MILESTONE:
The Voices of East Los

EAST LOS ANGELES COLLEGE
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If you are anything like me, you do not turn to poetry [literature] because you are interested in the author; you go there because you are interested in yourself and you see poetry [literature] as a means of stimulating your sense of being. If you are a poet [writer], you read other poets [writers] for inspiration . . . for the possibility that another poet [writer] will open a door for you that you never knew existed.

— Billy Collins

Poet Laureate of the
United States from 2001 to 2003
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Editor’s Note

Living in the upper canyon of Sierra Madre for two years has made me more aware of nature: squirrels and deer that prance around my back hill as I practice my flute, the variety of birds; and in the evening, the distinctive sounds between crickets and cicadas. The night, especially, has revitalized my senses after living on a traffic infested boulevard for twenty-six years. I find myself writing more poems about sitting on my balcony, gazing up at the moon or the occasional shooting star while sipping pinot noir, like Li Po and other Chinese poets. And I’m pleased to see, even at this late juncture, my writing is reflecting an ancestral tradition. In fact, this summer while working on my book of memoir poetry and prose, I have had to reflect on shifting styles, subject matter, tone and voice since the 1960s when the Vietnam war and the so-called generation gap infused my first poems with anti-establishment rhetoric.

Similarly, as an editor of Milestone for twenty-six years, I have been able to observe the shifting styles, tones and voices of emerging writers whose writings are also shaped by the issues and conditions of their time. Not only do we see another war reflected in their work but also the ongoing struggles with identity—political/social, cultural/ethnic, gender, family relationships, etc.—which, once crafted, transform the personal voice into the universal. Just recently, I had the privilege of seeing our Milestone writers read and speak before an off-campus audience, a first-time event as far as I know. The occasion was a publication party reading for Milestone 2005 at Skylight Bookstore in Los Angeles. The event came about as a result of Nora Wright’s efforts in contacting the store’s public events’ director, and as a result of our students’ presentation and audience reception, the acclaimed writing organization, PEN USA, invited our ELAC writers to participate in their Emerging Voices project, which among the many opportunities offered them, will allow them to have access to other publication sources.

As our writers move on to find homes for their work, this will not be the first time a writer’s first works appeared in Milestone. Luis J. Rodriguez, in his book, The Republic of East L.A., acknowledges our campus literary journal for his early publications. Over the years, he and others like
Marisela Norte and Evangelina Vasquez have returned to give readings and
tell of their experiences—or, as in the case of Evangelina, contributed a
story in *Milestone: The Voices of East Los* after having been published by
*Poetry/L.A.* and a variety of presses in Mexico.

Our current issue, as in previous issues, invites readers to dialogue
with our contributors’ poems, stories, narratives as they share with us
their personal concerns; and as we do so, we become a community of
readers and writers sharing a common ground.

Whether we are invited to share a veteran’s letter to a mother whose son’s
death he witnessed in Afghanistan (Matthew Corwin, “Dear Ms.
Kowalski”), a young woman’s homage to her homeland, El Salvador (Nanci
Mendez, “El Salvador”), a Chicano’s celebration of a live poetry reading
(Antonio Salcido, “Chicano Poetry Night”), the joys of eating Mexican food
(Luis Salinas, “Ever Eaten with a Mexican?”), or a tender reflective story as
a writer, who has made her home in Monterey Park for a number of years,
looks back on a childhood moment in Irapuato (Evangelina Vasquez,
“Ali”—we all know our own places of trials and tribulations, joys and
longings that memory returns us to, and what better way to realize we are
not alone than through the transforming power of reading and writing.

I would like to thank the students in the Spring 2006 Creative Writing
course, who applied their workshop skills to selecting the first cut of sub-
missions for this issue. As always, *Milestone* belongs to the writers, artists,
and students on this campus as well as the community. Those of us who
have nurtured them in our classes, counseled them through the transfer
process, and represented them on the administrative level know the
importance of having their creative and academic works represented in
a college literary journal.

I would also like to express my ongoing appreciation to Trish Glover,
Graphic Arts Designer; members of the Art Department, in particular
Chris Moreno for her gathering of student art in this issue; members of
the English Department: James Kenny, Department Chairperson, and my
colleagues on the Milestone Committee—Joan Gurfield, Susan Suntree,
and Nora Wright. Congratulations for another successful publication.

— Carol Lem,
*Sierra Madre 8/9/06*
The majority of the work that is submitted and accepted by the *Milestone* staff comes from students who have work-shopped their pieces in the Creative Writing and Poetry classes. The rest are solicited from the students of this campus. Subjects and themes vary, but what they all share is a cultural identity that represents the emerging voices of East Los Angeles College. For the sake of convenience their work has been placed in alphabetical order.
Christine Appel | GODS
(with apologies to Coleridge’s
This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison)

Well, everyone left, and I’m stuck here,
This East L.A. house my prison,
Left behind by my friends to write this damn poem
While they go see a Glenn Danzig show.
Oh, how I wish I could go,
I never miss any of Glenn’s shows.

Drinking outside, while in line, do my friends miss me or have I escaped their minds?
Inside the theatre drunk people congregate, intent on debate:
what is Glenn’s best song?

Passing by the dirty, sweaty, and the whores.
Get out of my way, I have to get in the doors!
The lights dim, the curtains rise,
I see tears in one girl’s eyes.
I push through the crowd to the stage,
Out runs Glenn Danzig in a rage.
In his black, tight jeans,
Glenn looks down into the crowd and sneers.

From the crowd massive cheers.
The band starts playing, pushing all around.

Hands, elbows, sweat, spit and hair
All through the hot thick air,
Pressed against the barrier, can’t breathe,
Push back violently.

Glenn reaches down, touches the crowd,
Stretch, stretch, touch me!
Never wash that hand ’till I turn ninety!

Glenn looks at me, smiles, recognizes the girl who has his glove.
The groupies look at me like envious snakes about to kill for their love.

Smelly, sweaty, aching body; never felt better.

Hope heaven is like this.
Time for the encore, way too soon.
Need to beat the crowd, move to the back of the room.
Danzig is back on the stage to thunderous applause.
Nice to enjoy him without the rage.
Time to leave, going home,
Will not sleep ’till tomorrow.

Oh God, my friends are back.
Pulled the car into the driveway,
Bodies falling on the lawn, staggering to my front door.
Shh! Shh! You’ll wake the neighbors from their slumber.
They told me Danzig was awesome, sick and bad.
I missed a milestone, Yes, I had.
“He is never going to play,” they said, “It was his last show.”
Yeah, I’d heard that before in ’04.
Bridget was there. You know, the Midget with a cane.
She asked about you and said you were lame.
Danzig did all your favorite songs.
It appeared, he was looking for you to sing along.
Oh well, he will see me again,
He always does a show on Samhain.
I sent my friends on their way home,
I still had to complete my poem.

How relaxed
I am lying in my bed
Surrounded by my furry friends.
No matter what I say,
I am their God everyday
Nudging each other to get the prime spot
On my chest, my thighs and belly too.
Small grumbles erupt on occasion,
Quelled easily by deft separation.
Finally, comfy and calm,
I feel the purr, five strong.
Legs, arms, heads, interlocking, without a care—
Small twitches from a dream of running fast,
Catching that elusive rat at last.
One running, one bathing, one catching fleas,
The other two on my dead asleep knees.
I rub their fur, their bellies, their ears,
What an amazing piece of machinery.
Who created you, surely you’re no mistake.
You are so perfect I feel like your slave.
Anything you want, need, or desire,
I supply without complaint, this is my mire.
Would I trade you for a Glenn Danzig show?
Never! Never! Not even close.
I’d miss your breath so sweet, tiny feet,
And moist, pink nose.
It is so much better to be in your presence
Where I belong
Than to be where I don’t matter,
All alone.
Always remember what is important in life,
And most importantly, why.

—to Peanut (Pete), Speedy, Spooky, Bunny and Taffy too
What is the shredding of this heart all about?  
Your cradling arms have morphed into dagger held hands  
and I can’t see your face anymore;  
shadowed, it is  
an eclipse of glaring doubts, silent schemes, and hard fists;  
faux love has slowly taken over.

I strain to hear your cuddled voice filtered still through  
lips of genuine comfort,  
but solely present are resounding waves of resentment  
misdirected and packaged without attention  
to the delivered casualties.

Where is the light that made my soul want you  
and altered every cell,  
caused me to grow even now,  
that instructed me through times of beat-downs, exposed icy nakedness, and into-the-night rocking and weeping?

Come out from behind that shadowed mask,  
my heart will recover along side with yours;  
be the guardian angel, the mother lioness, the woman warrior  
that you know you are  
and laugh at the fear that invites you in and convinces you  
that you deserve to die cold and alone.
Matthew Corwin | Growing up L.A. Style

I grew up in the dirty streets of the city of Los Angeles. Well, it’s not quite as dirty as New York; man, they really let the garbage pile up over there. But anyway, yeah I was born here in L.A., WAY back in 1983. Actually, that really does not seem long ago. Life can really pass by quickly sometimes: like one moment you’re running after an ice cream truck and the next you’re running to class in college. Seriously, I expect to open my eyes any time now and find myself in my death bed. Time just won’t wait for you to stop and smell the flowers.

I remember very little about my childhood, but that’s not saying much as I don’t really remember what I had for breakfast yesterday either. I have a terrible memory when it comes to some things. I write everything down that, well, that I remember to. I get most of the important stuff but more than a few friends think I snub them, I’m sure, when I really did forget. But no one ever buys that excuse. Heheh, we need an advocate group, us forgetful types, like a National Association for the Absent Minded. I guess the real question is what our mind is doing when it’s absent. Probably something a lot more interesting than we give it credit for.

So yeah, my childhood. Well, I do remember moving a lot, at least three times, after my father died. I don’t really think I need to go into how that screws up a kid’s life in every possible way, it’s almost cliché. Of course, we did not have much money, and my mother did her best trying to keep in food and roofs while raising me as a single parent. She had made it about as far as the second day in high school so she did not have much in the way of skills.

My father’s family always hated my mom, they would do everything they could to spite her. Of course, they would never go so far that she would keep them from seeing me, their grandchild, but they did not help her at all. I think they blamed her for my father’s suicide, and they practically disowned her afterwards. Really, I think they disowned my dad when he got my mom pregnant and married her, but I was not really around for that.

But before you get to thinking we were entirely on our own I should probably mention the seemingly endless parade of boyfriends, lovers, quasi-boyfriends, wanna-be boyfriends, fiancés, and I think she even got
married again once. She denies it, but I remember the wedding pretty clearly. She says the priest hated the guy she was marrying and never really did it. I always thought if you said the vows, that was it, but I guess there is always a loophole if you look hard enough. Or you are deluded enough.

I really can’t say too many bad things about the type of men she dated though, as I think I really ended up being a lot like them. I hope I only picked up the best qualities of each, but that’s just wishful thinking. I’m glad there were some men around for me to take after though, I shudder to think what I would have ended up like with just my mom and aunts as role models.

Those guys were real men at least: old school macho men, into booze, sports, guns, cars, working out, and of course, chasing women, not the kind of guys you really want your mom to date, but hey, if you have to take after someone. Problem was, none of them seemed very happy. The coldness might have been my mom’s influence, but they seemed to get increasingly depressed as time went by. None of them lasted.

But those guys were not the only influence on my character, not by a long shot. I mean, I grew up in L.A., this city has to have the most character of any in the world. I’d argue it against any other city I’ve been to, that’s for sure.

Just like those men though, this city has its good and its bad, and while I know there are countless good things here, I only saw the bad growing up. I mean I saw stabbings, shootings, beatings, as early as the 5th grade. And I don’t mean I saw it from across the street or drove by in a car, I was there. It was a violent place, no doubt about it, but I adapted.

I became more than a little violent myself, well more than a little, in fact it was so bad that at some point I really did not even have to deal with the violence anymore. My reputation preceded me. That was all well and good for dealing with other little creeps about my own age, but the bigger creeps, those in the school administration were another matter entirely. The teachers and assorted administrators steadfastly refused to even admit there was any kind of problem with violence in the schools. It was a totally insane viewpoint considering the obvious reality which smacked them in the face whenever they built up the courage to walk the halls.

Since there was no problem with the school I must have been the problem, but they really had no idea what to do with me. I was an anomaly,
here I was in the H-GATE program, one of their most gifted students and friends with everyone in the school including many of the teachers, those who actually enjoyed their jobs and saw past the petty bullshit. Yet despite all that, I was one of the worst “trouble makers” in the school. How do you deal with a kid thirty years your junior who can pin you to the wall in an argument, and just won’t shut up? Well they tried to get rid of me.

Only problem was despite all the trouble I seemed to get into, they could never actually prove I had done something wrong. Sure there were fights, but wasn’t I always defending myself? Yeah, sometimes school property was destroyed, but who’d say it was me? Actually it wasn’t me, but of course I always knew who did it, and I was occasionally involved in some convoluted way. But that’s the story of my life. Wrong place wrong time, but it always works out.

So what’s a well-meaning school administrator to do with a student like this? Well, why not make something up? Does it seem a little silly? It did to me too, but that’s exactly what happened. I think they had done this sort of thing to other “bad apples” before, but the same ol’ tactics didn’t really work on me. In fact, they backfired quite a bit.

You see, I had this funny habit of demanding hearings with impartial panels, then getting people to talk their way into bad situations or just plain blow their tops. Meanwhile, I was acting like Mr. Perfect, and it made the poor Admin. fold look like they really were out to get for some evil reason. It was funny stuff, believe me. A few of the poor bastards even lost their jobs. I could have warned them not to tangle with me, but hey, no one asked.

So long story short I did finally graduate, though it was not easy, and I was not allowed at graduation. Hell, that was more of a reward than a punishment to me. I got my diploma, walked out of that school without looking back. Not to say I didn’t learn anything there, of course, just not exactly in the classrooms.
“Do you feel better?” he asked.

“I feel fine,” she said. “There is nothing wrong with me. I feel fine.”

He sat down. A lone cloud drifted menacingly above them. Its shadow formed a dark blemish on the white hills of the Ebro valley. The girl’s face softened a bit as the cloud took its doppelganger with it out of the valley.

“I am glad you don’t want to go through with it.”

“That’s not it at all. I only want you to be happy.”

“I am happy.”

“The train will be here soon.”

“It might run late.”

“If it was, all those people waiting would be very put out.”

“They really have no right to feel that way.”

(Of course they do, they paid to ride it, and if not for them there would not be any trains at all.”)

“But the train does not belong to them.”

“It has a responsibility to them, they are counting on it.”

The man’s beer sat untouched on the table, losing its cool. He stared at it, thinking he should drink it since he paid for it and he should not let it go to waste, but he realized that in its current state it no longer held any attraction for him.

“I don’t think you will be happy if I don’t go through with it.”

“That’s not true, I will always be happy as long we are together. You know that, Jig, I will always love you.”

“No, we couldn’t have any fun. None at all.”

(Of course we could, it would be great.”

“No, you would never love me in the same way.”

“I will love you no matter what you do.”

“You can’t love me if I can’t do this for you.”

They stopped talking as the woman came out from the bar.

“Train is late, maybe engine trouble,” she said.

The woman cleared the girl’s empty glass and did not touch the still full glass belonging to the American. A man walked by them in the sun,
carrying several bags on one arm, the weight of which had turned his knuckles a translucent shade of white, and a young child in the other.

“That man looks so strong, like he could be the strongest man in the world.”

“There are plenty of men stronger than that.”

“If there were, I’m sure you would not have seen them.”

The man began tapping his foot nervously, glancing compulsively at the track stretching off in the distance toward Barcelona. The girl looked down at her stomach.

The sun moved inexorably across the sky, forcing the edge of the shade closer and closer to the couple’s feet.

“Where is that train?” asked the man.

“I don’t know, maybe it took the wrong track.”

“That’s silly.”

“Yes, everything I say is silly.”

“You know that’s not what I meant; I love the things you say, I always have loved them.”

“You used to.”

The woman brought out two more drinks without being asked and set them on the table. The man and the girl swallowed them in unison and without hesitation. The man placed his empty glass upside down on the table and the girl placed hers carefully in the center of the felt pad.

“I am only trying to help you make the choice that you will be happy with,” the man said.

“I can’t be happy anymore.”

“What is the point of saying things like that?”

“What else can I do?”

“You can act reasonably.”

“How do I do that?”

“Just tell me what you want to do.”

“But what if it’s not what you want to do?”

“I promise I will be happy with whatever you decide to do, I don’t even care either way.”

“Are you sure, are you absolutely sure you want me to tell you?”

“Why don’t we wait and talk about it on the train?”

The sun passed the point of no return and started down toward the
hills of the Ebro. The shade was gone now, the couple sat with the full gaze of the sun upon them.

“I think it’s too late for that.”

“That’s not reasonable.”

“I want to go through with it.”

“I knew it would be ok, after all it’s so simple and—”

“No,” Jig interrupted, “I want to go through with it.”

The sun crept closer to the hills and as it did, the hills did not seem so white anymore but were filled now with vibrant color.

“Are you sure that is what you want to do?”

The girl did not reply.

“It’s so much work you know, and you never get any peace and quiet. Nothing will be the same.”

The girl observed that in the middle of one of the largest hills there stood a great tree. It was the only tree on the hill, and it had grown old and wizened there, yet its branches still swayed youthfully in the breeze.

“No more fun,” she said.

“That’s not the point at all.”

“Isn’t it though?”

“It’s not, I just want us to be like we were, happy and not tied down.”

“Could we be like that forever?”

“Of course not, but, maybe for a long time.”
“And what would happen after that?”
“I can’t predict the future, Jig.”
“I think I hear the train.”

In the distance a long single note gave a shrill warning. The people waiting for the train were now impatiently jostling about on the platform. From the opposite direction there was an answer, the express from Madrid to Barcelona was also approaching the station.

“So are you really happy now?”
“I think when we get to Madrid and out of this heat, when you have some more time to think clearly, then we can talk about it.”

“Strange that you should say that, I don’t think I have ever thought more clearly than right now.”

The man’s gaze was lost in the hills and did not hear her.
“I wonder if we can catch a bullfight or two while we are in Madrid.”

The train pulled into the station and stopped, people hurried about, anxious now to get to their destinations.

“Let’s go, you don’t want to miss the train do you?” the man said.
“No, you’re right, I don’t.”

The American pushed aside the bamboo curtain and entered the bar, the girl behind him.
“I will get the bags, you go get on board.”

The man took care of the bags and then boarded the train. The girl sat down in her seat and breathed a long deep sigh. The man walked through the train’s cars looking for the girl but he could not seem to find her.

“Did you see a young woman with blonde hair board the train?” the man asked the conductor.

“Did not see her,” the conductor replied.

The girl smiled as the conductor yelled, “Todos a bordo, Barcelona.”

The man searched desperately and then froze as a stricken look came over his face. He dashed off the train as it picked up speed, only to see the caboose of the express to Barcelona fade into the distance.
These poems are reflections and reactions I had to Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness and T.S. Eliot’s “The Wasteland” and “The Hollow Men,” as well as W.B. Yeats’ “Second Coming.” These works are influential to me because through their words I heard echoes of my unconscious. It is an old Gnostic tradition that we don’t invent things, we remember them and so my poems are the result of my meditating on the heart of darkness and meditating on the wasteland of the soul.

Samuel Dominguez | ECHOES

Echoes and shadows conceal
What the mind seeks to reveal.
Faces and names of old
Tell tormenting tales that go untold.
Year after year they rise and fall,
Watch them come and go as the ancient heart begins to stall.
Battered and bruised the soul becomes barren
Dissolving into the air, becoming rotten.
The mind bends like waves upon the moon
To the sound of voices that tell of pain so soon.
Crimes forgotten, quiet secrets of deceit, upon the threshold of darkness
Nothing can conceive.
Through the river of the heart come the echoes of a life of old,
Numbing the body, retarding the senses, all turns cold.

Once, there was hope, and then walls rose
Whose bricks you secretly choose.
Quiet commands from within
That into the ether began to spin. One by one they came and overtook,
Their sound quietly shook and soon a brooding gloom arose into the night
In form of a raven engaged in flight,
Anguished as it chased the fading light.

The chaos of time reminds of clashing crimes
One moment of emptiness, one void of remorse and regret.
At last one final breath,
From which to drive away an aching death.
Within the cocoon you will find man.  
Headpiece full of straw, an utter loon. 
He wrestles with shadows and always finds time to rewind,  
Time to fold into a blanket of silence. 
Against change, against the world.  
Lying in a web on empty words  
That run off into the quiet night and disappear in the light.  
There he is  
In a straight jacket,  
Turning and turning to the sound of sterile cries,  
In his prison, a giant red rock and an empty tree. 
The cocoon the cocoon  
A humble abode buried within the moon. 
Quiet, calm, forever still.
Here I stand upon this ancient cross
With a rock around my neck that holds within its sway
The sorrows of a life held too soon, the noose that gave way too soon.
My face is eclipsed by the sun, revealing the hidden shadows of my skin,
Blood that boils with every breeze of the wind.
Held up high in this great desert of mine,
I am the king of stone, sitting alone on my throne of thorns.
My kingdom is that of arid bones, there is no memory here, no desire.
The thorns of temporality penetrate the land.
I stare out into the night with a blank and pitiless gaze,
I whisper the words of the great void, corrupting the air with every
   placid breath.
An abomination waiting in a high throne,
the king of stone
Breaking upon the sands,
slowly waiting in the shadows of time.
The wind rolled warts all over the flatness every now and then, and this particular time scooping up a dead black dried potato peel and turning it end over end or gliding it high up to the top of the hard breeze, where it would bounce along the backs and spines of invisible train cars that roared behind the locomotive of air that whipped beneath it. Falling off at the caboose the lifeless peel would turn, twist and flip up under and down over again, round and about, until finally rejoining the red clay of Teton County earth, where it would lie comfortably dead and perfectly still until it was spun awake by the miniature tornado of blurry murky reddish brown wind kicked up by an old flatbed or shoebox Ford cutting its way through the empty space that stacked itself belly against belly on top of the flatness. With each rotation the infant dirt devil carried the spud peel down the road a little further. This time, it landed about four and a half feet from the right partner which belonged to a pair of three-times patched and twice-resoled leather brown walkers that suddenly found their sides and tops buffed free from the ninety-eight degree sixteen-hour scratches and scuffs. To their surprise all the Teton County clay had been picked clean from the worn highway of groves that sprawled about their thin rubber soles like the twisted and warped rows of potato shrubs left for the worms and flies. Fields were never to be plowed clean again by father’s son, who drove grandpa’s tractor. Never mind that a cold wind would blow or a bug come to nest, bankers wanted their money.

Margaret’s toes stretched and curled in the unfilled front space of the worn loose leather brown walkers. Size seven and a half feet felt the freedom of size eleven boots, which he explored curiously. Margaret’s eyes lost interest in the spud peel and stared hard at the disappearing tailgate of a dirty white and rusting flatbed Ford crossing over into the horizon. After the trailing twirls of dust settled, Margaret’s green eyes were free to search for Cob Henderson, but he was late. He turned his head back and over the flatness listening to the truck’s motor hum down to a quiet shhh.
that fell asleep to the silence of ten thousand acres occupied by fifty trillion pounds of empty but fertile flatness. With nothing to jail his sight Margaret walked his eyes along the horizon. He searched for Cob’s red fat flattopped head to come bouncing over it, but as always, Cob was late. From somewhere in the house he could hear his sister Stacy blaring out his name, but rather than give her an answer he spent his energy bending and flexing the muscles in his thighs. In efforts to stretch his unworn carefully pressed chocolate brown 26 by 34 corduroy trousers just a little more or less than the painted on that they were.

“Margaret!” Stacy screamed out for the fourth time, her voice a little more cross than the third. She came upon the screen door from her short cut through the parlor with the intent of resting her nose against its wire screen then quietly but tactfully she would peer out over the porch and down the six or so wooden stairs (she was never really sure of the number)
in search of her brother Margaret. But her belly got there first and bumped the door’s wobbly frame and broken latch wide open; she stood in its place while holding out her left arm to keep its skinny aluminum skeleton from folding back onto her. Margaret sat outside on the Shannon home’s only splinter free section of pine step number seven.

“Christ boy, you don’t hear me calling you? I’m in here yellen’ and all.”

Stacy stopped herself in mid slander then squinted her eyes keenly. She had been distracted from attacking her younger brother’s auditory and reception abilities by an unfamiliar luster that glistened from atop Margaret’s head. Then starting with her nose she tilted her face up and outward from her neck and toward her brother in order to gain a better view of his suddenly shiny mustard blonde top. Next she rolled and stretched her shoulders forward while leaning her chest. Her belly wanted to pull her off balance and before her leaning turned into her falling she reached behind herself to sailor anchor her right arm inside the doorway, but she only caught the loosening white and peeling wood trim of the Shannon home’s front doorjamb. It screamed out a crack and twitched loose a pain, which her weight was more than it could bare. She let go and rode her momentum off into a mischievous strut and smiled around to the east side of Margaret. Margaret fast turned his head west and pretended to stare at something off in the empty space.

“What you comb your hair for?”

“My hair ain’t combed!”

“It is too, and with pomade no doubt! Why Margaret Stacy Sean you done combed your hair and taken a bath. Look at you! You’ve gone and shined your Daddy’s shoes all clean and brown, shit if it ain’t Sunday!”

“Well, it ain’t, bitch!”

“Norma Mae! Margaret’s mind done slid to shit again. He’s going off to the county fair all dressed up like he’s going to catch himself a pink tight little Mary Ann.”

“I am not, you big fat heffer, you best shut your fat mouth for I tell Isaac you was kissing Casey Auburn under the football bleachers at the Densville game!”

“Yeah, ’cause he don’t know that yet, shit the people in Diggs town know that. Bet he like to though, I’d tell him how soft her lips were and how her hair smelled like cotton candy and she was all perfume like.”
I was killed when I was a small boy, murdered real good too and I grew up dead. I can breathe now, but it has been a hard birth. Simple but important things needed to live like talking without scattering my speech all about the room; learning to see my reality for what it really is has been difficult and (I’m embarrassed to admit) sometimes painful. For instance, I was unaware that I walked around with my eyes punched raccoon black or that my round skull was mapped with countless river size fractures that were part of an unknown intricate system of canals and pipes that flowed cerebral spinal fluid mixed with blood and recollections in and out of my brains, limbic system and away from my amygdal. This explains the difficulty I have always had recalling personal information like where I lived as a child, what games I played during the summers, or even what school I attended; these things and the like are all a blank for me. Growing up I was always told so accepted that my forgetfulness was just a consequence of my being stupid like my stuttering. But Dr. May says that my condition is medical and not intellectual at all and that my inability to recall sections of my life as well as my stuttering is more than likely due to repeated traumatic childhood experiences, which caused my brain to form the series of pipes and canals that I now have: canals and pipes that carry information directly out of my skull via a small drain pipe located behind my right ear, thus bypassing all memory sections of my brain. Dr. May says that as they repair the cracks in my head and pipe the fluid back into my brain, I will start to recall a lot more. And that later I will speak to a Dr. Carry who will assist me in my remembering, but for now I should try to answer all the questions they have to the best of my recollection, as my brain surgery is challenging if not impossible, and the more information I can provide for them concerning past medical conditions and/or surgeries they could possibly eliminate any surprises they may come across when they open me up, therefore reducing the time spent under anesthesia while in the operating room.

Dr. Carry has explained to me that a few technicalities have surfaced, which will absolutely complicate my surgery. It seems that a chest X-ray has shown my lungs to be made of solid iron and since iron is magnetic it will be impossible for me to undergo an M.R.I scan, that was to provide
them with a detailed map of my brain; without the map my surgery at the
least will have to be postponed. But in the meantime she would like to start
work right away on a possible alternative to the M.R.I. She would like to
ask me a series of questions about past experiences while monitoring my
brain’s activity as I respond. An electrocardiogram will be used to record
my response, and I will be required to wear harmless electrodes on my
head for a period of about five to seven days. Her goal is to possibly build
up a crude blueprint of my brain using the recorded activity collected from
the electrocardiogram; if it works my surgery might be possible.

I agree to the study and the hospitalization for a week of questions
and examinations. After I settle in and adjust to my new hat of electrodes
and wires Dr. Hokenbury enters my room and introduces herself as the
one who will be performing my examinations. I ask what happened to
Dr. Carry and she explains that Dr. Carry does not practice in the field of
neuro-medicine, but rather she is a surgery coordinator or consultant so
to speak. I nod to signal that I understand but I really don’t. Dr.
Hokenbury is an attractive woman with abnormally large eyes. She
marks on my medical forms that are fastened to her metal clipboard. She
sits with her legs open like a man with her left foot snaked around the
left leg of the chair; her shoes are the leather clog kind that you can take
off by just shaking your foot. She has slipped her right foot out and is
stretching her toes when a pager beeps that reminder tone. She feels
about her waist and pulls up her scrub top so she can see the number,
then presses the button. She looks up at me and says something but I am
caught up in those eyes and slow to answer. She says something again
and I shake off my wondering and reply a numb “What?”

“Shall we start?”

“Please.”

“Over the next couple of days, I will be asking you questions about
your medical history, as well as simple obvious questions that have to do
with memory like what day is it and things to that effect. I will repeat the
bulk of these questions to you over and over but we do not want you to
give the same answer; we ask that you only give a different answer if the
question provokes a new memory, ok?”

“Got it.”

“Great, then let us get started. I was instructed to start with your med-
ical history, so why are you here?"
   “Ah, I have a problem with the pipes and canals in my head.”
   “How long have you had the problem?”
   “I’m not sure.”
   “When did you first notice the problem?”
   “I passed out while waiting for the 556 and woke up in the hospital.”
   “That’s when you found out?”
   “Yes.”
   “Did they tell you what it was that caused you to lose consciousness?”
   “Yeah, one of the pipes in my head was clogged and it backed up a lot of unprocessed memories and I had a partial recall which caused me to black out.”
   “When was that?”
   “When I blacked out?”
   “Yes.”
   “About a month ago.”
   “How old were you when you broke your nose?” She asks with her eyes fixed on the scribbled forms that make up my medical history?
   “My nose! What are you talking about?”
   “Yes, your nose, how old were you when it was broken and what was the mechanism of injury and do you have any more breaks old or recent other than the fractures in your skull and nose?” she asks while writing on my forms.
   “I’ve never broken my nose, doctor.”
   “Are you saying you don’t remember breaking your nose?” She stops writing on my forms and looks at me, but I don’t notice her eyes this time.
   “No, you are out of your shoes, doc, I’m saying I have never broken my nose.”
   “Mr. Marines, your nose tilts slightly to the right, your left nostril hangs about one centimeter or more lower than the right and I bet if I run my finger over your bridge I could—oh yes right here feel.” She takes her thin old cold doctor finger away from my nose and replaces it with mine, then grabbing me at the wrist she uses my hand like a pointer. Feel this ridge here, it’s where the cartilage mended with the bone.”
   “I have always had that bump, doc, since I was a kid.”
   “Ok, you broke your nose when you were a child, what about your lungs?"
“What about my lungs?”
“They are iron.”
“I know, doc, they are my lungs.”
“Why were they replaced and when?”
“When I was a kid.”
“And why, were you ill?”
“I almost drowned, they got too much water in them and had to be replaced.”
“Did you fall in a swimming pool or a…lake or something?”
“It was a bathtub.”
“You fell in a bathtub?”
“No, someone tried to drown me in a bathtub.”
“Oh I see.”

