ABSTRACT

CENTRAL VALLEY CHICANA ¿Y QUE?

This collection of essays explores the formation of Chicana identity, the social and psychological impact substance abuse, and the trail of immigration of the past and present. I historicize my experience of ethnic identity through baseball, growing up in Fresno, the success of Selena Quintanilla-Perez, and my fragmented ability to speak Spanish. I imagine what it would be like to be addicted to heroin, honestly retell my story with alcoholism, and what it’s like to spend thirty days in a drug and alcohol rehabilitation facility, while balancing the desire to drink with trying to stay alive.

Erin Laurel Alvarez
May 2013
CENTRAL VALLEY CHICANA ¿Y QUE?

by

Erin Laurel Alvarez

A thesis
submitted in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
in the College of Arts and Humanities
California State University, Fresno
May 2013
APPROVED

For the Department of English:

We, the undersigned, certify that the thesis of the following student meets the required standards of scholarship, format, and style of the university and the student's graduate degree program for the awarding of the master's degree.

________________________________________
Erin Laurel Alvarez
Thesis Author

________________________________________
John Hales (Chair)\hspace{1cm}English

________________________________________
Steven Church\hspace{1cm}English

________________________________________
Samina Najmi\hspace{1cm}English

For the University Graduate Committee:

________________________________________
Dean, Division of Graduate Studies
AUTHORIZATION FOR REPRODUCTION
OF MASTER’S THESIS

I grant permission for the reproduction of this thesis in part or in its entirety without further authorization from me, on the condition that the person or agency requesting reproduction absorbs the cost and provides proper acknowledgment of authorship.

Permission to reproduce this thesis in part or in its entirety must be obtained from me.

Signature of thesis author: ___________________________________________
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my family and friends who have supported my failures and successes throughout my educational career. I would like to thank every teacher and professor who has pushed and challenged me to think critically about the world around me, and telling me that my words matter. I would like to thank every writer who has come before me, who has made it easier to write my truths without apology, who has written with the intent of changing the world, and every writer I have yet to discover.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FIVE THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ME</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XICANA ENOUGH?</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IF YOU WERE A DOPE FIEND</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BLEEDING BLUE</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA SUPER SELENA</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESTORE ME TO SANITY</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMAGINARY LINES</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WE DIDN’T CROSS THE BORDER, THE BORDER CROSSED US</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROGRESS NOT PERFECTION</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ON REMEMBERING CÉSAR CHÁVEZ</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ON REMEMBERING WHY I HATE WHITE PEOPLE</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FIVE THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ME

1. I love libraries. If I could live in a library I would. In fact, on several occasions in my early academic career I spent long, leisurely Sunday afternoons curled up on a leather chair in UC Santa Cruz’s Science Library, where I first discovered Cherrie Moraga’s influential and multigenred narrative, *Loving in the War Years*, about the complications of being a mixed race, queer Chicana, which in turn helped me to reconcile my own mixed race identity and introduce me to the furthered complications of queer identity. Currently, I enjoy basking in the sunlight streaming through the window of my second floor graduate study room at Fresno State’s Henry Madden Library, the only study room in the whole library with a window. Last semester I used this room to analyze the racial and gendered implications of Faulkner’s “mammy” character, Dilsey, in *The Sound and the Fury*. Here, I also contemplate the importance of an academic room of one’s own.

As an undergraduate in the English major and a McNair scholar, it was encouraged, and required of me, to critically analyze the world through theoretical lenses of my choosing. Through this process, and facilitated by my instruction in literary analysis, I have been able to question and theorize as to the formation of social constructs in regards to ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual identity. I consider myself a feminist, a deconstructionist, a postcolonial and psychoanalytic theorist. I apply these approaches in considering prison studies, testimonios, Chicana and global feminisms, Chicana/o history, Anzaldúa and borderland theory, transnational mothering, social justice movements, writing, and multiethnic literature.

Now, as an M.F.A. student writing creative non-fiction, I have turned these theoretical lenses upon myself. I have willingly put my life under the proverbial
microscope and have lived to tell about it. I have scrutinized almost every aspect of my life, excavated almost every emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual experience for a hidden meaning that would validate my existence, to help me understand what living on this earth means.

2. I am a non-traditional student with a transcript that could serve as a non-traditional case study. I graduated from high school with a 1.8 GPA. I attended Fresno State as an Educational Opportunity Program student, accumulated ten units in two years, and dropped out with a 0.77 GPA. Struggles with identity and finding an academic purpose, uncertainty as to why I was attending college, other than to spite my high school guidance counselor, hindered my ability to fully participate in the role of a college student. Like so many other people embarking on a college career, I didn’t know what I wanted to be when I grew up.

From 1994 to 2007, I stumbled from Fresno City College, Cabrillo College, San Diego Community College, Oxnard College, back to Cabrillo College where I participated in the Puente Project, and finally returning to Fresno City College to establish my credibility as a student. Somehow, despite my earlier academic failings, when I returned to Fresno State in 2008, my transferable G.P.A. was stable at 2.92.

In my first semester as a full-time English major I made the Dean’s list. In subsequent years, I have presented at the Undergraduate Conference on Multiethnic Literatures of the Americans (UCMLA) and the Multi Ethnic Literatures of the US (MELUS), had my abstract accepted at El Mundo Zurdo Conference, been a recipient of the Andrés Montoya Memorial Scholarship, immersed myself in summer writing conferences at CSU Summer Arts and Las Dos Brujas, and participated in two ACLU Campus Network conferences focused
on social justice. This year I am President of Chicana/o Writers and Artists Association, whose mission is to promote the creative and scholarly work of students of color, or any person who has struggled to find their voice in our sometimes marginalizing society. I intend to continue these achievements in a doctoral program.

3. I’m a recovering alcoholic and major depressive. At thirteen, I took Sudafed for fun. I liked how the nasal decongestant made me dizzy and sleepy, waves of euphoria washing over my body. Up and down, I rode the waves. At seventeen, I discovered the same dizzying effects in alcohol. I went from social drinking to binge drinking within a month. All in an effort to silence the self-defeating thoughts of inadequacy, fighting the fear of abandonment, and trying to escape my loneliness. On July 2, 2001, after eleven years of self-destruction and a weeklong binge on hallucinogens, painkillers, marijuana, and beer, I came to the realization that I was sick and tired of being sick and tired. After thirty days in rehab and several trips to the psychiatric unit, I have learned that my life is about progress, not perfection.

For nine months after rehab, I lived with twenty other addicts and alcoholics in a mansion overlooking the Pacific Ocean in Santa Cruz. For nine months I lived with twenty different personalities that weren’t in my head, but living in front of me, writhing in emotional pain, constantly conflicted between maintaining sobriety and returning to their drug of choice. For nine months, I struggled with confronting the depression that lurked underneath my substance abuse. During those nine months, I watched recovering addicts become addicts again. I watched my house manager, Chris, relapse on cough medicine, returning to injecting heroin in his neck within a week, to hearing they found his dead body
a month later on the rail road tracks down the hill from our mansion, overdosed on cocaine, anti-freeze, and a bottle of malt liquor. At this writing, I have eleven years of non-alcoholism, to which I owe to those who have suffered before me.

4. I’m Mexican-Scotch/Irish. Erin. Álvarez. My name directly reflects the binary between identity and ethnicity. If defined by my first name, there is no denying that I am Irish. Erin is an Anglicized version of Éirinn, which means Ireland. Ironically, Erin Go Bragh, or “Ireland Forever,” was the motto of Los San Patricios Battalion, a contingent of Irish soldiers who joined the Mexican soldiers during the US – Mexican War in 1847. However, there is no Spanish equivalent for Erin. When introducing myself to Spanish speakers, I call myself Irene, pronounced EE-reh-neh. The closest equivalent to a Spanish translation is EE-rehn, which is actually Portuguese.

If defined by my last name, other complications emerge. Álvarez can immediately be traced to Purepero, Michoacan, México, my grandfather’s birthplace. Ultimately, Álvarez signifies colonization by the Spaniards upon the P’urhépecha tribe of Mesoamerica in the 1500s. Considering that the Moors had occupied Spain for seven hundred years, give or take a few, previous to Spain’s “discovery” of the Americas, I would speculate that the Arabic word for “knight,” Alfares, is a more accurate origination. Although some will argue Álvarez is a Germanic name, or strictly a Spanish/Portuguese name, the bottom line is that currently, Álvarez creates an uncomfortable reality for those who wish to ignore the Latino presence in the United States.

5. I love baseball. I love the Los Angeles Dodgers. I bleed blue. I love the crack of a bat. I love the call of a strike. Most importantly, I love a man in uniform. I
have been questioned about my loyalty to a baseball club whose stadium was built on Chavez Ravine, on land confiscated from Mexican families, a parcel of land my grandmother’s family resided on shortly during their trek from El Paso, Texas to Fresno, California. I answer that this is exactly why I love the Dodgers, in an effort to always remember where I come from, even if only for the duration between harvesting seasons.
XICANA ENOUGH?

All my life I have lived with the confusion of being of bicultural, as well as the confusion this creates for others. When I introduce myself as Erin, my light skin covered in freckles, combined with my green eyes and Irish name, claim a connection to whiteness in the US. I am accepted. Nobody questions my ethnicity because I don’t “look” Mexican; my skin color does not match the stereotypical image, like Rosarita on the can of refried beans. When I introduce myself as Erin Alvarez, it is usually followed by, “But, you don’t look Mexican. I just assumed you were white.” I suppose this is meant to be a compliment, but it only makes me feel like I have failed at being Mexican.

In fact, I would go so far as to caution anyone from making a comparative remark about anyone’s ethnicity, especially when there is a question of his or her racial or ethnic origins. No matter how sincere someone believes they’re being, no matter how innocent the statement is, the mixed person takes these assumption quite seriously. After years of hearing this, it still hurts, no matter what stage of the identity claiming game I’m in, but only when someone doesn’t think I’m Mexican. A white acquaintance recently told me she assumed I was white when we’d first met. Every time I hear someone say this, my body tightens and quick bursts of electricity reverberate through my body. Even though I have encountered this throughout my life, it’s still a shock to my system. It seems silly, but at times I want to cry. I want to cry from frustration and rage and anger and fear of never being enough of either identity, to continually live a life of halves, never finding a balance that satiates the needs of society and myself. I understand that my ethnic identity is something I will contend with my entire life,
and that I will never be able to distance myself from my mixed ethnicity. Even so, I don’t want to be two halves of a whole. I just want to be whole.

This same denial of my duality is mirrored when I introduce myself in Chicana/o communities. “But, you don’t look Mexican. I just assumed you were white.” When a Latina friend said this recently, I felt more compelled to question her assumption. I asked her, “Well, what does a Mexican look like? Aren’t there blonde haired, blue eyed Mexicans? You’re from Guatemala, don’t you hate it when people assume you’re Mexican? Don’t you think I might feel the same way?” She didn’t have an answer, but laughed when I asked her about being confused for Mexican. “Yeah, that bugs the shit out of me. But what can you do about it? People are always going to make assumptions,” she said. I know she’s right, and yet I still have a hard time accepting that realization. I wish I could tattoo, “I AM IRISH AND MEXICAN,” on my forehead in Old English script so that there are no questions later. Until then I associate more with myself with the least rejecting ethnic community.

My English professor in the Puente Project, Stan Rushworth, encouraged me to read authors like Moraga and Michele Serros, a young Chicana whose prose and poetry attempted to answer some of my questions about identity. Being half Native American and Irish, Stan, too, understood my longing for autonomy in a monoracial-inclined world. He pushed and guided me through this journey; most importantly Stan encouraged me to incorporate Moraga’s theories into my own writing.

I discovered Cherrie Moraga in the stacks of the Science Library at UC Santa Cruz. I was attending a local community college, and I participated in the Puente Project, a first year writing program for disadvantaged students. Through my Puente mentor, I found myself spending Saturdays studying in the library. I
remember sitting at a beaten and worn wood table, and holding Cherrie’s collection of essays and poetry, my eyes fluttering over words I had heard others call me, like la güera, the light-skinned girl. My hands eagerly turned pages hoping for a resolution, an answer to the questions that plagued me. Would I ever be whole? Would I ever be accepted? Would I ever reach a place where I was comfortable in my skin, where I stopped feeling inadequate because I wasn’t enough of something to make everyone happy? I tried to wrap my mind around the theory of Moraga’s flesh, her white skin in a brown skinned family, in a white skinned world. Being surrounded by the prestige of a university, between rows and stacks of printed and bound words, surrounded by the intellectualization of identity, I felt my desire to succeed in academia much more profoundly. I wanted to find my purpose, an awareness of self that eluded me. I wanted to find some resolution, an answer to my ethnic duality.

I came across *Loving in the War Years: lo que nunca paso por sus labios*, and immediately identified with an essay on coming to understand one’s dual ethnic identity titled “La Güera,” or the light-skinned girl. Moraga discusses her experiences growing up Mexican and white, and the notion that “light is right,” that the shade of your skin determines how you are perceived in American culture. She chronicled her struggle with rationalizing her placement in society based on other’s assumptions about her race, class, and sexual orientation. Finally, somebody else who had to confront what it meant to be lighter than her full-blooded Mexican aunts, uncles, and cousins, who saw the one blond hair on her arm as the pinnacle of whiteness, a benefit and a detriment at the same time.

Stan entered one of my essays into a writing contest, and suggested I read another essay at the Puente conference that year. At the conference I stood in front of a crowd of fifty other students and read an essay about being half white
and half Mexican, which consisted mostly of how much I hated white people based on my upbringing in a conservative household by a white mother and white stepdad, who consistently denied my mixed ethnicity and made overtly discriminatory remarks about men and women of color. Yet the essay also called for the empowerment of the marginalized voice by asking others to make a conscious effort to expose and question the covert racism that they knew existed in their schools and communities. As I read, my heart raced and my hands shook. I had never considered doing something as stupid as this. Fifty pairs of eyes stared at me as I bared my innermost insecurities to a roomful of strangers. When I stopped reading and said, “That’s it,” the room erupted into applause, and maybe a few cheers, as well.

My experience as a child born in 1974 to a multiracial couple has challenged the way I look at the world. Until the middle of third grade I attended school with children like me: brown, white, black, poor, most living in low-income housing with a single mother. By looking at my parents, I knew they represented the variety of students I went to school with, not yet realizing the social ramifications this would cause throughout elementary school, junior high, high school, and part of my college career.

I remember the first time my ethnic difference was detected. I was in the second grade. Two or three friends and I were standing at the back gate of the school, behind one of the big trees whose roots stuck up out of the ground waiting for someone to trip over them. Another Mexican girl asked me why my skin wasn’t as brown as hers, why my eyes were green, and told me Erin was a white name. I’d wondered the same thing sometimes, but no one had ever asked me these questions directly. She laughed and said, “You’re an Oreo, brown on the outside and white on the inside.” I think she meant this in the nicest sense of the
derogatory term. This term was directed routinely towards black people, but because my skin did absorb some color when exposed to the sun, I became a recipient of the title. I don’t remember being offended, but after that day I do remember feeling different from children that were full Mexican, white, or black. None of us understood my ethnic complexity. This lack of understanding was further complicated when my white mother, divorced from my Mexican father, married a white man and we moved to an upper middle class, white neighborhood. They did not understand my complex identity either.

Not only did I transfer to a different school in the middle of the year, but also a majority of the children did not look like my previous classmates. Instead of poor brown and black students with a sprinkling of white, my new third grade class was full of white children, with only a few brown and black children sitting on the outskirts of the classroom, bussed in from the area of town I had moved from. They were not sure how to receive the new girl that could pass for white or brown. Their staring eyes merely expressed childhood curiosity at the new girl, but the focus on my existence would become the beginning of crucial steps toward realizing the roles race and ethnicity play in identity formation.

The most pivotal point on my journey to self-identity in this new environment began at recess. Marlene, Emma, and Tamara, two Mexicans and one black girl, sat on the geometric half dome of steel bars. Kelli, a white girl, stood apart from them on the grass next to the sandbox. They all called out to me, asking if I wanted to play. I looked from side to side and decided to play with Kelli, because getting to know one person was less intimidating than getting to know three people. Plus, in class I heard Kelli say she lived on Del Mar, which is one of the street names I saw on my way to school in the mornings. Since this school was predominantly white, there were few black and Mexican kids to
become friends with. By choosing to play with Kelli, I’d sealed my fate. Because I played with the white girl, the other girls thought I must want to be white, too. From then on, I was almost forced to forge friendships with other white children because I was somewhat shunned by the black and Mexican kids. I didn’t realize the choice to play with Kelly would determine my loyalty to a certain ethnicity. I just wanted to belong somewhere.

I remember a night in seventh grade I spent at Angie’s house. Her family attended the same church my family did, so I knew this invitation to spend the night was made out of guilt rather than a genuine attempt at being my friend. That same night a white friend of Angie’s, Jenn, came over with her Mexican boyfriend. Even though I had wanted to be liked by the white girls, I felt myself being comforted by the boy’s existence in a room full of white people, even if only two of them. I vaguely remember him referring to something of the Mexican culture and my excitement at having had a similar experience, or being in the same particular situation. I vividly remember feeling connected to this brown-skinned boy and proud of my last name, not shamed or afraid for the first time. After they left, Angie said she was so mad that Jenn would bring the Mexican guy over here. Angie said he was an ugly, lazy, and dirty Mexican who had no class. I looked at her slack-jawed, trembling in disbelief, my moment of happiness and pride shattered by her hatred. It was at that moment I realized the enormous agony of racism.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “I’m Mexican, too.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean you,” she said.

If she didn’t mean me, then whom did she mean? Did she mean my dad, my uncle, or any other person of Mexican descent?
My ethnicity tainted Angie’s, an ideal shared by most Americans, of monoracial purity. Yet, I still sought the white girls’ acceptance, despite the experience with Angie, and continued to ignore the few black and brown children who were more likely to accept me than the white kids. But even they came to resent my capacity to claim either ethnicity. To them, my American first name and green eyes made me dirty, contaminated, untrustworthy, and a fraud because I could, and sometimes did, pass between both worlds. However, in my own ethnic reality, the way I saw myself, I was alone. I could traverse borderlands of color alone, but always understood that I could easily be undetected.

