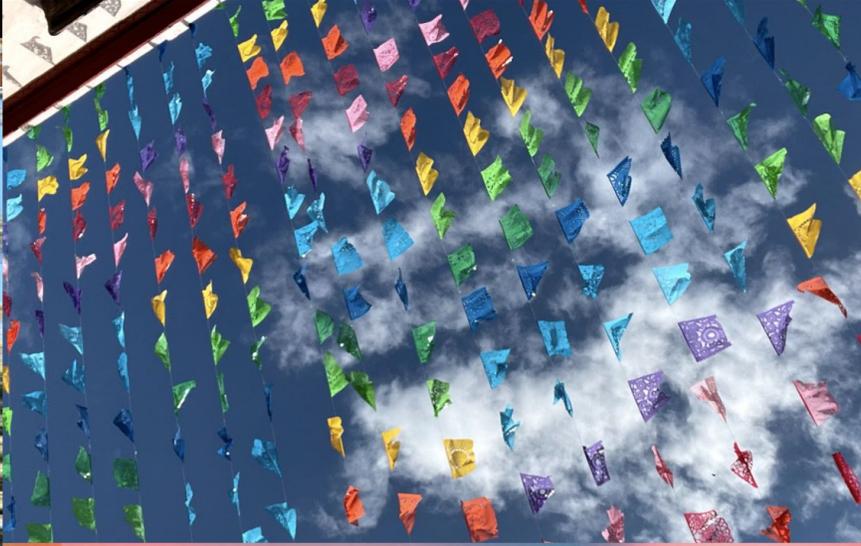




Chrysalis: Writing with Gratitude, Power, and Spice





Chrys·a·lis

/'krisələs/

(n.) A transitional state.

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Nallely Beulah Aceves-Romero

About the Author

Nallely is entering her third year of teaching at Will Rogers Learning Community. She will be teaching first grade next year as well as starting her Cotsen Fellowship. Nallely loves to try new foods and restaurants, travel and learn about new cultures and traditions, and spend quality time with her family, friends, and loved ones.

What brings you joy?

Something that brings me joy is learning more about my ancestral roots, history, and about the plantcestors that have sprinkled seeds of wisdom in our lives.

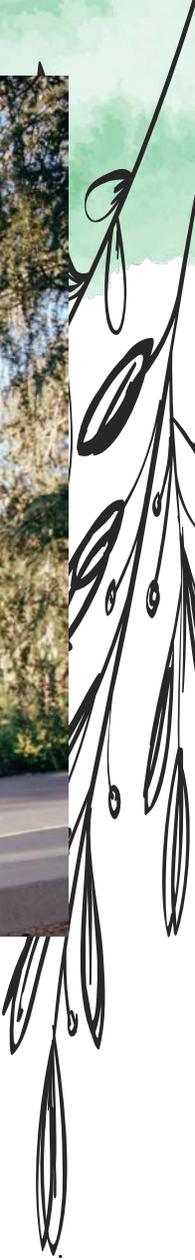


Which living person do you most admire?

The living people I admire most are the guerreras in my family, my *mama*, Beulah Aceves and my *abuela*, Leonor Romero. I am who I am because of them and live unapologetically to honor their hard work and sacrifices.

What has been the most inspiring part about the Writing Project Invitational for you this summer?

The most inspiring part about the Writing Project Invitational is building community with such beautiful human beings and learning more about their story. Thank you to my cohort for holding space and making me feel safe during my vulnerable moments. I feel so much gratitude to have shared this sacred learning space with you all.



My Abuela's Hands

I can picture my *abuela's* hands so perfectly.
They have a tenderness to them,
with lines that tell stories of resilience—
92 years of resistance, healing, fighting, and hope.

Hands that held me tight with *abrazos*
that warmed my soul with *mucho amor*.
Hands that gently held my face up
as a reminder to stay *humilde*,
while I hold my head up high.

Hands that invited me into *la cocina*,
as she upheld ancestral secrets through her cooking.
Hands that cut the *nopal* with striking precision,
and that made the most delicious tortillas *a mano*.
Hands that made the perfect *Agua de Jamaica*,
on a hot summer day in National City.

Hands that carefully placed *Cempasúchitl*
on our family *ofrenda*,
to honor and guide our ancestors back home
for *Día de los Muertos*.
Hands that danced over me during *limpias*,
to protect me from *Mal de Ojo*.



Hands that held fists up,
ready to fight for her loved ones.
Hands that held a tissue by her eyes,
with tears running like rivers,
after the passing of her eldest son,
and again after the passing of my *Tata*.

Hands that, now, wave to me through a screen,
and continue to offer their beautiful wisdom.
Hands that push the wheels of her wheelchair,
as she rides at lightning speed,
while the nurses chase after her each time.

My abuela, Leonor Romero, continues to live,
unapologetically.
Thank you for your beautiful gift of *sabiduría*,
for gifting me hands of a *guerrera*,
for being one of my first *maestras*,
and for teaching me how to be a good *ancestro*.
Te quiero mucho abuela y feliz cumpleaños.
Tlazocamati, tlazocamati,
Ometeotl.



El Conjunto

The Ensemble

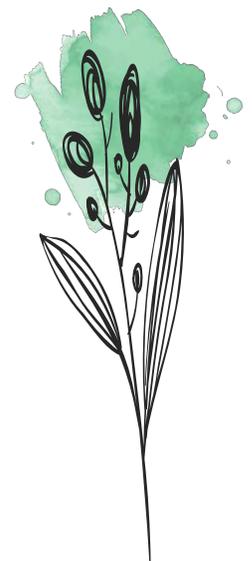
I hear my mom grinding up *chile* in the *molcajete*.
I can feel my tongue salivating
as I imagine the harmonizing of flavors I will experience
when the food is ready.

“Gooooooooolazo!”

I hear the announcer yelling with excitement.
My dad, the biggest Chivas fan in National City,
is enjoying the game.
He wears his serious face like a mask,
but I know his inner-child is screaming with excitement.

My brother is in his room, listening to Tupac.
More than rhymes, this is soul healing music.
Words that transcend this physical world
and put into words the thoughts that consume our mind.

I'm hiding in my parent's room,
taking in each sound, one by one.
Even though I have my eyes closed,
I can match each sound,
just like a musical ensemble.
This is the peace I take in
before opening the page of a new book.



Ruta graveolens

Ruda,

You were brought here from overseas.

You extended your branches so elegantly
and you planted your roots,
firmly into the ground.

Your love transcends borders,
and your magic embraces us all.

Thank you Ruda,

for your hearty medicine,

for your healing energy,

for your sweet bitterness,

for your affinity to protection,

for your ability to keep us grounded,

for your pungent culinary expertise,

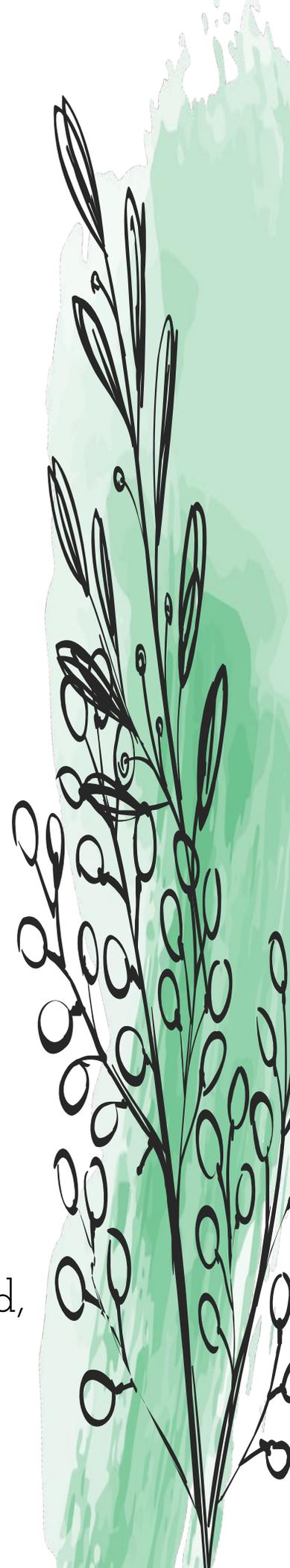
for being our plantcestor,

for calming our nervous system,

for offering your unconditional support,

for assisting our ancestors during times of need,

and helping us find our way back home.



Samantha Auerbach



About the Author

Samantha teaches 4th grade at Carthay Elementary School of Environmental Studies STEM Magnet. The 2021-2022 school year will be her fifth year teaching. In her free time she can be found travelling, scuba diving with her husband, Tal, and walking their pug, Yoda.

What brings you joy?

My family, my pug, strong coffee, the sound of the ocean, adventures in the sun, teaching, and scuba diving.

What is your favorite part of teaching?

The sound of a loud, engaged classroom and the kids!

What has mattered most to you about our invitational?

Coming into this invitational I was a hesitant, unconfident writer. Thanks to the invitational, and especially my writing group, I have become more confident and excited to teach writing in my classroom. Thank you to my writing group for holding a safe and comfortable space to be heard and to share my writing.

The Wind Chimes

It was hot that day. Stagnant, unmoving air slowly gets hotter and hotter. Even at seven in the morning. My heart felt compressed and tense, but also filled with happiness and complete contentment. It was a strange feeling. To be so anxious and excited at the same time. We had decided to do everything ourselves, after all, it was the middle of a pandemic. We kept our original date with only three weeks to spare. Flowers, check. Chuppah, check. 18 chairs spaced 6 feet apart, check. I could feel my heart relaxing, just a bit.

I sat down to begin the wedding day ritual. Hair and makeup. When I dreamed of my wedding day, this moment was filled with my best friends, mother and future mother-in-law spending the day getting ready, laughing, and drinking mimosas. On this day, it was just me, my makeup artist, and Yoda, our pug. Until I heard a familiar, raspy voice from behind the chair. “Good morning, sweetheart. Is there anything I can do?” my grandfather said. “Hi Grandpa” I exclaimed excitedly, “Can you just sit here with me?” I asked. My grandfather had just turned 91 a month prior. Earlier in the year he was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's. One of the reasons we decided to keep our original wedding date. He sat on the chair behind me. We didn't talk much, but just knowing he was there with me meant the world. After several moments of silence he said, “I wish your grandmother could be here to see this. I know she is so proud of you. She would love Tal just as much as the rest of the family does, if not more.” He was right. She would have loved Tal. Probably more than me. The two of them would have joked, laughed, and pulled pranks on everyone in the family. “I wish she was here, too, Grandpa. I know she will be, in spirit.” I replied.

The Wind Chimes

Just as I was finished getting ready, my dad arrived. It was another reminder that this day was so different than I had imagined. Noticeably missing was my own mother, and Tal's entire family. Another casualty of the pandemic. Before I got into my dress, I went to check on what was happening in the backyard. The air was still stale, lacking any movement or suspension from the heat. Tal had just arrived and was setting up our bedroom television on a table at the back of our ceremony location, which would soon house roughly 60 squares of the rest of our wedding guests, Tal's family in Israel included. I'm glad everyone was still able to celebrate with us.

Soon, the ceremony began. There was still no reprieve from the heat. Not even one slight, slender breeze to release us from the August sun's intensity. Part of me longed for a sign from my grandmother. I knew she was there with us, but I wanted to feel her, to know for sure. My dad grabbed my arm and the photographer snapped a photo of us just before we walked down the aisle together. As we stood in the doorway to the living room, looking out on the backyard, I looked up at the wind chimes my grandmother had placed there oh so many years ago. I thought of her, and I began to walk towards my forever.

After the ceremony, my new husband and I walked towards our guests in the tv to say our hello's. Our close family and best friends surrounded us. Tal's family played a music video they wrote and produced from Israel. We all laughed and our hearts felt content. Well, almost content. It made us miss them that much more. After a few mazal tov's and L'chaim's we said our goodbyes and went to cut the cake. Just then, a perfectly timed, gentle breeze slipped by us. The wind chimes accepted the breeze and played the smallest, yet sweetest sound. My eyes swelled with happy tears. My cousin, Katie, handed us the cake knife. I noticed her eyes were tearful as she whispered, "She's here".