Dr. Mays says that for my size and age I will never be able to completely fall back into the womb and should stop trying because I’m only going to hurt myself or my mother, but from time to time I still try to go back. I can get one arm in to about my elbow, then with the fingers of my free hand I stretch its opening and stick my head inside to about the tops of my ears but that’s it, my fat head stops there. I’ve tried going in feet first but that’s not much better; after I get a good footing inside I can only stretch the surrounding skin up to about an inch or two from my kneecap. In my garage and in my spare time I work on a secret formula that I will use to shrink myself down to about the size of an apple so I can go back in. But I was never really good at science and stuff so it’s not going too well and besides with my mother’s dried up kidneys she will probably be dead in a year or so, so how good could it really be in there? I’m sure by this time all my old toys have either been tossed out or sold along with the table and chair and without anything to do or a place to sit down I’ll never be comfortable.
I again can walk amongst the flowers and hear their colors leaping from their petals: my eardrums rupturing as their warm nectar spills into my head washing memories which hang paper framed about the walls of my mind in motherly ivory and olive, the river drenching the backs of my eyes, flooding my skull with the sweet rich liquid blue lavender of infant lilac; my brain smashing under the immense pressures of heavy coffees and chocolate browns crushes through the crown of my mouth gushing colors down my throat and trachea suffocating my lungs. My face, not being able to cope with such symphony, begins to inflate and like cracks in a swollen dam streams of scarlet and gold lightly fountain out through the tears in my bulging face. My eyes are punched from their sockets, and from their hollows a shower of color sweetened with nectar kisses the tongues of butterfly and bumbledbee as they flock then frenzy like vampires. Teeth that are ripped from gums and jaw ride the rapids of rainbow that waterfalls from my spigot mouth as I choke in pastels and vibrant-s and for a moment, I am breathing in absolute color, and I drown, Victoria.
There are objects shinier than it,  
they reflect a sharper light.  
Yet, the dull face of it holds me.  
Its rusting hinge remembers the warmth  
Of my chest.  
Its cold metallic touch still  
dothes me,  
my shaky voice  
my clammy hands.  
When they had no place to settle  
My hands held you, then  
As the weight of rusted lace engravings  
Stained the palms of my sweaty hands.  
It held no pictures  
Just a longing.  
Now you lie here, an empty locket  
in an empty box.
The rain flows in from the cracks in the walls
Of the mango colored room
A thin cotton sheet melts,
The rain demanding
knocks at the door
It lets itself in.
The constant buzzing of twelve beetles
Twenty-six moths
And thirteen crickets
Hover over me
Their wings powdered rice paper
Crafty weapons

I shrink
A tiny artifact floating in
A puddle of time
Each drop an ocean falling
On a tin roof
Its presence a screaming song
—always remember you are
mostly rain
You were always here.

A jungle surrounds me
The crashing thunder greets me
The stone beetles sing to me
and the rain reminds me
I belong.
Nanci Mendez | My Gift

I walked that dirt road
Where your mother dragged her feet
As you swelled her teenage waist
Into a plump anona
Sweet and brown ready to burst.
I saw her there a juggler
Balancing a canasta
On the tightly wound braids
Her own mother taught her to weave.
Her neck stiff
Only her eyes free
With a sack full of tomatoes
In one hand, baby Tia Chabela in the other
And a belly full of you.

I stood there and held my breath
As my feet sunk into the red meaty ground
And the pulsing of my origin held me.
Here I am a cousin, a niece
A daughter, a granddaughter
Here my name is not spread about
So hollow
The woman in the corner store
Who sells bananas, cigarettes, baby chicks
Says my name smooth
And lets the air out between her teeth
Quick, sudden, almost a whistle.

See, I always wondered why you never smelled as I do
Why in a room full of dried violets
I still smelled you
wet clay and burning leaves
Now I smell you everywhere
Now the little barefoot boy
With rocks in his pockets is you.

Looking at the volcano
That witnessed your birth, your youth and your departure

I stood there and held my breath
As my feet sunk into the red meaty ground
And the pulsing of my origin held me.
You were unapologetic about the mass killings of innocent people you sent to the firing squad, but damn you look good on a t-shirt.

You spread your revolutionary views of turning human beings into cold killing machines motivated by pure hate, but damn you look good on a t-shirt.

You spit on my god, you curse my country, and you hate my freedom, but damn you look good on a t-shirt.

You spread your communism, which is responsible for over 100 million murders and counting, but damn you look good on a t-shirt.

You tried to bring on nuclear war with the U.S. during the Cuban missile crisis, which would have wiped out most of two continents off the face of the planet because you believed that a better world could be built from the ashes regardless of the cost of lives, but damn you look good on a t-shirt.

Go, Che, Go!

Jason Padilla | Go, Ghe, Go!
Nancy Perez  |  Little Pieces of Finger

Little pieces of my finger
cracked the whole into brown
diamonds,
dripping,
creating checkered squares as they came slowly down
like white candles on fire.
I touched you,
tip to tip,
feeling the soft
breaking of bones;
wanting you with fingers.
Tip to tip,
I whispered my foggy
joy
broken up
in pieces of finger
and my love was dusty:
had I thrown dust in your eyes
you would not have seen.

My fingers, they were sagging
like night behind the stars,
silent;
this ended when you touched my fingers
tip to tip
and they cracked—
and it all came back
tip to tip
putting its little pieces of finger back
together until you shook my hand
and said, “Goodbye.”
And here you are,
all covered in turquoise blue,
I wonder what’s underneath your frosting,
are you chocolate?

I don’t know if it’s not your fault;
Ama and Apa brought you in from the bakery.

Ama steps in to set the candles,
dripping, they turn their white heads to me
and let out a “He, He,”
knowing their hair burns again, drip drip,
knowing.
Tonight my hand will twist and bend
as I cut one more slice; it
laughing as I'll find that it isn't chocolate.
And I'll hand one to everyone,
a slice of dreams covered
in blue frosting,
the knife biting
as it crushes against them.
And they will all eat it
and I'll watch them do it too, taking a gulp;
the blue cake growing small, all shriveled
and cut open, pouring out
while yet, another voice will say, “Can I have some more?”
and whatever flesh is left, I will say, “Yes,”
with eyes that drip.

But I haven’t blown out the laughing candles
just yet; I’ll get on with it all, soon—
Ama says, “Apurate,”
I look at everyone, anxious like the white murmuring candles
that talk to one another like gossiping
school girls laughing at the new girl with purple socks,
I grow still—
here I go:

happy Birth
day, Death.
Instructor’s Journal prompt: Where and how did you grow up? Who and what have contributed to the way you are now? What makes you angry? Describe one major event or turning point in your life.

Like you care—like anyone cares. In reality, or at least, by the end of the day, when class is over, nobody goes thinking about a fellow student’s story; nobody cares. Once I finish reading this (or even during the time I read this) someone will go home thinking about whether they’ve taken their underwear out of the dryer; another will go about her own way thinking of ways she can improve her piece, and still, another will totally not give a shit and put on the headphones, crank up the volume to a Nirvana CD until nothing from the world around can be heard—becoming lost in the distorted world of drums and electric guitar, looking in at the whole world from a safe distance, eating Cracker Jacks and laughing at the whole shit house! Nobody cares—that’s totally fine (I’m not saying you should)—I don’t care either.

Well, since I’ve established that no one cares, now I’ve convinced myself that no one cares; so, I guess it won’t matter if my telling of my story is crappy. I would have started tackling these prying questions since the beginning, but if you analyze my opening—the reason why I didn’t jump right into them, you’ll realize how hard it is for me to write this, how hard it is for me to intimate what’s in me, in my mind, even to a piece of paper (not that you care).

I suppose I had a good childhood. I was born in Hollywood (corporate city), stayed at Bell Gardens till I was about four when my family moved because my sixteen year old brother got killed. I grew up in a little city called Maywood, where I grew into my teens and where I still live (it’s a crappy city, but my porch is great for star gazing). It’s weird but I don’t think I was ever a “teen.” I know I was a kid—I loved riding bikes, playing basketball, playing hide-n-seek, running up and down the streets, playing football with boys (no, I’m not a lesbian)—I had a great childhood; I know that. I remember always wanting to do my best, having a sense of respect for others, a sense of responsibility—but I don’t remember being a “teen” as it is defined by our society: being driven by
hormones, getting high, disrespecting my parents; I remember being a kid and even an adult. I don’t remember being a “teen,” which is probably the subconscious reason why by my senior year in high school I realized I hated high school and was so happy the day graduation came around. It was funny to me when Lem said she was happy when she graduated too—damn, was high school crappy even then? I guess the conforming spirit of high school has no beginning or end.

I don’t know what has contributed to the way I am now; man, I hate this question—I feel like my god-mother: she’s always showing off what she has, her daughter’s pathetic accomplishments, always talking about herself (can you imagine, she called the other day just to say her daughter, Betty, had learned how to drive? Who cares, shit…as if learning how to drive were rocket science. What a snob!). Actually, I do know why I am who I am now; it’s just that, again, it’s hard to—(like you care). Well, for the assignment’s sake: I guess getting your right eye orbital broken and undergoing a two hour plastic surgery will make you a little suspicious and even more introverted and uneasy around others, more agoraphobic, let’s say. I only talk to people because I have to, as in school; I’m so crazy, don’t get scared, but I wish I didn’t have to talk, even avoid talking at all sometimes (most of the time). I’m not shy, I’m just…withdrawn.

I was watching “A Beautiful Mind” last time, I love John Nash—I mean the story of John Nash, this movie is based on his story. It turns out this guy is basically a genius in mathematics—namely, game theory, which is so interesting even though I don’t like math at all. This guy, Nash, is amazing at what he does but he’s also a schizophrenic who’s been battling with the disorder. My mom has told me before that I should make friends, but at my age, with my experience, it really doesn’t matter (I don’t care either). Nash was the same, I mean, he didn’t have friends, he didn’t like people, like me, which probably contributed just a tad to his mental disorder. But I say, “Hey, at least he had himself to talk to…ha, ha,” (joke). Still, there’s something amazing about the human mind; Plato once stipulated in his “Idea of the Good,” that the highest “Good” was the source of human thought. He realizes that he has the ability to think, like all humans, but he acknowledges that he does not know the power that enables him to think, itself; the amp, the source of thought. I don’t know where thinking comes from either, what enables us to think.
and “over-think,” but how beautiful to watch a mind work! I’m currently studying up on Hobbes for my class, and he says that the entire world is nothing but motions of bodies and the interaction of these different bodies with one another; namely, the physical and mental bodies. He says that the motions within our minds, the ideas we get, the images, interact and mingle with and are, in a sense, triggered by physical sensations. And I immediately thought of Coleridge: how in his “conversational poems” his stream of consciousness is triggered by tangible objects! How amazing! Think about how a single smell can trigger your memories or thoughts! What an amazing and strange power the human mind has!

Equal to the power a single smell has to take you into an old memory, so can the power of my brother’s voice take you out of the most serene of thoughts. I don’t hate him, just his voice. You can’t say you like philosophy without him unleashing his voice: dry, cold, objective like that of a judge, slashing at you as it says: “Philosophy is bad; it says so in the bible!” I swear, his voice, so authoritative, so judgmental, so absolute, that makes the collar of your shirt tight around your neck like a noose as your throat begins to carry a tangled grey ball made out of the words: screw you, shut up, you talk out of your ass, don’t talk to me, elitist idiot, asshole, narrow-minded ass, will make you hate Jehovah Witnesses! I hate moralists!!

Yes, I’m about to finish this now. I don’t wish to impose my story any longer on your uncaring mind. I guess I’d like to say that, still, with all my pains and all my sorrows—somewhere beyond all the blackness, way, way down inside, beyond my little skeleton, down my hands and brown fingers and eyes that hate looking—I’ll always carry with me this picture of a butterfly (thought made vague now by my bad memory), this pretty memory that comes when a dove goes cooing in the distance, a memory of something I got to experience without exactly deserving to, I’m lucky. Love is a gift, not a pain, only as it slowly leaves your body as the shadow slowly overcomes the earth during sunset. ☼
It was near spring break and I was still alive—in Lem’s class. She was trying to get us into writing an imitation piece entitled “The Story of My Life” as if it were a bribe. Looking back at all the dry, sucked-in attitudes reflected on the twenty year old faces staring back at her from the twisted distance of the student-teacher relationship, I figured maybe it did have to be—a bribe. Her trip, her way of selling it to us was by saying, “The narrator could be you or a persona, an invented character,” her voice ever so excited like a five year old girl looking at a blue balloon for the very first time; it always made me sad the drooling faces didn’t do it justice. No one raised their hands here, no one volunteered—everything had to be begged out of us; we had to be begged for our own poems, for our own “poetic visions,” treated like one of them old fat men in Titanic wearing a black tux and an elegant brown cigar sticking out of our mouths, leaving a large enough gap to down the fantastic glass of white wine, and we each sat on our thrones, right in front of her desk, saying: “No, no, we are dressed in our best and are prepared to go down as gentle. But we would like a brandy,” whenever she’d come to hand us a paper like a waiter.

Finally, our time was up and we all got up from our numb asses and headed for the door, feeling ever so enormous with Lem pleading after us, “Please have this done by then.” Spring break was officially started.

They headed to their cars; I headed toward bus stop 260, walking on the cracked, black ground being broken into by yellow forklifts that were making new constructions. I was listening to Nirvana or the Foo-Fighters, I don’t know which. Then again, I never really listen to the music playing through my headphones; I’m a drifter in thought, and I liked walking through all that shaded area with trees and yellow leaves—my Neruda world of green gardens and olives, even if it was placed on the fucked-up side of East L. A. with all the siren sounds going off. But just as I was smiling, after taking in the green world around me, I reached the bus stop just on time to climb the 260; I showed the driver my bus pass, got in, sat down at a back seat by the window and thought, Shit! What the fuck am I gonna do? I mean—sure, I got tons of work, but...
what? Oh, wait, let me sort it out: let’s see, I got two scripts to write, read, read, oh, research paper. Yeah, that’s right, I’ll do my research paper—on Coleridge. Shit, I don’t even have to do a shit-load of research; I already got tons of great material I can use from my new philosophy book. Yes, I’ll do that, I thought, and then…and then after that, what? Oh, the scripts. But what after that?...Read. And after that?...I’ll be done. Shit! Fuck! I’ll be done! Nothing to do, what will I do with nothing to do?! The bus went on and my questions and despair rolled with its wheels.

It wasn’t like I could go back to doing what I used to do when I had enrolled in my first semester here, before I met Jose; I went on drifting in thought as I got off the bus and made my long walk past the King Taco restaurant at the corner on Atlantic. That late summer, back in September, it was fresh: I was in the Puente Project, writing essays, doing math, doing it all at once because I could do it all, I thought; looking at Lem’s methods closely, making no time to compete with Juan Flores for the “best writer” in class title. I’d catch him looking at me whenever I looked very busy and consumed by Lem’s quick-writes in class: I’d look at his eyes staring stubbornly at me, burning green, through the corner of my eye, then I’d turn back to my paper in front of me. Shit, years later, he still looked at me like that when he and I crossed roads again in the same English class. I had no time to make excuses, only to correct mistakes and I wasn’t going to engage in small pride. Books and work were my life, but now I was walking home, not knowing what I would do after all that was done. Ah, I would figure out what to do, soon. With all these poor Mexican immigrants joining the marches on the streets, in hopes of enlightening our dumbest president ever, George W. Bush, I need to better myself—find more work to do to prove to myself and my community that a Mexican girl can do great things too. That’s it, I was going to get a 4.0 this semester, transfer out to USC or go for my other options, become something great: a poet like Neruda and have my name mentioned on channel 34 (ka-eme-eh-ehckis), as Nancy Lorena Perez, Un Orgullo Hispano, with Hispanic Pride. I wasn’t going to have my name mentioned on TV just for the shit of showing off but to make a contribution to the Hispanic body of over-achievers, namely another Mexican that is living proof that Mexicans can crawl out of the hole, use their brains and stand a chance in Statistics and English 240, classes with the
White and Asian kids. I was going to devote myself to this newly found cause, to better our community and the perspective of our people.

I reached for my key to open the dirty white screen door to my house, went to my room and began reading Karl Marx, a work of his called “Morality as Ideology.” As I flipped through pages, I quickly tried to punch out thoughts of Jose off my mind that were trying to sneak in memories of him and me sitting together after English Lit and discussing poetry; it was like trying to beat flies off your skin on a sticky summer day, and I had to stop myself when even the smallest thing like watching the Clippers play ball on TV would promise to make the thought of him crawl in. The thought of him was like a bad tenant coming to stay in my mind like some cheap apartment he’d trash, eat in and leave scraps and roaches, then leave and not show up until my fading memories would give off eviction threats, and then he’d creep in again throughout the night.
I was just finishing Marx when the phone rang. I picked it up, it was Angie. Angie was at Cal-State L.A. and went from nice school girl to horny party girl ever since graduation. Her first time with sex was with some guy she met, who then broke up with her and whom she later married in Las Vegas just to fix his citizenship papers because even though they weren’t together anymore, she still loved him and wanted to help him. Several months afterward, she started going out to dancing clubs at Huntington Park with random guys she’d meet on the internet, she always took them to La Boom.

I felt awkward talking to her; we had gone separate ways and I didn’t know what to talk about anymore. I had to try to entertain her: the kind of talk you have when you’re watching a movie with a stranger, like with a brother’s guy friend, and your brother leaves you alone with him to go to the restroom; you talk to him so that he won’t be bored and you can mask the jumping veins that are pooped out by your nervousness. And I don’t know why, but the cracked black ground at school being dug into always reminded me of Angie.

She said, “Hey, girl, whatcha doin’?”
“I was doing homework, why? What can I do for you?”
“Umm, I just got home for spring break. Everyone else left to Hawaii or Cancun, and …”
“And I’m the only loser at home so you called me, right?”
“Nah. It’s not like that, you’re not a loser.”
“I know.”
“Hey, remember that internet café by your house” –
“The Netzone, yeah.”
“Right, the Netzone. Let’s go.”
“For what?”
“You know, to chat on MySpace, look at cute guys while sucking on some strawberry ice cream.”
“Forget it. MySpace.com is for stupid, desperate-ass people; it sucks and it’s totally boring.”
“Let’s go for the ice cream, then.”
“I got ice cream in my house. Besides, you got a computer at home; chat from there.”
“Nah, come on. It’s not the same. I like the electricity at the café; so
much energy going on there. We gotta go, come on. I bet you’re done with your homework already, what else are you gonna do—it’s boring. Come on.”

I was finished with some work, she was right on that one. And no matter how many pages I continued to flip through, for the past ten minutes I kept reading: “Jose, Jose, Jose, Jose, Jose” all over. I kept thinking how he had left to Northridge for college, how I had called him at twelve one night to tell him I loved him and he said, “Can we talk about this tomorrow?” Just like that, with such a dry voice that sounded like Mrs. Wallace when I was taking her speech course, and I pointed out how Jim Morrison had used poetic imagery in “Not To Touch The Earth,” and she said it was “Bullshit!”

The tears were gone now, and I told Angie, “Let’s go.”

Angie came over and we left my house walking because the gas was too damn expensive, she said, and besides, the café was just two blocks away. It was a small but cozy place with four rows of black computers and black couches on one side where you could eat snacks; there were also huge red light bulbs hanging from the ceiling that served as low-key lighting in the dim place – that place was always dim, slightly lit by the red lights and people chatted with each other in there, in the dim place. Angie and I arrived, she paid two dollars to use a computer and I headed for a couch, sticking my hand inside my small brown backpack.

“Whatcha got in there?” she asked.

“Oh, it’s a copy of Milestone 2005. I told you about it remember; I’m actually in it.”

“Yeah, so? Whatcha gonna do?”

“What do you think? I’m going to read it.”

“Read it?! I thought you left that boring shit for when you were alone in your house. Come, take this computer next to me, I paid for you.”

“You shouldn’t have done that, Angie. I’m not gonna use it; you know I don’t like doing that.”

“Gosh, you sound like a fuckin’ priest. It’s not like they can see you; it’s like talking to invisible people – they’re not real,” she said this last part excitedly.

“Just do your shit, ok.”

“Ok, ok, jeese.”
She sat in front of a computer screen and I sat on a couch and opened the Table of Contents to *Milestone 2005*. I scanned through the titles: boring, boring, boring, nice, ok where’s Jose’s name? Right, I’m not gonna find it, his real name isn’t even Jose Dominguez, it’s Joe Morales, I remember because Lem had told me after he submitted to Milestone, this was the name he had told her was legit. Ah, well, I read his stuff five times already; let me see something new: I scanned through the fourth page of the table of contents again and a title stood out. It read: “At A Milestone Reading: Chris, Claudia, Nancy, and Henry.” Ah, it’s probably some other Nancy. Oh, no, wait I was in a *Milestone* reading not so long ago, maybe it’s me, I flipped back; let me see, who wrote this and on what page? Let’s see, it’s on page 161 and it’s by Arthur Marines. Do I even know an Arthur Marines? No. Of course not, I don’t even talk to anyone. I turned to the page and read some of it; oh, it is about me! Someone actually wrote about me? I gotta finish this.

It seemed that very page I read sucked breath out of me; his words did something to me. I had abandoned my books and written too many, but I was never able to find another person who wrote with such inflamed style. Every metaphor burned; every metaphor carved into my skin and engraved itself; it went through my breasts softly, then burning, and soon every word was suddenly – not enough. I used to think of poetry when I thought about Jose; but the stuff I was reading by Marines came with a certain smell, a certain taste, a feeling like the tingles you get when you got ants walking all over your body, making you itch. I was itching and every one of his words was eating me up.

He and I spoke with words on paper, making love one click at a time for almost a month before we stopped. Every time I’d get to a computer I’d get eager to mount him, to have a mouth to talk to, to touch and feel the lines of its profile, to go through its every pore and burn with lips in touch. But one day, I went to the internet café and sat in front of a computer screen and found his letter saying goodbye. I didn’t have to ask why because in it he said he was sorry that we were “just paper.” And he was right: it was sex – cut in paper, though I can’t say there wasn’t a point when I had wanted more.

Sometimes you try to compensate for what you don’t have or, I don’t know, maybe you try to replace it. And whatever you can’t have, you settle
for something else, a paper. And just like that, you tell yourself, “Screw it! It is savory to have fun. To touch and play with someone’s parts.” You try to find ways to “outsmart getting hurt,” but at the end realizing that there are times when paper still cuts.

Angie said, “Come, take this one next to me,” without taking her eyes off her screen, and motioned to the computer next to her. I closed the Milestone book and turned to Angie; she felt the electricity of my stare on her back and turned around, “What?”

“Is that computer still running?” I asked, eyeing the computer next to her.

“Right on! Have a seat, girl.”

“Invisible, right? They’re not real.”

“Shit, like talking to cartoons, man. You are not real,” she said this excitedly, with electricity in her eyes.

“Cool,” I said as if pronouncing that word for the very first time.

Hey, it was just gonna be some chatting, and from this position, from sitting on a chair in front of a computer, from a distance, I don’t have to be “real”; I could be as real as I want, I could say whatever I want to and skip the gestures and the searching eyes. And I don’t have to take it seriously, don’t even, because it’s not real; it’s just invisible people. Besides, after Jose, falling in love is stupid; if you fall in love you suffer. I’m not gonna hurt again. I’m not gonna go back to sleepless nights in purple, of the color nostalgia. I want to have nothing: when you got nothing, nothing can hurt you. Why fall in love if in the long run it’s going to end? In the long run, people just use each other, so I’m gonna have fun; this is just for fun, a way of heating up loneliness. Angie and I paid another dollar, I found a way to get in touch with Arthur Marines, got his email and wrote away. 🍼
Four childhood friends grow up to face the unwelcome prospect of adulthood and the uncertain future of their complicated life long relationships. Amber, Chloe, Mary, and Sherry were born into a life of trailer park homes, single mothers, and poverty. Though growing up with the same influences, ideals, and surroundings, they become as time goes by four different women. Sherry and Amber have contrasting ways of living life with men. Amber becomes entangled with a young man and Sherry disapproves of the way she is being held down and dominated by him. Chloe is constantly trying to get away from her same routine life and wonders if she is smart enough to become a success story, while Mary struggles in simply getting a job that does not demand too much on good looks.

Sherry is a girl of eighteen with dark black hair, fascinated with the 1950’s American culture. As a young girl she has witnessed her mother being beaten down, dragged, and raped by men. She ultimately grows up with a bitter view of men and relationships. Sherry has to struggle with having to find peace within herself and her perspective on men. Amber, on the other hand, just dreams of the man who will make her life worth living. Amber is a dreamer who doesn’t quite understand the difficulty of being in a relationship. Chloe is a very light skinned redhead with freckles; she is desperately seeking more to life than a dead-end part time job. People expect her to be successful just because she projects the image of studiousness. She is frozen by the fear of failing. Mary, on the other hand, is looked on in the group as the odd looking one. She suffers from severe acne. She struggles with landing a part time job; she has low social skills and lacks in vocabulary. She is extremely shy, oversensitive, and a bit conservative.

The film opens with the young women as the “finished product.” We begin with their day, which flashbacks to when they were children, and get a clue of how situations affected them and impacted the individuals they are now. Sherry witnesses her mother dealing with the men that cross her path, illustrating how she ultimately became neglected. Amber, not having known her father, has never really had a man figure in her life, so she naturally looks for one. Chloe suffers from constantly being put
down emotionally by teachers, which causes her to have a bitter view of
the respected higher class of individuals. Mary, sexually molested as a
child by her own father, has never had the courage to tell anyone; she
doesn’t even admit it to herself. This scars her for life and affects her
everyday without her ever knowing.

Each girl holds a defining color. Red identifies Sherry; she collects
hairpins that have bright red cherries. She constantly wears sunglasses,
an intimate thing with her, to prevent people from seeing her straight in
the eye. Amber’s color is orange/yellow; she wears butterfly hairpins,
while Chloe wears green with clover hairpins. Mary bathes herself in all
shades of blue: sea stars, sea shells, and sea themed hairpins. The sun is
always hovering around them like a huge spotlight for their stage
performances. A thick smoky atmosphere fills the screen as though the
characters are suffocating from smog, incense, cigarettes, steam, and so
on. Broken windows around the trailer homes and everything rusting
and falling apart or coming to an end symbolize their situations.

1. INT. AMBER’S ROOM. MAPLE MOBILE HOMES.
   DAWN.

A small room with a bed, drawer, nightstand, and
bookshelf. Morning sunrays sneak into the room from
a nearby window, spotlighting a small figure on the
bed.
A young woman with dirty blond hair lies asleep.
AMBER,
eighteen, has a cute porcelain doll face. Above her
are pictures pinned to the bedpost and butterfly
mobiles. AMBER is asleep with a calmness and peace-
fulness of
a new born child. Slowly the camera pans down to get
a close-up of her face; her lips widen as they
reflect
happiness. Unexpectedly, her lower lip begins to
tremble. She breathes heavily now. Her smile turns
into a frown. Her breathing intensifies. Her mouth
gets wider with every breath as a teardrop falls.
Her left hand reaches to cover her now distorted
expression. She wakes up realizing she had an unpleasant dream. Her water-filled eyes can’t take in the sunlight.
2. EXT. LANDSCAPE OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA.
   MORNING.

A panoramic shot establishes the setting. Out in the distance the downtown skyscrapers, fairly visible, are veiled by a thin layer of yellowish-gray smog, which engulfs the surrounding suburbs polluting the landscape: no greens, just rooftops and smog.

INSERT FILM TITLE:

"Whale at the Shore"

3. INT. SHERRY’S MOBILE HOME. BEDROOM.
   MORNING.

SHERRY, eighteen, wears a worn-out tight dark blue hip-hugger jean with a bright red baby doll tank top. She stands before a tall mirror as she considers which shoes look better with her outfit. She decides on her worn-out red CONVERSE shoes, then moves on to fixing her dark black hair. She twists her hair in a 1950’s fashion and adds a bright red cherry embroidered hairpin. The camera zooms in on a picture of BETTY PAGE on the top corner of her mirror. She takes a step back, removes her shoes, pulls from under her bed a pair of black tattered low high heels, puts them on, then reaches for her sunglasses as she gracefully steps out of her dirty room.

4. INT. MARY’S MOBILE HOME. BEDROOM.
   MORNING.

Mary, eighteen, sits by the edge of her bed, hunched down, in her tightly clean room. Her light brown hair is pulled back in a ponytail. She holds a small portable mirror as she applies layer upon layer of skin foundation. She desperately tries to cover up her
acne scars but becomes frustrated with the struggle. She snaps the compact mirror close, stands up, and gives out a breath of exhaustion. She walks across her small room to a larger mirror that hangs from the wall. She unties her ponytail, lets her hair down and tries to fix it so it covers most of her face. The sign of frustration fills her brown eyes as she tries to hold back tears.

5. INT. CHLOE’S MOBILE HOME. BEDROOM MORNING.

The room is fairly dark, a bed is in the center of the room. CHLOE lies on her bed, her fiery dark red hair covers her clear perfect skin. The bed is filled with photographs (colored, black and white, and sepia) of AMBER, SHERRY, MARY and CHLOE. She was looking at them last night but obviously fell asleep. Her alarm clock goes off; she jumps startled, hits the snooze button, and rolls over to the opposite side of the clock. She opens her eyes still sleepy with a blank look on her face. With her hair tangled CHLOE sits up and sits on the edge of her bed, looks around and finds a green cardboard box, takes a hold of it, and starts to put away the photographs. The phone RINGS. CHLOE walks across her room to get it.

CHLOE
Hello?

MARY
(Off-Camera)
Hey, are you ready?

CHLOE
Yeah, I’ll be right there, just let me get a few things and I’ll meet you guys out front.

MARY
Alright....Oh, please bring me some of your foundation and eye liner.

CHLOE
Yeah, okay. Bye...
SHERRY makes her way down the hallway of her mother’s small mobile home. AMBER slips on her shoes, combs her hair, and places eye liner. CHLOE is putting on flaming red lipstick; she squishes her lips, and plays with her hair. MARY stands before the large mirror, with the phone still in her hand; she smiles at herself but gets disgusted by her appearance. She gives a look of desperation. SHERRY makes her way down the hall. As she puts on her sunglasses and opens the door, the morning sun shines down on her as she makes her way to the EXTERIOR of the mobile park homes. AMBER has just finished making her bed and goes over to her nightstand to get a Monarch butterfly hairpin to place on her light blond hair before dashing out of the room. CHLOE picks up the photographs and places them inside the green box, which she shoves under her bed. As she gets up from the floor, the camera zooms in on her hairpin filled with shimmering green clovers. On her way out she gets a book, TALES OF A LIBRARIAN. MARY puts on a light blue sweater and walks out of her room and down the hallway. She opens the door as sunlight glares down and follows her to the mobile park as the camera focuses on her beat up BLUE CONVERSE shoes. The mobile park is run down, rusted, dirty, and highly neglected. The concrete is stained with oily car fluids. MARY walks past the row of small square mobile homes to meet up with her friends. While walking she pulls out from her sweater a hairpin designed with sea stars. MARY gives a smile that does not reveal her teeth as she gets closer to the others. CHLOE sits besides an old car reading her book, while AMBER and SHERRY are having a private conversation.

MARY (V.O.)
We remember being called naïve and innocent as if it were a dirty word. Everyone looks down on us if
we even show the slightest trait of stupidity. Men have the upper hand, but we are still fortunate, even in the dirtiest of times.