Now, I identify as Chicana. This realization has caused me to accept my participation in specific American traditions and ideologies. I relate to Moraga when she states, “I have had to confront the fact that much of what I value about being Chicana, about my family, has been subverted by Anglo culture and my own cooperation with it.” I, too, have cooperated with this ideology by seeking acceptance from white women and men. I realize now, because of my alliance with other multiethnic individuals I am committed to inspiring others to vocalize their experience. However, I feel that my main obstacle in feeling Chicana enough is my inability to speak Spanish fluently. I am what Karen Davalos calls, in her article, “Sin Vergüenza: Chicana Feminist Theorizing,” a sixth-generation Chicana:

Although ideologically distinct from a Mexican American subject position, a ‘sixth-generation Chicana’ might not immediately recognize how she, like Mexicans, is racialized and gendered…Contrary to popular myths, the sixth-generation might not speak Spanish, graduate from high school, or own a home; whereas Mexican migrants have a better chance of completing
high school and owning a home. The combinations, therefore, of racialization and gender and class hierarchies makes them structurally similar, even when specific experiences in education and housing are different.

Because of my lack of connection to Mexico and its cultural traditions, and my collaboration with whites, I unconsciously excluded my Mexicanness, even though we have similar experiences.

When I was five, my Mexican grandmother, Consuelo or Connie, asked me if I wanted to learn Spanish. Although I don’t remember the details, I imagine that she was sitting in her recliner positioned next to the entrance of her narrow kitchen in Fresno’s Butler Park, an unincorporated neighborhood on the city’s East side. I imagine she grabbed my hands, pulled me into her lap, and while stroking my long hair out of my face asked, “Do you want to speak Spanish like me and your tias?” I must have run away from her and said no, because I am anything but fluent. She never tried to teach me again. I learned fragments of the language from her and my great-aunts. I didn't necessarily understand each word, but I was able to translate what they said by emotion. Body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice are embedded in my sensory memory.

This is how I have forged my Chicana identity. Through language, the flesh of my tongue gives birth to a new generation of linguistic hybridity. But, I don’t blame my grandmother’s feelings of ambivalence. In the 1970’s my American born Mexican father and his brothers and sisters were taught in school that speaking any language other than English meant exclusion and ridicule. My grandmother wanted the best for her children and believed the schools were right,
that if her children were to be successful, they were to dispose of her language and adopt the native language of their location.

During the years my father grew up, in Fresno you spoke English and saved Spanish for the confinement of your home, silencing instinctual verbal response, silencing the truths of a marginalized group, silencing history. As an adult, however, I have no excuse for not being more fluent in Spanish. I had taken several Spanish classes in high school and college and received an A once, but mostly B’s. Not because I did not understand the vocabulary or was unable to conjugate verbs, but because I was learning Spanish in a American classroom, not within my community, not in natural conversation, not enveloped in personal anger or sadness, communal joy and happiness, but by studying irregular verbs and complex tense forms, things that didn’t engage me. My fault is that I blamed someone else for my deficit, never taking responsibility for something I could change.

When speaking in Spanish to Spanish-speakers, I become confused and inarticulate, stumbling over my words in an effort to add the right pronunciation to certain words, or roll an “r” with enough trill to establish my credibility as Spanish speaker. What I forget is that others who are learning a second language feel the same. There is shame and embarrassment in not speaking the dominant language, yet there is power in speaking both. Yet, it is living in this state of flux that creates an uncomfortable feeling. For immigrants in the United States, the stigma of accented speech creates fear of expressing oneself with any emotion or precision. Even though I feel this stigma from both sides of the language spectrum in the United States, being part of two ethnic groups with two different languages, I am expected to speak Spanish. This shame doesn’t exhibit itself within my realm of whiteness. My Spanish will never have the fluency of my
English. Within the realm of my Chicana identity, my lack of knowledge and fluency is a detriment. I am not whole. I am only half of what I am assumed to be. I feel embarrassment and shame when Spanish-only speakers assume I speak Spanish. I smile and look to my friend Karla who translates complex questions for me. I want to stumble over my words, to tell her, “No, ‘sta bien. Quiero hablar con ellos. Es en mi sangre, que no?” But, I don’t. I let her translate the conversation. I let her speak for me.

As I continue to explore what it means to be Chicana, which I believe will be a life-long process, perhaps without any clear resolution, I have taken it upon myself to analyze, apply, and pass on the theory of other Chicanas who have dedicated their lives to creating what Moraga calls “a new language, better words that can more closely describe women’s fear of and resistance to one another; words that will not always come out sounding like dogma.” This is the legacy I devote myself to continuing: Creating a new language for those of us who have been shaped by racism and discrimination, and forced to fit into the current generation.

In my ongoing personal research on problems of identity, I was introduced to a colleague of Moraga’s who formulated a Chicana feminist theoretical lens through which to analyze and critique our place in society. Through the radical poetry, personal essays, and critical writings of Gloria Anzaldúa, I have begun to incorporate her borderland theories of identity into my writing. By weaving political, cultural, and social history together through poetry and personal narratives of resistance, Anzaldúa gives voice to my struggle. She allows me to live in cultural hybridity, where language, ethnicity, and personal identity hover between multiple worlds, waiting for their chance to blend, mesh, and congeal into a narrative of endurance and triumph over those who question my legitimacy.
I have ascertained a new way to define my ambiguity in finding acceptance in the Chicana/o community. My affinity with Anzaldúa is based in her theory of the new mestiza. Through my studies and analysis, I have come to believe that her multi-genre approach to critical theory, politics of the body and mind, and her transcendence of borders, has propelled me to rewrite her words in my own voice as a descendent of Anzaldúan rhetoric. Anzaldúa defines mestiza in her collections of essays and poetry, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, as “cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war.” When I first contemplated the new mestiza, I had trouble seeing myself in that role. I didn’t live near the physical border that separates two countries. I knew there was something unique about me, but I didn’t have the capacity to comprehend my significance within societal definitions of race. However, I’ve come to understand that being half white and half Mexican, I embody the literal definition of mestiza: a homeless, mixed breed, who doesn’t fit any category.

As I delve further into the philosophy of Anzaldúa, and the ideology behind the new mestiza, as a woman now aware of her significance in the diversification of America, I embrace the notion of mestizaje. I am not biracial, because Mexican is not a race. I am of a dual ethnicity; I am Scotch-Irish and Mexican; I am Chicana and American; I live within two cultures, two identities; between two borders. I inhabit the area on either side of the border. I have come to the realization that my struggle to define and assert the complexity of my identity is determined by personal responsibility of sharing my experience with other dual or multiethnic women. By sharing my struggle and continuing to deflect the connotation of inferiority because of our ethnic hybridity, I hold myself
accountable for rewriting Anzaldúa theories for the new generation. I hope my words are enough.
IF YOU WERE A DOPE FIEND

You’re already a drunk. You live in a beach town where tourists flood the streets in the summertime. The main attraction, two blocks from your house, draws people from all over the world. A giant rollercoaster with a view of the whole town spans out before them as they descend the wooden rails in frightened delight. You love the funnel cakes they sell on the boardwalk. Every once in awhile you will leave the security of the porch of your small three bedroom house and walk the two blocks to the main attraction, dreading the intimacy of walking in a crowd, screaming children and scolding parents, shoulder to shoulder, sweaty and sandy skin brushing against yours, the craving for fried dough and powdered sugar propelling you forward. You don’t mind the sand or sweat so much; you live at the beach for God’s sake. It’s the people; thousands of people looking at you, walking past and through you, that scare you. You would rather be at your house in the middle of the Beach Flats, on your porch watching tourists, homeboys and homegirls, men, women, and children, old men and old women shuffling down the sidewalk, past your porch and around the corner, looking for something, going somewhere, wishing you could walk without their fear.

You’ve been depressed since you were thirteen. You will go to the psych unit voluntarily when you are twenty-three with thoughts of killing yourself by drinking a bottle of vodka and fifty aspirin, like Winona Ryder in “Girl Interrupted,” your favorite movie because you could relate to her detachment to everything around her. You will spend seventy-two hours drugged and drowsy, waiting for a psychiatrist to spend twenty minutes asking questions about your sex life, your drinking habits, and why you want to kill yourself. You answer his questions with short and sarcastic single word answers. Yes, no, I don’t know.
The psychiatrist will confirm your suspicions about depression. He will ask you if you have suffered any recent trauma. You tell him you almost drowned in the river; you saw your life, or whatever it was you were living, flash before your eyes. Your sleeping, drinking, drug use, and chain smoking may have gotten worse, but you don’t care because getting shit-faced and sleeping all day feels better than remembering almost being suffocated by a black wall of water. After three days of psych meds they let you leave, but not without signing a paper that says you can’t purchase firearms for five years, for the protection of yourself and others. You go home, sit on your porch, light a cigarette, take a couple Valium the doctor prescribed, and swallow them with a beer.

The house you rent was built in the 1920s, long before you were born, and it will be there for decades after you move. When you lived next door, you would sit on your steps late at night, lights off, inconspicuous, and stare at the blue house with the blinds always drawn, random people coming in and out, never stopping long enough to appreciate the rectangular porch standing empty, begging to be taken advantage of. When your neighbors were evicted and the For Rent sign popped up on your neighbor’s lawn, enclosed by a white picket fence, you convinced two other friends to move in. The roommate with the attic room found a box of human ashes in a hidden closet, hypodermic needles and bent spoons, artifacts of forgotten lives abandoned in a damp, dark corner. You realize the people coming and going were dope fiends, buying and using. You hear from the neighborhood kids that there used to be blankets covering the windows and blinds inside, the open spaced living room full of couches, pushed against the walls, bodies splayed out, heads nodding, time passing.

When you move into the house with Larkin and Sandy, the first thing the three of you do is buy plastic lawn chairs, placing them in the center of the porch
against the living room window. The view isn’t much different from the steps you used to sit on next door, but now you are more comfortable, resting your feet on the railing, your view somewhat obstructed by the pillar supporting the porch’s roof. You don’t care. You have claimed a spot where you can be connected to humanity without having to interact with the rest of the world. You can watch the world go by on your terms, safe from the examination of others.

The time spent on your porch is filled with drinking and smoking. Now that you sit on your porch during the day because you don’t have a job, the cholos and cholas walking past ask for cigarettes, if you have any weed, and if you will buy them beer. The more you sit outside, the more you get to know the cholas. Rachel starts to hang out on your porch even if there isn’t any weed, beer, or cigarettes. She’s sixteen, but she’s been through more shit than you ever will. She comes from a family of dope fiends. It’s drama all the time, Rachel says.

Rachel introduces you to the other girls. You learn that Rachel and Angel are cousins and Angel lives with Rachel’s family because Angel’s mom is in jail, Christina cheated with Giggle’s boyfriend, which is why Christina has a black eye, and Osa doesn’t like Rachel because Rachel used to date Osa’s boyfriend, Benigno. Rachel says there’s drama everywhere she turns. You don’t ask Rachel if she sells drugs because you’ve seen her standing on the corner waiting to walk towards the next car that stops in front of the curb. You wonder if she gets high off her own supply.

Your friend Jenny comes over to smoke a joint. She used to run the same streets when Rachel was a little kid. Jenny changed her ways when she got married at eighteen to her prison boyfriend. Now she is twenty-three and still married to Miguel, who is in prison. You and Jenny sit on the porch when you see Rachel make a deal. You ask Jenny what Rachel sells. Jenny says it could be
anything from coke, tweek, or chiva. She asks if you have ever done any of that shit. You say you’ve only taken pills, smoked some weed, and eaten some shrooms, but that’s it, you say, taking a sip from your brown bottle. Jenny says chiva is the one thing she hasn’t done. She’s been told the rush from shooting up is orgasmic, the best feeling you’ve ever felt in your life times ten, suspended in time and space, where nothing matters.

You think of the time you hurt your back and they gave you a shot of morphine for the pain. You remember lying on the gurney, fluorescent lights shining down, a blast of warmth spreading throughout your body, from your head to your toes, an overflowing exhilaration flooding your lungs, chest, heart. No pain, every muscle loose and relaxed, your body floating above the gurney, arms reaching out to touch the lights, weightless. You, loving everything: past, present, and future. Yeah, you sigh, lungs deflating, you like that.

You and Jenny look at each other, devious smiles on your faces. She says she will do it if you do. You look at Jenny, not sure if she is serious, but excited at the possibility of feeling that weightlessness again, of being lifted out of your pointless life of sitting and smoking, sitting and drinking, sitting and wanting to be anywhere but in your body. You both giggle like you’re talking about a new crush, a new adventure where you don’t know where you’ll end up, curious about the unknown. You both decide to wait for another time when you aren’t thinking about it, an organic moment when the universe decides you’re both ready.

One night you stumble home from a drinking binge at Tampico’s, your favorite bar. Your roommates are out of town so Rachel and some of the girls are sitting on your porch smoking cigarettes, protecting it, making sure the dope fiend zombies who walk around the neighborhood don’t use your darkened porch to get high. A few of the cholos you’ve seen hanging around the streets are on your
porch too. You think about telling them to leave, but you’re feeling friendly tonight, somebody might have weed or more beer, and you’d be alone otherwise. Rachel makes one of the girls move so you can sit in one of your chairs. There are eight of you on the porch, sitting in the plastic chairs, leaning against the railing, crouching on the brick stairs. The porch light is off. The streetlight throws shadows around your house. The eight of you whisper so you don’t wake the neighbors.

You sit in the corner of the porch, your back to the steps of your old house, the steps you used to sit on, hoping one day to sit in this exact place. One of your new friends, they call him Chato, asks you if you smoke chiva. You say you’ve never tried it, but you and a friend were talking about doing it the other day. He asks if you want some.

You think: What if you like it too much? Are you going to want it all the time? You know you’re going to like it too much. What if you get hooked? What if you were a dope fiend?

If you were a dope fiend you might end up like those girls you see walking up and down the street hanging onto the cholos who have the dope. You might be like that one chick who is always down here with a different guy, wearing the clothes she wore the day before. She asked you for a cigarette one time when you were sitting on your porch. She had scabs all over her face that she tried to cover up with a thick layer of foundation, but she kept picking at them and they started to bleed. The whole time you were talking to her she was itching and moving and looking around, waiting for someone to come around the corner with her shit.

You wouldn’t be able to control yourself if it felt anything like the morphine shot. You would want it all the time, which would mean you would need more money than you have. You know you would do whatever it took to get
chiva, just to get a couple bucks to keep yourself loaded all day. You would beg
and borrow at first, asking friends and family for five bucks here, a ten spot over
here, just until you get paid. Since you’re already a drunk, you’re pretty good at
convincing people to give you money. Your family and friends will be okay with
it at first because they won’t know that you’re using dope and they’re used to
giving you money anyway. They will think this is a temporary setback because
you lost hours at work, and the economy is bad. Your friends and family will trust
you when you say you can pay them back. They will have no idea that you will
keep begging for money until they ask you to stop calling and coming over.

Eventually, you might even steal from your friends or family, whatever you
can get your hands on to sell or trade for a hit, just one little hit. You might even
steal from you neighbors. All the houses are easy to break into around here. They
have the same warped wood framed house as yours. If you can break into your
own house, you can break into the little studio behind your old house with a knife.
You could break into the tourist cars when they park on your street, when they
aren’t supposed to without a permit. Serves them right, there’s whole parking lots
set aside for them so they don’t have to bother the Beach Flat residents. You
could grab the ladies’ purses when they walk around lost and confused, trying to
keep their kids on the sidewalk, trying to find the way back to the huge parking lot
and out of the scary neighborhood with all the addicts and dealers.

Or maybe you will get busted a couple of times for breaking and entering,
you might change tactics because if you go to prison who is going to take care of
your four kids that you will have with three different men? You will probably turn
to tricking because that’s safer. You will only hook up with guys you know, or
someone your dope friends know, or guys you know who have dope so it’s like a
fair trade. You can get high and not worry about getting busted. You and your
kids will live in the low-income housing and you will still get food stamps and welfare because you don’t pay taxes on each trick turned. You will be on welfare because your kids’ dads’ won’t be able to take care of them because they will either be in prison or he might be a trick who knocked you up when you were working Barson Avenue, who already has a family. If you get busted for prostitution your kids will have to go into foster care again, after you just got them back. But, you got to do what you got to do. They don’t call you a fiend for nothing. When you go to prison, you will hope they get adopted out because you will never be a good mother for those innocent children who never asked for a dope fiend mama.

But before you get pregnant four times, you will be admitted to and released from hospitals and institutions. You will only stay long enough to satisfy some court ordered drug program, having no intention of staying clean. Or, you will be held for the seventy-two hour mandatory hold on a 5150 in the psych unit because your boyfriend called the cops when you held the knife to your wrists threatening to kill yourself if he left you. Inside these places you will make friends with other dope friends. You will be able to identify each other by pocked marked faces, dirty hair, shaking hands, the blanket we keep wrapping ourselves in when we start shivering and then throwing it off moments later when the hot flash comes, bathing us in sweat, nausea making us bow our heads in pain. You will make plans to meet up with these other dope fiends when you get out.

Eventually, smoking chiva won’t be enough. You will search for other ways to reach that first high and you will find that, and more, when you slam a needle full of dope into your veins, feeling for one moment that exquisite rush of unadulterated serenity that you need to be engulfed in forever. You will forget about smoking chiva and will focus all your energy on shooting up, attempting
over and over and over again to reach that untainted moment of bliss. And when the veins in your arms collapse, you will shoot the dope between your fingers, toes, hands, stomach, thigh, neck, anywhere, as long as you feel something other than dope sick. You will forsake *everything* for chiva. You will shoot up to live and you will live to shoot up. That’s when life will get bad.

