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A Novel

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BULLET

SWALLOWER



ELIZABETH

GONZALEZ JAMES

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THE
**BULLET
SWALLOWER**

A NOVEL

ELIZABETH
**GONZALEZ
JAMES**

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For Antonio and Antonio and Zeke

“Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States.”
—General Porfirio Díaz, Presidente de México, 1876–1880, 1884–1911

PROLOGUE

DORADO, MEXICO—EARLY 1800S

Alferez Antonio Sonoro was born with gold in his eyes. The gold was sharp and it stung him so that he blinked uncontrollably and always carried a vial of salted water in his pocket. Of the four Sonoro brothers he was the only one thus signified, and his parents regarded it a blessing, incontestable proof of divine favor. Though he was the youngest, the servants carved his portion of meat first, even before his father's. His mother often knelt before him at night, delivering her prayers directly to her child, rather than to God.

The Sonoros lived in Dorado, a mining town established by their silk-clad forebears in the arid brushland fronting what the Texans called the Rio Grande, but which the Mexicans gave the more descriptive name Río Bravo del Norte. A flock of clay-colored buildings studded with wooden vigas and decorated with dahlias drowsing in white pots, Dorado sat quiet and erect across the water from the wilds of the province of Texas, a four-day journey upstream from where the river spooled emerald into the briny Gulf. Dorado, meaning “golden,” was both a wish and a command—the earth there was split apart by the Sonoros and her bounty revealed. And they took lustily.

The pain in his eyes made Alferez Antonio unsympathetic. *If I can stand it*, he thought, *anyone can withstand anything*. And most people believed he'd been born with gold in his loins as well for he lusted after more, more than he could spend, more than he could hold, more than could ever be dragged by the cartful from the belly of the earth.

When Alferez Antonio stood in the sunlight, the gold gleamed white and it was impossible for anyone to address him without averting their own gaze. Even his father, abandoning all pretense that he was master of his child, took to doffing his hat and holding it at his chest and looking at the ground one day when his teenage son stood at the entrance to the mother lode and demanded to know why only grown men worked in the mine.

“Surely there are small pieces that women and children could gather,” Alferez Antonio said. He kicked dirt at a thin, clubfooted child who’d stepped timidly forward, one palm open in supplication. “We ride mares the same as colts. We slaughter the fattest kid goats and cook them in their own blood. Why is it different with these Carrizo mongrels?”

His father watched the bare backs of the Carrizo tribesmen as they shuffled single file into the maw. Eleven thousand years of careful cultivation of the ungenerous earth, and for all their toil they were now granted the license to squat on their own land. The Spanish outnumbered the Carrizos and had long ago forced them west away from the riverbanks, because their God said to replenish the earth and subdue it. Their God granted them dominion over every living thing that moved upon the earth.

The father turned his hat around in his hands as though he might find courage somewhere along the velvet trim. “When the mine is yours you may run it as you like,” he said quietly. And with a tremor in his voice he added, “But I caution you against working the Carrizos too hard. They will bend only so far.”

Alferez Antonio snorted. “When will it be mine?” And then, in a voice his father took to come not from the boy but from God, added, “You won’t live forever.”

“A lame horse can’t run,” the father whispered.

When the father died days later it was assumed throughout Dorado that Alferez Antonio had killed him. And like all news that is unpleasant and inevitable, the story was accepted, absorbed, and forgotten in one gulp.

Mine work was presented to the Carrizos as an opportunity for advancement. Imagine closing your fist around your own centavos every week! The mine spokesman jingled change in his pocket and leered at the women as he strolled in pointed boots past their thatched-roof jacales. Imagine your children liberated

from the drudgery of tilling the fickle soil, imagine the freedom to earn a wage and contribute to your family. A job in the mine is a hand reaching out to you. Grasp that hand and be free. The people listened to the man's speech with one eye trained on the spokesman's cronies still seated on their horses, rifles pointing to Heaven. Those who did not voluntarily enlist were rounded up the first day, herded to the mine entrance, and forced down into the bowels by Alferez Antonio's private militia. It took only two days for the first fatality, a boy of five who was skittering along a ledge to bring a lantern to his father when his feet faltered and he plunged, the light illuminating his round face as he fell and fell, extinguishing on the rocks below.