Raquela Bases



About the Author

Raquela Bases is a 4th grade teacher at Charles White Visual Arts LACMA Magnet. She just completed her first year as a teacher and UCLA's Teacher Education Program (TEP). She graduated from UC Santa Cruz where she majored in World Literature and Cultural Studies. She enjoys painting, hiking, and spending time with her friends and family!

What has mattered most to you about our invitational?

The opportunity to share and discuss my own writing as well as the opportunity to hear and discuss other participants' writing have mattered a great deal to me. I appreciate how vulnerable my peers have been in sharing their work. Their vulnerability has empowered me to be vulnerable myself.

Which living person do you most admire?

The living people that I most admire are my mother and my father.

What is your favorite part of teaching?

My favorite part of teaching is the opportunity to connect with people.

The Lost Hat

Everything that happened is stuck as it was, frozen. I can touch it less and less as the years and months wear on. Once, I lived in the forest. You might not believe that, talking to me now. I lived in a 1960 model Streamline mobile home, running water, no toilet, in the forest above the northwest corner of my university's campus. It was cozy, my trailer. It was bursting with personality.

It was a unique choice to dwell in the Trailer Park, but I was not the only one who made it. My trailer was one in a ring of 42. Each was different, marked by its current residents and those that had lived there before, moved on, and handed their homes to younger students. There was an elephant trailer, an "Oh, the places you'll go!" trailer, a rainbow trailer and a blueberry trailer, to name a few. My trailer was a classic, silver, submarine-looking thing with a wooden deck. On the side near the front window, someone had pasted a large lorax sticker. There was a circular, wooden-paneled planter near the front of the deck. I painted colorful heads and a rat around its rim.

Each trailer housed at least one student. Oftentimes, two or even three students would live in the same trailer. Over the 18 months that I lived there, I had three different short term roommates: Roxy, River and Adrian. Adrian, who trapped rats and chased out raccoons. Good old Adrian. All that to say that a loose 50 – 80 young adults inhabited the trailer park at any given time. The place was teeming with music, activity, and food.

But in the Spring of my sophomore year, less than a week before the seniors would be graduating, the university issued a statement that all exiting students would need to haul their trailers off of the premises, sell them to third parties, or leave them in place for the university to demolish and dispose of. Our generations-old trailers would be replaced with new, shiny mobile homes. New students would not be able to paint them or modify them. They would be charged dorm rates to inhabit them. The "com," our communal hangout space, would be cleaned and painted. The trailer park would transition, now, from what it had been for 30 odd years, with the exit of each customized trailer.

We challenged this edict, but to no avail. I and three other "parkies" met with administration. We wrote our feelings on the ground with chalk. We ordered hats and T-shirts with the slogan, "Long Live the Trailer Park," to represent our cause.

In December of my junior year, I left my trailer. I was studying abroad in Spain, moving on. Part of the deal was that upon leaving, so my trailer would have to leave. As I packed up the last of my belongings I noticed, scrawled behind the edge of a clicking pantry cabinet, a place I'd never looked before, the sentence, "Went to Iceland, it was sick." I paused. This trailer. I bought this trailer from my friend, Nili, who bought it from an older student, Gina. Gina graduated before I started UCSC and was legendary for her big, infectious laugh. I wondered if Gina had written that sentence, or if someone before her had. Now, the trailer would be towed away by a young dad who intended to transform it into a clubhouse for his daughter. He would probably paint over my mural. He would probably paint over this sentence.

I stood looking at that sentence for a moment. Then, I rifled through my packed-up things and found a black sharpie. Below the previous resident's words I wrote, in my own handwriting, "Went to Israel. Headed to Spain."

I had spent the previous summer in Israel. I hopped around between friends' and relative's homes for much of my stay. I spent time in nature and deepened relationships with friends, old and new. My brother, Leor, and I traveled together for part of that trip. Neither of us had much stuff with us that summer. But throughout all his travels those hot, sticky months, he sported my green, floppy, "Long Live the Trailer Park" baseball hat. We switched hats while packing the morning of his departure. Something about the color, the style, suited him. It seemed to belong on his head.

Three weeks ago, Leor left Woodland Hills for San Francisco. From San Francisco, he flew to Tel Aviv – back. He would work as a NFTY *madrish* (guide or counselor), a job I held two years prior. His Hebrew is better now than mine was then. I helped him add some last minute luggage to his carry-on bag. I had an idea of what he would need. I suggested a sharpie, a battery operated watch, and, after some thought, my "Long Live the Trailer Park" hat, which had accompanied him on a similar adventure five years before.

In the hours before my trailer was driven away by its new legal owner, Adrian walked over with a sledgehammer and helped dismantle the deck that I had sat on to paint so many times. We needed to clear everything out of the parking space. It started to drizzle. The man who purchased my trailer, whose name I do not recall, hitched it to the back of a grey pickup truck and began to ease it away. An "ex-parkie," Beau, videotaped as my trailer was hauled out of its spot on 37 Leonardo Lane. I drove away from the Trailer Park, as I had many times before, watching my trailer edge away in a thick, misty sky. How lucky I had been.

Several days into his trip, I received a series of Whatsapp messages from Leor. *I'm looking for it right now, all over the place. I'm so terribly sorry.* On the beach in Tel Aviv, my hat was stolen. It was not Leor's fault. The counselor in charge of watching the on-shore belongings fell asleep. Many of the group's things were stolen. Rookie mistake.

Upon reflection, I recall a ring. A beautiful thin, silver ring that I bought from an Israeli artist the same summer Leor first wore the hat, the summer before I left my trailer. Inscribed on the band of the ring was the phrase, *גם זה יעבור* - *this, too, shall pass.*

That ring has since broken. And, alas, the hat is long gone. But, this is not the last item that we will lose. I am glad that, while we had it, we both got to wear it.

I hope that someone in Israel finds it and stops to think. "Trailer Park ... מה זה (what is this?)." I hope they wonder, a little bit, about where it comes from, the people who have worn it, and what it might represent. Maybe, they will put it on and feel a just a little history, a little independence, a little Santa Cruz.



Daniel Buccieri

About the author

Daniel has taught history in the Los Angeles Unified School District since 2003 and became a fellow of the UCLA Writing project in 2009.



Which books are on your nightstand right now?

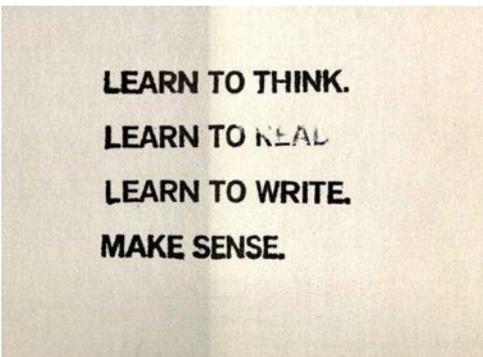
I just began **The Mexican Revolution** by Adolfo Gilly about four minutes ago. It will join **Vino Italiano: The Regional Wines of Italy** and **Capital, Volume One** on my nightstand.

Who are some of your favorite writers?

Two of my favorite living authors would be Mike Davis and Arundhati Roy.

What is a quote that really matters to you?

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”



LEARN TO THINK.
LEARN TO READ
LEARN TO WRITE.
MAKE SENSE.

A letter to my five-year old daughter about making pasta together

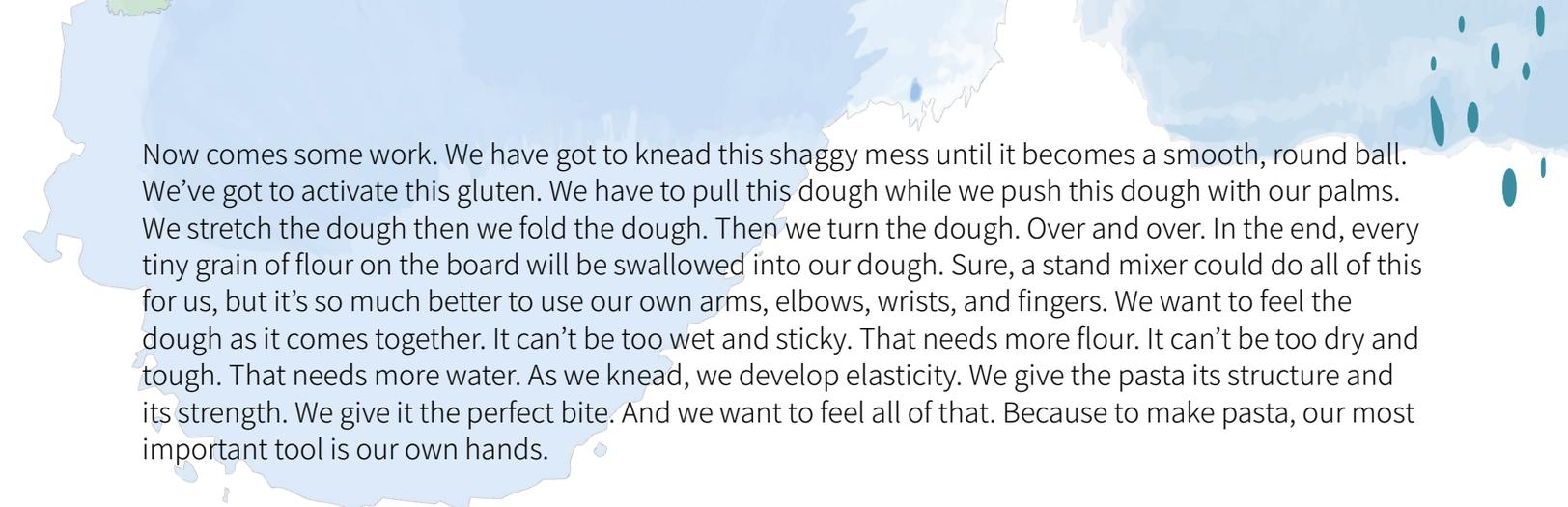
In our house, Sundays are for pasta. Fresh, handmade pasta. Maybe an egg pasta, maybe semolina. Maybe spinach pasta. Maybe stuffed. The pasta is made by us--as long as we have time. You always crack up when I exclaim jokingly that I hate when *something is messing with my Sunday!* That's because my happiest Sundays are spent in the kitchen with you. No errands, no obligations. Because to make pasta, we need time.

Today, let's make some balanzoni. They're a stuffed pasta from Bologna. Plump little hats filled with meat and cheese. Traditionally, they are made with a sfoglia verde agli spinaci, but I didn't buy any spinach. So, we are going to cheat a little and just make an egg dough. It's ok--I don't think anyone will be upset. We will stuff the pasta hats with ricotta, mascarpone, parmigiano, and mortadella. The sauce will be simple--just salsiccia, cream, and sage. What should we make with the pasta? Antipasti? Insalata? Contorni? Let's see what we find at the farmers' market. Because to make pasta, we need a plan and some space to improvise.

We stroll around the farmers' market on Sunday mornings. In one tiny hand you're holding a woven basket. Your other tiny hand is holding mine. You remind me of our shopping list, the same every time: Fruit. Vegetable. Treat. You get to pick out the fruit. What's in season right now? Your favorites are the cherries and raspberries. Red round bites of sweetness and summer. I'm in charge of the vegetables. We need sage, arugula, and how about some broccolini. For the treat, you head directly to the french baker for a cinnamon roll. And yes, you can eat it in the car. Then back to home.

Pasta always begins with the dough. Different shapes need different doughs made with different flours. For stuffed pastas, a Northern Italian specialty, we'll make a dough with only two ingredients--doppio-zero flour and eggs. But not just any eggs. When we make an egg dough, I like to splurge on the eggs laid by happy chickens, the ones who get to roam around and eat crickets. Their yolks are a vibrant orange. And we want our pasta to be pretty.