Chato asks you again if you want some chiva. You’re brought back to your darkened porch in the Flats, no arrest records, no kids, no needle marks. You tell him you have a pact with Jenny to try it together. You thank him and say maybe next time.
BLEEDING BLUE

I love baseball. I love the strategy and analysis that occurs in the seconds before and after the ball is pitched. Depending on how many runners are on base, or how many outs the other team has, or any other number of variables, determines where the ball will be thrown once it comes into play. It may seem like baseball players stand around and wait, and wait, and wait for something to happen. (If you’ve ever played right field, this is exactly what happens. The majority of batters, righties, tend to hit to left field.) But, it’s the split second from when the ball leaves the pitcher’s hand till it passes over the plate that is worth the wait. In an instant the ball will either enter the catcher’s mitt, or be let loose in the infield, picked up by the shortstop and thrown to first base for the out. Or pass the infield all together and become a base hit, the outfielder running up to the ball, a slight bend in the knees as they scoop it into their glove, taking a running step while throwing the ball, hopefully stopping a runner on second or third base for an out. Or the ball could be a pop fly, which is harder to catch than it looks, as the player tries to get under it, a solitary, rhythmic dance, small steps back and forth, left and right, anticipating the drag and spin of the ball as it descends through tiny vortexes of air swirling around the balls surface.

This is why I love baseball: the anticipation of a pitch, the exhilaration of a ball in play, the electricity that runs through my body as my team’s winning run crosses home plate seconds before the ball is thrown to the catcher from the outfield, ending the game, a victory earned, another game in the bag, high-fives all around, satisfaction. It’s the multiple moments of eagerly awaiting the ball to come my way, knees bent, the palm of my glove in front of my body, ready for a ground ball, ready for a pop-up, ready to play. That, and I love a man in uniform.
Any uniform, really. Police, UPS/Fed Ex drivers, military (I am partial to Marines), any athletic sports figure (I am partial to baseball players, but if some guy on a basketball team wants to date me, who am I to say no?), firefighters (except for my sister’s boyfriend), mechanics, a fast food uniform (only if he’s a Crew Manger), PG&E workers, even the cable guy. After years of questioning this fetish, of sorts, I have come to the realization that the uniform represents confidence and responsibility. In the case of the blue collar worker, it's the idea that he has a job that requires him to suit-up and show-up, denoting responsibility and an inclination for following rules, characteristics that will, more than likely, cross over into his personal relationships. As for the service officers, it has to do with the courage, honor, and integrity that the uniform represents, again likely to be transferred to a relationship. As for the athletes, specifically baseball players, well, all of the above, plus the fitting of their uniforms, which allows for the visual appreciation of every muscle used in throwing a ball, as well as the notion that they are part of a team that requires a constant sense of camaraderie, thus designating an ability to work well with others to achieve a desired goal. All the things I look for in a man.

I played on a softball team in third and fourth grade in the mid 1980s for a city league. The first year I was afraid of the ball and would rarely, if ever, swing. My hands would sweat as I gripped the bat, heart pounding, I would stand as far away from the plate as I could without stepping out of the batters box. I closed my eyes as the ball came towards me, always swinging a second too late. I don't even remember what position I played the first year. The only reminder is a close-up picture of me in my yellow uniform. My tan and freckled face, round glasses, gapped teeth still hang in a frame on my grandma’s living room wall.
In my second year, my grandfather, my mom’s father, became more involved in my practicing and encouraged me to pitch. He had a love affair with baseball, too. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, my grandfather worked as the general manager for the Fresno Giants, the farm team for the San Francisco Giants. As a child in the 1980s and far into adulthood, I knew my grandfather to sit outside on the back porch, watching the sun fade on any summer night in Fresno, listening to the Giants announcers call the ball game on his transistor radio, summer insects buzzing back and forth, in tune with the crackle of radio static and cheering fans coming from the speaker. That second year, my grandfather bought me a wooden yellow bat with green grip tape, Oakland A’s colors. I overlooked this fact because the bat was a gift from my grandfather. The A’s were in the American League and never played my National League team in the regular season. Therefore, not a direct threat to my team loyalty, at least not until the 1988 World Series, but I will have abandoned the bat by then. I imagined myself as the cartoon character She-Ra, the most powerful woman in the universe, wielding my Sword of Protection.

As I began my second season, fear of the ball disappeared and I stepped up to the plate with courage from day one. I pitched and played outfield. I excelled. I could smack the shit out of a softball. When I swung I felt a rush of energy leave through my arms. I could hear the whistle of the bat as it sliced through the air. I could hear the crack of the ball as it made contact with the bat, soaring over the pitcher’s head, too high for third base and too shallow for left field. If I hit a line drive between center and right field, the ball would roll for days once it hit the ground. There was no outfield fence, so the girls did more running than playing. And I could pitch strikes. Dead-center-over-the-plate-swing-and-a-miss-stuuuhRIKE.
I looked forward to the third season because we would learn sliding and fast pitch. My mom decided that she didn’t want to drive me to practice anymore. She didn’t work so there was no conflict with time or scheduling, she “just didn’t want to anymore.” My grandfather worked construction and had an inconsistent schedule, no guarantee I would get to practice or games on time. My career ended there. The yellow and green bat found a permanent spot in a corner of the garage. Technically, that is the last time I would play softball for a team. I played softball in P.E. classes in junior high and high school, but nobody was serious about playing, so I don’t count that. I tried out once in high school, but I didn’t make the team. I never learned how to hit fast pitch softball. My courage waned. But my fascination with baseball never has.

I am a die-hard fan of the Los Angeles Dodgers. The word fanatic, from which fan is derived, was coined in England in the 16th century, defined as a “crazed person” in the secular sense. Within a religious context, fanatic is more specifically defined as ‘possessed with divine fury’. In terms of sports, a fanatic is described as having high levels of intensity surrounding sporting events. This is either done based on the belief that extreme fanaticism can alter games for one's favorite team or because the person uses sports activities as a masculine "proving ground" for violence.

My fanaticism is informed by my family’s economic and cultural past. The story goes that my father’s mother’s family migrated from El Paso, Texas to Los Angeles, stopping in the Mexican American community of Chavez Ravine, six miles from Downtown LA, in the early 1940s. Chavez Ravine would become the new home of the Dodgers after their move from Brooklyn in 1958. The City of Los Angeles kicked out Mexican American property owners to build housing
projects in wake of population growth. Capitalist politicians believed housing projects to be a symbol of socialism and nixed the project. The land stood empty, slotted only for public purpose, which is defined as benefiting the populace as a whole. Unable to find suitable land to build a ballpark in New York, the Brooklyn Dodgers moved to Los Angeles in 1958 and purchased Chavez Ravine from the City of Los Angeles. Dodger Stadium opened in 1962. Win-win for everyone but the Mexican American property owners.

My grandmother and her family stayed there briefly before they continued north to Fresno. Despite the controversy over Chavez Ravine and the Mexican American communities’ dispossession of land, my family maintained the memory of their time spent in Chavez Ravine and looked to the Dodgers as a beacon of remembrance. A trail marker on their quest for a better life. The story is that my grandmother’s father robbed a bank with Pancho Villa during the Mexican Revolution and fled El Paso in the middle of the night with his wife and nine children, headed towards California where he heard land was abundant. A simple Google search tells me that Pancho Villa died in 1923 after the end of the Mexican Revolution, therefore making it slightly plausible that this rumor could be true. But, that would mean it took his family approximately twenty years to arrive in Los Angeles, also a plausible scenario being that they were migrant farm workers. I see this as searching for a better life beyond the region of revolutionary turmoil on the Texas border. Regardless, by the 1960s my father’s family identified as die-hard Dodger fans. I have never objected over my family’s loyalty to the Dodgers. I merely embrace it. I bleed Dodger blue.

Since I love the Los Angeles Dodgers, by default I hate the San Francisco Giants. That’s the way it is. If you are a Dodger fan, then you hate the Giants.
And vice versa. Period. Punto final. End of story. It doesn’t matter if the Dodgers aren’t in first place, or they lost two games out of three in a weekend series, or if they are in second, third, or fourth place, as long as the Giants rank lower in the daily standings, then it’s a good day, win or lose, for the Dodgers and their fans. Every now and then, there are days when the Giants come out on top, maybe jumping a half game over the Dodgers, or every once in a while when the Giants sit in first or second place. On those days my heart begins to race, a brief flush of anger floods my body, teeth grinding, and fists clenched, I seethe with anger. And then it passes. Tomorrow is a new game, a new team to play, and a new day to beat the Giants, any way possible.

If you are a true fan like me, you must attend a Dodgers-Giants/Giants-Dodgers game in the opponent’s stadium, proudly wearing your Dodger blue, clapping and cheering as loud as you can, “Let’s Go Dod-gers!” ignoring the taunts and jeers from Giants fans. You must be a true and dedicated fan. You must walk out of the stadium, win or lose, head up, shoulders back, grateful to share nine innings of strategic baseball analysis with your Los Angeles Dodgers.

It doesn’t matter if the Giants aren’t playing the Dodgers, you must always root for the opposing team. During the 2010 World Series, when the Giants, who hadn’t won a championship since 1954 (as the New York Giants), faced the Texas Rangers, I rooted for the Rangers. Somebody asked me why I wasn’t rooting for the Giants, “being that the Giants were a California team and this being such a monumental event for the Giants, wouldn’t it make more sense to root for them instead of the Rangers?” Nope. Negative. Never. Nel. I could care less about the Rangers during the regular season, but I watched and prayed, hoping Texas would end the post season by upsetting the San Francisco Giants. My heart bled Dodger blue when Texas lost four games to one.
You must talk shit about the Giants whenever and wherever you can. However, if you are going to talk shit, you must be somewhat humble in your arrogance. You must remember that the Dodgers and Giants are equally matched with both teams tied for the number of National League pennants (21) and World Series wins (6) in their West Coast franchise history. As of the end of the 2011 season, the Giants have won sixteen more head to head games with the Dodgers since their first meeting in 1890. This year I bought tickets for the second game of the season, which is the second of a three game series with the Giants. I will be wearing my Dodgers tank top covered by a Dodgers sweatshirt because it is a night game. My seat is in the Infield Loge Section 140, Row F, Seat 8.

I am the only Dodger fan on my mother’s side of the family. My grandfather, my mother, my brother, both my uncles, their wives, my cousins, and my two sisters, who are more like cheerleaders than fans, love the Giants. There is no particular story that I have heard regarding my mom’s family’s connection to the Giants. My grandfather hitchhiked from Illinois to California ending up in Fresno where he met my grandmother, but no mention of a stopover in San Francisco. I presume working for the Giants franchise is enough to make you a fan? I can’t fault him for that. He didn’t know any better.

My best friend’s entire family is composed of Giants fans. My dad’s best friends, who I consider family and have known for my entire life, are Giants fans. An online relationship ended before it even started because of this Dodger-Giant rivalry. Though I don’t know why or how these fans came to support the Giants, I believe it’s safe to assume that it doesn’t matter. I know these people to be baseball lovers, like myself, and can respect their commitment to any team. It’s just too bad it’s the Giants.
I have learned to take their shit talking with a grain of salt. I know if the Dodgers are down in the standings, they will come back next week and I will be the one talking shit. I also know that this too shall pass. The shit talking goes back and forth all season, which demonstrates a certain balance between the two teams, an equal command of the game that continues to fuel the longest and strongest rivalry in baseball history, which began over one hundred years ago in New York.

Like most rivalries, geographic location plays a significant role in the formation of this tension. However, the Dodgers-Giants rivalry is also inspired by class distinctions. The Dodgers originated in Brooklyn, which had a large working class, and newly arrived immigrant population. This contrasted with the elite, upper class Giants fans in Manhattan. When both teams moved to California in 1958, this rivalry mirrored the class distinctions that made it contentious in New York. During this time, Los Angeles and San Francisco were seen as competitors in terms of economic, social, and cultural positions within California. Both were large cities in California with two strong baseball teams. This adds to the intensity of the rivalry because the teams went from cross-city to cross-state competitors, thus enlarging their fan base. In the early 1900s, the rivalry was heightened by a long-standing personal feud (originally a business difference) between Charles Ebbets, owner of the Dodgers, and John McGraw, manager of the Giants. The two used their teams as fighting surrogates, which caused incidents between players both on and off the field, and inflamed local fans' passions, sometimes to deadly levels:

In 1940, umpire George Magenkurth was brutally beaten during a game by an angered Dodger fan, supposedly for making a pro-Giants call.
Most notoriously, in 1965, Giants player, Juan Marichal, claimed that Dodgers catcher, Johnny Roseboro, was returning Dodgers Sandy Koufax's pitches dangerously close to Marichal's head and had clipped his ear with one particular throw. As Marichal and Roseboro began to argue, Marichal hit the Dodgers catcher on the head with his bat. A bench-clearing brawl ensued.

On September 19, 2003, Giants fan Marc Antenorcruz was shot and killed by Dodgers fan Pete Marron in the parking lot of the stadium, following a late-season Dodgers-Giants game. Marron is serving 50 years to life in prison.

In 2009, Arthur Alvarez stabbed his friend in the stadium parking lot after opening day, in which the Dodgers beat the Giants 11–1. Alvarez was arrested and charged with assault with a deadly weapon. He claimed self-defense and was acquitted.

Most recently, on March 31, 2011 Giants fan Bryan Stow was severely beaten and kicked in the head by two Dodger fans, Louie Sanchez and Marvin Norwood, in the parking lot after another home opener. Stow’s family reports he sustained massive traumatic brain injury that has left him severely and permanently disabled. Stow is suing the Los Angeles Dodgers owners for $50 million. Sanchez and Norwood have been charged with felony mayhem and assault and will stand trial in a Los Angeles courtroom for their behavior.

I have spent my life loving the Dodgers and the art of baseball, but I hadn’t attempted to play on a team, even if just for fun, since trying out for my high school team in the tenth grade. I have been offered chances to play for a city league on adult co-ed teams, but I never felt confident in my skills. I researched private coaches, but could never justify spending thirty dollars an hour to learn techniques I should have learned as a child. I spent years resentful towards my
mother for a multitude of reasons that went beyond not being able to play softball, but I have always wondered how my softball career would have played out if my mother hadn’t been so lazy. Would I have made the high school team? I only tried out because one of the coaches was my typing teacher, and the other coach went to my church. Not only could I not hit a fast pitch, but I couldn’t run bases either. My typing teacher, Mr. Salazar, suggested I join a city league team. I told him to tell that to my mom.

Would my participation on a team sport have given me the courage, determination, and analytical skills to excel in school and life? But, you can only blame your mother for so long. There comes a point when you have to take responsibility for the failings of your childhood. The resentment will kill you, or make you gain weight.

As woman in my thirties, I try to stay somewhat active. My twenties were spent degrading my body, exercise being the least of my priorities. A couple of years ago I took swimming lessons so I could swim laps as a form of exercise. I lost seventy pounds by riding a stationary bike, lifting some weights, walking the indoor track, eating fruits and vegetables, and drinking massive amounts of water, daily. That was a couple of years ago. I have managed to keep most of the weight off, fluctuating in and out of a ten-pound range, but this year I noticed some of those pounds trying to make a home base around my middle. As I perused the physical activity classes at my university, I came across a class for beginning softball. I immediately registered.

When the spring semester began I decided to drop the class. I didn’t think I could manage my class schedule, work, and a personal life, which mainly consisted of studying in the library, and be successful. But, by the second class I
decided that if I wanted to get into a better shape I had to get active. What I didn’t consider was that most of the students in the class were guys. The class had a 2:1 male to female ratio. I’m not complaining. Even though the guys don’t wear uniforms, the illusion is there. Being a member of a team, positioned on the field, is a reasonable substitute for an actual uniform and most of the girls had played competitively, which left me and one other girl, who could barely hit the ball, as rookies.

I discovered that playing softball is like riding a bike. No matter how long it’s been since you’ve balanced on two wheels, once you start pedaling everything comes together and you are limitless in the places you can travel. Stepping up to the plate seemed like second nature. Making contact with the ball felt invigorating. Watching it soar over third base and land in shallow left field looked normal. However, running bases proved to be like those first awkward moments when you learn to ride a bike and you have to keep turning the handlebars to the left and right until you gain a sense of balance.

On the second day of class we played kickball until everyone could get their equipment, like cleats and gloves. That day I made it to second base. On my way to third, I began to lose my footing on the hardpan, dirt infield and started to feel myself falling forward. Unable to stop myself, I “slid” into third base. As I lay in shame in front of my teammates and a good two feet from the base, I heard yells of, “GET UP!” and “C’MON, YOU CAN DO IT!” I sprang up from my sprawled position and made it safely to third base and heard shouts of, “GOOD HUSTLE,” and, “ARE YOU OKAY?” My bleeding elbow and dusty clothes were a rite of passage.

As the semester progressed and we began playing tournaments, I found myself self-exiled to right field. Nothing happens out there. I do more cheering
for my teammates than anything else. Every once and a while a batter will hit the ball my way, usually a grounder or a shallow pop fly that I will never catch no matter how fast I run, but nothing extreme. Albeit, my batting prowess is still intact, my pitching skills have succumbed to time, and I have acquired a slight fear of the ball. Even though I enjoy playing with the more experienced players, they throw hard. Eventually, I hope to become more comfortable with a speeding ball coming towards me. I hope to try another position that requires I strategically analyze the anticipatory play, a position that requires I hold my breath for the split second the ball leaves the pitchers hand till it passes over the plate. Until then, I stand in right field, waiting for the ball to come my way, knees bent, the palm of my glove in front of my body, ready for a ground ball, ready for a pop-up, ready to play.
“Super-star Selena [Quintanilla-Perez], who took Tejano music from backyard weddings to 60,000 seat stadium concerts, was shot to death Friday [March 31, 1995], allegedly by a disgruntled ex-employee…The 23-year-old singer was shot in the back before noon at the Days Inn Hotel, 901 Navigation Blvd. She was taken to Memorial Medical Center, where she was pronounced dead at 1:05 pm. Nueces County Medical Examiner Dr. Lloyd White said Selena died of severe blood loss after a bullet struck the back of her right shoulder and hit an artery. ‘She was virtually dead on arrival at the hospital.’”

