



UCLA Writing Project
Summer Invitational 2020

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Javier Caldera

My name is Javier Caldera and I possess the honor of teaching English-language Arts at Bright Star Secondary Charter Academy (BSSCA). I grew up in the neighboring city of Huntington Park, where I attended Huntington Park High School and graduated in 2004. Afterward, I spent the next eight years of my life at California State University, Long Beach, where I earned a Bachelor's in Liberal Studies, a Master's of Arts in Educational Pedagogy, a Multiple Subject Teaching Credential, and a Single Subject Credential in English.

Even more importantly, I am the son of two Mexican parents and eldest of three. Growing up, I was always asked by my parents to help my siblings with their homework, so I started teaching even before I knew I wanted to be a teacher. I mastered my craft as a Teacher Assistant, a job I held since age 16, and a job that got me through college. It was in this capacity where I experienced working with effective teachers for over ten years and where I truly learned the practices, strategies, and tools that make me the teacher I am today.

With these experiences, I will always try my best to connect with every student to ensure that what I have to say is meaningful. I will always also try my best to inspire by acting as a role model to our students because, even though I don't know your child yet, I wish them greater happiness, achievement, and success than what I will ever attain.



Voces

I hear my *Ama* yelling because she cares.
¡Ya levántate! Es hora de ir a la escuela,
is her preferred greeting in the morning.
I hear my *Apa* not saying much
because he's tired,
and was never hugged as a child.

I hear my *abuelita torteando* fresh tortillas before sunrise
CLAP, CLAP, CLAP.
My grandfather's pronouncement for another round of dominoes,
as sure as Vin Scully and Dodger Baseball in the evening.

I hear Alba and Ricardo fighting.
My *Tio Gollo* smiling.
Our American Dream gliding.
And I hear times gone by that will never be again.

My Name

I was born in Huejuquilla el Alto, Jalisco, Mexico to Concepcion and Ricardo Caldera. I know that I'm named after my dad's brother, Javier, who passed away right before I was born, but that's as much as I know. I have never really asked my dad for more details, and he's never been someone to share more than he needs to share. I'm embarrassed to admit that I know more about our surname -- Caldera. It's defined as a "collapsed volcano chamber" and you might encounter Caldera when visiting Yellowstone National Park or buying a new hot tub for your home (lucky you).

The name Caldera suits me just perfectly. People who know me might describe me as intense, under pressure (mostly self-assigned), strong or passionate. But collapsed means to me that I'm friendlier than most think, always cave when no one is looking, and the strength and passion are overrated.

If I had to describe my dad, I would use the same paradox. We are both very much like a volcano; as much as we don't talk to one another, we are very much like each other.



The Old Ebbitt Grill

“Which fork do we use first?”

Since its inception, Bright Star’s philosophy has been to provide a holistic education to our students -- mostly from the community of Mid-City, Los Angeles. One significant component of Bright Star’s approach is its Life Experience Lessons, colloquially referred to as LELs. Every summer, a select group of special representatives from each grade-level is provided an opportunity to travel to, see, hear, and smell for themselves a different part of the United States. As a teacher of the 8th grade for many years, the *fancy* steakhouse dinner with so many of my students and some of my closest friends and colleagues, in a private room at the Old Ebbitt Grill in Washington DC, renowned for being the oldest saloon in the country that has been the go-to hostelry for statesmen and military heroes throughout its history, will forever cherish a special place in my heart as the ultimate way to culminate a middle school experience.

The 4-course meal started with too many forks, the slurping of oysters, but ended in a group picture that captured an amalgamation of memories and dreams. “Start on the left...Elbows off...Don’t reach for the napkin too early,” students whispered to one another in gentle secret. As I paused to breathe the moment in, capture and hold it, I awed at what I saw: the sweaty-palmed young boys, and fidgety young girls dressed to impress -- bringing real fancy to the event -- learning to navigate new experiences thousands of miles from home. That night, for the first time, many of them tried oysters, ate salad, and ordered steak. “I want to try another one,” marinated with “what’s the name of that one drink with lemonade and ice tea?” as my students made themselves comfortable for a fun dinner with friends and, perhaps, comfortable for the sometimes lurking exclusivities of life.

“I’m full, but may I have another Arnold Palmer?”

“Hurry, we want to take a group picture before we go!”

The dinner was the ideal ending to a week that had my students experience late-night trips to the pharmacy for candy, private lessons on how to self-tie a tie, and last-minute lessons on table etiquette to compliment the itinerary: Mt. Vernon, Monticello, Georgetown, copious monuments and Smithsonians, the White House, and even Frederick Douglass’s house. Indeed, the Old Ebbitt Grill was a long way from Mid-City, but nothing short of what my students deserve.



This Is Me

When I'm by myself
And I close my eyes
Me pongo a pensar

I'm a silent lion camouflaged in the wheaten grass
Callado pero no invisible

I'm a worried duckling trying to conquer his journey across
La lucha siempre sigue

I'm a hungry beast seeking to quench his thirst
Siempre mejorando

I'm a worried bear cajoling her cubs into a new day
¿Y quien lo esta?

I'm the road and the summit of the mountain top
hasta el final

What I care to be
Soy quien soy
Is me



Eileen Leckenby



What is your greatest extravagance?

Books. I would spend my entire paycheck on books if I could.

If you were a basket of 4 secret ingredients, what would you be?

A heavy helping of empathy, a serving of joy, a dash of intelligence, and a sprinkle of drive.

What has mattered to you most about our invitational?

I am grateful for the community that we built. I never would have believed a group of people could have come together on Zoom the way we did! I am also appreciative of this season in my life where I have been able to throw myself into professional learning and intense personal growth. I had been feeling stagnant and cynical, and the Invitational has lit a fire in me again.

Forever

I'm sorry I wrote a note
About all the reasons I hate you
You were standing by the washing machine
In the dim light of the garage

I handed you the folded note
Convicted that I wanted to hurt you
I watched your eyes read in my hate
Calmly, stoically
You folded it up and
Put it in your pocket
And looked me straight in the eye and said
"I'll keep it forever"

It felt like a gut punch
Instant, bitter regret coursed through me
Forever was too long for my words to stay with you
I already wanted them back

*A mother's love is unconditional
Which must be why we put them through
More than we would ever ask another human to endure*

Years later, as an adult, I asked about the note
You looked at me with confusion
You had no memory of the moment
I felt my exhale of relief in every cell of my body
The image of you reading that note over the years
Haunted me
You could have devised no better punishment
Than the hammer blow of *"I'll keep it forever"*

No matter how many years old I am
I am always most at home with I'm with you
My identity as a mother,
Fashioned after you
No one has ever loved me
As fiercely as you;
Your selfless example-
I'll keep it forever.

The Time-Out Corner

“Mommy, I threw it again.”

“Go to time-out!”. With a sigh, I heave my oversized-belly and weary body and waddle down the hallway behind Wyatt’s retreating form. This was the 4th time in 20 minutes that Wyatt threw a toy off our second-story balcony. At this point, I was intentionally ignoring him because I was tired of catching him being naughty. I didn’t want to have to follow up with a time-out. However, Wyatt is nothing if not honest, and he is happy to tell on himself.

He trots down the hallway and gleefully turns the corner and sits in the hallway corner, tucked away by the laundry room and the guest bathroom. He looks so cheerful about being in time-out, I feel my blood pressure rise.

In my mind, I can hear the voices of my parents, “Make it more unpleasant, then!”. The constant tug-of-war between who I want to be as a parent (calm, gentle, and firm) and what I know best (strict, authoritative) rises to the fore. I attempt to make the time-out more unpleasant for this little human that I swore to nurture and love by insisting that he puts both hands on the wall, like I’m a power-hungry police officer. The second the words come out of my mouth, the pit in my stomach over the unnecessary power struggle grows, as does my regret. He sprawls on the floor, limbs spread, and rolls around, refusing to comply. I lose this round.

Today will not be the day I resolve my parenting-identity battle. As the day wears on and the time-out count increases, I find myself becoming shriller and colder. My temper, usually buried so deep, rises to the surface, and my bad mood hangs over the house ominously. Finally, Kacey says, “Why don’t you just go to bed? I’ll put the kids down at bedtime,” and I do, feeling like a failure as a mother. I lock myself in the bedroom at 6pm and ignore the sounds of bedtime routine when the time comes.

Later that night, Kacey pokes his head in the door and tells me that Wyatt is still awake. I waddle back down the stairs and come into his room. He’s lying in his bed holding a book, and says, “Mommy, you forgot to read to me!” He can’t imagine a world where I *chose* not to put him to bed because I was so angry and frustrated. His child’s mind has completely forgotten our power struggles, and my bad mood. He hands me the book and we curl into each other. We read about the adventures of Spot, the puppy who hides from his mommy, in a lift-up flap book (I ignore that he had ripped off every flap hiding Spot before I came in the room). I take his easy forgiveness as an example, and I resolve to forget the trials of the day and to stop beating myself up for my shortcomings.



Melina Melgoza

9th-12th grade Social Studies and Ethnic Studies Teacher, Roybal Learning Center

Your three favorite books:

I am described as having an “eclectic taste of books.”

My current top three reads are:

- Glennon Doyle's *Untamed*
- Angela Davis' *Freedom is A Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*
- Any well-written romance novel I can get my hands on. JoJo Moyes? Yes, please.

What is your greatest extravagance?

Overly-priced coffee, books, and travel.

What is your favorite part of teaching?

Teaching is my way of leaving a mark on the world. My students give me hope in the future.

What has mattered most to you about our invitational?

Being in a group that loves writing as much as me inspires me to put my best writing self out there. Before the invitational, I questioned myself in calling myself a writer. Now, I can proudly and confidently say that I am a writer.

Metamorphosis
By: Melina Melgoza

I am in a constant state of metamorphosis.

A seed germinating into a beautiful marigold, I am fragile and breakable, but providing light and sunshine to the world at every opportunity. I am ancestrally rooted in Mexico and transplanted to the United States of America, creating my own roots in Los Angeles, California.

I am fresh soil, deeply grounded and ready to foster growth to all that lets me in, searching for crops of people and sowing seeds of resistance and resilience.

A daughter of *inmigrantes*, I am also a *mariposa*: the first generation to crawl on American soil from birth. I am the first generation to shed the deeply embedded cocoon of *machismo*. The first generation to undo years of generational trauma. I am the first generation to spread my wings and fly into the unknown with no looking back.

My experiences mirror the resplendent colors of the Quetzal's feathers. Iridescent gold, green, brown, and gray, I am as unique as the generational dreams, hopes, and aspirations my ancestors have woven into my blood.

My ancestors' ceiling is my floor and it is upon their shoulders that I stand, forever humbled and beholden. A firm believer in revolutionary change and radical transformation, I am a *mariposa*, a seed, a *Quetzal*, a *maestra* committed to working everyday of her life to create a more just world. I believe in leaving the world a better place for the future generations that will one day look back at their ancestors with pride, hope, and dignity.

Revolution flows in bloodlines.

Mija

By: Melina Melgoza

Every step I take, I hear the delicate whisper of “*Mija*” in my ear
It is all the *mujeres* who have lived, fought, and died for me to be here

Mujeres sufridas

Mujeres silenciadas

Mujeres encarceladas

Every step I take, I hear the sound of chains crashing against the ground
It is all the *mujeres* whose ankles have been tied to the land

Mujeres calladas

Mujeres tristes

Mujeres soñadoras

Sometimes, I hear silence

It is all the *mujeres* who had no place for them to spread their wings and fly

The *mujeres* who silently cried themselves to sleep

The *mujeres* who waited for the day to leave...the day of their liberation that never came

I come from *mujeres* who spend their lives looking for freedom

Mujeres revolucionarias

Mujeres poderosas

Mujeres

There is no key to liberate the *mujeres* who fought for me to be here

The *mujeres* who gave their hearts to keep me safe

The *mujeres* who fell apart to keep me together

A burden and a blessing: I am their revolution, their newly found voice, their forever liberation

Revolution

By: Melina Melgoza

I preach revolution to the world

Revolutionize education

Reimagine the world

I dream far and wide about the endless possibilities

Sometimes I forget,

My existence in spaces that weren't built for me is a revolution in itself

My mere presence is the revolution

Doing *lo que quiero* is my revolution

Simply existing is a revolution

44

By: Melina Melgoza

44 is the number of years it took my *abuelita* to feel free in the land of the free
Huyendo de un destino cruel, 1975 marked the date of her *pasaje a los Estados Unidos*
She folded herself up like a letter, stamped and ready to be mailed out in the trunk of a car

For 44 years, my *abuelita*'s land of the free was full of

Miedos y desprecios

Deportations, again and again

Crossing the border, again and again

Finding *trabajo*, again and again

Not out of want, but out of need

Flashbacks of crosses in the desert plagued her memories

hoping the next cross wasn't her or her children

Fue una vida difícil llena de noches tristes y falta de abrazos

Nevertheless, she held her head up high knowing everything she did was with *dignidad*

Arriving to the United States without anything, she gave her children and grandchildren

el regalo más grande de la vida: fuerza y fortaleza

1975 marks the approximate year of my grandmother's arrival on American soil

In the last 44 years,

my *abuelita* has been waiting for the day she can call herself truly American.

September 24, 2019 was that day for her.



Danielle Bulante

High School English Teacher, Roosevelt High School

If you were a basket of 4 secret ingredients, what would you be?

1 cup of rice (Adjust measurements as needed. Sometimes you need to go back and get seconds, that's ok!)

½ Tablespoon of pitbulls

¼ Cup of ocean water

1 Teaspoon of tears #cancersignproblems

What brings you the most happiness?

Warm, summer nights in Los Angeles spent with friends or family.

What is your favorite part of teaching?

Sharing laughs with my students!

What has mattered most to you about our invitation?

I really appreciated being a part of a space that honored the vulnerability of everyone who shared. I felt heard and seen. I am so thankful I was able to build community with so many amazing people!