We weigh out our ingredients: 454 grams of flour, 258 grams of eggs. The flour is dumped onto our big wooden pasta board. With the bottom of a large glass bowl we press into the flour mound and make our well and our walls which will hold our beaten eggs, glowing like the sun. Then comes the fun, one of your favorite parts. We take our forks and in gentle swirls we bring in a little bit of flour from the wall and make circle pirouettes with our wrist until it's joined with the egg. Then a little more flour. More circles, more swirls, more dancing forks. Careful not to break a wall! Soon the flour and the eggs will be one. One shaggy mess! Put down the forks and pick up the bench scraper and cut into the dough and bring in more of the excess flour with each lift of our wrist. Flour ends up on our clothes, and that's ok. Because to make pasta, we need to get a little messy.



Now comes some work. We have got to knead this shaggy mess until it becomes a smooth, round ball. We've got to activate this gluten. We have to pull this dough while we push this dough with our palms. We stretch the dough then we fold the dough. Then we turn the dough. Over and over. In the end, every tiny grain of flour on the board will be swallowed into our dough. Sure, a stand mixer could do all of this for us, but it's so much better to use our own arms, elbows, wrists, and fingers. We want to feel the dough as it comes together. It can't be too wet and sticky. That needs more flour. It can't be too dry and tough. That needs more water. As we knead, we develop elasticity. We give the pasta its structure and its strength. We give it the perfect bite. And we want to feel all of that. Because to make pasta, our most important tool is our own hands.

We wrap the dough in plastic and let it rest for 15 minutes. Then with a very sharp knife (don't worry, I'll do this part), we cut the ball into two and do even more kneading! Then wrap the two smaller balls in plastic. The dough will rest for two hours! I told you pasta needs time.

Next, the filling for the pasta. In a big bowl let's mix some ground-up mortadella, a whole bunch of ricotta, a little bit of mascarpone, plenty of parmigiano, and parsley. That's one secret weapon of the Italian cook. Fresh, chopped parsley. Add it always (parsley, and lemon, brighten everything). Fold it all together, fold it all together. Put it in a ziploc bag. Put it in the fridge. Later, we'll cut a tiny snip in the corner of the bag and pipe the magic into our pasta.

Two hours later...



We unwrap our dough balls. Time to turn them into sheets. The real nonnas do this all by hand with rolling pins. We are going to cheat just a little bit and use the pasta roller attachment for our stand mixer. It's ok--I don't think anyone will be upset. Then comes a sharp knife part again, so I cut the sheets up into 2.5 inch squares. You grab each square with more impatience than I am comfortable with whilst holding a sharp knife. I give you that look and you slow down. I squeeze a bit of this rich filling into the middle of each square. You want to grab them immediately and start squeezing and folding. But you have to stop. You have to watch first. Always watch first. Learn with your eyes before you try with your hands. We turn our square into a diamond, with its heart of filling resting in the middle. Take the bottom point of the diamond and introduce it to the top. With the tips of your fingers seal the sides so that you have created a triangle. Next take the two side points of the triangle and have them meet each other, too. Squeeze tight tight tight with your daddy-finger and your mommy-finger. Where the two parts of pasta dough meet, we have to squeeze so that it becomes one. Pasta needs to be even in thickness so that it will cook evenly. The squeezing is your favorite part. Your nose scrunches. Your mouth is open, tongue resting on your lower lip, your face frozen in concentration. A bit of filling escapes at the seam and you give it a little lick. Sealing each balanzoni with a kiss.

Making pasta, especially stuffed pasta does take a long time, but it holds a special joy. There's a delight in losing yourself in a task. Of focusing on each step and doing it right. Over and over again. You can block out life's little distractions and be dedicated just for a moment, in trying to find perfection. And even though perfection never arrives, pride and satisfaction does.

Because pasta is love. Sauce is, too. Every pasta is paired with a sauce. The shape of the pasta matters. The type of dough matters. Every pasta type has its sauce match. Today, we want a simple sauce. We don't want a sauce that will overpower the filling of our balanzoni. We want a sauce that will elevate it. Start with melting some butter in our pan. Then brown crumbled sweet italian sausage. Add six slender leaves of sage. Finally, a cup of cream. Gently, it will all be brought together with our cooked balanzoni. A bowl of pasta and sauce is an expression of love. The love is in the beauty of each individual pasta and it is in the dish as a whole, a symphony of flavor. The love is in the excitement your brother has when it's dinnertime on pasta night. When he asks for seconds, and then for thirds--that's love. It's when Mommy says "this is out of this world." That's love. For our family, we put in all of the effort handmade pasta requires. That's love.

You don't have the patience yet to make the whole batch of balanzoni with me, and that's ok. After twenty minutes, you want to go play with your brother and you say, "Ok, Daddy, call me when you start to cook, ok?" and you give me your thumbs-up. Ok, Samantha. Go play. I'm going to put on some Miles Davis and get a little lost in the pasta process and allow time to disappear. I'll call you when the cooking begins.

Sammy! It's time to cook.





Cindy Carrete Herrera

About the Author:

Cindy is entering her seventh year of teaching 4th grade at Dolores Mission School. She received her BA in English from the University of California, Riverside in 2013. After completing two service years with Americorps non-profit City Year Los Angeles, she started teaching and went to graduate school. She received her MA in Elementary Education from Loyola Marymount University in 2019. In her spare time, Cindy loves to go to the gym, concerts, hike and try new foods! Cindy resides in Los Angeles with her family.



What brings you joy?

The simple things in life are what bring me the most joy. Spending time with my family, close group of friends, exploring new places, coffee and a good book.

What is your greatest extravagance?

My greatest extravagance is overpriced coffee and my newfound love of traveling.

What has been the most inspiring part about the Writing Project Invitational for you this summer?

The most inspiring things about this fellowship are getting to know my cohort and their stories. My confidence as a writer has grown thanks to the wonderful space that has been created by these amazing human beings!





Yo Soy

By Cindy C. Herrera

Eres Mexicana

Por que tus padres son de Santa Maria del Oro

De ahí son tus raizes natales

Eres Americana

Por que naciste en el paiz de los Estados Unidos

You are American

Pero en esta casa solo

Se habla el español

Eres Mexicana

At school you must only speak,

Read and write in English

You are Mexican

When you speak English

You are told you speak with an accent

Eres Americana

Cuando hablas el español

Suena como alguien guera lo habla

You are Mexican

Por que California

Once belonged to Mexico

Y aun esto sea cierto

I'm living on borrowed land

Long before California

Became the 31st state

Long before California

Was a part of Mexico

Esta tierra

This land

Es tierra ancestral

Is ancestral land

Soy Mexicana-Americana

Soy maestra

Soy escritora

Soy humana que aprende

To live a peaceful life

And will stand alongside

What is morally just



Land NOT of the Free - A Generation of Sacrifice

By Cindy C. Herrera

It's a day of celebration
Everyone in the hood is waiting in anticipation
As sundown approaches we start to listen
As the sky glistens
Tints of yellow, green, red, purple, and blue
The sky illuminates
What is perceived as the country's independence
For many, the celebrations are full of pride and joy
For some, the generational damage and scars
Are too much to bare
For others, there's a sense of yearning to belong
Especially for those who have lived in this country for so long
Yet the government makes it clear
You don't belong
In a world of diaspora, they reflect
Whether their sacrifice was worth it
To see their offspring live with the promise of prosperity
And the pursuit of happiness

As we drive down the 10 West,
To sightsee alongside the beach crowd
The question of this country's significant day is posed
For reasons and observations made towards my neighbors
And many who senselessly partake
In the festivities without really understanding
The true meaning of this day

Este paiz nunca
This country has never
Nos a aceptado
Accepted us
Especialmente a nosotros los latinos
Especially us latinos
Pero bien que muchos de los nuestros
Yet so many of our people
Participan y les gusta el desmadre
Participate and like the chaotic fuss
En la hipocrecia de este paiz
In the hypocrisy of this country
Y de este dia
And of this day

Like most reflections and talks
Happen in the car,
This talk was bound to take place
You left because you had no support or home, mom said.
It was difficult growing up and make a living then
As it is now over there
Yet when has life ever been fair?
Dad responded

Eye contact is made with the help
Of the rearview mirror
El sacrificio
The sacrifice
Was and still is worth it
Valio y aun vale la pena

Their youth has been lost in this system.
Their native land awaits, but for now,
As this country does not represent their home,
Their home is with their *hijos*,
Who are now a part of both worlds
And have yet to seize both





Voces Marginadas Marginalized Voices

It's about survival,
It's about adjusting and the yearning to belong.
When the need is there, and humility takes over,
You'd be willing to do just about anything to survive.
You can be the most academically educated individual
in the room
Yet be under qualified in humility
You can be the most educated in the room
Overqualified
Yet do the grunt work if it means you'll survive
You can be, as society perceives
What is uneducated or not scholarly in any shape or
form
Yet humility and survival make you
The most qualified in the room

Some say beggars can't be choosers
But that applies when survival instincts take over
Even then, after so long
La costumbre, the habit
And trauma of being on survival mode
Never leaves
So I say NO
We don't take over the country's jobs
NO we don't steal them or from you
What YOU as a society stole
WE SURVIVE
Luchamos por una vida mejor
We strive of human life and dignity

Sombra Escondida Hidden Shadow

Hardly do I ever see him
In charge of the cooking
It's always mother
Who has the zest of the kitchen
Call it bias
She is the best cook

Ya te puedes casar
To Dad I say
It's funny
This is what girls are told
When they make a meal to share
He laughs
And that's the indicator of his good mood

It's because he is grilling and taking a break
Mom says
That's the man
Ese es el hombre
That I fell in love with
Del que yo me enamore
All those years ago
Hace todos esos años

Life and the hustle
Along with his personal demons
They all created a wall
In front of his easy going persona

That is the father
I wish to see more often
That's the adventurous father
From from my childhood
I finally saw him today





Not Enough - Just Enough

By Cindy C. Herrera

Brilliant and clever
School and academics were a breeze
Every day after school
He was taunted and provoked
He surfaced undefeated
Was he the bully or the one bullied?
Sometimes it would alternate

Withouts grandfather's support
At 8 he had to work to make ends meet
He sold chiclets off the street
To have his daily snack to eat
He put himself through vet school
Seeking grandfather's acknowledgement
The only prestigious inheritance was his last name
For it weighed a significant meaning in the town
All he received was grandfather's frowns

He graduated
And that's when grandfather pridefully
Stuck out his neck
I'm proud of my son
Whom I've supported all along
Seeing red father replied,
I have no father,
For don't you see
I've never been enough for you
You've never supported me

Back and forth between countries
He ventured
From Chicago and Los Angeles to Durango
He stamped his adventures

At nineteen he meets mom
And from there
It didn't take long
For them to marry and decide
To migrate and cross *la frontera*
And leave behind
La pobreza that awaited them
In their homeland if they stayed

With the hope of a better life and future
They took their chance and crossed over
First father
To work for mom's passage
Not knowing that life and paternal betrayal
Will have him hit a wall
And alcoholism will be his downfall
His rock bottom will set the tone
For wife and daughter
To manage the throne

8 years of sobriety have passed
He has done what he can
To make amends for his faults as a parent
Without grandfather's shadow present
For now that is just enough





About the Author

Tyra Lee Kristiansen is a writer, educator, and cowboy. She received her BA and M.Ed from UCLA. Although her studies were in the humanities, her favorite class was a neuroscience seminar (?). She is medium good at a lot of things and an expert at nothing. She resides in Los Angeles with her dog, Sarsaparilla.

What brings you joy?

The simple things in life bring me joy. Here's a list: root beer, vanilla ice cream, the combination of root beer and vanilla ice cream, the voice and comic musings of Richard Ayoade, watching good (or bad) films/television shows, the immaculate vibes of the California desert, the musicality of frontman Ruban Nielson, when the photo lab develops and scans my photos in a timely manner, and walking my dog whilst she is not pulling.

What has been the most inspiring part about the Writing Project Invitational for you this summer?