– Corpus Christi Caller-Times, April 1, 1995

I don’t remember if I heard Selena’s music before or after her death. I would like to say that I had been part of the musical revolution she inspired, part of her historical presence on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border. I would like to say that I had danced to her Tejano sound, a mixture of traditional Mexican music and German polka, before her death, which unified millions of fans all over the world, thus making her an instant icon nearing sainthood. I would like to say that I was a Selena fanatic, an admirer from the beginning of her band, Selena y Los Dinos, and the recording of their first album in 1985, but I wasn’t. Selena came into my life through a closeted gay boy in college. He brought a cassette tape of Selena and a bottle of liquor to my apartment. It was February of 1995, the year she was killed, I was twenty-years-old.

What I do remember is eventually learning of her death through the boy, mourning the loss of a woman so many admired, and seeing her face on the cover of People Magazine, the first Latina to acquire such a position, thus prompting People Magazine to target the Latina/o demographic by creating People En Español, which eventually led to the economic “Latin Boom” in the United States.
I remember her voice, raspy and guttural, drifting through a portable radio stationed in the corner of the apartment near the open window, a mixture of cumbia, mariachi, and pop music, confessing love and loss, falling on the sidewalk below.

Selena Quintanilla was born April 16, 1971 to Abraham, Jr. and Marcella Quintanilla at Freeport Community Hospital in Lake Jackson, TX, approximately seventy-five miles from Houston. Her family eventually moved to Corpus Christi, a small oil, agriculture, and port city in South Texas, and settled in the working class neighborhood of Molina, composed mainly of Tejana/os, persons of Mexican descent living in Texas [Tejano/Chicano identifies someone of Mexican descent living within the U.S. borders, with respect to Texas (Tejana/o) and California (Chicana/o)]. The 2000 census for Corpus Christi estimates that the percentage of persons identifying as White is 71.6%, with 54.3% also identifying as Spanish/Hispanic/Latino. As Latina/os, we have been conditioned to consider ourselves only as White, unable and at times afraid, to acknowledge the traditions and customs that make our uniqueness valid, née governmental standards. Our existence is condensed into a separate box asking us to identify as Spanish/Hispanic/Latino because we are not of one of the three inclusive races.

I believe Latina/os are of all races. My knowledge of our history states that we are mestizo, a mixture of Indian and Spanish blood. I do not profess to be an expert on theories of human migration, but if my knowledge is correct, and I paid attention to all the Chicano history classes I took as a testament to my subsistence within my ethnic community, then it is my understanding that as Indians we descend from Asians who crossed the Bering Land Bridge, found entrance into North America, and populated North and Central America. It is also my
understanding that the Spanish explorers (who had begun to colonize and intermarry with Indians, which became the starting point for the evolution of the Mexican) brought slaves from Africa who then also married Indians, thus creating an individual with African and Indian (Asian) blood. The Spanish integration into the African and Indian blood would come in the form of rape, cultural, and religious subjugation. Thus, the theoretical incorporation of each race into the phenotypic make-up of the Mexican. Tah dah.

By identifying as Tejana and Chicana, Selena and I have acknowledged that we are a product of ethnic duality, a blending of Mexican and American culture, customs, and traditions. In the U.S. we are forced to choose between race and ethnicity. We cannot simply be Mexican or Chicana or Tejana. This duality creates a splinter effect suggesting that we must either confirm or deny our race as Anglo. Those of us who biologically and geographically identify with both cultures will never be able to claim membership as Anglo without being scrutinized for the exact amount of Spanish blood that will make us part of the dominant power.

Corpus Christi’s economy is derived from agriculture and oil. Fresno’s population, 32.7% identifying as White non-Hispanic and 50.3% as Latina/o, is supported through agriculture, which provides 8% of the nation’s output. The labor-intensive jobs associated with these industries are filled by Latina/os, documented and undocumented, which in turns creates a new Latina/o American working class. This class, from which Selena drew her fans, identified with her close family ties (Selena and her husband, Chris, lived next door to her parents in the Molina neighborhood where she grew up), working class roots, dark skin that
reminded them it was acceptable to be Mexican in any sense of the word, and yes, the angelic voice that united different parts of the world. Some of the Anglo population of Corpus did not identify as closely to Selena as the Latina/o population. This could be from a linguistic barrier that makes it difficult for some to connect emotionally with her songs which are sung in Spanish, or pure unadulterated racism. I do not say this of all Anglos in Corpus Christi or even the United States, but the response to her death in regards to her memorial is disheartening. As fans prayed and walked, drove and cried past the motel and her home on Bloomington St., leaving balloons, hand written notes, candles and flowers, visibly mourning, expressing their loss, recreating her last performance through these physical acts, grieving for the future of what could have been, certain citizens of Corpus Christi decided that this overindulgent form of grieving was objectionable. The Corpus Christi Caller-Times provided a passive/aggressive way for some Anglo citizens to deliver this form of hate through written word with comments such as, “Our city is named the ‘Body of Christ’ and Jesus Christ is not getting as much recognition as Selena. This is not Selenaville. Back off.” Or in response to the proposed statue commemorating Selena’s life, “I don’t mean to sound heartless, but I just don't think we need to build a bunch of memorials every time someone dies. Who will be the next one they want to honor?”

However, the quintessential moment of unadulterated racism comes from Howard Stern. On his radio show, Stern began by playing one of her songs while interjecting the sound of gunfire. He went on to say: Spanish people have the worst taste in music. They have no depth…Selena? Her music is awful. I don’t know what Mexicans are into. If you’re going to sing about what’s going on in Mexico, what can you
say?...You can’t grow crops, you got a cardboard house, your eleven-year-old daughter is a prostitute…This is music to perform abortions to.

When challenged by two disc jockeys from Houston, Stern is quoted as saying, “If you don’t like it, go back to Mexico.” I would like to tell Howard where to go.

My life will never be as monumental as Selena’s. I will not win audiences worldwide with my singing voice. I will not create a clothing line and open a boutique to display these wares. I will not win over a group of high-profile Mexican journalists, known for being critical of Tejana/Chicana authenticity, by hugging and addressing each one of them in my fractured Spanish. I will not alienate my fans based on ethnicity or linguistic ability. But, there will come a time when I am confronted with racist American ideology.

I am a lovechild born from the sexual liberation that awakened the United States during the 1960s. Fresno Community Hospital welcomed me on Monday November 18, 1974, at 8:11 p.m. My parents, Michael Alan Alvarez and Penelope Jayne Steele, were a mixed ethnic couple allowed to marry in the wake of the 1967 Supreme Court decision deeming interracial marriage legal. Even though my birth certificate states my father’s race as Caucasian, the rest of the world defined him as Mexican, whether or not he was born in the United States. My mother’s race is stated as Caucasian, which is undoubtedly accurate in that her family is Scotch-Irish. My father’s family history indicates they migrated to the United States from Mexico by way of Jimenez, Chihuahua and Purepero, Michoacán on railroads financed by foreign investors and Mexico’s government in order to improve commerce and to strengthen its political and economic power over the large nation, to El Paso, Texas, Huntington Beach, Chavez Ravine, the
current location of Dodger Stadium, and Caruthers, California. My mother’s family legend tells of arriving in the United States by way of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Canada when it was native land, before French colonization, Kentucky, and Lake Forest, Illinois.

Both families settled in Fresno around the 1950s, respectively. My parents met in 1973, month unknown, were married in October of 1974 by a judge, and I was born a month later. I want to believe that my white grandparents were accepting of my Mexican father and that my Mexican grandparents were accepting of my white mother, their untraditional marriage, and their mixed race baby. In reality, at that time it didn’t matter if my Mexican grandparents accepted my mother or not. In 1974, it would have been my mother’s parents who would determine if my father was worthy of entrance into the realm of American culture.

Fast forward to 1978. My parents divorced when I was three or four, neither of them is quite sure. I lived with my mother during the week, and my father on weekends. During this time my mother met my future stepfather, Ronald Edward Stumpf, a second generation Russian-German whose family arrived in Fresno during the early 1900s. His parents were wealthy, having invested in land throughout Fresno, thus providing a privileged lifestyle for their only son. Combine Ron’s upper class, more-than-slightly-right-of-center American conservatism, with my mother’s middle-class, slightly-left-of-center American liberalism, and you have an upper-middle-class, politically tensioned, white American couple living the proverbial dream. Enter me, a reminder of my mother’s previous marriage to a Mexican man and a foreshadowing of the changing color of the American cultural landscape, and there exists a silent undercurrent of mutual confusion. When I reach high school age, having formed a very liberal opinion regarding social injustice, even more so than my democratic
mother, my stepfather will justify his verbal intolerance for people of color as something I “will understand when I get older.” I have yet to understand.

I don’t want to portray Ron as the evil white man “keeping me down.” I realize that he loved me in a stepfatherly kind of way, but I have always felt that he never recognized me as his daughter because of my darker skin and hair. Ironically, my father’s family will judge me in a similar way for being too light skinned, not Mexican enough. Even though I had been part of Ron’s life from four years old, I will always be the odd child out; never comparable to the three other children my mother will bear for him. I will never be white enough. My father’s past will always follow me.

Sixteen years after her death, Selena’s impact on the current generation of Latinas is amazing. As a tutor at Fresno State’s Writing Center, I encounter many young Latinas starting their education. Most are second language learners whose primary language is Spanish. They are intent on bringing their understanding of the written component of English to a competitive level where their skills are on par with what is expected of them in an American university. Most are first time freshman, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, at times unsure of what they want to be when they grow up, but committed to their education. They come to us because they want to better their futures.

Recently, while researching Selena’s life in the library, I entered into a conversation with a young Latina sitting at a nearby table. Being that Selena and Latina identity were foremost on my mind, I asked her if she knew who Selena was. She thought for a moment then said, “Oh yeah, I know who Selena is. She was a singer.” I asked her what her first memories of Selena were and she
informed me she was two-years-old in 1995, thus making her first memory of Selena as the Tejana icon that has always been a part of her life, inherently aware of Selena’s presence. I asked her what she admires most about Selena, what she has learned about herself through Selena’s influence on her community. She responded by reminding me that Selena didn’t grow up speaking Spanish, that Selena learned so she could sing songs in Spanish. The young woman explained that this is what inspires her, that if Selena could learn Spanish then she could improve her English.

I have my own preoccupations with my linguistic ability. I understand Spanish for the most part, I listen for key words, smile, nod and answer with a one word phrase that hides that fact that I do not fully comprehend the question or statement. Sometimes I look like a deer in the proverbial headlights, mouth open, throat muscles contracting, unsure of my next movement. Sometimes my reflex is right and I can clearly understand what is being said and respond with linguistic precision, but there are those moments when the translation and emotion escapes me and I suffer a cultural breakdown. Like the young Latina I spoke with, Selena’s ability to traverse the linguistic and cultural landscape between the U.S. and Mexico borders has empowered me to become the second language learner I was never given the chance to become. This is how Selena continues to change the world.
RESTORE ME TO SANITY

Day 1

Fuck mornings. I don’t want to go to work. I would rather die. I want to be admitted to the psych unit, threehots and a cot and anti-psychotic meds, but Doris, the crisis worker on duty says rehab instead. Warm beer tastes good in the morning.

Day 2

The driveway is lined with trees, an open field with basketball, volleyball, and tennis courts, green grass surrounds the Olympic sized swimming pool sitting in front of towering redwood trees where people stand, sit, smoke cigarettes, laugh, talk, eat.

Cabins blend into trees on the paved path. Men and women are separated.

Counselors smile and ask questions, ask me to pee in a cup, ask which was my drug of choice, ask if I’m ready to make a change, ask for a different life. I only want to sleep.

Day 4

Bombs burst in air, shouts of joy filter through a crack in the window of the detox room where women, young, old, fat, skinny, brown, white, black, are drunk, hung over, tweaking, nodding, moaning, crying, scared, confused, hopeful.

Day 7

It’s my grandma’s birthday, but phone usage is restricted the first week at The Camp. We were both born today. She emerged from the amniotic fluid of
life, screaming as the shock of air invaded her lungs sixty-one years before, and I
surface from the liquid of obsession, writhing in pain on a rubber protected
mattress as the glare of fluorescent light enters my brain and burns my eyes.

Day 8

I can’t sleep anymore. I’m not hungry, but know I need food. The nausea,
piercing pain in temples, back muscles tired of laying, stomach knotted from
anxiety makes it hard to relax, let alone sleep. Standing is hard after five days in
bed, hopped up on Librium, Valium, Benadryl, melatonin, Paxil and Imodium so I
don’t die from alcohol withdrawal and/or shit my pants. Four other women are
sleeping, tossing, turning, talking to themselves when I leave the cocoon of this
room.

I walk down the steps on shaky legs, hand on rail, counting because I am
traumatized from drinking binges and missed steps resulting in sprained ankles.
It’s summertime in the forest, late afternoon coastal fog rolling in across the lawn,
creeping through treetops. Alone in the dining hall I make toast with peanut
butter, while my shaky hands bring the bread to my mouth. I want to vomit. I cry
instead.

Day 11

Sitting in an outdoor amphitheater in the middle of the forest, I’m
surrounded by forty-seven other drunks and dope fiends. I begin to cry because I
don’t understand why I am here. An arm wraps around my shoulder and I am
pulled into a hug by a man twice my size. He whispers in my ear that everything
is going to be okay, I am safe now, I did the right thing. I look up to see if he is
real. He looks at me and smiles. I swear there is a halo above his head. The tears
in my eyes and the rays of sunlight cutting through the ancient trees make him look like an angel, but angels aren’t named Fred.

Day 14

I walk away from the incessant babbling of the meth chick. She says she’s not addicted, says she doesn’t smoke but asked for three cigarettes within five minutes of each request. I am trying to rest in the furthest corner of the group meeting area, close my eyes, silence the torture of withdrawal, depression, self-hate, doubt, clouded memories advising me that a drink will make everything better. I leave my corner to find peace and quiet, to distance myself from her insane mumbo jumbo. Each step I take away from her the louder her nonsense becomes. But is it really nonsense, the verbal confession of her distorted reality, or the pitiful denial of my own twisted addiction? I tell the nearest counselor I think she’s in the wrong facility, that I gave up my bed in the psych unit for her.

Day 18

My counselor wants me to make a list of why I drink. I say that’s easy: fear, fear of being alone, fear of being loved, fear of the voices that tell me I am fat, ugly, lazy, stupid, a whore.

I sleep with men who are engaged, sometimes married, men I meet at bars, parties, street corners, work. I keep drinking after they leave, preferring to drink alone. I steal money from work for beer, swearing I will replace it when I get paid, but never quite able to part with what I owe. I ditch a friend on a street corner at two o’clock in the morning so I can drink on a cliff above an ocean with people who have better drugs. I don’t know how she gets home. We never speak after that.
My counselor says I have to walk through it to get to the other side. I wonder if I can blame my fragile state of mind when I punch her in the throat.

I make a list of all the people I have hurt physically, emotionally, spiritually, and mentally. It’s a long list. I write on notebook paper the horrible things I have done to people who love and trust me. All the negative thoughts I can never quiet down with alcohol, all the guilt I can’t purge from my mind, screams at me from the lined paper, parasites feeding off my soul. I cry out of relief. The past can’t hurt me anymore. I am free from myself.

Day 22

The guy that runs the sober living house comes to talk to our group. I never considered moving out of my rented room, never considered that I might be tempted to drink when I go home. The more I think about who I was, who I had been, and what I was capable of doing by only being accountable to myself, I admit that I can’t do it alone.

Day 30

My new roommate, an ex-Camper, picks me up on Thursday afternoon after an alumni meeting, an aftercare meeting for those who have left the Camp, a reminder of where they never want to be again. I don’t ever want to return. I put my bags in to my new roommate’s car. I turn to the redwoods and say goodbye. I turn to the campers and say goodbye. I look up at the sky and wonder when it got so blue.
I have learned never to read the comments section of an online article about a controversial issue during election time, or any time for that matter. I have learned the hard way that the words people write are sometimes more harmful than when they’re spoken. In writing, words are forever, printed, indelible, emblazoned on our memory as a permanent reminder of the hatred we have for each other when ethics and morals collide. Still, even though I know better, I find myself scrolling down to the comments section at the end of an article, hoping that an intelligent and productive debate about said issue will enlighten me to differing viewpoints, so that I may form or solidify my own opinion. This is hardly ever the case.

I doesn’t matter what the issue is, abortion, immigration, education, there will always be naysayers on both sides, those unwilling to see compromise, those intent on being part of the problem, who clog up cyber waves with alienating rhetoric only meant to infuriate, rather than articulate a solution.

Being that this is a presidential election year and controversial issues abound on social media sites, I find myself drawn to the immigration debate. This isn’t a new debate, but it is one that I feel close to. Don’t get me wrong, I feel strongly about the rights of many oppressed groups, several of which I belong to, but with immigration, I can’t help but feel dirtied by the mud being thrown at faces and names like mine, even in all my U.S. citizenry.

For example, I read an article on the use of the term “illegal alien,” by Charles Garcia on CNN.com. The author points out that the term was first used in 1939 as a slur by the British toward Jews who were fleeing the Nazis and entering Palestine without authorization. In the United States, especially in the Southwest,
this term is almost exclusive to Mexicans, most of whom are hard working individuals trying to escape poverty, trying to build a better life. Garcia argues that the term creates divisiveness and dehumanizes the individual who has committed an illegal act wherein, “you are effectively saying the individual, as opposed to the actions the person has taken, is unlawful. The terms imply the very existence of an unauthorized migrant in America is criminal.” Currently, the term preferred among immigrant groups is “undocumented,” sometimes in conjunction with “and unafraid.”