AMBER, SHERRY, CHLOE, and MARY make their way down the dirty path, their bouncy hair swaying in slow motion.

As the scene moves into a FLASHBACK, the camera pans down to focus on eight vibrant legs becoming shorter under white bed sheets hanging from a clothesline. Their shadows are visible behind the clean sheets as the sheets dance wildly from the gusty Santa Ana winds. The girls can be heard giggling behind the dancing bed sheets as the sheets snap their ends in the wind.

MARY (V.O.)
But we say some things should be simple...untouched...and pure.

FLASHBACK - 10 YEARS AGO.

The CLEAN white bed sheets now move quietly. Four pairs of skinny dirty legs make their way out. The girls are wearing worn-out foam sandals. Their dirty faces and shaggy hair move with the wind. They have exaggerated smiles as they make their way down the MAPLE MOBILE PARK on CLEAN concrete.

8. EXT. MAPLE MOBILE PARK. PLAYGROUND.
   DAY.

Four unkempt girls invade a worn-down playground. The playground consists of a rusted swing set with a rusted slide. A wooden five feet fence surrounds three sides of the yard. The one open side leads to the mobile homes. The sun shines bright, not a cloud in sight. SHERRY (with dirty dark black hair and light complexion) stands atop the rusted slide overlooking the playground. AMBER (with dirty blond hair) and MARY (tangled light brown hair and soft
skin) sit on the swing quietly. CHLOE (with red hair and light skin) walks across the playground towards a pile of trashcans. She pulls out a torn magazine. SHERRY slides down to see what CHLOE has discovered. MARY and AMBER are right behind SHERRY. CHLOE now stands surrounded by the rest of the girls peering at the cover of a pretty girl with glamorous eyes and pampered hair. The girls open the glamour magazine as the camera zooms in on their small dirty hands turning the pages.

9. EXT. MAPLE MOBILE PARK. PLAYGROUND.
   EVENING.

The girls are still looking at the magazine. They sit in amazement looking at the girls that stand in unnatural poses. They turn the pages and examine each of the pictures closely.

   MARY
   Oh look at that, she is wearing a diamond necklace. Oh...And look at her lips, they are bright red.

   CHLOE
   When I grow up I am going to have a dress filled with colored diamonds.

CHLOE stands and starts to DANCE.

   CHLOE
   I’ll be rich, I’ll have a huge house in the forest. I’ll have parties with the rich kings and queens. I’ll have a house with a humongous ballroom, and everyone will wear fancy dresses and we’ll eat weird food that we like. And I’ll have the animals from the forest help me out with the party preparations.
SHERRY looks up at CHLOE.

SHERRY
That’s stupid, you know animals can’t do that.
CHLOE
I know, but I’ll be rich and I can make them do whatever I want them to do. Anyway, nothing is impossible when your rich.

CHLOE continues to dance and the girls keep their eyes on the magazine.

Sounds start to come from behind the wooden fence. CHLOE stops on her tracks, looks back and wonders what it is. CHLOE looks back at the girls.

CHLOE
(Whispering)
You guys...there is something behind the fence.

SHERRY, AMBER and MARY look up at CHLOE.

MARY
(Puzzled)
It’s probably a dog.

The girls focus now on the fence. There are forms that move back and forth between the gaps of the fence. We can’t see what it is, so SHERRY gets up and walks towards the fence. The girls trail behind her. SHERRY looks between the wooden slabs trying to find out what is moving from behind.

MARY
Be careful, a dog may jump out and scare you to death.

SHERRY
No. It’s not a dog. It’s something else.
SHERRY moves on trying to find out what is behind. Sounds of laughter and shuffling grass are heard from behind the fence. SHERRY finds a corked hole in a wooden slab. She struggles to uncork it and peeks through, taking in as much as possible.

AMBER
Do you see anything?

SHERRY
No. Nothing yet.

SHERRY looks desperately trying to find what is behind the fence, and suddenly a black figure obstructs her view. SHERRY backs off and stands straight as she looks at the girls.

SHERRY
It’s Boys.

The girls get excited and run towards the fence, hogging gaps and trying to find figures. AMBER looks through the hole that SHERRY uncorked. Her blue eyeball blinks in search of something only to find another eyeball gazing right into hers.

AMBER steps back and catches her breath, looks at the rest of the girls.

AMBER
(Whispers)
I looked right into my eye.

The girls step back as the fence begins to tremble. Hands make their way up to the top. Three ten year old boys (ROBERT, MIKE, and BRIAN) pop their heads up and search the playground. They find the girls and smile.

ROBERT
(Smiles)
Hey, what are you looking for?

The girls smile and blush, except for SHERRY, who gives them an awkward stare.

Fade Out.

BACK TO PRESENT DAY.

10. EXT. LONG BEACH 710 FREEWAY.

A small 1985 Brown TOYOTA CAMRY runs down the stretch of freeway.

11. INT. TOYOTA CAMRY.

The women drive down the freeway and pass scenic downtown high-rises. They sit quietly as they listen to the radio. AMBER is next to SHERRY, who is driving, while MARY and CHLOE are in the back. CHLOE is reading her book as MARY pulls down her window and the furious wind rushes through the car. Their hair dances from the wild wind. SHERRY adjusts her dark sunglasses, gives a smile as she presses on the gas pedal.

12. EXT. SEAL BEACH. COASTAL POINT. WINDY.

The girls sit on the sand, sun bathing. CHLOE reads her book as a man and his son stand right by her. She senses four eyes upon her breast and looks up from the pages to the man and his son.

CHLOE

Can I help you perverts?

The man and son walk away with dirty smirks on their faces.
CHLOE
(Looking back at the girls)
Oh man, why did we come?

SHERRY
Because you wanted to.

MARY
It’s disgusting if you think about it.

CHLOE
(In a comic way)
I know. Thank you, Mary, for understanding my female suffering.

MARY
Ah? What? No. I’m not talking about that. I was thinking about the ocean.
That place is really dirty. Just think about it.

AMBER
I don’t get it, what is so nasty about the ocean?

MARY
(Looks at AMBER)
Fish piss and fuck in the sea and we swim in it. Don’t you believe it’s at least a bit disgusting?

CHLOE
(Holding back laughter)
Well Mary, I don’t know about you, but I do breathe the air around me, and it’s been said that people do fart, fuck, and die with an odor.

AMBER bursts out laughing.
SHERRY
No. It’s not the same. Mary is talking about liquids. Like swimming in whale sperm. Those things shoot out like gallons upon gallons of their baby makers into the ocean. I mean whales have swum that ocean for I don’t know how many years, and I am sure that each male whale shoots out more than once in their lifetime.

AMBER
(With enthusiastic shock)
Oh well, that explains it all.

SHERRY
What explains all?

AMBER
Well, why the sea is so salty.

MARY
(Annoyed at AMBER’S remark)
Oh, that is just stupid. Stop being so dirty. I really don’t like it when you talk like that. Especially in public places.

SHERRY
Oh Mary, stop being so innocent. Get with the program, get de-virgin-ized. How do you ever expect to get a guy with that attitude?

CHLOE
Oh, you guys leave her alone. I’m glad that at least one of us stayed clean.

(CHLOE looks straight at MARY)
Every time I see you, you remind me of what I once was...It’s nice to have someone remind me of the things that I am NOT.

The girls sit in the sand as the high tide makes it to the shore.

CHLOE
I have this new infatuation with the natural smell of guys...and I don’t know why.

AMBER
Oh, that reminds me. Last night I had the weirdest dream. And it stuck to me because it was so vivid.

SHERRY
(Rolls her eyes and mumbles)
Here we go again.

AMBER
I dreamt of Robert. And it was just so weird because I dreamt us as kids. Back when we first met him. (Pauses). And it just brought all these things back. The sounds and smells of the playground. The games we played. The looks we gave each other. All that stuff.

SHERRY is annoyed. She tries to bring her conversation to a close.

SHERRY
Oh, now I remember. Isn’t that the summer that we were all going through puberty?

AMBER
Yes. And don’t remind me.
MARY
(Looking at CHLOE)
Ehuhw! What is that smell?

CHLOE
Don’t look at me, it aint my time of the month.

AMBER looks shockingly out into the ocean with eyes wide open.

AMBER
Oh God.

A POV shot as the camera, poised over the women’s shoulders, shows them looking at the massive ocean. The camera, moving up from women’s backs, reveals the distant horizon. A massive solid form floats on the waves. A dead whale is making its way towards the shore. The corpse is rotting, decomposing, and the flesh lets out an unbearable odor. AMBER, SHERRY, and CHLOE get up while MARY stays momentarily seated unable to move. The decaying whale is making its way to the shore, like a ghost ship that is finally landing at shore. The whale is about fifty feet high and a hundred feet long. As people start to move out from the beach, the girls slowly drift away too. Struggling with the sand they abandon the beach and the old dead whale.
I’m sorry if I defy my own norm of staying up late not to do homework, but I have to write what has been going on this week: where to start but in the beginning, although that goes far back years and years. I could just sum up everything, but then again, any conclusions made might be done by misjudging the situation as well as the characters themselves. Even if it were all true, not that it is not true; what am I supposed to do when even I have played a role in this whole ordeal? After all, it was because of me that my step-father ended up cheating on my mom.

Mom and Step-dad have been living in free union for the past fifteen years or so. I can’t remember the exact date because there are more important things on my mind than a useless memory like a date from many years ago. Even if I justify my lack of memory, to me being a naïve child, viewing the world differently, it still would not be able to change what happened at the house Thursday night.

Mom tried calling for me that night, but I was too distracted listening to Bjork’s “Play Dead” with my “Dynamic Stereo Headphones” in my room. However, I felt something was not right. I felt an energy from the floor coming up to me, followed by thumping sounds that made me take off my headphones and hear my mom calling out for me. She repeatedly told me to call the police. I wasn’t aware of what was going on, but in picking up the vibes from my mother, the anxiety and fear in her character, I just dialed. My instinct told me to dial 911, but why I was dialing 911 I did not know. As a son I had to dial because no sane mother would tell their son to call the police if there was no reason behind it.

I was too confused, nervous, as well as hyper to calmly tell the operator what was going on. I did not even know what was going on, but little by little I started giving whatever information Mom was telling me.

“Someone hit my dad— the man is in a white truck— he’s going down Union Pacific street— I am located at the intersection with Amalia street—”

The environment got cold all of a sudden. It was not the man who brought out fear in me, but my mother’s reaction as well. Usually, she is...
a strong woman that stops people in their tracks only to show she is superior, but at this time she was weak and made me weak with her emotional fright. I was shivering.

Mom and Step-dad came inside the house while I was still on the phone trying to give the operator information about what was going on.

“I couldn’t get the license plate number. He was already too far out of sight,” said Mother.

Everyone was talking at once: two voices on one side, another voice over the phone, and my voice trying to give information. Bursting out of frustration I shouted to my parents, “Be quiet!,” and they were.

The operator asked to speak to my step-father. Luckily, the operator spoke Spanish because my step-father can never remember his English.

After a second I noticed Peter’s shirt ripped wide open from the collar. Not only that, but there were specks of blood on the right side of his lips and cheek. Apparently, he got punched once by the man who tried to pick a fight with him, he told the operator.

Mom was tense, crying on the couch while I stood shivering and still nervous, not about what was going on but about what could happen next. Would the man come back? If he did, what was he going to do?

Step-dad hung up the phone, and without hesitation, Mom started shouting at me. Nothing new, other than I was worthless and knew what to do. My step-dad’s life had been in danger, and if the worst would have happened what would I have done? Usually, Mom’s arguments would have pierced my heart, but trying to figure out what was going on was more overwhelming than whatever Mom was trying to tell me.

Finally, two policemen arrived. Calmly, they walked up to the gate and onto the house’s porch. The three of us came out, and to my usual surprise I was going to play my usual role of the interpreter: English speaking police with Spanish speaking parents, and with me in the middle of all of this.

“Good, you’re going to be my interpreter!” said one of the policemen. Alright, might as well do everyone a favor.

“OK, Peter. Go!” I commanded him. After looking at me for a second, he started—the man came, knocked, they shouted, punched—then one policeman used his flashlight to see my step-dad’s face.

“Have you seen the man before?” asked the policeman.
“Apparently, he went to where my step-dad works at,” I translated.
“Well, I still don’t understand what was going on,” said the policeman.
“The man was saying something about his wife,” I translated.
“Well, here’s what we’re going to do,” and he gave a long procedure that I caught for a millisecond. “— but if he comes back, you tell your dad not to be macho and try to take on the guy himself.” Well, I thought that it was a little too late for that advice.
“Tell them I’m a diabetic, and that I feel bad. Tell them!” started my mom.
“What is she saying?” asked the policeman.
“She’s not feeling well. She has diabetes.”
Everyone goes back inside, and the police leave.
“This is all your fault!” Mom started shouting at me. “You always have to lock yourself in your room.”
“Calm down,” I told her, “you’re going to feel bad again.”
Mom charged over to where I was standing, trying to throw a blow at me. I blocked her and grabbed her by the wrists, letting her struggle to set herself free.
“Calm down, both of you,” my step-dad tried telling us. After a few seconds, though, I let her go.
My parents took a risk with what they did next. We left the house to look for his house. My step-dad’s memory was unclear, so he was not sure of where he needed to go, exactly. Someone had just disrespected our house. Shouldn’t it be fair to return the “favor”? Anyway, it is my nature to be vengeful.
We came back. Mom got the story straight from Peter and started making her own conclusions. Me, I had to get back and finish evaluating my fourth source for my research paper. The evaluation was the only thing I needed on my mind, but unfortunately, I was going to be distracted for the following two hours.
I was trying to concentrate in working on this evaluation, but all I was able to concentrate on were my parents arguing at midnight. I had to turn my assignment in first thing in the morning, so why did they have to do this right now? Even my usual techniques to pay no attention to them were not working. Finally, I turned my radio’s volume a little higher. It was good enough to block my parents’ voices, but not good enough for
me to concentrate. Well, I decided to take that risk because there was nothing else for me to do.

Afterwards, everything got quiet; my parents were finally silent, and I turned my radio down. Not long afterwards, though, my mother came in my room. More drama? Fine.

Mother wanted to talk to me. Well, I guessed my evaluation could wait a bit longer. Anyway, this was Mom’s moment, or at least it is whenever she is calm and eager to have someone to talk to. The least I could do was play my role as a son and hear Mom out. I could do that, or I could just think about my assignment.

Mom asked me if I had heard her argument with my step-dad. I answered, “Yes, I did.” How anyone could not have heard them in the first place? My answering “yes” was a mistake because Mom started from the beginning, unfortunately, further back than what I needed to hear. She said that ever since she met Peter she was warned about him being a lady’s man. Peter’s aunt, my mom’s sister, and their cousin, had all told Mom of accounts where Peter was found with other women. He was not a stable man, and his marriage that produced nine children was not going to tell otherwise of his character.

Afterwards, Mom said her suspicions grew of Peter going back to his old ways even after he had promised my mom to change and settle down with her. Now, as I look back, it has always been Mom, who has taken authority in this house.

Mother kept on talking while I kept listening. She told me that she had been made stupid for so long, and she was not going to take it anymore. She was growing tired of being taken advantage of—whatever that means.

I wondered if she was actually trying to tell me something. She always said that I was too smart for this family, so I guess she thought I understood all that she was telling me. Then again, when she asked me if I had heard their argument earlier I had answered her yes, but it was not true since I had my music on. In fact, what I heard was the yelling and screaming, and this one particular nagging voice that was asking them to shut up. When it came to the coherency of their words, that was where I just lost myself since I did not understand what exactly they were saying to each other.
Finally, Mom concluded by asking me, “Why do you think we don’t sleep together, anymore?”

Tough question? Not really. It does not take a genius to know that when two people do not sleep in the same room it is because of one of two reasons: they just do not want to, or they have problems. I answered my mother, “Because you two don’t have the same kind of relationship you had before—if you ever had one.” This was true no matter what point of view someone had of their marriage. Mom and Step-dad just did not have that kind of connection two people who love each other have. Since I had been exposed to this at such an early age, I regarded this as normal. In fact, all the arguments these two had I thought were normal. As long as I focused on my own things, things were fine from my perspective and I did not take into consideration anything “suspicious.”

Although, whatever was going on did seem suspicious, because no stranger comes up to your door and tries to pick a fight with you unless he has a reason. My biggest suspicion for me was not Peter, but my understanding of my research paper. I understood that milk is bad for you, and Robert Cohen’s book had been showing me so much more. Apparently, there is pus in milk due to a cow’s infectious condition called mastitis. In the mammary gland area, this infection grows and is taken care off by the body’s own immune system in the form of white blood cells. Then, dairy farmers load their cows up with antibiotics that naturally end up in cows’ systems as well as in their milk. So, next time I drink milk, I will keep only this little piece of information in mind. Then again, I cannot drink milk because I am lactose intolerant, a condition that, according to Cohen’s research, naturally occurs in the body. Apparently, many children lose the enzymes that break down oversized sugar molecules into smaller sugar molecules. This happens because a body’s nutrition should start coming in from other sources rather than the mammary glands. Nevertheless, we still have millions of people turning milk into America’s drink. How convenient is this for the dairy industries, saying that they sell nutrition in the form of a liquid when the body is not even supposed to take nutrition in the form of milk.

Finally, I finished evaluating this source. I bet most people questioned the purpose of doing such a long evaluation. I thought this assignment was quite useful. I even took a greater advantage of it and started writing

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my research paper. So far I had the backbone, and all I needed to do was amplify Cohen’s arguments and fill in some blanks. How good is that?

I slept two or three hours that night—definitely no more than three. Mom was definitely not feeling well and asked me to take her blood sugar level. She was over the allowed maximum level. Usually, she does not do anything to treat herself and bring her sugar level down. This time, though, Mom made a big scene and refused to go to the hospital.

“Get yourself dressed up, and you [Peter], take her to the hospital. Now!” Whether they were surprised or not by my reaction I did not care, but without questions Mom headed to her room and got ready.

I started heading out the door when my step-dad asked me if I had heard their discussion last night. I stayed quiet, thinking about what to answer. My step-dad then asked me if I had talked with my mother the previous night. To that, I answered “yes.” I had talked with my mother, but in regards to understanding what Mom was trying to tell me, I had no coherency of. Step-dad, though, did not know that nor considered that possibility of having understood Mom last night. Actually, he must have thought I understood what was going on because whenever Mom talked with me alone, it would seem as if I would come out more knowledgeable of whatever family situation we were in. Peter, then, considers Mother and me to be confidantes.

“I’m heading out,” said Peter. “If you need me, you know where to find me in the meantime because I am leaving the shop, too. Either way, I will soon get in touch with you so you can get in touch with me.”

Right.

“Are you going to your classes?” asked Peter.

“No. I am just going to drop my assignment off and then come back home. I’ll see you later.”

There was no answer from him. It was no surprise since I never get answers from my greetings, not if they take place outside of school. I had more important things to do, so I headed out the door, headphones over my ears, assignment in one hand and CD player in the other.

The school’s Writing Center opened at 9 a.m. I arrived at 8 a.m. I had one free hour to do what I pleased. I chose to look at nature to the tunes on my CD. If I had had my camera, I would have been inspired to take pictures of flowers, trees, and bushes located around the campus. The
morning dew made all the greens on campus look shiny, and the trees high up in the cloudy air made everything seem gentle, calm. Usually, I would be in a class during this hour or sleeping in during the weekends. That day, though, was different. The rose petals on the ground were not dead; they could still give new life to the yet unborn flowers once the petals decomposed. Even better would be if all the flowers decomposed and fed the trees so their roots would get longer, and longer, and longer, and the trees would go higher, and higher, and higher, showing their grandeur and their might high up in heaven, or at least, close to heaven.

I did not take long appreciating nature, so I walked over to the Writing Center again, dropped off my evaluation, and headed back home. Was I supposed to be thinking about what happened Thursday night? Was I supposed to be analyzing what Mom told me early this morning? Was I supposed to make a conclusion about what Peter said to me today? Was I supposed to be doing anything at all? I did not know.

I thought that I did not have to know this because my focus was not on other people. Instead, it has been and always will be my education. In fact, I did not know why it was that I knew exactly what was going on, but I just could not make the connections, put the puzzle pieces together, and really, truly understand what was going on right now. However, since my parents presumed I already had had the explanations the night before, I had to go to secondary sources and figure things out myself.

I went over to the mechanic shop where Peter worked. The secretary, Claudia, was a very good acquaintance of mine. Claudia has helped me out a lot in the past and continues helping me. She has known the things I have gone through at home as well as at school, has helped me understand the world through new perspectives outside of the old family culture and conservatism. Claudia was a confidante whom I have always been able to go to whenever I needed advice from an adult; someone with experience about the world because she has seen what I have not seen and has experienced what I was experiencing as a teenager.

Claudia told me that the same man that went to our house on Thursday had come to the shop on Wednesday.

The man had come to the office and asked Claudia for the man with the magenta-colored truck. She answered that he was working, but the man insisted on seeing him. Agreeing, Claudia went to look for Peter.
When the man saw Peter, he ran towards him, grabbed him by the shirt, and started shouting at him.

“You were the one who hit me with your truck! It was you! I know it was you! I saw you just as clearly as I am looking at you right now!” the man shouted at Peter.

“Please, you’re not supposed to be doing this here!” declared Claudia, but neither of them were listening.

Although there had been no hitting, there was still shouting and arguing coming from the man.

“I saw you with my wife! I know it was you! I saw you just as clearly as I am looking at you right now!”

“I don’t know your wife,” answered Peter. I don’t know her he answered my mother the previous night.

“Aren’t you the chiropractor?” asked the man.

“I haven’t seen your wife before!” answered Peter. Ask your son, he saw when she came to the house! answered Peter the previous night to my mother.

“I knew you worked here! You did a job for my son!” the man stated.

“I have no idea who your son is!” answered Peter. I did a job for him a while ago Peter said the previous night.

Claudia continued that there had been exchanges of bad words between both men. While the man grabbed Peter by the shirt, he shook him like a tree. The man was shorter than Peter, and even though he was nervous, he was still there trying to avenge whatever had happened between his wife and Peter.

“I swear. I knew something was going on from the beginning,” claimed Claudia.

“Wait a minute, you’re actually telling me that Peter was with another woman? When?”

“Everyone knows how he is. Everyone knows he doesn’t go directly to his house, and you’re always telling me that your mom complains how he is never home. Haven’t you noticed anything?”

Shaking my head, I answered her, “No. I haven’t.”

“Well, finally Peter is getting what he deserves,” said Claudia.

See what happens when you go on looking for trouble! Mother had said to Peter the previous night.
“But, oh my gosh, I was literally scared. What if the man had had a gun? He could have shot us all! And then I said I was about to call the police, and that’s when the man finally left. But, seriously, the whole thing literally took five minutes, but it felt like such a long time. You know, it was the tension that both men boiled up. Oh yeah, he ripped the shirt buttons off of Peter’s shirt.”

“I seriously can’t believe it, Claudia.”

“Where is he when he goes to work on Saturdays? Because you know we close the shop on Saturdays.”

“What? On Saturdays he goes to work, does private mechanic jobs for other people, and always comes home dirty.”

“Yeah, he comes to the shop and rolls around the floor to get oil on him,” said Claudia as we exchanged laughs. “I don’t understand why he preaches what he preaches.”

“What?”

“Yeah! He goes to church so much, makes you go to church. And then he’s so, so—he has pictures of naked ladies where he changes, and they’re next to his Jesus! What kind of person has naked ladies and Jesus side-by-side? I mean, I’m no religious person, but that’s just wrong! He’s such a, such a—”

“— hypocrite?”

“Exactly!” We sighed. “And what does your mom say about all of this?”

“Something about being stupid.”

“She had to suspect something from the beginning!”

“She did! She does, and she has always had! I think that’s what she told me last night.”

“No, she finally figured it out.”

“She’s accepting it.”

“No, not really accepting it.” Then Claudia said, “But you know how even though your mom doesn’t like me, I am totally on her side. She should not be taking this from him.”

“I guess. Well, I’m just—I don’t know—(sigh)—Wait! Is that The Da Vinci Code you’re reading?”

“Yeah! I’m trying to go through it before the movie comes out! Haven’t you read the book?”
Awesome! I can’t wait to see the movie. I have enough reading to do for school. But, if I ever do get to the book I might just buy the audio version.”

“You must be an auditory learner, then.”

“I think I am. Either that, or I am dyslexic. I can’t understand much by reading alone. Then again, you know how Peter and my mom are always arguing and don’t let me concentrate. Like last night! I swear, I had to turn my radio on high just so I could block their voices out. I tried working on an assignment all day yesterday at school, and these people were not helping me get that done. Anyway, do they ever help me out?”

“Yes, I know what goes on. But you swear. Anyway, you won’t be able to do anything unless you get a job, save some money, and move out of your parents’ house. Sorry, I didn’t mean to go there.”

“It’s all right. Anyway, it is true. But I need to focus on school first.”

Mom’s usual response would be Get a job! Go to a McDonald’s and get out of here! You’re no good to me! All you do is your silly school. You think school is going to get you anywhere?

Someday, I want to answer her back: It has already gotten me farther than you ever dreamed to attempt yourself. May I remind you who got pregnant after dropping out of junior high school? But I would rather not answer her that. First of all, Mom always has a good comeback. I do not know where she gets it, but she always has a good comeback to my arguments, and if she did not she would just try to hit me, but she is too weak. Anyway, I would not want to disrespect my mother.

“But tell me, how do you feel about all of this?” Claudia asked.

“About school, or me getting a job?”

“About Peter!”

“Oh! Well, you know—I feel indifferent. You know how my relationship with Peter has been.”

“Yeah. Everyone sees you guys as the perfect family—which you’re not!”

“Definitely we are not!! Supposedly, I’m their only child, product of their marriage.”

“But you’re a good kid.”

“Yes, I am the good kid! Always doing what they say,” I sighed.

“Then your mom should be giving you more freedom! Excuse you?
How old are you? Hasn’t anyone told your mom lately that you’re a legal adult?” Claudia said sarcastically.

“Well, it’s not like I am the same way out of the house than I am at school. But, you know how my mom wants me to marry— what a disappointment she’s going in for.”

Claudia came up to me and gave me a hug. It was the first time she gave me a hug, so I knew she actually meant it.

“Oh honey. And by the way, I feed Diego organic milk only. And when he gets sick I tell the doctor that I don’t give him any antibiotics because I want his body to learn how to take care of itself. I don’t take antibiotics either.”

“Really? Me neither!”

“Yeah! And then we get our organic milk for the regular milk store price. It’s part of the club’s deal that I am subscribed to.”

“Wow! Sounds great! Sign me up for one of those,” I said comically.

Finally, I was heading home. I made it just in time for the last twenty minutes of “I Love Lucy.” I have always admired Lucille Ball. My mom thinks that I love her comedy when in reality I love her life story. According to a documentary, Lucille loved going to work everyday, tape her shows, and live an entire day by the scripts she was presented and the character she portrayed. Her marriage with Desi was not a good one, not since the episodes before she moves into her country house. During the preceding episodes taking place in the country house, Lucille’s marriage with Desi was a disaster. Their kids feared divorce, and I bet so did Lucille. What she did to relieve herself was to go to work each day and live on TV the happy marriage she wished she was having in those moments.

Mother was no Lucille Ball, especially since going to work was just another burden for her. She still thought everything was funny, but who was Mom actually kidding when she was living a total lie? The lie that has progressed with even more lies, all rooting back to my biological father.

Peter had been mother’s solution out of scandal after Mom had separated from my biological father. In order to create the perfect family once again, with Peter as the replacement, I had to call him “Father,” which I did for one day, only. I may have been young, naive, a simple child that just wanted to have fun, but since then I have been smart enough to
make my own decisions, and I decided that Peter was not going to be my father. Still, Mom comforted herself as long as I had a father figure, and as long as she had someone who would pay the rent, anything I thought or said did not matter.

If it had not been for me, Mother would not have lived in fear of being oppressed by her society, reason why she got with Peter: in order to avoid any type of scandal for her. Mother got with Peter in order for me to have a father figure. Nevertheless, I never regarded Peter as a father, but as another male figure whom I could still have looked up to, but I never did. Peter grew in my life as a stranger, and we both respected each other’s personal spaces. However, mother insisted in staying with Peter, and as the house puppeteercer she was driving Peter insane. I had my focus on school, and little by little I had been coming out of the puppet strings and becoming my own standing model with no strings attached. Peter was more abrupt in leaving his strings, and here were his consequences.

Mom only wanted for me to have a father figure, but the only positive example Peter had set for me was to do things for myself and stop being driven by Mom. However, both Mother and Peter underestimated me and my own mind as I had enough positive influences in life to become the kind of person I am today. I am not a self-made man; in fact, I am still a young boy who has a lot to learn. Mother and Peter were supposed to teach me about life, but instead, school itself has taught me a lot more than mother and Peter ever will as long as they live. Still, Mom’s intention could be appreciated—it could, or I could just continue doing my research paper on milk. Whether Peter’s situation was supposed to teach me a lesson, I am still not sure, and I will not be sure as long as I am typing here something not related at all to my paper.

Enough is enough. I sit here typing what went on this week and why, for a moment, I felt guilty that Peter cheated on mother—although maybe she has to learn something out of all of this. Whatever it is that we all are supposed to learn I am sure we will learn. In the meantime, I will replay “Play Dead” for the hundredth time and finish drafting my research paper, just as soon as I reflect on my relationship with my stepfather—nah! Milk instead! 🍪
I received a sandwich of laughter and applause which I washed down with some “Thank yous” and “You were greats” as I stepped off the stage at a comedy club in San Francisco. My job was done and I had obviously done it well. I never thought that in a million years I’d be getting paid to tell jokes.

Growing up I was encouraged to become a doctor, lawyer, or any other safe profession that earned a lot of money. But there I was at that moment: not earning a lot of money; but at least being safe. No one got hurt that night with my comedy routine. On the contrary, people actually enjoyed the comic tales I was passing on to them in the form of short setups and punch lines.

Time and time again I would hypnotize the audience with a question such as “Do you know why aliens won’t abduct Latinos?” I would follow the brief pause after this question with the answer “…because we Latinos would want to put twenty people in a flying saucer made for three.” Wow! People would laugh and laugh as I threw one line after the other.

That night I asked myself some very important questions that would forever change the way I looked at the things I say. One of the questions was “Is all this material the right material?” Well, it was working. But was it really working? Or was it taking stereotypes and prejudices and exposing them for people to laugh? I figured that either way, something needed to change. Either the way I portrayed my people or the way my people behaved.

I never thought I was being racist because I was too busy thinking I was being funny. That was my job after all. Be funny by any means necessary even if those means were mean. I paid my bills with this pain I would inflict on myself and everything I stood for. Eventually, all I stood for was a painful dose of self-buffoonery and I would bring anyone that had the same background as me down with me. If your culture was similar to mine, I was determined to find a way to show its bad side. I wanted people to laugh, even if that meant they were laughing at me.

No one thinks the “good life” is funny and that’s the reason most people laugh at other’s misfortunes. Humor comes from ridiculing a truth and I would search every nook and cranny for the truth that would
destroy me inside. Then I would take that truth, told people about it, and got paid for it. It became an addiction that I couldn’t kick. I was degrading myself and people thought it was funny.

