



# *I'LL WRITE MY WAY OUT*

*An anthology  
of writers from the  
California  
Institution for  
Women and the  
University of  
Southern  
California*

*Spring 2021*

*Edited by  
N.D.,  
J.P.D.,  
and K.M.L.*

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## FOREWARD

This spring, twenty-eight emerging writers signed up for an Inside-Out Writer's Workshop offered by the University of Southern California. It was the first course of its kind at the university, where USC writers were partnered with writers incarcerated at the California Institution for Women to read and write autobiography. The class was intended to take place in person. In fact, in-person learning within the correctional facility is integral to the Inside-Out model: students from different worlds interact with each other and make meaning out of a shared educational experience. But like a lot of other things this last year, one defined by its uncertainty, we had to throw intention out the window. At first, frankly, we were a little crestfallen, having worked so hard to get the class approved only to have to convert it to a correspondence course dependent on the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's *electronic correspondence system*, JPAY. A word about JPAY: imagine being in a remote location with spotty service trying to communicate important information to someone. As soon as you establish connection and begin to speak, someone on the other end lets you know that you're not coming through. *How about now? Kind of? Sort of?* As soon as you begin to start to relay whatever it is you're trying to get across, the connection drops. Imagine, too, as soon as you redial, a goblin appears out of the mist and kicks you as hard as he can in the shin, laughs, and disappears as quickly as he materialized. That's JPAY. What follows is a collection of work produced by writers on both sides of that divide, and despite the frustration caused by faulty means of correspondence, we know this class created a genuine community of writers. Despite everything, the course proved to be the most singular and brightest teaching experience in our lives. Every week, we met with our USC students to discuss their work and the work of their partners. Every week those USC students communicated back to their CIW partners the discussion, the readings, and the assignments. Although we never met our CIW students, we got to know them, understand their stories, and learn from them through the power of their words. One of the first assignments we gave to students was to write 6-word memoirs. We begin the book with those, having chosen to omit the authors' names. They could belong to anyone; they could belong to all of us.

Something happened over the sixteen weeks we shared together. We discovered that each of our stories is our own, but that we write from the same place and for the same reasons: to understand others and to better understand ourselves. Perhaps most importantly, the class taught us that people find ways to connect, regardless of the barriers between them, and that's what matters. Beauty gets made, goblins and all.

*N.D. and K.M.L.*



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## *COLLECTIVE MEMOIR*

- \* breathe, what's meant to happen will
- \* giving myself the permission to live
- \* imperfect visible hero impacted faithful tethered
- \* love one another; forgive and embrace
- \* knived mouth, tofu heart, split apart
- \* the chains are yours, break them
- \* "to thine own self be true"
- \* sleepwalking through my life's trials
- \* dreamer whose cup is half full
- \* I'm still learning who I am
- \* I don't know, I'm trying though
- \* misunderstood mistaken judged forgiven graceful favored
- \* rooted fluid blooming
- \* in constant evolution
- \* shining crazy beautiful full found infinite
- \* thank you for saving my life

*Students were asked to write a six-word memoir, inspired by Ernest Hemingway's six-word story.*

# *THE GARDEN NAMED TURTLE ISLAND*

*P.O.*

I have a large garden in the backyard of my unit that took me four years to create. I call this garden Turtle Island. All the plants in it were rescued from going to a dumpster.

When I'm finished watering Turtle Island, I go out front of the unit and water the plants there. People walking by are always complimenting my gardens. That always keeps my spirits up.

I also have a third garden at the SAP building that's also overflowing with plants and wildlife. It takes all day (7:30am to 3:30pm) to water and weed all of my gardens seven days a week.

I love Turtle Island the best. I feel calm and so much at peace when I am working here. T.I. has attracted a lot of wildlife due to the "jungle like" atmosphere of having so many plants in one area.

I put water bowls and bread, sunflower seeds and other food scraps out for my wildlife to keep them healthy and safe. Sitting in the middle of T.I., surrounded by plants and wildlife can take me far away from this place. When I'm gardening, in my mind, my parents are right here with me. Everything I know about gardening I learned from my mom. And every chance I can, I pass that knowledge on to others here.

Just recently I was watering T. I. with the hose when I suddenly noticed a female hummingbird flying circles around me. So I got real still, and the next thing I knew she landed on my hand. Then she hopped down my finger and got a drink of water from the end of the hose. WOW! After that I was floating the rest of the day. She stills comes around and will go to flowers right next to me without being afraid of me.

Right now I'm sitting amongst my plants on T.I. and a lizard, one of dozens that call my garden home, has been running across my legs

playing with other lizards. I can also see one of my three bunnies eating an apple under a geranium plant. I can absorb so much positive energy sitting like this, surrounded by my plants and wildlife, that people say I glow when I'm in the unit walking around.

When I am in my gardens, the whole ugly world of prison just disappears. I can suddenly be back at my family farm as a kid or back at my home in the mountains. The only time I'm really STUCK in prison is when I'm locked in my room, or we're locked down for COVID and can't get to my gardens.

The gardens are a very spiritual place for me. When people ask me who helped me create the gardens, I look them straight in the eye and say JESUS! Because whenever I garden I only listen to KLOVE, which is "Jesus music". Well, I hope this brief trip through my garden has made you feel better today. I know I feel better sitting here amongst my plants writing about my spiritual love for Turtle Island.

## *I'M STANDING.....STILL*

*A.I.H.*

My name is Altonia. I was born June 26, 1986, to Antoinette and Albert in Sacramento, California. My father was a protective father and my mother is, and always have been, loving and caring. July 4, 1990, my father was brutally murdered by an ex; his death was sudden and tragic. It really has impacted my entire life. As a child I heard stories and always felt like it was my fault. In the years to follow I experienced more and more trauma, along with a bunch of misplaced feelings of despair, anxiety and abandonment. Once my mom did get with another man, he abused me. I remember the day he hospitalized me. One day my mom didn't come back on time and he took his belt off and beat me with his buckle. I can also remember feeling the blood running down my face, and the saddened look on the face of the medical personnel that tended to me that day. But most importantly I remember the tears in my mom's eyes. I didn't know it then but they were guilt driven tears, and that type of tears has a certain sting to them, different from any other tears we cry.

At age 12, me and my siblings were removed from my mother's home and placed in foster care. I went to 13 different homes in less than a year. I started running away and experimenting with drugs, I had found a way to not be in my body and it felt good. I was a mother by age 17 but truth be told I was an addict by then too. But that didn't stop me from having more kids though. I had Antonio at 17, Ainotla-Zeni at 19, James at 21, Zja-Troi at 24, Andrenia at 26 and King Darius at 27. By the time my oldest son was 9 years old I had lost custody of 5 of my kids, I was pregnant and on my way to prison for the first time, I gave birth to King Darius in a California prison and have not seen him since.

Being away from my kids has left a huge hole in my heart. I cry myself to sleep every night. I dread holidays, their birthdays and even the sight of things associated with them like their old schools and their favorite television shows, especially Mickey Mouse Clubhouse. It's devastating, it's painful and it's overwhelming. But I do my best to just get up everyday and put a smile on my face. I know that the

only thing that keeps me going is my god and the strength that I draw from him in every single breath I breathe. I pray, I sing praises to my god and I have a relationship with my god that creates a sense of peace in my life.

Today I am working on myself, I am doing everything I can to be a better mother, daughter, sister and aunt. I've set goals for myself and I am working diligently to accomplish them. I am a student at Palos Verdes College pursuing a degree in chemical dependency, with hopes of becoming a drug and alcohol counselor. Everything about me and my story is unique and I want to share my strength with the world. I want to reach out to women in my situation, those that may be overwhelmed by grief, loss and pain. The mom that may have lost her kids and feel like dying. The person on the verge of a mental breakdown because they're stricken by guilt. And that lost little girl that doesn't know how to be comfortable in her own skin.

## *NIKI, NOT STEPHANIE*

*S.M.*

My first name and middle name—Stephanie Nicole—is a name usually only used by my mother, father, and sister, upon being reprimanded. The relativity of them both is how I have come to now be nicknamed as “Niki.” The story I have been telling for years when asked the question “If your name is Stephanie, then why do people call you Niki?” The answer to this question is that my parents decided that the name “Stephanie” was too difficult for my older sister to pronounce, so, by shortening my middle name Nicole to just Niki, my sister was able to easily pronounce it. This explains the story of my nickname Niki. To this very day, the majority of people in my life—immediate family, coworkers, colleagues, friends--all know me as Niki, and although many times I have to explain why I go by Niki and not Stephanie and it may not make perfect sense to others, it makes perfect sense to me :-)

## *TWO BECOME ONE*

*S.B.*

I was just barely 22 years old and was about four months pregnant. My belly was now a noticeable bump, proof that I had a new life flourishing within me. I was getting settled in and accepting I had to move back home with my parents to at least be able to give my daughter a safe and loving welcome into this world. The past few years had been a heart wrenching struggle and I wasn't sure I was worthy of being a mother to the pure, innocent and precious life I carried inside of me. I had ended up as a single mother who couldn't provide for her daughter or herself, a place my parents tried their hardest for me not to be. I struggled with my parents' disappointment, my shame, feelings of inadequacy, low self esteem and fear. Needless to say, I had a lot on my mind. But I knew deciding to follow through with this pregnancy was the one right thing I did and would do in my life, and for my daughter's life.

One day I was helping my mom clean the house. She had put on a mix CD she had made. I was out in the living room dusting while listening to the music coming from the speakers. I was sitting down, dusting a lower shelf when this song with a young woman started singing. She sang in a very vulnerable, but strong voice. As I continued dusting, I began to listen to the words of this song. She was telling a story of a young, single mother who had her baby in the back seat, driving to her parents house. The singer was describing the struggles the mother had been going through. How she was low on faith and gasoline. She was so distracted in her thoughts, she didn't realize how fast she was going and hit black ice on the road and the car started spinning out of control like she felt her life was. She saw both of their lives flash before her eyes. When she gained control of the car, she pulled over and realized her baby was sleeping like a rock. The whole time I listened to this story unfold, I had goosebumps over my whole body and I felt the words of this song hitting my heart and soul. At that moment, I wanted nothing more than to be able to make my baby feel so loved and so safe that no matter what happens around us, no matter how out of control life can get, she would know that I am her rock. And little does she know at this point, she is my rock.



When the song was over, I got up and played it again. My mom came out from the back of the house and asked, “You like that song?” I responded by saying yes and asked who sang the song. She told me the artist was Carrie Underwood and that the name of the song was “Jesus, take the wheel.” I went out and got her CD.

I was still working at this time. Every morning while driving to work, I put “Jesus, take the wheel” on repeat and turned it up as loud as I could. I sang every word to my daughter. This was such a private, intimate time with my daughter because it was one of the few times it was just the two of us. While living and growing just under my heart, I hoped that while I sang to her, she could feel and hear my deep and growing love, hopes and dreams I had for her. I believed and felt like she did, because as I continued to sing this song to her every morning, my belly continued to grow as she continued to grow and flourish within me. And when I sang to her, I could feel her moving within me. During these precious mornings, it was like our hearts beat as one. We were two lives as one.

# *THE PRICE OF TIME*

*C.P.*

Growing up, you look at your parents like heroes. My dad was mine. I loved him so very much. I still do. He was big, strong, and always cracking a joke. We used to be so close when I was just a little girl. As time passed and I grew older, little by little my relationship with my father became strained. Life took its toll and we became strangers. I went years not talking to him, for no reason in particular, but, in a sense, I guess it was easier to block one another from each other's lives, knowing that my incarceration only brought too many questions and no answers. Perhaps he believed he had failed as a father, or doubted he did a good job raising not only me but all his kids. Until this day, I wondered why he never came to visit me or talk to me like a father would to his youngest daughter. For many years I didn't allow myself to think of him or any of my other relatives—it's what made my world a tolerable one. The less I thought of them, the less I could feel. Unfortunately for me, that was one of my many mistakes. I did it on the assumption that it was better that way.

The last time I saw my hero, my dad, he was young, healthy, independent, and strong—always working to sustain his family. Now he's a frail old man with bad kidneys, going to dialysis every other day. His vision is failing him, and he's not only been losing his ability to be self sufficient, but I'm sure his pride has taken a huge punch as well. It saddens my soul to see that brave man who left his home country in search of a chance at a better life. I'm sad mainly because I've failed him. I failed to be that good daughter he raised me to be. And when I think of all those years I would not ever call him or try to get to know him, I feel ashamed that I don't know my own father's story. Of course I tell myself it's not too late. But exactly when will I be able to ask him all the questions I want to know? I wish I could go back in time and hold on tight to all those long years I've let waste with no questions, no answers, absolutely no knowledge of where I came from.

As a grown woman, now I wish to know my father's struggles, his dreams, his happiness, and his darkness. I wonder if I will ever get the opportunity to learn about my roots, my cultural background, and

where I descended from. I took for granted something so beautiful, and it tears me apart. A lot of things are replaceable in life. But not our parents. And although I still hesitate to call, I know that I need to, even if my father is a man of little words. His way of showing love is different than most. I'm sure life dealt him a harsh hand, yet I have to find a way to break through both of our silences and get to know him.