I come to the end of the article and scroll down, hoping and praying that an intelligent debate will ensue. I am hesitant, scrolling a millimeter at a time, debating within myself whether I am ready to confront the hate and intolerance I know is coming. But, I go for it, rationalizing my curiosity with the old adage, “Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.” (I also use this rationalization when flipping through news channels and deliberately stopping on Fox News, just for a moment, just long enough to be reminded that people hate what I represent.) My heart begins to race as my cursor hovers shakily over the down-page arrow. I hold my breath as I read the first of one-too-many comments:

“You call low IQ, corrupt, criminal, non-English speaking Mexicans ‘useful’?” writes Lucas Evans.

“Then they should go back home where they are so proud to come from, if it sucks so bad here!!!!!” writes south4evr.

“WAKE UP AND DO IT FAST. MEXICANS WILL TAKE OVER OUR COUNTRY WITH HELP FROM OTHER ILLEGALS FROM SOUTH AMERICA…” writes Jose.

With each comment, I gasp. With each gasp, I lose oxygen to my brain. With continued loss of oxygen, my chest tightens; sharp shooting pain pulses
down my arms and up my back. It feels as if a rope is tightening around my neck. I can feel the blood boiling in my brain, shut off from the rest of my body. I want to scream, but this noose of disbelief strangles the life out of me.

I catch my breath when I read comments that challenge these marginalizing and hateful words, but they are few and far between. I read a few more comments, but the gasping returns. My hands tremble, making it impossible to compose a reply. I close the window to the article, trying to erase the words from my mind. I close my eyes and see the words etched in white against the blackness of my lids.
I’m driving Diane’s Ford Expedition in stop-and-go traffic. My foot hovers over the brake, applying pressure every few seconds so as not to bump the car in front of me. I rest my left arm on the car windowsill, lean my head out, look up into a cloudless sky, and feel the summer sun heat my face, freckles forming instantly. The fingertips of my right hand rest on top of the steering wheel, gently guiding the car through Sunday evening holiday traffic. I bring my head back into the car and look over at Diane in the passenger seat. She’s fanning herself with a piece of paper.

“It’s fucking hot, goddammit! Can we turn the air on?”

“If you want your car to overheat, then go ahead.”

Diane rolls her eyes at me and goes back to fanning herself. I turn up the music to drown out her eye rolling. I glance in the rearview mirror and see her ex-husband, Jack, in the back seat looking behind us at the sea of cars that ebb and flow across row after row of white painted lines.

»«

In 1848, at the end of the Mexican-American War, the United States gained control of Northern Mexico in the name of Manifest Destiny, the semi-religious belief that the United States was destined to expand across the continent. The end of the war resulted in the signing of The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which stipulated the cessation of California, Nevada, Utah, and parts of Arizona, New Mexico, Wyoming and Colorado to the U.S. in exchange for fifteen million dollars and forgiveness of approximately three million dollars in previous debt.

Mexicans and Native Americans living on this land were given guarantees that they would keep their rights, properties, and possessions, and could become
U.S. citizens after one year if they desired. However, the articles of the treaty, which guaranteed the rights of the nearly three hundred thousand Mexicans living in the ceded lands, were often ignored by Americans moving west. Many Mexicans who lived in these areas lost their lands and rights, and some weren't officially given citizenship until decades later. The Treaty of Guadalupe also established a border between Mexico and the U.S.

»«

“How much?” Diane yells from the car window. A man holding blankets over each arm looks in Diane’s direction.

“Twenty,” he yells back.

“How about two for twenty?” she yells back, bartering.

“How about two for forty?” He laughs at her offer.

They meet in the middle with thirty. Diane pulls two plush blankets, one with Barbie, the other with a tiger’s face, through her window and hurls them at Jack in the back seat.

“Fuckin Diane, always buying shit you don’t need,” Jack teases.

“That shit is going to keep you warm at night,” Diane chastises.

This time I roll my eyes at their bickering. My leg starts to quiver from holding it above the pedal, waiting for the lights in front of me to blink red.

»«

Up until the early twentieth century, migration was not restricted for Mexicans. Due largely to the need for agricultural and railway workers, Mexican laborers were seen as a commodity, and with the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, the worldwide economic shutdown and the scarcity of American jobs led to the repatriation of four hundred thousand Mexican nationals and U.S. citizens of Mexican descent.
In 1942 the need for labor during WWII prompted the government to implement the Bracero Program, Spanish for “strong-arm,” a contractual agreement with Mexico and the U.S., which would give over four million Mexican men temporary entry into the U.S. as agricultural workers. These men were not allowed to bring their families and were required to return to Mexico at the end of harvesting season. Workers also had ten percent of their wages withheld until the end of the season, only to be refunded upon their return to Mexico. In addition, the Mexican government’s poor oversight of the treatment of their workers allowed agricultural employers to provide substandard housing, insufficient wages, and discrimination, despite contracts negotiated between the U.S. and Mexico.

Even though the Bracero Program was a temporary solution to labor shortage, when U.S. servicemen returned from war, they were unwilling to return to agricultural labor in favor of industrial jobs, thus requiring employers to rely on a more permanent Mexican labor force. U.S. employers encouraged Mexican workers to return to Mexico, enter the U.S. illegally and seek employment in their fields, thus circumventing Mexican governmental interaction regarding labor disputes. This ebb and flow of migration continues till this day.

Diane buys a six-foot flag, a white piggy bank with rainbow stars, a Selena calendar, a bright bouquet of papier-mâché flowers, a box of gum, a purple and white striped hammock, a red decorative guitar, and a black felt cowboy hat with a peacock feather in the leather band. Since the back of the Expedition is filled with luggage and bedding, and part of the backseat where Jack sits is filled with plastic bags from the weekend’s shopping, we fit Diane’s new purchases in the free space around our bodies.
Due to the large number of undocumented Mexican immigrants entering the U.S. seeking work in agriculture, and agricultural employers need for cheap labor, President Eisenhower and the Immigration and Naturalization Service implemented a new program in 1954, Operation Wetback, to return undocumented immigrants to Mexico. The justification for Operation Wetback was based on restricting access to jobs for Mexican immigrants, therefore providing U.S. citizens with employment after the Korean War and WWII. Approximately 1.3 million Mexican immigrants and U.S. citizens of Mexican descent were removed from the United States and deported to the interior of Mexico, regardless of the person’s state of origin within Mexico, or even American citizenship.

»«

The flowers sit on the dashboard to avoid being smashed. The six-foot flag with its matching pole divides the car in half; the covered pole floats between Diane and me, while the uncovered end taps on the back window. I put the cowboy hat on my head to keep the sun off the left side of my face, while Diane strums the out-of-tune guitar. Along with the blankets and hammock, Jack makes a bed for the plaster piggy bank that must be opened with a hammer if the owner wants her money. Jack also tucks the calendar between the back seat and the blanket, making sure it doesn’t bend. The gum stays in its plastic package on the floor by Jack’s feet.

»«

In an attempt to regulate illegal immigration and insure that employers hired documented workers, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 required employers to attest to their employee’s immigration status, made it illegal to hire or recruit undocumented immigrants, and granted amnesty to seasonal undocumented immigrants, as well as granting amnesty to undocumented
immigrants who entered the United States before January 1, 1982, and had resided there continuously.

About three million undocumented immigrants were granted amnesty based on the theory that by legitimizing these workers, therefore making prospects of work limited for undocumented workers, immigration would be reduced. Employers who did not abide by these laws were sanctioned and required to pay a fine. However, employers were rarely sanctioned because of strict legal constraints on investigations and non-communication between government agencies. If employers were penalized, they absorbed the fine.

»«

We accomplish our goal of looking like tourists coming back from a long holiday weekend. We continue to follow the lines of cars, inching around a turn. In the distance we see a brown, two story building that expands the width of twenty-one lanes. Black letters adorn the face of the building. From our vantage point, all we see is UNITED STA.

»«

Even if you enter the U.S. without proper documentation, there is a pathway to citizenship in the form of a permanent resident card. The process eventually results in an Adjustment of Status, from undocumented person to a tax-paying resident. This process involves several steps:

1) Marry a U.S. citizen or receive sponsorship from an employer, pay a penalty fee of up to one thousand dollars, apply for a green card. Wait time can be up to eight years.
2) Upon receiving provisional approval of a green card, you must file form I-485 to adjust immigration status. You must then wait for a biometrics appointment.

3) After filing form I-485, you will be notified to appear at an Application Support Center for biometrics collection of fingerprints, picture, and signature. This information will be included in your green card. You must then wait for an interview.

4) An appointment for an interview at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) office will be required. You must provide any and all paperwork used to complete your application. You will answer questions under oath that the information you have provided is correct. You must then wait for your paperwork to be processed.

5) After all paperwork has been received, interviews conducted, security checks completed, and other eligibility requirements reviewed, your case will be ready for a decision by USCIS. In all cases, you will be notified of the decision in writing.

6) Upon approval of green card, you, the Permanent Resident may now apply for a driver’s license, a social security card, and after five years of continuous residency in the U.S., you may apply for naturalization. This pathway to citizenship can take up to twenty years.
Note: If you commit a crime, violent or non-violent, your residency will be revoked, and you will be deported to your country of origin, unable to return for ten years, regardless of familial ties in the U.S., or lack of familial ties in your country of origin. You will remain in county jail, then transferred to a federal penitentiary near the closest border, where you will be bussed into Mexico. This process can take up to six months.

»«

We sit in silence. I look in the rearview mirror and see Jack resting his head against the backseat. Diane looks at me and breaks the silence.

“I’m scared.”

“We’ll be fine, just relax. We got our IDs and with all this shit piled up in here, there wouldn’t be any reason to believe we aren’t tourists.”

“But, don’t the guards have those machines that swipe your ID and tell them if you’re a citizen?”

“Every time I’ve crossed, all they do is look at your ID, ask if you’re a citizen and where you’re going. That’s it.”

“Yeah, but what if they want to inspect the car or ask me and Jack questions? Don’t they have dogs that smell the car? Jack’s a permanent resident, but he’s been deported. I wonder if his accent will give him away?” She turns towards the back seat. “Don't talk Jack.”

“Unless Jack’s smuggling drugs in the piggy bank, they won’t bother us. And people with accents can’t be American citizens? Plus, his license is still valid. Just like ours.”

“I know, I know. I’m just being paranoid. How can you be so sure?”
“What else can we do now? We can’t turn back, there’s like a thousand cars surrounding us. We knew what might happen when we came up with this plan.”

Jack listens to our conversation, but says nothing. Diane and I turn around and look at him.

“So, what do you think, Jack?” Diane asks.

“If there’s a problem, you guys deny everything. Just say you didn’t know I wasn’t a citizen. All they can do is keep me here.”

“How do we explain us having the same last name?”

“Coincidence?”

“You’re stupid. If you don’t make it back Rosie will be devastated.”

Jack looks out the window. Diane and I turn around and face forward.

»«

The San Ysidro Point of Entry is the busiest land-border crossing in the world with thirty five thousand daily commuters, pedestrian and autos, between Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico and San Diego, California, United States. An estimated fifty million workers and tourists legally cross this border annually. When crossing the San Ysidro Port of Entry, wait time can be anywhere from two to three hours. Wait time is much longer during an American holiday weekend.

»«

I don’t remember if I was chosen to drive across the border, or if I just assumed the job because I had driven across several times. Either way, I sit in the driver’s seat, taking us closer to the US – Mexico border. I see the words on the brown building now: UNITED STATES BORDER INSPECTION. Because the Expedition sits above most cars, I look over the roofs of the cars in front of me at the blue border inspection booths. A border guard stands outside the booth
inspecting driver’s licenses, passports, visas, green cards, birth certificates, forms of identification that allow entry into the U.S. These men and women wear blue jumpsuit uniforms that match their booths. They come in all colors, shapes, and sizes, just like the people they inspect.

Up until this point I have been calm and rational. I am the one whose has the least to lose in this plan to cross Jack over the border. I have nothing to gain, other than seeing Jack and Diane’s daughter, Rosie, grow up with her mother and father.

I am suddenly conscious of the music coming out of the speakers, the bass vibrating off my calf. I am conscious of the Labor Day heat, the stale air that sits with us in the slow moving Expedition. I am conscious of the ease with which I can cross this border. I am conscious of the unease that Jack will feel when his identification is examined. I am conscious of the laws I will break in a matter of moments. I am conscious of the many people who have crossed in more unconventional ways. I am conscious of all the political, historical, and social inequality our actions will attempt to rectify in the three minutes of interacting with the border agent.

»«

According to the Pew Hispanic Center, illegal immigration rates plummeted from more than one million immigrants in 2005 to 286,000 in 2011. This decrease in numbers may be due to heightened border enforcement and lack of jobs.

Despite this decrease in activity, the reasons Mexican immigrants come to the U.S. have stayed the same. According to the push-pull theory, immigrants are pushed out of Mexico by lack of job opportunities, poor medical care and housing, and loss of wealth or property, and these immigrants are pulled into the U.S. by
promises of the American Dream: more jobs, better living conditions and health care, education, and familial links.

In an attempt to realize the American Dream, immigrants risk their lives to reach this land of opportunity. Various ways in which they attempt to cross this liminal space between legality and legitimacy are performed through climbing fences, swimming across rivers, walking through deserts, or hiding in cars or trucks. When attempting to cross ports of entry in vehicles, immigrants have been known to hide in the trunk, dashboard, undercarriage of the vehicle, inside the engine, in a suitcase in the trunk, or even as an actual seat, their bodies stuffed inside the fabric, their faces covered, hidden from border inspectors.

»«

Finally we approach the blue booth. We are two car lengths away. Even though I have maintained my composure for the sake of Jack and Diane, our collective heartbeat pounds in my chest. I can hear the blood rushing through my veins. My temple throbs. My hands sweat. My foot shakes as I press the brake. The car in front of us pulls up to the red STOP sign and flashing red light, waiting for the light to turn green, and the yellow and black striped barrier gate arm to lift, signaling entry into the border agents single car-sized territory. As we wait, I look at Diane. She stares straight ahead, expressionless, deep breaths in and out. I check the rearview mirror one last time. Jack looks at me through the mirror, raises his eyebrows and shrugs his shoulders at the same time. I smile and return my gaze to the red light in front of me. The light turns green and the barrier arm lifts. We’re ready for inspection.
PROGRESS NOT PERFECTION

Hi. My name is Erin and I’m an alcoholic and an addict. I’ve been told that if I share my story it will keep me sober. I have to give it away in order to keep it. I have also been told to share my experience, strength, and hope, hoping that the addict who still suffers will connect with something I have said. So, fingers crossed that this works.

My sobriety date is July 2, 2001. That would be the first full day I didn’t have any alcohol or drugs in my system. I believe that alcoholism and being addicted to drugs are one in the same. Both are mind-altering substances that make it almost impossible to function in society. I can’t deny that both have sucked up my life.

I will start at the beginning. My parents divorced before I could ever remember them being together. My father’s family was comprised of drinkers and drug addicts. I wouldn’t figure this out till many years later. There I was, maybe four or five, staying the weekend at my dad’s house. My uncles were drinking beer while someone shredded pieces of brown, dry grass in a metal tray. But there was only one beer that I could see clearly, even now. I remember standing in front of a man with brown skin and black wavy hair, and a brown bottle with a red, white, and blue label, resting in his hand. This could have been any one of my uncles or my dad.

I asked the man what he was drinking. He looked at me, smiled and asked if I wanted to taste it. I said yes because I probably thought that if one of the men in my family was drinking it, it must be good. I don’t remember what it tasted like, but one day I will not be able to live without it. One day I will snort cocaine and meth on the tank of a toilet in a bar where I will become a regular.
At thirteen I was sneaking pills, usually Sudafed or any cold medicine that got me high. I liked the feeling of floating on my bed traveling to some far off land, sleeping for hours at a time so I could forget about my fucked up life. I know there were others who had it worse off. I had clothes, a roof over my head, all the physical things you need to be safe and civilized, but mentally I was going crazy. I had the responsibilities of a parent with my sister who was ten years younger than me. My step-dad called me a “built-in-babysitter.” My sister called me Mom. This is when the depression kicked in because of my situation and what I believe to be hereditarily defunct genes on both sides of my family. And then my mom had more kids, twins, when I was sixteen. Nobody was taking care of me. My aunt told me once that I raised myself from the age of ten. From the age of thirteen I experimented with alcohol. It wasn’t hard. Whenever we had a family gathering and when my grandma finally left, my dad and uncles would give me and my cousins drinks: beer, wine, champagne, whatever was available, except hard liquor because that would be bad.

I got my first hangover when I was in the eighth grade. My aunt thought it would be cool to buy her nieces wine coolers, because “hey at least they’re drinking with an adult around.” My cousins weren’t into it that much, but I was. I drank about two and a half wine coolers and Ruffles with cheese sauce. This is also the first time I barfed from alcohol. I woke up the next morning with a headache I had never felt before, head pounding, sweating, thirsty, gurgling stomach. My aunt thought it was funny. This would happen a few more times in high school, but randomly, never with premeditation. Like in the 10th grade at my friend’s quinceñera when my cousin and I, who finally got into drinking, drank the bottle of champagne sitting at our table. Nobody else was going to drink it, right? At home, ironically, there were bottles of vodka, rum, whiskey, and tequila under
the sink in the laundry room that I never drank from. Thank goodness my drink of choice was beer.

I moved into an apartment with some friends my freshman year of college. A seventeen-year-old, budding alcoholic, living on her own? Chaos. Friday nights at frat parties, Saturday afternoon drinking at a backyard barbecue, which would lead into another night of drinking, smoking, dancing, enjoying the youth I never had, and Sunday mornings with menudo and micheladas, the hangover cure. Living in this apartment, being free from family obligations, living with undiagnosed depression, access to alcohol from the twenty-four year-old neighbors, helped me fall in love with alcohol. Mainly beer though, because I could handle the drunk better.