Everyone was fair game, so I made fun of other races, also. It was the thing to do since the audiences, as well as my peers, thought it was hilarious. I used to have such great times until that night. That’s the night that I realized how funny it is that some things aren’t funny at all.

How I could so easily get on a stage in front of an audience full of strangers and for thirty minutes simply “kill”? Usually, the term “kill” is a good thing when it comes to standup. It means that you definitely rocked the crowd. You gave them your all and they appreciated that. But in my case it became something different. Something that brought shame and grief to my heart. Hurful words that worked almost as well as playing Russian Roulette with a loaded gun—by myself—yet being witnessed by dozens of people who would laugh at what I was doing.

Sometimes I wish I could go back and erase the memory of all those words. But it’s too late. They are out there; inside someone’s heart ready to laugh at their remembrance. What have I done? Is there any forgiveness for such an atrocity? There must be some sort of redemption for a soul that is willing to change its old ways. A soul ready to journey down a path of giving, understanding, educating and informing. A soul looking to make things beyond right—to make them better.

When I turn the television and I see people with the power to influence killing their inner being and hurting subconscious minds around them, I’ve noticed they do it naïvely. They have no clue or idea that the words they are saying are being deciphered by unforgiving hearts everywhere. What’s a quick laugh worth? It’s worth nothing; actually, you end up owing a debt.

It happens in movies, magazines, and radio everyday: Race Buffoonery. For example, Tin Le’s “Enter the Dragon” would be a very comedic film, that is if you take away the real pain he endured. If you just have the truth without the pain, Hollywood could have a blockbuster in their hands. Especially the part where he narrates that “some of them [bullies], influenced by Japanese ninjas and Chinese martial art fighters in movies, often challenged me to fight because they thought I was one of ‘them’.” That is sad and wrong, nevertheless true. If not already in
existence, some people would laugh at a movie made with that same exact scenario.

In our culture it’s okay to make fun of our own. It really empowers one to know that we are the only ones that can make fun of your kind. So I did it over and over again to show the world my power. The world laughs at the truth of our words, and life imitates art in the sense that if it’s funny, then most likely it’s the truth, which in turn means that you must stay within the perimeter of that truth in order to be part of what you’ve always been.

It’s funny when the poor make fun of the rich, but it’s not funny when the rich make fun of the poor. The reason for that is that the truth in that situation is way too close for comfort. We hurt at the fact that we are a certain way and we fail to admit it; so, when someone like us does the admitting for us, then it becomes funny. But these views may only come from someone who understands your pain. We don’t want someone rich telling us how poor we are, or someone good-looking telling us how homely they see us.

We laugh at social issues such as racism because it hurts. We know it’s true, yet we deny and laugh at it; however, the laughter stops when we
realize that it’s no game. Usually that realization comes about when our opportunities are shattered, our faith broken, and our hope stepped-on and dragged through the streets. When a job is not “available” to us because of our race we stop laughing. When a person of another race calls us a derogatory term we halt all the giggles, pay attention and get offended.

When that kid told Tin Le “All Chinese know Kung Fu; aren’t you one of them? You’re supposed to know some Karate,” that kid was way out of bounds. He used stereotypes to hurt. I was in that same predicament with my comedy routine. I needed to stop being a creator or, worse yet, a redirector of hate, no matter how funny it was.

If a carpenter calls another carpenter a “carpenter,” they laugh because a carpenter knows a “carpenter.” The same applies in real life. When I would tell jokes about bad things within my race, it was funny, because I must know from first hand experience. By coming out and telling these truths in a public forum I was giving the world license to laugh at me. “Come on world, look at how pathetic my people and I are!”—and the world, including my people, would laugh hysterically.

Self-discovered prejudice is a burning fire that never ceases to burn
within its discoverer. It hunts you down like a nightmare that escaped the safety net of sleep and blended itself into an awaken reality. Once you know it’s there, it never leaves you alone. It looks for you in your most peaceful moments and attempts to converse with your conscience.

The words on this paper are part of the escape plan that my conscience has tailored up for me; further, a way to throw out some of the dirt that has been stored inside for way too long of a time. Something that should have been done already, but I am just getting started doing.

Another question that I posed myself that night was “How do I bring about change?” Not change as just my behavior, but change in the complete sense of the word. Change to the way things are. That way when I’m on stage ridiculing truths I could do it and not feel guilty about them being truths.

I remember my grandmother would always want to see me perform. All she heard was my stories of this “crazy” career I embarked on. One day I visited her and I brought a tape of one of my performances so that she could watch me. I noticed she didn’t laugh throughout the show. So I wrote this off as being a language barrier since my grandmother didn’t speak English. At the end she reflected about things for a moment, and then she asked me, “Why were you saying all of those bad things about you?” To this day, I still get chills when I remember her words. My only response was “that’s what people like to hear.” But it wasn’t true. That’s not what people like or at least want to like. She was right—those things were bad and they were about me.

That night, inside that dark comedy club my grandmother’s words hit me and they hit me hard. I realized people had no choice but to laugh at what I was saying because they were truths. But they were bad truths. Sort of like smoking a cigarette—it’s bad, but smokers keep smoking them. It’s hard to quit a habit that has instant gratification.

I believe that night was the night I became closer to the person I want to become. I want to be a person that can make people laugh at the truth—but a good truth. A bad truth coerces us into admission; however, a good truth allows us to change for the better.

Luis Salinas | “Ever Eaten with a Mexican?”

Milestone: The Voices of East Los
When it comes to eating we don’t discriminate. We love to eat our golden brown chicken, our well-cooked pork, and beef. We love our greens, our reds, and whites, with some limon y sal. We love to dig in, feeling the textures of what goes in our mouths—smelling the freshness of our vegetables, the combination of the warm heated meat with the nice cool touch of the luscious red-diced tomatoes, the tearful white onion, and the still wet cilantro.

“Ever eaten with a Mexican?” We eat our nice hot sopa de arroz and brown frijoles de la holla without a spoon or fork, only with the burning hot tortillas that we cool down with the movement of our hands moving the round delicate and vital corn masa utensil, letting it flap between our palms and seeing the steam escape from it. We cut the tortilla and scoop up the rice, beans, and meat along with the fresh vegetable salsas. There are those who are experts in this technique, only using the soft tortilla to scoop up the food without ever getting any on their fingers, getting mouthfuls of delicious Mexican food between their chopping teeth.

“Ever eaten with a Mexican?” I say. One thing we Mexicans cannot live without is the spice in our life. We need a nice salsa picante, made only with the freshest red plump tomatoes, the whitest tearful onions, green-est cilantro, hottest green jalapeños along with a cup of hot water, some smelly garlic and a pinch of bitter salt. However, there are those who want to be valiant or the machista man; they play around with the rich green ripe jalapeño, feeling the smooth and slippery texture. They like to bite, you can almost hear the crunching sound of the jalapeño, and you can hear it laughing at the victims with their ardiente pain when the valiant or machista ends up crying like a niña, gasping for air and agua to turn down the hot fire that has been ignited in their stomachs.

“Ever eaten with a Mexican?” I say. The way we eat—like it is the last meal we will have, yet we do not eat it fast because we want time to taste and appreciate what we eat. We eat until we can no longer walk; we eat until we can no longer talk. We eat until we can no longer eat. Eating is the ceremony in which we celebrate and appreciate our food, celebrating what we are eating and what has been given to us. We finish our food because we have been brought up that way.

When we were children our mamas would tell us to eat everything because there were poor children in other countries without a piece of
bread. They would tell us to appreciate the food on our tables and not insult them by not eating the food they made for us. The food that was made by our madres, tias, and abuelitas could not be left untouched. That is why Mexicans eat like they do. That is why we cannot leave prepared mole, tacos, enchiladas, chilaquiles, or chiles rellenos to waste. That is why we dive into our almost empty plates sliding our piece of tortilla to clean the plate—to take off the salsa drips, chicken murusas, anything edible and be able to see our reflection on the plate, getting ready for the next round, the delicious dulce desserts: flan, arroz con leche, or simply a coctel de fruta.
We eat them with such grace and thoughtfulness, thinking of the sweet lives we live, thinking of how special we feel to have been eating such great heavenly desserts. The milky smooth texture of the flan melts in our mouths, or the tasteful arroz that has been swimming in the white waters of milk, or the exotic colores and miss-matched shapes of the fresh and juicy fruta.

“Have you ever eaten with a Mexican?” I say. Well do not wait any further and be prepared to enjoy what you eat and appreciate what you have. Buen Provecho. 🍴
It is Friday night again. There is nothing on TV, only the same shows from last week. My room is messy with ideas, plans, books, decorations, and paper. My bed is undone and my clothes are on the floor. The only thing shining bright is the gloomy yellow light in my room—it’s 10:38, I’m seated on my unattended bed with my back against the cold solid white wall, my knees against my insecure chest and tears rolling down my eyes. I’m sobbing, I’m shaking, I’m having trouble breathing. My nose is running, my body is sweating and my thoughts are taking over like the night takes over the day, thoughts that are hard to distinguish between reality and a horrible confusing nightmare.

A half-hour before, when I was in a trancelike state watching a big large black box called a television, I fell under the spell of a show like people that go to church and listen to a man speak about God, love, and forgiveness. I watched the program as a young twenty something woman with her sister and mother search for a man that sexually abused her and her sister. He was a friend of the family, someone they trusted, someone that was like family, someone they called uncle.

During the program the woman is recording herself with a video camera. She wants to make a documentary of this journey into the lion’s mouth. Throughout the show she explains to the camera the fragmented memories of her horrific molestation. She says how confused and lost she was when the man touched her and was told what to do. I could almost see through her watery glassy hazel eyes the little girl that lost her innocence, her child-like spirit, the sudden way the little happy, perky idealistic girl became a grown up realistic adult that lost trust in men.

She cries alone, they cry with her, I cry for us, we all cry together: her mother, sister, and I. She drops to the floor, she is shaking and sobbing as her sister holds her and tries to calm her down, but her hollering and torment do not stop. The sister joins in on the tearful journey of what her life has become. That same day after the fireworks of tears she confronts the old fat bald man that betrayed her father, her mother, and her soul.

When she knocks on his door and sees him, her hand shakes with fear, for she decided to go to his door without her mother and sister. She calms herself down as the door opens; she is face to face with the man...
she knows, the man she considered an uncle, the man she now fears, the man that took advantage of her as a little kid. She asks to speak with him and he says okay. They then get together with her sister and mother in a cafeteria within the complex where he lives, and she begins to ask if he can remember what he did to her? She is shaking and her voice starts to shiver, but she maintains her composure. She does not want to lose herself in front of this man again. She wants to be strong for herself and others who cannot do what she is doing. She asks and asks things that happened. However, she does not remember or does not want to remember most of the events. So she asks him to tell her everything he did to her. She wants to go through the experience she had once locked up in a safe and thrown to the depths of her sea of thoughts. She wants him to remember what he did to her and to see her miserable face now. She wants to recall the many times she was being abused—the times in which her body, thoughts, and soul did not know what was being done to her, to remember the frozen look that prevented her from crying, or yelling, or saying anything for that matter. Once her memories returned to her already wounded head, she had many unanswered questions that only he could answer. She has so much in her she wants to say and know, the questions that every person, man or woman, have wanted to ask, questions from those that have been through the tormented and unfortunate
experience she has gone through, “Why? Why me?”

He has no words to say. He feels ashamed, embarrassed, and guilty that she is here confronting him, that she is not pressing charges, and that she is forgiving him. Her questions are not answered and she still fears the man that stole her innocence, but she also feels sorry for him—because he is now alone, because he does not have the support she now has, because now he has to think of the questions and live with the experience that she, the one he abused, comes back to confront him with and show him the pain and trauma he caused her.

She walks away with courage and strength. It seems as if she recovers her innocence and her child-like spirit that was once taken away from her through the traumatic experience of rape. She is now a stronger and better person. She feels no longer oppressed or chained down to this man’s actions. She walks away happy to meet her sister and mother. She walks away into another chapter in her life.

As I see the end, my eyes become red and swollen. They become dripping water faucets. Even when I think they are completely off they still drip-drop. My body shakes and as I rock myself back and forth I remember the time, the nightmare, and the reality, the confusing reality of that night when I was four: the night I was coming home from a road trip with my father and his friends, the time of confusion like the woman on television, the time I did not know what was happening, the time I froze and let him take away my innocence, my child-like spirit without my knowing it.

I cry thinking it is because of the girl and her abuse. I cry thinking I feel sorry for her when I realize I am the girl. I live through the girl. We are so different but we are so similar because of our encounter. However, I do not have the courage to confront the monster that did this to me.
I go outside because I’m mad at my family for something that I’m not sure of. I lie on the grass and look up at the sky to see darkness coming down on me. All the miserable people are coming out of their houses running far away from the darkness. Suddenly, something unexplainable happens. I see thunder or white light, like a flash of a camera. Then when I turn to see the people that were running, they are lying on the ground as if asleep or dead. I see pieces of body parts all around me as though giants were playing puzzles with them. Then I hear this guy screaming, but I don’t pick up what he’s saying. So I stand up and walk towards my house, but all I see is the frame; the walls have disappeared or have become invisible. I turn around to see if any houses are up but all I see is dirt—bodies and two-by-fours sticking up from the ground as if this were a cemetery or a place where they throw dead people.

Inside my house, which didn’t get totally burned, I call my family and go to get my bear. But in my room I can’t find my bear; all I see are ashes from stuff. I realize my bear is like a member of the family. Still looking for the rest of my family, I scream, “Mama, Papa, Maribel, donde estan!”

But I get no answer. I go to my sister’s room...
where she always plays with her dolls right after she finishes her homework. The dolls are all burned, melted, and my sister is gone; all I see are her ashes. I cry, "Why?" I go to my papa’s room, where he’s always asleep because he’s tired of working. I see only the metal parts of the bed; he is gone too. My father never really talked to me, but I still liked him even though I didn’t show it. I cry again, “Mama, Mama, donde estás?!”

I go down to the kitchen where she always makes her “frijoles and sopa de arroz.” The food is still on the kitchen stove, including my favorite enchiladas. Though I know I’m not supposed to eat them alone, this time I have to because Mama is gone too. I scream for anyone to hear me, but no one answers, and for the first time I wish my parents, sister, bear—the whole family—were with me, so I can show them how much I love them, which is something that I never got to do, being a person who didn’t show appreciation for the family.

And now I miss the times I used water colors to paint on my bear’s face, the times my sister and I used to argue for no real reason, the food that my mama used to burn by accident because she was too busy playing “Gameboy,” and finally the weekends when Papa used to drink and actually talk to me about how he didn’t want me to end up like him, how he wanted me to graduate and get a good job.
El Dia de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead
Ofendas, calaveras, tombas y calacas
Papel picado hanging beneath a frozen tree
Pan de Muertos, with folded arms crusty and brown
Bananas, persimmons and oranges lie next to sugar skull candies
Food for relatives who have long been dead
Families spread their blankets and eat tortillas con flor de calabaza
Sugar skulls brightly painted turquoise and red
A time to reunite with our relatives who’ve passed to the other side
Zempasuchitl, yellow and orange pedals line the pathway to the cemetery
Marigolds with the faint scent of sunlight
Candles burning under a black moonless night
The guitar music under the stars playing my uncle’s favorite tune
Lying on the altar is his favorite tequila “Tres Generaciones”
I remember my grandfather and grandmother and the stories of an aunt that I never met
Pictures of dead relatives who have long been dead
Photographs recall the short time they were here among us

Candy Briones
Grandma preparing tortillas on a summer’s day
Her hands pouring flour, water, baking powder and salt
Kneading the dough in a large plastic bowl
Till the texture is elastic and white
She hands me a piece to practice with
Quickly and accurately she forms 20 little balls
She slaps them between her hands until they turn flat and round
She sprinkles flour on the cutting board so they won’t stick
And spreads them out with a rolling pin until they’re perfectly round
Her hands have a memory of their own, she’s done this thousands of times
She slaps them on the hot comal for a minute or two
Until they bubble and turn light brown with steam spewing
The aroma fills the small kitchen
She gently lifts them from the griddle without burning a finger
And places them in a plastic bowl lined with a soft cotton towel
Grandma spreads butter on a fresh tortilla, wraps it in a paper towel
and hands it to me
I’m around five but in heaven
Pat Sandoval | *Hurricanes, Water and Wind*

Hurricanes in the Gulf Coast
Tsunami in Indonesia
Earthquakes in California
Is Nature a Terrorist?
Hurricanes, Water and Wind
New Orleans
Air twisting, twirling and swirling
Wood, steel, asphalt, glass scattered everywhere
Water coming from above and below
Swollen bodies floating down flooded streets
Superdome is a prison New Orleans police won’t let you leave
Is there no way to escape poverty?
Hurricanes, Water and Wind
Voices screaming from rooftops, help us please!
The National Guard is in Iraq
George is on vacation, Condoleeza’s buying shoes
Where’s Michael Brown?
Is Nature a Terrorist, a weapon of mass destruction?
Hurricanes, Water and Wind
Looters stealing babyhood, food, water and TVs
Six days later Bush is on the way
As the world watches Castro offers help, 1500 doctors
Hurricanes, Water and Wind
Two weeks later here comes Rita
Two million evacuated from Houston
Cars stranded on the roadside
A bus bursts into flames, more people die
Hurricanes, Water and Wind
Who’s responsible? Global Warming?
Oil Prices rise and the poor are sent elsewhere
Hurricanes, Water and Wind
Halliburton to the rescue, Bourbon Street and Mardi Gras
Will there be Jazz once again?
Eastside, Northside, Southside and Westside

A homeless man sleeping under a bridge
Black, white yellow and brown
A rich man driving a Hummer
Rich, poor dirty and clean
A movie star on Rodeo Drive
Hot, windy, cold and dry
An immigrant selling ice cream from a cart
Ralph’s, Vons, Wal-Mart and Sears
A business executive in a suit
Wendy’s, McDonald’s, Carl’s Junior and Taco Bell
A hooker doing business on the strip
USC, UCLA, Cal State and Dominguez Hills
A woman gathering cans by the road
A city of contradiction
A glimmering dragon glowing at night
Through polluted air and dark clouds of smog
The birds singing

Next to rotting mattresses and broken bottles
The trees growing

Between deserted buildings and cemented streets
The flowers blooming

Among fumigated houses filled with poison gas
The insects still buzzing

Above hospitals bridges and cars
The sun still shining
Early in the morning an old silver Ford Sedan with balding tires turns off the freeway at 1st Street and pulls into downtown Los Angeles. The streets are still wet from the rain that fell the night before. The sidewalks are empty except for the homeless sleeping in cardboard boxes trying to keep dry. Soon the car pulls into an old warehouse and one of the passengers gets out and opens a metal fence, two large rotweilers appear out of nowhere and begin barking. The driver of the car, a large Mexican man, turns off the radio and announces to the passengers in the back seat that they’ve arrived.

Benigno and Josefina scramble out of the vehicle and begin stretching their sore arms and legs. They had been riding in the trunk of the car for miles and had only been allowed back inside of the vehicle a few hours before. The Coyotes, as they were known, escorted them inside of the warehouse. Among the vegetable crates and trashcans were a few stained mattresses spread out on the cement floor. There was a large wooden bench with packages of food and propane stove.

“Are you hungry?” shouted Alberto, one of the Coyotes, “Come and prepare yourself something to eat.”

Benigno said that they were too tired to eat and wanted to rest.

“Go lie down on those mattresses over there,” exclaimed the other Coyote, who went by the name of Rodolfo.

As Benigno lies on the mattress, he looks up at a rat scurrying along the rafters of the warehouse. As a boy Benigno used to shoot rats with his slingshot while he ate garbage near his village. He was tall and skinny then with long black hair —

Benigno, carrying a machete and a few tools across his shoulders is returning from the milpa. He’s tired and hungry and is anxious to return home where he knows there will be fresh tortillas and coffee awaiting him. Now that his father was dead he was responsible for taking care of his mother and younger sister. As he reaches the village he hears the sound of large engines and quickly sees the dreaded green army trucks near his home. Out of nowhere his mother comes running down the dirt street, grabbing Benigno quickly by the arms. She screams,
“Hurry, son, hide, the soldiers have returned.”

As they flee from the village she tells Benigno that the soldiers are rounding up all of the boys over twelve and drafting them into the army. As they pass the cornfields, they follow a small trail that leads into the forest. Then suddenly, a group of soldiers spring up out of nowhere. Benigno’s first instinct is to defend his mother. As he turns toward her, a soldier knocks him down with the butt of his rifle. As Benigno gains consciousness he finds himself in the back of an army truck with five other boys from his village. The next day is steamy and hot when they arrive at the military compound near the coast. The soldiers pull the boys out of the truck and force them into small wooden barracks.

Startled by Josefina’s voice, Benigno focuses on the shafts of light beaming down from the skylight. Josefina is lying on another mattress across from him. He asks her where Alberto and Rodolfo are.

“I don’t know, they left a few hours ago. I overheard them say they were going to find us some work.”

Benigno and Josefina begin heating up some of the tamales that the Coyotes had left for them. They find wooden crates to sit on and silently unwrap their tamales. As the steam spirals into the stale air, Josefina informs Benigno that she also comes from a small village in Oaxaca, Mexico, and that her parents are Zapatecos. Benigno asks her why she decided to make this long journey.

“In our village we weave blankets and plant corn,” she says. “It’s becoming more and more difficult to survive. People from our village have been coming to the United States for years, and now every young person in our village is expected to come here. Many of the people from my village live near Stockton in the San Joaquin Valley. That is where I want to go.”

That evening Benigno and Josefina hear the dogs barking and the chain link fence rattling. Suddenly, the aluminum door comes sliding open. Alberto is still sitting in the car smoking a cigarette and listening to “Musica Nortena,” while Rodolfo comes striding into the room.

“I found you two some work,” he announces, “you start tomorrow. Josefina, you’ll be working in a flower store, while you little Benigno, will begin working in a restaurant. Don’t worry, with the money you’ll be making you’ll pay us off in no time, but in the meantime we’ll be collect-
ing 50% of your salaries until your debt is repaid. I found you two a place to live, a hotel with plenty of other pollitos to keep you company. Get some sleep now because tomorrow you’re going to have a long day.”

The following day the Coyotes take Benigno to a restaurant on Wilshire Boulevard. When they pull up to the restaurant, the Coyotes tell Benigno to wait outside in the car. Rodolfo returns with a large man with red hair. Rodolfo says to Benigno,

“This is Bob, he’s your new boss.”

Bob signals Benigno to follow him into kitchen. There are two other men waiting there as well, one from El Salvador and another from Mexico. Bob asks the Mexican man to interpret for him. Bob explains to Benigno what he wants him to do: wash dishes, mop the floor, sweep, and clean the dining area. He tells Benigno that he’ll be making $4.50 an hour but that Alberto would be collecting his paycheck. That evening as Benigno goes out to the alley to empty the trash, he sees two policemen arresting a young man dressed near the street—

Benigno, now fourteen years old is living in a military camp in Guatemala. He has been receiving military training for several months. However, in addition to his training he is being forced to provide manual labor for the maintenance of the camp. Assigned to a ruthless sergeant th by the name of Euricio, there seems to be no end to the humiliation that he is being subjected to day after day at the hands of this little tyrant. In fact, the sergeant harbors ill will against Benigno because it was he who had ordered the assassination of Benigno’s father. Unable to tolerate another day of the unbearable treatment of Euricio, Benigno decides to escape from the camp. That evening while everyone sleeps he slips out of the barracks and leaves the compound.

Several months pass and Benigno and Josefina are growing closer day by day. Josefina has been working steadily at the flower shop. It seems that their debt to the Coyotes should have been repaid by now. However, Alberto and Rodolfo keep adding more to their debt, charging them for rent and food. Meanwhile, the conditions at the hotel are becoming more and more intolerable. It seems that there is a steady flow of new arrivals to replace the others who are moved to new locations. The people there are working in sweatshops, hotels, restaurants, and the women often work as nannies in the suburbs of Los Angeles.
It is on a Friday that Benigno tries to awaken Josefina for work. She is covered with perspiration and burning with fever. Benigno calls the Coyotes for help but they are nowhere to be found. Several of the women at the hotel try to help Josefina, but she seems to be getting worse as each hour passes. Frustrated Benigno flags down a taxi and uses the little money that he has left to take Josefina to the hospital. The taxi driver pulls into the emergency entrance of the Los Angeles General Hospital. It takes hours for the doctors to attend to Josefina as she lies there shivering in the Emergency Room. After being questioned by the nurses, Benigno sits in the waiting room all day, and then toward the evening a nurse walks up to him, “I’m sorry, Josefina passed away a few minutes ago.” Enraged and in shock Benigno rushes out of the hospital and begins walking silently through the city alone.
Evening sky purple and blue
Tiny lights gleaming
A treasure chest of diamonds

A night bird singing
Perched on a rotting tree
Soon becomes silent

A dome of sparkling stars
A soft glow on the horizon
Grows larger

A bright orange face
With a crooked smile
Approaches from the east

People slumber in their beds
With the stars and planets overhead
And moon the only witness
Dominic Tiberio | The Lioness

My mother comes home from night school out of breath from holding in her coughs as if it were vomit. She leans on the sink with her palms and stares in the mirror. How do I go on, she says.

She lifts her bruised legs into bed, she won’t sleep tonight. I can hear her muffled coughs through the wall. She wakes me in the morning, two egg yolks for eyes.

Over the year my mother lost her hair and was left with scars that reminded her she could never have another child. She didn’t let my sister and me see her in the hospital.

That Halloween my mother wore a wig and handed out candy to the trick or treaters.
Dominic Tiberio  |  INHERITANCE

I've been looking for you
since I was five
at the beach or on the pier
where you held me on your
shoulders with my hands
locked into your curls
I look for you behind
every thick mustache
like digging through
sand never finding your
sun beat flesh

I can see your eyes nesting
in Grandma's head
but you still can't be found

But when I am home
I can see you when
Mom watches me
draw or play guitar
I was five, at recess,
The first time I kissed
A girl with curls that
Hung like ribbons
In front of my eyes.
We hid under the plastic
Roof of the playhouse
Where the sun couldn’t
Reach us.
Tiny voices filled the
Air with chatter,
Tricycles whizzed by
Like bees and squealed
Like hamster wheels.
Inside our hideout
Yellow dump trucks
Stood still. No Hot Wheels
Rolled on the carpet
Street we stood on.
We looked eye to eye
And closed them.
We moved as if we were
Underwater, our tongues
Stuck out, pressed between
Our lips. We leaned in.
Two slugs touched
Like a 9 volt battery.
“Fairy Godmothers don’t exist,” Raquel said that afternoon.

“Oh yes, they do!” I said, “but only a few can see them.”

Raquel started to laugh, “You are a dreamer.”

Surprised, Ali looked at her, “Why are you here so early, Raquel?”

Ali was six years old, a month younger than I. Her name was Alicia, but almost everybody called her Ali. It was winter in Irapuato, the city where I was born, and the orange tree blossoms gave the old patio its unique and beautiful aroma.

The orange tree has blossomed early this year, I thought that morning. It was maybe because that year the weather of the Mexican winter had been warmer than usual.

“Let’s go, Alicia,” Raquel said.

“Oh, no! Please, Raquel, I don’t want to go yet. Look, we are drinking orange blossom tea. We just made it. Do you want some?”

“Alicia, what you are drinking is dirty water only. Come on! Let’s go!”

“Please, Sister, let me stay a little longer. I don’t want to go yet.”

“No,” Raquel said.

“We have to go home. Hurry up! I have homework to do.”

I looked at her. Soon, Raquel would be fifteen-years-old. She was as skinny as a straw. Both Ali and Raquel were my first cousins. They were the daughters of my uncle Antonio, my father’s older brother. Uncle Antonio disliked my father. I never saw them speak or hug each other.

My uncle came to visit my grandmother every evening on his way home, which was only a block away from Grandma’s house. I was already used to my father and uncle’s cold war. It had been like this ever since I could remember.

However, I liked my cousins. They came over to my grandma’s house almost every day to play with me and my brothers. We lived next door, so we met there every day. I only played with Ali. Raquel was much older than I, and my other cousin, Reyna, was only three years old. Besides that, Ali was my best friend.

Ali was so beautiful, so good, that sometimes I thought she was one
of the little angels floating above the Virgin Mary in the altar of my church. So there, in that patio, we played house, jumped rope, started to practice soccer, and sometimes we climbed to the roof of the house to pick orange blossoms from the top of the tree and mix them with water from the kitchen faucet to make tea.

Indeed, those days were perfection revealing itself through the eyes of two children.

The little ceramic cups that my father had bought for me in Guanajuato shone on the little table we had set under the lemon tree. It was six o’clock P.M. more or less. The music of the merry-go-round outside the house played its old songs with a rhythm magical and different. Uncle Melchor, my father’s younger brother, was in charge of the carousel that day. We children called him “Padrino,” and he was my favorite uncle. He always had a little present or a kind word for me.

That day we celebrated the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe to Juan Diego in 1531, and on the streets of the barrio, people gathered at night to enjoy the band’s music, good food, clowns, firecrackers, and to meet old friends and neighbors.

“Please, Raquel,” I insisted. “Let her stay. I will ask my father to take her home later, please….?”

“No,” Raquel said and turned her back on us and started walking toward the gigantic front door.

Outside the decorative, colorful squares of tissue paper hung from side to side on the street. All the families had spent weeks making them especially for that day. Soon, the band would be playing: “Above the Waves.” I knew it.

Ali hesitated. Her sister had disappeared, “Okay, prima, I have to run. I will see you tomorrow, okay?”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Wait for me, Raquel,” Ali screamed. And she ran through the open door to the street. I looked at the teacups sadly, and I thought that Raquel had come that day too early… too early. I looked around. I saw nobody.

Everybody is outside already, I thought. The sun going down in the horizon was making funny shadows over the bricks of the patio. I started to put the teacups and spoons in a box. Then, suddenly, a strange sound
made me tremble. What’s that? I wondered. I listened to the voices coming from the street. I heard people crying, screaming, asking for help. I ran to the street and saw what I should never have seen and knew suddenly, that life has no favorite children.

At that moment, I felt as if someone had stabbed me in the heart. My chest, my head, my whole body hurt. But I couldn’t talk. I couldn’t move. Then I saw uncle Melchor holding Ali in his arms. Her white dress had turned red. Her face was white, white. Her pink ribbon was in the mud of the street. My grandfather looked at Ali with a strange expression.

Next to the door of the monstrous truck, there was a man whose bloodshot eyes were gleaming. He had run over Ali. I heard Ali saying, almost whispering, to uncle Melchor: “Padrino, I can’t see anything. Is it night already?”

“Yes, Baby,” my uncle said, with a weird whistling in his voice. “It is night.”

“Padrino,” Ali said, “please hold on to my gum.”

“Okay, Darling, okay, I will.” And Ali closed her eyes and went to sleep. Uncle Melchor ran with Ali in his arms toward the nearest hospital. But it was too late, too late. Ali never woke up.

I stood there, next to the merry-go-round, looking at my grandfather cover his face with his hands. The little horses had stopped going around. The next morning. I saw Ali in her white coffin. She had a gardenia in her hands, and her beautiful angel face was white like alabaster. She was in perfect peace. She already rested in the arms of God. Her mother bought a new pink ribbon for her hair.

I remembered, then, some lines of a poem that Sister Columba, our first grade teacher, had recited to us at our reading class not long before: “Run… moon… moon… moon… if Gypsies came, they would make necklaces and white rings with your heart.”