I wish to sit next to him as he tells me his childhood stories, what made him leave Mexico and come here to the United States. I would like to know how he met my mother, and just every little part that molded him. I wonder if he will still crack jokes in between or if he will keep a stern face as he tells me his most precious memories. Thinking now, I'm just like him in so many ways. I let the silence overcome me, but I don't want to allow it to keep my relationship with my father adrift. I lost too much time already, and I don't think I have very much left.

Family is everything, no matter how different they come. We only get one. I tell myself I have to appreciate them while we're still on this earth, and before it's too late and all those questions are left unsaid.

## THE PUPUSAS LINE

J.B.

When I was seven, I started off at the very end of the pupusa making line. Wetting tennis ball sized globs of masa for the next person in line, usually my older cousin Melly, to flatten them out. It was a beginner's position, or rather a position that could easily be filled by the same person flattening the masa. But I was old enough to follow directions, so they made me feel included. I would watch the heat rise and cover all the women in our small kitchen. My aunts wore aprons stitched with our flag, flowers, and sometimes our last name along the bottom. When we went back to El Salvador, they'd take me to the little shop in their pueblo that made them and get me one.

Every holiday, long weekend, or random Sunday after church would be spent in our kitchen. Steam and sweat followed two lines of at least seven aproned women—tias, primas, my mother, and me. Music and chisme supported the steady beat of masa being flattened, filled, balled up, flattened again, and placed on a comal. On the other side of the kitchen was another line for the chopping, straining, and mixing of the salsa and curtido. A symphony of sounds, smells, and secrets that would be divulged to me at a later time when I was capable of keeping secrets.

Melly got pregnant when she was sixteen and being a mom took priority over being in the pupusa line so at age eleven, I was promoted. Now I stood between my prima, Wendy, and my Tia Rosibel. I was in charge of stuffing the flattened balls with different combinations of loroco, beans, cheese, and meat.

*Pro-tip:* scrunch up your nose when making revueltas to reduce the smell. After a scarring incident involving a revuelta and myself hunched over a toilet bowl, I never ate that kind again. My favorite was loroco. I could never describe the taste of those little green flowers but at least they never made me throw up.

I learned all the updates on family drama standing in those lines.

“Did you hear about Javi?” Elizabeth would talk over the heads of my two aunts to her sister Wendy. “He got fired again, didn’t he? When will he learn to stop flirting with the waitresses?” Wendy responded. A chorus of giggles followed by the rest of the women listening in.

The older women in my family only spoke Spanish, but with the constant murmur of my cousins’ gossip, little by little, they would learn enough phrases to get by. I never felt closer to them then when we were all together, making pupusas and laughing along to whatever rumor or news was circulating that week. I would stand in my place in line, waiting for a promotion.

My mom died in December and for that Christmas, I took a break from the pupusa line. I sat on the wall next to the doorway leading into the kitchen, hearing my aunts and primas tell stories about her.

“I remember when my tia used to braid my hair every morning before school when we all lived together,” Melly was back in line, her son was four now and he spent his time playing with the other younger cousins.

After every story there was this silence that filled the room, quieting the noise of chopping and sizzling. Sometimes it was followed by the sounds of sniffing, the tops of their aprons stained with tears and flour. I’d sit there on the floor, knees to my chest laughing and crying along with them. And by the next holiday, I was ready to get back in line.

At fourteen I stood next to my dad’s eldest sister at the comal. I was given the most important role, placing the now stuffed and flattened pupusas on the hot comal, and making sure each side got the perfect amount of time to cook. My mom used to do this role, perfectly and without fail. Every pupusa placed and picked from her hands were beautifully browned, with crispy bits covering the edges where the cheese had seeped out and burned, and a gooey inside. After a few burnt batches, I finally discovered my mom’s secret—three and a half minutes on each side.

*Pro-tip:* wet the pupusas with a bit of water before placing on the comal to get the perfect brown.

Our family met less and less over the years as dad's siblings went to North Carolina while mom went to Texas or back home to El Salvador. We'd meet up for weddings, quinceañeras, and funerals. The lines would get smaller, bigger, have new faces, new roles, but the laughter, the smells and the gossip stayed the same.

Now, at age 21, going into our second year of quarantine it's been a while since we've gotten together to stand together in our line. Maybe we'll all be back in my kitchen on Thanksgiving. I can't move up in ranks anymore, but I can choose where I stand. I think I'll go back to the end of the line with the bowl of lukewarm water, balls of masa, and a full view of the magic made in the pupusa line.

## *LESSONS FROM MY 5 YEAR OLD ELDER*

*A.M.*

According to reddit theories of western astrology, a child can inherit characteristics from their parents' sun sign through their own rising sign. My theory is that this is where karmic lessons are passed down. My dad is an Aries, I am an Aries rising. Hence, the fighting. My brother is a Taurus, my next youngest sister is a Taurus rising. Hence, the stubbornness. Ariana is a Capricorn, my mom is a Capricorn rising. She came with lessons for all of us.

I'm ashamed to admit it now, but I was angry when I found out that my mom was pregnant with her. As the oldest daughter, I knew this meant that, by proxy, I was also having a child. In her defense, she was 45 and claims to not have expected it either. Arguments between my parents were more frequent and divorce seemed imminent (hence, a baby).

In her first few months of existence, I barely spoke to her. Something about talking to someone that couldn't respond felt embarrassing. Which is to say, vulnerability was embarrassing. Minimal words, minimal emotion, minimal conflict - lesson learned from an Aries. But that wouldn't work with Ariana.

dance with me, sing louder, why do you always say you're tired, don't be boring

She's five now. She has my dad's dark soft curls, my mom's moon shaped eyes and our ancestor's natural sensibility. She speaks spanglish and loves rolling her r's, even though she still thinks my name is Andea, not Andrea. She believes God is watching her at all times. I hope she grows out of that one. She finds school incessantly boring, except for art class. Her favorite question is 'why don't the planets and the numbers ever stop?' I never know how to answer.

Whenever I am back home, she insists on taking daily walks around the neighborhood. One day, she became acquainted with a tiny ladybug sitting on a tree outside of our house. Her name was Ginger.

For the rest of the summer, she would wake me up to go on walks to find her. Usually, I would point to the first ladybug on the ground and say ‘that’s her, we found her’. But Ariana knew better.

No, that’s not Ginger. Maybe it’s her sister, we have to keep looking.

Some days, she wouldn’t find Ginger but she never got upset.

Ginger is napping today, Ginger is on vacation

Soon, she created an entire community of ladybugs in our neighborhood. Or maybe she just tapped into it. Walks with her were portals into bug world, as she calls it. They were reminders to pay attention, because paying attention is an act of care. To stop and listen. Be gentler. Breathe deeper. Look closer. There are other worlds around us, we can tap in when we want to.

By the time I was her age, I had lived in two countries and would soon be leaving for Pennsylvania, where she would be born and raised 16 years later. Back then, I would force my grandfather, Piki, to take me on walks around the neighborhood. He would point out different bird songs and tell me stories about the pink dolphins of Canaima. The pink looked more like flesh but what really fascinated me was something about their smirk, almost as if they’re laughing at us. At some point, I must’ve told him that I wanted to become a dolphin because I remember him teaching me about reincarnation - that reincarnating into an animal is believed to be a punishment, a step backwards in the journey towards self-mastery. I was skeptical about this growing up - the humans around me didn’t seem too far in that journey. But the pink dolphins became a sort of mental anchor throughout my time in Pennsylvania, a reminder of Piki and of a life outside our own flesh. I forgot about this until my walks with Ariana.

In retrospect, I was projecting that anger. We won’t have the same childhood. With the relief of that realization come trickles of resentment. There is an instinct to pass down your pain, to make others aware of it and feel it, even if under the guise of protection. This comes in my instinct to be a mother, to hold some sort of



authority over her being. To shield her from things I've faced and teach her lessons that she has yet to encounter. That she hopefully will never encounter. But in those instincts, I forget to look at the trees. I forget to run, and dance, and admire ladybugs. She really has more to teach me, if I just listen.

Piki and Ariana have yet to meet, though it feels like they have. He is a Capricorn too, after all. Ariana doesn't know about the pink dolphins or Canaima, but a few months ago, I woke up to her drawing a picture of two dolphins.

I had a dream of us-we were both dolphins, swimming and playing in the ocean.

I'd like to believe that Ariana's dream was a portal into a past life, although, I'm sure she's further along than me in her journey of self-mastery.

The nights without you were long and dark. You used to hold my hands tightly as we shivered together in the drizzling winter for the last bus to take us home. After my ballet lesson, we would walk across Mingquan Road, the main road connecting Zhuwei and Guandu, as automobiles and motorcycles lined according to the pattern of the hustling life. We'd sit next to each other quietly, savoring the residues of our slightly damped cotton jackets.

The bus could only fit twenty people. There were always a couple seats empty, as if they were reserved for someone special. Exhausted by two hours of intense stretching of muscle, I would often fall asleep on our way home. You'd rest my head gently on your shoulder while you listen to serene psalms. As the bus followed the wiggling hillside path, steadily ascending uphill, you would whisper my name into my ears, like a clement spring breeze in the middle of the meadows. You would grab all our belongings – ballet shoes, combs and hair accessories, Tinker Bell water bottle, and my favorite Minnie backpack that you bought for me when we first visited Disney together – as we descended the bus holding our hands as if we never let go.

Leaving the bus stop behind, we passed a convenience store, a Quickly, and a dumpling place in the neighborhood. I would persuade you into getting me a boba milk tea, half sugar and little ice, and freshly fried crispy chicken chop with just a little white pepper as we approached Quickly. As I held my chicken chop dearly and closely, nibbling bits by bits, we arrived at the courtyard of our apartment complex. The guard would always greet us with a bright and brilliant smile, while you would wave and ask him how his day was. As we took the elevator up to the tenth floor, you helped me clean up my oil-smeared face, made sure I look presentable, and together we turned the keys three times clockwise and entered our home sweet home.

During the years when you still lived with us, you'd cook my favorite dish for me. You called it “dan dan mian” – noodle soup with egg and vegetables. Nothing could compare to it. In winter or in summer, in

mornings or in evenings, I would always ask you if you could make me a bowl of dan dan mian. Just one sip of your tasty noodle soup, I instantly felt the warmth transferred from the bowl to my body, engulfing me in a bubbly tenderness. Your soup is the best cure-all. Whenever I caught a cold or flu, lying in bed, finishing a bowl of freshly cooked soup, and resting for a couple hours, my energy seemed to flow right back to me. I knew it wasn't a difficult nor laborious dish, but it was impossible to replicate. I have spent hours and hours in the kitchen, trying to figure out the perfect ratio and your secret recipe – still no solution. Perhaps it was love.

You were the best cook. I loved and still love breakfast food. You used to make sunny side ups and pancakes for us every morning. Piles of pancakes organized in a hill-like fashion with sun rising above Mount Guanyin, letting in bits of sunshine into our lives, was an image that would stick in my mind for the rest of my life. After you left, I barely ate any pancakes. Even when I went to college, at Afternoon Delight, the renowned perfect Sunday brunch spot in Ann Arbor, I never ordered pancakes. They never tasted the same. They were never as crispy and fluffy at the same time as yours. I miss you.

When I started to enter adolescence, I began to care significantly about my looks. In middle school, you used to prepare sumptuous lunches for me. As I started to perform a strict diet, although you did not approve of the childish peer pressure opinions about body types, you would make me a boiled egg and noodles. Simple yet unforgettable. I was always proud of my lunch box – it was catered to whatever I wanted the most at that moment.

As I grew older, I started to realize that I never truly understood you. I was young, dumb, ignorant, and self-absorbed. I never asked what you did for fun during the day when I was out for school. I never asked what you were going through when I saw you wiped off the tears on your cheek. You would always show the best side of you to me. You were always there when I needed you the most. You got my back every time. But I wasn't reliable enough for you.

You left.

I was still in middle school, struggling to understand the world while the world did the same. Being a self-absorbed brat, I was so into my own world that I did not realize how much I missed having you in my life. When I was still in elementary school, we used to share the same room. It was not until college that I understood how uneasy and inconvenient you must feel when I had a roommate in the dorm. I still remember when we first moved to Tianmu, because of the mistake conducted by the interior designer, the size of your room was reduced by one third. I always felt terrible about it – but I never mentioned it. I regret it.

We met again. Two years later at your wedding. I flew across the globe from Taipei to Fort McMurray. Although I was already sixteen, you let me be your flower girl. You looked absolutely gorgeous in the white lace gown. All the jewelry together was not as glamorous as you. The three-layer lavender colored wedding cake topped with decorative whipped cream and a combination of different sorts of berries sat quietly at the end of the lavishly designed table. I sprinkled rose petals in your direction as you smiled at me, eyes full of happiness. After the ceremony, you and the groom invited us to your place for a couple of drinks. As we sipped Bordeaux, we talked about all the things that happened in the past two years. I realized you were still the same – caring, loving, and elegant – the same person who raised me up.

We are never apart. For you live in my memory as vivid as it could be.

# *NO REGRETS*

W.A.

If anyone reading this has lost someone close to them, they will be able to relate to the realization death brings. After the passing of my mom, I realized truly how short life is. I was very close to my mom and I always remember her talking about the things that she regretted not having done in her life. Those things resonated with me after she was gone, and at my young age of 22, I vowed not to have the regrets that my mother did.