I entered the WP invitational as primordial ooze and exited as a fully fledged human being! What an inspirational transformation that would not have been possible without my peers. I was inspired by all the educators in the program to be a better and more confident teacher and writer.

What is an important quote to you?

“But I repeat my advice to those who would appreciate poetry, and unwind its difficult involutions. You must read, you must persevere, you must sit up nights, you must inquire, and exert the utmost power of your mind. If one way does not lead to the desired meaning, take another; if obstacles arise, then still another; until, if your strength holds out, you will find that clear which at first looked dark. For we are forbidden by divine command to give that which is holy to dogs, or to cast pearls before swine.” -Giovanni Boccaccio

Also, “happiness only real when shared”

A Guide to Hope for the Hopeless

I read my horoscope today and it said “Attach yourself to hope.” Seems like a generic, vague, woo woo thing a horoscope would say. But it got me thinking. To be honest, I had been feeling pretty hopeless. After enduring a year of loss, the idea of ‘hope’ has been a bit lost on me. 2020 was brutal: we had a literal global pandemic, a grueling presidency, graphic displays of police brutality, impending climate disasters, revealings of violent wealth inequality, ect. When I lay it all out like that, life kinda sucks? On the personal side of things, I experienced a breakup, returned to the horrors of modern dating, and my careers haunting turn to a virtual set up via Zoom which sucked all the joy from my work as a teacher. My anxiety, stress, and hopelessness skyrocketed. What should I really be hopeful for? What does ‘hope’ even mean? Here are 3 definitions that came up on Google.

Hope /hōp/

1. a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen (this feels a little naive don’t you think?).
2. (archaic) a feeling of trust (hm, will come back to that one).
3. An optimistic state of mind that is based on an expectation of positive outcomes with respect to events and circumstances in one’s life or the world at large.

And lastly, I would like to include this adorable blurb on ‘hope’ as a verb: “to cherish a desire with anticipation” (so cute!).

Despite my cynicism, hope is a good thing. Admitting that is very off brand for me. Healthy and secure people are (apparently) hopeful and positive. No matter what the outcomes are in life, they are ok with it (there are people like that?). They roll with the punches. So this leads me to contemplate: how do you cultivate hope when you feel hopeless? How does one “attach” themselves to hope?

Before I attempt an answer, I want to state one justification for hopelessness. If I am hopeless and don’t expect the best, I won’t be disappointed. I have prepared myself. And if something positive does happen, then it will be a pleasant surprise! Despite this preparation, disappointment is still felt. Negative things do happen, that’s just life. So if ‘hope’ is healthy, and ‘hopelessness’ is unhealthy, why does my (our) brain go toward the negative? What am I/are we doing wrong?

According to research, nothing. Negativity/hopelessness/stress/anxiety all serve a purpose, evolved to protect us, and weirdly enough...to occasionally motivate us.

Did you know? The stress chemical cortisol is released when we fall in love.

Did you know? The brain is naturally inclined to be more affected by and dwell on negative things. This is called the negativity bias.

Did you know? The fight or flight response, or as we more commonly refer to it as anxiety, evolved to protect us and serve as a warning sign. A study in the UK revealed that those with more anxiety were less likely to experience an accident.

With these facts in mind (and to answer my original questions), might I suggest that we hope for the best because our brains are already expecting the worst for us. When we inevitably catch ourselves in a negative thought loop of hopelessness, it might behoove us to navigate to more positive waters. As we ebb and flow in this ocean of life, we should trust that good things can and do happen. I’m not suggesting to detach ourselves from hopelessness (that would go against all those “Did you knows?” I wrote above. It’s bad to repress negativity), but we can also actively attempt a hopeful attitude. I’m also not suggesting toxic positivity. Let’s be realistic, life really can chew us up and spit us out. Life bites! Personally, I am going to bite back by cherishing a desire with excited anticipation. Will see how it goes.

I was raised to be small

I was raised
To be small,
To expect loss
With a desire for gain.
To fit
In jars not meant to hold me,
To fill molds
That are mean to me.
I'll be the best that I can be,
But not good enough.
I was raised
To be small,
But learning
That I don't have to be.

Eleni Mandell



I will be starting this upcoming school year teaching 9th grade English at Grant Senior High. It will be my fourth year teaching after a lifetime as a professional singer-songwriter and performer.

My greatest challenge is raising my two children; 11 yr old twins, one with autism.

I love joy! So many things bring me joy from conversations with strangers to roller skating to singing to writing songs to connecting with friends, family, and my students.

My three favorite books:

Shadows on the Hudson by Isaac Bashevis Singer
The Yiddish Policeman's Union by Michael Chabon
The City and the City by China Mieville

The Red Suitcase

part 1

How can I explain the sorrows and the joys of these things? My son, Rex, has autism. Before he was born, I worried. When he didn't reach for me, I worried. When he didn't turn when I called his name...but he was so happy and so beautiful. He loved to be held and kissed. That didn't fit what I knew of autism. My grandmother watched me kiss his softest chubby cheeks over and over, holding him up to standing on the arm of the blue couch. "Eleni, dear, can you please kiss your daughter, too?" He was so sturdy, a chunk of baby with a bowling ball head, big green eyes, and long lashes. He was so easy to hold firmly and kiss. My daughter was fragile with the same long lashes and chicken skinny legs. I would stare at her and think "How beautiful!" but I could squeeze him and press my lips on that sweet softness to make the loudest, squeakiest kiss. But why didn't he tell me he loved me? I came up with a game. "Do you love your mama?"

"Yes!" he'd exclaim. And then I'd tickle him and he'd laugh. We still play this game and he likes to ask me in reverse sometimes.

We are so glued, so connected, so completely knowing each other. And he is verbal and affectionate, not what autism looks like in the movies. His autism is violence. Don't say violence, a therapist told me, call it aggression. He wants something but he can't have it or there's a time to stop, turn it off, go outside. Shocking profanity and violence. When he was five years old, I felt like I was being abused. We were walking to school. There was something he wanted or didn't want. He kicked me. I got down low to talk to him eye to eye and he grabbed my hair to pull me to the ground. How strange, how animal. All my time and my thoughts are about saving him from a future of pain, of danger, of nothing. I want to save him from a pile of trash by the side of the freeway, of jail and of loneliness.

"Rex, you hit me again."

"I'm SORry," he emphasized.

"You're always sorry."

"Got it. Got it."

"What do you have?"

"Autism..."

And he has a twin sister. Della. I must save her from being sidelined and traumatized, of her life being about his life.

Rex decided he should have a sleepover at my aunt and uncle's house. My daughter had had one and he felt that it was his turn. He called her on FaceTime and she hedged. "Then Della is the most spoiled one!" he complained. He was getting agitated, walking in circles and I knew I was in trouble. When they hung up, he attacked. His pain, sadness or frustration or anger, always turns against me. He swiped at my head and yelled. He's only 10! I've been punched in the face, right between the eyes. He's given me a left hook to my cheek bone, a shock, angry that the two hour monologue he had been giving to my old boyfriend, his "uncle" needed to end. I stood stunned in the hallway before bursting into tears. I've been bitten and pushed. I've been called names I have never been called in my

entire life by the person who needs me more than anyone; without me, there are no volunteers. This time he stopped and backed off. "I'm going to go pack."

"But Auntie hasn't said when you can go over."

"I don't care. I'll be ready."

Some minutes passed. I was paralyzed out on the patio wondering what my next move would be. He was back outside carrying the vintage, red suitcase that I kept on top of his closet. Was this more trouble? My mind started shuffling through the Rolodex of responses. What to say? How to say it? What tone? Am I stern, empathetic, excited? Every word and action is important, possibly dangerous, possibly perfect.

"Where did you get that?" I asked.

"From the top of my closet." I left the patio and headed inside. This was something. What was it? Was it a grave warning? Was it more trouble? In his room was the step ladder I keep in the service porch on the other side of the house. The cupboards above his closet were left open. How did he know? How is it possible? And why am I so amazed and afraid? "Can I show you what I packed?"

"Yes, but I need to understand first." I walked purposelessly into my daughter's room and then into the den. He followed me with the suitcase. I was stalling for time. "Ok, show me," I said.

He sat on the floor and opened it. On top was the blue, fuzzy blanket that was a gift from my aunt.

"First, I have my blanket." He carefully lifted it out and set it to the side.

"You folded it!" I didn't know he could fold.

"I know. And underneath..." he revealed neatly rolled and other gently folded items: pants, underwear, a shirt, a toothbrush. He looked up and smiled at me.

Wolfpack part 2

When Della was born she was only 4 lbs 11 oz. Rob, known to Della and Rex as "Uncle Jones," was my birth partner. It was October 14, 2010 at 1:52am. I had to be stitched back up and he waited with me, cupping the top of my head in his giant palm, laughing with me and singing the goofy songs we made up together, until the supervising doctor stuck her head over the curtain that was propped up so we couldn't see my body gaping open and getting sewn together again. She said, "You two have not stopped laughing this whole time!" That made us laugh even more, reveling in our joyful high, the miracle of life. When they wheeled me away, I said, "That was so interesting."

Jones came back to the recovery room after holding each baby. I had made him bring a clean shirt so the babies wouldn't be contaminated by second-hand smoke; told him to be sure to do "skin on skin," not thinking about how it would bond him to them and them to him, only knowing it was supposed to happen and I wasn't allowed to be with them for another 23 hrs to do it myself. Jones met them and held them before I ever did. When he came back to the recovery room to tell me all about the dream babies I had fought tooth and nail for, spent a fortune to conceive, thought I would die without, it was 3 o'clock in the morning. He said, "You gave birth to some very good looking babies! Those are some really good looking babies." He sort of nodded like it was important, real insider stuff. I beamed with pride. Imagine my surprise when I finally got to meet them and saw the scrawniest, chinless, worm-like creatures lying in the incubators with tubes and monitors twisted around their pink bodies. "That's them?" I looked at him, "I thought you said they were good looking." I shyly asked a nurse, "Will my son *never* have a chin or is it just that he's so small?" And my daughter, what would life be like for her with a square nose and rubbery lips? I will love them anyway, I told myself. I will protect them from bullies. It turned out that Jones was right and we joked that he was a talent scout, could really find a diamond in the rough. They got nice and chubby and were truly beautiful with "lashes so long you could sweep up the room," I sang. Della was always more delicate and wiry. Her legs were long, she was athletic and brave, daring and friendly; wading too far out in the ocean, trying to walk on her hands, upside down all the time. She believed in magic.

Life opened up. I called her "Angel" because she gave me this gift. I no longer felt like the odd-ball, the poorest at the Hollywood Hills party, the least desirable. Now I was a mom, just like the other moms. Sure I didn't have a husband but I could talk about naps and feeding and schools. I was happy and proud, content. And then... just like the ship I boarded from Sicily to Tunisia in the middle of the black night with no separation between ocean and sky, we went cruising the waters of family life until our ship took it's first dive down and I went scrambling. On that ship in the Mediterranean that was soon covered in vomit; in the sinks, on the bathroom floors, flooding the toilets and covering the toilet seats, and in the lounge area; with my 3rd class ticket and adventurous spirit, I held out, breathing slowly and deeply, gripping the railing on deck, covered in salty water with hair plastered to my forehead. I held out, tried to stay strong until I finally lost it, too, just as land was visible in the distance at dawn. And when all the signs were there that our lives, the family ship, was taking a nose dive just as that ship to Tunisia had, I also held out, gripping the railing, telling myself it couldn't be true, not my boy, not us. And how is it that

I start here to tell you about my little wolf and still wind up falling into this turbulence that is autism?