Someone by the name of Lorca had written them, Sister said. I memorized the passage because, to me, it sounded like a song for children although it had a strange rhythm, I thought that morning. And you, Ali, unlike the moon, didn’t have time to run, and the Gypsies had stolen your heart.

I went home later, but I never played with another cousin again. My teacups were forever forgotten somewhere at my grandma’s house.
Now, Ali..., dear Ali, half-a-century later—I still think of you, and somewhere, deep in my heart, in a secret place, I keep you, and I know that sooner or later, you will return to that old patio, old house, old lemon tree to fulfill your promise.

And I will be there, waiting for you under that patient tree that still now casts its shadow over the hard floor and still drops its bright yellow lemons over my grandma’s pots. That old tree waits for you, Ali, waits for me, waits for the people we loved and love.
And around it, over the dry leaves, we will dance in the moonlight, weightless and ethereal, and we will go back to perfection. After all… a promise is a promise…

Isn’t it, Cousin…? 🌝
At the end of World War II the colonial town of Irapuato, where I was born, was full of Europeans who came to America fleeing the Nazi Army. Mexico was a safe country to hide because Mexico didn’t support the war, and we had a respectable and peaceful life.

I was raised in a very conservative society, where values and religion were respected. So when I was four years old, I started attending a nun Catholic school called Atenas Academy, a school where girls learned to be good daughters of God and good wives, in that order, where mathematics were not that important, and the history of Mexico didn’t exist. I didn’t know exactly why, but when I asked Sister Columba, she looked at me as if I were an alien from space until one day I stopped asking. After all, I thought, I could read my brothers’ history books, for they were attending public schools and learning many pretty things about our country. At Athens School, however, learning to express our thoughts and write them in good sentences was primordial, and to read the classics was extremely important. The rest of the main and essential subjects were crocheting, knitting and embroidery, so I had the chance to make for my mom a lot of tablecloths with poinsettias or roses and knit purses for my grandma and sweaters for my brothers, which they never liked. Of course, we had subjects like geography and geometry, etc. etc., which were fun and easy for me. So I spent many years of my life in that old building on Allende Street.

In the evenings when I had finished my homework, I was usually bored. I couldn’t go outside to play with my neighborhood friends because my father thought it was dangerous (of course). So I was bored most of the time.

One day while wandering my grandma’s house (she lived next door from us), I found a gigantic box full of books. So I decided to take one to the roof of the house, where I could sit without interruption while the sun went down. That day I discovered that without moving a foot I could go far away to distant places where different people lived and had different and fascinating stories. I read all the books in the house little by little while I was growing up, like The Divine Comedy, the Bible, Gone with the
Wind, Vision of the Anahuac, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, The Voragine, Les Miserables, Paradise Lost, and so on.

Soon I felt the need to write, and I did. I wrote many little poems and essays that I faithfully destroyed because I was afraid my brothers would read them and make fun of me. Many, many years later, while taking Carol Lem’s creative writing class at East Los Angeles College, I discovered that writing was a good catharsis for the pain of living, and when I would finish a piece, yes sometimes I cried, but in the end peace came to me.
Michael Venegas  |  ATTENTION

So, how does this work entirely?

You have to type whatever I say?

But not what you say.

Right.

May as well start.

You know for someone that is supposed to be listening and typing, you sure do talk a lot.

Want a drink or something before we start? No wait, don’t put that in there.

Too late?!

What do you mean too late? It’s never too late, all you have to do is highlight and delete.

Fine, whatever, let’s just get started.

I want to clarify a few things first, my name is Edward. I lived in a shack of a house that brought about nothing but pain, honor and pride. You see, I’m the older brother of the family. My younger brother… well, I rather not talk about him at the moment.

It’s been years, I’m thirty-eight now, with a son of my own. It took three tries but I have my son. I can’t wait to see the girls chase after him. It’ll be quite a sight to see him grow-up. I can only imagine that he’ll turn out just like me. I mean, I wasn’t all that bad while growing up; in fact, I’d say I was a perfect child. HAHAHA… who am I kidding? I was a rambunctious kid. I bit the butts of the cute girls at the K-mart. My parents had their hands full with me. Couldn’t handle me for nothing. Did whatever
I wanted and got whatever I wanted. Why do you think they had my brother? He was someone they could control.

Wrong? What do you mean wrong?

I’m doing this because I don’t know how to write, I know how to talk, I know how to tell a story. I know how to be me. Do you know how annoying it is for someone to act and try to be like you, when you don’t want them to? No matter how old I was he would always try to be like me.

Yes, I know he was my little brother, but still he needed to find his own life. His own thing to do. He did and ended up becoming a writer. Guess he wanted it more than I did. Or at least my parents babied him until he was ready to go out on his own. I, on the other hand, wanted money, didn’t matter where it came from so long as I was being paid for a job well-done. I didn’t want to be under my parents thumb like he was. Yeah, he was able to reach his dream. Well, forget about it and move on.

When he was in college he wrote a piece called “Sacrifice.” I thought the title was interesting especially since he stole my birthright. “Stolen” would’ve been a better title for it. He said it was a fictional memoir piece. Technically, it was a memoir. But it wasn’t his memoir, it was mine. That story was based off a memory I had kept telling over and over. He stole that memory from me. It wasn’t even a memoir; it was a memoir based off my memory. And the extent he took the story too. I can’t believe he would lie so much.

First of all I still remember the day, June 19, 1973. Mom wasn’t cooking rice and beans, she opened a can of refried beans and reheated the rice Grandma gave us the night before. That was her usual “home-cooked meal.” He made it sound like she bought a McDonald’s cheeseburger and called it prime rib. He was right about me being under the bed when Dad came in through the door. But what he didn’t tell you was that he was slobbering all over his blanky. Did you know, he had this interesting way of sucking his fingers?
Most normal kids, like me, they would just suck on their thumb. Of course, he was an idiot. He would suck on his middle and ring finger, but before that he would wrap his blanky around those two fingers so that the blanky would be rubbing against his nose. To this day, I have yet to meet another person that did that, he still is the only one. He would do things a different way just to do it. It didn’t matter to him how he looked to other people; so long as he felt comfortable he didn’t care.

What was wrong with it? I’ll tell you what was wrong with it! He had no pride in his appearance! I hated that, he had a name to live up to. He needed to live up to my father’s name. My father fought all his life to get his family taken care of. He fought in the mud, worked in the dirt and built his family a home. Not a house, mind you. Anyone can buy a house to live in. But it took my mother and father to build a home. And then for him to write that story basically degrading my parents. Our parents. I don’t care how many people said it was a beautiful piece. I don’t care how many people said they loved it. Fact of the matter is Dad and Mom weren’t shown in the greatest of lights.

Anyway, back to the story. I remember I was watching something, cartoons. I forget what but that doesn’t really matter. But when I heard Betsy
I did run straight to my room, locked the door and hid under the bed.

Betsy? She was my dad’s truck at the time. It was brown. Old. It had construction stuff in the back. But under the bed I couldn’t hear nothing much in the other room. I’m not going to bother to guess either. I didn’t care really. I was safe. My mother wasn’t going to let me be spanked.

Yes, spanked. That’s all that happened. It wasn’t a beating like my so-called “brother” described. He was right though, usually when my dad saw two legs sticking out from under the bed he would just walk away, take a shower and watch T.V. I would come out near dinner time, he’d rub my head and we’d just watch T.V. He’d always smile and tell me, “One of these days, that bed isn’t going to be a safe place.” He was right, the day came and I got the spanking I deserved.

I deserved it because, well as cliché as it may sound, I was a bad kid because I wanted the attention. What do you expect? He was the baby! So he got all of their attention, he didn’t have to do anything and they loved it. He had them wrapped around his finger. He’d blow bubbles with his drool and they’d run to get a camera. When he slept they would give him all the attention. I still remember this one time: we were going to bed, they put him in his crib, covered him up ‘cause it was a cold night. They kissed him then they walked away. It was like I wasn’t even there. All I got was a flick of a light switch.

Is it any wonder why in all of our childhood pictures every time there’s a picture of him the next ten pictures have me in the shot with him. I tried everything I could. At first I was the good kid, I was the smart one, I didn’t make that much of a mess when eating. I was able to read billboards almost as soon as I could talk. I was biting butts well because I wanted attention. Even if it was negative attention I wanted something. I didn’t want to feel like I did that cold night.

The spanking lasted quite awhile actually. To this day, I still say neither of us gave up. I still remember when my ass was in the air the belt never moved up or down. Each hit was squarely on the butt. My dad would scream, “Are you going to school tomorrow?!”
I screamed, “NO!”

Whack.

“Are you going to school?!”

“NO!”

Whack. This went on for maybe ten, fifteen minutes. By the end of it, I didn’t say yes, he didn’t say I give up. My brother separated us. When my father heard him screaming he dropped the belt and me. I remember my face being red. I was sweating a lot. My ass was so beet red that it hurt when the wind blew in from the window. But I got up. That’s the one thing my father always gave me. I got up. I walked to the kitchen and, of course, my mom blamed me for whatever happened to my brother. I looked at him, my brother. I looked at him and believed what he’d done. Even when I’m a bad kid, even when I’m getting spanked, even negative attention, he manages to wrap them around his finger. I used to have that power and I wanted it back.

I did the only thing left. I went to school. Got good grades. Hell, when he started school he was missing a lot. More so than me. My dad always wanted to do the same to him but he never got the chance. My mom said she could barely bear to see what he did to me, but to do it to him would’ve been too much. But I always liked hearing, “Why don’t you be more like your brother.” Especially when my mom said it, cause then he wasn’t getting any attention, I was. When report cards came out, he would hide his or say he lost it somewhere. But me, I would always be sure to tell them when they came out so that I would get the attention and hear those ever loving words, “Why can’t you be more like your brother?” He tried. So hard. But he never could. I felt bad for him though.

Because I would set the standard to point where I knew he wouldn’t be able to reach it. He would try his hardest and still fail, I liked seeing that. I liked putting him in that situation. Remember what I said when we were going to bed as kids?

I left out something, we used to have a night light. I used to be able to see him and he used to be able to see me. Well, he must’ve known something was wrong that night. You see, when my parents left the room he was
lying there just looking at me and I was looking at him. A few minutes

later he reached out his hand for me. You want to know what I did?

Nothing. I flipped over, looked away and went to sleep. If he had the attention of my parents, then why should he have mine?

Do I miss him? I don’t miss him as much as I hate him. You tell me, you were his wife. How did it feel when you found him in the tub? Like I said, I hate him more than miss him. He didn’t get back up. If he wanted to be like me he would’ve gotten back up. Maybe my father should’ve spanked him. He did what my father was afraid of, he gave up.
Michael Venegas | The Store

It was yellow. A big studio-like store. As you walked in from the back it was dark and there was no light. The only light coming in came from the door. If you weren’t careful you could smack your shoulder against the clothes rack. Yes, it was a Men’s Big and Tall clothing store. There were shelves in the main lobby separated enough so that mannequins could be fully dressed, though many times they weren’t. I remember the seasonal dressed ones were on the first floor, the classic tuxedo mannequins were standing on the shelves.

There was a wall that divided the back half of the store. If you were to walk in from the front, the back entrance was on the right. On the left was where the tailor worked with a measuring tape wrapped around his neck and a pocketful of pins.

There were stairs that went up to a second floor. It led to an office where I rarely saw anyone, but I always felt someone watching me though there were absolutely no cameras in the store. The owner relied on the good nature of the people and on the nature of his mystic guards. I would often find myself hiding in the clothes rack trying to get away from the eyes that would stare at me. I would get a sense of relief when my mother said it was time for us to go and jet out from the circle of clothes to be the first one outside.

It’s been years and a decade since returning to this store; a pity really, a store that was once dedicated to my father’s back is now worshipping my mother’s toes.

When I walked in all of the old memories disappeared in a second. The room is now split in half, its vast wideness replaced by a narrow row. Ceiling lights brighten up the backroom filled with rack after rack after rack of floor model shoes for sale. They call it the bargain corner. It’s more like the last hope corner. A trashcan directly across from it waits for new donations to add to its collection. The shelves that once held a complete mannequin now hold six rows of boxed soles. The other half of the store is used for storage.

The tailor is gone. Even when I was scared he would always bid my family and me, “Ah Good day,” with a heavy Irish accent. He was white with eyes that have seen new worlds come and go. I can only figure he
died and his family sold the store. Every time my mother would buy my father’s clothes he always asked how he was doing. He was the type of man that would remember a face when he saw the name after one business deal. His spot is gone now, replaced by shoes. All of his life is gone.

That was all gone. They are replaced by a Chinese, “Yo!” People that only care about the deal, not the person. As I write cameras are recording the slightest motion of my hand.

In the front to the right is a small men’s shoes corner filled with Florishmens, Dockers, Carolina Shoes, Sketchers and Berlingtons. When you first walk in, though, the first thing you notice is a bargain rack of size ten and half and eleven shoes. Four rows of chairs face a wood paneled wall, oak with maple miter joints: shoes with heels and buckles, shoes with laces cover the walls. The wall only serves as a separator to cover even more shoes. Against the back of the seats are displays, the grandest of all sitting in the middle of the whole store. There are two islands of six seats back to back opposite the chairs and displays. Hush Puppies, Naturalizing, Ros Hommerson fill the right wall. Clinic and Spring Step fill the left along with a register.

The Irish man made business deals when on the phone. The man talking now on the phone is making his personal calls switching between English and Chinese. Before, the store was run by one man; his son worked the register.

Now, the quality customer service is gone. The Chinese cashier used my mother’s card to pay for another customer’s shoes and not wanting to have to go through a “rassle of a reef-fun.” He suggested that my mother buy another $150 shoe while he charges the original pair of shoes that she was buying.

I wondered about the ghost that watched and made sure that there was no stealing. I would like to think that they don’t care about this place, especially since the owners took away their second floor office and filled with guess what, more shoes.

Even I can only hope that the old Irishman had not seen this before he died. If only I can find out for certain that he hasn’t visited his store while in death because this would be his hell.
Michael Venegas | TEDDY

“Merry Christmas, Honey!”

“Thanks, Grandpa,” then the light rushed into my eyes. Then I felt a grip loosen, like a candle blown out by the wind.

“It was mine when I was a little boy, please take care of him as if it was me,” my master said.

“Ok, I will!” Putting up a lying face to her grandfather, she didn’t want or need another teddy bear. She already had five from her past Christmases.

Unfortunately, a few days later he died and I was sad that I would not see him anymore. But I knew there was a reason why he gave me to his dearest granddaughter just before his death.

A few days later...

“You...,” the girl picked up the teddy bear. “You remind me of my grandpa,” she said smiling. After that I suddenly became her favorite toy.

Oh I can still remember when I was still in good order. I had a red bow
around my neck, marble eyes that had such a shine, and just like any other bear I had cotton fur, and filled with cotton to make me extra soft, as if I was made to be a pillow for a loving child, hopefully, this child.

I remember when we would sleep together, that was when I knew I had worth. I mostly remember when we went to the neighborhood park. Everyone had their mechanical Tinker toy Men, or family-like figurines.

“I don’t care what you say, I love my bear! My bear is better then all of your toys put together! He takes care of me when I sleep,” and she knew I always would. “Can your toys sleep with you keeping the monsters away? I can talk to him and he talks to me. We’re friends!” The children had been silenced by my new master, and for this I would do anything and everything possible for her.

But just like my previous master she would grow older. She was ten, I had been with her for five wonderful years. But she began to change suddenly, she wanted the family-like figurines. She wanted things that were more real. I understood. It had happened with my previous owner. “Can I play with that?” my master asked another child.

“What about your bear?” the child smirked.

“Him? I’m tired of him, I want to play with your toys, can I? I’ll give you my bear if you let me play with your toys.”

“I don’t want your bear, he’s old, and he’s been yours. Why do I want that? You can play with my toys, but what about your bear?”

At least that child cared enough for me. “I’ll just put this shiny chain around him. That way the other kids will know he’s mine.” A present for me? From this child that had just tried giving me away; maybe perhaps, I was still loved.

She placed me in the sandbox so that I could see other children playing but would never touch me. There I sat for the next few hours bleaching under the sun, losing my oak tree coloring. I saw so many children playing with their toys. I saw them happy as my child once was. But night had started to come around and I wondered where my master was. No child would pick me up because they were afraid that the child I belonged to would come and scream and say I was theirs. Or maybe because they thought I made some disease that would get them sick. The moon was out now, and my master still wasn’t here. I hoped she’d come back. I felt so alone.
It was morning now and children were playing in the sandbox a little closer to me. I was getting buried under their playful sand. I could feel the shine in my eyes growing duller. It started to rain, and all the children fled. But where was my master? Had she completely forgotten her promise to her grandfather? Or was she treating me the way she always felt about me?

“Let’s go, Timmy! Hey my bear, I forgot it was here.” Those were the words I awoke to the next morning. “Timmy, I’ll meet you later!”

“Oh! Bye!”

“Hmm... I wonder if I could make you better.” Was she going to repair me? Did she still really love me?

“Mommy, where are the scissors?”

“What for, dear?”

“Oh... I need to cut something out for school.” Maybe she was going to repair me later. Then we went to her father’s work station, she found three wooden screws before her father found her in his work room. We then went to her mother’s sewing room and found three pins and two thumb tacks. She stared into my dulled marbled eyes, “I’m going to make you better, just you see.”

She started cutting from the back of my head and made sure to not cut my neck and to start at my back and continued down to my tail. Then she started pulling out my insides. I wondered if she had heard me screaming, would she have stopped? She put the thumb tacks into my mouth from the inside. “There now you have fangs like a ‘real’ bear.” She started with my body now; again I started screaming. Could she not hear me? How can she not hear me anymore? We’ve talked before. Still I bore the pain for her because I loved her. Wooden screws for my right arm, pins for my left, “There now you have claws like a ‘real’ bear. Isn’t that better?” Was it? For the better, that is? It surely didn’t feel like it.

This was when she realized that it would be much too hard for her to put my cotton back. She couldn’t ask her mother to repair me. What would she think if her daughter did this to her father’s dear teddy bear? So she filled my head with sand, tied up the hole with a piece of loose string from her dress. She filled my hands with rocks, why with rocks and not with sand I did not know. But she didn’t bother to fill in my stomach. “Eww... you look uglier than before,” she said with such disgust. I always wondered what it would be like to fly like bird. Now I was given the
chance to fly like one. She threw me onto the park’s grassy knoll and with that I knew I was no longer wanted, or worse yet no longer loved.

How could she be so cruel? Why couldn’t she just give me to another child that would accept me the way that I was. Why did she have to change me so much, into something so hideous and dangerous? I will probably never find the reason why. I heard the dogs of Mr. McGee. Are they coming to gnaw me? Or would he care to repair me and present me to one of his children? The hope I had was dashed when a dog began to shake me like a rag doll but was soon let go once my “claws” picked his nose.

There I lay for days and days, then finally a drunkard picked me up, he smelt of one. I would never forget him, his stench was one that never left my fur. Last thing I remember was blacking out and only seeing his shoe.

“A... And here I am, a toy, a child’s plaything. Well... maybe not anymore, maybe if someone cares to repair me to my normalcy.”

“I don’t care who or what you are. You’re no toy I’ve ever seen before,” said a Tinker toy man pointing with his neon red stick.

“Believe me or not, but I was once loved, as if I was a real person,” the teddy bear said

as its head was tipping over.

It’s been over, oh I lost count of how many years I’ve been sitting on this charity shelf. I’ve seen every one of my friends leave me—the slightly bleached rabbit, the one-armed string puppet, and yes I even heard the Tinker toy man say I wasn’t a toy. They’re all gone and I’m all alone.

“Mr. Stevens, Mr. Stevens. Do you have anymore toys for my little sister?” Is there a chance that, perhaps, I would be given to a new master, one that would love me enough to change me back to my normalcy?

“I do have one left, he’s been there for over nine years now. But I don’t think your sister would want it.” A charity man picks me up and shows me to the child.

Nothing hurts my heart more than seeing that child scream and cry after she sees me. “I’m sorry, honey, but I don’t have anymore toys left, he’s all I have...”

With that he puts me back on the shelf; Mr. Stevens and the child continue their talk. Why, why did my old master give me to his granddaugh-
ter, why did she turn me into this horrid beast just to throw me away? Am I doomed to be alone for something that I’ve done?
Michael Venegas | Wallet
The sun rays lit his off-white office.
The makeshift desk, two red cabinets and a door
were still dirty with his work.
There I sat in his chair
wondering where has my rock gone.

I looked through the drawers frantically.
The cold steel handles, cabinet containers hid nothing:
my elementary school work, paper clips, rubber bands, his diabetes test supplies.
Everything in its place and a place for everything,
I slammed the drawers shut

and saw his turtle shell.
Had my brother or mother walked in
they would’ve thought the day before didn’t happen.

I cracked open the worn leather wallet.
Yesterday it meant nothing, today it’s the Holy Grail.
The tri-fold wallet showed his three sides.

First who he was—a driver’s license, Kaiser card, Triple A card.
I opened the other flap of the brown shield.
It showed his business side—contractor’s business cards.
Hidden away was one of his own,
one for each site where he was an Oltman’s Super.

Finally the middle, his deepest side—family:
an ATM card, two Visas and a Mastercard, then his savings card hid
at the bottom, my second grade picture back to back with my brother’s fifth.
I glanced into the big pocket, only a lotto ticket,
because he’d given me money for the week.
Then I laid out the contents of his life,
still looking for something that belonged to me.

When I pulled out our 1988 pictures, it slips.
In my head a bomb explodes as it lands on the desk, five hundred dollars kept hidden for the family. Time stops, every second takes an hour.

All I could do was kiss the wallet and piece the turtle shell back together. The dripping water will not break it down I did what I could only do—

Put everything back in its place so that I knew it would still be there again and again.
Not all that long ago, I was eating a yellow Starburst pack. I had just eaten my favorite, strawberry. I thought to myself, “I really wish they make an all strawberry pack.” With this notion in my head I decided to skip through the rest of the flavors—lemon, orange and cherry. I never really had a taste for them yet I would still always eat them, but this time I didn’t want to.

I just had one, and I loved it, as I always do. I had my second, and I still loved it. Then my third and I felt the pleasure of eating the candy leave me; it left like a train leaving the station. Finally, I had my fourth and the flavor was just gone.

After I swallowed my last strawberry Starburst I managed to null out my Ethics class completely, which wasn’t really in session. The students and the professor were talking about random vacation-time things. I began to process through my feeble little mind: how can something that should bring me pleasure suddenly doesn’t?

I began to think about what made the Starburst so pleasurable. Then I realized the sad reality of it, it was pleasurable because of only one fact, that I had to eat through the tastes I didn’t like, and for one hated flavor, lemon. Usually, when I finally get the strawberry flavor it would be so much sweeter than normal.

Too much of a good thing can be a bad, nasty and down-right horrid thing. Something I thought was “Heavenly” suddenly isn’t and became “Hellish,” and something that is “Hellish” suddenly became “Heavenly.” Maybe that is the reason as to why Now and Laters never really sold. To this day I rarely see someone eating or even buying them for that matter.

My class was nearing its end, and I still had more questions for myself. I thought that if this was true for candy, maybe it’s true for real life as well. I’ve met people that I thought were truly dumb, ignorant, and didn’t know what they were talking about. But by the same guidelines, I’ve met the opposite. When I’ve met the seventh person in a row that was truly smart, I would wish in the deep pits of my being that I would meet someone who didn’t know what they were talking about or led a very superficial way of life. It’s almost rejuvenating.

I also noticed that this analogy can also work with situations in life.
such as someone going through a horrible week at school and/or work
only to have some kind of good day on the weekend, doing whatever it is
that person wants to do. I’ve gone through so many weeks of school just
trying to keep my grades up or finishing a paper, just so that I can go out
to my favorite bar to meet a few people, or possibly Miss. Right, though
too many of these days can weaken the experience.

I realized also that this works with girls. It seems that in my early
years, I went through some really good girlfriends, my strawberry
Starbursts. Then just like I was at the end of my class, I’ve had nothing
but flavors that I really didn’t care for.

I didn’t throw them away though for some reason to this day I still
can’t comprehend completely. My best guess is maybe I have gone
through lemon, orange and cheery Starbursts in order to finally find my
strawberry again. Girls—unlike candy, I can’t go to a vending machine to
get another twelve for seventy-five cents. Who knows, even now as I’m
growing older, I’m developing more of a taste for those other flavors.
Nobody remembered where he came from.
Nobody touches him unless they have to.
Nobody remembered the carve marks, gold paint or lost key.
Nobody touches the rusted hinge or gaping hole.

He was once loved and played with everyday.
He is old and worthless.
He was happy and sprang to life for a child.
He is what scared children when they hid behind mommy.

Somebody gave him as a Christmas present.
Somebody tries to sell him, three pence or best offer.
Somebody gave away his key and didn’t know it.
Somebody tries to bury him, in a chest, beneath the stuffed dolls and metal trains, porcelain clowns and teddy bears, and the tattered dressed twisted stringed marionettes.

Nobody cared when his spring was broken.
Nobody cares if they find him.
Nobody cared when they called him an evil wizard punished for his crimes.
Nobody cared that he is waiting for someone, to fix him.
Michael Venegas | Voice of Memory
(Inspired by Edward Hopper's “Evening Wind”)

The young widow sets in for the day. 
She topples her covers over her hand, 
reaches out for his. 
A gust of wind smothers her bare body, 
the white shaded curtain caresses her face 
like her husband the night before. 
Kneeling on the bed, she is still 
searching for him 
as she turns her head. 
Swearing she heard the wind whisper 
she looks out the window 
and is met by the gentle caress 
taking away her tears and saying, 
“i love you, too.”
I know you are here, somewhere,
Your hair twisting like rattlesnakes,
Your voice like a cackling hen.

Someone says, “Go over there.”
I walk to the end of the room
And sit,
Watching the web
Glistening like lights on a pinball machine.

Is that you?
Brown hair pulled up like dried weeds,
Red lips like poisonous fruit,
Nails long and curved like pigtails.

The prey oblivious to the spell,
Entangled in the silk,
Mesmerized by the glistening lights,
She slowly makes her way,
Then turns and looks at me.

I feel a hole
Where my heart used to be.

The prey twists and turns,
Trying to free himself
From the shackles of the silk
And succumbs to defeat,
His head hanging in remorse.
Is that you? It’s you—
Brown hair
Shining in the light.
Red lips,
A petal’s pout.
Her hand reaches for mine,
Her nails long and curved like pigtails,
Her handshake a lie.
No glittering vision from this balcony
the night is moonless
clouds gray with smog and pollution
as smoke does to an addict's lungs

an hour or two at the strip joint
round the corner
bodies of angels promise pleasure for the dollar
and if you're luckily maybe even more
you're burning, throbbing at their offer
faces pretend they want you
trying to empty everything
but the dust in your wallet
smoldering in drunken stupidity
your dumb ass gets thrown out of the club

bills go to more booze instead
you wobble back to your hotel room
sitting on the bed
blank stare into oblivion
what happened to you?

Why are you here?
why has it come to this
the Smirnoff vodka falls
breaking the glass, cutting your fingers
the sheets are stained crimson

A run to the bathroom
letting the water run through
for the first time that night
you get a good look at yourself in the mirror
what do you see
blood shot eyes of regret
you haven't slept in days
well a decent night anyhow
haven't shaved in weeks
the once barely stubble, now spiked whiskers on your cheeks
what's wrong with you

a delicate rose
the only angel you want
you can't afford to buy
stripped you 1/2 of your possessions
but the money isn't what bothers you

her face won't get out of your head
fists pound the marble in sobs
blood oozes from your knuckles
tears burning your open wounds

no matter how much you wallow in regret
it's written on paper
it’s over
you'll never get her back
Another night, another fight
Screams fill the night like a siren’s cry
These four concrete walls slowly
Close in more and more each day
Like a bear trap waiting to snap its prey

Running at speeds I never thought I could
Short breaths, quick and tired
The yelling is coming closer
Brute force is the only way he knows
A sharp grab of my arm
I cry in defeat

Closing my eyes palms over my face
As he spits his words
Tightening his grip

Not knowing his own strength
Self-soothing, my only comfort
Soon this struggle will be over, to start again another day

For now, the sweat, tears, anger subside
Checked into my place
I have to be good
There are people around

Putting on masks
His handsome face, a gentleman
As for me, there’s nothing makeup can’t hide

Standing like a porcelain doll on his arm
Look deeper in the glassy stare
Don’t be fooled
Behind the mask
She’s reaching out wanting to be saved
Dianna Virata  |  Hope Shattered
(After Sharon Olds)

Suddenly I don’t know if I want to do this anymore
Your hair black as charcoal, your jaw line defined
As a crafted blade.

Passing through the crowds on campus, I walk hastily,
My golden blouse flowing in the wind
Like a phoenix soaring through a concrete maze.

None of the men staring compare to you,
Too husky, too synthetic, drowning in brand name fabrications.
They crowd together in little groups
Like ants swarming around a morsel of food.

Cars zoom by like colorful blurs
So driven, racing like wild horses at the sound of a gun.
And I cannot spot you.

My breathing weighs
Like smog creeping in and devouring the oxygen in my lungs
When in the restaurant a man stands up,

A man who looks very much like you,
His eyes bright like a child on Christmas morning
His clothes awkwardly frame his body
Like a wolf in sheep’s skin

Coming closer
He is you, but I don’t feel it.
Once you lose someone it is never exactly
The same person who comes back.
Focused exercises are often useful to encourage the practice of a specific craft. Having students begin and end a poem with the same line, for example, might show them how by the end of the poem they may discover something that happens in the poem that changes the way they feel about that line at the end. As a result, writers learn the process of organic form. For this workshop exercise, we were looking at poems in which poets repeated lines for rhythm and meaning.

Or, telling a story as though writing a letter to some-
one who needs to know exactly what happened because the letter writer was there allows for the surfacing of specific details that might not emerge without this personal, conversational approach. The model for this prose assignment was Allan Gurganus’ short story, “Condolences to Every One of Us.”
I am the face in the hotel mirror,  
perhaps you know her:

She looks around the room—  
the sepulchral drapes, the one table  
and chair beside the window  
that always looks out to the street,  
the toots and screeches, and  
restaurant grease seeping through  
the cracks like spiders.

But these night props she has come  
to embrace beside the one dim  
lamp, the page opened to where she  
last wrote,

I will not be back for awhile,  
please do not look for me . . .

and continues,

the woman that once was  
is not here, eyes gaze at the web  
of words

as she blows out the candles  
one by one.  
I am the face in the hotel mirror.
In my life
I’ve seen a blue balloon float,
and I want nothing more than to follow:
I don’t want to
say anything anymore; what if my mouth suddenly swelled up
until it fell inwards, got lost in all the fleshy red?
What if I pulled my face off and turned to ash
whenever you’d speak to me?
   With no ears to hear you
   chip away at my leafy soul,
   I wouldn’t hear my blackening soul,
   the kind of noise when squares of mirrors,
   piece by piece,
   fall and scream, being sucked
   out of their reflection;
what if the world swallowed me into nothingness
and I laughed as you’d say, “Wait”?
what if I had no breasts? Then I
wouldn’t feel them eating out of my flesh like hungry dogs
at a banquet, picking through all the reddish and saggy skin,
poking their heads out for an occasional smile, then plunging back into
the hole.
It would be beautiful not to have a shadow;
could jump and skip and say: Fuck You
through the wind,
white, touching nothing,
feeling myself lighter and lighter
because I am nothing.