Now all the decisions I made were not the smartest, and not all had the best outcomes, but I do not have regrets for the experiences I have. I began running from all the emotions I felt after her death, and at the same time found some great adventures. If I wanted to go somewhere, I didn't put a second thought into it, I would jump on a plane and go with no prior planning. I carried my mom with me on every adventure that I took. By the time I was 23, I had already lived in so many different states and met different types of people along the way. I found myself one day on a plane to Alaska, to a small town of Soldotna. I was living with an amazing family who decided to take me to the lake and go jet skiing with them. When we got to the water, they drove me out to the middle of the lake and we all dove in the water. It was ice cold, and I was sick for 2 weeks, but that is a memory I will never forget. I soon found myself at the opposite extreme from Alaska when I moved to Hawaii. While there, I began to have adventures and make memories for my mom on the day she passed and on her birthday. On the one year anniversary of her passing, I hiked to a waterfall, climbed to the top and jumped. I was so scared but I had mom from above whispering no regrets. Then on her birthday, I took a balloon and climbed to the top of a mountain on Oahu and watched the sunrise over the beautiful ocean, celebrating her birthday with an unforgettable memory.

Now, as I sit in prison, I have a lot of time to think, and I find myself looking back on these good memories. I do not dwell on the bad memories or the ones that brought me here, that is why I didn't write about them. Everyone has a past and makes mistakes, it is what you

learn from it that matters. Many times I have heard people say, I wish I could go back and do this differently, or if only I could change something from my past. These are words that I will never say. I have no regrets in life, because for me to have had those good memories that I remind myself of, I had to take the bad as well. All the factors in my past have helped to shape and mold me into the person that I am today, and for that, I am grateful and have no regrets.

## FINDING HOLY GROUND

A.T.

*“And I add my own love to the history of people who have loved beautiful things, and looked out for them, and pulled them from the fire, and sought them when they were lost, and tried to preserve them...”*

—The Goldfinch, Donna Tartt

Ask me from a few years ago and I would tell you: I didn't know that God had anything to do with love. Forgiveness, fear, punishment, redemption, sure. He had a lot to do with those things. But love? I questioned if there was any love to be shared between a Creator so unfathomably perfect and a creation so unfathomably flawed. I became intimate with my fear of Him and assumed that the fear would carry me through the depths of the despair that comes along with being human. I found myself following a perceived faith that was really fear heavily conflated with respect. That fear ultimately became too heavy for me to carry, so it broke against my back. In my desperation, I started looking for God. I turned to His Word and I tried with my own words to connect with Him more lovingly.

I've spent a lot of my life writing letters to God, pleading to know Him, exploring ways to find Him. According to His own words from the Quran, He is closer to me than my jugular vein. He's closer than the part of my body that brings my head's blood flow back down to my heart, yet in my letters I questioned whether God could ever coexist in the same plane as love. God, closer than what brings me back to my heart, not existing in the same plane as love? Given what I know now, I find it hard to believe that I almost missed this, almost missed *Him*, even though He was there all along. You're not as close to me as He is, but you've come closer than any human ever has. Sometimes I think no one else will ever get this close. I started finding Him before I found you, but I think I started truly knowing Him when I began to know you.

We're closest to each other when you're spilling yourself inside of me. You're spilling into me and collapsing on top of me and I'm sharing

with you that which I previously thought I would reserve only for the man I married before the eyes of God. Our love, simply put, is sacrilegious. What we share between us goes against the teachings of our respective Abrahamic faiths. Mine, I've clung onto for moral sanity. Yours? A past you've left behind and replaced with a life led free of divine dogma. The mouth that has spent twenty-two years singing praises of an Omnipresent Greatness now also spends time singing praises when it's wrapped fondly around your retracted foreskin. And I sing and I sing and I don't know how but I think I've found harmonies that bring together both songs.

There is, of course, what the Word says, and what the Word says is that we're swimming in a cesspool of sin that might be hard to wash off. I can't confidently say that I'm proud of that, because I don't think that I am.

And yet, I find my way back to you every night.

And yet, I don't know if I've ever met anyone that makes me feel quite as holy. Dear love, you've held a mirror to my face and shown me who I am and what I lack. You've shown me what it means to be a human and have confirmed a faith in me I didn't know I had. Knowing you has forced a renewal of my faith that has me praying every night that you become the one that completes half of my faith. It's scary, but also rewarding, to have your humanity in such close proximity to another's – to be wrapped up in someone else's soul feels like a departure and a homecoming all at once. With you, I've been to Heaven and Hell and everywhere in between. You've touched me and you've hurt me in ways that feel like they can only exist in some middle ground between those two places, and it reminds me of Rumi:

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,  
there is a field. I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,  
the world is too full to talk about.  
Ideas, language, even the phrase 'each other'  
doesn't make any sense.



I've met you there and I am most myself when I lay with you there. And there is where we find love. And I know that wherever there is love, is exactly where you will find God. There, we come as we are. I come to God exposed by all of my imperfection—raw, vulnerable, human. And he says that as I walk to Him in this place, He'll run towards me. In this place, you and I find each other together with all of our goodness and all of our faults. Beyond ideas of Heaven and Hell, we find each other, we find love, we find God.

# *SURVIVOR*

*T.H.*

My name is Tamara and I am a survivor. Sexual abuse, post traumatic stress disorder, witnessing domestic violence and multiple suicide attempts have not destroyed me. Because of God's mercy, grace and unconditional love, I am able to share my story with you. My mother did not know that I had taken up space in her uterus let alone what to name me the morning I decided to break free and stake my claim in this heartless world. My older brother named me Tamara after his girlfriend. Tamara comes from the Hebrew name Tamar, which means palm tree and belonged to biblical matriarchs who, like myself, were involved in sexual intrigue, endured rape and oppression. Yet these same women became pillars of faith whom God honored by placing in the direct lineage of Jesus Christ. However, I spent most of my life feeling worthless and unloved.

Now that I am wiser I understand that being named Tamara is an honor. You see, palm trees bend but never break and thrive regardless of their location. Their branches provide shade and food for the weary. Palm trees also symbolize victory. Their branches were spread on the road for Jesus Christ's triumphant victory into Jerusalem on Palm (Victorious) Sunday. Since no victory comes without its share of tribulations, those who have crossed the finish line frequently shed tears of joy. Every day I thank God for the life He destined me to live before I ever took my first breath.

My earliest memories are of 42 years ago on a pinstriped swing set in my great grandmother's backyard. I could not imagine a life greater than one filled with enough popsicles to satisfy my palate. However, the first of many traumas would soon shatter my child like innocence. During one of the rare times when both of my parents were together since my father, being in the music industry, stayed on the road at least nine months out of the year, I would receive an introductory course on violence. After my father cooked a West Indian meal of fish, kidney beans and rice, my niece and I were allowed to wash the dishes, which meant that we spilled more water than anything. While joyfully making a mess in the kitchen, unbeknownst to me when

he got caught trying to make sexual advances towards a sibling, my brother's left hook missed his head by mere inches and put a hole in the wall that I remember to this day.

My mother Carol was a naturally beautiful light complected woman whose Native/African American ancestry, freckles and high cheekbones attracted many suitors and became the envy of many women. At five feet eleven inches, Mama was a plus size woman of many hats. She was a registered nurse, entrepreneur, and co-founder of the African American Midwives' Association in Houston, Texas. Underneath it all she was a sexual abuse survivor who endured domestic violence at the hands of my father.

My father Anthony was a dark skinned Jamaican who stood five feet eight with waist length dreadlocks and a gold tooth. He was born into a musically gifted family in Guyana, South America. He was an extremely jealous, insecure man who taught me proper etiquette and the Ten Commandments. He also taught me to hate men. Because of his indiscretions while on tour he would accuse mother of cheating. He would beat her for hours then threaten to kidnap me. I did my best to protect her by hitting him with anything I could get my hands on. Calling the police was always a waste of time because their solution was telling my parents to "work it out", which made the beatings escalate. The day Mama's hair fell out because of the stress, we ran away to a battered women's shelter. With the help of her friend Mama Jesse who filled a large paper bag full of home cooked food for our trip we boarded a greyhound bus to California and never looked back.

I thought things would improve until one of her lovers began molesting me during trips to the store. Something inside of me knew that what he did was wrong but I kept quiet because Mama seemed to be happy. I blamed myself every time he fondled me, convinced that I caused him to do what he did.

My mother always had a personal relationship with God as she knew Him. Growing up we practiced Islam, Judaism and Rastafarianism - based on the belief that former Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia

better known as Ras Tafari I is the Messiah. Pleasant memories of burning incense while reading the Quran, Bible or Torah helped me understand the importance of communicating with God. Within hours of arriving on the island of Jamaica, Mama and I were living in a house surrounded by acres of marijuana. Thus began our quarterly trips to America as drug smugglers. Under the guise of visiting family, we would board a plane with pounds of the island's best weed packed into hollowed out statues. Texans, Chicagoans and Floridians were our highest paying customers. We enjoyed the fruits of our labor, blessed to have a roof over our heads in a place that gave new meaning to the phrase "If you don't work, you don't eat."

Private beach parties with reggae artists, smoking marijuana, climbing trees and attending private school became a normal part of life. When Mama left the drug game things were hard for a while yet we always managed to have enough. While working as a doula she met and befriended the wife of a reggae music legend and our lives improved overnight. We moved to a home with servants at our disposal. Life was great until the handyman began molesting me. One of the maids teased me about our secret meetings but failed to protect me. I was seven years old being molested by a teenager whom I believed was my boyfriend. The abuse continued until Mama and I left the island. During a stop at Miami International our paperwork raised red flags which caused authorities to do a background check on my mother. Unbeknownst to her, there was a warrant for her arrest in Texas. She was arrested and I was placed in foster care. The first foster parent left me and the other two kids unattended for the rest of the day. The second foster parent was an older Christian Lady who kept the television tuned to the 700 Club. Three of her grandkids helped take care of us foster kids. We went to church at least four times a week for choir practice, bible study and the like. It was during one of these church services that I heeded the altar call to accept Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior. I fell to the floor as I'd watched others do and laid there for a good ten minutes before getting up and walking to my seat. Although my reasons for going to the altar were unimportant, that decision would forever alter my destiny. I became a child of God that day, the greatest thing to ever happen to me.

My life continued to have traumatic experiences, some of which I brought upon myself. However despite the teenage abortions, promiscuity, broken hearts and depression, God has never failed me. His love is the reason I'm able to forgive my parents, abusers and most of all myself. I lived by the hand I was dealt until I chose to ask for help, become honest and transparent and begin a healing journey that has hurt sooo good. The past does not define, limit or hinder me. I am stronger, resilient and more than a conqueror. I continue to deal with life on life's terms with a heavenly perspective, not as a religious person but because of my relationship with Jesus Christ.

# *THE GAMES*

*D.K.*

I'll never understand why Child protective Services seem to forget that their job is to protect the child. They say that their goal is to keep the children with their parents but that's not always true, they give the children new parents instead.

My family is a victim of what CPS can do to a family that isn't quite broken. Yes, I had my addictions and no, I wasn't always there, but I never harmed my kids. If CPS' job is to keep the child with their parents then how come when a parent goes into rehab, the child stays. What happens is the child gets removed from their family until their family proves they're good enough.

The pain it causes hearing your child scream and cry for you, their screams piercing through your heart and all you can do is hope the addiction calls you a little less. I fought to stay clean and I fought to prove I was good enough for my own kids while a strange family takes control over my kids assuming they are better. How traumatic for a child at any age to be taken from the love they knew and felt and to be put in an unknown place, unknown smell and unknown feel, being told things would be okay.

It's not just the parents' fault, but the fault in our system, made to forgive and protect. It's heartbreaking for all parties involved because at some point that child will go home. How could such a system believe that an addict already struggling will get better once you take their child away?

My whole family has never been the same, but I want to encourage those who feel what I feel and have tried how I have tried and have failed how I have failed to be strong. I used to think God couldn't fix the damage the system had done to myself, my kids and my family but after the years and the kids growing older, their freewill kicks in and they will say enough to your absence.

There's nothing anyone can say, not even you, that will make your child or children not love you. I learned my children always loved me

and the many times I cried, they cried for me too. Forgiveness doesn't always come but when your child chooses to forgive because they won't allow the time they had without you affecting the time they can have with you, there's no second guessing that. Feeling the forgiveness my children gave me permeates my heart, my mind, my soul, and that feeling is better than the high I ever felt, because that feeling is real.

Don't give up. Stay focused. Stay in the fight and you will win.

## FIGURING IT OUT

B.A.

My mom found out I had a boyfriend when I was in high school and my dad thought it was some sort of cry for help. He said that I needed therapy to “deal with things.” I was relentless at first, because why? Why was me having a boyfriend a cry for help? I was 16– it’s normal. Whatever. I was given an ultimatum and I had to go.

My mom has always blamed me for how disconnected we were. My dad and mom put me in the middle of their issues: “Who do you agree with?” “Tell your mother I am not sending her money!” “You can’t take clothes to your dad’s.” I always had to worry whether the argument my stepdad and mom were having was going to lead to yet another time he hits her. Through these times, I was expected to be the mediator between my mom and dad, expected to take my siblings to another room so they wouldn’t see the argument my mom and stepdad were arguing. I was responsible for everyone else’s peace of mind, and was left to find mine on my own. I was a teenager that was forced to grow up.