Soon, explosions rattled the plaster saints in Dorado's church niches and sloshed water over the round rims of clay ollas. Alferez Antonio was tunneling deeper and wider. Before, the mine had been worked by three hundred—Alferez Antonio would have three thousand in his shafts, entire families outfitted down to the toddlers with hand drills and black powder.

The mine spit gold out of its mouth with such regularity it became known as El Fuente—the fountain. A bridge was hastily built across the river so shipments could travel north to San Antonio. Alferez Antonio oversaw construction of a new church in the center of Dorado, with the tallest bell tower north of Monterrey. He built himself a sprawling hacienda on the southern edge of town with white Roman columns and smaller adjacent structures for his brothers and their wives. He threw parties, served mountains of shrimp and shark fins he had packed in ice and floated up the Río Bravo on barges from the Gulf. Over the next ten years he took one wife and then another and another, parading them through the plaza on Sunday evenings in their gauzy regency gowns like three naiads. The people of Dorado swallowed their misgivings like bitter medicine topped with sugar—they danced at his parties, played faro in his cantinas until dawn, wore braided gold chains around their necks, and cleared their throats and changed the subject when the Carrizos loudly bore another of their dead through the streets, wailing and wringing their hands and clanging their bells.

But in his early thirties, Alferez Antonio's eyesight began to fail. The gold had slipped from the edges of his irises and was now invading his pupils, clouding his vision. The pain woke him at night and he'd stomp through the

halls of his splendid home, glaring out the windows and between the columns at the dark fields and the dark mine beyond. Soon the workers were divided into shifts and the mercury furnaces burned all night, rivaling the moon for their radiance.

It was then that the Carrizos' dissent began to grow tendrils, spiraling out and clutching legs as the men worked with rags tied across their faces, leading horses around circular patios to agitate a foot-thick slurry of gold, mercury, salt, water, and copper sulfate. Two more girls dead, they whispered, and an old man. And everyone had the headaches, the weakness in their limbs. *Mal aire, bad air.* No, said another, it's the chemicals, and he pointed at a young roan pushing through the slurry with knocking knees. They managed to lead the horse out of the patio before it collapsed dead. An overseer pushed the men aside and split open the animal's stomach with one flick of his large knife. He reached in up to his elbow and extracted a bloody lump the size of a mango. He demanded water and, once it was rinsed, the gathered men recognized it as an amalgam of gold and mercury, warmed in the humid oven of the horse's stomach.

A strike was planned for the following week.

Alferez Antonio heard the whispers. His spies knew the location of every meeting. The day before the strike, a sultry June morning thick with impending rain, Alferez Antonio appeared before his workers and announced he was allowing them the day off, that they should rest with their families. Pickaxes were dropped, donkeys were left unloaded, and the Carrizos returned to their huts laughing and singing. *Why, brother?* the other Sonoros asked. *The Carrizos will grow indolent. Next they'll expect us to rub their calloused feet.* Alferez Antonio laughed. *You're exactly right,* he said.

That night the Carrizo men were meeting in a cypress grove to list their demands. Alferez Antonio waited for his spies to ride back with word that the meeting was underway, and then he dispatched his men to the Carrizo shanties to round up all the women and children. *Drag them by their heels,* he said. *Every last one.*

There was a defunct vein and a series of stopes along the northern edge of the mine and they were deposited there, shoved at gunpoint down into the hole.

When the Carrizo men returned to their huts, Alferez Antonio himself was waiting to tell them exactly where their wives and babies were.