Braids
By Danielle Bulante

Step 1: Cross over the ocean

And skip over the painful goodbyes.

Step 2: Cross over the ocean

And create a new life.

Step 3: Continue crossing...

Over poverty,

the painful twangs that plagued your belly.

Over language barriers,

desires to be heard, yet also remain invisible.

Over grief and loss,

he was your only partner in this foreign home.

Over loneliness,

"There must be a way."

Step 4: Stop, admire your work. Tie it off with the smiles of a young child.

Your granddaughter,

she will be able to live free.

She is your wildest dream come true.

Teach Me Your Name
By Danielle Bulante

BULANTE

Embedded in my name's fabric is the
desire to live.

Desire

Fueled the back-breaking work
Our crossing of the ocean
Our navigation of a hostile country.

"You are not from here, nor there"
Displaced. Without a home.
Diaspora embodied.

And yet, life found
My lolas
My mom
Me.

Adobo

By Danielle Bulante

Garlic, soy sauce, vinegar. *Hmm...I know that smell.* I turn the corner to find my lola hunched over the cutting board, masterfully flicking her knife to cut pieces of chicken.

That's when I know. Immediately, I run towards the room where I find my sister sleeping.

"STEPH. LOLA IS MAKING ADOBO." Her body perks up to meet my excited eyes.

"Okay, I have a pen and a piece of paper. Are you ready to do this?"

My sister and I are both in our twenties. At this point in our lives, we have attempted to cure our homesickness and feed our nostalgia by creating our own versions of this beloved dish; but, there was always something missing.

There was too much garlic. Not enough garlic. Why is the sauce so watery? It only tastes like vinegar. The chicken is tough.

Today is finally the day to get it right once and for all.

The kitchen suddenly feels so full, crowded by the bodies of three small women. Peering into the pot, our noses are welcomed by the scents of our childhood. We are suddenly transported to warm, summer days spent underneath the tangerine tree; in front of us baskets lay full of fruit that we worked so hard to pick. We are tired, but proud, proud that we can help our grandma with one of her many tasks.



I am now looking at the same hands that picked fruit and cooked adobo for us in our youth. They are harder now, worn down by years of caring for others. But something that remains is her never-ending love, the kind of love that won't let you walk away from the dinner table without finishing your plate. The kind of love that washes you over with warmth.

"Steph, we need to write this recipe down."

This is something that I don't want to forget.

Sayra Santillanes

High School Spanish
Math, Science, And Technology Magnet Academy @ Roosevelt



What brings you the most happiness?

Seeing my family and loved ones together.

Which living person do you admire?

My mother.

What is your favorite part of teaching?

Building relationships with my students and seeing how resilient they are. Teaching high school is a unique experience. I've seen former students graduate college and some even pursue a career in teaching.

**What has mattered most to you
about our invitational?**

I truly appreciate the time and commitment of my colleagues during our time together. I have learned so much from everyone. Through this invitational I have done what I haven't in years, which is write about things that are important to me. It has sparked my interest in writing a children's bilingual book in the near future.

“How To Train For A Marathon”

Identify the date of the marathon and plan for 6 months of training. Now, someone can run a marathon with as little as 2-3 months and for others it can take up to a year of training; it would really depend on your current physical health and your stamina. Give or take 6 month is appropriate for a first time long distance runner in good health.

First you begin your training in the Jeff Galloway method where you jog for a certain amount of time (let's say two minutes) and then walk for 30 seconds. The purpose of this important step is to get your body comfortable running while preventing injuries. First week of training focuses on running/jogging for short periods of time. 20-30 minutes about 3-4 times a week. I would repeat this process for a second week.

From then on, your training would be completed by setting small distance goals. As an example week four and five would consist of the following: on day 1 and 2 your goal would be to run three miles each day and on day 3 or 4, depending on how many days a week you are running, would be your long distance day. For week three and four long distance days can be 4-5 miles.

After the first month of consistent jogging or running, you continue the same routine for the next couple of months by gradually increasing your distance. Some focus on keeping a certain pace throughout their training but I would recommend focusing on your stamina by jogging or running as much as possible without walking. Little by little you should be able to jog or run for longer periods of time and push your body further.

A sample training schedule for six month can look like this:

Week 1	Day 1: run/jog 20-30 mins	Day 2: run/jog 20-30 mins	Day 3: run/jog 20-30 mins	Day 4: run/jog 20-30 mins
Week 2	Day 1: run/jog 20-30 mins	Day 2: run/jog 20-30 mins	Day 3: run/jog 20-30 mins	Day 4: run/jog 20-30 mins Goal: 3.1 miles 5k
Week 3	Day 1: 3 miles	Day 2: 3 miles	Day 3: 3 miles	Day 4: 4-5 miles
Week 4	Day 1: 3 miles	Day 2: 3 miles	Day 3: 3 miles	Day 4: 4-5 miles
Week 5	Day 1: 3 miles	Day 2: 3-4 miles	Day 3: 3-4 miles	Day 4: 5-6 miles

Week 6	Day 1: 4 miles	Day 3: 4 miles	Day 3: 4 miles	Day 4: 6.2 miles/10K
Week 7	Day 1: 4 miles	Day 2: 4-5 miles	Day 3: 4-5 miles	Day 4: 7-8 miles
Week 8	Day 1: 4-5 miles	Day 2: 5-6 miles	Day 3: 4-5 miles	Day 4: 7-8 miles
Week 9	Day 1: 5 miles	Day 2: 4 miles	Day 3: 5-6 miles	Day 4: 9.3 miles/15k
Week 10	Day 1: 4 miles	Day 2: 4 miles	Day 4: 5-6 miles	Day 4: 8-9 miles
Week 11	Day 1: 5 miles	Day 2: 7 miles	Day 3: 5-6 miles	Day 4: 10-11 miles
Week 12	Day 1: 5 miles	Day 2: 8 miles	Day 4: 5-6 miles	Day 4: 13.1 miles half marathon
Week 13	Day 1: 5 miles	Day 2: 4 miles	Day 3: 5 miles	Day 4: 8-9 miles
Week 14	Day 1: 5 miles	Day 2: 7 miles	Day 3: 5 miles	Day 4: 10 miles
Week 15	Day 1: 4 miles	Day 2: 8 miles	Day 3: 6 miles	Day 4: 14 miles
Week 16	Day 1: 5 miles	Day 2: 7 miles	Day 3: 5 miles	Day 4: 10 miles
Week 17	Day 1: 6 miles	Day 2: 8-9 miles	Day 3: 7 miles	Day 4: 15 miles
Week 18	Day 1: 6 miles	Day 2: 10 miles	Day 3: 8 miles	Day 4: 18 miles 30K
Week 19	Day 1: 5 miles	Day 2: 4 miles	Day 3: 4 miles	Day 4: 10 miles
Week 20	Day 1: 4 miles	Day 2: 6 miles	Day 3: 7 miles	Day 4: 13.1 miles
Week 21	Day 1: 4 miles	Day 2: 5 miles	Day 3: 6 miles	Day 4: 10 miles
Week 23	Day 1: 5 miles	Day 2: 7 miles	Day 3: 5 miles	Day 4: 12 miles
Week 24	Day 1: 5 miles	Day 2: 4 miles	Day 3: 3 miles light jog	Day 4: 26.1 miles marathon

And finally, there it is! The moment you have been training for, for months. As you approach the finish line you can't help but to feel emotional. By this point thoughts that have crossed your mind may include: "why am i doing this again? Is it almost over? Ouch! It hurts here and there!" But all of that goes away, just for a couple of seconds and you cross that finish line...

It seems so wrong....

It seems so wrong that we consider straight slick hair more beautiful than big curly hair (but why?? Curly hair is so uniquely shaped. It is the ocean waves cresting and Tigger's springy tail, some twist right while others twist left, not one curl is like the other.. There is volume, life and texture. There is a combination of 2C, 3a and 3b curls all in one head. It requires unique care, deep conditioning, some clarifying and a variation of styling. Why should we have to straighten our hair to be considered beautiful? Why does my hairdresser continue to recommend a brazilian blowout "it would look so beautiful she said" I shake my head from left to right. I refuse to continue burning my hair. I refuse to hold back my hair from doing what it wants. It is free. I am free at last!

Ni de aquí, ni de allá

Piel de cajeta, sangre azteca;
Desde la serpiente de plumas, hasta los profetas.

Antepasados ocultos, el historiador culto,
Altura de rascacielos, ojos del cielo.
Antepasados ocultos, la madre segura,
descendencia azteca, corazón sin abertura.

La madre de Dios nos espera,
para rezarle por nuestra vida eterna.
Huitzilopochtli nos ilumina la vía,
Para darle fruto a cada día.

Xochiquétzal ascenderme a mi realidad,
que esta neplantera está llena de turbiedad.
Tierra desconocida, lluvia cada día,
la justicia llegará algún día.

Calladita y bien portada,
desde ahorita digo no es parte de mi programa.
Aztlán ha sido arrebatada
por los hipócritas de doble cara.

Es hora mi pueblo
de levantarnos de este hoguero.
Juntos seremos
la victoria del encierro.



Nora Zepeda

Professor of Spanish, East Los Angeles College

What is your greatest extravagance?

Traveling is my greatest extravagance. I love to go back to Spain and Italy and discover a new place each time I'm there. It is my favorite luxury.

What brings you the most happiness?

It may sound corny, cheesy or cliché but waking up every day and doing the things I love brings me the most happiness. I think the key to happiness is being grateful for your health, your life and the people in it. I have many passions: reading, writing, teaching, traveling. Honestly, though, the simple pleasure of waking up and having my morning coffee brings me immense pleasure and happiness.

What is your favorite part of teaching?

My favorite part of teaching is transmitting my love for my first language to my students while teaching them how to be critical thinkers and encouraging them to be citizens of the world.

What has mattered most to you about our invitational?

It has felt luxurious to write every day. What has mattered to me the most is the awakening and healing I have experienced. I have been awakened to new ways of thinking about my own writing as well as how I can introduce what I have learned to my students. In terms of healing, my mind and heart have been opened to writing once again. This invitational provided a safe and welcoming space and made this healing possible.

Only Four?

For their basket of four, they say,
“We’ll often try,
certainly in an entree,
to have a grain or starch
or one ingredient that is substantial,
whether it’s a protein or produce.
But there’s no hard and fast rule
that there has to be this, there has to be that.”*
Is it, then, a little of this and a little of that?
Am I the ingredients that yield a spicy, smooth, salty treat?
Or am I a fleshy, sweet, juicy mango, limón, aguacate y tajín?
What is sugar and spice, sometimes salty?
I am spicy and sweet, strong but not bitter,
Damn it, do I have to be ingredients?
Can I be a slice of buttered wheat toast, perfectly toasted,
a firm poached egg, soft to the touch, but not runny,
a little pepper on top, sometimes jalapeños, instead, for some heat?
Four ingredients you say?
Why can’t I be a buffet?

The Geography of my Heart

Drop a pin and begin
in Newport, Rhode Island,
that's where our family was formed,
and my heart's geography begins.
For the next pin, west we drive,
my sister, mother, father and I
until in California we arrive,
530 Isabella Drive,
Kindergarten, a new baby sister,
as I turn five.
We are five: my sisters, parents and I
When we board a plane,
destination? Madrid, Spain.
We reside in Alcalá de Henares, birthplace of Cervantes,
Churros con chocolate, learning how to read, me late.
La casa de Cervantes, el Retiro in Madrid, tortilla de patata,
just a few of my favorite things.
By car we travel through France to Italy,
to the air base in Aviano,
for more than a year we will live in Roveredo in Piano.
Hotel Oliva, a dog named Bambi,
glassblowers in Venice, the beach in Bibione,
snow in Piancavallo,
Oh, the places my heart will know!
The odor of pizza I still recall,
lifelong friends whom I adore, allora
It's back to Spain for this party of five,
Madrid again for a length of time:
3rd grade, 4th grade, 5th grade, 6th grade
Hotel Bedel, Royal Oaks, Alcobendas, el pueblo,
chorizo, jamón serrano, gazpacho, lomo,
¡te la has calao, bacalao!
Camping in Valencia, haircuts by David, gatherings on the weekends,
Mapped onto my heart is the convivencia,
as my Mom explains: it is when friends become familia.
Encarni, Antonio, Marisa, David, Esther, Pedro, Eva, Juan, Gonzalo y Jorge,
You will always be, my Spanish family.
Back in California, we are five, together we will always be,

bound by my heart's geography.

librecht baker

English Composition, Los Angeles Community College District and California State University,
Dominguez Hills



Who is your hero of fiction?

Binti from the *Binti* trilogies

Your three favorite books:

Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, *The Vodou Quantum Leap: Alternate Realities, Power, and Mysticism* by Reginald Crosley, M.D., and *Black Quantum Futurism: Theory & Practice, Vol. 1* compiled by Rasheedah Phillips

What is your greatest extravagance?

Travel

What is it that you most dislike?

I dislike people's fear of the unknown, i.e. xenophobia, ageism, homophobia, transphobia, racism, classism, etc. because their fear and the choices and actions they make initiated by their fear are harmful, predatory, and dangerous.

What is your favorite part of teaching?

