My father internalized the delusions of an imposed "American dream." But his true spirit flickered in his smile, and I lived for it.

BY CHED MYERS

Pulpo en su Tinta

(Octopus in its Own Ink)

"THEY SEEMED HAPPY WHEN they were here."

Felix is staring out at Santa Rosa Island. We are sitting on ocean-smoothed boulders at El Capitan, northwest of Santa Barbara. Only here do we break the unspoken taboo against speaking about our fathers.

When we were young, our families used to camp along this magical coastline, where rolling hills of chaparral embrace the kelp-smoothed waters of the Santa Barbara Channel. From here you can sometimes see Point Conception, what the Chumash called the Western Gate, where departed spirits went to the other world. Felix and I have decided that the spirits of our fathers linger here, sitting around some ghostly campfire drinking too much and spinning jokes late into the night. The roar of their laughter used to keep us awake.

I reach for a piece of driftwood and turn it around in my hands, thinking of the only time my father and I ever went camping together by ourselves. It was in 1970, four hundred miles down this same coastline. The year before, our family trip to San Quentin, Baja, had been something of a fiasco. We'd spent most of a day by the side of a dirt road, trying to stave off sun and dust and despair, our VW bus slumped like a beached whale, until Dad finally tinkered the engine back to life. After that, the rest of the family decided they'd had their fill of off-road adventures in Baja's rugged desertlands. So the next year, it was just Dad and I.

I close my eyes and see the photograph on my memorial wall at home. His hat is tipped back, his foot propped against a rock, a cup of *pulpo en su tinta* in his hand, held out toward me. The picture, like the memories it evokes, seems to orbit around his smile.

We always stopped at La Bufadora on our way south from Ensenada. It was my dad's ritual: We would purchase the pulpo from sleepy vendors, top it with slightly sour salsa picante, and put out the fire with cold beer. He had a mustache at that time, and in the picture he looks at ease with his *mestizaje*, the Mexican ancestry he usually kept buried beneath the surface of his assimilated suburban persona.

Here, he could eat all the tortillas he wanted, belt out off-key strains of "La Adelita," oil his rusty Spanish. His mother's side of the family were all Californios, but most of the time his *raza* lay mothballed beneath his Republican politics and corporate wardrobe, exiled like a bastard son.

BUT HIS SMILE BETRAYED THE Californio spirit in his bones. That spirit surfaced occasionally, such as when he spontaneously would invite all my friends in for dinner, to my mother's distress. The famous hospitality of Mexican Californians was maligned by contemptuous, ambitious, 19th-century Yankee colonists like Richard Henry Dana, who wrote that Californios were friendly to a fault and loved nothing so much as a fandango or rodeo, and lacked "industry and thrift."

Sobered by the hard catechism of growing up half-Chicano and poor, my father had, like California itself, succumbed to the imposed "American dream," conforming to its severe dictates and internalizing its saccharine delusions. But his *mestizaje* still flickered in that smile, and I lived for it.

I remember it as the first thing I saw as I stepped off the plane, returning from a dark and difficult student year abroad in Scandinavia. That gaze was an embrace warmer than the Prodigal's father's robe, richer than the fatted calf. It was a promise of home in what had become for me an increasingly alienating world.

And it is what I recall of the last time that I saw him before his hospitalization. It was in the middle of the Gulf War, about which we disagreed profoundly. Just as we felt the argument coming on, he mercifully changed the subject by bringing out an old cache of photographs of his "anscesters." We spent the evening poring over them and talking of a trip to the Azores Islands to trace the roots of his great *abuela* Mendosa. A week later U.S. flyboys were on a turkey shoot in Iraq, and my dad was dead.

At the memorial service my mom asked me to preach on John 14:2. "There was always lots of room in my father's house," I began, but couldn't go on for a full two minutes.

"Let's go catch the sunset," says Felix, and we begin walking back around the point.

"Ever eaten *pulpo en su tinta*?" I ask him.

He stops and looks at me nonplussed. "No."

"Tastes horrible," I say.

And there he is, smiling, holding the cup toward me.

"But as far as I'm concerned," I add after a moment, "it's the Body and Blood."