Everyone in Dorado sat up in their beds at the screams of the Carrizo men as they tore through the brush to their families. The men stormed down into the warm earth, their families blinking up at them out of the blackness. Everyone spoke at once, everyone had a plan, and no one heard Alferez Antonio's men strike their matches, nor the hiss of the fuses. The explosion sealed the exit behind ten meters of rock and created a wave of dust and debris that blew the Carrizos deep underground and smothered the most fortunate.

Alferez Antonio swallowed the last drop of golden añejo in his glass and watched with satisfaction as the smoke from the explosion rose under the full moon. He was about to turn to his lieutenant and order the man to ride to Agualeguas in the morning and recruit a new corps of workers. Tell them, he was about to say, what happens to agitators in El Fuente. But as he opened his mouth the ground beneath him began to shake. The explosion on the north end had worked loose the supports along the western edge of the lode. Beams snapped. Tunnels caved. The moon was white as an egg and in its glow Alferez Antonio watched whole trees sink and disappear. The shaking grew more violent and was accompanied by great explosions as the methane gas trapped underground flooded and lit every artery. The new bridge collapsed into the turgid river that sloshed over its banks and dampened the homes fronting the water. In town the people left their beds and ran out into the streets and looked up at the new church steeple rocking side to side before falling to the ground and shattering. In Laredo, Texas, three days' journey by horse, the shaking rang the bell at San Agustín Church.

The moon disappeared behind smoke and dust. North of the mine, where the Río Bravo had peacefully carried silt and rainwater for millions of years, the explosion caused the river to split into two, to fork like lightning and then rejoin itself past Alferez Antonio's big white house, at the southernmost edge of the Sonoro lands. Within minutes Dorado became an island, as though the river had spread its legs and delivered the town, now long and liver-shaped, and as disconnected from Mexico as it was from the United States. The rocky bluffs of

Texas rose undisturbed like a sleeping leviathan on the other side of the water. Dorado was a land without a country.

When the sun rose and Alferez Antonio could see what remained of El Fuente, he felt as though he'd slipped away somewhere else, had been plucked by giant fingers and deposited into a foreign land, so unrecognizable was the terrain that appeared in the purpling dawn. The mine hadn't simply collapsed—it was no longer there. A waterlogged crater five kilometers wide spread before him, a shallow hole that had swallowed every horse, every rock, every tree, every shovel, and left behind a barren depression as though crushed under an enormous boot heel. His eyes burned and his heart felt torn in two, for it wasn't his wives he loved or his children or even the gold. It was his power for which he now grieved. He knew he would never again be able to take unquestioningly. His freedom and his privilege were trapped underground with the Carrizos, buried under kilometers of strata. He envied them even as he hated and blamed them. Their dirt-stained hands had managed to reach up out of the ground and clutch tight to his ankles, fixing him forever to the spot like an old Russian story he once heard about a soldier who'd been dared to thrust his sword into a grave. He rode his horse through the Sonoro lands, which now comprised the bottom three-quarters of the island, to where the river reconverged. He watched the rushing water carry away the last of the trees that only yesterday had stood on dry land. *So it is*, he thought and he spat on the dirt. He had ruled the town and now he would rule an island. And he took some consolation in knowing his will had been strong enough to bend a river. His fury had remapped the earth.

But the townspeople were disgusted by what Alferez Antonio had done, not least because their maids and ranch hands had been cousins of the Carrizos, and had packed up their rosaries and their Sunday shoes and fled, claiming they couldn't hear themselves think for the whispers of the dead begging for a candle or a prayer. Children threw rocks at Alferez Antonio and his wives when he took them for a stroll. More than once he awoke to find cow's blood smeared on the white columns of his home. The Sonoro brothers fought: one brother's house was burned to the ground, another dropped dead into his caldo, and the third became convinced his wife favored Alferez Antonio and he strangled her with a curtain tie. Nephews and nieces washed up dead on the banks of the river.