But always, at my feet, holding my string,
a little black boy pulling
the blue balloon down

and my heart feels the pin
and it pops a: Oh, in my life.
I want to run away
To be with you
To follow our dreams
To buy a big house
Have children
A big dog
To take care of you
To clean our house
Feed our children
Bathe our children
Wash our clothes
Play with our children
Make dinner
Wash dishes
Work 40 hours
To help pay the bills
Clean up after the dog.
I want to run away
Matthew Corwin | Dear Ms. Kowalski

I served with your son in the 561st Military Police Company, special detachment, and I was there the night he was killed. I am sorry it has taken me so long to write this letter, but even now it is very difficult for me to think about. I am taking a writing workshop in college and one of our assignments is to write a letter to someone who needs to know what happened. I thought of you and while at first I did not want to trivialize a letter to you by using it as a class assignment, once I had thought about it I could think of nothing else. I hope that this letter is a comfort to you, and perhaps it will exercise some of my own demons.

I have felt that the burden of guilt for what happened to your son since that night. I have also at one point or another blamed everyone from President Bush to the crack addict whose needs cause the flow of drugs into this country that we were trying to stop. They told us in the mission brief that our assignment was a dangerous one and that the jungle we were shipping off to was a lawless jungle, but in the Army you go where you are ordered.
Your son was not a showoff, he kept to himself most of the time, but he was without a doubt the most dependable man in the unit. I know he had seen action in Afghanistan so while he was still a PFC, he was not green. I remember one morning after a brief pass we had to assemble at unit HQ at 0500. Everyone had to be there, or it would mean a loss of passes for the rest of the deployment. Captain Reed was such a hard-ass about stuff like that. Your son, although we did not know it, had been riding in a taxi which had been broadsided by a bus on the way back to post. He was a little bruised up but OK. He could not find another cab at that time of the morning in the middle of nowhere so he decided to walk. He was about halfway here when he was attacked by a gang of kids only a few years younger than he was. He tried to give them his cash but there was no way he was parting with those perfectly shined boots he always wore. I guess they figured out they messed with the wrong guy after he knocked the third guy unconscious.

So there we all were, standing in the dark in formation. It was 0455 and Captain Reed had a huge evil grin on his face as he said, “Well Gentleman, looks like your days of lollygagging on pass are . . . ,” cutting himself off mid-sentence as your son came running up the hill toward HQ at full sprint. No one said a word as he found his place in the formation. “Sergeant Black!” Captain Reed barked, “Time!” “Zero-four fifty-nine, Sir,” Black answered. “Humph,” Captain Reed shrugged and walked over to your son, who stood there, missing his beret, his uniform torn and filthy, wearing a new black eye, and perfectly shined boots. Captain Reed looked him over and said, “Looking sharp as usual, Kowalski.” We kept our passes.

Your son was the guy who always had some spare water during a road march or a spare magazine in combat just when I would run out, and he would give it to me before I could even ask. I realize that you were by necessity told little about what happened to your son, but I think you deserve to hear the whole story. There is no reason to keep secret facts which have been in the news and even made it into Hollywood movies. I am bitter about many things the government has done, but one of the worst was not telling you what a hero your son was.

That entire night is etched into my memory, possibly deeper than any other in my life. We were waiting in the staging area and the mosquitoes...
were going crazy as they always do at night during those hot muggy months of the year. I had just slapped one on my neck and was looking at the rusty brown streak left on my hand when the Agent who was coordinating the mission walked out of the latrine up to the front of the formation. He said the intel was spotty, but it was believed that the guy we were hitting tonight was a major trafficker and was known for some particularly devious business practices. As usual the cartel boss’s location was unknown and it was considered highly unlikely that he would be at the location we were hitting. We would have no support from the local Army on this one, which worried me less than it should have. I was always more worried about friendly fire from those guys than I was about enemy fire from the bad guys. It seems that the boss of this cartel liked to have the children of his enemies raped and murdered, and the locals refused to get involved. The plan was to hit the main house with the team going in first and our Special response team backing them up. The K9 team would ride in a third bird and would not enter the area until it was secured because it was lightly armed.

The sky was clear and full of stars as we flew over the dark jungle. Over the loud roar of the Blackhawk’s rotors I could hear our pilot talking to your son, who was just now leaving the post. There was no moon so they decided to switch to night vision for the infiltration. As we neared the drop point the aircraft slowed and the rotor noise quickly decreased so that it could not be heard beyond a few hundred feet.

This was our fifth mission at night and it was becoming almost routine. We were not worried; so far opposition had been very light. The people with guns in these compounds were there to control the cartel’s workers, not prevent raids by American commandos. When they realized what was happening they usually dropped their guns and ran. Still, silently roping down into a pitch black jungle is not something a person could ever really be comfortable with. As the helos took off and left us at the extraction point we prepared for the long night ahead and began to move methodically through the jungle.

We hiked downhill for about two hours with no contact. Our faces were caked with camouflage, our clothes the color of nature around us. We were in our element, one with the jungle. Silently, we crept closer and closer to our objective. At last through the jungle I smelled the tobacco
smoke, and then I saw the red glow as a lookout inhaled from his cigarette. I motioned to TJ who took him out with a silenced shot from his MP5. We came to the edge of the tree line and a walled compound with a large mansion and several smaller structures. I saw a storm culvert a few feet away, which passed under the main road into the compound and through a hole in the wall protected by a chain link fence. Hughes and Getz stayed at the perimeter to provide cover while I signaled the rest of the team to follow me into the culvert. I cut a hole in the fence and we crawled through. There was no activity inside the compound so we moved in to breach the main door. TJ set the charges and we took up positions on either side of the door. The perfectly placed charges blew the door off its hinges and into the main structure.

This was also the signal for Hughes and Getz, our sniper element, to take out the remaining sentries outside. While the door was still falling through the air with us right behind it, the sniper’s bullets found their targets. I went left inside the door with TJ while Kowalski and Dice headed right to clear that half of the building. Through the first door I found myself in a huge “kitchen,” which was in some disarray; most of the items on the shelves had been knocked off the walls by the blast. I saw no one inside and just stepped back into the hall when I heard shouts and weapons fire from the area Kowalski was clearing. We leapfrogged our way over to the other side of the house and what looked like the main bedroom door.

Inside had been converted to a makeshift arms room; I saw at least five dead men wearing the same clothing as the sentries outside, and Dice lying just inside the room covered in blood. “Kowalski,” I whispered, “over here.” Kowalski had taken cover behind an old oak trunk, and I could tell he had been hit pretty badly. “They were waiting, opened up on us as soon as we came in; someone must have tipped them off. Dice took one to the head before he could fire a shot, I managed to get some cover and shoot the bastards but I took a few rounds. Body armor stopped some of it, but my leg is finished.” I was about to call for a medivac when the radio crackled, “Mike Papa one, this is helo three, you have multiple vehicles inbound on main road.” I keyed my mike, “Rodger, helo three, I have two casualties, need medivac.” “Negative Negative, area is not secure, cannot approach. Advise when area is secure.” “Rodger, Mike Papa one out.” “Shit,” said TJ.
who covered us while I stopped Kowalski’s bleeding; Kowalski had passed out by the time I was done. I pulled Dice, who was barely breathing and had a jagged crack in his Kevlar, over to Kowalski.

“Shhh,” TJ said, “You hear that?” The distant rumble of engines vibrated through the walls. I heard a tremendous crash followed by gunfire as one of the trucks veered off the road and into a tree, its driver shot by one of the snipers. They were exchanging fire but I could not see anything from the side of the house we were in. By the time I reached a window at the front of the house the gunfire had stopped and the men from the trucks were spreading out through the compound. Our sniper cover was gone. TJ and I took up positions at the windows and began firing, but the return fire was overwhelming. TJ got hit and I pulled him back into the room with Kowalski. He was out cold and his pale yellow skin told me the bad news. The incoming fire was intense, bullets splintered wood everywhere and plaster rained down continuously from the ceiling.

I was sure that was it for me, sooner rather than later a bullet would find the spot where I was hiding and it would be over. Then I heard explosions from outside and the whole house shook. I still heard firing but it was less now, none of it seemed directed at the house. I made it out a side window where I was able to take up a firing position beside the house. I saw two of them running toward the woods and as I emptied my last magazine I watched them go down in a spray of dirt. It was over as quickly as it had begun. The Locals had pitched in after all. Hughes and Getz were ok; they had pulled back when the situation looked hopeless and joined up with the locals when they showed up.

Well, Ms. Kowalski, I know nothing can make this right for you, or stop you from wishing your son had not been there that night. I can’t even imagine the pain you must feel. Know this though, if your son had not been there that night, my own mother would be feeling the same pain you feel. Thank you so much, and I am so very sorry.

– CPL Matthew Corwin
Dear Peter,

How’s life been treating you? I know—I know. Ama tells me the same thing, and the worst part of it is that she’s actually gotten me into believing it, so easily after Willy died. It’s weird but I didn’t come to realize how sad it was believing it, up until now that I’ve finished reading Mrs. Dalloway. We spend our days trying to guard it, this life. They tell you: “Be careful, don’t go there, “You never know what’s gonna happen,” all day long that it makes you afraid of life; you begin to look at it as this bunch of sapphire diamonds—so shiny, pretty, given to you to “protect,” to hoard even, but when do you get to play with them? They tell you to be afraid of life, make you afraid of living it until you become clingy with what is not yours: this life. We’re just drifters passing through—I need to “Let go, throw it away.” Afraid of life until you stop living it—sad.

What’s the point in trying to hold on to something that’s not yours? You know, this is probably the reason why I didn’t mind at all telling him I loved him—no matter the outcome, I didn’t think of it. It was great, even though I wish I could have said more (I don’t know why, can’t explain why I didn’t).

I was listening to Stevie Wonder’s “My Cherie Amour” today. I usually listen to it when I’m walking back home, passing through Fishburne, through that line of beautiful trees that shed their leaves; sometimes I stay and play with them. But today I listened to it to blot out Luis’ stupid voice; you know how he gets when he starts talking about religion—he’s a stupid, arrogant ass who thinks his word is law, always speaking in that authoritative tone when in all reality he just talks out of his ass. And when he talks about relationships, I never knew a dog so desperate; he’s like Mr. Collins in Pride and Prejudice—he’s stupidly deluded and just looks for whatever girl is stupid enough to marry him. Oh, well, enough of that.

I really like that Stevie Wonder song; it makes me think of myself when I’m riding the 260, looking through clouds as if the answer I’m looking for is somewhere hidden in the sky. It also reminds me of the times I walk to the park at night. It’s amazing what you see sometimes,
walking through streets. Like last time: I was just walking around aimlessly when I saw some kid, around eight years old, dancing outside or jumping, into the air, for no reason—he was laughing; he looked happy. Sometimes I’ll do that: look into other people’s windows, into other people’s lives and they look happy, so happy.

Man, this song is so beautiful, really, it makes me want to sing along with it, in my head anyway. You know me, I cry inside my head, I’ll laugh inside my head, crack a joke, I express—inside my head; surprisingly it hasn’t cracked, huh?! Anyway, you know that part when Stevie’s all like: “My cherie amour, won’t you tell me how could you ignore that behind that little smile I pour, I wish that you were mine?...La, la, la, la, la, la, la,” you know that part? That’s a nice part, huh? You can really hear his voice take off...La, la, la...

Maybe some day I’ll stop looking through other people’s windows, (La, la, la, la; I’m listening to it again—can’t help it it’s so pretty). I hope nobody has to look through other people’s windows.

Yes, I didn’t get to tell him, not completely. I wrote him a poem, and now he’ll never get to hear it. I was supposed to go to Skylight Book store and read it, you know, for Milestone 2005, but I went to the internet to get the address on mapquest.com and the shitty shit gave me the wrong address! I never got there on time. When I came home, Apa asked me where I was. I told him I was looking for an address; he said, “Let me see.” I handed him the paper I had gotten from the internet; he looked at the address above, looked back at me, gave a little smile and said, “Ah, mijia, it’s so easy. I know where this is. Why didn’t you ask me, I would have taken you?” Oh, really, I thought. That’s messed up, all this time I was lost when I could have just come home and asked my dad. Fuck!

“Have some pizza,” he said and handed me a plate with a slice. I refused and went to lock myself in the room. Outside, in the living room, everyone was watching TV, eating pizza and laughing; I was inside a dark room, all lights out thinking about my stupid mistake and trying to figure out what to write for a poem Lem had asked us to write. I came up with lines like: “Little love got lost, bumped into some traffic and never found her way home; little love got stranded with road blocks, an ambulance drove by to pick her up,” but, ah, it wasn’t enough—I didn’t like the images. Nothing I was thinking could have gone into a poem; I didn’t get
to tell him, not completely. I wrote him a poem I wanted him to hear at
the reading, and now he’ll never hear it. It was kinda like my last words
to him, you know? Like the last thing of mine I wanted him to go away
with, even if he was to retain it only for that moment, but yeah—I didn’t
get to tell him.

Now he’ll never know—not completely. I really don’t feel fertile, but
I’ve been feeding out of the trash and well, at least I’ve gotten myself to
write again. He’ll never know, but he’s given me my writing back. He’s
very beautiful, and I know she’ll be very lucky, with him—it hurts me,
but I like to see him smile again (at least when I think of this possibility
and picture it in my mind).

I’m sorry. Peter, I’m putting you to sleep. Hey, maybe I’ll lend you the
Stevie Wonder song, or the Sheryl Crow CD, the one with the song “My
Favorite Mistake,” (me and my country songs, huh! Don’t I just love to cry?!)

Well, it sounds like stupid Luis has gone to sleep, Ama’s making me a
soup—I’m going to finish the rest of the Stevie Wonder song, for the
tenth time!

Goodbye, Peter.
Dearest Michael,

**Sweet Michael,** how many people do you know that would confess an affair with every explicit detail? Before you get angry at that mere fact, continue reading why I did it, and what happened.

The big fight we had I didn’t forgive you for a long time. The abuse has been going on for months, and I finally couldn’t take it anymore. It was so hard to function with my right hand; you almost took away my greatest passion, my ability to write. As you remember, I broke up with you and refused to be with you unless the pain and abuse would stop, until there would be changes. I was vulnerable; I did what I always do when I’m sad, run into a pair of arms for comfort. In this case, more than that happened this time.

I want to be honest with you. No more fooling myself that everything is okay, this relationship is dead. No secrets, no more lies. Here’s my uncensored confession of another love of my life. It was a reunion of two people of a questionable relationship. Lovers, friends with benefits, be what it may I don’t like labels, they make things complicated. In a lot of ways we were forbidden by society’s standards, and at times my own, I didn’t care about all that. He came back, that’s all that matters. Like a giggly schoolgirl I lie on my bed waiting to catch my breath before I was to go outside to meet him. I’m wearing those black pants with the pockets, the matching black lace panties emphasizing on the delicate curves of my body. Vincent was above that I know, but nonetheless he was still a man. As swiftly and carefully, I tiptoed on the creaking brown carpet not to disturb Nonna or your mother sleeping in on Saturday morning. During this time I was living with you and your family, your grandmother and mother, that last thing I needed was bitching from people I really have no obligation to. The coast was clear, Michael, it was that weekend you went to the car races.

I called Vincent telling him I needed him once again. I always went to Vincent after a falling out with you. In a way it was wrong for me to fall out the arms of one man then run to another’s. It was a slightly overcast day, but as soon as I stepped into his black Corolla in front of the house
it was just he and I. I was never able to forget about Vincent. Everything just stopped. His dark honey skin in the charcoal dress shirt insinuated his much-improved muscular form. I squealed in delight being in his arms again.

“I missed you so much,” I whispered in his ear.

“Ditto,” he whispered in reply. When Vincent comes back it never seems real, as if any moment, the university will steal him away from me again, and poof he’s gone.

“This is so surreal,” I said, dazed, still latching my arms around his neck.

He gently cupped my face and brushed his lips against mine, tongue just so slightly touching mine.

“Trust me, this is real.”

I smiled in satisfaction. He always knew how to do that, melt me within seconds without even trying. I sat in the passenger seat in anticipation and burning with curiosity. He pulled into the Blue Marlin Hotel, a familiar site; we used to stay here on certain nights he would rescue me when I was living with my parents. Back then I was afraid to go back to my abusive household, Vincent was there for me on those nights I didn’t have a home to go to. Yes, Michael, Vincent was there with me all those nights when I said I was alone.

“Don’t you need to check in?” I asked puzzled as he passed by the obvious parking spots near the entrance. I noticed we were going more toward the west wing of the lot.

“Already did,” he grinned, as we got out.

He juggled the key card from his pocket. He finally opened the door to my awaiting surprise. The beige walls glowed with the numerous candles lit in perfect harmony all over the room. Rose petals adorned the bed and spilled all over the floor. On the bed sat a teddy bear, open arms holding a small tray of my favorite bread, as well as another bouquet of red roses next to it. I was shocked by his actions. Just like the movies, I thought, every woman’s dream.

“Vincent,” I said softly as I wandered around the room. I gently touched the soft light fur of the teddy bear. I haven’t had a stuffed animal since I was six.

“I actually got it in L.A. earlier than when I first called you,” he admit-
ted, “It took me awhile to set this up actually. I went to the bakery to get your favorite, I went to the shop you like to…” As he excitedly told me the lengths he went through to make this special for me, I stared at this man. He’s unlike any man I know.

After you, Michael, broke me into a thousand pieces, he gave me hope that I was worth more than what you showed me to believe. He fell in love with my mind, my soul before anything else. My angel, he saved me from an icy world of bitterness and hate. He showed me a kindness so rare, not expecting anything in return, just for me to be happy.

I shushed his lips with my index finger and traced it down to his neck, circling his chest. I pierced him with a gaze, he knew what was coming. I reached for the top of his collar and began unbuttoning slowly. I didn’t have to see his face to know he was watching me with zeal and anticipation. The gray dress shirt fell to the ground; I stopped for a moment and gazed at his striking figure. I bit my lip as my eyes moved up his body, his tall physique, and skin of dark honey, his shoulders perfectly angled in a structure, chest fit and defined. An exhilarating chill went through me as the center of my palm felt his heartbeat. I glided my finger up his chest to the soft flesh between his neck and collarbone. This is how a man’s body should be.

That was it, I couldn’t control it anymore. I threw him on the bed with a force that surprised him but still welcomed. Hastily, I helped him unbuckle his pants and kicking off his shoes. I soon felt the smooth fabric of my blouse pull over my head, my pants pushed down to my feet. Both breathing hard in desire, we removed the final remaining undergarments. Naked I lay on top of him skin-to-skin, flesh-to-flesh. His kisses were like nectar, sweet, and left me craving for more. He groaned from my nibbles
and tormenting licks on his neck and shoulders. His caresses on my skin set me off in an unbearable ecstasy.

I was going to take this man. He was mine; he belonged to me, no one else. I was his first, his only to teach him the throngs of passion. Vincent was once chaste, always pulling away from sexuality as if it were a sin. He reminded me of a monk, having only what’s necessary, and turning away from the tempting indulgences in the world. I was the one who took his virginity, showed him that there was nothing wrong with sex, that when two people love each other, it becomes more than just the act. I gave his physicality being. On top, slow but hard, I took him to a bliss of heaven incomparable to any other. Moans of pleasure escaping our lips, moving together like two becoming one. Finally, with a finishing moan of climatic release I collapsed, lying by his side still recovering from the pleasure just seconds before. I lay cradled against him, stroking my hair and back, he watched my reaction to the teasing of his fingertips. It was perfect, it was heaven, and I never wanted it to end.

We must have slept there for hours but I don’t think either one of us cared. We were tangled in the sheets with my back against his chest, his arms wrapped around my waist holding me close. He held on tight, as though he were afraid this would disappear. I dozed and woke to see him already awake playing with my hair.

“Hey,” I said groggily, planting a quick kiss on his lips.

“Your phone rang a lot,” Vincent said with a hint of uneasiness in his tone.

I reached over to check my cell reading eight missed calls all from you, Michael. I heard your affectionate messages of the “sorry’s” and “I love you’s,” telling me you missed me while you were at the drag races. But as you see you were the last thing on my mind.

“You and Michael,” Vincent started slowly.

“We’re not together anymore,” I said coolly

“I see.”

I gave him a reassuring kiss on the cheek. “Let’s not talk about him okay?”

He nodded followed with a sigh. “You were constantly on my mind, Dianna. At night I always wished I could hold you. You give Southern Cali meaning, you’re the only reason why I come back from NYU, did you know that? Without you this place is a barren wasteland of regrets and memories that I wanted to get away from. I was so ready to leave this
place. I was done. But then I met you. I love you, you’re my sweetness. Dianna, I want you to move away with me.”

“To New York?” I asked in surprise.

From the beginning, when I first met him, Vincent was sick of his life in L.A. He wanted a change and was very desperate to leave. An acceptance letter from New York University was his ticket out. Then he met me, he didn’t know or intend on falling in love, a reason to not want to leave California. Nonetheless, he moved on to N.Y.U.

“Dianna, I’m tired of seeing you in pain. I can’t just sit here while that asshole is hurting you. I want, no I need to help you.” I looked up into his deep chocolate eyes seeing nothing but genuine sincerity and concern for my well-being and happiness.

“I’ll think about it;” I replied, closing the subject.

I had a wonderful opportunity to start a new life, to start over with a wonderful man. At times, I was angry with you, all the abuse you put me through. All I wanted was to get away from them, that place, to get away from you. I thought you would never change.

All too soon the night was over. I sat up with the white sheet wrapped around my body. I stared into nothingness. I was torn between the two of you, two paths of life. Deep in my heart I knew the decision was already made. I decided to tell my Vincent my choice of staying in Southern California. This was where I belonged, even if I had to suffer the constant battles with you. I would tell Vincent after he left; I wouldn’t be able to see him in pain. A bit cowardly I admit, but I am selfish at times. I lay in Vincent’s arms listening to his adventures of his new home in New York for a while before nudging him it was time to leave. I put on my clothes, as did he. I stayed quiet, not wanting to slip out my thoughts in risk of ruining this wonderful night. It was a silent awkward drive home. He constantly asked me what was wrong; I kept the nonchalant mask on reassuring him it was nothing. One of the most difficult things I had to do in my life was let him go. For the last time our lips locked, I wanted to hold on, relish in this delight forever knowing it was our last. The night followed with the heart wrenching words of goodbye.

I walked toward the house, I didn’t turn back in fear of being tempted to forget my decision and run away with Vincent. I reluctantly opened the door to the dreaded house. I saw you, Michael, sitting on the couch.
already waiting for me. Before I could take another step you ran to me and pulled me into your arms, tears streaming down your eyes.

“I’m sorry,” you cried over and over again.

I simply listened as you continued your endless sobbing. I shushed your cries with my empty touches of comfort. You didn’t notice the numbness in my body, in my eyes. You were desperate for any kind of contact with my skin. Resting on the couch, I held you as you lay on my bosom, tears soaking through my blouse. Till the late hours after midnight, in the dim living room you rambled on about how you felt horrible, unable to go on without me, how you hated yourself for the recent damage. I was your reason for breathing, your existence would mean nothing if I were not by your side. Or so you would say, I always thought you were utterly pathetic when you said things like that.

For this decision I had to think with my head, not my heart. Thoughts of survival overruled any desire for love. You had the resources I needed; you gave me security of a home, money and took care of my needs. The price to pay for this soon became too much to bear, how many more injuries did I have to endure? I’m sure deep down inside within yourself, Michael, you knew what you loved was an illusion, that I was just using you. If you didn’t know, then my acting must be truly excellent. It was all purely in the means of survival and who can be a better provider. Vincent was very dear and good to me, but not the most dependable. Vincent was illogically optimistic, always thought everything would turn out all right, without thinking things through. I knew life on the road with him would probably be a bumpy one, and I was scared of taking the choice of stepping onto the path of unknown possibilities. Life with him wouldn’t have been a wise choice. A part of me felt like a whore for sleeping with both you and Vincent at the same time. I was wrong for hurting both of you, acting out of anger, acting out of emotion. I acted out “battered wife syndrome” doing drastic things, in escape from or revenge on an abusive spouse.

So, do you see now, Michael? I was torn between two men who loved me very much. Some would call me foolish for giving up and shattering my beloved Vincent’s heart in the end of all this chaos. I chose you, it was hard, really fuckin’ hard. I knew the consequences and what risks came along with my choice. I lost my best friend and maybe a possibility of a relationship. I need to let go of this. As a final revelation, this is what real-
ly happened, and if you still wish to be with me, sadly my fate is in your hands. I’m tired of acting; I’m tired of feeling like a doll. One day maybe things will change and I can finally move on, put this behind me. Maybe one day I can finally be set free, start over and have a relationship with someone that actually means something. One day you were going to find out about my affair, you might as well know the truth now.

Sincerely Yours,

Dianna
Since college composition focuses on writing essays about what we read, students often find it helpful to read how other students, not just professional writers, write about text. Like many instructors, I encourage students to provide a context for their subject—either personal or cultural/historical, etc.—to give scope to their close reading analysis.

The essays must also display the expected skills of establishing a thesis, organizing content, providing evidence from the text by paraphrasing and incorporating quotes; and, if research is required, citing outside sources.
Lord Byron’s dramatic play, “Manfred,” develops the complex character of the Byronic hero. Byron’s fascination with the “internal dramas of the human mind” (607) is reflected in Manfred’s bipolar tendencies and is at the root of the complexity of his character. Manfred is a master of two worlds: the world of common men and the world of psychological and spiritual forces. Manfred’s calling upon the spirits of the universe as a means to escape the sorrows of his troubled past is driven by the desire to escape from this world of mortal suffering and transience, which is maintained by the strength and command of his will. The desire to escape the world of suffering and transience can be found in Manfred’s constant dabbling with death. Manfred’s flaw is his greatest strength, his strong will, which eventually dictates his fate. Manfred and the Byronic hero are identified by several important psychological characteristics: self-isolation, self-reliance, introspection, a haunting past, and a gloomy spirit. Byron creates complexity in Manfred through his actions and behavior; they are not black and white, they reside in that obscure, dark place that all humans recognize yet lack the courage to enter and dwell therein, namely death. Manfred’s ability to enter, explore, and embrace the darkness of life and death makes him a psychological enigma.

Manfred’s haunting past sends him on an inward journey in search of the knowledge of mortality and life. His opening monologue quickly reveals his introspective nature as he proclaims in isolation, “…grief should be the instructor of the wise/ Sorrow is knowledge; they who know the most / must mourn the deepest o’er the fatal truth / The tree of knowledge is not that of life” (637, lines 9-12). If Manfred believes that the tree of knowledge is not that of life, then he must surely believe that the tree of knowledge is that of death. His words reveal a personal grief and sorrow, for such proclamations are usually made through painful, subjective experience. In the lines that follow that monologue he proceeds to call upon the spirits of the universe and demonstrates the power that he has as a human and his ability to reach inside to the other world, “Rise! Appear! /...I do compel you to my will. Appear” (637, lines 35-49).
The spirits obey and appear only to deny him that which he desires… "Forgetfulness— / Of that which is within me; read it there— / Ye know it, and I cannot utter it" (640, lines 136-138). Manfred desires to escape or “forget” himself, his sorrow, and the terrible guilt which consumes his mind and soul. The spirits deny his request and proceed to offer him many things that would make any other person happy: wealth, strength, and longevity. To their surprise Manfred refuses all such gifts. Manfred’s refusal highlights several important aspects of the Byronic hero: his self-reliance and his desire not for the transience of external gifts but for the boons of the internal world.

Manfred’s conflicting emotions and desire for death come into view in the second scene in which he is alone on the cliffs of Mount Jungfrau. Manfred is distraught with the spirits’ inabilities to grant him what he wants and so proclaims, “I feel the impulse—yet I do not plunge / I see the peril—yet do not recede” (643, lines 643-644). The standoff of his words echo Hamlet’s dilemma: to be or not to be and are examples of the conflicting urgencies within himself as to whether he wants to live or die. He is prevented from jumping by a chamois hunter but quickly refuses further help, demonstrating his self-reliance and self-alienation from other men. Manfred reveals to the chamois hunter, “I have lived many years / Many long years… / ages—ages / Space and eternity—and consciousness/ With the fierce thirst of death—and still unslaked” (646, lines 44-48). His words reveal his craving for death and a dark gloominess, but he refuses to trade his lot with the chamois hunter. An important characteristic of the Byronic Hero revealed here is that through his embracing suffering he attains strength and redemption. Manfred does not desire to pass his buck, and he eventually refuses the hunter’s prayers.

Manfred loves nature and isolation believing that both bring illumination of self and an escape from the sorrows of life. Isolation, as detachment from mankind, is symbolically representative of death and its detachment from life. In Act 2, Scene 2, Manfred reveals his alienation from men and his introspectiveness in his dialogue with the witch. Manfred seeks from the witch the same which was denied by the other spirits, “A boon” (649, line 47) of forgetfulness. He proceeds to tell her:

From my youth upwards / My spirit walk’d not with the souls of
men... / My joys, my griefs, my passions, and my powers, / Made me a stranger... / I held but slight communion / My joy was in the wilderness... / These were my pastimes, and to be alone... / And then I dived... / To the caves of death / Searching its cause and its effects; and drew / conclusions most forbidden. (649, lines 50-83)

The “conclusions most forbidden” are never given a name but are assumed to be a view of death as a release and an end to be sought; for what is most forbidden to man than to view death as a gift. The same dialogue gives a name to Manfred’s consuming guilt, “I have not named to thee... / One with whom I wore the chain of human ties... / Yet there was one... / She had the same lone thoughts and wanderings... / I loved her, and destroy’d her... / Not with my hand but with my heart—which broke her heart” (650, lines 100-119). His last words echo and remind of what Thomas Mann referred to as Erotic Irony, when one hurts or kills that which he loves because he loves it. Manfred is consumed by guilt because he feels responsible for Astarte’s death. The witch offers her help with the condition that he submit himself to her will and become her slave. Manfred again refuses any help that might take away control from him. His refusal echoes William Blake’s words, “I must create my own system or be enslaved by another Man’s,” (77) and further reveal his strong will and his desire to be in control of his life. Manfred refuses to be enslaved by anyone’s system and so he creates his own.