One day my alarm for school was replaced with screaming from the kitchen, “Where’s the fucking lawn mower?!” followed by the noise from a pot being thrown in our kitchen. I have never been so scared, yet I thought to myself, *Shit Bianca, you have to get up. Check on your mom.* I got up, trembling, worried about what was going on in the kitchen. But, I couldn’t be scared, I could tell by my mom’s voice that she was scared, and the cries from my sister’s room told me that she had also been woken up and of course was scared. *1...2...3...* I counted my fingers– some shit I learned in therapy to help me relax. *Alright go.* I walked into the kitchen and told, well I screamed, and said that my mom and stepdad needed to leave and deal with this somewhere else or some other time. *1...2...3...* I went to my sister’s room, “It’s okay mi amor, everything will be okay, let’s go get you showered.”

I couldn’t be scared, I had to be composed. I had to protect my siblings before I protected myself. I had to be the adult. It was me. I didn’t know how to deal with everyone’s mess, so every time I was



overwhelmed I waited until bed, got under my blankets and cried. I cried for everything—fuck, I still cry for everything, I hate it. But, I don't know any better.

Me having a boyfriend wasn't a cry for help, me having a boyfriend was me trying to have a childhood. To feel normal, to live like any other teenage girl— I wanted to feel butterflies for seeing my boyfriend across the quad, not because I woke up to my mom and stepdad yelling in the morning. I didn't want to be the 16-year-old girl that carried everyone's baggage. I didn't want to be mature, I wanted to be young and naive. This made *me* happy. No one was asking me why I was siding with *her* or how could I respect *him* if he isn't helping my mom with me. This was for me. A cry for help would be me reacting to everything. Reacting to the name calling, to the blame, to my parent's selfishness, but no, I dealt with that on *my* own.

My parents were too invested in their own issues, but therapy allowed me to not have to deal with everything on my own. Once Lisa and I “resolved” this whole boyfriend fiasco for my parents' sake, we started to deal with issues that mattered to *me*. We talked about my parent's divorce, but it wasn't much, they split when I was two so having split parents was *my* normal. We then started dealing with the baggage from my mom's second marriage and my relationship with my mom. Keyword is started, because I don't think I'm there yet. It's been five years and it seems like things just keep piling up, new arguments, new issues. It's never ending. But someday, I will no longer be resentful, someday I will not blame *him*, someday I will be at peace and will be able to honestly forgive my mom instead of pretending.

But through all that I realized that I lost myself. I was always trying to please *them* and look out for *them*, I never really knew myself. And I am still trying to figure it out, I will figure it out. But I hope Lisa is still around to help me with that and help me not feel so alone.

## *CHOCOLATE MALT, CAMEL CRUSH, CANDYLAND*

*J.D.*

I'm at Smith's in the produce section, bagging apples. Checking each for bruises but digging the guy over by the bell peppers at the same time. He works out. Could crush an egg if he put one in the inside of his elbow and flexed, with those biceps. He's wearing a shirt too small to show off, the same green shade as the peppers he bags, but I don't mind vanity. He's fine.

I'm reminded of another time when I was still in LA. I went on a date with a guy named Trevor the same day I attended a wake for my friend Henry. I met Trevor still in a white dress shirt and tie. Trevor was nine years older and wearing a baseball hat to hide that he was balding. I gave him a campus tour and we talked for two hours on a bench because my roommates were home and we couldn't hook up. He walked to his car, and I said, you can, if you want to, because he kept looking at my mouth. He said, right here? Looking at all the people walking by. I said, yeah. We didn't kiss. He was scared.

I couldn't conceive, at seven, eleven, or twelve, how good these little things would feel. I assumed I'd be dead before I could experience them. If I lived, I assumed I would never be able to speak about them. Casual, open expressions of wanting. Not even love, just the ability to look at a guy. The ability my brain has of checking out guys in the background while I bag apples and doesn't bother registering women. Normal. Natural.

I'm lucky. Lucky. As a preteen in the Cook Out drive-thru with my dad, trying so hard not to cry that my eyeballs felt like they were going to pop out like those squeeze stress toys, I didn't know how to imagine loving other men. I just knew I had the capacity, and that was enough to ruin my life by expressing it, almost a decade ago.

My dad got me Cook Out or Chick-fil-A after every session with Mark. I loved Cook Out and their forty-six milkshake flavors. I'd get two hot dogs and a chocolate malt shake—not plain chocolate—every

time. It was my reward for staying on triple, the recommended dosage of Zoloft and going to “therapy.”

I don't remember coming out, although it's popularized as a defining moment. Maybe I would have if I'd waited until I was older, but I didn't—I needed to do it then, in the middle of a little town in South Carolina. I'm hesitant to appeal to West Coast fantasies about the South being composed of the bigoted and backward to fuel their superiority complexes and disgust of the working class, but their worst imagination was true then. I won't appeal to that fantasy. I'll focus on Mark and the milkshakes.

We didn't do too much typical therapy in that office. For the most part, Mark would tell me I wasn't what I thought I was, and even if I was, then I'd suffer the rest of my life. I'd be unloved, alone, unemployable, an outcast and freak. Better off dead. He'd bring in my dad around every third session and they'd both yell about saving me from going to Hell. He'd sneer with his yellow teeth half-hidden under a grey walrus mustache.

I got to practice keeping a straight face, and when I mastered that, laughing at things that weren't funny. The overmedication helped by rolling my emotions out flat. When I started forcing Mark to play the same board game during every session—some Candyland knockoff where I'd move my character and he'd get to ask me a question like, Why are you choosing this?—my dad gave up. It would be nice to think of me losing my cool a little in the car as I ate and started breathing all ragged and funny and saying, Dad, I don't want to go back, had something to do with it, but I can't be sure.

I gave up on him, too, not long after. He got orders to move to San Diego and I used it as an excuse to move out to Vegas with my mom that summer, right before I turned fifteen. We went no contact. I started referring to him in the past tense: my dad was, my dad used to be. He was assumed dead and I didn't mind.

At times I miss the South. I miss how cheap Cook Out was and how good their shakes were. I miss the librarian who saw me getting called

a fag and passed me a book on gay youth after computer time one day. I miss losing my dad for someone who was more concerned with the sin than the son needing him under it. I don't miss Mark.

In choosing my mom, I chose economic struggle over emotional. The flightiness that took her around the country after the divorce settled when she reconnected with a guy from her childhood, Brentt. He was grey skin and bones and as greasy as any car salesman would be. He smoked two packs of Camel Crush cigarettes, drank a pack of O'Doul's non-alcoholic beer, and ate a carton of Blue Bunny vanilla ice cream every single day. He had two kids from two past relationships and ruined credit from thousands of dollars in unpaid child support. His favorite activity was to go to Dotty's or the South Point and gamble for hours while he had my mom rub his shoulders and tell him how good he was at it. Never mind how much money he lost.

He thought a woman's place was in the home. He had my mom buy him steak and the rest of us ramen, never skimping on his ice cream and beer. He wouldn't let my mom work even as his paycheck shrunk, and he let his parents call her a gold digger. My mom's dream man and the optimal father for two more kids because he had a roof to sleep under.

I avoided him for the year I lived there. Stayed out of his way to express my gratefulness at getting to stay. I asked--through my mom--to go to Buffalo Wild Wings for my sixteenth birthday. He gave me homelessness instead. Kicked me and my mom out along with their two kids because she asked for fifty bucks for that dinner--and because she was getting wise to him cheating. He's asked her--now that she has an apartment and he has a custom home because he fixed his credit by maxing out cards in my mom's name--if I hate him because I think he's homophobic. He says he has a gay best friend.

He denies what he did the same way my dad denied sending me to Mark for years. I sleep easy while they play dumb to feel better, though. They're Christian. Catholic and non-denominational, respectively, real men of faith. One day they'll die. Something I don't

believe in will judge them. Every time they dressed in their Sunday best won't matter. Me, though—I have nothing to worry about. I just love men. It's out of my hands. All I need to do is pick up the pieces.

There are a string of men that came in the years after, while I still lived in the South and after I'd bounced through six cities across the country. Men I latched onto to fill the role I was missing without understanding why I latched, whose offices and classrooms I'd sit in and cry the tears I'd saved up since Mark. Most of them stayed mentors, but as I got older, I mixed up admiration with other feelings, ended up in messes of boundary issues.

I can't blame it all on Freud. My fictional crushes as a kid always skewed toward the men in the movies my parents watched instead of the boys in the cartoons I did. I guess the bit of conversion therapy and abandonment didn't help though. I cried for every reason and no reason. I remember I was eighteen and got asked, Why do you cry so much? Isn't it time you, you know, sucked it up? Do you cry this much with other people—or?

No, I said, just you. You're the only person I feel—and I stopped talking because I felt myself choking up at the thought. The only person I feel safe with. How embarrassing. I couldn't articulate then what it was—past a crush, the admission of which was out of the question—that made me turn into a waterworks. My answers never made sense.

Later, I learned to articulate what I'd been doing and why. I apologized, still cutting around that admission. Of course. I was overemotional but cruel, below the bottom tier in Maslow's convenient hierarchy of needs. I as sixteen, seventeen, and sleeping in a car or a ratty apartment, worrying about eating. Messes in mentorships—or whatever they were—were a lot easier to roll my unresolved shit into than deal with them at their source, growing up and into a young gay man.

I've clammed up and stopped crying again, just when I was learning to strike a balance. It feels like I've grown more because I ditched the

habit altogether. I got to fix my issues after I repeated the same cycle a half dozen times, but after, I found I'd sucked up someone else.

My siblings say our dad has a shrine to me, patched together from the few pictures he has before I stopped letting him photograph me at thirteen or so. Were someone to go over to his house, they'd think I'd died. That's true in a sense—he doesn't know me past that age, hasn't had a real conversation with me in almost a decade, could only approximate my interests based on what I enjoyed as a kid. He has his outdated memories instead of my present.

They say he brags about me, too. Tells coworkers and friends that his son's so smart and he's so proud. I'm his only child to have gone to a "good school" with aspirations for better, so he wants to claim me. Preserves me with his shrine, the closest proximity he can achieve. He excels at cognitive dissonance, so he doubtless believes he can lay claim to a kid he didn't father.

I've been told that I'll want him in my life when I get older, that I can't replace a dad. He accepts me now, so why not? Why not? The same close-mindedness that led him to tell me I would burn in Hell—it hasn't gone away. It was only a symptom of much deeper brain rot. He still doesn't believe in evolution. He still thinks dinosaurs never existed and fossils were planted in the Earth as a test of our faith in God, despite his organic chemistry Ph.D.

The necessity of a dad is debatable when I've already raised myself. Messy, stupid, angry, immature, I did it. Cobbled together from pieces of the men I admired and what I remember of myself before 2011. Glued together by a bitter preteen need to stick with it out of spite.

There's another fantasy in line with the Western conception of the South called "It gets better," where coming out makes a life magic, and the out man gets to cry over his younger self and tell him he has no idea how strong he is. Well. Being gay and poor isn't better than being closeted and poor, and he and I know he was strong, otherwise I wouldn't be kicking still to condescend to him here. I got to be out but that didn't protect me from experiencing the harsher stresses of

poverty and homelessness. I fell in love and found heartache; could be worse than slurs and death threats, but I say that because I'm soft now, compared to him.

There's no need to say it gets better. My younger self would hate for me to pretend. That's why he came out. Instead I just am whatever I happen to be. Gay. Poor. Half-Mexican and full bus-rider. Happy or ungrateful or stubborn, it's natural. Maybe it never gets better, but we find new things to suffer for.

He deserves that shrine, my younger self, but not to exact revenge or levy suffering. He deserves a testament to his strength, honoring what he endured. My mind blanks on so much of his pain even as I remember the feeling of South Carolina humid air on my face, sour mustard on a warm Cook Out hotdog, the nighttime buzz of frogs and katydids. His memories are placed somewhere unforgettable, where they won't blend into what I lived through after. He wouldn't need me to be proud of him, but I hope, wiping an apple on my shirt and looking at a guy—I hope he'd be proud of me.

# *THROUGH HIS EYES*

*H.T.*

Mike pushes his hair behind his ear nervously as he sits in the waiting cell before entering the courtroom. He can hear Heaven singing to Jesus through the cold cement walls as they wait for the lunch break to be over.

“Babe, can you hear me?” Mike hears Heaven ask.

“Yes, I can hear you.”

“Let’s pray,” she says.

“Heavenly Father, please be with us as we walk into this courtroom, Lord. Allow those people to see us through your eyes, Lord and not their own Lord. In Jesus’ name amen.”

The door opens, and Mike walks out and looks left, down the hall as the court officer removes the shackles. He sees Heaven with a smile that says I love you forever on her face.

Mike smiles back. A silent moment between them that says a million words only they know.

The shackles are off. Heaven walks over to Mike and looks up to him. She reaches up to straighten his tie.

“You look so handsome.”

“Shut yo’ mouth...” Mike says with a smile across his beautiful lips. He bends down and kisses Heaven on her forehead.