Alferez Antonio continued to live in the white house, even after scorpions invaded the library, nesting in Cervantes and fighting atop the yellowed writings of Sahagún. He closed the rooms he did not need and his world shrank. One of the wives he buried in the garden after she choked on a fish bone, another ran away after a violin salesman, but the third stayed, dutifully producing children and grooming them for their eventual return to moneyed society. This wife died in childbirth on her fortieth birthday, a squirming baby girl at her breast. The child was named Perla, and perhaps owing to her hand in her mother's death, the girl grew up sickly and fearful, certain every sneeze portended doom.

Alferez Antonio was nearing sixty when his daughter Perla was born. His other children had grown and gone, but not before they'd dragged off as much of the family's dwindling fortune as they could carry. When Perla was a young girl, she could see the faded rectangles of paintings that had once cluttered the walls, dust outlines where once rested fauteuils and tufted ottomans, glass cabinets emptied of their Chinese figurines. At twenty she married a distant cousin who promised he could repair the cracks in the white walls and reclaim the books from the scorpions, though he always found excuses to be away from the house and meanwhile pigeons roosted in the bedrooms.

When Alferez Antonio awoke one morning crying that he could not see—the gold had finally pierced the nerves and blotted out the last lights of the visible world—Perla ran screaming through the brush that now surrounded the white house and into town for the doctor. But the old man died before she'd even closed the heavy oaken door of the main house, expiring with a cough and a whimper, his last thought just a single word repeating like one key struck again and again on a piano: *Mine*.

Perla hung black cloth over the mirrors, stopped the clocks, and refused to eat anything but bread and water for a month. That year, 1864, the year Napoleon III installed the Austrian archduke Ferdinand Maximilian into the Mexican presidency, Perla's son was born.

She named him Antonio Sonoro, her priceless child.

After Perla had banished the doctor, the maids, and her cousins from the room, afraid they would breathe impure air into her son's delicate lungs, she nursed her infant.

And watching her from a chair in the corner and jiggling his foot in angst and anticipation, unseen and unheard by the doctor, the maids, the cousins, and most of all Perla, sat Remedio.

Remedio had been to the house several times before to make a collection—a young man who had pleaded with him, a young woman who had sobbed, and an old man who had laughed and shaken his defiant fist in the direction he presumed to be Heaven.

Perla used her fingertips to brush black hair from the baby's forehead and Remedio got to his feet, no longer able to sit still. The only indication that he moved across the room was a slight disturbance in the uniformity of the air, his presence as easily blinked away as an eyelash.

"I don't understand," Remedio said aloud, standing behind the woman and staring down into the grass-green eyes of the newborn. "He's done nothing. He knows nothing. What if he lives his entire life virtuously?"

There was, of course, no answer.

Perla began to sing to her child. Antonio stopped suckling. He looked up at his mother, neither of them aware of the shadow behind her headboard, the edges of which vibrated slightly in agitation. Though the baby was scarcely ten minutes old, there in his mother's arms and bathed in the warmth of her love, he smiled.

Remedio walked around the room and tried again, though he knew his arguments were futile. "Look at him. How can someone so young be assigned such a fate? That's not justice—it's little better than chaos."

The baby began to cry and Perla put him on her shoulder and patted him gently on his back until his lids dropped. In another moment Perla was asleep as well, and Remedio thought the mother and child looked as still and posed as if Filippo Lippi himself had painted them onto the landscape of the bedchamber.

"I won't do it," Remedio said, taking one last look at the baby and putting on his hat. Men and women were marked for Hell every day by their own iniquitous hands, their misdeeds open around them and touching everything like a spreading tide. But this was the first time Remedio had ever been sent for a baby. "Strike me down if you will," he said, "but I won't do it."

He left the house through the front door and walked down the path that led to the Río Bravo. A day, a year, a lifetime—viewed from up high the movement of time held as little significance as the rotations of distant galaxies. He would return—he was duty bound for that much—but only he would decide when.