My favorite part of teaching is the ongoing teaching-learning exchange that happens between the students and I; the people in my classroom are also teachers as I am a student. Likewise, supporting students in their writing process while co-facilitating community building, getting to know to them personally, having conversations, and seeing them make discoveries about themselves as college students are also beloved aspects of teaching.

dear librecht: epistolary (part 1)

by librecht baker

sometimes, for 21 days or 504 hours, you had no writing ritual
when imagination humidified your dry panting urge for penning paper, you let
a slug exhume your potted calathea orbifolia soil-self

silver trail

sometimes, at intervals, you turn off the primordial motheresque hum
in morning hours because coffee after water for breakfast cramps your stomach
you want to continue praying, but stomach churns a vibration

persistent lulling

sometimes, rarely, when a person gifts you dying brightly peach, magenta, and chalky color
flowers with green leaf plumage cut from stems and drizzled in pesticides, you
despise fragrant bound bouquet because death's illusion of living in a vase stinks

gentle ritual

sometimes, incessantly, you inhale your right armpit's scent as lemon juice rubbed into pores
deodorizes at will while rosewater sprayed on top lemon juice pressed into newly
hairless pores similarly perfumes at will

nicked skin

sometimes, occasionally, you're tired because you eat sporadically, but not fasting
as if you seek rare worms slithering somehow beneath trampled
city cement cloaked lateral sewer lines

vertigo

sometimes, frequently, you awaken during twilight, post liquor-lush bent hours
you'll think *in a future-past, i'll be a silent hum eventually*, but there's Sinaa, Lanette, Mel, Torre
and others

humidifying breath

sometimes, lately, visioning a slow slinking serpent consuming you, ori to feet, but
there is no slithering rainbow snake in your home, but instead, it is you
circumnavigating meaning and needing hearth heat

sun starshine alignment

2

sometimes, oddly, you, a Black bop, are the only you in the room, so chop and screw your thoughts, a leviathan levitation, and sip rooibos tea, so when Black bop is beckoned, recall dendroapis polylepis' venomous thoughts about Black bops aren't your mental meandering

crown on coils



Nicole Chiarella

First grade teacher, Sylvan Park Elementary School

Who is your hero of fiction?

Hermione Granger

What is your greatest extravagance?

Exorbitantly priced candles

What is your favorite part of teaching?

Connecting with and building relationships with students

What has mattered most to you about our invitational?

Being surrounded by other educators who feel as passionately as I do about writing, education, and social justice, has motivated me in so many ways. I look forward to seeing each person in our cohort go on to do amazing things for the next generation, and transform our ideas and application of education.

loose laces

By Nicole Chiarella

one two three they line up for you to tie their shoes; one with wet laces fresh out the bathroom (death); one with huge knots up and down both strings like climbing rope

the third girl; laces crossed and tied at her ankle

you look like a ballerina, you tell her

you think of the jewelry box you had when you were little, with the dancer who spun in dizzy circles when you opened the lid

you are not going to cry

when she walks away she closes her eyes and laughs as she hops, too happy for both feet to be on the ground

an invisible string that goes from your heart to their small, dirty sneakers gets pulled taut, until it's long enough to walk across like tightrope

'teach me how to do it' they beg; how to write a lowercase M, draw a dinosaur, tie their shoes; throw a ball

you want to tell them that every part of you is trying

you're going to change the world, you tell them

they blink. ask you, *when is recess?*

but when you get home, you have to empty all the acorns and quarters, loose beads and small, plastic toys from your pockets
those small, reverent gifts placed in your hands

you didn't know you could hold love like that

you keep their notes in drawers and tucked into sweater pockets, your name misspelled and backwards

they draw you bigger than every planet, the sun orbiting around you and your full-body halo and you think, *jesus*, how can we ever hope to love like a first grader?

you don't know how to tell people that hearing room 37 laugh is the only sound that ever really makes you feel calm anymore, and that you like their endless questions and range; the way they get quiet when you read to them

every day you look at their smiles, crooked with missing teeth like broken fences and all you can think about is that Leonard Cohen quote; something about how the cracks are how the light gets in

there are times when you feel so much joy looking at them that it makes you want to sit down.

you will not cry, at least, not in front of them

your eyes feel different and tired at night. you will think about that time before dinner and a bath and bedtime when you were little, when your parents were cooking dinner and your brothers were wreaking havoc and the sky was a soft orange in-between

how recklessly you spent that time; like it would be for always

you will read the giving tree in a new way that makes your teeth hurt and your hands shake. you will miss your mother.

you will think of that tree and look down at your bruised knees from sitting at chairs and tables that are too small for you

you will peel off the stickers that students press onto you as they walk by

this time, you will let yourself cry

One of them will announce it to the class; *she's crying because she loves us*

you'll find a scratch n sniff sticker pressed thoughtfully to the top of your shoe at a terrible bar downtown, where a guy tries to tell you you're smart for a pretty girl and anyway, he's fiscally conservative but socially progressive

you will go home and cut and paste small stars on pieces of construction paper
you'll wish for more time, more paper clips, more copies on the copying machine

you will wish you had more words to explain the grief that comes with growing up; like a funeral for an imaginary friend

you will listen to David Bowie on repeat and start counting again

you will get home and stretch your spine to the ceiling after sitting hunched all day, tying shoes



Pravin Srihari Kaipa

7/8th grade Special Education teacher, Thomas Russell Middle

Who is your hero of fiction?

Santiago from the Alchemist

What is your greatest extravagance?

Travel/Food

What is your favorite part of teaching?

I love the moment when a student understands something like a theme or symbolism for the first time and it changes how they view a reading or a story. “Mr. Kaipa, THAT’S what you meant?! Oh man, that’s so cool!”

What has mattered most to you about our invitational?

I loved the opportunity to just learn with a community of teachers with different experiences who brought a vast amount of experiences at different levels of education. We had people who taught kindergarten all the way to college; who taught history to special education; people who had taught for over ten years and people who just started teaching. There was so much to learn that I’m going to spend a week after this just going through and putting something from each person into practice in my classes.

Rainy Pizza

“Oh no, it looks like it’s going to rain!”

My little sister Vidya always knew just what to say. We were in Bangalore, India to visit my parents homeland for yet another summer family vacation. We were outside celebrating a birthday because for once, the forecast didn't call for rain.

During Monsoon season in India, a day without rain was an excuse to go outside and today we were all set for a birthday picnic in the park. Unfortunately, our plans were ruined by the latest monsoon, or so I thought, when all of a sudden I heard:

“Andharu ki Pizza baghunda?” asked my grandpa in his native Telugu.

After a brief moment considering our options in the quickly drenched picnic area, my grandma, aunts, uncles, cousins, parents, and sister all murmured in agreement.

Pizza would be good, we all agreed, and we quickly walked across the street from the park, throwing away our rain-soaked picnic supplies on the way to a bright, glowing, dry, Pizza Hut.

The restaurant instantly felt right as we entered and were warmly greeted by the staff as we came in from the cold. As the night went on, we realized the experience of going to a Pizza Hut in America would never compare to what it was like that night.

A large clean restaurant with comfortable seating at the last minute for my entire extended family?

Check.

A Bollywood style birthday song complete with employees bringing out cake and dancing around our table?

Check.

Warm, delicious, customizable comfort food in the middle of a random monsoon for my sister's birthday?

Check.

Going to a Pizza Hut in the States was never the same after that day, but I guess you could say that night had all the ingredients of a perfect storm.

What's in a Name?

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet." I've read this line from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* many times in my life as the play seems to come back into my life at various points from when I was a high school student to my first year of teaching to now after having taught for over a decade. The line always touches me a little differently because I have always had an interesting relationship with my full name.

Sometimes I loved it, especially when I asked the woman of my dreams to marry me and she replied "Yes, Pravin!" and I blacked out because I was so excited.

Sometimes I was embarrassed by it, like when substitute teachers would add syllables and letters to my name so it became so jumbled I didn't even know my name was called.

Sometimes I tried to change it, like when I was so bullied I thought it would be a good idea to change my name for a week at Space Camp where no one knew who I was.

Ultimately, no matter how I felt about it, my name has always been:

Pravin, (Pronounced Prah-veen) meaning Expert in Sanskrit.

Srihari, (Pronounced Sree-hurry) meaning Vishnu the god of preservation and protection in Hindu Mythology.

Kaipa, (Pronounced Kai-pah) meaning the place in South India where my father's family is from.

I've been called a lot of names over the years but my favorites are the ones I hear that bring a smile to my face:

"Oh Pavni," the name my partner and her family call me as I try to use my meager Spanish skills to say something silly,

"Take a look at this article, Prav," the nickname my dad calls me as he's about to impart some wisdom.

"Yo P, heads up!" I hear from some of my friends especially when we're in the middle of a game of basketball.

"Mr. Kaipa, can you help me?" what my students call me as I try to help them discover their voice and realize that confidence which I struggled to find as a student

because I was so uncomfortable with myself and my name because an extension of that leading to me negating who I was whenever possible.

It just seemed easier to say my name was Paul Brown than have a week of people butchering my name because I wasn't confident enough to correct them.

It just seemed easier to introduce myself as P on the basketball court because I didn't want people yelling a mispronunciation of my name across the hoops.

It just seemed easier not to correct the substitute teacher because it was easier to be invisible than to speak up and say my name properly and cause a "scene".

My name may have many meanings but the meaning that I give it is what matters most, not necessarily the negative meanings I thought I needed to hide from by changing my name to make it easier for others to pronounce.

Now, as we reach a new digital age where there are hundreds of Pravin's on the Internet, there is only one Pravin Srihari Kaipa.

There is only one son of Prasad and Vinoda who took the first three letters of each of their names to give me my name and carry on our family legacy.

There is only one brother to my sister who is halfway across the U.S. but always just a call away to discuss politics, pets, or the latest plant in our respective gardens.

There is only one partner to my love, who took a chance on saying yes to me and who I strive to make proud every day.

There is only one of me.

Pravin.

Srihari.

Kaipa.

And the world's going to know my name. Just you wait.



Isabel Morales

8th grade US History teacher, Hollenbeck Middle School

Who is your hero of fiction?

Arya Stark of Winterfell. A fiercely loyal girl with righteous anger saving the world? YES.

What is your greatest extravagance?

Travel - I'm glad I completed my 40 x 40* challenge last year, before Corona the Dream Crusher entered the scene.

What is your favorite part of teaching?

I teach to change the world and uplift communities. It's so rewarding when I see students recognize and use their power!

What has mattered most to you about our invitational?

I loved to tell stories when I was younger, but I lost my identity as a writer somewhere along the way. Our invitational helped me reconnect with the desire to be heard. It nourished my creativity, and inspired new forms of expression I didn't even know I had! Over the past few weeks, I've written, arranged, and recorded a couple of songs - a project made possible by the newfound courage and confidence this experience provided.

Our invitational also gave me much-needed structure and purpose during a time when everything else felt so uncertain. I enjoyed developing relationships with my colleagues, and look forward to continued collaboration in the future!

* Forty countries by age 40; my deadline was November 2020!

vanessa



You stare directly at us, brown eyes and long eyelashes, wearing your standard-issue U.S. Army camouflage. Your photo circulates on social media, but the message has changed.

Back then, we wanted them to find you.

Salma Hayek shared your photo,
demanding answers from the military.

It took two months for them to find you.

Now, we demand a Congressional investigation, and a shutdown of Fort Hood.

Latino civil rights organizations shout:
Justice for Vanessa Guillen!
Military recruiters out of schools!
Students, don't enlist!

A teacher friend remembers you as a Cesar Chavez High School student, and writes,
*You embodied all of us trying to get out of the hood and make something of ourselves.
You put on the uniform to serve and protect but I wish that you would have been better
served and protected.*

I don't know you, and yet I do.

I cried.

I cried, for the life and dreams and light taken from this world, out there at Fort Hood.

You liked to post pictures of pregnant women, and couples in love, revealing your romantic desire to one day have kids and a husband of your own.

I cried for your family and your community in Houston, grieving this unimaginable loss.
I've read the report.

And I cried for the many young Latinos who join the military,
giving so much of themselves to a system that chews them up and spits them out.

I thought of my young cousin, who regrets ever enlisting.
He says he never experienced as much racism as he did when he joined the military.

I thought of another cousin, who goes to therapy for the PTSD he brought back from the Middle East. He waits months for appointments and lives with the knowledge that his particular assignment places him at high risk for developing cancer.

I cried for the countless women,
who face harassment and abuse
by a system that silences them.

I cried for me.



- C O R O N A B O M B -



With her bags packed, she said her goodbyes to her job, her students, her community, her friends and family, and boarded her plane for Amsterdam. This would be the longest time she would ever spend away from home, never having studied or worked anywhere outside of LA. She would spend six months in the Netherlands, conducting research, presenting at conferences, making new professional connections, and learning more about the global education landscape. In the next six months, she planned to travel around Europe, spend more time with her husband based in Germany, and decide what to do with the rest of her life. She smiled, imagining herself biking past tulip fields and drinking beer brewed by Belgian monks, when a voice interrupted her daydream.

"This is your pilot speaking. We have an unexpected situation. Unfortunately, we are unable to land at our scheduled destination. A Coronabomb has exploded, and the place we were headed to no longer exists."

Shit. What now?

"Visibility is low, and we are currently trying to find a safe place to land," the pilot continued.

"We're lucky, you know." An elderly woman held out an open bag of peanuts as she spoke.

"Lucky?"

"Yeah, we were in the sky when it happened. Think about the people on the ground. They're running around, putting out fires, taking care of the injured, breathing in sickness and disease. All we have to do is sit here and wait."

Sitting and waiting for an indefinite amount of time in the clouds of uncertainty was the last thing she wanted to do. She was a planner, who set and accomplished goals with ease. She craved security, and carefully formulated Plans B, C, and D in case things Plan A didn't pan out. She hadn't planned for this, however. Now, she was regretting ever stepping foot on this plane.

She shook her head, letting out a defeated laugh. *Of course this would happen right now, the one time I take a risk.*

She could feel the energy draining from her body as it began to shut down, a strategic act of self-preservation for a mind too overwhelmed to function. She closed her eyes, desperate to escape reality for a while.



Sarah Rager

4th grade teacher, Carthay School of Environmental
Studies Magnet

What is your greatest extravagance?

Pasta for lunch

If you were a basket of 4 secret ingredients, what would you be?

1. Winter squash: needs sun & ample growing space
2. Passion fruit: drought-resistant, tangy inside
3. Meyer lemon: sweet, but acidic
4. Avocado: resilient trunk, but fruit bruises easily

What is your least favorite part of teaching?

Saying goodbye every year.

What has mattered most to you about our invitational?