Della howls at the moon. She howls at the fingernail slivers, the waxing or waning, and the big, belly-full, pregnant moon. She keeps pages in a notebook with words and translations of names and other things. She writes in a big, black felt pen, starting at the back of the book for no apparent reason. Jones is in her pack and meets with her to discuss. His 6 ft 3 inch frame sprawls across the olive green beanbag chair, legs reaching halfway across the room, as she matter-of-factly discusses the business of the day: who will be invited to join, will be bitten into the pack, what else? She is the alpha, the secretary, the note keeper, the story teller, the rule maker...now Rex is spinning and talking; he has to stop her from being a werewolf in case someone tries to kill her. He's off and interrupting and making trouble again. How will we survive? She wears good luck charms, even silver, despite its anti-werewolf properties, saying that hers is to ward off evil. She's a fighter. She never cowers away from her brother or treats him delicately for fear that he'll attack, she goes for the kill like any wolf. I jump between them. She may be the alpha but I am the Mama and no one will touch my girl. I tell her that she must be the best at knowing him, she must be fluent in her brother, even more than I am. But she says that she wants to make him angry because she is angry. She wants revenge. She wants to rip apart the childhood that is marred by tantrums and profanity and doctors appointments and an endless array of therapists and books to solve this puzzle. She will tear out the throat of her prey and then she will emerge and be free. I will see to it.

Hanna Grace Nelson

About the Author

I am entering my seventh year teaching, the first six I served Culver City High School, and I will be transitioning to Winters High School. I deeply love and care for my students, and am constantly learning and unlearning to be a better teacher and human overall.

When I'm not "Ms. Nelson", I love crafting: soapmaking, sewing, quilting, painting, woodworking, you name it!



What has been the most inspiring part of the invitational?

The shared opportunity for processing our pedagogies and this very challenging school year. Hearing writing from so many talented teachers. Being in a zoom call where everyone has their cameras on.

What is your greatest extravagance?

Feather pillows (they will seriously change your life) and comfortable shoes. Life is too short and too rough to not give oneself a soft place to land.

What living person do you most admire?

Unrelated to me, Angela Davis. Her prison abolition work and steadfast clarity have taught me so much and opened my mind to possibilities of a better world.

Related to me, my grandfather Ralph. Grandpa Ralph has been my rock, my inspiration, and my reminder to keep pushing through hard times.

Processing this Past School Year.

The exhaustion permeates our faces, even in the respite of July when summer should have settled in, soothing our synapses, we are grey-faced and dull. It's been like twenty one years, this one. The first year teachers should earn purple hearts, for haven't they been wounded in their service? Maybe we have all been wounded.

Teaching is my calling, and I have been blessed with self-knowing from a young age. The existential pining and deep frustrations my friends experience with their careers and life paths is simple for me: I teach, because I love humanity. I teach, because it's a sacred honor to be one of the many guides passing children through to adulthood. Our hands, arms, bodies sway in this annual motion. All ages, genders, skin colors, we work to move the babies along until they are unrecognizable adults with beards and babies of their own.

The line of teachers that have come before and are coming after— we are working arms linked— these many years. It's how we hold enough space for the joy and wonder of learning. And all the sorrow and hardship, too. My grandmother Bonnie taught ESL at the local community college to newcomer adults. My great-grandmother, Florence, taught elementary school while raising four children on her own. My grandfather John, my mother's father, taught too.

Separated from each other, we lost capacity. Moving through the motions, I cried so many times. Once when two boys stayed in the zoom to work on an assignment. They chit-chatted and thought I wasn't listening while I made myself dinner, and we all said good-night when time got too late. Sure, the video calls did a lot— but it's not the same. Sharing space is palpable— we can feel each other, sense that there is someone there. Alone in front of chromebooks, lights out, bright screen, blue light pouring onto us in tidal waves, there is no sense that we are not alone. Just a sense that we are watched. Connection was so strained, and far apart.

Sisyphian cycles of poverty and prejudice permeated our conversations and inequities and systemic oppression came into discourse. Many topics that we've been talking about in education for years were suddenly common concerns.

And we held through, continuing the legacy of working to pass children through the gauntlet to adulthood. Our lessons tended towards survival. Love tells us survival is not enough. Our hands cannot reach through the chasm to our students' hearts, all we hear about is the lacuna in their minds.

Can we have two summers please? I don't know if ten years is enough rest for this one year. Not aloud, or even to my partner, I whisper in my mind, "what if I collapse?" I know I'll keep going, but there it is, that hiss, that bone-knowing. Fellow educators, do you feel that, too?

Knowing that I'm tough isn't enough anymore. I know I can endure, I have stamina for that. But is that how I want to live my life, enduring? And what of my students, green and born into a desertified world? They are raw, without the armor of coping skills and stamina for pain, they are uncalled and therefore more vulnerable. How do we return to the classroom, pretending that those second graders' last experience in the classroom was as kindergarteners, or that my future 11th graders may have not interacted with anyone besides their own family since the year they entered high school? Have the little ones not been wounded? Where are their purple hearts? Instead we issue the CAASPP, a hate crime if you ask me. What can we glean from these standardized tests, in this year, in any year!?

Hope is not something I dare to feel yet, deltas flowing from rivers into the ocean don't know if they're out of the mud yet either. I'm trying to flow like water, but I sink into the mud. I'd love to snuggle in to rest in the silty bosom of the river, restore myself with fish, cattails, and herons. But this summer, the ocean is on fire, and I've got students waiting for me.

May there be laughter, may there be joy, may there be hope, may there be crying, may there be growing, may there be acting, singing, drawing, writing, dancing! May there be community, may there be conflict resolution, may there be friendships formed and re-set like bones set to heal. May there be the pure-hearted joy, the extreme bliss, the wondrous high-notes of being together again.

Plants From My Childhood

Soft, delicately unfurling
Like the many wishes I had
For safety, For love, For freedom
Fronds stretching out, craggy and delicate simultaneously
Ferns holding the possibility
Of being rugged
And soft

Our mother collected foxglove seeds
Purple stalks towering over my little head
The rattle shake as she
Hoped for something
When they shriveled into brown
As seeds fell onto paper
Black dots, little bits, one would hardly think it was more than a speck of dirt
She sold them
She always knew how tap into the great mother
to keep us going

Spearmint still grows in a wild patch
On the far side of my grandfather's lawn
Forget Me Nots, too, though their tepid flowers are small and seasonal
The mint patch feels eternal
There from my earliest memories
One of the first things I could cook on my own, mint tea
The summer of my grandfather's stroke
I turned toward the mint patch
It made the metallic bitter
Well water go down smoother

Samantha Pack

About the Author

Samantha (Sam) Pack has taught for 11 years in independent schools in Los Angeles. She currently teaches 8th and 10th grade English at Windward School. She is a yogi, and an amateur gardener and baker.



Which books are on your nightstand?

Loosed Upon the World: The Saga Anthology of Climate Fiction: this one will probably be on my nightstand for a while. I'd love to teach an environmental fiction course someday, so I have to do my research! I'm also about to dive into *Throne of Glass*, by Sarah J. Maas, which comes highly recommended by my students. It's always exciting to embark on the first book in a series. I count audiobooks as part of my reading rotation, too: right now I'm listening to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, by Anne Bronte, for one of my book clubs.

If you were a pasta dish, what would you be and why?

I would be rigatoni for its chewiness (flexibility), tube-like shape (open, yet structured). My rigatoni would also have fresh basil - grown on my patio - for my connection to the earth. My rigatoni pasta dish uses olive oil for depth and fluidity, and lots of parmesan cheese for flavor and kick. This sounds like my aspirational pasta dish...

What is your greatest challenge?

Letting go of harsh mental stories.

To Listen

Samantha Pack

When I pulled the '87 gray Volvo up to the front entrance of the Boys and Girls Club of Northern Westchester in Mt. Kisco, my heart always sank. Really, my heart started sinking from breakfast on Friday morning, knowing where I'd be headed that afternoon. For six years I was deposited (or deposited myself, when I could drive), and every Friday afternoon, the best part was leaving. The freedom tasted like the iron-gray clouds that hung over the metal fence.

Diagonally across from the Boys and Girls Club was the Westchester Medical Center. I remember thinking glumly, *Well at least I'm not headed there*, some major medical emergency ranking just below the numbness of handing out snack cups and playground supervision. I don't remember any of the kids - not one. Nor do I recall the adults with whom I supervised. Why would I? I hovered on their periphery, counting the minutes until release. My apathy was palpable, and I'm sure they wondered the same question I should have been asking myself: *Why is she here?*

Why was I there? What made me spend six years of precious weekend hours - in the prime of my youth - doing something I genuinely hated, and for no discernible reason? Somewhere, I'd gotten the idea that I needed to volunteer for my college applications - and that in general, the self-imposition of undesirable tasks equals good. Getting into college needs to feel really hard, right? No one actually told me that volunteering would shore up my admissions prospects - I reasoned all on my own that the internal shriveling it did was good for me, would be worth it.

I also kept dragging myself to the lower floor (who chose to put the smallest children in the basement?) to read stories and supervise mat time because I had made a commitment. Changing the plan, any plan, caused me near-existential discomfort, and I was more than willing to drown out my own voice for the sake of safety: the safety of knowing what was next, even if it caused me to internally scream. The safety of having a packaged sound bite readily available when someone asked me how I spent my free hours (never mind that I absolutely hated my answer, and never wanted to discuss it). And the safety of knowing that I had a plan, and was moving towards a goal - I was being productive - so therefore, I was not wasting time. God forbid.

Of course, the irony is that my aversion to time-wasting, which prevented me from exploring what I might have genuinely enjoyed, guaranteed that my volunteering would indeed be a colossal waste of time. Had I permitted myself to bake, draw, delve deeper into reading or writing, perhaps dinosaur-hunt, without a clear end goal in mind, there's no telling what interesting messes I might have sunk my supple adolescent teeth (brain?) into.

I can't get those Fridays back. They did not shape me in any meaningful ways; the meaning comes only now, in the reflection. I repeatedly forced myself into *should*, rather than open myself up to *could*. That time is grayed out for me, like invalid calendar dates you can't click on to make an appointment. I understand now how my rigid thinking doubly inhibited me. I closed myself off to beautiful possibilities for how to spend those Friday afternoons, both because I could not tolerate deviation from the plan, and because the uncertainty and messiness of discovering what I truly enjoyed terrified me. No road map existed for discovering what I loved. I did not yet understand that this precious, wonderful, meandering road map was *inside* me. I am frightened by how systematically, how ruthlessly, I ignored my own voice.

I imagine I am back in those dungeon classrooms, watching the kiddos eat animal crackers, drink juice out of Dixie cups, and look up at me with their moon faces. I tell them solemnly, "To listen to yourself is the most important skill you will ever learn. If you're like me, it won't come naturally - you'll have to teach yourself. But you can do it. Try not to wait as long as I did." They would blink at me, then go back to their trucks, but I will know that they heard me. Then I would open the doors of the Boys and Girls Club for the very last time, get into my Volvo, and drive away, finally free.

Morning Yoga

Samantha Pack

Morning on the mat
in savasana, corpse pose,
alive as I'll ever be.

My ring finger clacks against the wood floor
as my hand falls open,
the fluid collected there during
practice pulsing.

This is the pose of rest: a repose.

My knee crooks and armpits clam with yeasty sweat,
processing in stillness the last hour's motion.

Green veins dutifully move their cargo
beneath the soft underbelly of my arm.

Highways, so close to the surface,
carrying life through
this, my human body.



About The Author

Faye Peitzman, teacher-professor at UCLA for lots of years, started her academic journey at the University of Pennsylvania and earned her doctorate at New York University. She is grateful for the many years she's directed the UCLA Writing Project, learning from teachers who share just how they go about reaching their students and guiding them to claim the identity of writer. Faye will tell you how she admires birds with wide wing-spans, the ones who fly across oceans, and who always seem to know when to flap their wings and when to soar. She adores her two grown sons, David and Michael, and it seems that they really like her too.

What qualities do you aspire to?

I want to be a really good listener, be present for family, friends, colleagues and students. I want to live my life full-hearted, no holding back, no saving for later. Why choose to live otherwise? Half-hearted—the word drags you down, doesn't it?

Name a few favored words and phrases. Maybe you coined them, maybe not, but you've made them your own!

Enhanced understandings: As in—knowing for a long time that a mother's love for her children is unrelenting, but understanding in a more profound way after entering the world of Pat Mora's "Elena."