Astarte’s two appearances are important because they can be interpreted as psychological projections from Manfred. During his dialogue with the spirits of the universe in Act 1, Manfred desires to “behold ye [the spirits] face to face,” to which the spirits reply, “We have no forms... / But choose a form—in that we will appear” (641, lines 175-183). Manfred tells them that they should take the form that they find “most fitting.” The spirits choose to appear as a “beautiful female figure,” which is assumed to be Astarte for Manfred declares, “Oh God! If it be thus, and thou / art not a madness and a mockery, / I yet might be most happy.— I will clasp thee, / and we again will be—” as the figure disappears Manfred shouts, “My heart is crushed!” (641, lines 189-192). The spirits choose the form that is reflected from Manfred’s mind, the figure gone autonomous in his mind, and projected it from his mind. Manfred’s love
for Astarte is so much that it continues after her death and is manifested as projections. Astarte appears again in Scene 4 of Act 2, again by means of the spirits and Manfred inquires for forgiveness, “Yet one word more—am I forgiven?” (660, line 152) to which the ghost of Astarte replies, “Tomorrow ends thine earthly ills /…Farewell /…Farewell” (660, lines 152-153). These final words seem to be Manfred’s sentence, for from here on out he behaves as a man who knows the end is at hand. He is resolute, self-reliant, and is willing his own life when he tells the Abbot, “…Whate’er / I may have been, or am, doth rest between / Heaven and myself,—I shall not choose a mortal / To be my mediator,” (660, lines 52-55), and in doing so he wills his death. Scene 4 then brings the fall of Manfred in the interior of a tower. The Abbot interrupts and witnesses his death. Manfred remains strong and resilient in his darkest hours and refuses any hope or prayer the Abbot offers. Manfred refuses to succumb to the spirit’s will, declaring, “I have not been thy dupe, nor am thy prey / But was my own destroyer, and will be / My own hereafter… / The hand of death is on me—but not yours” (668, lines 139-141). This proclamation reveals that Manfred wills his own death and that he accepts the fate which he has chosen. Manfred’s final words, “Old man ’tis not so difficult to die” (668, line 151), reveal the absence of fear within him; he does not feel like he needs to give one last prayer, he is ready and welcomes death. Death as a welcomed release from sorrow is finally attained and Manfred is at the end of his journey.

The Byronic hero was an important figure in his time because he marked a true separation from the church and the popular religious beliefs (Christianity) of his time. In breaking from the norm Manfred has created intrigue in the darkness of the human mind. Consequently, Manfred remains an intriguing figure because his complexity, as a character, has greatly influenced many movements in literature, philosophy, and psychology. The modern anti-hero has been immensely inspired by the Byronic hero, manifested in such literary works as Dostoyevsky’s Crime and Punishment. The Byronic hero has also helped spearhead philosophical movements such as existentialism with its emphasis on the analysis of human existence, its belief that each person is able to define and determine his life, and its strong belief in the power of an individual’s will. Manfred could be easily considered an existential character.
because of his strong will to determine and define his own life, fate, and death. Manfred can also be seen in psychological movements, specifically, Freudian psychology. Manfred is a perfect example of the manifestation of Freud’s “death” instinct and Freud’s idea of the individual’s “sense of guilt.” The Byronic hero is a character that most readers could identify with because he is a very humanistic character. Manfred is not the idealized hero with superhuman strength or the favorite of a certain God; he is a mortal who feels and experiences things in ways that allow the reader to connect and dialogue with him. He appeals to the psychology of humanity and appears as a projection of our deepest desires and fears; he does the things that we wish we could but fear doing. It is that paradox that has rendered the Byronic hero and Manfred a holistic range and continuing longevity within the human experience.

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Seduction is the most powerful force between a man and a woman. The power of seduction has no escape. It is a glistening web of desires, heat, passion, an entrapment of slavery; for when one is seduced by normal means or by those beyond imaginable, the seduced one will fall into the darkest depths of his or her existence. Women are enchanting creatures of nature with alluring figures that turn men wild. Men can be weak and desperate creatures who are needy of a woman’s gentle tenderness in hopes of fulfilling their soul, their body, and their mind. The power of seduction is so great, it can lead to death, just like a female black widow lures her opposite into her web of seduction, only to use her mate and then kill him. Women are not too far from these brutal and loveless acts of seduction as in the poems, “Siren Song” by Margaret Atwood and “La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad” by John Keats. The females in these poems are portrayed as heavenly-sounding creatures with voices like angels and faces which are beautiful and enchanting, a disguise to hide their horrendous thoughts and desires they truly wish for. In “Siren Song,” the murderous female character lures seamen in, seducing them and calling to them as she convinces them to leap off their ships to rescue the so-called beautiful enchantress. However, the men are fooled by the seduction, and instead they fall into their cursed deaths. The poem, “La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad,” portrays death in the form of a beautiful and comforting female. The female is consoling a wounded knight in his hour of dying. In a dream the knight learns the female has a reputation of causing despair to others before him. Once again, the woman uses her seduction and her beauty as a means to kill or send her opposite away into another existence. However, the story, “A Rose for Emily,” by William Faulkner, an old maid falls in love with a Yankee and defies facing the truth when her love dies and leaves her. In the two poems, the females disregard the concept of love and care only for ridding the world of men, whereas in the story, the woman, Emily, is seduced by her own wishes and by the power of love she has for her Yankee. She cannot accept that her one embrace of love to another has ended with his death, and so she preserves his corpse in hopes to fulfill her emptiness and loneliness.
The female is used in myths and fairytales as usually being gender kind and submissive. The masculine figure is usually portrayed as the character with hurtful intentions. Generally, the male figure has more freedom than a woman in being allowed to feel and emit a wider range of emotions and thoughts. It is refreshing to see a piece such as “Siren Song,” where the feminine gender uses the art of seduction on men in their ships. The legend of the enchanting song is known to lure these seamen ashore to the dark island from where the seducing voice is coming, or as it is described in the scene, “The song that forces men to leap overboard in squadrons even though they see the beached skulls” (280). The alluring sound is so great that the men become blinded by it; for they do not see that their death lies ahead of them. The beached skulls on the beach are a sure sign of danger and death; however, the men pass them like hypnotized animals. All the while the “picturesque and mythical” (280) female characters are bored with the vulnerable wits of the man. The poem greatly elevates the female, as she is the controller of the man and is also his fateful decision maker. The mythical female continues her call of death as she says, “Alas it is a boring song but it works every time” (280). She amuses herself by her evil deeds, causing havoc.
on the man’s soul. She is represented as a cold opposite of what society expects of females figures.

In the poem “La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad,” the female figure is not quite as loveless as the murderous siren; however, her intentions are not to nurture and provide love. The female is a representation of death, trying to send the wounded knight to his eternal sleep. The woman of awesome beauty seduces the knight in a way so that he is enfolded in her as he says, “And there she lulled me to sleep” (285). She nurtures him into a promising and loving sleep, though he is forewarned in his dream which came, “pale kings, and princes too, Pale warriors, death pale were they all; They cried-‘La belle dame sans merci Hath thee in thrall!’” (285). The knight, a character of strength, incapable of pain, is defenseless against the female. He is warned by others who were once in his shoes that he is a victim; he is not being saved by the female. Though the female may have sent men off to their death, she seems to do so more in angelic manner, remaining beautiful, nurturing and loving; she too, like the siren, disguises herself to be a savior when she is only in fact sending men to their death.

“A Rose for Emily” has a twist on the gender role which has been discussed thus far. The two poems represent the female gender as man killers. In the story, even though the reader is led to believe Emily kills her love, this does not certify that Emily plays the same role as the females in the poems, for it is Emily who becomes a victim of love. Miss Emily Grierson is an unfortunate soul with societal pressures concerning her age and ugliness, not to mention her lack of gentleman-suitors: poor Emily is an old maid. Her home is of “dust and disuse” (200) with leather cracked furniture. Emily is a woman who gives up on glamour and on the up-keep of her image as a carrier of her family name, at one time a noble family with great respect from the community. Now, Emily is alone, with no one to keep her company or to keep her spirit alive, until she meets Homer Barron, a Yankee foreman in charge of paving the sidewalks. Homer is a well-liked man and “he knew everybody in town. Whenever you heard a lot of laughing anywhere about the square, Homer Barron would be in the center of the group” (203). Emily has at last discovered the feeling of belonging; her heart surrenders to the charm and likeableness of Homer. He is accepted by all in the commu-
nity, which makes it odd that he would fall for someone like Emily, who has lost her social status in the small town. Her rank of aristocracy had crashed with her father’s death, and now she is an older, eroded woman with no love from the town around her. Emily has fallen in love with Homer hard, and she lets the entire town know of her newly embraced relationship by having them appear together “on Sunday afternoons in the yellow-wheeled buggy” (203). Emily is aware of the foul and mean things the women of the town whisper to one another about her, and she wants to prove all of them wrong. She makes it even more apparent to the town’s eye that she and Homer are in love by purchasing a “man’s toilet set in silver, with the letters H.B. on each piece” (205) and later “had bought a complete outfit of men’s clothing, including a nightshirt” (205) which leads the town to believe that “they [were] married” (205). She enjoys having all her misery and loneliness taken away from her life, and she is glad to be accepted again by her community. Emily is in love with Homer Barron and also in love with the respect she is gaining again from the community. However, happiness does not last forever and in Emily’s case, her happiness does not thrive.

In the poems, the men fall victim to the villainous female character and to the love they superficially encounter whereas in the story, the female character, Emily, falls victim to love for the male character, Homer Barron, and a victim of her town by trying desperately to fulfill a marital image. Even though the reader learns that Emily preserves Homer’s dead body in her own bed, the reader realizes that it is not Homer who is the victim of love, that in fact it is Emily. She is so consumed with her love for Homer and her love for the companionship that she cannot bring herself to give Homer his honoring departure into death. Instead, Emily clings to the decaying corpse lying in her bed in her house without telling anyone of Homer Barron’s whereabouts. She starts to isolate herself from the rest of the world, driving herself into a slow, painful and lonely death. She takes no part in any social gatherings and does not allow anyone to visit her. This behavior causes her to become an enemy to herself, by disconnecting herself from the norms of society. She remains absent from the civilization that is taking place just outside her home. Her own appearance begins to wither as she becomes older, for she has “grown fat and her hair was turning gray,” (205) until alas, she herself meets with
death. After the town and Emily’s cousins bury her, they break down the door to the top room in her house, and as they do, “a thin, acrid pall as of the tomb seemed to lie everywhere upon this room decked and furnished as for a bridal” (207). Among the withered display of bridal intimacy Homer Barron “himself lay in the bed…rotted beneath what was left of the nightshirt” (206). Emily was desperate to be rid of her loneliness and emptiness. She could not live without Homer Barron, even after his death, and she would have done anything to keep her artificial happiness. She couldn’t accept the possibility of living the rest of her life alone and with her outside community believing she drove Homer away. She kept Homer a secret for years, unable to cope with her insanity. She needs Homer, who in a sense plays the role of the villainous female, dead or alive to feed her love and her needs which have such power over her. This love is the only love that she knows.

Just as the men all fall victim to a seducing damsel of beauty in the poems, Emily falls victim to the seducing charm of Homer Barron. He gives her the confidence and the strength to feel comfort and love. Although Homer does not lead Emily to her death the way the poetic dames lead their men to their death, Homer, unknowingly, has led Emily to a life of psychotic solitude, a lingering pain that equals death itself. The art of seduction should not be taken lightly, since it is likely to be more powerful than the human mind’s rationality. Those who are already in distress—a weary seaman, a dying knight and a lonely old maid—are too disillusioned already in their own minds to carry the strength and the challenge of taking on a loving yet superficial relationship. They become easily influenced by the charismatic dominance of the opposite sex, which as a result, leaves the tortured individual far from feeling loved. The feeling of love that the victim embraces reveals itself to be artificial, empty and evil, evil because it leads one into a temptation that one cannot resist.

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The tension of political and social turmoil has served as a catalyst for artistic works concerned for the human condition. Art remains a descriptive reflection: a historical record of the period wherein it was produced. Because of the cyclical nature of political upheaval, modern concerns can find counsel in past literature. The Romantic period, dated from the late 18th century to the early 19th century, was marked with the contemplation and apprehension of the French Revolution. The hope of a new age inspired writers to explore the importance of a “new spirit” within the chaos of war. Among many writers who were disillusioned by the gory results of the revolution, Percy Bysshe Shelley maintained his vision of radical social reform. His re-examination of the source of social ills leads to a meticulous exploration into the “moral failures” of the human condition. His idealism is well-grounded in the affirmation that the power of creativity and self-reflection can overcome the limitations of the ordinary world, thereby transforming it. Shelley’s exemplary dedication to progress and his introspective search for the resolution of social and political instability inspires hope in contemporary times. In his poem, “Ode to the West Wind,” Shelley examines the autumn wind as a metaphor for the purity of imagination and creativity. He uses the natural process of the seasons to convey the ever-changing illusions of the mundane with the purity of creativity. He conveys the importance of a revitalization of thought with the metaphor of spring. This quest for creative rejuvenation and the importance of hope for a better future are Shelley’s contribution to social reform.

The wind is set against images of death to convey the power of the wind and the life it brings in the changes of the seasons. The opening line of “Ode to the West Wind” describes the wind with qualities that are animate and representative of life: “O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn’s being, / Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead / Are driven” (772, lines 1-2). The speaker addresses the wind directly, not only as the wind but as the “wild West Wind,” a free and intense force. This same quality is felt when the speaker assigns the wind, breath. One of the ultimate symbols of life is breath; this “unseen presence” drives away the dead leaves. The speaker goes on to describe the leaves as “pesti-
ence-stricken multitudes” (773, line 5); this disparity between the liveliness of the wind and the darkness of the nature around it creates the image of a divided world. The power the wind is assigned is highlighted against the dark descriptions of the leaves: “Each like a corpse within its grave, until / Thine azure sister of the spring shall blow” (lines 8). The power of the wind is heightened; the seeds of autumn are lifeless and static until the spring wind blows. After contrasting the images of lightness and darkness, Shelley unites them in the last line of the first section by referring to the wind as “Destroyer and Preserver” (line 14). The speaker describes the wind as a rejuvenating force; upon destroying the dead leaves of the past it preserves life by spreading the seeds that remain. This duality of force in the wind expresses Shelley’s intention of examining the need for human revival through the metaphor of the changes in seasons.

Shelley emphasizes the importance of self-rejuvenation by using the wind as a symbol of inspiration and a rebirth of creativity in humans. The objects of nature take on human qualities; the dead leaves are symbolic for the death of spirit. The diseased multitudes refer to people with inanimate minds, each a corpse static in their grave. The speaker reveals the power of the spring wind that “shall blow/ Her clarion o’er the dreaming earth, and fill / (Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air) / With living hues and odours plain and hill” (lines 9-12). Here, the speaker is illustrating the importance of inspiration; humans are the “dreaming earth” that will “feed in air”; in other words, creativity will bring life back to the mind. After describing the changes in the autumn winter and spring, the speaker observes the effects of summer on the sea like on land. The images of overgrown vegetation and “sapless foliage” (774, line 40) seem to represent the conformity of summer. This suggests a time of idleness in people when one is conformed; in summer, there is neither a surge of life as in spring nor death as in autumn. This is evident in that the stillness that the summer brings is weary of the oncoming wind: “The sapless foliage of the ocean, know / Thy voice, and suddenly grow grey with fear” (lines 40-41). Because the vegetation of the sea is familiar with the changes the wind brings they are resistant to awaken from their summer dreams. They “grow grey with fear” of starting anew. This is a familiar feeling in humans when renouncing to conformity and anticipating the dramatic
changes in revitalizing our spirit. Shelley confirms the importance of creativity and the rejuvenation it brings to the vivacity of human kind as he illustrates the importance of the wind to seasonal change. Each season is representative of the different stages in human growth, each relying on the inspiration of the wind for progress.

The need for inspiration and the freedom of imagination become more evident when the speaker addresses the wind in first person. The speaker’s wish for the wind to carry him is characterized by the longing of a plea. He compares himself to adaptable objects of nature such as a “dead leaf,” a “cloud,” or a “wave” (lines 43-45); these are all moved by the wind. He wishes to feel the strength of the wind and to be lifted. The speaker cries out to the wind to free him possibly from the confines of the mundane, “I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!” (line 54). The speaker seems weighed down by his current self; his plea to the wind is a plea for the freedom of inspiration. The thorns of life may be the flaws of the world that inhibit creativity. He mentions the weight of time chaining “One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud” (lines 55-56). Here he may be referring to his creative qualities or that of others chained by time. The speaker asks the wind to make him its instrument. Evading the restrictions of the world he wants to serve the wind, the speaker asks to be a channel for music, symbolic of art in general.

The speaker confirms Shelley’s views that internal change and creative forces are primordial for external (social) change. The speaker requests that the wind revitalize his thoughts over the universe “Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth! / And, by the incantation of this verse, / Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth / Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind! / Be through my lips to unawakened Earth / The trumpet of a prophecy” (774-775, lines 63-69). The speaker solicits the wind to spread his thoughts over the universe, like “withered leaves” possibly referring to his written word, to “quicken a new birth.” He wants his thoughts to be a catalyst for change, a rebirth that began within him and that he hopes to spread with the aid of the wind to humankind. But taking into account the necessity of death for rebirth Shelley refers to his leaves, his written words, as withered. Just like the dead leaves of the first stanza fueled the rebirth in the spring, Shelley’s words, his art, will serve as a vehicle for the rejuvenation of society and a new flourishing of ideas. He stress-
es that thoughts are dead even meaningless unless they are used to inspire creativity in others. In other words, the individual’s creative process is only important as it leads to a social creative process. The closing line confirms his idealism and his belief in progress: “O Wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?” (775, lines 69-70). Shelley asks this with the intention of having the reader confirm the implied response, “No,” Spring can not be far behind. His idealism seems to stem from his understanding of the natural process of rejuvenation evident in nature as well as in history; it is not naïve idealism but a rational conviction that throughout a history of war and death, creativity (art) can redeem humankind. In other words, there is hope because the winter is a prelude to the regeneration of spring. He implies that in times of social upheaval and discontent such as war—times equivalent to winter—creative inspiration can aid in a social rebirth. Shelley argues that society must also change like nature and that the inspiration of creativity will bring forth that change.

Shelley’s vision of social reform is prominent in his works; his exploration of the human condition reveals the power of self-renewal. He links this creative rebirth with the reform of social conflict; in other words, we must renew ourselves in order to renew the world that surrounds us. Shelley’s reaction to the war that surrounded him was that of responsibility; he suggests that we search within for hope to promote creativity. He, like
many others, were let down by the prospects of change after the revolution; therefore, he concluded that a deeper change had to occur. We, too, have faced the emptiness of war—Iraq has weighed on many of our minds. Throughout a history of wars it is more than likely that the flaw lies within us; not only those who start the wars but those who idly stand by are responsible. Shelley offers a very obvious yet difficult solution: we need to seek inspiration in order to spark changes around us; and although this may not mean to end war forever, it will result in strength to speak out in our own ways. This vision is valuable in current times as a reminder that we can find in ourselves a force that will contribute to positive change in the world that surrounds us.

Works Cited

Samuel Beckett’s “Endgame” reveals to its audience, through fragmented and almost nonsensical dialect, a postmodern truth: the human condition is a play within a play, in which all the characters present the absurdity of life; the play results in a collage of repeated phrases and ritualistic, meaningless behavior that exposes the audience to an uncanny visualization of the postmodern disillusionment with a substance-less life. The characters Hamm and Clov embody the universal concept of co-dependence, revealing the individual’s need to qualify existence by feeling useful in habitual tasks. Hamm is master of his domain yet remains alienated; he is unaware of true emotion and is only useful in ordering his pet and companion, Clov. Hamm’s parents, Nagg and Nell, are isolated, at least more physically restrained than the others and lead partial lives, constrained by ashbins from which they only peak out of. Clov is servant, pet, son, and companion; he is the only character able to move freely, yet he is restricted by his emotional dependence on Hamm. This postmodern play reveals within its satirical and “grotesque” world that the meaning, the purpose of life, is not a constant truth, but it is framed by an individual’s dedication toward a sub-
jective concept. Here, all the characters are going through the motions of life but lack meaning, purpose. The characters are aware that their lives are only show, they are aware and even apathetic to the “play within the play,” and in the comfort of their fragmentation, discontinuity and instability, they go on with the show.

The scene opens with Clov setting up and opening the curtain to his own play. The ashbins, the armchair and even Hamm are covered waiting for their curtains to be drawn. After uncovering the ashbins, drawing the curtains and revealing Hamm, he “turns toward [the] auditorium” (2395). The play begins, yet Clov is already tired, obsessively chanting “finished, it’s finished, nearly finished” (2395). This reveals the habitual cycle of their lives; although we have just been exposed to the scene, Clov’s muttering reveals that this setting-up has been happening continuously—never finishing—it’s just a cycle of monotonous activity. This ritual is now completely void of expectancy, there is even numbness to it as Clov wails, “I can’t be punished anymore” (2395). His repeated pain has become obsolete. Hamm wakes, his first words are “Me—[He yawns.]—to play” (2395). Throughout, references to “the dialogue” (2314) reveal mechanical interaction; their communication is limited to “lines”—memorized clusters of words. The references to “the play” become more apparent close to the ending, Clov pleads, “Let’s stop playing” (2418); the reader is stuck by his exhaustion. It’s as if he can no longer hold on, yet sadly we know that soon he will end where he began, asking, “finished, is it finished?” Hamm even warms up for his soliloquy, angrily shouting at Clov for ruining his “aside” (2418).

Despite the inactivity of their “play,” it is all held together, not by a plot but by co-dependence. They only exist in that they may justify their existence in the other. Hamm asks Clov, “Why do you stay with me?” and Clov responds, “why do you keep me?” (2396). This is the essence of co-dependency; in other words, Clov stays because Hamm “keeps [him]” and Hamm keeps Clov because Clov stays, and so on. This is the superficial attempt to fill the void of meaninglessness with just company. Hamm knows that Clov wants to leave and no longer loves him, yet what matters most is they both resign to the idea that “There’s no one else” and “There’s nowhere else” (2396). This dependence causes each character to remain in an existential limbo; neither is fulfilling what little they have
left of will. Hamm wants his “pain-killer,” the ultimate pain killer is death. It would mean freedom for Hamm to die, yet he can not do it himself. He wants Clov to do it. Clov wants to leave, constantly asking himself, “What is there to keep me here?” (2413). Hamm responds, “The dialogue.” Hamm is aware that they depend on each other for the dialectic, and that they exist only for the play of words—there is no plot to their lives, no movement, just words—empty as they may be.

Beckett reveals the absurdity of life and how trivial our actions may be. Yet the ultimate belief that it will all fall apart if we do not play our role is the underlying comic relief. Beckett reveals that individual truths are only illusions maintained by the individual’s need for purpose. The individual’s need to be needed is why Clov wants to believe that “[he has] things to do” and that he is somehow “putting things in order.” This is the ultimate farce. The postmodern concern with purpose, or lack there of, sprouts from the essential need for qualification. Beckett reveals the void that is habitual and empty behavior, yet all is not lost. As the curtain descends on the lonely, possibly dead Hamm and absent Clov, the audience is left with a choice of endings. Either both achieved what they truly wanted—freedom—or they will wake to the same room with Clov pleading, “finished, it’s finished, nearly finished” and the “farce” will go on.

Works Cited
After many years of being away, Toto returns to his home town to bid his last goodbyes to his old friend, Alfredo. He begins to walk around the town square, looking around, and then he fixes his eyes on the old Cinema Paradiso where he grew into a young man, and just pauses for a moment. An old, homeless man walks by saying, “The square is mine, mine!” Toto looks at him and smiles: he remembers this man from when Toto was a young boy, when the old man would always say the same thing: “The square is mine.” Toto takes joy in seeing this, as if he begins to recognize something that was lost within himself—he looks at the old faces, the old town; his old memories return and they make him feel as if he’s found himself again. In Giuseppe Tornatore’s “Cinema Paradiso,” we are reminded that, yes, progress is good, but you cannot know where you’re going if you do not know where you came from; our past is what makes us who we are today, and Toto finds, at the end, that he can never fully escape his own past. By telling the story from Toto’s point of view through the use of flashback, dramatic monologue, metaphors that suggest progress and a connectedness to the past, and mise-en-scenes in which motion serves as the “dominant contrast,” Tornatore lets us know that though time moves forward we need to find the unbreakable connection to our past which gives us passion, without which we are lost, empty and lonely.

In his film, Tornatore is saying that no matter how much we try, and despite the progression in time, we can never get rid of our past. As the film opens, we see an older man with grey hair driving through a street at night and alone. When he arrives at his house, he lies in bed beside a woman who tells him his mother called from Sicily and left a message. She, then, tells him that his mother told her that whenever she wants to see him, she is the one who has to make the trip to Rome, where he currently lives. To this remark, he leans back and becomes annoyed, evasive, and simply asks, “She called just to say that?” From the man’s gaze and expression, it seems that he doesn’t like the idea of getting a phone call from back home; it seems he’d much rather try to forget about anything that reminds him of where he comes from, forget or rid himself of his old memories. But when the lights go out and his insensitive bed partner goes back to sleep,
the man stays awake, and it becomes evident that there is something that still lingers, that still hurts. There is something which makes him try to shut out his memory, and this becomes a constant struggle for him, for even the mere phone call of his mother already brings back notions of that other world in a small town in Sicily he left behind.

We must also ask if trying to rid himself from his past and living strictly in the present really makes the old man, Toto, happy. Yes, Toto lives in a nice home with a fancy dining table, a chandelier hanging from the kitchen ceiling, a bed partner, a promising career as a filmmaker. But something about his vacant gaze, his stout posture, makes us think he is a man who tries to hide that something is missing from his life. And through his present state, his staring out a window at night, we are made to wonder if one could really let go of everything that we’ve lived, and if yes, does one feel empty or like a blank piece of paper when one does so.

It is very effective to let Toto tell the story because Toto personifies the abstract idea of progress, of someone who left the poor and provincial circumstances of a past life and yet returns to it, which carries out the idea of the co-existence of the past with the present. Toto was born and raised in a small town called Giancaldo. He lived in a town in which a kiss in a movie was considered too much and kissing scenes, therefore, were banned and censored by the conservative town’s priest. In Toto’s day, a school’s methods for teaching consisted of getting your head banged into a chalk board if you didn’t know what five times five was. When Toto decides to leave, he gets out of the small town and becomes a noted filmmaker. It’s good for him to retell the story because he gets out of that town that seemed stale. He becomes something greater than a mere projectionist, he moves beyond the small town; he personifies the idea of what it is to move on. So, since Toto gets out of the small town and thereby symbolizing modernization, he needs to tell his own account of the story so we can understand that a little bit of the past lingers on with the present despite changing fashions and life styles. Toto needs to tell the story because he is the one who mingles the old world with the new through his memories, and characters like his elderly mother or even his intimate friend and mentor, Alfredo, cannot tell it because they are products of a passing time, characters that remain in that past generation with their old customs: they never get out of the small town.
The strategic use of flashback also adds to the notion of Toto carrying his past with him. When Toto is lying in bed at night, there is a sound of bells coming from a metallic object that hangs from the porch ceiling outside. After he takes in this sound, he drifts back into his old memories of when he was an altar boy, sleeping through the mass ceremonies. From there on, the story is told through his memories. The flashbacks portray Toto’s life back then to contrast how it is now; they remind us that Toto is telling the story from a distance and place the past with the present side by side, a technique which dramatizes the fact that his memories have not completely died even though Toto is now far away.

Another beautiful component of the film is Alfredo’s dramatic monologues, which work thematically and illustrate that this is a film about finding one’s self again. After young Toto finishes his military service of a few years, Toto returns to his town distraught, not recognizing anything in the town, feeling alienated and saddened by the separation from his girlfriend. But, then, Toto and Alfredo decide to take a walk to the sea; they sit and talk beside the blue ocean. Alfredo tells young Toto that living in the same little town for so long makes you narrow-minded, as if the town were the center of everything and that nothing will change, but “then you leave for a year or two. When you come back, everything’s changed. The thread’s broken. What you came to find isn’t there. What was yours is gone. You have to go away for a long time…many years…before you can come back and find your people. The land where you were born.” Indeed, this is what happens in the film: Toto is happy at the beginning, with a girlfriend, his job as projectionist, his friends, then he leaves for a few years, comes back: everything seems unrecognizable to him with no girlfriend. Finally, toward the end Toto comes back after many years and is overwhelmed with memories as if he is now able to reconcile with his old demon, his past. Alfredo’s lines are prophetic; he is wise when he says this; for Toto’s journey, it means that it is only after being away for so long that he begins to appreciate and look at those things which he left more sensitively. Indeed, it is only after being away for so many years that Toto gets a sense of completion when he returns; perhaps, this is so because by leaving and starting over in another place he grew out of that immature adolescent he used to be. So that in seeing again the familiar places and objects that symbolize who he used to be,
as when he enters his old room with the familiar pictures and film posters, he realizes his memories have become more potent and much needed after the distance of a lot of years.

Tornatore effectively utilizes cinematic metaphors to suggest change, progression of time, the future and its link to the past. As Toto grows older and takes over the projection booth after Alfredo’s accident when a reel of film catching on fire leaves him blind, new inventions and customs come to the cinema where Toto has taken over his mentor’s job: the invention of a film that doesn’t catch fire, the screening of films in which men and women kiss (which were not allowed when Toto was a boy) and the upgrading of the camera projector. All of these juxtaposed images (though not in this order) symbolize the passing of time; the film industry is expanding, we don’t even see the old priest with his bell inside the theater anymore, since he will not watch what he calls “pornography.” All the new film innovations, the screenings of certain films at the paradiso suggest the ingenuity that’s taking place because of the changing times.

But the most remarkable metaphor in the film comes in a scene with Toto’s mother, which symbolizes Toto’s connection and reconciliation
with his past. After Alfredo dies, Toto’s mother phones him to let him know. The lady is now old, filled with wrinkles and sits on a small brown sofa, sewing and expecting Toto’s visit. When a bell rings, she gets up with her bundle of yarn and says, “I know it. It’s Toto.” She walks away taking her bundle of yarn with her, the main ball of thread stays behind, sitting on her sofa. We see a line of yarn extending as she walks out of the house and onto the front yard. The frame moves to a window through which we can see Toto and his mother embracing, Toto’s mother still hanging onto the thread, unbroken and extended. This is a beautiful image; it makes Alfredo’s previous speech about “the thread” being broken, resonate: in this scene, the thread is unbroken and it’s expanding, connecting Toto back to his old house as he connects with his mother for an embrace; that thread is linking Toto back to his old life.

The mise-en-scenes portray the distinction between the then and now through motion. At the beginning of the film, life in the town seems more rural with men riding bicycles to their destinations, ladies walking through town to get water and chores done, even people bathing in water fountains. But then, when Toto returns after many years to the broken down cinema, he looks out the window; the camera zooms in slowly at the road outside: here, we see streets cluttered with vehicles and honking trucks and busses. This is all motion going on in two separate mise-en-scenes, used for contrast to reveal the dramatic changes the little town has gone through. In these mise-en-scenes the focus is on the motion going on, symbolizing the town moving from provincial to modern.

The film ends with a beautiful scene that is also worth a closer look. At the end, we see Toto as a grown man, watching an old film by himself in a dark auditorium. As the film is playing, we learn that the montage is a sequence of spliced scenes that were edited out from those
films in which men and women kissed. Toto watches and smiles; he knows where these cut-outs come from: they are the censored pieces of films played in his day, which he wanted to keep as a little boy, but which Alfredo kept for him. Alfredo had told little Toto that the cut-outs were his but that he would keep them for him; Toto never got them until now. Perhaps, Alfredo wanted to remind Toto of the passion he once had, perhaps wanted to say that before you can find something you must lose it; before you become wise, you must be ignorant. Perhaps, Alfredo wanted to keep the films for when Toto really needed them to help find his way. 