Heaven looks up at Mike and for a moment she sees a glimpse of Jesus in his eyes. She starts to tear up.

So many times, she has found herself lost in his eyes. Lying in bed lazily on hot summer days, looking into his soul for hours. Or



mornings waking up to him watching her sleep for who knows how long. And the passion she got while looking into his eyes while making love to him. But in this moment, anger, fear, and hope flashes in his eyes.

She snaps back to the present, starts to feel herself tear up and stops.

“I love you, Mike,”

“I love you too, woman.” The door opens and the court clerk enters the hall.

“Okay you two, you know the rules. You ready? It’s time.”

Mike nods his head and says, “Yep, let’s go.” The court clerk wishes him luck.

“We don’t need luck. We got Jesus,” Heaven says.

Mike squeezes Heaven’s hands, kisses her lips, and enters the courtroom.

Heaven enters behind Mike, they take their seats in front of the judge between their lawyers.

A crowd fills the room. But all Mike could hear through the noise is,

“All Be seated. Court is in session.”

# *I AM MY MOTHER'S CHILD*

*B.L.*

We moved into our apartment on Grevillea when I was 11 years old. Slowly, she expanded the perimeter of where I could venture off to alone. First, the CVS on the next block over to buy cake mix. Then, the Fosters Freeze two blocks over for an Oreo Twister. Finally, the Hawthorne Pool a mile away for swim practice. The pool felt far in the winter when evenings came early, and no matter how long I dried myself off, I would still walk home with my ass wet. But she was a swimmer too, much better than I ever was, and my eagerness to be just like her made the walk worthwhile.

I was 14 now, taking one of the last walks from the pool before I went off to boarding school 3,000 miles away. Turning onto Grevillea, I met a familiar face – my babysitter's son. I lost touch with them when I was about 6 years old. By then, I was able to use a phone to dial 911, which meant I didn't need a babysitter anymore. We walked to his apartment together, no longer the corner blue house I recalled from years earlier. *La Mam* threw her arms around me, weeping *te extrañé mucho mi amor!* She was a cleaning lady at Raytheon, no longer watching children, but she was still rocking the blonde pixie cut from 2005. The scent of Columbian lentejas filled the small living room, bringing back memories of sweaty children playing outside while I stared at the ceiling in silence.

I counted to the highest number I knew...*seventeen...eighteen...nineteen...twenty*. Wait, is it *twenty* or *twenty*? And restart at one, until a stranger's fingers dragged out from between my knees and pressed to my lips. *Shhh*. I pulled up my Fruit of the Looms and went out to join the other children in play.

In my first year of boarding school, two cousins revealed they were assaulted by the same stranger. She asked if it happened to me too. *No*. I won't allow this in my perimeter.

*Okay. I want you to tell me if it ever does. And I want you to know* – her mother's husband molested her as a child. Naturally, he denied it, and

the internalized misogyny made her mother deny it too. She showed me how to talk about it. Didn't I want to be just like her? *No*. Not like this.

But it was trespassing on my perimeter. Then loitering. And eventually taking my place in bed. I stopped speaking to *La Mam* for it, but it wasn't her fault. I had to learn it wasn't mine either.

I sat her down 15 years after it happened. Heat filled my body, and my throat was constricted. I could hardly hear myself speak, but now I'm in her arms. It has its place in our perimeter.

# *PAST TRAUMA MADE A STRONGER ME*

V.J.

I came into this world by my biological father beating my mom up while I was still in her womb. I believe that even as a baby I felt my mom's fear. My mom protected me by laying in a fetal position on the kitchen floor. My biological father was violently enraged. He was suffering from heroin withdrawals and needed the keys to the car to get his next fix. My mom was due at any time. She needed the keys to drive herself to the hospital in the event that she went into labor.

I grew up believing my step dad was my father up until my mom divorced him. At age nine, my mom tried to get back with my biological father so that my older sister and I would have our real dad. By age eleven, my older sister ran away with our real father. Later, she had become involved in an incestual father-daughter relationship. At twelve years old, I was molested by a twenty-eight-year-old female. A party animal's best friend named Perrita. Since my mom was raised with no affection, we also were shown no affection. My mama done what she had been taught to her. Therefore, when Perrita started to show me affection, I readily responded. Her hugs, combing my hair, and massaging my body all led up to me being molested.

One day, she upped and disappeared. I felt totally abandoned by my step dad (who I consider my dad), my sister Irene, and now Perrita, too.

I decided to take eleven Excedrin and I began to throw up violently. My mom took me to juvenile hall, where they told her to enroll me at Charter Hospital, a mini Patton for kids under eighteen. Six months later, my mom took my baby brother by four years to be raised by his dad (which to me was my dad). My brother was my heart. We were inseparable. He recently passed away on October 19, 2020 due to COVID-19. May he rest in God's loving arms.

I started running away to my step dad's to be with my little brother. At age fourteen, I became married to my husband. I was very young

when we got married. We just passed our fourteenth anniversary. I gave birth to my first son Rocky on New Years Day of 1983. He has blessed me with three granddaughters.

At sixteen, I was introduced to heroin by my brother-in-law who had just paroled out of Pelican Bay Prison and was mentally unstable. Soon after, I was continually raped. Later he would stab me in my back and crack my head open with a brick. Moving forward, my second son was born addicted to heroin. I never left the hospital with him. Child Protective Services came and ripped my son Rocky from my arms. I had a nervous breakdown. My world was crumbling before my eyes. As much as I self-medicated on heroin, the pain kept erupting from the depth of my heart and soul. When I was twenty-one, my daughter Rosie was born my first and only baby girl. She recently had my twin granddaughters. I love them both tremendously.

In short, I continued to be a part of CDCR and am serving a sentence of eighty-one-to-life. I have taken many self help groups. I have changed beyond my wildest dreams because someone said, "You have a choice!" I live day by day, making a living amends to Azalia Sandoval. I share my testimony with others daily. I hope that my testimony can save lives...

# *I REMEMBER LEON CAMPBELL*

*M.M.*

I was awestruck and awkward, ready to back flip from a pediment, just to love him and to bond our hearts in life. I had lived a dozen years so surely these delicate feelings had righteously blossomed. I hope that he will think I am enough. Marathon sprints atop ramshackle barns, discreetly turning those moments into the game of holding hands. Sweet raillery while chewing yummy gum, squeaky tones of youth bursting inside each bubble we blew.

From any angle, he was a marvel to look at! A masterpiece Van Gogh could never have captured! His chiseled cheek bones were like a rare find in Architectural Digest, His delicious, wide mouth that spoke to his East African lineage, a brilliant smile with more wattage than the Times Square New Years Eve Ball. His complexion was a marriage between Hershey's chocolate and clarified butter! It was exciting just to share the air with him! I had it bad.

He taught me how to skateboard and softball like a right handed person. I taught him the importance of Shakespeare and Faust. He would say I was the prettiest girl he ever knew! My golden brown eyes would bat faster than the Dodgers, my face hurt because I smiled during our entire visits, my insides were like cotton candy sweet and fluffy, completely useless to a well balanced existence. He thought my Cuban and West African roots were special in our neighborhood. In that year, I was very happy to have landed in the states. How quickly this can change and almost turn to hate.

Six months will pass, a mere 180 days. I should have known something was wrong because there was no air blowing, the putty colored skyline was screaming and crying, the daisies stood half mast on my overgrown lawn.

You would think that some adult would have known better. They should have sensed that life was choking him, that asking him to cope was just too hard, just too much. They should have seen the signs of how his father was hurting him, they should have cut off their own right hand to help him out.

They should have felt the shift in his joy and pride because his father made him feel like an object. He was 13, a natural athlete, a wonderful young man.

He would never see the first black president, he would never see our current oldest president, he would never see the first female vice president, he would never know COVID, he would never have a wife or kids. He blew his brains out in his living room, it's how I found him...he was already dead.

Granted in years to come, I would see some very harsh pain, but on this day in my life, nothing hurt more, nothing salted my eyes greater, nothing cut out my heart before I was able to grow a new one. Before my husband, I did know true love. I lived a dozen years and my feelings were a garden. I was awestruck and awkward, ready to back flip from a pediment, just to love him and to bond our hearts forever beyond death.

R.I.P. Leon Campbell

# LESSONS FROM NANIMA

K.P.

There has been much grief in the world these days. This was written in the throes of loss, those fresh moments after a loved one is gone in the wind. Dedicated to my *nanima*, my maternal grandmother, and my *ba*, my paternal grandmother.

I come from a line of women who are caretakers, writers and storytellers, women who did not have the privilege of financial independence, but were abundant in social wealth.

What is it like to care for a person who speaks another language? It is a reliance on observation. An awareness towards the way they take their morning tea deeply brewed and are not picky with what they eat. The way their beauty seems to radiate from their insides and everyone is attracted to their smile, like butterflies to a light, wanting to know what it is that keeps them joyful.

My *nanima* knew how to weave love into her surroundings with the mere look of her eyes. Her hands were tender but her spirit exuded a deep resilience. Sometimes women orchestrate change in ways that fly under the radar, an invisibility that proceeds their strength. Time and time again she has risen to her moral responsibilities, simultaneously serving as an engineer and healer for her community. A true matriarch.

You see, I don't come from a generation of literacy or educational attainment. I come from a legacy of hard work married to sacrifice intended towards sustainability of the family structure, whoever family may be. Community first, and therefore, intentions transcend verbalization. Sometimes love doesn't need to be spoken, just felt. Sometimes love is sight and subsequent action to fill holes that cannot be mended alone.

I think somewhere in our relationship to death lies our relationship with life. *Nanima* didn't fear dying -- she saw it as the next journey beyond the material. She was detached from this physical plane. In



Hindu philosophy, there is the belief that the Bhraman (Supreme Consciousness) is an inherent part of every being. Each person's truest self is their soul - it's made of cosmic stardust and takes spiritual priority over the body. She lived through her divine soul at home in those moments between creation and dissipation with a full spirit and complete tenacity.

In contrast, the underlying modern social value is such that one dies having defended their right to life. We monitor worth and potential to sustain life on a daily basis based on how much money one has accumulated, rendering those without a buy-in to our system less deserving. A small group holds power and the rest are left toiling after the next paycheck that will grant them and their community food, water, electricity, shelter, broadband access, and if they're lucky, time to rest and rejuvenate. This is an injustice to the beauty of being human.

While it is the mentality of many immigrant parents to encourage their children to work hard to the point of self-sacrifice, I do not believe this to be an effective way to honor the lineage or the bodies our souls inhabit. For people of color, our ancestors were oppressed and possibly enslaved, but if we go back far enough, they existed through cultural vitality. Music, paints, dance, these were the pleasures of life; a collective appreciation for that which cannot be spoken, only expressed through artistic mediums and thankfully are still invested in today.

Generational trauma is distantly rooted in a history of global colonization and land acquisition. Some of our great aunts, uncles, relatives died for our right to *live* without mandates or external policing. The most thoughtful way to honor them is to reexamine where I put my worth. A rejection of accolades and titles to feed social images makes room to embrace a realigning of the moral compass. The individual worth of one's human life should be dependent on how one treats other souls (humans, animals, and plants alike) and the way it evolves, compared to no one but themselves.

The women who came before me were proud, bold, and sure of themselves. Social standards prey on insecurity and leave us feeling

like we're not enough. But we deserve to show up everyday in the spaces we occupy as my proudest, boldest, surest, softest self. *Nanima's* memories are alive in the jovial house she upheld. It's tucked away on the backend of a road tangential to a busy intersection in the city of Ahmedabad in the region of Gujarat, India. Her spirit lives on in those who knew and remember her.

My family believes in reincarnation, where the soul can make another trip to Earth as any living being. The most ascended souls can come back as part of nature themselves. There is a jasmine tree my *nanima* tended to. It blooms every summer night and sleeps in the day next to a mural of a mosaic peacock. But I really hope her soul is next housed in a banyan tree, for they are a symbol of immortality and grounding. The most beautiful quality about them is the way their roots are grown from the branches of an older tree. Generational resilience.

May you rest in love, *Nanima*. May I live up to the great woman you were.

And you, reader. Thank you for feeling with me. My favorite social justice activist Valarie Kaur says "grief is the price we pay for love. Loving someone also means grieving with them." To heal is to share in the depth of the emotion together. May we, as an act of shared human existence, find solace outside of grief to live and love, truly live and love, for those who have come before us.

# COLIBRI

C.T.

Colibri represents joy and happiness. And I think that's what life is about. Finding colibri. When I was younger, I found a colibri, literally, with my grandma. It was wounded on a wing and we took it home and fed it papaya. It was very amazing for me to be able to hold this small weighless bird and place it in a deep huge orange basket with plants my grandma had there. I never thought of hurting colibri, of taking advantage of its vulnerability or keeping it forever. I knew it was meant to be free. But I made the mistake of allowing other kids in my grandma's home to see colibri. And they weren't soft like I was. They threw the basket and dropped my grandma's plants. I was afraid and mad and filled with sadness on why they would hurt colibri. And I look back now and realize the boundaries I allowed others to pass that in turn ended in the harm of colibri.