The teachers. I have been inspired by your courage, kindness, and trust throughout this difficult time. Everyone this summer has brought something unique and important to the invitational, both in your voices and in how you teach. This group has made me a better teacher, learner, activist, and writer--I am so grateful for all you have taught me.

I Am From

I come from a yellow house full of stories,
where in 1942, a family hid from its country,
and in 1992, my family learned from them,
remembered their fear, preserved their memories.

I am from seven centenarian oaks, then six, then five,
playing badminton over the power line,
running from side to side, always winning and losing,
the smell of Meyer lemons, sweeter than sour.

I am from Aunt Mildred, Great Uncle Jack, and Grandpa George,
whose heritage was lost in a misspelled last name,
I am from degagé and coupé and “tuck your belly in,”
an out-of-tune piano playing clumsy Chopin.

I am from Portland and Paris, San Luis Obispo and Seyðisfjörður,
the great Multnomah, and pink moments on the San Gabriel ridges.
I am from “Moon River,” cheesy movies, and pet names galore,
quiet fancies and tacit understandings from someone I adore.

I am from ventilators, convalescent homes, and hospital monitors,
the rallying support of family, friends and guardian angels,
if there ever were such things. I am from “Sorry, Charlies”
“deep yogurt,” and “don’t let the bed bugs bite.”

Many “See you soon,” but never “goodbye.”

The Rules Don't Apply Here

Nothing says “theater of experience” like the back of house in a busy restaurant kitchen. It is a rush of boiling water, a stampede of clogs, and an endless collection of unlabeled Styrofoam cups filled with the liquids that hydrate and medicate those moving in and out.

When I was little, waitresses were my version of superheroes. I was entranced by their grace—the apron tutus, the balancing trays, the pirouettes performed between tables. Until I was seven or eight, if you asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I could answer easily: a waitress.

My career as a waitress lasted two months. It was the summer after my freshman year of college and I had to stay in Portland to do an internship. My internship was unpaid, as most are. Thankfully, my roommate offered to recommend me for a server position at the country club where she sometimes worked. It was an old elite golf club, one that required memberships to be passed down through blood or business. The club sat on the banks of the Willamette River, where tour boats would pass by to share its storied history over a megaphone. The restaurant itself was scattered throughout several dining rooms, including a “casual,” tie-optional grill for golfers in the basement.

I should have known something was wrong when they hired me on the spot. Despite many years of practice playing pretend as a child, I was still not qualified to be a waitress. But especially not in a restaurant that required the knowledge of so many forks, or polishing silver, or folding napkins into swans. However, it was made clear that past experience would not matter anyway, because the club did not operate like most restaurants.

To begin orientation, I had to learn the official rules of the club. Members are never expected to order off a menu. Nor are they allowed to tip. It was very important that I learn the history of the club and all its most important members' names. I was expected to perform formal service etiquette, serving dishes from the left of the guest and retrieving them from the right. I was to start with older women first, unless the man was very important, which he somehow always was. I was told to sub in as a dishwasher when they were short-staffed. A more senior server told me to make the water hot enough that it left burn marks on my hands. She promised me my skin would grow tougher, and showed me her battle wounds to prove it.

Even though I was very underage, my job often involved rudimentary bartending. This was one of the many unofficial rules of the club; liquor laws did not apply to us. I was told to buy my own corkscrews and practice uncorking wine at home. “With what bottles?” I wondered. The club trademarked many of its own special cocktails, which we would make in pitchers to send out in to-go cups for golfers or for members who wanted “one for the road” as they headed home for the night. Because of our grand history and elite members, there was apparently no reason to card anyone either. And there were definitely no limits for how much we could serve.

I figured out the corkscrew, because I had a lot of opportunities to practice. One family came to the club for dinner every night, and would order two or three bottles of \$300 Chardonnay each time. I was supposed to wrap the bottle in a fancy napkin fold, and pour the wine while rotating my wrist in a way that forced any lingering drops on the mouth of the bottle back inside. I guess when you are spending that much on wine every drop really does count. But even after that intricate

dance, they routinely left a glass or two in the bottle. I only hope that someone in the kitchen finished it off later that night.

I tried my best to learn the ropes there. For my first few weeks as a waitress, I took home the menu each night to study it, along with the bar menu and wine list. I practiced serving and balancing plates in my dingy home kitchen, and tailed the head server each day with a list of questions tucked into my apron notepad. I always parked in the furthest spot from the building so that I didn't take up any space a member might want. But I also chose that spot, because during my lunches, I could sit there and cry in peace.

I was a terrible waitress. I forgot requests as quickly as they were made, spilled martinis with every clumsy turn, and never figured out the computer order system or how to tabulate (or keep) my receipts. I have never been one to banter, but especially not with people I don't like. And while there were a few kind members, I really hated most of them. I don't know what is worse, members not having to tip, or the older men who would stuff a twenty in my apron with a wink after their family harassed me all night.

I put in my two weeks notice before the summer ended. But I still learned some valuable lessons during my short stint as a server. One, waiters and waitresses really are superheroes, and they deserve so much money. And two, I don't have what it takes to be that kind of superhero.

iSearch: Tracking (Just a Start)

When we think about segregation in schools, we often think about how the income and race of a community drive school funding. We think of private versus public, and traditional public versus charter. Schools are segregated. That is a fact. But there are rare zones of integration where isolated communities come together, and the school is within the zone of intersection.

My school is one of these rare sites. I teach at the first environmental studies elementary magnet school in our huge district, and its focus draws families from all over Los Angeles. Magnet schools and bussing have been a historical force for school integration, and according to some, they have been a true success. However, that only accounts for part of the picture; while a school itself may be a diverse community, classrooms often are not.

Tracking is the act of sorting students into classrooms based on academic achievement. It is widely believed that tracking begins after students have begun state testing, and that those test scores are used to sort students into all their future classrooms. Really, tracking begins much earlier, before a student has even stepped through the door of their kindergarten classroom.

There is some rationale to tracking—by sorting students into like groups, some believe it is easier for teachers to meet the needs of all their students. We like to call it “differentiation,” but don’t get me wrong—differentiation is a different, magical beast.

Tracking is aptly named. The rail system is etched with a history of racism, and so are our schools. Before they can add, recite the ABCs, or even hold a pencil, we determine what path children’s education will take. Some students board a train that leads them to the best teachers, AP courses, and extracurricular opportunities. The other train moves perpendicular to that first track. It leads to lower quality teachers, endless language acquisition classes, and lower expectations.

I have seen how tracking segregates our students by language, race, and income. In elementary schools, the differences are already stark. They mirror the inequities of our larger educational system: the disparities in the makeup of students identified as “gifted,” or those identified as having special needs; in the presence of school police in some schools and not others; in the vastly different high school graduation rates. And since our educational system is itself a pipeline to the criminal justice system, let’s include the inequities of incarceration here as well.

I know this sounds bleak when I am talking about my own *little* students. First off, my students are not statistics and their futures are bright. But I also want to recognize that our elementary schools are making decisions that are placing students on an educational track before they even begin. And as teachers, we are part of that racist system.

As we think about everything going on in our world right now, the Black Lives Matter movement, the disproportionate effects of Covid-19 in black and brown communities, the ethics of having police officers and army recruiters on high school campuses, this question of tracking seems all the more important to me. Tracking is a force of systemic racism that undermines the goals of education and equity. This summer, I have barely scratched the surface of this question, but I am not done.

Angélica
Michelle
Reyes
Martinez



Ethnic Studies & World History Teacher, Santee Education Complex

1. Which living person do you most admire?

Angélica Maria Martinez Garcia. She left an entire country, everything and everyone she knew for the hope that I would have a better life. I will never be able to fathom the courage and strength it took to not only live through that but to thrive as a mother and as a person.

She paused her life to offer my sister and I everything. She is the sun walking among us, illuminating those in her path. Despite being denied an education at a young age, she taught my sister and I so much about the world. She taught us about the world, our positionality, education and countless other subjects. She ignited my curiosity and my growth mindset. She knew things that I didn't realize were graduate level theories until I reached college. Mi mami es la mujer mas chingona y fuerte que tengo la fortuna de conocer.

2. Which historical figure/fictional character do you most identify with?

Moana, I love the ocean. I challenge outdated and inequitable norms and try to reimagine what could be. She's also the first character to have dark curly hair like mine. Our power flows from it.

3. What is it that you most dislike?

I hate apathy, inaction and mediocrity. The world could be so much more if we cared and tried.

4. What brings you the most happiness?

Nathan's laugh makes my heart swell. Long hikes bring me peace. Helping people and animals. Engaging in acts of resistance makes me feel happy and powerful. Teaching. I feel like I can be myself fully when I am teaching. There are parts of me that no one outside of my classroom has ever seen.

Para mi otro yo

No le digas a nadie.

I'm only trying to protect you.

Tienes que trabajar más duro para demostrar que tu si sirves

Que tu si puedes

Que eres la mejor en el cuarto

En este país no nos quieren si no te preparas

You have to be essential

Here read this

"The more you read the more you know. The more you know the smarter you grow. The smarter you grow the stronger your voice when speaking your mind or making a choice."

Ama, I hate reading these books

They never talk about people like me, when will I even use this

Que?!!

Leelo otra vez.

And again!

Learn it.

Learn to love learning.

We can find you something that you love

Read it again

It's the only thing that will save you.

She was teaching me to survive

At the End We Giggle

My sister and I recently got new sandals. They are not broken in at all. Why did we decide to wear them to walk along mom as she sells raspados in the park. It's so hard to walk and it's so hot. "Ama, me duelen mis pies. Ya no quiero caminar, estoy cansada" says Ruth, my little sister. "Yo se. Yo también estoy cansada. Está pesado este carito. Pero metete abajo y duermete un ratito." That's my mom, offering to carry us adding to the 400 pound cart she's dragging around rough terrain in the park. Just then someone runs towards us to warn that they're coming. "Salubridad está a la vuelta. Corran." I saw fear and anxiety appear on my mom's face and I started to feel it too. We headed out of the park and up a huge hill. My mom vocalized her desperation. "Where do we go? Que vamos a hacer?" This man runs out of the park and tells us he lives halfway up the hill. We can hide the cart there. Even though they weren't looking for us, my sister and I hide next to the cart. My mom looked over at us squatting and tells us to get up. My mom reassures us that we will be ok. Even if they take the cart, I'll still be here and you'll be ok. She hugs us tight and starts to giggle. We look up confused. She reminds us that we couldn't walk earlier but had no issue running up that hill. In her arms, we all started to giggle too and hugged her tight.

When we experienced moments of policing, dehumanization and terror my mami was always there to hold us. We have taken that away from thousands of children who remain kidnapped and incarcerated in detention centers.

They don't get to giggle in their mami's arms.

La Luna

I often find the need to recharge my energy in the moonlight.
I ask her to give me strength, guidance and wisdom.
She's seen it all be done before.
She'll know what to do.
I guess this is what it's like to pray.
I recharge myself to face the world and set my head on straight.
I take a deep breath to blur the image in my head.
It's a 6 year old me bagging on a huge rocky wall the size of a mountain trying to tear it down
I'm pounding and crying and I don't stop but I'm tired.
One day I'll chip away at it. It'll be easier for the next person who'll pound this wall down.
I take a deep breath and remember all the moon's energy has helped me through.
I feel the power in my veins again.
It feels like the waves of an ocean filling me up, swiftly washing away my doubts. the pain.
The moon reminds me of what's already there.
Mi lucha continúa porque la luna me acompaña.

Sci-fi Dystopia

Some days I think about my reality and I realize I'm living in a book, a movie. I'm in the hunger games but Katniss isn't here to save us. Agents are ravaging my communities, kidnapping children, mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles. Hasta las abuelas. There's this huge jail on Alameda that cages up people just like me. I'm standing on the outside protesting for more school funding but I can hear them banging on the windows. They are me. But they're inside. I'm out here fighting for their captor's kids to have better funded schools but they are locking people like me inside. There's nothing separating us. Remember In'lak'ech. They are my other me. My heart is going to explode. How are we walking around like nothing is wrong? The world is on fire but no one's talking about the smoke. It can't just be me.
I read about Willem Van Spronsen, a man who attacked cars outside a detention center. They shot him dead. But not the guy who shot up a church. He got a burger and fries.
Another kid got shot today and there was another mass shooting too. My students want to talk about it but it's overshadowed by their tummy rumbling.

Limbo: Ni de aqui, ni de aya

Part of being undocumented is putting in all your effort IN CASE you get an opportunity that may never actually come. It's preparing, propping yourself up, carrying the emotional baggage knowing you might never get to do what you've been preparing for but you have no choice but to do it. If you don't, all of the sacrifices, the pain you're family endured are for nothing. Being undocumented is having coraje, starving for safety and peace. Yearning for a peaceful breath.

Like You

I testified for the Amicus Brief going to the Supreme Court today.
La niña tímida ain't shutting up today. Strong, resilient and beautiful like the nopal.
The LA Times wants me to write an Op-Ed. CNN wants an interview. Go write another Op-Ed.

The movement could use this humanization.
I reluctantly put my full name on my piece, knowing that my family could be further targeted. But,
this is nothing new. We already are. We have been. I've been afraid all my life.

I'm tired of being afraid.

I owe it to my people to fight back. To love back.

Es mejor morir de pie que vivir de rodillas. O no?

My son is watching. My sweet Nathan is learning. I hope he is.

"Mami, you're a Trump suer" If you can sue him, you can change anything.

No, we can change anything.

My students are watching too. They need to know the power we have.

"Ms., love us all. You should be president."

I can't under our current constitution. No naci aqui. Remember

"Well maybe we should change it. I bet we could."

My heart explodes. They recognize their power and it fills me with hope.

I can't let them think that "Pues que vamos a hacer" is good enough. No. Not for them.

I publish the piece and post it up online.

The comments flood in.

You are so strong they say to me

Like it's a choice to *sink or swim*

"We need more people like you!"

Yes we do.

But wait. NO!

No, there are millions of people like me.

You see the pain, you feel the loss.

Displaced. Ni de aqui ni de alla.

