most personal point of view. It gives readers the opportunity to obtain a view of the author's feelings, thoughts, and opinions as seen through his lens.

It is important to note that since the story flows from the present to the past and back again, the author has chosen to use a combination of the past and present tense depending on where he is in time. This technique makes it possible for the author to insert memories into present events without confusing the reader.

## Tone

The tone of the book varies depending on the subject the author is talking about when he refers to the past and his mood when he is in the present. When he talks to his father, and members of his family when he first arrives in Indio his tone is angry, vindictive, and judgmental. When he thinks of his mother one can describe his tone as being sentimental and thoughtful. The same holds true in the ghost whispers to his lover. His tone is optimistic and enthusiastic at times. Reader feel his excitement when his family finally gets their own place, when he gets into college, and when he wins the spelling bee.





## Quotes

In Spanish our voices are much more violent because the hatred comes from the gut, not from the schools of our adopted language.

-- Gonzalez as the Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 30)

**Importance:** This quote reveals information about Gonzalez's character. Even though he was born in the United States, lives and studies there now, and lived there growing up, he is first and foremost Mexican. This is his culture and it is through the language of this culture that he is best able to express his true feelings.

I will not fight with my father. I will not long for my lover. I will forgive my father. I will forget my lover."

-- Gonzalez as the Narrator (chapter 2 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** This quote depicts the tension Gonzalez feels between the two worlds that define him and shows how he is running from one world to the other, hoping to have better luck at home than he is having in the life he has chosen away from his family.

What gives me courage is remembering the man he used to be. What disheartens me is knowing the man he has become.

-- Gonzalez as the Narrator (chapter 2 paragraph 9)

**Importance:** This quote demonstrates the mixed feelings Gonzalez has towards his father and why he has them. At some point, his father exhibited behavior he could respect. He tells his lover about this in a ghost whisper. The particular incident was when he father played in a band. Then he exhibited hope that he could change his life. Instead he has succumbed to it and turned to alcohol. He has even remarried and started a second family without taking care of the needs of the first one.

Our extended family was a necessity for socioeconomic livelihood, not a romanticized notion of togetherness and unity; by sticking together there was less a chance of going hungry.

-- Gonzalez as the Narrator (chapter 8 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** This quote characterizes Gonzalez's family life. No one shows love. Readers may wonder whether this is because no love exists. The family unit does not live together for love and support; they do so only because it is economically feasible.

The guitar hanging from a nail on the wall of our little home on top of the garage held a prominent place in my father's memory and heart. This instrument was a symbol of more than music.

-- Gonzalez as Narrator (chapter 9 paragraph 95)

**Importance:** Gonzalez's father tries to relate to Gonzalez by teaching him how to do something that means a lot to him: playing the guitar. Gonzalez, however, does not take



to guitar playing at all. This fact adds to the feeling that he is a disappointment to his father and symbolically shows how different the two of them are from each other. It also symbolically represents the fact that Gonzalez's ties are not with the tradition and culture the guitar represents.

Effeminate and demure, I always became self-consciously boyish around my father.  
-- Gonzalez as Narrator (chapter 9 paragraph 100)

**Importance:** This quote helps explain Gonzalez's behavior as an adult. He is not comfortable just being himself around his father. When they are on the bus, he uses the tone he learned from his grandfather to speak to him. Gonzalez cannot relate to his father as himself, instead he continues to behave in a self-consciously boyish manner.

The question popped into my head for the umpteenth time: What if I was meant to be a girl?

-- Gonzalez as Narrator (chapter 9 paragraph 117)

**Importance:** The importance of this quote is that Gonzalez knows that he is gay, but is ashamed of the fact because he knows that his father is ashamed of his feminine ways. Even his voice his too high for his age. There is nothing he can do about it though. His feminine mannerisms are so much a part of him that he wonders whether he should have been a girl instead of a boy.

I wanted to be a girl because I wanted to do girl things: comb my long hair, sit on the back of the pickup truck and whisper secrets, and wash dishes and stick my tongue out at the boys when I caught glimpses of them playing ball through the window over the sink."

-- Gonzalez as Narrator (chapter 9 paragraph 118)

**Importance:** This quote shows how strong Gonzalez's feminine instincts really are. The activities he mentions are things he believes only a girl would want to do.

My mother corrected my habits and mannerisms repeatedly.

-- Gonzalez as Narrator (chapter 9 paragraph 123)

**Importance:** This quote highlights the fact that Gonzalez's true identity is not accepted in his childhood household. It lays the foundation for issues he has in the future that cause him to endure beatings and search for acceptance.

After the ceremony I would have no one to answer for my yearnings but myself, even if after my death I would have to lag behind that priest until the end of days, a pair of branded souls dragging the heavy burden of their sins, like cows roaming the forfeits dawns, the first guiding the second with its dangling rosary of a tail.

-- Gonzalez as Narrator (chapter 11 paragraph 15)

**Importance:** This quote portrays the guilt and burden Gonzalez feels because he is gay. Not only has he committed a sin by being gay, in his mind, but he has also failed to



confess it. Thus he is doomed to carry the burden of his sins for the rest of his life and afterwards as well.

When I received the notification of acceptance, I clasped the letter to my chest, feeling my heart implode. Finally, I had my ticket out.

-- Gonzalez as Narrator (chapter 12 paragraph 201)

**Importance:** This quote shows how much Gonzalez wants to escape from the tradition and culture his family represents. It is ironic that it is a letter of acceptance that elates him as acceptance is one of the things he thirsts for.

And yet this is not a terrifying realization. It's more like a relief to liberate my family and father from all responsibility:

-- Gonzalez as Narrator (chapter 16 paragraph 52)

**Importance:** This quote proves that Gonzalez has grown and learned a valuable lesson during his journey. He now accepts that he, and no one else, is responsible for his actions and current state as opposed to blaming others like his father and family members as he has done in the past.



# Topics for Discussion

## 1

Multiple Characters in this memoir experience domestic abuse. Describe the role of domestic abuse in this memoir. How is it presented? Which characters experience it? How do different characters handle it, or are affected by it, differently?

## 2

Why does the author often describe himself as being between two worlds? What worlds is he between? How does he cope?

## 3

The author says that when he was young he felt as he should have been born a girl. Would his life have been the same if he had been a girl?

## 4

The author writes the following about his father: "What gives me courage is remembering the man he used to be. What disheartens me is knowing the man he has become."

What does the author mean by this? From what you have learned about the author's father, is his assessment correct?

## 5

Compare and contrast the lives of the author, Carlos, and the janitor's son at the end of the memoir.

## 6

Do you think that the author's treatment of his father is fair? Support your answer.

## 7

How do you think that the author's mother would have felt about him as an adult if she had lived? Support your answer.



## 8

The author wrote, "I will not fight with my father. I will not long for my lover. I will forgive my father. I will forget my lover."

Given that these were the author's goals when he started his summer road trip, how do you think he fared? What does this say to you about goals and success?

## 9

Why is the author so happy to receive his college acceptance letter?

## 10

How does the author's past influence his present?