The colibri in us can be free at times and in perfect health. Flying from flower to flower and fulfilling its purpose. But sometimes our colibri can be wounded and lost. It may need time to heal and rest. And when we allow others to cross our boundaries whether invited or uninvited - our colibri can suffer more. I have yet to learn this lesson. I allow others to cross my boundaries. I offer my help, my time, my love, energy, money and resources when I know I have none to spare at that moment and/or for that person. But I invited them anyway and they hurt the colibri and I am again that regretful and afraid child in my grandma's kitchen regretting letting the children come in the home and have access to colibri. And sometimes they come uninvited, and come in despite your resistance. I try to teach boundaries in my family - a very new concept - but it is disrespected. I am forced to help and give me, give me and give up my colibri to feed theirs...when I have none to spare.

Colibri in us is not eternal and it is not strong. It dies, but in death it is like a phoenix and can revive. You have to nourish it and hold it close. Colibri is felt differently in us, in women, in immigrants, in low-income and communities of color. In those of us who are not often allowed decisions and sometimes have no control of colibri,

hands tied in the back are forced to walk away from it for a while. But eventually, colibri comes back when we get stronger, and rebellious, assertive and restrictive, communicative and kind, loving and patient and growing despite the thorns. Accomodating to migration, beyond the desert hills we crossed and the thirst we experienced, the violence and the sexism, the abuse, the cycles of hurt. Colibri comes back and with papaya, our womanhood, that nourishes it...it grows.

# PIZZARIO

S.F.

Shairoo, as always, curious catto sniffing about my computer screen, pays no regard to the 12 squares on Zoom “aww-ing” at his cuteness; my headphones are shrieking with high-pitched admiration from the chef. I was taking a Pizza-making class online: some form of an icebreaker activity from a rich company. I knead the dough with care and rhythm and rehearsed patterns of folding and pushing and oiling.

I haven’t done this since I was maybe 13 or 14-years-old. My Taya Abu<sup>1</sup> and Tayi Ami<sup>2</sup> owned a pizzeria, “Pizzario” – hidden on the back end of B-Block’s market. Taya Abu had an almost unhealthy obsession with cooking. He would stay up till dawn browning cardamom on twelve different pans to find the perfect pan for his beloved spice.

We used to live in a house portioned into two stories: They lived on the ground floor and we lived on the top. Family politics always coloured my parents’ relationship with them, but for us, the kids, it was always a regaling luncheon in Taya Abu’s test kitchen. We had the fanciest, greasiest packed lunches making all the other kids jealous. Taya Abu would escape at night for his moonlight tryst with bread-making and vodka. Tayi Ami knew, but she enjoyed the leftovers for breakfast. One lucky investment gave him his dream restaurant. Only problem was that an adult film DVD shop popped up adjacent a year later when Pakistan banned internet porn. Everytime we went to Pizzario, my dad made us all close our eyes and hold hands to cross the street like baby chicks who hadn’t seen cleavage. Well, maybe not blonde women with blue eyes like the ones posted on this store.

We needed the money so we sold our portion of the second story and rented a place about two kilometres away in A-Block. The school bus didn’t come to my new house anymore so I’d go over to Pizzario and sit on the counter top layered with flour and watch my Taya and Tayi

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1 Paternal uncle

2 Paternal aunt

prepare for a busy night until Mama picked me up. Back then I wasn't tall enough to look inside the bowl on the counter so I learned to trust that my mighty fists were mixing it well. I also trusted that Taya Abu smelled of only Dettol, and that Tayi Ami was always crying over the bills or throwing shoes at him because he wasted too much of it. One bottle cost 500 rupees, I thought; her reaction was fair. Mama would do the same.

Also in B-Block was the only veterinary clinic in town run by Dr. Saleem Qaiser. Bastard that one. My sister and I snuck in a cat despite our mother's categorical threats to the pet. But just like other moms, she fell in love with Oreo. We weren't original with that name in retrospect. Oreo fell ill with cancer and he needed surgery right away. Hashim, Taya Abu and Tayi Ami's 15 year-old son, picked us up and drove us to Dr. Qaiser's clinic for Oreo's scheduled procedure. Mama cried in the waiting room. Meanwhile, a stray puppy from outside the clinic started chasing Hashim who sought refuge in the nearest place – the adult film store of course, conveniently in his mother's purview from Pizzario. Now, she ran over to Hashim with her shoe gripped in her hand determined to reinforce his morality, the same shoe she uses to reinforce Taya Abu's.

Anyway, Oreo didn't get any better. Eight years later when we moved to the U.S., I saw a Facebook petition circulating to boycott Dr. Qaiser. Apparently, he had been scamming many other patients by cutting and suturing up the animal without performing the necessary surgery. Bastard gave me my first experience with betrayal.

He wasn't the only snake in B-Block. There was also Sarmad Uncle from "Sarmad General Store." Quite nepotistic of his parents to name it after only Sarmad when his other brother worked there as well. Apparently my grandmother had babysat Sarmad as a kid and so his everyday comity towards my father was unquestionable, but it didn't strike a moral code when he overcharged me from groceries. I remember in 2005 there was a severe national shortage of sugar and stores ended up price gouging. Sarmad came up with an entirely new scheme to put 50 gram packets of sugar into cereal boxes, cerelac, tea bags, anything with a box. This way, if people were willing to

purchase sugar, at an already inflated price, they had to also purchase his stupid cereal. Here, I learned about the stupid economy. Mama always made me wear a chaddar<sup>3</sup> whenever we went to B-Block and especially Sarmad's store. It was replete with masculinity and we must protect ourselves from it, Mama said. Men harassing, groping women and children with witnesses, all ignoring it of course just like when you see someone pick their nose and it's just too awkward to make eye contact. Sarmad General store was also where I realised I was a woman. No matter my love for the streets of B-block or the fact that I grew up here, it did not love me back. And it certainly could not protect me.

Anyway, Pizzario couldn't recover from the shut down and a Domino's opened nearby, which squashed the remaining sales. Domino's became the hotspot for dates in Model Town. The only people who went to Pizzario anymore were old married couples and some of my teachers who received coupons along with my homework assignments. When Taya Abu finally sold the deed, the official reason was the "economy," and maybe it was, but Taya Abu's addiction pervaded business affairs and one bad financier took away his dream restaurant. Tayi Ami cried harder for his dream. She cried for her hand-picked table mats and serving plates, for Shafeeq who was now jobless with an infant, for her own labour, outside the house, where she was needed, where she was successful.

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3     Cover up

## PARENTS

R. W.

*"They fuck you up, your mum and dad.  
They may not mean to, but they do.  
They fill you with the faults they had  
And add some extra, just for you."*

– Philip Larkin, "This Be The Verse"

My mom rules the family as a matriarch in a short spaghetti strap nightgown. She's a leo. And her thick black curly hair knows it. I can picture her walking around the house (which she keeps at a solid 80° year round) naked as sesame oil soaks into her skin, calling us into the bathroom to talk as she soaks in an epsom salt bath, and lecturing us on health as she organizes mason jars full of tinctures, herbs, and vitamins. She had me naturally, at home, in a bathtub (which she loves to remind me of when we fight).

For most of my childhood, she raised us TV-free, homeopathic, and vegan-adjacent. I was five when I realized all milk wasn't plant based. I had to keep myself from spitting out the Straus cream top whole cow's milk that my would-be best friend's mom gave me on our first playdate. Well, I was vegan until the day my dad, without my mom's knowledge, brought my brother and I to Bongo Burger. After biting into the bloody beef patties, we never went back. I'm not sure if that happened before or after my parents separated.

My mom taught us to hold hands and go around in a circle to say what we are grateful for before dinner. Despite our gratitude practice, I'm not sure we've ever made it through dinner without fighting. She's quick to pick a fight, but even quicker to make amends. My dad always says that one minute, she can be arguing, yelling, bickering, and the next she'll say she's making some tea and ask if you want some. I tell her everything. Mostly because she gives the best advice, but also because her motherly sixth sense is so strong that the one and only time I lied to her, she found out anyway. I realized it saves us both some trouble if I just tell her. Her fiery love manifests as worry.



And I feel that inherited worry in my own bones. She stays up all night when she senses something wrong with her children. I know that one day I'll do the same.



My dad is the classic jack-of-all-trades, master-of-none, and when he still owned the yellow bungalow I was born in, it was a constant work in progress. He kept our kitchen under remodeling for the entirety of the second Obama Administration. The kitchen walls were painted with a collage of mistints, a portion of the floor was bare plywood, and the fridge, stove, and washer and dryer lived on four-wheel dollies for months. I can picture him blasting the Red Hot Chili Peppers as he packs up camping gear late at night in a white Costco t-shirt. He's so eccentric that it's impossible to feel embarrassed in front of him.

He let me be fearless. We roamed barefoot in Bishop, rock scrambled in Joshua Tree, and climbed one-hundred tall sequoias in Yosemite. When I made it to the stop, but was scared to climb down, he'd tell me, *if you made it up yourself, you can get down yourself*. He wrestled with me, sent me down a trick black diamond my first time snowboarding, and taught me how to use a nail gun and electric saw.

Growing up with separated parents meant that for most of my childhood there was space for me to sleep with him in the king bed that at one point all four of us had shared. When we slept in his bed or when he slept in the crack of our pushed-together twin beds, he read to us and told us stories. My mom always says he has the best memory when he tells us things about her that she doesn't even remember. He told us about his own adventures—pool hopping, getting into fights, breaking bones. His stories made me nostalgic for a childhood that wasn't mine—big family, close-knit neighborhood, roaming the streets. When he read to us, sometimes he struggled through the words. Now I realize I feel this inherited dyslexia in my own mind. After talking to the other kids at school, I realized that he had mispronounced all the *Harry Potter* spells. I know that one day I'll do the same.

\* \* \*

We're all fucked up by our parents, at least a little. But if I got even a fraction of my mom's empathy, strength, and warmth, and even a fraction of my dad's adventure, quirkiness, and generosity, all the faults they filled me up with won't matter.

# *THE SPACE BETWEEN US*

*R.L.*

I lived in a small country town where I dreamt of cowboys with integrity who treasure their girlfriends. I had a ready smile for the hardworking guys who drove pickups and said “ma’am” and “thank you.” I always knew that one day, I would marry a man like the ones they showed in old fashioned westerns. The Pizza Works was the place where I played pool for a quarter, drank a coke for fifty-cents, and often came up on a free slice of pizza. Today, it lives only in my memory as the spot where my true love found me.

I am the shy mousy type. Playing small and invisible is how I get by in this world. Often, people don’t notice me and therefore, they don’t see me fidgeting with my pants that are too short, or hiding my worn out shoes, by crossing my legs and tucking them under my chair. I am so happy it is the 80’s, everyone’s hair is a mess. Unlike my skilled friends, I haven’t figured out how to use the curling iron or put on makeup. I don’t pay attention to the boys that hang out with us, they are trying to be tough, their mission is to show the pretty girls they are worthy of a second glance, knowing they will never even get a first.

I love to play country music on the jukebox in the corner. The selection is limited to Garth, Brooks and Dunn, Reba. I don’t mind them, but Keith Whitley is one of my favorites, probably because he is no stranger to the rain. My friends quickly recognize that rock-n-roll has taken a back seat to country music, and the complaints go flying. Refusing to be made fun of, I point my finger at the family eating by the front table, and shrug my shoulders, shifting the blame.

In 100 years from now, I’ll still be able to tell you about the handsome cowboy, his brown hat that matched his plaid cowboy shirt. The way his dark eyes locked on mine, and the big smile. I looked around to see who was sitting next to me, then he asked, “Who has the next game?” I just sat and stared at him. I noticed the tip of his ring finger was missing when he slid his hand into the front pocket of his Levis to pull out a couple quarters and asked me if I wanted to be his partner. “Yeah, yes, I do.” Then I turned red and tucked my feet under the

chair. He never noticed what I wore, and when he listened to the music, he said, "Hmm, good choice." In that moment, I knew one thing for sure, that I could just be me, and that was enough for him. I played more country music, with my head held high.

"I'm David," He said. "Rhonda," I answered. He burst out singing, help me Rhonda, and my blush spread to my toes. He came close, putting his arm around me, to teach me a bank shot. I breathed in his scent and quickly lost the game. He was funny, and I spent the evening laughing. When it was time for me to go home, he walked me home, even though he had a truck in the parking lot. He used the time to learn about me, and share himself. We sat on the curb down the street from my house, as the hours slipped away, we parted with the sweetest kiss.

We became inseparable. He took the lead, I watched his every move, followed his every step and knew his movements better than I knew my own. I loved him so deeply, and credited him for giving me worth. My emotional security was dependent on his love. He was the big picture while I was only the small detail within his world. I worked so hard to prove to him and his mother that I deserved to be there, and was worthy of my place within his family. We both love the idea of a normal family. He had one, and I wanted to be a part of it. All of our dreams were held together with our love.

Eventually, our children arrived and we fell more in love with them, but not each other. My husband was used to women who give all they had until there is nothing left. He never realized how little I had on my own. He did not pay attention to the little girl whose worth was dependent on his love for me. I was a fifteen year old girl who knew so little about life, being a mom, and a wife. I only knew that my husband and children were the greatest loves of my life and would eventually be the most tragic losses that I had to endure.