What we need is *you*.

We need you loud, unapologetic and raw.

Step the fuck up.

They'll reach out when they need the next sound bite of tragedy porn from the token
undocuemented woman.

That's not what makes me special.

El fuego en mis venas.

Self proclaimed chingona.

Just like my mami, and Yeya, and the women before her.

We need

The unsatisfied perfectionist bitch who doesn't back down.

She gets things done.

I get things done.

Que hoy sea el día que realizas

You can't be neutral on a moving train

Your inaction is your compliance.

She gets things done.

I get things done.

But so could
you
If *you* stopped pushing it all on
us.

My Perfect Brown Prince

I can deal with the microaggressions and the ones not so small
With the systems of oppression that presses up against us like a wall

I can play this game but where does it fit in
with my little prince?

I'm dry heaving at a loss for words.

That never happens.

I don't know if I should tell you.

I do and wonder

If you even understood.

Should I show you the monsters and teach you to fight back
or should I protect you and paint you a world with sugar, love and rainbows.

You deserve the flower and butterflies. To focus on science and coloring

But you don't have that privilege.

I created this fake dichotomy to pretend I have a choice

If I don't tell you, I'm not preparing you to survive

You need to see it but it's time for it to be a history lesson not a survival lesson

You are a collection of our dreams, hopes, coraje y el fuego de mis venas

Your brown skin is power

Your brown is beautiful

I say it a million times so you never try to wash it off

I point out the fire in our lineage so you recognize the hurdles

and how far we have soared

Despite *them*

Research scientist who look like you so you can feel pride

Knowing, seeing about the brilliance and resiliency you come from

Your self-love is power

May you feel pride when you look in the mirror

When you think of yourself

May you hold radical self-love

Your existence my Brown prince is resistance.

May you realize you are perfect

You are you

And

Always will be

More than enough



Emily Mi Smith

2nd Grade Lead Teacher, Citizens of the World Charter School

Who is your hero of fiction?

Captain Marvel!

What is your favorite part of teaching?

The relationships I build with the children I teach and their families. These children and parents become part of my extended family. Each year, new students enter my classroom, and every year thereafter, I am so lucky to be able to still watch them grow academically, socially and emotionally. It's truly a gift to be able to witness the change you've made in a child's life.

What is your greatest extravagance?

Workout clothes! Rationally, I know it makes no sense to spend more than \$30 on a pair of leggings, but when it's a staple in your wardrobe, then isn't it understandable to spend closer to 3x that much? I mean, especially when they feel like a second skin and feel silky to the touch and compress in all the right places? No? Just me? Okay then.

What has mattered most to you about our invitation?

The thing that has mattered the most in this invitation has been the friendships I've made. Everyone I've met has been so supportive and vulnerable in what they've shared. They have guided me, pushed me, questioned me and more importantly, I feel like they've become family. They have shown me the importance of taking risks in my learning and my writing. This cohort is unforgettable.

“Voices”

Unique in origin, but equal in value
Voices can be a window
into our minds
and our hearts
They are like waves that come
Crashing
to the shore
And as quickly as they flowed towards us,
Can ebb back
towards the ocean
They are yours, mines, ours.

“More Than a Meal”

If someone were to ask me, what food I wouldn't be able to live without, my answer would 100% always be “pasta.” Now pasta comes in many forms I know - macaroni, shells, lasagna, fettucini, ravioli, the list goes on and on. But it doesn't even end there! With all the different combinations of sauces, proteins, vegetables, etc. that could be added to the doughy goodness, the possibilities are truly endless.

It was two years ago when my husband, my son and I were venturing out of our comfort zone of predictable hotel dinners, and into the city that was San Diego. The restaurant was rather cozy, just enough space to seat about 8 tables. The light was dim and very deliberately decorated with reviews of the restaurant and black and white photos of the owners and previous guests. The menu was a simple-one pager and I was surprised at how comforted I was at the predictability of this.

“Cameron would have the spaghetti... I guess I can share with him.” I thought to myself as my eyes traveled from the menu items to the prices. You see, when you're a new mom and a teacher, and you're new to the idea of saving, a meal out in a small and cozy Italian restaurant is a luxury. It was a luxury I was excited, but also hesitant, to indulge in. I decided that I'd really go for it and order the fettuccine with a tomato cream sauce. My husband ordered shrimp scampi. I was not surprised as my husband and I have very similar tastes in food, and shrimp is kind of our mutual kryptonite.

Our waiter came to the table, a young man not more than 24 years of age, and asked us if we had any questions and if not, if we were ready to order. Our interaction didn't last more than a few minutes, but he seemed kind and while it was a small restaurant, he seemed like he had a mental list of "to-dos" and I didn't want to keep him longer than I needed to. I made note to myself to ask him about dessert. Why, you ask? Because I'm on vacation.

"A Letter to My Mom"

A Letter to my Mom

I walk in and already I can feel the disappointment
A disappointment so thick
It's like a caramel, a caramel that turns into quicksand
Pulling me deeper and deeper
Into sadness.

I see her on her knees
crouched down on the floor
Her hands swinging back and forth
Like windshield wipers
I scan the room and look for my heart
And I hear a giggle from the other room.

"Just leave it," I say... as I've said everyday
Everyday I come home and have left her
To care for my heart.
Or is it my hearts?

"How can you have Cam living in such
A dirty place?
Don't you ever clean?
This isn't good for his breathing. It's not
Good for a boy to grow up surrounded
By so much
Dust and hair."

I turn and look away before she can see
My face.
The sadness and the look of wanting to be
Accepted.

I want to tell her,
“Mom, we all make mistakes.
We aren’t perfect.
You, too, have made mistakes.”
But instead, I swallow my pride
And push my tears down
back into the dark, cavernous space
They’ve spent decades of their existence.

Today, I choose not to fight.
Rather, I choose to find the light.
So, I walk past her, through the tension,
Towards my heart.
I pull him closer to me,
Hug him tight.
In that moment, I find perfection and
Peace.

Top Chef- Ingredients Basket

I love food! I love how food can bring people together in the stages of investigating, researching, planning, shopping, prepping, cooking and finally eating and enjoying.

If I had to choose four secret ingredients that would fully encapsulate who I am as a person, I would have to start with my favorite staple of any meal- salt. Salt is such a simple item, very much like myself, rather basic, but can help to enhance flavors in other ingredients. A pinch in water to enhance the flavor of pasta and rice, a rubbing of it on your favorite go-to protein, or a sprinkle on my favorite summertime fruit, watermelon, to draw out its sweetness. It’s a highly underestimated pantry staple.

Next, I’d have to add rice to my basket. Rice has been a part of my diet for as long as I can remember. Standing next to my mom in the kitchen, pouring cups of rice into the pot of my rice cooker as my mom says, “Don’t forget to rinse it! Rinse the dirt off and the flour or you’ll get us all sick”, for the hundredth time, as if I’d never made rice before. Rice can be used to make a 9-course meal if so desired! It can be savory, sweet, sour, or bitter! It can be on the drier side or watery, like the thousand-year old egg porridge my mom used to make when I was sick. I’m the kind of

person who, for the most part, can be paired with so many different people or given different tasks and I'd do my best to work with what I was given.

The next ingredient that would be in a basket that would represent me is my favorite- cheese! Cheese is another staple ingredient! It can be used as a savory addition, or it can be the main focus. I'd like to think I'm similar in that respect- a great addition to a group, a team, or sometimes I can be the focus. I enjoy sharing what I know with others, and in my professional life, I tend to only take the spotlight when I have knowledge to share. So that's me... a salty, ricey, cheesy morsel.



Jeanette Gonzales

Kindergarten Teacher, Ranchito Avenue
Elementary

What is your greatest extravagance?

Shoes! I LOVE shoes! I grew up poor so we didn't have too many of them. The shoes that we did have were always a size too big so that they would last longer. I spent a lot of time running around barefoot outside as a kid because we always had to take care of our shoes. We didn't wear them unless we were going somewhere. Now that I can afford them, I buy them. I think they're so much fun!

What is your favorite part of teaching?

Watching the students learn is my most favorite part of teaching. When a lesson is going amazingly well and all of the students are engaged and excited about learning, I feel electric. It's like electricity is actually running through my body. That's when I feel the most alive. It's absolutely magical!

What brings you the most happiness?

My faith in God and my family. I would not be able to do anything in life without either one of them. My family has supported me in everything I've ever done. They are my most favorite people and my faith in God has guided us all.

What has mattered most to you about our invitational?

I've been able to rediscover my voice through writing and share it with others. It's forced me to step out of my comfort zone, be ok with being vulnerable, and grow as a writer and person. It's allowed me to be part of a bigger community of writers and like minded educators. The level of excellence exhibited by the other participants has been amazing and inspiring. It's been a great experience!

Butterfly Girl

“Put your shirt on!” I yelled at my two year old daughter Lucia. “Hurry up! We’re going to be late”. She just stood there looking at me blankly. Unmoving. Why wasn’t she getting dressed? She had just spent the previous day trying on different costumes for Halloween. She took such pride in putting everything on by herself. It made her feel like a big girl but today, nothing. She was a generally sassy little girl so I thought that maybe she was just being defiant. My patience was quickly disappearing. I had taken the day off of work to take one of her brothers to the doctor and now we were going to be late. As we headed out, I kept rushing her along the walkway towards the car by the scruff of her shirt. It wasn’t until I buckled her into her carseat that I noticed that she felt hot and was very lethargic. One of her brothers had brought home a bug from school a month earlier. It had cycled through all of her other siblings for weeks so naturally I thought, “She must be coming down with the same thing.” The night before had been a restless one for her. I had given her Tylenol for the fever but this was different. She was on fire.



I told my husband that something didn’t seem right and when we got her back home, she was even more floppy and listless. He immediately called the doctor to make an appointment as I dashed off to call one of my friend’s to come over to pick up our other infant daughter. As we waited for my friend to arrive and pick up the baby, we couldn’t help but wonder what was wrong with Lucia. It was serious but we didn’t know what exactly it was.

We rushed her to our local Kaiser where they examined her from head to toe. Her arms weren’t moving, she was having trouble lifting her right leg to walk, and was still on fire. The doctor went away after examining her and didn’t come back for about an hour. As we sat there nervously waiting, we couldn’t help but wonder what was wrong but instinctively knew that it was something serious because he was gone for so long. When he finally came back, the look on his face said it all. He said, “She needs to go to the hospital immediately. She has a virus. We called the Kaiser downtown and have made arrangements for her to be admitted. They will be expecting you within the next 2 hours. They have a bed ready for her. They will need to run further tests on her. Will you be able to take her right away after we finish here?” My husband and I didn’t know what to do. Panic started to set in and we said, “Yes!”

We rushed home, scrambled to pick up some of her things, dropped her brother off with my friend and made the 30 minute drive to the big Kaiser hospital downtown.

October 10, 2016 was one of the absolute worst days of our lives. When we got to the hospital we didn't know that it would be the beginning of a long journey for all of us. Our other four children all but became invisible in the following months as we took turns staying at the hospital caring for Lucia. The doctors said she had the much dreaded Enterovirus D68, the mysterious polio-like virus we had all been hearing about on the news that was randomly paralyzing children across the country. She was immediately put in the intensive care unit and quarantined away from everyone. The nurses and doctors who came in to see her were all wearing hazmat looking suits. Word got around about her and we soon had all sorts of people from different departments of the hospital coming to see her. Some of them even poked her arms and legs with pins to see if she could feel the pain. She was an oddity. It didn't seem real. No one was telling us anything because they didn't even seem to know but we could hear them all talking in the hall and it wasn't good. Doctors from Children's Hospital down the street even came to see her. People from the CDC and county health offices came to interview us and ask about her symptoms. It was all so overwhelming. We cried a lot.

Doctors waited five days before beginning any treatment. They wanted the virus to run its course. We didn't understand. Why weren't they helping her?! As she lay there in bed, her arms made limp by the virus from the shoulders down, we couldn't help but think that our lives would never be the same. Was it going to get worse? Would she die? Would she ever regain the strength in her arms? Why was this happening to her? Why were we so mean to her when she couldn't put on her shirt? Why her? She was so little. So many thoughts and questions flooded our minds.

In the days and weeks that followed she had plasma transfusions, steroid treatments, spinal taps, x-rays, MRI scans, and at one point, her blood was being drawn every hour for a day. We weren't given too many answers which made the stress even worse. Once the treatments were coming to an end and the doctors had tried everything they could, we learned that the virus had made her own body turn on itself, attacking her spinal cord between her shoulders and eating away at the myelin sheath around the nerves. Her spinal cord was damaged and her arms were paralyzed. We were told that she had Acute Flaccid Myelitis (AFM). The news was devastating.

At the same time, there were a couple of other children down the hall with the same diagnosis but with much more severe results. Their lungs were affected, leaving them on respirators and unable to move any part of their bodies. The same virus had left them quadriplegics. I could see their parents pacing up and down the hall. Mothers and fathers crying uncontrollably. I couldn't help but feel guilty for having Lucia be better off than they were and thanking God that she wasn't that bad. She could still breathe on

her own. She could sit up, smile, laugh and talk. She was still with us. She was still conscious.

After all of the available treatments were exhausted she was transferred to Children's Hospital for intensive physical and occupational rehabilitation. She stayed there for 2 months. She had to learn how to walk again and feed herself all over. It was difficult because she had just finished learning how to do all of those things as a part of her normal development. She was a very independent toddler. Now she had to be spoon fed, dressed, wear diapers and be potty trained all over again. She couldn't do anything alone. She needed help for everything which was very frustrating and depressing for her. Her independence was gone. She was totally dependent on everyone.

Hospital staff pretended to do procedures on her stuffed toy "Lammie" to help her understand and cope with what was happening to her. "He has floppy arms like me!", she likes to say. The two have been through a lot together and are now inseparable. We often remind her of "her story" through Lammie. It was a horrible but hopeful time. We had so much support from family, friends and church community. It's what got us through those difficult days. It's been 4 years since she got sick and has had two 12-13 hour major nerve transfer surgeries, was in a body cast for 2 months afterwards and continues to go to therapy appointments at CHLA. Like a trooper, she's managed to keep her smile through it all. She's sassier than ever and has a positive attitude.