The first night I got fucked up, not just drunk, but fucked up was October of 1992. I drank a forty of warm Crazy Horse, a malt liquor that I now realize is a pretty racist name for a beer, through a straw, followed up with three Keystone Lights, and my first attempt at smoking a joint. Looking back, I’m surprised it took me that long to smoke weed. That time I knew I was drunk. I was swaying, stumbling, slurring, and talking shit, which never really stops no matter how sober you are. Alcoholics Anonymous calls it a character defect. Then I drunk dialed before I knew what that was. I may have passed out in my bed, but I don’t remember. I don’t remember the hangover, probably because I was still drunk when I woke up, but I remember that first drink, the malt liquor sliding down your throat a little easier since the warmth doesn’t shock your system or cause your throat to contract, no, it glides down smooth and sweet, making you only crave it more. I didn’t drink warm beer all the time, but when I did for whatever reason, I think back to that night and can relive the happiness I felt by numbing myself. Life became bearable when I drank. My mind and body were filled with liquid
courage, believing I could overcome anything, believing that nothing was wrong, the rest of the world had problems, not me.

I went from being a social drinker to a binge drinker within a month of starting college. The first month I drank at parties on the weekend, sipping my beer, trying to ignore the affects of social anxiety that made my hands and voice tremble. I discovered the more I drank, the less anxious I became, thus the quick switch from social drinking to binging. Drinking also quieted down the obsessive thoughts that convinced me I wasn't good enough, that I would never succeed at anything, that it would be better if I wasn’t alive anymore, that nobody would miss me, imagining ways of killing myself so I could stop hurting. This unleashed the beast.

At first, I had fun getting drunk. Laughing and loving everyone, making new friends, the feelings of belonging I never felt in high school. And then as quickly as I became attached to alcohol, the anger and resentment that I was stuffing down from being deprived of a childhood, boiled to the surface. This would happen intermittently throughout my adulthood, bursts of anger splitting my personality in two. Ultimately, this is why I drank: to quiet the mental chatter of madness, to wallow in my loneliness. My mind did not shut off. There was a constant barrage of negativity that could only be hushed when I drank. From then on I drank whenever I could. Attending class and doing homework wasn’t as important as getting drunk. Alcohol became my parent. My drinking hadn’t become a problem, yet.

And then I moved to Santa Cruz when I was twenty, the obsessive thoughts following me. My best friend attended UC Santa Cruz, and I enrolled at Cabrillo College. I say enrolled because I attended Cabrillo in name only. By this time, alcohol had become a regular part of my life. When I went out my intention was
to get drunk, as drunk as I could get. At first it was cool, I didn’t live in Fresno anymore, I lived two blocks from the beach with friends, and my neighbors sold weed. I finally fell in love with weed at nineteen. First time I got high, “The Wall,” by Pink Floyd stared at me from a dorm room television, while I stared back, transfixed by the music and abstract images. Not a bad experience, weird nonetheless, but it didn’t deter me from smoking weed.

I lost my virginity six months after moving to Santa Cruz. The guy thought that I wouldn’t give it up so he put that date rape drug in my gin and apple juice. When I did drink liquor, it was gin. Gin reminds me of the movie “Anchorman,” where Will Ferrell says, “I love scotch. Scotchy, scotch, scotch. Here it goes down, down into my belly.” That’s how I felt about gin. I don’t know exactly why I liked gin, because it smelled like Scotch Tape. I did know that I liked gin with juice, any kind of juice really, pineapple being my favorite. Or maybe the influence of Snoop Dogg and his song, “Gin and Juice,” gave me the idea. For whatever reason, within a few minutes of drinking with him, I passed out, which was strange because we had only begun to drink. Definitely not to the point of passing out from drunkenness. I remember flashes, him on top of me, behind me, me stumbling to the bathroom, waking up alone, mattress stained with blood. It will take me thirteen years before I accept the fact that he raped me. At the time I believed that it wasn’t rape because I knew him.

Around that same time, when I was twenty-one, the guy that owned our house sold it. Being that I had no job and my money had dwindled down to almost nothing, I decided to move to San Diego with some friends. I don’t know which is worse, living in a small college town with lots of friends, or living near Tijuana where the bars stay open all night and never stop serving alcohol. A fantasy/nightmare come true. I lived in San Diego for five months before I moved
back to Santa Cruz. During this time my depression became more significant, which deepened from the alcohol. I missed countless days of work, even told the company I worked for that I might have cancer instead of telling them I had a hangover. I felt bad when they gave me flowers and wished me well, to get better soon and come back to work. I never went back. Instead, I ran back to Santa Cruz.

Nothing changed when I moved back. I picked up where I left off. My friends hadn’t changed. But now I could hit the bars. On Tuesdays it was hip-hop night with two-dollar beers at the Blue. Wednesday we started drinking around eight at The Silver Bullet, three-dollar pitchers, inside smoking, couches, and sticky floors, till two a.m. Then the party would move back to my house till four or five. Thursday, after my friend’s radio show on KZSC, we would meet up at Tampico’s, the bar where I would eventually become a regular. It seemed like every week more and more people would show up, until there were about twenty of us walking from bar to bar. I told myself I was happy, surrounded by all these people who said they were my friends and most of them still are. I was popular, could drink most the guys under the table. It turned out that these friends would stand by me when I made the decision to go to rehab, glad that I recognized my self-destruction before they had to intervene. Friday and Saturday nights were spent at house parties. When you run with twenty people, there is always a party and the party didn’t start till we got there.

On Sunday someone had a barbecue, a relaxing Sunday afternoon that mimicked the oldie’s songs I endlessly listened to sitting on my porch, chain smoking, and watching the people in my neighborhood walk past my house. Life appeared good. I was having fun, living the life I thought I’d missed out on. Trying to live in the moment, not to enjoy the moment, but to not think about the
past, present, or future, refusing to admit that I thought about killing myself daily. These debilitating beliefs could be triggered by anything: missing a green light, forgetting my wallet at home, losing money or a shoe or my glasses, nothing life threatening or important in any sense. Anything with the potential to make me feel bad would make me want to kill myself. Berating myself for being so stupid: god, why did I do that, everyone is going to hate me, nobody will ever trust me again. I would use any excuse to feel sorry for myself, blaming my present situation on my parents and how I didn’t get enough love, how neither of them took responsibility for parenting me and never noticing how depressed I was in junior high and high school. The black hole of depression sucked me in.

This behavior went on from the ages of twenty-two to twenty-six. I worked as a receptionist, waitress, group home counselor, community organizer, manufacturing technician, and an office assistant for a maximum of a couple of months before I sabotaged myself by coming to work drunk or calling in because of a massive hangover that cemented my limbs to my bed, unable to lift my head, unable to control the shaking and cold sweats. An employer will only be accommodating for so long. Usually, I quit before they could fire me. I began sleeping with various guys, mostly one-night stands. I’d meet someone at a bar, party, on a street corner, and bring him home. I gave myself away thinking all I deserved was an anonymous body, to fill the void, and nothing else. I didn’t care if they left after we had sex. I didn’t care if they didn’t call me again or take me out on a date. I didn’t care if I saw them in public because I would ignore them, like I ignored my hopelessness, believing that I didn’t deserve someone to stick around long enough to care about me.

Then I began to need a different high. Alcohol got the job done, but the depression, the obsessive thinking, the hopelessness that my life would never be
perfect, couldn’t be restrained anymore. One night I walked into a bathroom at a party and three girls were doing lines of cocaine. One had just been lined up and a rolled dollar bill was handed to me. I didn’t think about it. I took the rolled dollar and instinctively stuck it up my nose and inhaled the white powder. It burned momentarily, but then the rush overwhelmed any feelings, pure energy, a moment when everything is fucking fantastic, I’d never felt more confident and outgoing, thoughts running as fast as my heart. I never committed to cocaine like I did with alcohol. I liked cocaine, but I enjoyed the depressant rather than the stimulant. I liked to be down rather than up. But, since I had opened myself up to this type of high, I figured why not see what else I could sniff. This led to free-basing at a Halloween party, snorting meth off the armrest in my friend’s car, the tank of a toilet, a bar, and my friend’s coffee table while her two-year old daughter and younger sister slept on the couch next to us.

On August 14th of 1999, a group of my friends and I traveled from Santa Cruz for to Fresno for a beer float down the King’s River near Reedley. Even though I had been on this run many times and anticipated the current, within moments of getting on the water in my raft, the current swept me to the side of the river, where I floated into a tree with its branches sticking in the water, creating white water effect. White water rafting without a life jacket or an oar. As I hit the branches my raft overturned and trapped me beneath the water. As I struggled, I could see three colors. Above me a white light shined through the water, the sun directing me towards air. To the side a greenish, brown color reminding me of my current situation, stuck in the middle of light and darkness. Below me, thousands of pounds of dark river water waiting to engulf me. In that moment I began to pray: Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god, I don't want to die, I don’t wan to die, oh god help me. Somehow I pushed the raft out of the way, came up to the surface
and started to float with the current. I grabbed for branches but they slipped from my grasp as the water propelled me forward.

I could hear my friend screaming from the bank. OH MY GOD, POOKIE! GRAB ONE! Finally, I secured a grasp and began to scream. SOMEBODY HELP ME! SOMEBODY HELP ME! My friends had their own problems. Javier slipped on a moss-covered rock, went under and hit his head, stunned, but was able to return to the surface and swam towards the side of the river. Sandy’s raft came out from underneath her as she ran into the branches, falling backwards into the water. Margarita perched on a tree branch, trembled, afraid to let go. Juan floated by, unable to do anything, watching helplessly. As I held on to the branch, two large men approached me. They were walking through the three feet of water, their bodies able to resist the current. One asked if I knew how to swim. I said yes. He said let go. I let go and felt two pairs of hands grab my arms and bring me to the surface, safely to the embankment, to my friends’ outstretched hands pulling me out of the water.

From that day on I would embark on a downward spiral, an even more intimate relationship with hopelessness and isolation. For a year I will fight the memories of this near death escape, drinking more, sleeping more, until successfully completing the float the next year. However, this accomplishment will not free me from the depth of despair. I will briefly feel a sense of renewal only to be return to the same sense of abandonment.

The next six months after the nearly drowning were the darkest days of my life. Because of my already unstable mental health, I fell into a deep depression. I started seeing a psychiatrist through County Mental Health and received a prescription for Zoloft. I took it regularly, but when mixed with alcohol all it does is make you drunk. Real quick. I didn’t have any feelings. I became numb to
everyone and everything. I quit my job as a community organizer because I could no longer interact with people on a professional level. I temped for a manufacturing plant working swing shift. I inspected glucose test strips for defects. I interacted with plastic parts, so I could keep to myself. After work I went home and drank, smoked weed, chain smoked Marlboro Reds, and thought about nothing. Food wasn’t important. Leaving my house wasn’t important. Being alive made no sense. Vicodin, Valium, Flexeril, Soma, whatever I could get my hands on, also made getting drunk a quick process, quick to forget my existence.

In February of 2000 I entered the Behavioral Health Unit at Dominican Hospital in Capitola, for the first time. I woke up that morning wanting to die, more than any other time in my life, wanting to swallow a bunch of pills and drink a gallon of any kind of liquor. For some reason, possibly the faintest sense of self-preservation, I called my roommate at work and told her my plan. Karla worked as an office manager at a counseling center, but hadn’t been able to understand why I slept, drank, and smoked all the time. Now I chalk it up her not yet understanding the depth of my misery.

Most people are confused as why someone would want to kill herself. I didn’t understand this impulse until all I wanted to do was sleep, smoke cigarettes, stare at the television, and take painkillers to quicken the process of falling asleep. I didn't have the energy to cook a meal or go to the grocery store. I lived off delivery pizza and convenience store hot dogs, chips, and soda. I cried for no reason, fearful of interacting with people, pretending not to be home when there was a knock at the door. Those who had never experienced this must have believed I was just lazy and not emotionally and physically unable to attend to my life. I have discovered that all of us will go through an episode of being depressed
or suicidal, although the depth varies by person. Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness will hit you at the beginning of life, the end, or somewhere in between when you think life is going according to plan. It’s human experience and cannot be avoided no matter how invincible you think you are. A counselor advised my roommate to take me to Dominican on a 5150, an involuntary psychiatric hold, so I could be evaluated. Basically, I spent three days eating, sleeping, watching TV, taking my meds, talking to a psychiatrist once a day, and realizing I wasn’t as crazy as my unit mates.

Upon being discharged from the hospital, the doctor referred me to a County Mental Health worker who continued to evaluate me monthly. For a few months I lived a somewhat productive life. I attempted to take my anti-depressants on a regular basis. I went back to work. I ate enough food to fuel my body. I began to hang out with my friends. I returned to the King’s River and completed the float without drowning. I began to have hope again.

I never stopped drinking.

Slowly, I returned to the original feelings of hopelessness. I ignored the darkness, the echo following me through my tunnel of depression, a pinhole of light a million miles away, by doing what I knew best. Drinking more. Everything would go away. This is how I learned to survive.

And then, thank the goddesses, Medusa of female wisdom, Artemis patroness of nurture, fertility and birth, Carmenta goddess of writing, and Xochiquetzal goddess of love, change and transformation, I finally hit bottom.

Around the end of June 2001, living in a rented room on the Westside of Santa Cruz, my roommate’s boyfriend grew shrooms in the dark, damp earth of the redwood forest. I bought two ounces. Half an eight is sufficient for a six to eight hour high of body tingles complimented with auditory and visual
hallucinations. Life seemed manageable behind a lens of breathing walls and plaid faces, where everything made me laugh, which made me laugh more. I ate at least one ounce over a period of one week. The trick with shrooms is that if you eat them on consecutive days, you must double the amount of the day before. This may not be true, but that is what I believed at the time, so I doubled, tripled, and quadrupled my intake. I spent a week hallucinating, eating mushrooms that grew on cow shit, and drinking orange juice to intensify the high, anything to avoid my life. By the end of the week, I was vomiting anything that I ate or drank, and shitting green. That weekend my friends and I planned to take the river trip again, making it an annual event. Of course I had to go, regardless of my health. Before I left, a woman I did drugs with gave me a bag of pills in various colors and shapes, which I took randomly over the weekend. For the next forty-eight hours I mostly drank. I slept four hours each night and woke up to the crack of a cold beer. Sunday night, sunburned, dehydrated, and nauseous, I arrived home and passed out from exhaustion, feeling like I did two years before the near drowning. I didn’t want to go through the pain anymore. I needed a change.

Monday, July 1st, 2001, I woke up feeling the same hopelessness I felt the February morning of the year previous. I had a job I liked, but that morning I could no longer stand the darkness; I had to do something. Instead of calling a friend, I called Dominican Hospital myself. Doris, a crisis worker, answered the phone. I told her I wanted to die, that I needed to be admitted, I didn’t know what else to do. Doris asked me if I took anti-depressants. I said yes. Doris asked me if I drank. I said yes. Doris said no psych unit could help me unless I stopped drinking. The proverbial light bulb turned on. This woman didn’t know me from anywhere; she couldn’t even see me, yet she knew me better than I knew myself. Doris asked if I had insurance. I said yes. Doris told me to call my insurance
company and ask for a twenty-eight day program. I thanked Doris and hung up. I kept Doris’s words in my head as I called my insurance company, which referred me to The Camp in Scotts Valley, six miles north of Santa Cruz. I spoke to a counselor at The Camp. He said they didn’t have an open bed till the next day and asked if I could make it till then. I said I hope so.

I spent twenty-eight days at The Camp. For the first week I woke up pissed off. The counselors came in at six o’clock in the fucking morning. In my old life, I worked swing shift so I wouldn’t have to get up early. I liked my sleep. I liked to get up leisurely, on my own. I’d prefer to sleep until the last possible moment, sleeping with denial for as long as I could.

At my house, before I went to The Camp, Denial and I slept on a mattress on the floor, cinder blocks and 2x4s to make shelves for books we had acquired through the years, both of us surprised they weren’t ever sold for drinking money, a portable stereo which made moving that much easier, an AT&T cordless phone with voicemail and call-waiting, the only bill Denial and I paid, a borrowed TV and VCR for watching Sixteen Candles and Pretty in Pink when Denial and I felt alone, oh-so-alone, and a closet of mostly bare hangers, clothes, some clean, some dirty, mixed on the floor because Denial and I were too tired to do anything ever again.

I had to learn a different way. Obviously, life on my own terms wasn’t working. The first thing I learned at The Camp was that the only thing I have to change is everything. I learned in four weeks of tearful group sessions, one-on-one counseling, twelve step meetings with outsiders who had managed to stay sober, one addict talking to another, laughing at common mistakes, smoking cigarettes, sharing similar stories, men and women bonded by one entity that does
not discriminate, meeting people you never thought you’d have anything in common with, meditating and crying in the redwood forest, shards of sunlight cutting through the hundred year-old branches, early morning fog you can hear brushing against trees, discovering yourself through writing and journaling, honestly and truthfully accepting life in that moment, I learned to approach life on life’s terms.  I came to believe that I deserved to be happy.

Eventually.

Nothing happens overnight.  Supposedly within the first couple months of continued sobriety most people live on a pink cloud.  It’s like earning a Mary Kay pink Cadillac.  It’s all bright and shiny, waiting for you jump in, convertible top down, pink scarf around your neck, black hair blowing in the wind.  Happy, joyous and free!  Yay!  Look at me I’m brand new!

I hated those bitches.  A lot.

When I was able to get past the obsessive thoughts of killing myself, I became obsessed with Law & Order and Lifetime movies, telling myself to be grateful I wasn't in jail or a prostitute or a murdering mistress, but I didn’t believe what I told myself.  My pink Cadillac would be in need of a tune up every six months.