Worthy: As in, "worthy books"—A book or film that's really worth my time and yours—like *The Penguin Book of Migration Literature*.

Linguistic Equanimity, actually Samy Alim's term, but he was focusing on the equality of all languages and language variations. I also embrace the notion of welcome, acceptance—especially in times of turmoil—in a calm yet vibrant space.

Prized writing: Our students may literally win a prize because their writing is so good—first prize, yay! Or they get published, or their teachers just sit up straighter and taller as they read this piece of writing—it's that good. And—sometimes the writing is "on the way," the very best a student can do right now. That deserves a blue ribbon too.

Brightening Our Literary Canon

By Faye Peitzman

Mirrors, Windows and Enhanced Understandings

The good news is that there are so, so many exquisite readable works of art: novels, graphic novels, memoirs, essays, poems, spoken word pieces. How lucky we are as teachers to assume the responsibility of knowing them, lots of them, so we can grow as readers and thinkers and humans ourselves, and so we have a large repertoire to draw from when we choose books with and for our students.

When I first encountered the term “mirror texts,” which I initially understood as literature that reflected a person “just like me,” I started to wonder. What stories mirror my experiences and curiosities. Any at all? I’ve been searching for ones that explore and expose some of the core pieces of my positionality: race/ethnicity, gender and orientation, class, age, profession, role as mother, daughter, sister, partner, friend. That capture my temperament, my follies, my chances to prove myself worthy and strong.

I realized that while I’ve been happily reading, by design, a variety of multicultural literatures for the past three decades—and oh what a wonderful ride—Jewish literature was never a focus. And so it became one. On these few pages I’d like to share some worthy Jewish literature, but first give attention to other multicultural treasures that abound. Because, as you probably know, the brightest windows often offer mirrors too. I choose these few instead of their many contenders because I’ve read them with my own students. I’ll go at a fast clip, so hold on tight. Just imagine more elaboration.

Multi-cultural, Multi-lingual—and Glad of It

Two books that I adore: *Tongue Tied: The Lives of Multilingual Children in Public Education* edited by Otto Santa, and *The Penguin Book of Migration Literature*, edited by Dohra Ahmad. Both contain within their covers pieces by authors representing an impressive range of ethnicities. I particularly value *Tongue-Tied’s* focus on U.S. attitudes toward the variety of languages and Englishes representing the home languages of many students. What accounts for the fury and hate for people who speak languages in addition to English? What is the relationship between language and race?

But *Tongue-Tied* is far from all doom and gloom. I love how it captures a playfulness and exuberance that multilingual people enjoy. Abby Figueroa’s “Speaking Spanglish” comes to mind, as does “English Con Salsa” by Gina Valdés. Two languages, by definition, are better, and more fun, than one.

Migration Literature through its specificity, offers us enhanced understandings about migration. The focus is on those who come to the U.S. from other countries—and includes a section on the leaving of the home country, another on the arrival, then on the continued fending, and the last story focuses on returning to the home country. There’s only that one, Pauline Kaldas’ short story “A Conversation.” Returning is a possibility too.

Jewish Literature—why?

While I had intentionally immersed myself in multicultural literature these past several decades, I neglected Jewish literature. These works didn't "count" in the mid-80s efforts to build inclusive curricula. But eventually I started reading on my own, then joined a book study group hosted at a local modern-orthodox Jewish day school. Na'amit, UCLA Writing Project fellow who created and led the group of parents whose children attended the school in the present or past, had read these pieces with her high school students. Heady stuff for high school! And yes, she chose a few theoretical pieces here and there just for us grownups.

I now consider modestly literate instead of illiterate. I still haven't found my "just like me" character. I know, I know, then I have to write one. But that's not next on my "to do" list. My current intention is to find writings with Jewish themes and/or characters that might enrich the offerings at our local public schools.

Why? It's not that I really think students wonder if Jews, devils in partial disguise, have horns and tail. If by any chance one or two did think this way, I'd let Max and Becca, my exquisite felines, assure them that the tail part is simply Not True. After all, these animals, insiders with tails burnt sienna and cream- striped and black-brown striped, respectively, are on intimate terms with this part of their anatomy.

But many teachers I've talked to do tell me that their students haven't encountered any Jewish people to date, and so might, in fact, be more susceptible to taking troubling tropes to heart. All Jews are rich, slum lords, pawnbrokers, unscrupulous, stingy. They are loud and brash. They may be smart. In any case, they are most definitely the Other.

Here is my tiny annotated list for us as teachers and, depending on who the particular students are, where their interests and passions and curiosities lie, It's brief, just a trio, because you need to skim them yourselves first, you have busy, busy lives and I will run out of space.

Chaim Potok's stories—oh, he's such a storyteller! My favorite is his autobiographical novel *The Chosen*. More of a window text for me, with the focus on two groups of Jews, Chasidim and Orthodox, clearly on the religious-observant end of the "religiosity" spectrum. While I was familiar with most customs and Hebrew/Yiddish words, and some history, my knowledge was limited. More important for our purposes, the book is a coming of age novel focusing on teenage boys, father and son relationships and finding one's own place in the world. The book hooks us in right from the beginning where we find ourselves in a baseball game and Danny, as he pitches, literally wants to kill the boy at bat, Reuven. The rest of the book places us inside an unlikely new friendship and never lets up on the value of studying, working harder than most could imagine, and becoming brilliant in the process.

"The Shawl"—written by Cynthia Ozick, the "matriarch of Jewish literature"—probably will not find its way into our urban Los Angeles classrooms. But a book for us, yes. Why read it? Because if you didn't have a deep sense of the trauma Holocaust survivors carry, you will gain entrée now. In its brief eight pages, "The Shawl," devastates with its depiction of a mother's worst nightmare at an internment camp in Nazi Germany. The interlocking novella, "Rosa," re-introduces the protagonist, Rosa, as an old woman in Miami. Trauma won't let go, mental illness manifests in many ways—as we find out about the little shop Rosa owned and then destroyed and see how she writes every day to a daughter long deceased. Thankfully, Ozick eventually mixes the nightmarish misery with comedy — introducing laundromats, missing underpants, and the flirtatious old man Persky.

The Book Thief was written by Marcus Zusak, an Australian author, not Jewish, whose mother was born in Austria and helped Jews trying to escape the Nazis pursuing them. The place is Germany, 1939, and the reader is taken along as everyday realities change fast. The characters are compelling, including Death, who narrates the story. No scary grim reaper, this Death is gentle, silently and compassionately carrying souls whose time has come. Others: Liesel Meminger, the main protagonist; her pal Rudy; her new mama, the foul-mouthed Rosa Hubermann and her new papa, the gentle Hans, who gained Liesel's trust early on because of his "not leaving." Any more to say about this 500-page book? Plenty. Such a worthy text.

Next Steps

Keep reading—focus more on shorter works—stories, poems, spoken word pieces. Ask my UCLAWP fellows to consider piloting a piece of Jewish literature in their classrooms.

Study the website of the Museum on The Seam, in Jerusalem, to learn about the artworks they've displayed recently. Its website specifies the underlying philosophy and purpose. "Art is a language with no boundaries" and they shape their exhibits "to raise controversial social issues for public discussion." When I visited ten years or so ago, that was certainly true. The multi-media exhibit focused on borders throughout the world. Stunning. Most of the website will have English translations, but if there are any just in Hebrew, I'll reach out to my multilingual pals.

Wish me happy reading! And I wish you the same.

Anahi Rocca

About Me

I am a high school math teacher who loves traveling, eating dessert, reading and spending time with family and friends. I'm passionate in developing students' math and critical thinking skills. My goal is to create mathematical mindsets amongst my students.



Which living person do you most admire?

I admire my mom the most. She is a strong woman who has handled the toughest job in the world with such grace, being a full time mom.

Who brings you the most happiness

My sister brings me the most happiness. She is a 20 year old woman with Down Syndrome and a spirit like no other.



My three favorite books:

*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows by J.K. Rowling
The Forty Rules of Love by Elif Shafak
Mathematical Mindsets by Jo Boaler*



First Year

My first year of teaching was during the pandemic. First semester, many of my students failed Algebra 1. These were 9th graders who either never showed up to zoom class or showed up but never submitted anything. The district mandated that we allow these students to raise their F's by giving them 3 extra weeks during Christmas break to raise their grades by giving them a time to submit the work they missed.

The first weekend of winter break, I received a call from a teacher. This teacher told me to give students some worksheets to complete and raise their grades to a C. I was hesitant. I knew students were not going to learn the content in 3 weeks and certainly not with worksheets. The teacher told me that most of these kids won't go to college, so learning the material was not important to them, graduating high school was their only goal. While I do believe all students should pass, I don't think that passing students along is a good idea. When we lower our expectations, we teach children that they don't have what it takes. The teacher believed that learning didn't matter, numbers were the driving force.

This was an educator, who was once hopeful like me. This was an educator who once thought they could make a difference. This was an educator who had been beaten down by the system until they were stripped from hope as they faced the *parasite* of American education.



The Bus

As a first-year teacher – or as first year professional in any field, people think of you as hopeful, or naïve. In my teaching program, I was told to avoid the teacher’s lounge. The teacher’s lounge is where teachers complain about their jobs and talk about quitting or leaving the profession. They say teachers leave the profession within the first 5 years of service. When does it all go wrong? Why does it all go wrong?

Is a job like a bus, heading to a destination that no one wants to go to? Is the bus losing people along the way because they begin to get restless, bored, and unhappy?



The summer of 2012, I took a bus from LA to Mazatlán, Sinaloa with my grandparents. I remember being excited the first hour or two. After that, I began to get restless. I wanted to sleep but couldn’t with all the motion and commotion. I wanted to read, but the constant movement made me nauseous. For about 28 hours I sat there, thinking “I should’ve gone on a plane.” Finally, after a long ride, that felt endless, the driver said we were an hour away from our destination. I started to get excited again! I was going to my hometown. I was going to walk on the beach, eat *mariscos*, hang out with all my cousins, and enjoy the sun as much as possible.

If a job is like a bus, wouldn’t people want to stay on until it reaches its destination?

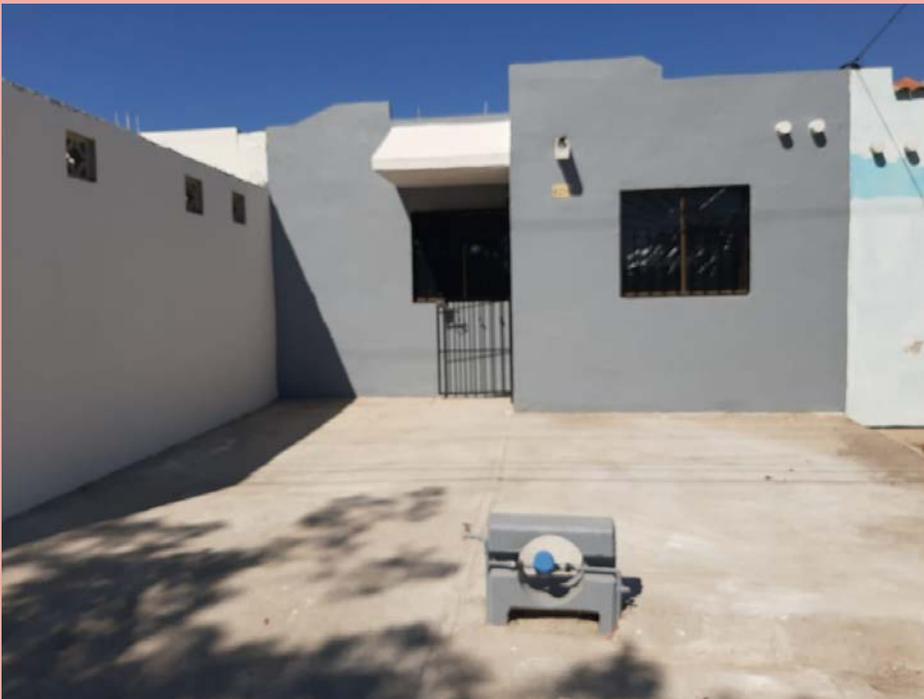
But what exactly is its destination? Is it a happy place where you find fulfilment and joy...like retirement? Or a hopeless pit of emptiness?