When the cast was finally removed after her second surgery, it exposed an alarmingly long, wavy scar that ran down the length of her left arm. It was very upsetting to her but we explained that it was her "caterpillar". When kids in her class ask about it, she tells them, "It's my caterpillar. It goes wherever I go to remind me that I'm tough!" Her arms are finally moving again but with very limited motion in one of them. There are a lot of things she won't ever be able to do as a result of her illness but she always tries her best and beams with pride when she can do things on her own. Looking at her now, you would never know that she's living with a rare neurological disease. She has taught us all so much about being patient, resilient and strong in difficult situations.

During these Covid-19 filled days our family has been painfully reminded about the "other" virus that changed our lives not too long ago. The lessons we've learned from Lucia are still very much applicable today: Life goes on even when it doesn't go as planned. Good things can come out of bad situations. Tomorrow isn't guaranteed and the one thing that you can be certain about is change. Caterpillars always change into beautiful butterflies that fly and soar high above the cares of the world. Our Butterfly Girl, whose past is far behind her, reminds us to do the same and enjoy our lives every day.

Freedom in the Time of Covid

Happy Graduation!but stay home!

Happy birthday! but stay home!

Happy 4th of July!... but stay home!

It's a beautiful sun-shiny, gorgeous day outside!... but stay home!

They tell us to stay home because it is for our own good and the good of others but no one else seems to be doing it!

Like a stubborn child I say, "Why do I have to?!"

There is no freedom with Covid. It attacks your very breath, stealing life from deep within and sucks the joy out of our lives lived in community up until it arrived.

Covid, YOU go home!

Stay far, far away from everyone. Don't go to the store! Don't go to the beach! Don't visit my family because you are not welcome at our house... or anyone else's.

You're lucky that I enjoy staying home. You're not going to steal my joy!

I've still enjoyed my family! I've gotten to see my children grow despite your arrival. I've gotten to know their unique personalities more and have watched them intently as they've forged new relationships with one another...new, old playmates.

You haven't taken my freedom entirely. I have the freedom of time! Time with my family. Time to read. Time to write. Time to sort the clothes my kids have outgrown. Time to watch movies together and talk about girls with my teenage sons. Time to braid pigtails and make lemonade with extra spoonfuls of sugar with my little girls. Time to make cookies and binge watch silly baby cartoons.

Yes, Covid you haven't taken my freedom even though I can't leave my house. I've been free to use my time as I please and you can't take that away from me.... as long as I stay far, far away from you!



Elsie Dang

11th-12th grade English teacher, Alliance Tennenbaum Family Technology High School

Your three favorite books:

Mitch Albom's *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*;
Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*;
Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

What living person do you most admire?

Conan O'Brien--he's unapologetically awkward (like I am) yet utterly hilarious, wise, and grounded (like I hope to be). Whenever I doubt myself, I watch the commencement speech he gave at Dartmouth in 2011 to make myself laugh and reinspire myself.

What is your favorite part of teaching?

I love when my students prove me wrong or unveil a new insight in their own reading and writing. My students always keep me humble and hungry to learn and push me to be the best version of myself.

What has mattered most to you about our invitational?

Despite being an English teacher, I've never considered myself a writer. Even since childhood, I'd try to write in diaries but always quickly abandoned them and dismissed them as lofty or capricious. In high school, I was a strong academic writer, but I assumed the value of academic writing took precedence over narratives and personal writing. The invitational uncovered yet pushed me to face and accept my insecurities. Most importantly, it has provided me a safe space to re-acquaint myself with...myself. I strive to replicate the same type of community for my future students.

Numbers Speak

I've never been good with numbers,
Never been a math person,
Never understood how "math is the universal language."
But Numbers speak
And have more meaning than
Anyone can comprehend.

576 lost to police brutality in 2020 alone.
62,425 coronavirus cases and counting in the United States.
19 million helpless in Yemen.
Protests in Hong Kong since 2019.
"Terrorists" in the Philippines.
2,000 and counting victimized by ICE.
1.1 million threatened to be purged by deportation.
3.2 million ordered to go back to classrooms.
14,070 "only" to die if schools re-open.

AND THE LIST KEEPS GROWING.

It's *exhaustive*
And *exhausting*
To idly watch the numbers climb everyday.

You can't deny that you've heard these Numbers.
Or are you neglecting them? Rejecting them?
Muting them?

Do you accept these Numbers as they are?
You do realize those Numbers are actually people...
Humans who deserve their lives...
Right?

How high do Numbers have to grow for you to see the problem and its severity?

If you believe that math is a universal language,
Grab a Q-tip and clean out your ignorance.

Rate Your Pain

On a scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate your pain?

1 - I'm stripped of basic necessities. My loved ones are dead or dying I have no job, and even if I could get one, I'd only be hired as a mule rather than a person--minimum wage, no benefits in exchange for emotional abuse...not that that's new for me, but it's amplified now that I'm essential but expendable.

2 - I'm at the edge of ruins. Sure, I'm employed, but everyday I report to work wondering if that day would be my last. What should my last goodbye sound like? Am I merely going to be remembered for doing my job? Isn't there a larger purpose for my life?

3 - My sanity is in shambles. If anyone has a map on how to navigate through working from home *and* raising my children *and* caring for my parents all under the same roof, please lend it to me. If anyone can quell my anxiety and actually give me an answer as hope that this'll all get better, maybe I can reclaim my sanity.

4- I'm questioning everything. What is actually true? Is our government really doing what it can to protect and inform us? Does my job care about me as a person?

5 - The government sucks. Healthcare sucks. Racism sucks. Working from home sucks...but am I in pain? No. Am I in imminent danger running out of food or supplies? No. Do I live with someone vulnerable to this silent but merciless killer? No. BUT being stuck in this emotional echo chamber has been chipping away at my tolerance for BS.

6 - I'm doing what I can to alleviate the harm, donating blood and whatever money I can spare. How much is money *really* helping people though? Where is it going? Why can't others do more?

7 - I don't have much to complain about, although I'm burning through my Netflix queue faster than calories accumulated in my couch pouch. Another 6,000 cases? Gotta change the channel. Another gunned down by police? Click, switch. Unemployment statistics? Uh... I'll just disconnect now.

8 - I feel bad for others, but not so much for myself. It's a shame that people have to die everyday, but some of them deserve it, don't they? Some have criminal histories and failing immune systems already, so they had their suffering coming.

9 - What a major inconvenience. As much I enjoy being at home and reclaiming time for myself, life has to come back to normal. *My* life has to come back to normal. I want to enjoy

going out and having someone else cook and clean after me. Don't other people want to go back to normal, too?

10 - What pain? What *is* pain? That's a thing? I mean, if I can't go wherever I want without a mask, yes I'm totally in pain. How dare these Trader Joe-blows take away my "constitutional right" to breathe. How dare *my* government take away *my* access to a haircut. How dare *my* local mall close so I can't buy another pair of rose-colored glasses to go with *my* bangin' outfits. Did I miss something? Should I be feeling something?

Now repeat the process. On a scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate your privilege?

(In)Security Blanket

AKA inferiority complex.
AKA imposter syndrome.
AKA crippling inadequacy.

My (in)security blanket gives me stability.
I'm accustomed to the nagging harpies in my life and over time,
they've materialized in my mind, my conscience and sometimes,
they overthrow my rationality and hope
that I can meet expectations
but *just* barely, just enough to look like I'm stable.
Gradually, I've come to normalize feeling less than--

My (in)security blanket looks like a peacoat but feels like a potato sack.
It projects the illusion that I'm *fine*,
But I'm always hiding how much it itches and swells and burns
into my skin and psyche.
Fake it til you make it? A mantra for my livelihood.
Normalcy is necessary for survival.

My (in)security blanket dismisses approval and affirmation.
Doubt is a default, and the voices from my past diminish my own into a murmur.
But a murmur can only be sustained for so long.
No, shouting won't reverse the damage either;
Rather, I'll listen. I'll observe. I'll rest. I'll learn.
An educated and informed voice triumphs over the meekest whisper
and the most thunderous screech.

I'm ripping the seams of the (in)security blanket.
I'm shoveling the weighty gray cotton out.
I'm trimming the edges and adding some patches for color.
I'll avoid floral patterns, especially roses, but some streaks of
asters, peonies, and carnations can transform this blanket
into a cape.



Sabrina Villagran

11th grade English teacher, Santa Fe Christian Schools

What is your greatest extravagance?

Ice cream. Naps. A nanny for our kids.

What is it that you most dislike?

The sound of styrofoam when it slides out of a box. It's worse than fingernails on a chalkboard.

What is your favorite part of teaching?

I love the energy of a room full of teenagers engaged in dialogue. They are honest, funny and willing to be vulnerable, under the right conditions. It gives me hope for the future to sit and listen to them talk.

What has mattered most to you about our invitational?

I've been in a professional slump and haven't written much for myself in a long while, but the invitational refreshed my writer's soul. In a time when we all have to be distant, this group allowed me to connect with, and be inspired by, colleagues who share my pedagogical values. I deeply value the connections I made here and hope to celebrate in person one day!

An Elegy

Watching my two children dance in the living room
during a Sunday twilight as tomorrow's breakfast muffins bake in the oven,
I remember that afternoon years ago

The bleeding happened so fast,
so suddenly,
we barely made it to the doctor
in time for him to pronounce the death.

And the nurse cried.

So I know the pain of what it's like
to want kids, to want this life I live now.

Believe me,
this mess
this noise
this chaotic life we live,
it's more than fine.

"Don't you mind...
this
that
or the other thing?"

Nope, I don't.

Because I remember eating Chinese food
in my bed,
in agony.

I remember the contractions coming,
my body doing
what it needed to do
to protect me,
even though
I willed it not to.

Later,
we took the classes,
met the social workers,
did the waiting.

And waited.
And waited.

And they came.
Just as suddenly as the others were lost.

Now here they are
dancing,
and screaming,
in a house we bought ourselves,
with a backyard,
where the grass is dying,
because something's gotta give.

And I've learned...
that there is no good way
to give two little people a bath
without getting wet yourself,
and race cars,
and princess tiaras,
and balloons are the source of all happiness.

I've also learned...
that on this,
the other side of the proverbial valley of death,
there is so much life.

A Life By Design

Our mortgage documents tell me that at 776 square feet, our tiny house holds two bedrooms and one bathroom, with a dining nook and a little kitchen. Standing in the kitchen, you cannot open the fridge and the stove at the same time without the doors hitting. But a small child who wants to watch cookies baking in the oven has the perfect seat on the kitchen floor. Daddy always makes the best cookies.

The crib, nanny's bed, and toddler bed rail are long gone, but the playset still gets heavy use, so we have not worn out our childhood yet. Bubble baths remain, as does the food splattered on the wall from an overactive toddler. Speaking of that toddler, Xander learned to walk right here in the living room, with its bad lighting and brown walls. At 13 months old, he took high-knees steps across the laminate floor before he toppled over, then looked up to his daddy with the brightest smile. Isabella, searching always to be most helpful, stalked a spider in her room, and finding it on the window, smashed it with her hand. We woke up that January morning to the sound of breaking glass, and a five-year-old who thankfully didn't need stitches. They share bunk beds now, a true sign of childhood, and they swing high and fast on the swings in the yard. Right now Xander is out there bouncing on the trampoline, getting energy out even at 10am. I hear Isabella throwing her frisbee around, but it will only be a matter of time before she throws it over the fence into Phil's yard, AGAIN. The kettle is on for tea, or maybe coffee, and the sky is gray. Looking out, I see the repair in the fence where the car smashed through it three months ago, the cherry on top of the shit cake that was March 2020. Thank God the repair was only to the fence, not to the little bodies of the people who live here.

Fools Rush In

Along with *The Beach Boys*, I could count on hearing Elvis in regular rotation on my father's car stereo as we traveled through town. The song that I refer to as "Fools Rush In" is actually called "[Can't Help Falling in Love](#)" (thanks Wikipedia), from *Blue Hawaii*, a "musical" which features Elvis as a lover boy who sings his way into the heart of a native Hawaiian girl, whom he weds by the end of the movie.

One of the only regrets from my wedding day is that I didn't play this song as I walked down the aisle towards my husband. Dad escorted me, which would have made the song a perfect tribute for him giving me away to Marco, as well as emblematic of our quick courtship. We met and married in under 365 days, and certainly people thought we were fools for rushing into our marriage, my mother included. She wrote me a four page letter explaining that Marco (with his shaved head) must be dangerous, a gang member, someone who might hurt me, what was the harm in waiting to marry a little longer? Well, to quote Billy Crystal in [When Harry Met Sally](#), "when you realize you want to spend the rest of your life with somebody, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible."

My mother didn't know that I fell hard for my husband the moment I saw his dog lick his face, Bandit's huge tongue engulfing half of Marco's face in the photo. He was a *dog* person, like me. He took his faith *seriously*, like me. At 31, he had never been married, had no children, and wanted to meet me for dinner at Father's Office in Culver City. From that first six-hour date, I knew. Two weeks later, we both knew. Four months later when that diamond slid on my finger, everyone knew. Six months later, we were *us*.

I can't help falling in love with my husband when he sees a table full of teenagers at a restaurant in fancy attire and suggests we pick up the check for their Prom dinner. I can't help falling in love with him as he carries our son off to bed each night, tiny little limbs dangling from his strong, capable arms. I can't help falling in love with him in these COVID times as he slices, dices and sautees onions with bell peppers for fajitas on the grill, his daily cooking a way of caring for us in uncertain times. We are not the fabled fools that Elvis sings about; nearly ten years into *us*, our love is seasoned and savory, a tasty meal that makes my mother eat crow.