However, I’m happy to report that life eventually gets fabulous.  And then it gets shitty.  And then it’s fucking awesome.  And then it sucks.  There is no magic potion for solving life’s problems.  We get to walk through the bullshit of life, sober, without a drink or pipe to hide or dull the pain.  We get to have problems, we get to smile, we get to love, and we get to learn from hate.  We get to do these things.  Where before we felt nothing, today we get to feel everything, and be grateful.
I am grateful for the chance to live a better life. I could no longer sleep my life away and expect things to get better just because I was sober. I had to get my ass up, as they say, and show up, be responsible, be accountable for my life. Go to meetings, get a sponsor, work the steps, live in a sober living house, be a part of, share during meetings, be of service to other addicts who still suffer, take it one day at a time, or ten minutes at a time, get rid of the stinkin’ thinkin’, never let yourself become hungry, angry, lonely, or tired, keep it simple, stupid. I was the only person who could do that. This also meant I had to know my limits. I had to know how far I could push myself to be accountable without sacrificing my mental health. At times this became unavoidable. Even though I appeared to be more functioning than before my time at The Camp, I would go into Dominican’s psych unit again for thoughts of suicide. This went beyond the craving for drugs or alcohol. This was life or death. How many times would I have to go through this? I’m happy to report that we get to go through all kinds of shit. It’s called life. But, we get to have one again.

Today, I am studying for my master’s degree in writing. After eighteen years of enrolling and dropping out of several colleges, I finally earned my bachelor’s degree in English in 2010. Since I graduated high school I had continually enrolled in college classes. Education was the one consistent factor in my life. College was always there, waiting for me to figure out that pursuing a degree would give me the courage and discipline to invest in myself, to free myself through creative and analytical thought, pushing me to confront the inconsistencies in my life and the world around me. I plan to pursue a Ph.D. after my master’s, continuing my fascination with ethnic, class, and gender inequalities and progressions in literature. I never would have had this goal ten years ago. Ten years ago I spent my time figuring out whether to use my last five dollars for food
or beer, usually choosing beer. I believe writing has kept me sober. If I didn’t write then I wouldn’t be alive. Writing holds me accountable to myself, assigning importance to my interpretation of society. Writing may be the only thing I can do honestly in this life. I write what I can’t speak.

Today, at my house, I have two large bookshelves, eight shelves each, stuffed with books, books lined up in front of other books, books that I won’t sell for beer money. I have a small flat screen TV and a DVD player, where I still watch Sixteen Candles and Pretty in Pink, still feeling alone sometimes, but not oh-so-much. My TV sits on top of my dresser where I fold and put away my clothes, which is next to the closet with hangers that hold clean clothes, dirty clothes in the hamper, shoes lined up neat and straight, a set of speakers that are hooked up to my laptop, wires tangled, making it difficult to take and run. I go to sleep at night on a bed that rests on a frame off the floor, a bed I paid for, with a nightstand where my cell phone, which I have almost paid consistently on for ten years, sits. However, Denial does stop by sometimes for a weekend visit, or sometimes just for coffee, but it doesn’t live with me anymore. It’s not the material stuff that I am proud of but the effort I put out to get these things. I must always remember too, that I did not get these things alone. A whole community of alcoholics and addicts encouraged me, challenged me, demanded that I value my own existence.

The other day I walked through the free speech area of campus around noon. I noticed students walking past me, standing in groups, talking, laughing, all of us enjoying the fall afternoon. This is when I understood why some crazy people dance in the streets, yell out what a wonderful day it is, telling us to be happy, smiles on their faces, twirling, arms outstretched. In that moment that is exactly what I wanted to do. I wanted to arabesque, twist and shout, hug the trees,
the people, the ground, anything and everything around me, grateful to be alive, grateful I get to be in that moment.
ON REMEMBERING CÉSAR CHÁVEZ

“Our language is the reflection of ourselves. A language is an exact reflection of the character and growth of its speakers.”

- César Chávez

The summer after eighth grade in 1988, I remember seeing César Chávez’s face on the Fresno evening news. The camera zooms in on a thin Mexican man in his early sixties, sitting in a rocker, a white canopy shielding him from the hot valley sun, head bowed as he passes Jesse Jackson a wooden cross. The newscaster reports that the passing of the cross signifies the ending of César’s thirty-six day fast to protest pesticide use on table grapes, and this was his third fast in an effort to bring public awareness surrounding farm worker rights and the threats of pesticide poisoning on workers and consumers. I stare at images on the screen as the camera zooms out. Hundreds of people, whom I assume to be friends, family, workers, and supporters of César and the United Farm Workers standing in the scorching summer sun, some fanning themselves, others leaning on their neighbor’s shoulders, children held in their parent’s arms, witnessing the end of César’s fast as he receives communion from Robert F. Kennedy’s widow, Ethel.

My thirteen year-old mind didn’t comprehend the significance of César’s fast or the impact this man had on worker rights. I did know that the scene took place seventy-seven miles away in Delano, a small farming town I passed every time my family visited my aunt and cousins in Shafter, an even smaller town, in the San Joaquin Valley of California. I didn’t know at the time that I had been part of the farm worker movement and would continue this role into adulthood. While watching the newscast, I have memories of which I assume is my child-self walking amidst crowds of people yelling in unison, but this could be a fabricated
memory. I see another image of me sitting in a metal chair in a dark room while people chanted, cried, yelled and fought with each other on a stage. I can’t say for sure that I remember being in these moments. I don’t know which memories are real, or which are images from news reports, or which are stories I’ve been told, or those of which I have acquired as my own and labeled as memory. Regardless, my awareness of César Chávez and the United Farm Workers movement isn’t dependent on images or memories, but is essentially a by-product of having grown up in Fresno to hippy liberal parents and the influence of their hippy liberal friends.

In the late 70s and early 80s my dad’s friend, Gina, attended UC Berkeley pursuing her Master’s degree in Public Health. My dad would take me to visit Gina, her husband, and two daughters, on the weekends. I have fragmented memories of my dad, Gina, and her husband having coffee-table conversations. Words like “Chicanos” and “Chicanas” and “movement” blended together, while “zero population growth,” “breastfeeding is natural,” “pro-child pro-choice,” and “boycott grapes” floated through the room. Her daughters and I played “Renaissance Faire,” wreaths of dried flowers adorning our heads and flowing pink ribbons bouncing off waves of air as we spun, arms outstretched, around their graduate student-housing apartment. Although oblivious to the seriousness of their conversations or what the specific words meant, their rising voices and fervently gesticulating hands conveying frustration and hope, settled in my consciousness.

As an adult, I ask Gina if she and my dad took the girls and I to social justice events. She tells me that we went to marches protesting farm worker injustices, rallies in support of reproductive rights, and attended plays by El Teatro Campesino, or farm worker theater, satirizing the plight of the farm worker, the Vietnam War, indigenous roots, and racism. I wish I could remember these
events. I wish I could say I was an active participant in these rallies and protests, part of a larger movement of human rights. I wish was cognizant of the impact my presence had on the campaigns for rights my dad’s family lacked when working agricultural fields throughout the San Joaquin Valley. But, I would have only been five or six at the time, so I imagine. I imagine one of my small hands, balled into a fist, pumping the air after every QUE VIVA! My singsong voice adding to the refrain. My other hand waves a red flag, with a spray painted black Aztec eagle in the middle, stapled to a piece of wood. I imagine being held in my Chicano father’s arms, fists punching the air in unison, marching in a sea of humans from every walk of life, shoulder to shoulder, seeking justice for all. I may not remember the events like Gina says, but my consciousness doesn’t care whether they happened or not.

During high school in the 1990s, I attended pro-choice rallies and demonstrations around Fresno with my white mom. I remember standing on the Southeast corner of Shaw and Blackstone holding a sign that I made with a Sharpie. The thick black letters read: “Keep your laws out of my vagina.” I stood holding my sign, wearing my white t-shirt with blue letters that read: Pro-Choice. I remember smiling and waving to people yelling, “Baby killers,” as they made right turns from Blackstone onto Shaw. My mother passed down her liberal political leanings to me, yet allowed me to make my own conclusions about the debate.

In my tenth grade English class, Mr. Jarnigan assigned our class an argumentative paper about a controversial issue, which of course I wrote about abortion. I remember having to read a section of my paper aloud in class and became so empowered by my argument that I unconsciously slammed my fist on
the desk when making a point about a woman’s right to choose without governmental interference. A couple of years later, my mother and I would travel on a chartered bus with other pro-choice supporters to the National Organization of Women’s March for Women’s Lives where I would walk down crowded San Francisco streets, shoulder to shoulder with other men and women, marching for reproductive rights, demonstrating our social awareness, my mom and I carrying identical “March For Women’s Lives,” cardboard signs.

The summer before my senior year of high school, I decided to become a writer. It was the only subject I excelled in. My first novel, which I have yet to write, would be about how stupid high school was and the stupid people who went there. My frustrations came from attending a predominantly white high school on the rich side of town and not being able to fit in with the brand new luxury car and off-road Jeep driving rich students. I wanted to write about how rejected and unworthy I felt because I wasn’t rich or white enough, and how when my high school guidance counselor and I discussed college in ninth grade, she advised me to go to City College because I probably wouldn’t have a chance anywhere else. I wanted to write about how there were only forty-five Mexican students in my graduating class of five hundred, and how we silenced ourselves because our lack of money and depth of color already made us invisible, or in my case, the one drop of Mexican blood that erased any chance of being white enough.

In my twelfth grade English class, Mr. Knapp assigned us to write a story of our choosing. I created the fantasy characters Biodegradable Betty and Toxic Ted around a storyline about toxic waste and recycling. I wrote nine pages long hand, front and back, on lined paper in blue ink. I wrote scenes where Betty and Ted meet at a toxic waste disposal site and fight, Betty using a metal garbage can lid as a shield as Ted sprays her with toxic fumes. Or, where Ted tries to
contaminate the city’s water by pouring excess pesticide chemicals into the water treatment plant, only to have Betty lasso him with her hemp rope. My teacher gave me a thirty-three out of thirty-five, citing it as, “too long.” I don’t know when I became environmentally conscious, but Betty’s mission to protect the human race from the injustices associated with toxic waste seemed another demonstration of my activism. I realized that my writing made up for the inadequacies I felt because of my ethnicity and class. My activist life had fused with my writing life.

I started drinking heavily my freshman year of college. I drank socially for the first ten minutes of a party, but for the rest of the night I drank to get drunk. I attended Fresno State, despite my high school counselor’s suggestion I should attend City College. I use the word “attend” loosely. I was enrolled, but I rarely attended class. Most of my days were spent nursing a hangover or sleeping all day in my darkened room. I did this for two years before the school kicked me out. I still considered myself a writer, but I never wrote. I still considered myself an activist, but I never marched or protested. My drinking increased, which exacerbated the depression I had grappled with most of my childhood. I did what most alcoholics do when they can’t admit they have a problem: I ran away.

In June of 1995, I moved to Santa Cruz. My best friend attended UC Santa Cruz (she actually attended class) and through her I made friends who liked to party. The party I started in Fresno continued in Santa Cruz. I enrolled at Cabrillo College mainly for the financial support of grants and student loans, but again, I rarely if ever attended class and was kicked out after two semesters of failing to pass any classes. Part of my failure, besides my alcoholism, was that I had classes with rich white students like the ones in high school, which conjured up feelings of inadequacy I had repressed despite my success in high school English classes.
After a year in Santa Cruz, I moved to San Diego, again running away from my failures. After three months in San Diego in October of 1996, I moved back to Santa Cruz because I missed the town and my friends. Somehow I managed to remain in Santa Cruz for a couple years, which is when I decided to take school a bit more seriously.

During those years, in a small farming community about fourteen miles south of Santa Cruz, the United Farm Workers were organizing strawberry workers to demand better working conditions and a living wage from their employers. The same organizing took place in Oxnard, another small farming town outside of Ventura in Southern California. In an effort to mobilize and educate the community about the plight of these workers, and steeped in the tradition of activism, the UFW organized a march in the streets of Watsonville. On April 17, 1997, thirty thousand supporters walked through the streets, waving flags, chanting, “Si Se Puede,” and “A people united will never be divided.” Students, union members, clergy, and community members of all colors, shapes and sizes came from throughout the country, merged on the town, and doubled its population.

I found myself marching shoulder to shoulder with friends and supporters, holding my UFW flag and yelling as loud as I could to join in the demand for the right of the strawberry workers to unionize. Although I had participated in other marches during my life, I had never felt this empowered. I would not have to wonder if these memories were figments of my imagination. I stayed in the moment, conscious of my political act, my contribution to the movement for worker rights and human rights. I let these moments fill in the gaps of my childhood memories.
I carried that empowerment with me when I enrolled in an English class the fall of 1997. I knew that I had a greater chance of passing because this class was different than my previous attempt. This class was part of the Puente Project, a two semester English class focused on multicultural literature for multicultural students. For once my ethnicity and lack of money wasn’t a problem. Everyone else dealt with these same pressures. I felt comfortable in the classroom and my creativity was stimulated by the writings of Michele Serros, Cherríe Moraga, Leslie Marmon Silko, Gary Soto, Rudolfo Anaya, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, just to name a few.

Drinking was still part of my day, but my writing thrived in this program. All my social and academic insecurities dissolved when I read Michele Serros as she described throwing up from anxiety every morning on her way to school because her pink Van’s weren’t enough to fit in with the white students, and what she and I perceived to be their perfect hair and clothes, which we could never match. She was speaking directly to me. On Saturday morning between the stacks of UC Santa Cruz’s Science Library, I found solace in Cherríe Moraga’s struggle with being half white and half Mexican and navigating high school honors classes filled with white students, while trying to define her mixed identity on her terms. She was speaking directly to me. My writing was motivated by Sor Juana (Sister Joan Agnes of the Cross) who had been encouraged by the Ecclesiastical hierarchy to abandon her studies when she challenged a woman’s right to study and write in 1691. She was speaking directly to me.

My professor, Stan Rushworth, told me I was a writer. He entered my essay about white privilege into a contest and had me read the same essay at the Northern California Puente Project Conference where I stood in front of fifty other Puente students, my hands shaking as I read my words aloud for the second time.
This time was different. I didn’t know any of these students like I did in my high school English class. I didn’t know how they would respond or if they would understand my experience being half white and half Mexican and trying to reconcile my own privilege at having the opportunity to go to a high school where access to advanced educational opportunities was based on wealth, where the graduation and college acceptance rate surpassed most schools in the district. When I finished reading, the room burst into applause. I bowed my head and smiled shyly at the ground as I walked back to my seat.

I received A’s in both semesters of the Puente class, but my momentum stalled after the spring semester. I blamed my drinking for not going back to school the next fall. But, it was really my fear of success. I feared that I wouldn’t live up to Stan’s expectations. I feared that I would never write an essay that would elicit the same response. I feared going back into classrooms where the majority of students were white. I stopped writing about social problems and wrote sloppy love poems in my journal after drinking binges.

In the fall of 1998 I moved back to Fresno, even though I vowed never to return. I couldn’t hold a steady job and living at the beach requires paying exorbitant amounts of rent for a room the size of a closet. I found myself living in one of the bedrooms in my hoarder grandma’s house, which also felt like sleeping in a closet. I slept in a room with a twin bed surrounded by boxes filled with seventy-plus years of my grandma’s “treasures,” my clothes stacked in neat piles on the floor because I couldn’t access the barricaded closet. I made it my purpose to move away as soon as I could.

Out of pure determination, something I could never muster in Santa Cruz, I found a part time job as an office assistant. One evening, while sitting on half of
my grandma’s love seat, the other half filled with unopened boxes from the Home
Shopping Channel, the phone rang. My friend Jamila, who lived in Los Angeles
and worked for the United Farm Workers as a public action coordinator, called
and told me about a community organizer position in Oxnard. She told me about
the job because she didn’t want me to live in Fresno either. I applied the next day.

In January of 1999, I found myself sitting in a conference room at the UFW
headquarters, what used to be a tuberculosis sanatorium in Keene, thirty miles
southeast of Bakersfield in the foothills of the Tehachapi Mountains, where César
had moved the union headquarters in 1972. The compound became known as
Nuestra Señora Reina de La Paz (Our Lady Queen of Peace), or La Paz for short.
César passed away in San Luis, Arizona in 1993 at the age of sixty-six, which his
family contributes to his three fasts for human rights. His body is buried on the
property where he had been living with his family for the past few years.

For three days I learned a brief history of the unions beginnings during the
Chicano Movement of the 1960s, slept in bunk beds in the defunct tuberculosis
units, ate meals in the communal dining room, and walked the trails of the foothill
property during breaks from campaign planning. I gazed at the Tehachapi
mountaintops and the San Joaquin Valley floor, the same views I imagined César
also looked upon when strategizing for campaigns, or trying to find peace and
strength within himself to continue the fight.

What I remember and cherish most about that first retreat was visiting
César’s office. His family left everything in its place. Nothing was touched or
moved. There was a rope around his desk to keep visitors from touching his
belongings. I remember standing in the room taking mental pictures of the
hundreds of shelved books that lined the walls on subjects of philosophy,
economics, cooperatives, and unions, to biographies of Gandhi and the Kennedys, and the memoirs of Ché Guevara. Over the years I had started my own collection, but the enormity of his library astounded me. Papers were scattered across his desk, a pen lay on a piece of paper, ink filling only half the page as if in mid-thought, his desk chair pushed back, enough room to stand up and walk away.

After several months of working and educating various community members and organizations in Oxnard about the continued fight of strawberry workers to unionize, I was sent to Phoenix to help organize a peace march. A month previous, gang violence had escalated resulting in multiple murders, those innocent of gang violence and those complicit in its destruction, throughout the city of Phoenix and the nearby community of Chandler. The manager of Phoenix’s Radio Campesina, a farm worker radio network broadcast in small farming communities in Arizona, California, and Washington focusing on the lives and interests of farm workers, called my boss and asked for someone to organize the march. I drove the four hundred thirty five miles in my 1986 Chevy Monte Carlo, from the ocean to the desert, on a Thursday morning in the middle of May.