“Life’s what you make it,” right? Can I decide what I want the destination to be, or is it already pre-determined by the United States’ Department of Education?

La Campiña

I was 3 years old. I finally had my own room, my first bed, my first sanctuary. Our 2 bedroom home was located in La Campiña. La Campiña was a little community of newly built homes in Mazatlan, Sinaloa, Mexico.

There, I made my first best friend, Carolina. Caro was 6 years older than me. She was the eldest of her family, but also the eldest of mine. Caro was the older sister I never had. She played video games and barbies with me. When I think of my first home, I think of Caro. When I think of La Campiña, I think of Caro.



Rosana Rodriguez

About the author:

Rosana is entering her third year teaching. Rosana teaches at Carthay Elementary School of Environmental Studies STEM magnet. Rosana loves exploring Los Angeles, attending concerts and traveling.



Which living person do you most admire?

The person I most admire is my mom. Rosa, my mom is kind, thoughtful and caring. I am always inspired by the love she pours out to those around her, and hope to be like her :)

What has been the most inspiring part about the Writing Project Invitational for you this summer?

I am inspired by the passion, the love for teaching and the love for learning that each member of the cohort has brought. I was inspired to write, I was inspired to share, I was inspired to step out of my comfort zone. Thank You!

What brings you joy?

Simple pleasures such as the first sip of coffee in the morning, chisme to go along with coffee. Hot Yoga. A 90's playlist.

La Vida. . .Life

The first two years of my education occurred at Pio Pico, my mom worked at Pio Pico and my dad drove us every morning. I remember feeling happy. I had great teachers and many friends. We sang about Los Pollitos and the legendary Mr. Sun, oh Mr. Golden Sun.

It was not until the end of Kindergarten when my mom shared that I would soon be joining my brother, Joey, at his school. I can't remember if I was excited or upset, but nonetheless the choice was made.

Weeks later we were driving down PCH looking out at the ocean, watching as the waves crashed one after another until finally we faded into the bluffs and made our way to the school upon the hill. As we walked onto the campus I remember clutching onto my mami's hand, she and my papi walked me to my first grade classroom where I was quickly greeted by my teacher Ms. Lee, I remember my parents letting go and walking away, with tears in my eyes I followed her inside the classroom. This was the first day of the rest of my life, I walked in those doors and began my westside experience. The westside experience is a compilation of events and occurrences that have shaped my upbringing. My experience as a student in some of the most affluent neighborhoods of Los Angeles was exhausting, enriching, and at times deceiving.

School became a journey, waking up before the sun was hard to understand. I remember constantly questioning my parents, “why do I have to wake up before the sun rises to go to school? Why can’t daddy drive me like he used to? Why do we have to be the first kids at school? Why couldn’t I stay with mami at her school?” The constant questioning, only to be given the same answer every time, “You have to wake up early so you can go to a *good* school” as the years went by the questioning stopped and the acceptance had settled in, I began to believe that quality education was somehow sitting on the other side of the 10 freeway.

It was ingrained in me that I was commuting so that in return I would have access to a good school. What that meant was a school that was properly funded. A school that emphasized the importance of art and music. I commuted so that I could have an opportunity to learn about U.S history through song and theater, so that I could take a field trip to Sacramento to better understand the Gold Rush. I learned, and my love for learning was constantly fueled but what I did not realize was that with every opportunity that I *“gained”* I also lost. I spent many years trying to perfect my articulation skills trying to sound less like myself to fit in. Acquiring vocabulary so that I could *“sound smart”*. I spent so much time playing different versions of myself at school, at home and on the bus with my friends that eventually I learned exactly when to be who, for the most part my friends also acquired this skill. Many of us navigated this trajectory of life.

Some however did not, while I was told that waking up early and traveling miles across town would allow us to attend a good school I was not told how hard it would be to make it until the very end... for some of my friends code switching and commuting was not enough... because once we got off the bus we were back in our neighborhood subjected to the gangs, drugs, and for some of my friends broken homes and financial stress it felt as if our day had been spent in a realm of fantasy and was rudely awakened the moment we stepped foot off the bus... Some of my friends got lost in the reality of our environment. For example, my friend Carlos, I can tell you stories of the days we would sit on the bus and collaborate aka share homework, the days that we would wander to the liquor store and buy chips after a long day at school, I can tell you Carlos is the reason why I loved SlipKnot, he was kind of a dork. I wish I had more stories but my friend Carlos was gunned down in his neighborhood when we were in 11th grade. Losing Carlos was painful. I remember being upset, upset at Carlos for going from dork to suddenly changing and becoming part of Los Angeles' gang culture. Thinking back now that I am older, I am enraged, enraged that a system failed him, he played his part... he tried until he couldn't.

Years have passed since then. I am now approaching my third year as a teacher. Prior to stepping foot in the classroom I spent ten years servicing the Florence-Firestone community as an after school program coordinator and a classroom aide, it was then that I realized (**again**) how unjust our education system truly is. Perhaps my mom was right, perhaps as a child my best opportunity was on the other side of the freeway. My inner child and I still do not understand WHY, why are students expected to master the same standards with completely different resources? While I do not have the answers, nor the solution to the injustice we call Public Education, what I do know is that my experience has created an awareness that I now bring into my teaching practice. I am a work in constant progress, but I strive to use the voice I have acquired, a voice that has gained power through experience. A voice that sometimes whispers, but one that I can finally recognize.

Karla Tobar



About the Author

I have been a teacher for 13 years. I am passionate about bilingual education and have taught in New York City and Los Angeles County.

I enjoy watching reality TV, listening to podcasts about reality TV, taking my cat on walks, and making GoPro videos.

What has mattered most to you about our invitational?

I am grateful for the opportunity to grow and see myself as a writer. This space has been restorative, healing, and inspiring in ways I could not have imagined.

What is your greatest extravagance?

At the moment, my greatest extravagance is photography. I am working towards earning a photography certificate and am loving it, but classes, equipment, and subscriptions are definitely an investment.

What brings you joy?

Beautiful sunsets that paint the skies pink, purple, and blue.

Finding Joy

Karla Tobar



Joy. A word meant to capture lightness and happiness, but on a personal level has translated into emptiness.

During a recent professional development about trauma I learned something new.

Trauma can impact the way one experiences joy, at times, preventing one from experiencing it at all.

I recall numerous what should have been joyous events in my life where I felt numb.

I have always been aware of the disconnect, but I began to direct my attention to this idea last summer after reading *We Want to Do More Than Survive* by Dr. Bettina Love.

A few lines in the book brought a feeling of healing and comfort.





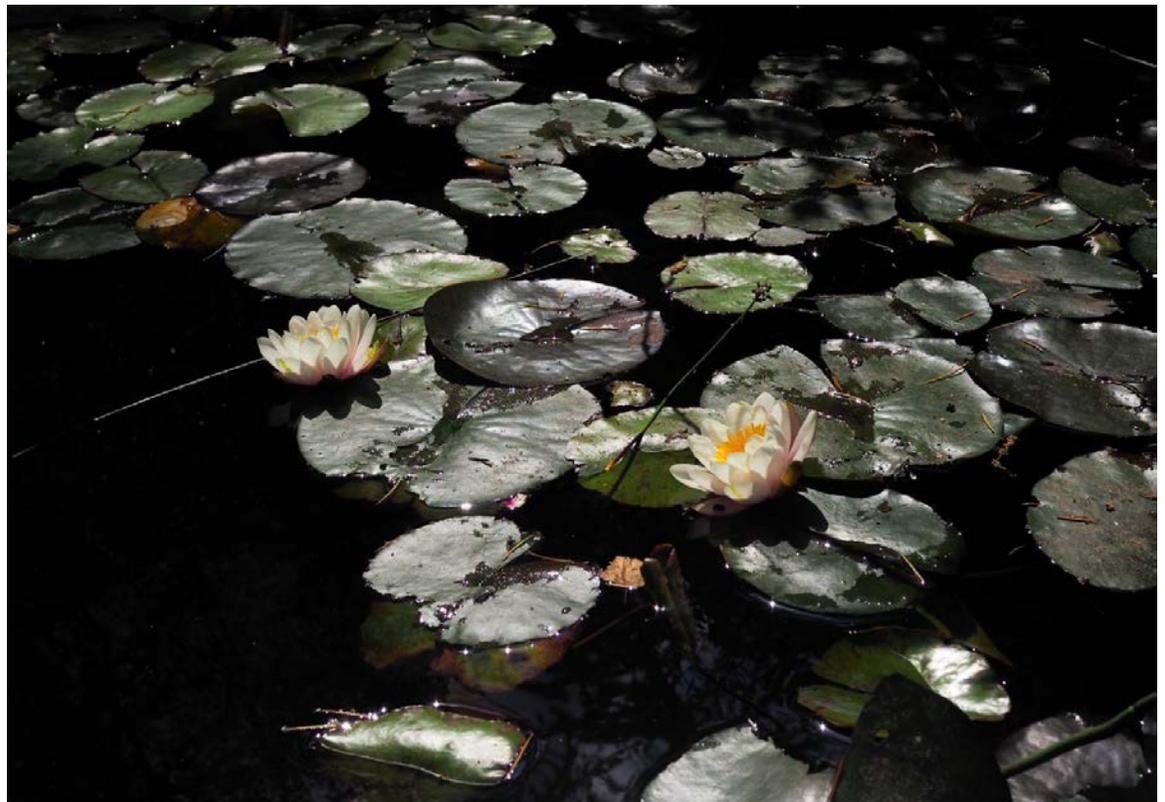
Dr. Love writes: "Fighting for justice shows how human and how loving we are. But to be fully human is to know yourself beyond the fight, to have an inner self that can be quiet and enjoy life" (157).

Those words stood out. I immediately typed them up and printed them out. They hang on the wall next to my computer, confirmation that there is more to life than struggle.

Struggle feels so ordinary, especially when life experiences have normalized it, when the world we live in can be unjust, oppressive, and dehumanizing.

I believe another world is possible -- a just, more humane world.

Organizing for a better world is important. I am recognizing that taking care of myself is just as important.





Life is struggle. Life is also beauty and joy.

Realizing this duality exists, understanding that life is full of contradictory emotions and experiences has been essential for healing.

I am embarking on a personal quest to seek out joy wherever and whenever I can.

Learning a new way of living and being is transformative.

I accept and honor my lived experiences, but am working on embracing the present, healing, and finding joy in life.





Latrice L. Washington



About the Author

Latrice L. Washington teaches 9th and 10th grade English at King Drew Magnet High School of Medicine and Science. The Fall 2021 semester marks her 10th year in education. She enjoys writing short stories, learning Tik Tok dances, baking, and traveling with her husband, Henry.

Which books are on your nightstand?

Legendborn by Tracy Deonn, *I Can Make You Rich* by Ramit Sethi, and *Everything I Never Told You* by Celeste Ng.

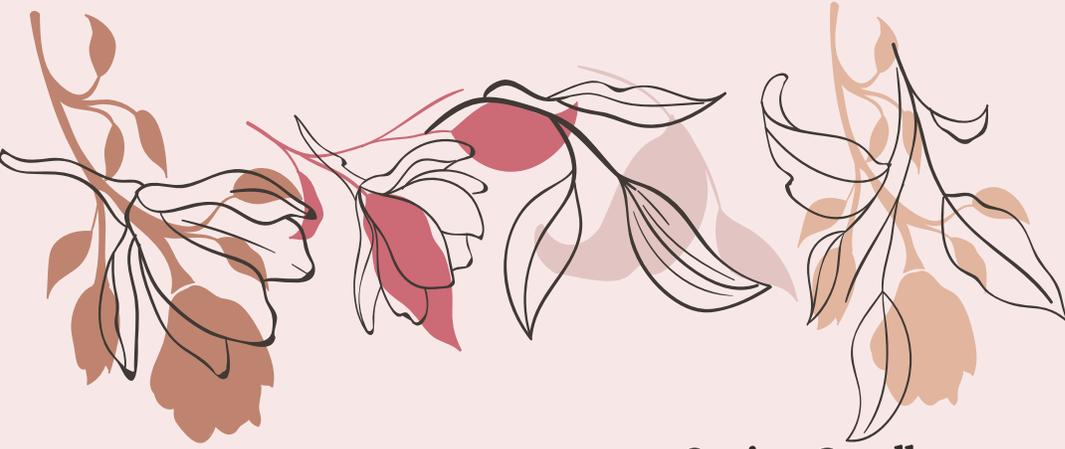
What is your greatest extravagance?