Years were wasted by asking what was wrong with me? If I had not lost his love, I would never have been able to see the true worth and beauty that was hidden inside of me. I am beautiful, smart, and funny. I am a wonderful mom who loves loyalty, and wants everyone to get

along. I love australian shepherds, mint chip ice cream, and singing crazy country music with my kids. All the days wasted at the lake were worth it, so were our country drives. I love order, and hate shoes. I remember how you love to fall in love with people, you are outgoing, where I am careful, watchful, and standoffish. We are completely different people who should have never expected the other to fill up the self worth meter in the other.

If only we held on to the lesson that we learned at Pizza Works, just being ourselves was enough, we were already worthy of giving and receiving love.

It has been thirty-four years, I can still hear your voice, see your face, and hear your laughter. I have never forgotten the song, the look in your eyes when our children were born, or the pride you had in me. I remember the day I stood on Millville Plains Road. I got out of my car and watched the sun rise. I had finally realized that I had to let you go, your need for freedom was bigger than my need to hold on to you. On that day, I decided that when I look at a sunrise, or the moon, I will greet you with love that will never die or exist anywhere else in the world with the exception of the space between us. To me, love will always be treasured memories.

## *PACKING*

*K.L.*

It took us nine months to pack up that house. It should've taken one. You remember how those rooms were though, don't you? Locked shut with the key thrown out, hiding more than the possessions that filled them. "Don't try it," I'd say. "We don't use those rooms." The doors remained locked and allowed the animosity to grow within. But what if someone were to enter? Would you hear her scream in opposition? Would you look to see his indifference towards the matter? Or would you uncover further to see how the accumulation of things never quite made up for the absence of love?

In those final months we spent throwing trash into cardboard boxes and writing "keep" along the sides, I felt like I couldn't breathe. She delegated the tasks, commanding us to store away whatever crossed her line of sight while he remained far off, detached from the chaos inside. There is a wall you reach when the sense of helplessness grows too strong. And although I surrendered to it, this acquiescence brought me no peace.

One of the days I stumbled across a gift bag in the corner of the dank basement sitting atop a pile of water damaged goods. The bag was full of neatly folded wrapping paper along with handwritten cards. As I began reading the cards, I realized they were from my baby shower. The wrapping paper creases were crisp, almost new, covered in storks and tiny cherubs. Notes saturated in congratulations and unsolicited advice to the first time parents bulged out the top. I couldn't help but wonder what those guests would've thought. To know the next time their words were read would be by that unborn child as she packed up the remanence of her forgotten life.

I don't believe I will ever fully understand her. She has a funny way of shutting the world out when they try to look in. But as I packed, I realized she must've always been afraid. Afraid that the disease which wiped her father's mind would ultimately come for her. And maybe if that day came, those tiny white storks on the untouched paper would be enough to bring her back. If only for a moment, she might

remember. Yet if those futile items were ripped from her desperate hands she'd be left with only what remained in her head. That could never be enough, could it?

I don't feel as though I must speak of him much. I've felt his love deeply, but always situated at unreachable distances. He contributed in his own ways, but maybe the lack of space devoted towards him in the home and on this page describes the lack I feel inside. He was there, but was he really? Drinks grow to cloud affect and perhaps they provided him the numbness needed to endure her. And perhaps the clutter filled the void he could never quite satisfy in her. Coping is strange, isn't it?

What I've chosen to believe is that before the hostility, there was love. I must trust that in the beginning, the two of them saw something within each other that they yearned to have in themselves. Between two individuals who weren't sure of their own identities, this longing appeared to be enough. He was funny, she was disciplined. She was free and he was steady. And I should be grateful for this, shouldn't I? Grateful for their union, for the life they built together, to be here, to have witnessed it all. Perhaps. But as the inevitable truth rose to the surface, those around them bore the burden. At the end, she couldn't see past his ego and he grew to resent her untamable soul. And I, sitting on the sidelines for twenty years, grew to resent them both. Pots boil over and someone must clean up the mess. I just wish I didn't feel like it had to be me.

I find great contradiction in the comfort and distress I feel when acknowledging the two of them within me. When I feel distant from either, I know they are here, innately etched into my makeup. I can't look at myself without seeing each of them. A perfectly equal mix, so I've been told. But beyond his green eyes and her curly hair, I see them inside of me. They're locked in the parts I love to hate the most. I see her in my lifelong collection of birthday cards I keep above my bed. Or in my inability to let go of stray ribbons, discarded bottle caps, or old boxes all of which are concealed deep within my closet. I see him in the arrogance that grows as I drink. In the insatiable urge to lose myself completely.

It's a peculiar thing to come to recognize your parents as people. There is nothing distinguishing them from a passerby at the grocery store except for their significance to you. This affection doesn't negate their humanness though, does it? Just like you, they are raw, complex creatures, attempting to survive each day. You can spend your life idolizing, striving, despising, and desiring all in the hopes of reaching them. But people are flawed by nature. It is that which makes them beautiful. So maybe you never get to the top, and maybe you never meet their most authentic forms. Maybe at the top there is nothing to see but yourself.



# *IYI YOLCULUKLAR*

*E.Y.*

One of the best parts of visiting Istanbul is using the ferries to travel across the city. Istanbul is such a beautiful and unique city because it sits at the nexus between the European and Asian sides of the country. The Bosphorus Strait cuts the city and country in two, so to get from the European side to the Asian side and vice versa, you can either cross the bridge by car or use the ferries. I always preferred the ferries—there's something about the city that always draws you to the water. And in the summer when it's boiling hot outside, the cool breeze from the water slaps temperate relief across your face.

I remember one summer when I was working in Istanbul, I took the ferry every day to and from work. It was the summer after my sophomore year of high school and my first venture of real independence—I was away from my parents and living with my grandparents in the city. Every morning, I got up way too early for what should have been a relaxing summer vacation and walked to the ferry dock in Hisar. If there was time to spare, I'd grab a fresh pogaça from the small café across the street. Something to eat on the long boat ride. The Hisar dock is relatively small, only a handful of passengers would be waiting alongside me, yet we were all joined together—the daily ferry commuters. As the clock ticked down towards departure time, you could slowly begin to make out the outline of a large, white ferry emerging from the distance. I never looked forward to work, but always looked forward to the ferry ride.

As the ferry pulled in, the dock men would rope the boat to the dock. I'd wait for people to get off, which weren't too many at this hour, before crossing the makeshift ramp. Because Hisar is an early stop, the ferry was usually pretty empty too. The ferry has two stories. The bottom has a main enclosed, indoor cabin, with benches lining the sides of the boat on the outside. Upstairs has a partially covered outdoor seating area. Upstairs was my favorite place to sit because it felt more free, but I always stood outside until the boat took off and stared at the water. Hundreds of small jellyfish floated next to the

boat. My mom said she and her brother used to swim right off the docks and I always wondered how did she avoid getting stung??

Two loud honks from the horn, and the boat would begin to steer out from the dock. As the boat took off, I would make my way up the narrow stairwell to sit outside. At 8am, the sun hasn't begun blazing yet, so it's the perfect temperature. I breathed in the brine of the water as the wind wafted the salt onto my skin. The Bosphorus is the most brilliant shade of blue, and as the sun shines on the water, it glitters like the sapphires in the Topkapi Palace. As the ferry zigzagged across the strait, the water always provided the perfect foreground against the stacked buildings of the city. I did my best thinking on those ferry rides. I always carried a journal with me, but inevitably was always too shy to enshrine my thoughts to the page. Instead, I just listened to music, leaned against the bench behind me, and watched the waves undulate before me.

Before I knew it, we had reached my stop. Somehow, I had missed all the passengers who had joined our commute, because now throngs of people were pushed up against one another, ready to disembark once the dock manager hooked the boat. As the boat neared the dock, you could see everyone swaying, trying to maintain their balance, as the waves knocked against the ferry. When he finally hooks us, everyone pours out onto the dock like beads spilling out of a bag. One-by-one (or really three-by-three), everyone piles off the ferry. I jump across the ramp, head through the turnstile, and become one of a million others bustling about the city.

# OUTLAST

N.J.

For someone who spends so much time in the shower, you'd think I'd have better hair. There are five bottles of shampoo in my shower. I have Head & Shoulders dandruff shampoo from when I was going through a rough scalp month, two bottles of Pantene Repair and Protect (I had to buy multiple for the coupon to kick in), one Pantene Moisture Renewal with the pump cap that my dad gave me because he didn't want it anymore even though it was half empty when he did so, and an Irish Spring 5-in-1 that serves as a shampoo-conditioner-bodywash-facewash-deodorizer. There are two body washes, including the aforementioned Irish Spring, and a Dove shea butter one that my roommate gave to me because her boyfriend (now-ex) told her he didn't like how it made her smell like avocados, an extraneous fact I revisit every time I use the bottle. I only have one conditioner that was part of the Pantene deal where I got two shampoos but I have two hair masks, both Korean brands that have done little for my hair's brittleness and split ends (I guess other Koreans don't have hair as difficult as mine). I always buy more shampoo than conditioner, expecting the shampoo will run out first, but that just leads to me have way more shampoo bottles than any one person could reasonably need at one time. Two face washes (three if we're counting the Irish Spring for a third time). And shoved somewhere between the clutter is an always rotating cycle of orange single-bladed razors, disposable, just like everything else in my life.

It's funny how many of these bottles have outlasted my relationships. The plastic they were made with can take anywhere from 20 to 500 years to decompose, so they could be here for double the time I've been alive to far past when I'm not anymore.

The body wash my roommate gave to me our freshman year was the big Costco size (twin to hers because Costco doesn't sell single items) and I still use it long after we last talked--a week after our freshman year ended.

The three bottles of Pantene, two shampoos and one conditioner, were brought on by an after-work shopping spree at CVS during my

first week there. I've since been "let go of" (whatever that means, as if they had been trying to hold onto me but simply could not contain my brilliance any longer), but here are those bottles. They outlasted my first fling which was with a coworker the week after Christmas. The first time we talked on the phone outside of work he told me his deepest secrets and I said I could fall in love with him.

These bottles are the only audience to my deepest thoughts. They are present when I am the most alone. Naked. Vulnerable.

Some showers are to wash off the boys I haven't called back. Their touches, their gaze. I use a lot of body wash for these showers. For the creepy men who watch me at the gas station. The ones who approach me in Chinatown and talk about me behind my back in Spanish not knowing I understand everything that they're saying. The random guy I made out with the first time I went to a nightclub my freshman year of college, too drunk to know better and too drunk to stop him from fingering me under my dress. More than a hundred showers and I haven't washed off that feeling.

There are showers to wash off the sweat from my sporadic workouts, unable to commit even to losing the weight I've wanted to get rid of since I was ten years old. I'll go weeks at a time, proud of myself, noticing how my aspirational pieces get closer to fitting. Then I'll hit a wall and maybe take a rest day here or there, but once the train stops there's no way to get it started again. So I put on five pounds, ten, I'm up even higher than I was when I started. The scale rises and my face falls in the mirror and I'm suddenly much bigger than I ever remember. Each week I think to myself, "This is the heaviest I've ever been in my life."

And later, "No, this is the heaviest I've ever been."

My tangled history with exercise and food began when I was young, as it does for most people who eat. When my family was living in Cambodia, there was this burger place we ate at practically every Sunday after church. It was probably the only burger place in the city that we bothered to eat at. I can still vividly see the beads of sweat

dripping down the face of the cook who came out from the kitchen to ask how we were enjoying our food. Suddenly the saltiness of the burger tasted like much more than seasoning. Every time I went to Mike's I ordered the Crazy Burger just for virtue of the clout it got me among my 10-year-old friends. The Crazy Burger was twelve patties and all the fixings stacked on one another. When I was younger I prided myself on eating frequently and I strongly believe that this misplaced sense of accomplishment at a young age is what contributes to my tendency to be overweight. It's manifested itself in the constant slew of Instagram stories of food I feel necessitates a post and a tag to show off how well I'm eating.

My shower in the "en suite" bathroom I had in Cambodia was the only one in the whole house with a water heater. Everyone else took quick showers just long enough to wash off the sticky heat of the everyday weather there. I used to think my parents let me have that bathroom because I was the only one that was not okay with us moving there, but now that I'm thinking about it, I don't think any of us had a really easy time. My parents just knew that I was going to complain the most, so they gave me the nice bathroom. The only soaps we used were those huge purple pump bottles of Aussie Moist, brought back from Costco every time we returned from a trip to the U.S. in protest of expensive import prices, though it was probably more expensive to check a huge suitcase full of American goods onto the plane than to just buy them from the stores directly in Cambodia.

When people think about Cambodia, what comes to mind is probably different than how it really is. History buffs and sociologists might consider the Khmer Rouge Genocide of not even fifty years ago. Cinema fans will think of Angelina Jolie's *Tomb Raider*, filmed at many famous sites in Siem Riep's Angkor Wat temples, considered to be one of the Seven Wonders of the World. My perception of it is probably different than how it really is too.