On Thursday afternoon I met with an assembled group of community members who would connect me with other community groups and labor unions throughout the city. We planned the next month in terms of logistics: march route and permits, flyers, flags, food, music, speakers, and a letter writing campaign to area agencies convincing them that their participation would be pertinent to creating and maintaining change within their communities. What I had been doing in Oxnard in the past five months, I would have to do in one month in Phoenix.

The station manager, David, made an office for me in the radio station. I hung up butcher paper with the names of each community organization, a phone
and fax number, and a contact name. I met with directors of at-risk-youth and gang prevention organizations, The Boys and Girls club counselors, administrative assistants in low-income medical clinics, teachers of alternative high school classrooms, musicians that shuffled in and out of the radio station. I spoke at the Central Labor Union meeting with a representative of every union chapter in the county present. I spoke with Community College and University students, and members of various faith communities to explain and encourage them to confront the violence that was tearing their community apart. After my meetings, I sent a follow-up faxed letter thanking them for the opportunity to meet and restating my purpose for the visit.

Everything that is written on UFW letterhead must pass through the legal department in La Paz to check accuracy and probability of litigiousness. I don’t remember what I put in the letter, other than reiterating the importance of community awareness and activism, and how their participation in the march would demonstrate their commitment to community and dedication to social justice. After a couple of a day of waiting for clearance, I received a fax from the legal department allowing me to send my letter with a note from the director saying that my letter was well written and very inspiring. I think I blushed while reading the note. I may have jumped up and down in place. I know I felt a rush of adrenaline followed by an all-over body tingle. The director’s words were significant because it was the first time I had written what was essentially an essay on social justice and not an assignment for class, and had been praised for my writing ability. The letter came straight from my heart, without the pressure of performance, but with conviction and confidence, unfazed by the idea that hundreds of people would read my words, motivated by my own commitment to the betterment of my communities in Fresno, Santa Cruz, and Oxnard.
About a week after faxing my letter to the people I met with, one of the organizations resented my letter, promoting their own event, using my exact words, only replacing UFW letterhead with their own. I did what I had done a week previous. I blushed, jumped, and felt a rush of adrenaline heat my body. I had been plagiarized and it felt good. Part of me was mad at not being given credit, but ultimately, this organization was affected and motivated by my words insomuch that they wanted to pass that same feeling to their constituents, and that was most important. Or, they were just lazy and my letter came at the right time. For the purposes of my ego, I believed it was my words that moved them.

As the march approached, I received a call from César’s son, Paul. At the time, Paul Chávez was president of the National Farm Workers Service Center, an organization that promotes education, leadership, and affordable housing for farm workers throughout the Southwest, and the keynote speaker for the march. Apparently, Paul heard I was an excellent writer and asked if I would write his speech. Again, the tingles and blushing, minus the jumping. My words and activism collided and provided me with a paycheck. Hiding my excitement, as nonchalantly as I could, hiding the immense pride I felt in being asked to represent the Chávez family at a social justice event, I said, “Sure.”

A few days before the march, I received another phone call from Paul.

“Hi, Erin. It’s Paul Chávez. I have some bad news. A family member has passed away, so I won’t be able to speak at the march. Would you be willing to read the speech you wrote for me?”

I offered my condolences and said I would be honored to give his speech at the end of the march, even though my body told me differently. As I placed the phone in its cradle, my hands began to shake from fear and excitement. I had read
in front of crowds before, but never in front of the four hundred anticipated marchers and media that Radio Campesino invited.

On a warm Saturday afternoon in June, UFW supporters and Phoenix community members marched from downtown to a local park, waving red flags that read “March for Peace” underneath a black Aztec eagle. I walked on the margins of the path to the park. I guided marchers as we made turns down side streets and kept them off the sidewalks, which wasn’t allowed in our demonstration permits from the city. In my hand, I clutched two sheets of white paper with the speech I had written for Paul, single-spaced in black ink.

In the distance I saw the entrance to the park. My hands began to shake as I thought about reading in front of all these people. Would there be “Boo’s” and “Get off the stage! We want Paul Chávez!”? Or stone cold silence as the crowd wondered who I was and what I was doing there? People stood talking in circles, children sitting in the grass, the DJs from Radio Campesino setting up the microphone. I was at the end of the line; each step brought me closer to the stage where I would literally bare my soul.

I walked up the four stairs of the stage, a platform on risers, black cloth draped around the edges of the stage to hide wires, a microphone and a podium for me to read from. My knees wanted to give out with each step. My sweaty palms slid across the railing, the pages of my speech moistened at the edges. David, the station manager, explained to the crowd that Paul Chávez would not be attending, but a representative from the UFW would read a message from Paul and the Chávez family. David handed me the mic and everyone clapped, no boo’s.

“Welcome! And thank you for coming out this afternoon. My name is Erin Alvarez and I am a community organizer for the UFW. Paul Chávez asked me to
read the speech he prepared for today’s event. He regrets that he can’t be here to share in the healing of your community. He has asked me to share his words.”

I looked out at the crowd and saw hundreds of people staring at me, waiting for me to read Paul’s words. I took a deep breath, cleared my throat and continued reading:

“As Latinos and Mexicanos, we come from the fields. At some point in our ancestral existence, we, or someone in our family, have had to toil in the blistering sun to forge a future for our family. My father was a man who stood for respect and dignity for all people. He fought for the rights of farm workers and poor people. He believed everyone deserved a life filled with abundance and prosperity, and that no human being should be treated with contempt or degradation. He was so compelled by justice that he sacrificed his life for the rights that many of us take for granted.”

I paused to swallow, my mouth dry from nervousness and speaking too fast. I inhaled deeply, slowing the rate of my heart, and told myself to say one word at a time, don’t rush, pretend like you’ve done this a hundred times.

“He, and the many dedicated people of the United Farm Workers, past, present, and future, have donated their time and hearts to my father’s vision of honor and admiration for the hard working people of the physically taxing back breaking labor of farm work. It is this vision that has propelled us into the future and it is our responsibility to continue the legacy that my father left.”

My heart rate had slowed down and my speech was slower, but I forgot to make eye contact with the crowd. I tried to look up once during each sentence.

“We must always remember the struggle that he and many others went through to guarantee our freedom and dignity. We must continue that struggle
until every child can be raised in a nurturing world full of compassion and understanding.”

The crowd applauded at this statement. I looked up and smiled, filled with confidence; my voice became stronger.

“Today, we are gathered here to honor those men, women, and children who have suffered by the unrelenting hand of violence. During the Great Grape Boycott in Delano, California, the element of violence was so stupendous that people were murdered, beaten and harassed for their convictions. As a child my grandmother taught my father that there were other ways of solving a problem without using your fists. César internalized this principle to the point of complete acceptance.”

There were shouts of “Si Se Puede” and “Que Viva Chávez,” cries of inspiration, an allegiance to a better way of life. My heart rate sped up, but not from fear, from excitement, not because of my words, but from the channeling of César’s spirit.

“He applied those ideas to his life and the way of the world. The only way to succeed when confronted with anger is to rationalize your predicament and comprehend the outcome of broken bones, blood and a shattered spirit. You will not win when you destroy the vitality of another human being.”

I was on a roll. The words escaped from my lips, begging to be heard. I took another deep breath and continued.

“The state of Arizona is a special place for the United Farm Workers and our family. It was in Yuma, AZ where the essence of strength was breathed into the consciousness of my father and it was also near his birthplace that my father returned from which he came, the soil of his habitat. On behalf of the UFW, the Chávez family, Arturo Rodriguez and Dolores Huerta we wholeheartedly regret
not being able to attend this event of rebirth for your community. Because in 
rebirth comes death, we are grieving at this moment for the loss of my fathers’ 
older brother, Manuel, who lost his long battle with cancer. Please include us in 
our prayers as you are in ours. Gracias y Si Se Puede!”

The crowd cheered, flags were punched in the air, children jumped up and 
down, absorbing the excitement of their families. David patted me on the back. I 
waved at the marchers, a smile on my face, the sheets of paper still clutched in my 
hand.
ON REMEMBERING WHY I HATE WHITE PEOPLE

March 30, 2009

6:45 a.m.

I wake from an uncomfortable dream, in which I hear people talking to me, but I can’t answer back. I feel abandoned and alone, but a sense of home. This morning I am hungry and awake too early. I rarely get up before noon. My undergraduate advisor only has office hours at 8 a.m. I respect her anyway.

8:20 a.m.

My advisor tells me I will graduate next May. I have a decision to make: Go home and sleep till my 1 p.m. class, or go the 9 a.m. birthday celebration for César Chávez in the Fresno State Peace Garden.

César’s actual birthday is tomorrow, March 31, a state holiday, so campus is closed. He co-founded the United Farm Workers labor union in 1966, with Dolores Huerta, after the Delano Grape Strike, here in the San Joaquin Valley. César and his supporters drew attention to the inhumane working conditions of farm workers who harvest and package a majority of the United State’s food supply. Sometimes I forget that part of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s happened in the fields my grandmother and her family worked in. Sometimes I forget that Delano is only seventy-three miles from Fresno State’s Peace Garden, where a statue of César represents the struggle of those before me.
I worked for the United Farm Workers as an ineffective community organizer for eight months in 1999. At the time, I was a semi-non-functioning alcoholic and my ability to organize was hindered by my desire to escape from the self-defeating thoughts of inadequacy. I escaped in the romantic notion that passion alone was enough to make a difference. However, passion without motivation makes a bad community organizer. Even after eight years of not drinking, the shame of past inadequacies still keeps me from participating in community activism.

Today, something motivates me to stay on campus instead of going home and back to sleep. I figure I can sacrifice my laziness for the non-violent, farm worker, and labor leader who gave his life to a social justice movement, and my opportunity to go to college. Plus, it will be proof that I actually woke up before noon.

8:45 a.m.

I park in Lot Q and take a few hits from a joint while sitting in my car, listening to the radio, trying to find any of my friends who are awake and not at work, so we can eat breakfast, any reason not to face my past failures. I give up after hearing five different voicemail recordings.

I get high most days before class. I have social anxiety and weed slows down my racing heart and shaking hands. On days like this, I take my time walking to class, listening to my Ipod and N.W.A. prompting me to “Fuck the
police.” This morning the sun rises above the Social Sciences Building and an early spring breeze reminds me I left my sweater at home.

I approach the Peace Garden and a crowd circles César’s statue, holding hands, singing “De Colores,” the unofficial union anthem. I sing along, remembering some of the lyrics, making up Spanish sounding phrases in place of ones I don’t know. I look at the brown faces and wonder if I’m the only half white, half Mexican who doesn’t understand all the words. Is there anyone else who didn’t grow up speaking Spanish, finally learning in high school and college, embarrassed when stumbling over their words in an effort to speak with as much fluidity as a native speaker? I feel alone in a crowd of fifty faces similar to mine.

Varying shades of brown skin surround me; voices rise in tribute to a man who saw beyond race and gender to unify poor people. I wonder how many of them have ever felt insecure about their identity, or compensated for their lack of cultural identity by trying to be the best Chicana activist they could be? The circle breaks and I walk to the library, the only place I can concentrate, and the one place that feels like home.

**10:00 a.m.**

I enter Starbucks in the library and order a venti-extra-black-iced-tea-unsweetened-light-ice. The white female barista who takes my order looks uncomfortable when I say “extra black.” Ironically, the black female barista who makes my drink gives me a small smile because she knows Starbucks waters down their tea so that their black tea is more like a light tan. I send her telepathic messages: “You know Starbucks don’t know how to make no tea.” My vernacular, not hers.
10:08 a.m.

I am sitting on the second floor overlooking César’s statue in the Peace Garden. From my seat I see students setting up similar tables covered with posters and pamphlets advertising their organizations like M.E.Ch.A., Trabajadores de la Raza, Nu Alpha Kappa, and University Migrant Services; campus clubs and programs that promote success for Chicana/os and Latina/os in academia. Young activists and educators peruse the tables, making connections, learning about the farm worker movement, and exchanging ideas on how to improve leadership within our community.

A banner with César’s face and “Si Se Puede” – yes we can, the union slogan – stares at me from behind his bronzed statue. Students walk across the grass, between the miniature lawn flags of the United States and the United Farm Workers union label; a black eagle symbol in a white circle on a red flag. Aztec and folklorico dancers practice their movements, waiting for their moment to be part of this annual commemoration. I search the scene and realize there are no food booths. My stomach grumbles, angry at missing the opportunity to eat tacos de asada, fresh cut mangoes covered in chile powder, and aguas frescas de melon, Jamaica, or tamarindo. I take a sip from my venti-extra-black-iced-tea-unsweetened-light-ice, and vow to be on the food committee for next year.

10:17 a.m.

Two white female students walk up to my table and sit opposite me. My first response is fear. Not the kind of fear where I think they are going to be mean to me, but the fear that they may say something disapproving about the festivities going on outside. Fuck me. They probably don’t even think I’m Mexican. I have been told I look Japanese, Korean, Armenian, Hawaiian, Italian, or sometimes just
white. Right now I want to study, not defend or explain my culture. They begin to comment on the event and the Mexican flags scattered about. Am I going to hear a negative or positive comment? Am I going to get mad at some rude remark or breathe a sigh of relief when the existence of my culture doesn’t upset them?

As a child, whenever my white mom and stepdad watched the news and a Mexican or black man’s mug shot or police sketch appeared on the screen, my body would tighten in fear, my heart would race, and I prayed the power would go out before negative and inflammatory comments came from one of them. I waited in anxious anticipation for one of them to make a comment about his presumed guilt. These men on the screen reminded me of my dad, my uncles, cousins, or one of their friends. If the news story was something good the Mexican or Black man may have done, there was no commentary about his contribution to society from either my mother or stepdad. I lived in irritated silence. If I tried to rationalize the situation to either parent, tried to make them understand that they aren’t all bad people, I was told, “When you get to our age, you’ll understand.” I still don’t understand.

10:22 a.m.

White Female #1 looks out the window and asks her friend what was going on outside? White Female #2 says the gathering is for César Chávez. White Female #1 says nothing and they return to their work. Thank you, Jesus. I give
kudos to Female #2 for having heard of César and his legacy. I know all white people aren’t culturally unaware, in fact some of my best friends are white, and I’m half Scotch-Irish, but as much as I try to give white people the benefit of the doubt, sometimes I’m reminded of why I hate some of them.

10:26 a.m.

A young white male student walks up to our table and sits with the girls. Fuck me, again. I ignore them by putting my headphones on and I start watching an episode of “Family Guy” on my laptop. I can still hear them talk about Spring Break, turning twenty-one, and why some guy named Ryan broke up with his girlfriend. Their conversation is interrupted as a mariachi band begins playing outside. I hold my breath.

My fear returns and my heart begins to race. White Male looks out the window and asks what’s going on. Female #1 replies, “It’s for César Chávez.” Oh dear, Jesus, I pray. White Male turns back toward the females, eyes downcast, mouth frowning, and shakes his head back and forth in disapproval. I exhale, trying to stop my body from shaking, trying to stop myself from jumping across the table and using my fists to explain myself, really wishing I had a joint to calm my nerves. Did he just marginalize my culture, my family, my history with a twisting of his neck? Does he thing that what we are celebrating is trivial, without significance, just something us colored folks do to make white people feel uncomfortable? Am I crazy, irrational for feeling defensive? Is this a post-traumatic reaction from my personal experience, or an example of what others have experienced too?

I don’t know what he is thinking or why he feels the need to debase the event, but Female #1 smiles at him, agreeing with a giggle. My ally, Female #2
looks at him with wide eyes, confusion contorting her face, wondering if he is serious, yet says nothing. I inhale slowly, contemplating the previous few seconds. I want to confront them verbally, ask White Male what he means, what is wrong with honoring a man who fought for human rights? But, I realize I am in a library, a sacred place of knowledge and understanding, where silence is respected. All three turn to me, a deer caught in headlights. I sit up, look over my laptop, over my glasses, down the bridge of my nose, and stare them down, one at a time. They look away and change the subject.

10:30 a.m.

I wish I could smoke weed in the library, but that’s illegal. I wish I could justify violence, but in César’s name I won’t. I wish I could control my emotions, stop myself from caring, but I can’t. I wish we could understand each other without prejudice and preconceived notions, but knowing that may never happen. I wish to be released from fear, to channel my hate for the greater good, to be louder than the mariachi band’s trumpet, whose notes fill the Peace Garden in homage to the legacy of the man who made it possible for me to write these words.
Non-Exclusive Distribution License
(to archive your thesis/dissertation electronically via the library’s eCollections database)

By submitting this license, you (the author or copyright holder) grant to Fresno State Digital Scholar the non-exclusive right to reproduce, translate (as defined in the next paragraph), and/or distribute your submission (including the abstract) worldwide in print and electronic format and in any medium, including but not limited to audio or video.

You agree that Fresno State may, without changing the content, translate the submission to any medium or format for the purpose of preservation.

You also agree that the submission is your original work, and that you have the right to grant the rights contained in this license. You also represent that your submission does not, to the best of your knowledge, infringe upon anyone’s copyright.

If the submission reproduces material for which you do not hold copyright and that would not be considered fair use outside the copyright law, you represent that you have obtained the unrestricted permission of the copyright owner to grant Fresno State the rights required by this license, and that such third-party material is clearly identified and acknowledged within the text or content of the submission.

If the submission is based upon work that has been sponsored or supported by an agency or organization other than Fresno State, you represent that you have fulfilled any right of review or other obligations required by such contract or agreement.

Fresno State will clearly identify your name as the author or owner of the submission and will not make any alteration, other than as allowed by this license, to your submission. By typing your name and date in the fields below, you indicate your agreement to the terms of this distribution license.

Embargo options (fill box with an X).

- [X] Make my thesis or dissertation available to eCollections immediately upon submission.
- [ ] Embargo my thesis or dissertation for a period of 2 years from date of graduation.
- [ ] Embargo my thesis or dissertation for a period of 5 years from date of graduation.

Erin Laurel Alvarez

Type full name as it appears on submission

April 5, 2013

Date