Milestone: The Voices of East Los
Let’s imagine waking up each morning to a life we do not wish to lead, opening our eyes to see the same redundant individuals and to do the same dreary routine. It would all just feel like a life being wasted away because everything would seem meaningless. How far would we have to let this charade go on? Under what conditions must we realize that the life we have can be changed only by our choices? We naturally hold the right to govern ourselves, so if we are not happy with what we got, then we should go after what makes us happy. We begin to fantasize about a life that seems too distant but can be reached. We begin to visualize a life filled with ease and happiness, and as we think more about it the more we want it. We decide to go after that dream, but as we do we begin to understand the complexity it takes to bring that dream to life. No matter how motivated we are there will always be a demanding backdrop between the vision and its execution. We try to escape the life that we do not want, but we realize that that is an impossible idea because our history will always be trailing along. History will cling to us as we move along trying to escape the landscape that makes our life so difficult to bear. We will always have our thoughts and dreams to ease our trivial existence, and perhaps with self-meditation and self-discovery we will someday find the peace and happiness we are all desperately searching for.

In the film, “The Hours,” director Stephen Daldry has the challenging task of envisioning and executing Virginia Woolf’s classic 1925 novel Mrs. Dalloway. In his film we see three different women living in three different times and places, all of them connected by one book. As the film opens Daldry bonds the three women by using stylized synchronistic editing, which helps enforce the parallelism of their diverse lives: first with Virginia Woolf, who lives in the quiet suburbs of London in the early 1920’s; throughout the film we follow her moods and listen to her voiceover as she pens passages to her novel, Mrs. Dalloway; then we see Laura Brown reading and bonding with the novel’s character, Mrs. Dalloway, in post-World War II Los Angeles; lastly, we watch Clarissa Vaughan prepare for a party in 2001 New York, replicating the unexamined lifestyle of Mrs. Dalloway. The film goes on to portray the three women planning their day and hours while their stories interlace to a life
changing moment. Daldry creates a faithful adaptation of Virginia Woolf’s novel by capturing the dark poetic tone, artistic imagery, and theme of despair, madness, and death. He also manages to envision the story in its simplest form and is able to execute it brilliantly into a film that a contemporary audience can relate to and easily understand.

Stephen Daldry is able to create a dark lyrical tone to the film as Virginia Woolf does in her novel. The novel has an elegant way of flowing with profound moments. Daldry captures that by also having a lyrical graceful flow to it. The film is filled with feelings and moving moments expressed in insightful conversations between the characters. Virginia Woolf, played by Academy Award Winner Nicole Kidman, resembles the dark perplexed character Septimus in Mrs. Dalloway. In one scene Virginia Woolf storms out of her Richmond home in a desperate desire to catch a train to London. Her overprotective husband, Leonard Woolf, chases after her hoping that she isn’t going through another of her mental breakdowns in which she attempts to commit suicide. Leonard Woolf manages to catch up to her at the Richmond Train Station and confronts her on why she ran out on him with no explanation; he unsuccessfully attempts to reason with her as to why she should come back to their suburban home and live a quiet and peaceful life. Virginia Woolf lashes back, “I have endured this custody, I have endured this imprisonment. I am attended by doctors. Everywhere I am attended by doctors who inform me of my own interest.” Virginia Woolf is revealing her dark thoughts that control her mind as she suffocates in this sedated life Leonard has established for her nerves. But no one can help her, not even doctors. Screenwriter David Hare manages to capture the dark poetic tone of Mrs. Dalloway, condense the ideas into a few sentences and still have a meaningful impact.

David Hare also captures this somber tone in Richard, played by Ed Harris, a sad poet who is dying of AIDS. Richard also seems to hold a fragment of Septimus’ gloomy characteristics. As the ex-lover of Clarissa Vaughan, he represents the friend she can’t get out of her life. Like the character of Virginia Woolf, Richard also suffers from mental episodes. In a poignant scene, Clarissa goes up to Richard’s apartment to pick him up for the party. Richard has been thinking deeply on how his life is coming to an end, and he wonders if he can endure another hour with a dis-
ease that is taking over his body. Clarissa walks in and finds the place a mess while Richard is going crazy talking about how he needs light and fresh air. Clarissa knows that Richard doesn’t want to attend the party, so she tells him that they don’t have to go, but Richard insists that is not his point. He explains how he can not live the way he is, “…I have to face the hours, don’t I? The hours after the party. And the hours after that…I’ve stayed alive for you…But now you have to let me go.” After confronting Clarissa with that prospect, he plunges down the window to his death. The same despairing event occurs in the novel when Septimus refuses to be taken by doctors and plunges out the window to his death. The haunting tone is faithful to Virginia Woolf’s novel, even with the characters, time, and locations altered. Stephen Daldry manages to focus on the actors’ craft of delivering simple lines to form a nostalgic tone of time wasting away, life slipping away, and the hours counting down.

Daldry is capable of executing the artistic imagery of the book onto the big screen by the use of close-ups, high and low angle camera views. *Mrs. Dalloway* is a novel that contains delicate words which create images in the readers’ minds. Daldry manipulates the camera shots, angles, and lighting to create the same effect. He focuses on capturing the sense of despair by using close-ups to show the expression on an actors’ faces. A tender close-up is one with Richard in his apartment sitting beside a table strewn with pills; he is holding a picture of his mother: as the camera zooms in on his face and slowly pulls away, a tear runs down his worn-out sunken cheeks, and his bright blue eyes are lost in memory. Similarly, Virginia lies underneath an enormous tree besides a burial ground for a dying bird. The scene connects Virginia to nature, this lush world coming to an end. In the scene Virginia seems to be deeply interested in the moment of the bird’s death. She lies next to the bed of colorful roses in which the bird lies; as she gazes deeply into the eyes of the bird, we get a close-up of her face, which is now a death mask. The bird lies with a spark of light from the sun in its dead pupils, then the light begins to fade, the bird’s life is slowly vanishing away.

Daldry also uses high angle shots, which help illustrate the mental state of a character. In Laura Brown’s case we see the image of someone desperately trying to be perfect. Laura has everything a woman in her time could ever want, yet she is not satisfied. One of Laura Brown’s
scenes she is in a hotel room trying to commit suicide. She has a thought of killing herself, but will she be able to execute that idea? The scene is shot from a high angle bird’s eye view of the room as Laura lies meditatively on the bed with her eyes closed. Suddenly, we see water gushing out from under the bed. The water continues to rise as Laura is thinking; as it begins to engulf her, she wakes up from her thoughts and realizes that she can’t give her life away. The high angle gives the viewer a sense of Laura’s desperation: four corners, four walls, no possible way to escape but through suicide. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf uses long paragraphs to illustrate the meaning of a scene to get her point across while Daldry only has to use a few simple well-defined images.

The theme of despair, madness and death dominates in both film and novel. Throughout the film we witness characters undergoing hard situations that take them into their darkest moments, and they struggle to surpass them by any means possible. In all three stories we encounter a woman who has to make a choice that will highly impact her life and those around her. This theme is best summarized by Virginia Woolf when she confronts her husband in the train station, “This is my right.
This is the right of every human being. I chose not the suffocating anesthetic of the suburbs, but the violent jolt of the capital. That is my choice. The meanest patient, yes even the lowest, is allowed some say in the matter of her own prescription. Thereby she defines her humanity.” Here Virginia Woolf illustrates how important it is for a human being to have control of her own life. Choices should be made by the individual; that is a right, a true power, the liberty to lead the life she feels she can lead and be happy with. The film’s theme may be dark and depressing, but it does give contemporary viewers an insight into how important each life is. The message transcends class, race, and gender just as the film transcends location and time.

Stephen Daldry captures the essential message of Virginia Woolf’s novel, the message that as human beings we should not let our history hold us down when we try to find the happiness we search for by looking at life and recognizing it for what it is, accepting it, and then putting it all away. Daldry presents the characters and their situations in a refreshing manner and still creates the same atmosphere as in the novel. Finally, the film is paradoxically a celebration of life; as Virginia Woolf says towards the end of the film, “Someone has to die in order that the rest of us should value life more.” In the film that someone is Virginia Woolf while her novel’s character, Mrs. Dalloway, lives. The characters begin to value what defines them, the choices they have made; they are confronted with situations which force them to examine the way they spend their hours. We see them making choices and confronting the difficulty of executing their ideal self. It is very easy to imagine a life filled with simple happiness, but it is difficult to undertake the creation of that image, which may result in tragic events.
I remember the times when my parents drove me crazy. As a young teenager, I was never allowed to leave the house and go places on my own or with my friends if they hadn’t met them. They always thought I would get myself into trouble with the police, when I actually felt that my home was like a jail for me. I soon felt isolated from the world outside as if I hadn’t lived it. Sooner or later, I began to rebel against my parents while I had the mentality of “I can’t wait to move out of here.”

I always thought I was the only one who lived that teenage life. I never understood why my parents were so hard on me. Did they have a bad past life? Were they raised by strict parents themselves? Then I read Gail Sheehy’s essay, “Predictable Crises of Adulthood,” about the steps of development each person takes from one stage to another in human growth. By outlining the “developmental ladder” of the six stages, she presents us with a better understanding of what we will face in each stage of the ladder.

Before eighteen years old, our motto is “I have to get away from my parents.” Usually, during our teenage years, we do not like to be told what to do. We often like to think that we know what we’re doing just so we won’t be told what to do. After eighteen years old, we begin the “Pulling Up Roots” stage. We often say, “I know exactly what I want,” just so our parents will let us live our own life on our own. In reality, we can’t take care of ourselves. We haven’t yet learned how to survive in the real world. Therefore, we often move back in with our parents until we are fully ready.

I agree one-hundred percent with Sheehy’s description of the “Pulling Up Roots” stage. In my case, I wanted to move out as soon as I turned eighteen years old to escape from my parents’ strict rules and live my life in freedom. My girlfriend, Liliana, and I were going to move out and live together in the summer. After we came up with the average price for renting an apartment in southern California, she felt she wouldn’t be able to pay it all on her own. I, on the other hand, wouldn’t want to work full time and stop attending college. It would take me longer to graduate and achieve my goal of becoming a psychologist. It turned out that I am going to finish with school and possibly work half time, depending on
the situation that I’ll be in. My girlfriend and I agreed that we will wait a
couple of years until we are fully ready to live our lives together in the
real world. As of now, I have remained in my grandmother’s household
since she is more lenient when it comes to staying up and/or coming
home late. I realize that I still have a life ahead of me that will quite pos-
sibly change as I move on into my twenties.

During our twenties, we question how to deal with life in the adult
world. We now begin “The Trying Twenties” stage. We begin to act our
age by how society defines it. At this point in time, we should be married
and settled down. People in their twenties feel that they should be very
careful with their decisions because they believe that changes can’t be
made. However, it is not true. Change is possible but unfortunately some
decisions are impossible to change. There are two types of people in their
twenties, one who is ready for commitments and the other who explores
and experiments. We commonly believe that the path we have chosen is
the right one, ignoring the other.

I believe that Sheehy makes a convincing case because my uncle relates
to her description of “The Trying Twenties” stage as I’ve observed his life
in his twenties. In his mid-twenties, he married his wife, Lisa, because
they were both in love with each other and wanted to continue their lives
together. A few years later, she gave birth to their first child, my cousin
Veronica, proving they’re ready to live their lives together. After five years
of marriage, they were having problems with money and each other that
eventually led to their split up. Unfortunately, things are likely to change
in the future as much as we don’t want them to, that’s just the way life is.
As much as he doesn’t want anything to do with Lisa anymore, he is stuck
by paying child support for Veronica. I can see other factors that con-
tributed to their split-up as they moved on into their thirties.

Men and women in their thirties feel very narrow and restricted. They
now begin the “Catch-30” stage. They blame all sorts of things, mainly the
choices they made in their twenties. Usually, the choices differ greatly in
our thirties than twenties. Sometimes the person may feel that he or she is
missing something in their life which leads to new choices and commit-
ments. However, it involves great change, turmoil, and often crisis. “One
common response is the tearing up of life we spent most of our twenties
putting together” (208). The single person feels the pressure to seek a part-
ner, the housewife wants to explore the outside world, the childless considers having children, and/or anyone who is married wants to separate.

My mom’s friend, Carmen, and her ex-husband, James, are the perfect example of the “Catch-30” stage. Carmen was like any other young woman in her early twenties who already wanted to settle down, get married, and start a family. James, on the other hand, was in his late twenties who was on the same page as Carmen. They dated for a while, and a few years later they got married while Carmen was still in her early twenties. After more than ten years of marriage, she began to realize that she wanted to be free again and date other guys. Of course, James wasn’t too fond of her decision. It eventually led up to their divorce having two daughters and a son together. Our choice(s) change again back to our previous decision as we move on to the next stage.

Life becomes more rational and orderly in the early thirties. We now begin the “Rooting and Extending” stage. We begin to settle down at this point in time. People have careers and are financially stable. Satisfaction with marriage generally goes downhill in the thirties due to a lack of social life outside the family by focusing more on children.

My mom and father’s relationship reminds me of the “Rooting and Extending” stage. They have been married close to about ten years and they have settled down. Although my mom hasn’t quite yet achieved her career, she and my dad are financially stable. Their satisfaction with marriage is average due to the fact that all of their friends are doing their own thing since most of them are also married. The “Rooting and Extending” stage, then, leads to the next stage of our lives.

In the middle of our thirties, we have reached the halfway mark. We now begin “The Deadline Decade” stage. We tend to squeeze a great number of things in between which can be stressful. This is the stage when we feel the loss of youth, the physical power we have taken for granted, the purpose of stereotyped roles by which we identified ourselves, and the spiritual dilemma of having no absolute answers. It is a time of both danger and opportunity. We can all rework our identity and make the most of our opportunity to have a “full-out authenticity crisis” (210) as Sheehy states. To come through this crisis, we must reexamine our purposes and reevaluate how to spend our resources. We can’t take everything we have into the bridge to the second part of life. Along the
way, we discover that we are alone. We must learn to give ourselves permission rather than asking for permission because we are the providers of our own safety. Our true identity is what we are going to display in the sense that we are no longer being something we’re not to please others. It is a renewal of our identity.

The situation my uncle is in right now is the perfect example of the “Deadline Decade” stage. Although he is turning thirty-eight years old next month, he feels the need to squeeze everything in between his thirties before he turns forty. It’s been quite stressful for him as he realizes that he no longer has his youth and everything that revolves around it. He has to take better care of himself because his life is more fragile as he ages. This stage leads to the final stage of our life as we continue on in our forties and after.

Somewhere in our mid-forties, our equilibrium is regained. We now begin the “Renewal or Resignation” stage. A new stability is achieved which may have a positive or negative effect on us. If we skip “The Deadline Decade” stage, we may feel the need to give up. At this stage, we feel abandoned by our family as we all grow older. The crisis usually begins at age fifty. However, if we have confronted ourselves in the middle passage, these may well be the best years of our lifetime. We gain personal happiness as we forgive our parents for the burdens of our childhood as our children can let go to be on their own, and we no longer feel bothered by our children leaving the nest. At age fifty, our friends become more important than ever to us, but so does our privacy.

At this point in time, we no longer take shit from anyone.

My dad fits in perfectly with the “Renewal or Resignation” stage. He is almost turning fifty years old and he’s already shown early signs of this stage. He feels abandoned by my mom and me because we are all doing our own thing. His childhood life was a tough one, having to deal with his father’s death in his thirties, his mother’s sickness throughout her whole life, and having to take the full responsibility of his mother, sister, and two brothers. His parents were blamed for all his misfortunes, but he forgave them a year ago. I’ve noticed that he has a lot of friends now. Everywhere he goes, he makes friends with people. I always see him talking to people he doesn’t even know at a store or at the gym. He already has the mentality of “I’m not taking shit from no one anymore.” I sup-
port him one-hundred percent because he’s suffered greatly in his life, so it’s time to relax and enjoy the rest of his life while he is still able. That’s why everyone should live their life everyday as if it were their last because death can occur anywhere at anytime.

Though it’s impossible, given my age, to relate to the last five stages, I have gained a better understanding of what is in store for me as I move from one stage to another up the “developmental ladder.”

Works Cited
For many students, attending a live reading or cultural event may be an unfamiliar experience they will want to repeat. By fulfilling this class requirement and writing a report without a set of guidelines as in an essay or research paper, they tend to be more open and reflective, less self-conscious, than writing graded papers. Many acknowledge moments of inspiration while in the presence of writers reading their own work or observing works of art or art forms that mirror back something in themselves.
For this report I decided to go to a poetry reading in Pasadena. The event was called *Word Painters: A Poetry Reading About Art*, which was being held in an art gallery. I had never attended a poetry reading before so my imagination was running wild with images of what I would see. Would there be beret wearing, goatee sporting men and all natural dreadlocked women? Imagine my surprise when I arrived at the art gallery and saw that most people were middle aged and nicely dressed. It was wonderfully normal. I have to say that I do have prejudices against “artistic” people. My own mother was a failed art major and she...
poems for me to get used to the animated way poetry is read. I know it adds personality and feeling but I am not used to that. I also found it odd that we did not clap between poems. I found the silence uncomfortable.

The next poet was Beth Paulson. She was not as animated as the first lady. I thought her poems were nice but I couldn’t really find anything that I personally related to. It is also harder for me to just concentrate and listen. I like to be able to read along. I think I may have gotten more out of her poems if I could have read along.

The last poet was Carol Lem. I felt very comfortable while she was reading her poetry since I know her from school. I like listening to her read because I feel that she does a good job. I wish she were able to stop and explain like when we are in class reading T.S. Eliot. I think that is what is hard about poetry. There could be several meanings. I would like it if the readers could have gone line by line and explained the poem and what they were feeling. I guess that would ruin the cadence of the poem. I liked the poem she read about the plum tree and going to see if it was still there. I am like that. It made me very sad to think about the things that I have tried to go back and see. Some things remain and some have gone (is that a song?). I feel sad when I think about past friends from high school. I know very well that we have changed and probably would not be friends but I hate letting go. I drive by a house in Downey that I lived in 32 years ago. I think of my father, who died when I was nine. He built the wooden fence to the back yard of the house and it is still there. I guess those are poems waiting to come out.

I really enjoyed myself at the reading. I would definitely go to something like that again. I guess that I should give artists a chance and not base my feelings on how badly my mother behaved. Well, I guess bad parents give birth to the artists of the world.
Ernestine Gallegos | Pigments Mixed with Wine and Words

The silence was deep and the words evasive, cascaded in a blue, which helped to cast those silver and grey wisps in a halo of intellect and intrigue. April 9, 2006 at the Fine Artists Factory in Pasadena I was greeted with a smile and a wave hello and left with a deeper insight into a woman who I would learn could be found in the shadow of a plum.

The crowd was large and I was late so I tried to sneak in unnoticed as though not disrupting a class in session. I was of course caught by a sweet, welcoming, round rimmed face and a smile that beamed with passion and love for the written word. I was seated in the back and listened with illuminated ears as the poetess was on display in a gallery where pigments mixed with wine and words in order to paint verbal pictures of emotions and moments in time. There were two other poets that heralded the approach of the mystic that I came to hear, one accompanied by beautiful melodies played on a native flute; and the other, I must admit, to walking in half way through.

As for Ms. Lem, Ms. Carol Lem, Carol Lem—What to call her here, no longer standing in front of the dry erase board filled with whimsical insights and journal questions? When I heard chuckles in response to her introductory comments all pomp of the professor/poet professing and the instructor instructing seemed to melt away. Ms. Professor Carol Lem spoke of teaching at East Los Angeles College. Hi, I’m Carol, she said to the crowd with a smile, a giggle and a sigh, yet immediately I was bewitched by the ideology and insight that she had to share. No longer was Ms. Lem a two dimensional figure standing in front of the class helping me to better understand both World and English Literature; now she was the poetess reciting the rhythms of her muses. We often don’t take the time to appreciate those that spend their lives trying to give us the gift of knowledge and understanding; we have a tendency to believe that it’s just a job, perhaps something to pay the bills, and then you meet a professor who doesn’t just talk but she is.

So as I sat silently flipping through her book, Shadow of the Plum, I came across “At a Poetry Reading,” and it was those words that said it...
best, “It was not the words so much, / the meaning, but the way she read them.” So I smiled, closed my eyes and listened to what she had to say. She also commented on “Upside Down Drawing,” her passion and desire to paint; but it was when she concluded with the “Plum Tree” that my intrigue began to rise. She spoke of a childhood plum tree that grew in her yard. With such sweet sentiment she began to recall how that plum tree seemed to watch silently over the days of her youth, and it wasn’t the words but the way that she read them that seemed to echo, “I would rest my head against the trunk / and feel life push up from the roots / to the open sky.” She also explained how she would visit the tree often and how one day it was gone, yet it remains in a poem, in a memory, and lingering in the room that night. So as silence fell and the room erupted into applause I began to think of what to write for my report on Professor Lem’s live reading and knew it had to be something about a plum tree.

My greatest Thanks, not just for the invite to see and hear you read your own work, but for viewing the passion that sparks the use of such words so passionately.
Ernestine Gallegos | LORDS OF CREATION

As I sit here, the day after viewing the exhibit and scan the museum guide it hits me that what it has to say seems clinical and evasive. So it was at that moment that I put the guide down and searched the annals of sheer emotions the exhibit stirred inside me. I am of Aztec descent and my family can trace itself back past its American migration beyond its Spanish conquerors to the time of what we now call those “Ancient Civilizations.” Although I stand here, amongst these lands, fifth generation Mexican American, it is that pride, that understanding, that veneration of my culture in which I find my greatest strengths and values. So as I stood at the threshold of the museum ready to step inside and be reminded of the Mayan people’s greatness I realized that the person that stood next to me was of Mayan descent (my fiancé Edwin). I began to realize that this would not just be a museum visit; it would take on a much deeper meaning than what I had first anticipated.

As Edwin and I walked amongst the exhibit pieces we both seemed to experience a sense of pride and belief followed gradually by loss and detachment. My family still lives in Mexico City and Edwin’s family in Guatemala. When we go to visit they insist that we see the surrounding temples in order to pay homage to the past by praying and making offerings to not just the old Gods but also those new Gods that have come to exist in those lands. And each time we visit I am always reminded that although many of our old ways are gone, our culture still exists and the voices of our ancestors still dwell inside all of us. We are a people of great culture and great belief and those seem to be some of the attributes that still live on in many of us.

The pieces that spoke to me beyond any other were those made of obsidian and onyx. They were very small, housed in a single case, and were in two shapes of various sizes. There were about six in the shape of snakes, which represented among other things rebirth. There was also one larger piece in the shape of a man that couldn’t have been more than five inches in length but it reminded me of things that my great-grandfather used to speak of when I was young. He had many pieces carved out of obsidian and a lot of jewelry with onyx stones. He would often say that the Aztecs (his people) believed obsidian and its sister stone onyx to
be worth more than gold. He spoke of the Spanish with their disease that only gold could cure, and he would laugh as he held up his obsidian blades. He was 95 when he passed and he had always believed that he would meet with his Gods at his end. I believe he is with them now.

The funerary mask made of jade was also another piece that spoke volumes about these great people and what they believed. In the museum guide it simply says that, “Death was defined as the expiration of the breath soul, or life force.” However, the description that was placed upon the exhibit itself told a more enhanced and beautiful message. The description pointed out that the white pieces that seem to be escaping from the masks mouth were the representation of the soul at the moment that the body expired and the soul set itself free. To me this was meaningful because it showed the absolute literary and physical difference between just reading about something and giving yourself the opportunity to see it in a three dimensional context.

Although many, many generations later would be viewing this exhibit with a whole new religious twist on this subject, the opportunity is there to get a glimpse into the inevitable, that moment when creation mixes with the unknown and we depart to see what is beyond this physical realm. This exhibit helps to remind us that we need not go silent into the abyss. Reading Cantares Mexicanos helped to animate and bring this exhibit to life for me, that understanding that man lived amongst nature and did not try to subdue it. In today’s busy world we can’t expect to live completely by the standards of those that have come before us, but perhaps we can learn from the culture, traditions and values that they held most dear in order to seek a more justified, civilized and complete life.

Thank you for requiring our class to attend a cultural event to write this report since very soon I will be receiving a copy of the book, Cantares Mexicanos, due to the overwhelming effect these two stories/songs, included in our English 206 syllabus, had on me. So, Thank You… 🌸
I had never been inside the Vincent Price Art Gallery; though I’ve passed it quite often enough in either a slow meander or hurried steps to the car or class, respectively. Recalling that second day in May leaves me feeling a bit like Wordsworth in “Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,” reflecting upon my experience out of the immediacy of the actual moment of occurrence. I remember strolling into the room five minutes before the reading by Jim Marquez was to commence, placing my backpack against a wall, and taking the few minutes to admire the artwork. At the time, I remember being impressed by the variety of art pieces. Now, “…passing even into my purer mind, / With tranquil restoration…” (lines 29-30), I can recall two pieces that made the most powerful impression on me. The first was one I encountered before the reading, “The Cat” by Rafael Coronel, mostly because of how dark the painting is. The last painting, for one reason or another, was the main focal point for me during the poetry reading. It was painted by an ELAC artist, whose name escapes me, entitled “Protection,” and it still appears vivid in my mind’s eye. It was hung behind the poet, directly to the right of where Ms. Lem sat: acrylic on wood panel, divided into thirds, each very catching in hue. One side is black and impenetrable; the other side is a leaf, soothing and refreshing; in the middle is a mesh of colors of flame, chaotic but simultaneously full of life, energetic.

When the signal came for the reading to commence, I hurried to the reading area and sat at the end of one of the aisles, next to a man that seemed to be writing his own verse during the event. Jim Marquez has a friendly face, is jovial in demeanor, and is passionate about his art. The reading was of three pieces, two short stories and an observation, from his self-published book entitled East L.A. Collage. All three pieces were based on experiences that had a particularly powerful effect on him, all of which the audience seemed to be receptive of because of its familiarity in plot and colloquial vernacular. The first story, about a girl in a café who is caught in a bad marriage, evoked personal memories of encountering battered women, of witnessing my own mother’s relationships. The second story, more sentimentally charged about watching a neighborhood thrift-store burn down, reminded me of losing my own neigh-
neighborhood Vons; of losing late night shopping trips and the employees who always remembered my family, of the end to the small-town effect in a big city.

The last anecdote Jim Marquez shared, about a roadside memorial, was the one that was the most powerful for me perhaps because as a poem Marquez pays homage to that memorial and the one it belongs to as well as to all roadside memorials and the street corners that claim lives. Although I do not know of that particular memorial, its memory will always be with me and the others in the audience. A roadside memorial will always be more than just another dot on the landscape of my passing peripheral. It will be more than passing curiosity. It will be a shrine that conveys the care of someone to erect it, a life precious enough to deserve fresh memory in candlelight and flowers. The ending of the piece, about how that particular shrine in Marquez’s story had to have been kept by a mother, brought tears to my eyes as I thought in trepidation of having to keep a memorial for my own son (knock on ALL the wood).

After the poetry reading and questions, all filed out of their seats. I stood, took the opportunity to admire that “Protection” piece, which had held me so captivated, gathered my things, and filed out of the gallery. I did take the refreshments offered, but did not stay to mingle and converse with fellow reading-goers. The experience was a welcome break in my busy day, a moment to celebrate poetry and art. Life cannot withstand perpetual robotic motion, cannot thrive in endless routine. Poetry is motion wrought with pleasant fervor and emotion, ambrosia for the soul. Thank you, Jim Marquez and “Protection” in acrylic on wood panel. 💫
My first experience at a live cultural event was at the 7th Annual East Los Angeles College Chicano Poetry night on May 4, 2006. The professor, Guillermo Carreon, started the night off with words of inspiration by saying, “Poetry is something from the heart and soul…It takes courage to recite your thoughts and feelings in front of a crowd…that makes us all poets tonight.” The inspirational beats of Congo drums lit up the room and the guitar cried out its very soul with every pluck of its strings. I never thought that I would see such a burst of poets join the event.

There is no grade or standard to which a poem is written; it is what in essence tells us who we are: our life experiences and where we come from. Everyone from ex-gang members and students recited their trials and tribulations and how writing poetry helped them to escape the harsh realities while in prison, through near-death experiences; it helped them to speak their minds on current events. In a complete act of sheer passion for poetry a deaf man touched me the most because he is the pinnacle of what passion and desire represent. How can someone write such inspirational words without being able to recite it? Only his voice is a white canvas and just about anything he can write on. If anything, I learned from that poet that it’s never too late to get into something you feel passionate about and pursue it; it doesn’t have to be poetry, it can be anything as long as you have a desire to fulfill it. Never let different roads venture you out of what you truly desire and want to pursue.

I noticed throughout my life that everything we as individuals do are often measured by a certain standard set by those who have come before us. However, I noticed that poetry is a deep journey into the mind of a poet, very much like voiceover in a film. Everyone’s mind is different and a poem takes us into a little journey into the mind of what that person has caged up like a bird waiting to fly out and soar. It can be an outburst or cry, but once it is released that caged bird can no longer torment you inside.

I’m not the greatest writer by any means, but when I read my poem, “The Ghetto Sound,” I felt as though I realized the caged bird I had inside me for years now. Imagine me speaking in front of a large crowd talking from the heart and soul, something I could never have imagined at the
start of this year. For once, I was one with the crowd because it seemed as though everyone wanted to let something out. Many might not have recited a poem but the applause was for all us poets on this one night we needed. I am not saying that one night turns me into a poet, but for that one night I can say I was a poet.

I hope that many students and writers try my experience once in their life; it helped me and my perspective on life—

THE GHETTO SOUND

The Streets of the World
We can not understand it
We can only live through it
The ghettos cradle to every syndicate
Followed by the association of terror
Even when we are destined to fail
We can choose to overcome and prevail
And the lost souls are but a destined rival
Falling into a cycle of survival
Many fall but few succeed
Many starve and die of disease
Silence in the code of the streets
Is like remembering your dream last week
So while many are sound asleep
Another world is lurking the streets
The sounds can only paint a picture
The sirens go tick with my clock
The pain of the streets will never stop
There is historically an inevitability of feeling pain in being a woman in Japanese high society. During the time of the Heian era and Murasaki Shikibu’s novel, *The Tale of Genji*, women were oppressed and left in waiting for the desires of men to fall upon them. In addition, class boundaries left women feeling inappropriate with their higher ranked love interests. Through longing and difference of class boundaries, Rob Marshall’s film, “Memoirs of a Geisha,” draws parallels with that of *The Tale of Genji*. Sayuri, the protagonist of the film, is an underprivileged girl who is sold into a geisha house in pre-World War II Japan. She struggles to the top, where she attains her goal of becoming a famous geisha but is unhappy with her success. She realizes that her intention of becoming a famous geisha is just a means to fulfill her desire to be with a man with whom she is enamored. Just as in *The Tale of Genji*, where women wait and long for their loves to appear, Sayuri finds that she also falls into the same predicament.

Sayuri is most similar to the character of the Akashi Princess in *The Tale of Genji* because they are both of lower social status than their respective love interests. Sayuri loves a wealthy chairman, while the Akashi Princess is Genji’s lover. Though the Akashi Princess and Genji consummate their love, she bemoans the fact that Genji’s background is much higher in class in comparison to hers. This causes conflict when she must give up their child to be groomed by Murasaki (referring to character in the novel, not the author). Ideally, she wants to take care of her own daughter, but class division forces her to do what is best for her child in giving her up to Murasaki. However, Sayuri must keep an arm’s length away from her love because she, as a geisha, is not supposed to have feelings for her clients. Her profession keeps her away from her desires because the chairman is of a higher social rank.

In both cases, the women must yearn for their respective love interests from a distance. It is ultimately societal status that erects a wall between the women and their true desires to be closer to the men they love. In the case of Sayuri, the longing reaches fulfillment, but the Akashi Princess never realizes her dream. Such is the case for people in the present as class boundaries still develop a certain barrier between relationships.