"Wise men say, only fools rush in" echoes in my mind even now as I write, a reverberating memory of my father that rings true long after he has been gone. But more than the nostalgia Elvis holds, that song reminds me that we are not time's fool; indeed rushing into the rest of my life is to this day one of the best decisions I have made.



My Sun, My Moon, and All My Stars

It's March 7, 2020, a Saturday. While big sister is off at hockey practice with Daddy, we take to the farmer's market in search of fresh produce. Maybe today I will finally ask the meat guy about local free-range beef? A chill in the air, but the sun shining, I dress you in jeans, a polo and a hat for sun protection. You gleefully hop out of your carseat and follow me into the market. Your tiny toddler hand stretches to reach the sample plums, plucking one from its box, bringing it straight to your mouth. I grab a head of lettuce, pay the vendor and drop it in my bag. "No, Xander do!" you exclaim, and grab my canvas tote, shouldering it to "carry for mama." We walk on, searching for the elusive panini guy to no avail. You see a sandwich board sign and ask, "hide seek??" I agree and you rush to "hide" under that same sign, believing that I have no clue where you are. "Where did he go?" I question aloud to no one in particular. A grandmotherly woman nearby smiles at me and glances down at you. I pretend not to see you and walk closer to the A-frame. You giggle. I tag you and move on to the next booth. When I turn around to say, "keep up papa," you smile your cheesiest smile and I snap this picture. You are fully alive in your toddlerhood, toes taut, smile wide, hand at the ready for more mischief. We grab a fresh squeezed lemonade and sit to listen to the guitarist playing his tunes. You sip, I smile. Then we pack our produce into the car and head home, unknowingly about to enter into a global pandemic and a statewide quarantine. I see this picture now as a moment lost to time, and a time of innocence lost to COVID-19.



Jackie Steves

9th and 10th grade English teacher
Notre Dame Academy of Los Angeles

Four Favorite Books (I couldn't pick just 3!):

The House of the Spirits, 1984, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, and The Handmaid's Tale

What is your greatest extravagance?

A glass of wine almost every day!

If you were a basket of 4 secret ingredients, what would you be?

Watermelon, chocolate chip cookie, garlic, red wine

What has mattered most to you about our invitational?

Spending time with and learning from such inspiring educators. You all fired me up! I loved learning from everyone's incredibly thoughtful teaching philosophies and practices. I especially feel inspired by everyone's passion for social justice issues which they infuse in their teaching.

Entering the Scene

Twenty-two years before Malala was shot for advocating for the rights of girls to be educated, 26 years before a man who brags about sexually assaulting women was elected president of the United States, and 29 Years before 16-year-old climate activist, Greta Thunberg, scolded world leaders at the United Nations, saying “you are failing us,” Jackie Steves was born outside Seattle, Washington and found her way to teaching literature to young women, endeavoring to use texts as training grounds for navigating the real world, a complicated text itself, with the hope that her students would continue to fight for equity and justice.

My Four Secrets: Watermelon, Chocolate Chip Cookie, Garlic, Red Wine

My smile reflected in a watermelon slice. People ask me, “Do you ever stop smiling?” If it’s a student, I say, “No. I have a disorder. I can’t stop smiling.” They almost believe me. Summer is my season. Pink my favorite color because I love being a woman. Seeds are my many ideas, my thoughts, ready to germinate. I love to tackle big, complex problems, like cutting a watermelon into bite-sized chunks.

My ordinary goodness symbolized by a soft chocolate chip cookie. Sometimes I feel like your basic white girl saluting the sun in yoga pants. While I personally haven’t jousting with depression or anxiety, I listen to my friends’ battles and do my best to comfort them like a warm cookie fresh out of the oven.

My bold flare echoed in garlic. While I can be a little conventional at times, don’t be surprised if my pungent passions cut through like raw garlic. I love to take societal problems like they’re garlic cloves--cut off their ends, lay the side of a large kitchen knife over them so I can pummel them, remove the crushed innards and mince them into tiny pieces. Saute them in some EVOO until creamy and nutty and delicious to all.

My hedonism characterized by a glass of red wine. I love to work hard cultivating young minds like a vintner tends to her grapes. But when 5 or 6 strikes, it’s time to pour the juicy red blend. I love fooling myself into believing a glass a day keeps the doctor away. I love dancing like a complex cabernet, but my dance moves are far from sophisticated. I love when my conversations with friends are as rich as the vino we share.

I Am The Walrus

 *I am he as you are he as you are me
And we are all together
See how they run like pigs from a gun
See how they fly
I'm crying *

When I was 7 or 8 or 9, my dad would bang out the Beatles' "I Am the Walrus" on the piano. On some days I would stand on the piano bench with my hands on his shoulders, reading over his shoulder, belting out the lyrics in unison. I'd bob to the rhythm--side to side, and up and down--on my perfect perch.

 *Sitting on a corn flake
Waiting for the van to come
Corporation T-shirt, stupid bloody Tuesday
Man you've been a naughty boy
You let your face grow long *

Other days, I'd ask my dad to play that song and I'd lay beneath the grand piano, the vantage point from which those chords sounded utterly grandiose. The amplified sound waves vibrated through my small body like heat travels through meat in the microwave.

 *I am the egg man
They are the egg men
I am the walrus
Goo goo g'joob *

Other times when my dad played that favorite song of mine, I'd cycle through my repertoire of dance moves. I would bang my head to the beat, just like the rockstars do. I would do the goofy one where you bend your knees and move them out and in while your hands wave over them. Then I'd imitate a dying bug. But most of all, I loved to twirl--like a maniac.

 *Mister City policeman sitting
Pretty little policemen in a row
See how they fly like Lucy in the sky, see how they run
I'm crying, I'm crying
I'm crying, I'm crying *

When my dad played the song on the record player, it freed him up to dance with me. Sometimes we'd do the bucking bronco and I'd hold on for dear life. Our

favorite was me standing on my head and him holding my ankles, twisting me back and forth like a screw. You could say I get my super cool dance moves from my dad.

🎵 *Yellow matter custard*
Dripping from a dead dog's eye
Crabalocker fishwife, pornographic priestess
Boy, you've been a naughty girl, you let your knickers down
I am the egg man
They are the egg men
I am the walrus
Goo goo g'joob 🎵



Daniel Buccieri

US History teacher, Venice High School

Which living person do you most admire?

Angela Davis

What is your greatest extravagance?

Books, records, and Italian ingredients.

What is your favorite part of teaching?

Teaching is where I am able to combine all of the things I love with the ultimate desire to change the world—one teenage mind at a time. In teaching, I find my praxis. I am actualized. I leave the realm of necessity and dance around in the realm of freedom.

What are three of your favorite books?

**100 Years of Solitude, A People's History of the United States,
Pedagogy of the Oppressed**

In the Background

There's a lot of beauty in the town where I grew up. My family moved to Temecula when I was eleven. And I lived there up until I got my first teaching position, in Los Angeles, when I was 23. Eleven to twenty-three. Those are some important years, right there. Oh, Temecula. Southwest Riverside County. The Inland Empire. Somehow so much closer to the imagined mythic Wild West than to the Pacific Ocean. Out there a breeze is always blowing, offering a gentle caress. In spring, the orange blossoms send their scent out to beckon you to spend evenings outside solely for the purpose of breathing. In and Out. The hot air balloons ascend above the morning mist and dot the sky. Spend a summer day escaping the desert heat in the shade of a pontoon boat out on Lake Skinner. The wineries, the beauty of the grapevine rows and patterns carving geometry across the hills. There's a lot of beauty out there.

Oh, Temecula. There's a lot of ugliness out there. Behind all that beauty. Temecula is like any other suburban project—a destination for white flight, a refuge for those who don't want to have to confront their own racism, an entire community dedicated to dog-whistle terms like safe neighborhoods, rising home values, and a great school district. Temecula is artificial. The suburban dream built upon stolen land, beholden to the lifeline of irrigation. Gated, figuratively, but also literally in certain parts.

Temecula is a town for the supremacists. In high school, I first learned to recognize white supremacy, that white supremacy wasn't just the individuals, but the entire world they surrounded themselves with. In 1994, Prop 187 was on the ballot (and remember, it passed). 187 created a state-wide system to screen for undocumented people and to deny them access to health care and education (thankfully courts later struck it down). There were kids at my school who made their own Yes on 187 t-shirts. There were kids who wore shirts that said "Welcome to America. Now speak English." My high school was a school where I could get in trouble for writing "Fuck Nazis" on my jacket, but the actual Nazis at my school--the gang of skinheads all in their uniform of high black boots, white shoelaces, and bomber jackets with iron cross patches--could just be. These were kids. They lived in *nice* suburban homes with their *nice* suburban families. What goes on at the dinner tables of the suburban families? I began to question my own family at our *nice* dinner table. I didn't like what I heard. Family is hard.

In Temecula, I first learned to recognize Christian Supremacy. The fanatics who stood outside my high school every day with their anti-choice signs, complete with images of aborted fetuses. The kids at school who all wore their Harvest Crusade shirts like they were letterman jackets. The guy who paced in front of the movie theater on Friday nights, carrying a giant cross he made with 2 by 4s. The people with ties riding bikes. The groups, armed with graphic biblical literature, who would swarm you if you were just hanging out with friends in front of the Baskin Robbins. The first friend I met in 7th grade asked me if I wanted to go to Crossfire

with him on Wednesday night. And I said that sounds cool, is that like a laser-tag game? And he said no, that's where we learn how to fight the devil.

If the essence of Temecula were reduced to a basket of four ingredients, they would be proselytization, fear, conformity, and white bread.

I didn't originally intend to write this rant against my hometown. But I opened the floodgates, and all that had to come out. And said floodgates opened up from looking at a happy picture. A picture of my daughter who is four, helping her nearly one-year old cousin take her first steps. My Samantha, so proud, sunshine smile baby-teeth and eyelashes, always knows how to capture the camera's eye. Her tiny hands and rainbow fingernails wrapped around Baby Mia's baby-round belly. The two cousins stepping with care down a woodpile path carved into the lawn of one of those beautiful Temecula wineries. In the background, sat the infinite blue sky and white pillows atop the soft grapevine hills. It was a gathering for my mom's birthday. The first weekend of March. The last weekend of normal life. The next weekend, our worlds shut down and day by day we learned the new reality created by COVID. That was the last time we were all together. My family. My brother's family. My sister's family. My mom. And my dad. A day of drinking wine, laughing, and watching the little people we all created, creating the people they will grow up to be, one laugh at a time. I don't get together much with my family. Christmas. A few birthdays. Family is hard.

The same thing happens to me every time I'm back in Temecula. My mind starts to wander. And wonder. What would have happened if I would have stayed? I was the first person in my family to leave Temecula, and the only one who moved to Los Angeles. A decision my family never has understood. What if I just would have taken a job teaching in Temecula? At my old high school. Or somewhere nearby. It is after all what the suburban project is all about. Your parents escape to the land of gated communities and planned development. The settlers moved west and built their plastic reality on top of all that had been erased. Where you grow up is meant to be where you stay. Otherwise, why did your parents move out to the center of nothing in the first place?

This strange mind trip doesn't last for long; I still believe moving to Los Angeles was the best decision of my life. I may have grown up in Temecula, but it's been in Los Angeles where I have learned how to grow.

With the COVID shutdown, I haven't had to go back to Temecula. We haven't really gone anywhere, but we needed to. We escaped to the mountains for 4th of July weekend, a cabin at Big Bear Lake, and tried to leave the pandemic in the background. A small getaway climbing 7,000 feet up into the San Bernardino Mountains. Me and my wife. Our Dylan and our Samantha. Pulling over into the turnouts that hug the edge of the world to relieve little bladders. Oh, the smell of the mountains this time of year—was it honeysuckle? I don't know my native wildflowers. COVID had quieted LA's streets a bit, but nothing like the silent sound of the mountain highway at midday.

Celebrating the 4th of July is odd during COVID. Everything is odd during COVID. The tiny downtown of Big Bear was full of people. Many people wearing masks. Many people not wearing masks. Many people decorated in an abundance of red, white, and blue. Many people decorated in an abundance of red, white, and blue with a defiant anger about them. Flags flying behind their pick-up trucks weighted with a heavier political message than I remember from past 4th of Julys. Stickers on windows saying Fuck Newsom. Lots of Trump 2020 shirts. As if giving the finger to social distancing was a way these goateed settlers of today could feel a kinship to the original tri-cornered hat wearing settlers settlers giving the finger to Britain. And to indigenous peoples. Big Bear felt a whole lot like Temecula.

Big Bear was a temporary escape from COVID. Spending Saturday on a pontoon boat, drifting around the lake, was an escape from Big Bear. We had our sandwiches. We had our snacks. We had our age-appropriate drinks. We had some time. I took photos to catch the smiles of exhilaration on my kids' faces when the lake would splash up onto them, or when they took turns steering the boat. My Dylan and the pride on his face when he's doing something new. My Samantha, making her silly faces and posing ridiculous. Kimberly, soaking in the summer sun and stealing a nap at the front of the boat. Family is easy. In the background, the infinite blue sky and white pillows sat upon the mountain peaks, overpowering the tiny flags below.

Web in Front

A few weeks ago, I revisited Robert Hughes' *The Shock of the New*. The first time I read it, I was a confused nineteen-year-old kid in an Art History course in community college. Now I'm much older, and slightly less confused. The book's a dive into the diverging directions modern art charted, but I want to take a moment here to just recognize the chapter titles Hughes came up with because they are spectacular. Like "The Mechanical Paradise," "The View from the Edge," and "The Landscape of Pleasure." *Those would make great album titles*, nineteen-year-old-me thought, while daydreaming about one day being a rock star. Forty-year-old me still thinks that's a stellar idea.