My Cambodia was mostly red dirt roads and rice fields that stretched out to the mountains in the distance while we were driving through the countryside. The orange curry that was prepared for us when we visited the provinces where other missionaries lived. The chicken that

was plucked and chopped and plopped right into the curry served for lunch. I felt the crunch of the bones sauced in the curry very keenly that day. The vermicelli noodles and the baguettes we dipped into the curry, remnants of the French protectorate from long before I even existed. In my Phnom Penh, there was that lawlessness that allowed me to drive a Vespa around my neighborhood at age twelve and the corruption of the police that got us pulled over at least once a month in our pine green Toyota Sienna because we were foreigners under the guise of illegally tinted windows. One time, the cop pulling us over for illegally tinted windows let us off after a pair of my \$3 blue diva sunglasses in the glove compartment caught his eye. I hope he feels good about stealing sunglasses from a 12-year-old. Cambodia was the green tin roofs of the slum across the street from my family's gated community where we lived in a three story building that felt like a mansion and I first started to feel the width of the street that separated us from them.

There are quick showers where I dump a handful of the Irish Spring into my palm and slather it everywhere. It's 5-in-1 for a reason, right?

The Irish Spring smells like my dad, my appa, whom I started addressing in Korean to feel more in tune with my roots (and maybe a little because appealing to his heart language makes him more malleable to outrageous out-of-the-blue requests for \$200 to buy makeup). I think he and I are one soul, because we curse the same way and we make the same jokes but refuse to laugh at each other's. For days at a time we will find each other insufferable and then fall back into step. When he's proud of me he posts on Facebook. When he's really proud of me he won't. He just looks at me admiringly, kisses the top of my head and says, "Appa ddal." Daddy's little girl. When I'm sweaty from being out in the sun but I've just driven a ball 250 yards down the center of the fairway. Appa ddal. Even when I curse in the family group chat because I got mad at him for eating my cheese right out of the refrigerator and he kicks me out, it's because I'm Appa's ddal.

When you're washing off the day in the shower, isn't that what we crave? The sense of belonging. I am appa's ddal and umma's ddal and

I am mine. I'm a shampoo hoarding, overweight, third culture, third generation Korean American who speaks better Spanish than she does Korean. My hair gets greasy nineteen hours after being washed and demands around the clock care. I shower and I sweat and I swear and I overeat and I am loved and I am alive. I am Natalia. And when these shampoo bottles outlive me and begin to degrade five hundred years from now, me and the people I loved will be long gone, decomposed, but we were here. Natalia was here.

## *HANDMADE*

*A.L.*

It was Chinese New Year again, but we wouldn't get any time off like my family back in China did. They would get an entire month of break, with all the time in the world to celebrate with red firecrackers, tables full of food, and red envelopes packed with spending money. But here in the states, my family of four would have to stick to weekends and weeknights. I wonder sometimes what it would be like if my parents decided to move back to China, if I would have grown up learning Chinese literature and idioms.

First, the most important step before the New Year even starts, is spring cleaning. We have to clean every nook and cranny of our house, scrub every floor and vacuum every carpet. This is to prevent any bad luck spirits from coming in, and to prepare for the good luck ones.

Next, on the day of the New Year, we make dumplings. My mom would roll out the dough in flat little circles, imperfectly round with lumps around the edges. But I would always prefer them over the store-bought ones, cut into exact circles by metal machines. My grandma was better at rolling those dough circles than my mom, but she was getting better. She was really good at making the filling though. She said she could tell how much more soy sauce and seasoning was needed just from a single sniff of the filling. My job would be to mix it, a delicious combination of ground pork, green onions, some white cabbage, soy sauce, sesame oil, sugar, and salt. After we finished the preparations, everyone would gather around the table to help fold the filling into the dough rounds. Just the right amount of filling in the middle of each round, and we would pull one end into the other, making into a half moon shape. From there, it was up to each person's creativity. My mom could make the edges into beautiful little ruffles, whereas my little sister would make it look like more of a monstrous alien. I try to imitate my mom's ruffles, but horribly fail. Oh well, at least it'll still taste good.

They're supposed to resemble the gold ingots from ancient imperial China, the ones that decorated the emperor's rooms and spilled out



from intricate chests. Eating dumplings on Chinese New Year is supposed to symbolize that fortune will come to us. As a child I never cared about any of that. I was just excited to eat the dumplings. But now, I cherish these long standing traditions that my parents were careful to raise my sister and I with. Maybe we wouldn't get a month-long break and rippling firecrackers, but we still got to experience Chinese culture in our own way. I haven't seen my dad in over a year since he works in China, and before he would fly over during Chinese New Year to celebrate with us in the U.S. This Chinese New Year was a bit empty and lonely, but hopefully next year we'll be able to celebrate all together again.

After an entire wooden rolling dough board has been filled with dozens of dumplings, each one uniquely shaped by one of our hands, it's time to boil them.

My mom has a giant pot of boiled water ready, and gently plops the dumplings in around a dozen at a time. We eagerly wait at the dinner table as the savory, comforting smell begins to waft around the room.

Most people like soy sauce, but I prefer my dumplings dunked in Chinese black vinegar, like my mom. We pour a bottle of 山西老陳醋 (Shan Xi Lao Chun Cu), imported from my mom's hometown province, into a bowl to share. I also eat it with a bit of raw garlic, much to the dismay of anyone I might be meeting with later that day. Raw garlic and vinegar is a staple and the biggest export of my mom's hometown. I developed an instant love for it the first time I visited as a child. My uncle eats raw garlic with every single meal, and he's the most handsome, healthy man at 60 years old that I know, so I think I'll stick with my guns despite the consequences. Sometimes I even drink any leftover vinegar in the dipping bowl, and my mom is similarly enthusiastic. Her childhood friend even drank vinegar from the bottle when she was younger. My dad is a little less extreme, while my sister prefers to eat them mostly plain.

After our bellies are full of handmade dumplings, my mom declares that we must drink the water used to boil the dumplings. She says it's nutritious, and would be a waste to just dump down the sink. It's

thick and milky, looking like smoke in water. I used to dread this step as a kid. It's bland, but somehow satisfying as it washes down all the strong flavors from before. It's soothing and warm, and wraps us all in a safe blanket of security, love, and hope for the future.



## CONTRIBUTORS

**A.H.** is a 34-year old California native, pursuing a degree in chemical dependency. She is also a proud minister and enjoys sharing her hope with others.

**A.A.L.** grew up in Taipei, Taiwan. She has lived in Los Angeles since she was teenager. She is constantly exploring herself and the world.

**A.L.** is Hong Kong-born but San Diego-raised, and a senior studying computer science and linguistics at USC. After graduation, Amy will be working on self-driving cars as a software engineer. In her free time, she loves drawing and writing, and plays many video games, especially League of Legends. Most notably, she lives for love.

**A.M.** is from Barquisimeto, Venezuela and grew up in Allentown, Pennsylvania. She's a senior at USC studying visual anthropology and economics. She loves drinking blueberry green tea, making ceramics, dancing with her chosen family, and yearning.

**A.T.** is a graduating senior at USC from Texas. She currently lives in L.A and has dreams of one day attending law school. She is interested in reading African feminist literature, painting, pilates, and watching Tik Toks. She loves writing and connecting with other human stories.

**B.A.** is passionate about addressing healthcare disparities and hopes that her passion drives her to make an impact in Latino communities and in communities experiencing homelessness. BA. enjoys watching basketball, reading mystery books and listening to 2000s R&B.

**B.L.** has lived on both coasts, mostly in Hawthorne, CA, but calls New York home., but calls New York home. She's a senior studying neuroscience at USC. After graduation, B.L. intends on going to medical school and has interest in becoming a neurosurgeon. She keeps busy with learning, cuddling her yellow lab, Lola, third-wheeling her parents, and asking people for their birth time.

**C.P.** is from Los Angeles, California. I love to listen to music and watch the sky change colors.

**C.T.** is 23 years old and migrated to the United States from Mexico when she was two. She graduated from the University of Southern California with a B.A in Law, History and Culture, Cum Laude, with department honors and a Discovery Scholar medal for her research in prison abolition. She plans to attend law school after taking a gap year to study for the LSAT and work in a non-profit.

**D.K.** grew up in Riverside, California, and is the mother of three.

**E.Y.** is a second-year PhD student in the Urban Education Policy program at the University of Southern California, where she studies community colleges and the myriad ways in which the U.S. education and legal systems intersect. E.Y. is a Turkish-American, trying to make her grandmother proud as she practices her Turkish language skills. In her free time, E.Y. loves to read, pretend to enjoy running, bake desserts, and watch Real Housewives reruns.

**H.T.** is a faithful woman in Christ. I'm what you would call a learner. I'm always learning something. I'm from Northern California, a small town named Burney. I'm creative, a lover of Art such as anything you can create with your hands. I'm a lover and a fighter. I try to only fight for the right things, and I'm truly just learning what those things in life are. I've got a lot to learn and a lot of places to go in life. I'm sure of one thing: Jesus will walk with me each step of this journey I'm on, and guide me to where I'm headed. My name is H.T. and I'm just another girl in this world trying to make her way home.

**J.B.** is Salvadoran-American born and raised in South Central LA. She is graduating from the University of Southern California with a Bachelors of Science in Business Administration. She's enjoyed being a member of Trojan Shelter, which serves college students experiencing homelessness in the greater Los Angeles area. She asks too many questions while watching movies, can eat an entire Big Mac meal in under 15 minutes, and likes to give her friends advice like she doesn't need her own therapist.

**J.D.** is from all over the place. He currently lives in the Southwest. In his spare time he likes to walk his dogs and bake.

**K.L.** was raised in Denver, Colorado, and currently resides in Los Angeles, California. She is a senior at the University of Southern California studying Health Promotion and Disease Prevention. She hopes to pursue a career in nutrition and dietetics. When she's not contemplating life, she loves to experiment in the kitchen, explore new places, and act like she has her shit together.

**K.P.** is the queen of poetry - at least that's what her name means. She dabbles in poetry to prevent irony and is a professional dancer and storyteller inspired by Indian culture and the people around her. She will be advocating for health as a human right and can be found in Los Angeles living in tandem with the divine rhythms of the human experience.

**M.M.** is of Cuban and West African descent. Writing since age 6, she has been a professional ghost writer of poetry and songs for more than 20 years. She is a college graduate and is currently completing an additional master's degree in divinity and Christian ministry. Married for 30+ years, six children, seven grandchildren. Trusting God with full faith as I walk in full service unto Christ until God sends me home.

**N.J.** is from Arcadia, California, but spent a number of formative years in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. She is a student at the University of Southern California studying to become a doctor and hopes to serve as a primary care physician in underserved communities both locally and abroad. She is an enthusiastic golfer, plays the guitar and trombone, and enjoys painting and reading in her spare time.

**P.O.** is an avid plant lover who has a deep connection to Jesus and her faith. She also enjoys learning about new botanical theory in her free time, along with attending mental health classes at CIW.

**R.L.** is from Redding, California. I write stories for my daughter so that she knows that I walked the road of life. Sometimes I cried, other times I laughed, but mostly I overcame. It is important to me that she knows she is not alone.

**R.W.** was born and raised in the Bay Area. She studies Law, History, & Culture and Spanish at USC. She is passionate about criminal justice reform and hopes to be a part of the effort to free people from prison. She loves jumping in the ocean, dancing to loud music, watching the sun set, and enjoying food with friends and family.

**T.H.** is a difference maker in her community professional student and mother of three. Born in Texas, raised in Jamaica, she enjoys listening to music, writing poetry and needlepoint.

**S.B.:** When I look back through the years I was growing up, I don't have very many fond memories to look back on. And the person I allowed myself to become through these experiences led me to prison. However, I've learned that a seed that is planted does most of its growing and rooting a strong foundation in the dark before its beauty breaks through into the light. Even though I am currently in prison, I am just like that planted seed, doing my growing and rooting a strong foundation for myself through the dark times and breaking out into the light like a blooming beautiful flower, hopefully leaving a legacy of a beautiful aroma.

**S.F.** is a junior at the University of Southern California studying Public Policy and International Relations. Shanzeh grew up in Lahore, Pakistan, and then moved to Atlanta, Georgia. She hopes to go to law school one day. S. is interested in studying abolition, feminist theory, and international law. In her spare time, she likes to try out New York Times Cooking recipes and feed her neighbour's cats.

**S.M.** was born and raised in San Diego, California. S.M. loves yoga and the ocean.

**W.A.** is from Virginia but has lived in many other states. She loves music, animals and travelling.

**V.J.** is Mexican-American, Apache Indian, and Spaniard. I have lived in Corona, California since I was a baby. I was raised by my mom and step dad who is my dad. I have two sisters from my mom and one brother. I have a step sister and step brother. I am fifty five years old. I am a mature woman in mind, body, and soul. I love human beings.

I find that it would be lonely work without them. We are able to communicate and care for one another to nurture and love. In loving the beauty that surrounds us, we discover our likes and dislikes. We learn how to find new appreciation in the new picture that God paints for us everywhere. The new beginning of hope, faith, and especially the gift of loving people right where they are at. Sometimes, we even have to let others love and support us right where we are at until we are able to nurture ourselves.







*The USC Dornsife Prison Education Project (PEP) creates the opportunity for USC and incarcerated students to learn from each other in a rigorous and collaborative learning environment across a variety of academic disciplines. PEP seeks to reinforce the idea of education as a fundamental human right and to facilitate connections that transcend walls both literal and figurative.*

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