My greatest extravagance is gifting myself whatever I want!

What brings you the most happiness?

Creating new memories with my loved ones.





Saying Goodbye

Written by Latrice L. Washington

The weather was ideal for Keisha’s “I’m outta here!” college-going-away party. Keisha peeked through the backdoor curtains and spied on everyone gathered in her honor. Her parents’ backyard was filled with colorful streamers, tables laden with spicy dishes, and the air pulsated with the thrum of her father’s Segunda drum. Keisha raced to the bathroom and looked over her reflection one last time. She scrunched her curly brown hair once more and touched up her lip gloss. She was grateful that her cocoa complexion was not marred by any new blemishes. She texted her cousin Tracey, “I’m ready,” and waited for the music to shift to Goapele’s soulful track, *Closer to My Dreams*. She exited the bathroom when she heard the song’s introduction. She sashayed toward the backdoor and paused before opening it. Straightening up her posture, she opened the door and stepped out onto the patio deck. Keisha beamed as she took in the faces of her family and neighborhood friends.

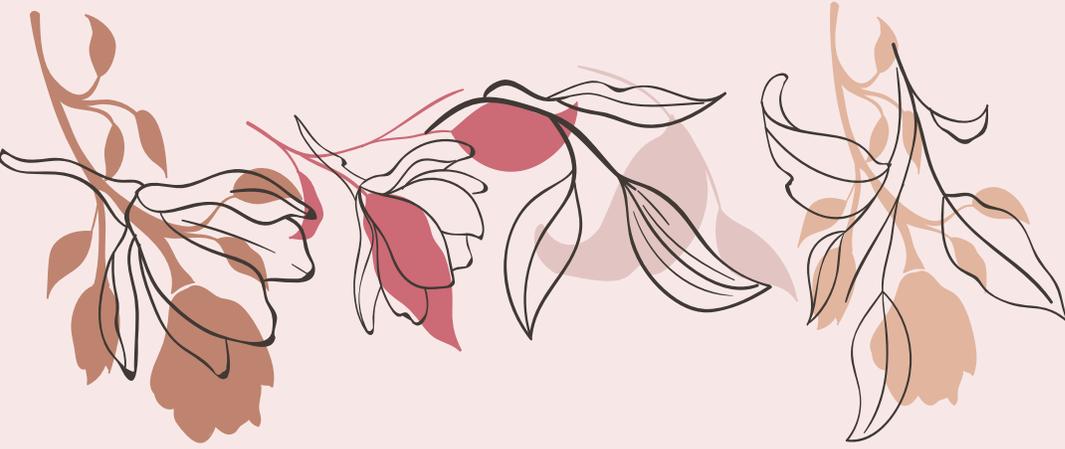
“I can’t believe my niña is leaving next week,” Keisha’s mom, Lily, moaned. Keisha grinned at her mother and walked into her open embrace.

“Ay, Mama! I will be gone for three months and then I will be back to get on your last nerve,” Keisha laughed as her mother tightened the embrace.

“Let her breathe, Lily! She has many guests to visit with,” admonished her father, Frank. “Keisha, Ve y deja que todos te vean.”

Keisha kissed her mother’s cheek, turned, and pranced over to her abuelitas who were seated around the outdoor dining table on the other side of the deck. After an hour of visiting with her aunts, uncles, cousins, and neighbors, Keisha decided that she had enough hugs and kisses to last her for the entire year. Keisha noticed that the covered swing chair was vacant, so she plopped down on the cushion, and enjoyed the Santa Ana breeze. Her cousin Tracey joined her with two cups of fruit punch, and they shared a quiet moment in the sun. Keisha took out her phone and took a selfie of the two of them to capture the moment.





“Dónde está tu hermano?” Keisha asked.

“On his way... that was like three hours ago tho,” Tracey replied. “I’m sure he had to pick up his boys, get the car washed, ... buy a fresh white tee.”

“Man, Ronaldo loves his swap meet t-shirts!” Keisha laughed.

“I know, right.” Tracey finished her punch and leaned back into the swing chair. They rocked back and forth slowly. Tracey looked over at Keisha and quietly asked, “Are you scared?”

“A little bit. I won’t know anyone there. I was the only one from my school headed to Boston,” Keisha uttered.

“You can call me anytime. I have unlimited data,” Tracey said.

“Thanks. I’m more scared about the weather,” Keisha replied.

“Yeah. It does get cold out there. Personally, I would be more afraid of picking up their accent,” laughed Tracey.

Keisha flicked her wrists up and replied in a poorly executed East Coast accent, “Neva!” Keisha continued matter-of-factly, “Besides, Robertson College is like two hours away from Boston, so maybe the accents won’t be that noticeable on campus.”

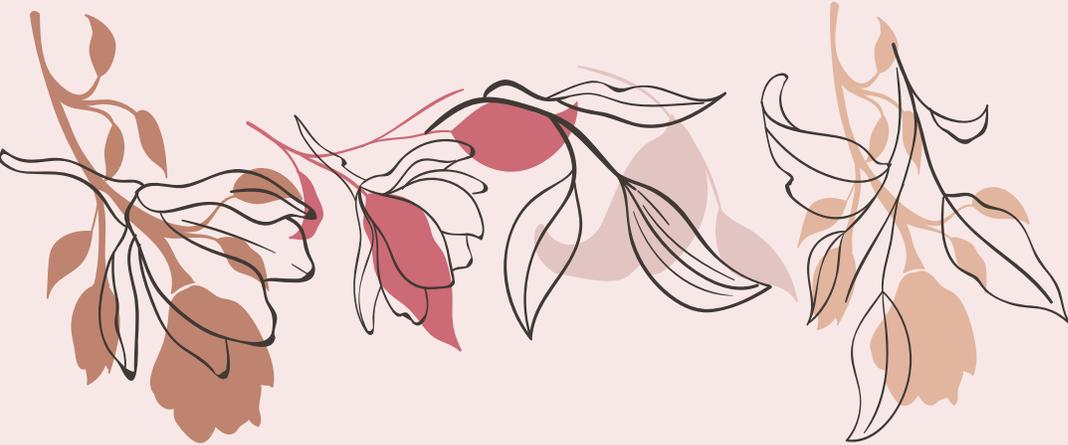
“It doesn’t matter! It’s still too far,” Tracey lamented. “Why couldn’t you just go to a normal college like Long Beach State? I mean, then I could come crash in your dorm and check out cute boys!” she pouted.

Keisha leaned over and embraced her cousin. “We’ll talk everyday-”

They were disrupted by the booming laughter echoing through the backyard. Tracey’s brother Ronaldo emerged from the driveway with his arms raised signaling his arrival. Behind him trailed a young man that Keisha had not seen before. Keisha’s heart fluttered, and she suddenly felt nervous by his presence. He was cover model gorgeous. From her vantage point, he appeared to be her age, maybe 5’9. He had a beautifully chiseled jaw, and his clothes hung nicely on his athletic frame; his skin a tawny-beige.

Keisha slowly rose from her seat and gently grabbed Tracey’s hand. Clearing her throat, Keisha looked to Tracey. “We’ll be Ok. We’ll talk everyday. Now, let’s go greet your brother and his new friend.”





Remembering Aunt Therma

Written by Latrice L. Washington

I miss my Great Aunt the most on my birthday. I miss her annual birthday phone calls. She would sing, “Happy Birthday, Trice!” She always remembered my birthday. She always had a hug for me.

My Great Aunt’s name is Werthenia Hines. I called her Aunt Therma. She was my maternal grandmother’s youngest sister. She stood tall at 4 ft 8. She was a fireball of energy and loved to dance.

After my grandmother’s death in 1970, my Aunt Therma stepped up and tried to keep her sister’s family together which was not an easy feat. When my Mom was 15, she had me. The original plan was for her to give me up for adoption. However, my Mom changed her mind. Aunt Therma came to our rescue. She opened up her home and we lived with her and my cousins in Watts’ Jordan Down Projects. I have fond vague memories of those years. I remember playing on the linoleum floor. Being held. Laughing. The air held a tinge of chlorine and Ivory soap. Aunt Therma eventually moved out of the projects, as did we. No matter where she lived, she always had a hug for me.





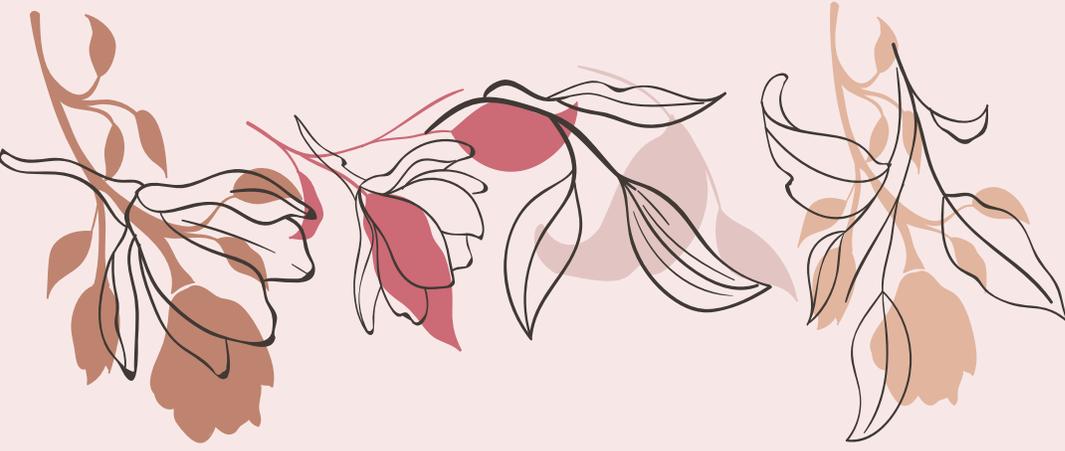
When I was 21, Aunt Therma sent my cousin and I to the store to purchase beer. We didn't really pay attention to her instructions and upon entering the store, realized that we didn't know what she wanted. I didn't know Miller Brewing Company had so many brands. We grabbed what looked closest to what she liked and returned to her home. She had a fit when she saw the beer we were unpacking.

"I told you to buy me a 24-pack of Miller High Life! I don't drink this!" she gravelly exclaimed pointing to the case of Miller Lite.

"You know you takin' this back, right!"

The lecture that followed reinforced the importance of listening to instructions. My cousin and I dejectedly returned to the store and exchanged the beer. She was pleased when she saw that we had followed instructions. All was forgiven. No matter if I was right or wrong, she always had a hug for me.





I spent numerous holidays with Aunt Therma. On holidays when my family would arrive at her house, I would make a beeline for the dining table. The center of the table would be saddled down with dishes teeming with roasted turkey, honey-glazed ham, collard greens, cornbread dressing, candied yams, and macaroni and cheese. The credenza featured platters of German Chocolate Cake, Lemon Cake, and Sweet Potato Pie. Aunt Therma would either be in the kitchen, holding court, or reclining in her chair centered in the middle of the room. She was always happy to see me. She always had a hug for me.

I miss greeting her. I miss her scent. I miss her hugs and kisses. I wish I could hear her tell a story, laugh or watch her dance. I loved Aunt Therma. I loved that she called me “Trice.” She always remembered my birthday. I always felt safe wrapped in her arms.

She always had a hug for me.

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