Ok, here's one more awesome chapter/future album title: *The Threshold of Liberty*, Hughes' chapter surveying Surrealism. Think about Dali's melting clocks, Miro's doodle farms, Magritte's pipe that is not a pipe; the Surrealists painted an imaginary world built upon exploring the subconscious. Their fascination with dreams became obsession laced with mystery, melancholy and fear. "It was a world of phantoms," Hughes wrote. A world completing lacking any absolute truth or

explanation, and without hope for ever attaining either. The Surrealists believed symbolism was everything but there was no key to help us decipher it. They had a leader, the writer Andre Breton, who published manifestos, attempting to give form to the amorphous surrealist project. Hughes dubs these madmen the last group of artists who wanted to change the world, and the last who believed that they could.

I don't know. I appreciate the whimsy and adventure in Joan Miro's paintings. I admire the Michelangelo-like skill Salvador Dali used to create his shrunken, illusionary worlds. But I don't give much acceptance to their political vision. The Surrealists' philosophy was a retreat from the real world, to instead curl up in the make-believe. Political change requires vigilant engagement with the real world. But the Surrealists were all lying in bed believing that strategy comes from dreams. I mean take a look at this line from Breton's *Manifestoes of Surrealism*:

I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality, if one may so speak.

That doesn't even mean anything! And therein lies the problem: there should be no manifestos in art. In politics, yes. Manifesto of the Communist Party? Of course. Manifesto of Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band? No!

All of this makes me wonder, once a work of art has been birthed, once it has been released into the world, who gets to say what it means or doesn't mean? Art is created by the artist, a product of all of the conditions they themselves exist in, but once it is viewed by the viewer, it's the viewer's world, shaped by the viewer's conditions, that makes meaning of the art. If an audience is a required component of something to be labelled *art*, then to disallow the audience the opportunity to construct meaning for themselves is dismissive of the audience, of the people. Sorry, Surrealists, once that painting is hanging in a public space, its meaning belongs to the people.

There was a seemingly strong surrealist influence on many indie rock bands of the 1990s I grew up listening to. Was the surrealism intentional? Well, the Pixies, famously, wrote a song after watching a film written by Dali. Or is unintentional? The singers all sing such nonsensical lyrics at times, so nonsensical perhaps, that critics who strive for meaning everywhere in their own lives, feel compelled to assign meaning to everything they are aesthetically confronted by.

In looking for the most surrealist of the 90s indie standards, I'm going to call up the song "Web in Front" by the Archers of Loaf. An explosion of a song featuring both jagged guitar salvos and jagged lyrical images that evoke scenes from a surrealist painting. Because in many of the Surrealist paintings we see objects we recognize, but in a context that makes no sense. Probably the most famous example is Dali's *The Persistence of Memory*—we recognize the clock faces, but we cannot figure out why they are melting, drooping off tree branches and cornered ledges. That's the type of simultaneous recognition and disorientation "Web in Front" produces. Surreal lines like, "Stuck a pin in your backbone," "I got a magnet

in my head,” “a tongue twist tie.” All of these images build upon each other until the anthemic chorus is released, “*All I ever wanted was to be your spine!*”

Now, it took the entire world of the frontman Eric Bachmann to conjure this song, and I trust that when the band shouts in unison their desire to be someone’s spine, it means something to Bachmann. All of the parts of this song come from somewhere in Bachmann’s lived reality (or if he were indeed an intentional Surrealist disciple, his dream reality) And it could be interesting to learn where these images came from, but the question is: *Do I really want to know?*

Because as the listener appreciating this musical art, I must construct my own meaning first. And the meanings we construct become our musical memories, the familiar scent of nostalgia that rides throughout any aesthetic return.

To be your spine. To be 14, close to 15 again, having that crush and the crushing feeling being confused about love creates. Having that crush on the girl with scoliosis who was going to get surgery after freshman year and would have to spend the summer in bed. And she was stuck in bed, all those miles away, so we wrote letters to each other. I remember she wrote in purple ink, small letters very curvy, all so perfectly spaced. While my letters surely were primitive sticks and scratches that I tried my best to dress up as normal script. Her letters even smelled like her and I held each one to my nose until it didn’t smell like anything but persisting memory. When I was 14, close to 15, all I ever wanted was to be her spine.

So, when I hear Web in Front, I think of scoliosis, purple ink, and perfume. And I also think of all the layers I’ve built upon that foundation. I think of the Frida Kahlo painting where her spine is a broken Roman column. I think of the infinite ability of our minds to make sense of our finite lives. I think of how much more sense music made to me back when music made no sense. I think of a time when the answer to any question was not a Google search away. And so, we just had to figure it all out ourselves.



Faye Peitzman

Director, UCLA Writing Project

If you were a basket of four secret ingredients, what would you be?

Seaweed—because this primitive plant is on intimate terms with everything-ocean: the crackle of waves, salt-fish aroma, home base for seagulls—the ones who teach us when to flap our wings and when to soar and glide.

Limoncello—because this lemony liqueur lives on the Amalfi coast, a perfect place for me to write and dream.

Chamomile—grants me calm, so I can offer the same to others.

Paprika, more mild than chilly peppers, but offers a kick—watch out!

Which living person do you most admire?

A famous one—Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Brilliant, strong, works out at age 87 with Bryant Johnson, her personal trainer. Mind and body—so strong! Good for you, Ruth! Cheers for your documentary and film. And just what slim volume perches on my living room bookcase—centerstage, no less: *The RBG Workout: How She Stays Strong . . . and You Can Too!* I'm trying, Ruth, I really am!

And one person you don't know-- my sister Sue, the kindest person I know.

What is your greatest extravagance?

Extravagance packages herself in various bundles. I'm choosing to divulge my everyday extravagance—cappuccino, dry.. Before March 13, I would seek out Starbucks on Melrose—their capp, so tasty. Or make my way to Elysee, beloved bakery café at the corner of Gayley and Kinross. Oh, how they understand the nature of a "dry" cappuccino and know at a glance that I am the one who truly appreciates foam, so festive and essential. I'd also visit Andante, a neighborhood café that welcomes multi-generational writers. Their espresso actually tastes sour, a minor snafu given their low-key vibe. Capp is still my extravagance—but now, with help from Nespresso, I am the barista in charge.

Which fictional character do you most identify with?

I'm all about offering students mirror texts, so they can see themselves in a work of art, and also window texts, so they have entrée to new worlds. I'm hard-pressed, though, to find my mirror in any of the fiction I've read. No one "just like me." I'm still looking—and hopeful. But do I empathize with characters? Absolutely. The one that first comes to mind is the mother in Pat Mora's poem "Elena." Elena desperately wants to learn English so that she'll be there when her teenage daughters need her. Since her husband doesn't want her to be the "smarter" parent, she locks herself in the bathroom with her English book. My adult children share our home language. But I so understand the fierce desire to help your children—because there will be a time when they need you.

White

By Faye Peitzman

“Don’t tolerate the fact that there is one lonely person of color in a big room.”

Impetus

I-Search, that’s what Ken Macrorie (1988) called it. Not research. Why? Here’s my answer. I-Search—because it’s personal, empowering, and unique. “I” take the lead, decide the focus, the process, the level of formality in my writing, the playfulness or solemnity of my tone. (Not much play in this piece, I realize.) For this particular I-Search, I find that I am my primary audience, although I am aware and care that trusted colleagues will read my reflections and in-process understandings.

“I”—center-stage for the moment. How I identify: gender, race, ethnicity, class, immigration status, geography, home language, age, physical and mental abilities. Say it in a rush: female, white, Jewish, middle-class, citizen, East coast, English, elder, able in body and mind. Slow down and dive in. Race calls out, comes first. Typically I say that I am white- Jewish or Jewish-white—depending on setting, geography, and history past and present. I’ll continue to start with “white” right now while our country opens its eyes to the violence of long-standing and non-stopping racism.

Not that the other isms are less important or virulent than before—the anti-immigration atrocities at our border, the plight of DACA students these many years. The role our schools play in disregarding students’ multilingual riches, in perpetuating racist assessments of their abilities and progress, certainly including writing assessments. All the judgments designed to sort out, leaving plenty of bottom-row room. Of course, anti-immigration, linguisticism and racism all go hand in hand.

Race and racism call out. The murders of so many black men, and brown men and women of color too, have grabbed our nation, including me, by the throat. Particularly the video of George Floyd, the eight-minute, 46-second horror story of police brutality, unthinking and intentional at the same time.

This isn’t new, the stealing of lives, indigenous lives and black lives. The early slave narratives, dating from the late eighteenth century, recount those stories. As do the essays of June Jordan and the Ta’Nehisi Coates’ memoir *Between The World And Me*. Too many stories—recycled history. But now we’re seeing how Black Lives Matter is spurring our nation to action. The ongoing protests. The outpouring of outrage across color lines and gender and age. The scope of the current awakening—this is new.

Under The Social Justice Umbrella

Every year, we in the Writing Project pose the same question: How can we, this multi-racial group of teachers K-University, be of most use to fellow teachers, their schools, communities, students? And I ask myself the role that I, personally, might play. In the past, when it became clear that English learners weren't getting the attention they deserved, we started an Invitational Writing Project just for teachers of multilingual students, and several years later, a yearly conference. We formed a study group on homophobia and one on race. The first year of each I was co-facilitator, then made room for others to lead. More recently, we invited educators and scholars immersed in the why and how of culturally relevant and culturally sustaining teaching, like Samy Alim and Django Paris, to address local classroom teachers.

This is all to say that attention to issues of social justice isn't new to us, to me. The salience of my seeking out other white people ready to acknowledge their own racism, to support and challenge one another, and to puzzle out how to guide others who have not been so inclined . . . hadn't occurred to me. And so, my search.

I am a white woman who has benefited from white privilege, advantages I haven't earned. When I display white fragility, too uncomfortable to engage openly in conversations centering race, I am supporting racism. What are my blind spots that prevent seeing and listening? Who might I partner with to gain insight? And, at some point, how might I go about guiding others?

What do I already know? How will I proceed with my search?

I've been lucky. These past 25 years or so I've been surrounded by teachers and other friends who have thought deeply about racial injustice. I'm thinking of Jeannie Oakes, who, after the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, spearheaded the creation of Center X. I'm thinking of some UCLA colleagues who, eight or so years later, engaged in a three-day retreat to practice hard conversations amongst ourselves--so we'd be stronger facilitators for our graduate students, student teachers, who in turn would guide their own younger learners.

I learned, among other things, that one doesn't "practice" hard conversations. And when you engage, disequilibrium is inevitable, emotions are raw, differences in race and home language and class take on new meaning. Among us, there was no level playing field. We were all university teachers, middle class, but where were our families and friends? Stand in a horizontal line and take a giant step forward—or backward-- when the facilitator asks about your parents' English abilities, or number of people you know who have been incarcerated. After ten questions you and your friends are scattered about, no line visible. Then you're asked to kneel down and pretend you're getting ready to race.

I'm lucky because our Writing Project initiated study groups on race and others on homophobia a good 15 years ago. And these past three years we re-imagined the study group on race. We delved into Derald Wing Sue's *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence*, and this past year, Ibram X. Kendi's, *How To Be An Anti-Racist*—usually three chapters a month, posing questions, knowing we were reading with an eye on taking action: How might each of us take an anti-racist stance with our own students, professional groups, institutions?

For this I-Search I intended to dive into reading, interviewing, conducting focus groups—and to come up with a solid action plan for myself. Aspirational, that I would manage such a frenzy of activity in a few weeks.

But I did re-read Peggy McIntosh's "Unpacking The Invisible Knapsack"—for the third time. I purchased and read (too fast) Robin Diangelo's *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*. I read Emily Chiariello's piece "Why Talk About Whiteness: We Can't Talk About Racism Without It." I asked some friends and colleagues to share their take on white privilege and white fragility. Such a generous group, willing to entertain my questions on the spot.

What Resonates

McIntosh's definition: "White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks." (1990, 3).

Many whites will recognize that others are "disadvantaged" but don't consider themselves overprivileged.

Because "privilege" has a positive connotation, it is an inaccurate description of white dominance and power.

McIntosh poses the question: How will we (white people) choose to use unearned advantage? Will we try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base?

In the preface to *White Fragility*, Michael Eric Dyson calls author Robin Diangelo "wise and withering." Also, clear-eyed and unsentimental. He is accurate.

According to Diangelo, there is no such thing as a positive white identity. She, herself, strives to be "less white;" that is, less racially oppressive; instead, she is interested in understanding and compassionate toward the racial realities of people of color. She says, "Ultimately, I strive for a less white identity for my own liberation and sense of justice."

I am listening to all of the above, not always (or yet) agreeing, and definitely not parroting.

Q & A with wonderful teachers--

Q 1: What do you think of when you hear the term "white fragility?"

Diversity sessions gone wrong

White people crying

Fear—angry outbursts against people of color

Defensiveness—not thought out, probably protecting a system of white privilege

Those too delicate to deal with hard realities. And just why should they be delicate?

Reluctance to associate oneself with less-evolved whites—such as the Karens, or those who scream about reverse racism, black on black crime. Or insistence that you're not white, you're Jewish—as a way of dis-associating, distancing.

Q 2: McIntosh suggests that whites “give up” their privilege? What's your take on this?

It's not a matter of “giving up.” Rather, be more conscious of your actions and words. Be more inclusive. Don't tolerate the fact that there is one lonely person of color in a big room, a room lacking rich, diverse perspectives.

To do: If you're asked to be a panelist and you know that a colleague's perspective would enrich the discussion, say, “Actually you should talk to X person—better for this role.”

Some people of color worry every day how they will be perceived if they speak up and put themselves on the line. They've experienced whites who angrily point to “playing the race card.” So you, instead, point to the worth of the expressed ideas—vocally, and on the spot, no hesitation.

End Notes, Next Steps

Talk more with trusted friends and acquaintances. Their energy and honesty fuel this search.

Know that as I engage in dialogues, as a participant or facilitator, I'm going to make mistakes. I'll need to acknowledge them. And keep trying.

Explore national and local organizations, like Showing Up for Racial Justice, that welcome allies and allies-in-training.

None of us can be free until we end white supremacy.

To be continued....

UCLA Writing Project Summer Invitational 2020

