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Senior Projects Spring 2019

Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects

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Spring 2019

## Salta, Socorro

Gabrielle Alexis Reyes  
*Bard College*

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Salta, Socorro

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Language and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
Gabrielle Reyes

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2019



## A Note on the Title

Up until now, I had only ever told my closest friends at the time that if I were to ever have a baby girl, I would name her Socorro. I joked that whenever I would be calling out for her it'd be like calling out for help and she would be forced to come to my aid. The more that I think about it, though Socorro would also indefinitely be calling out for help herself and I've grown fond of the idea that Socorro is able to ask for help and reach out to others in this sense, which is essentially the message of this piece. It's me realizing that although I had become conditioned due to the trauma to sheltering my feelings and keeping everything in with a mask of independence that there is no way I could have learned the things I did on my own that all I had to do was jump. I could no longer let it hold me back, so I jumped. That is why I am eternally grateful for those who were patient enough to nudge me until I was ready.

*There are those who believe that in this corner of the world there's nothing left for them.  
There are those who are willing to launch themselves into a new inferno by crossing the border,  
by [jumping]. - Oscar Martinez*

I am forever appreciative for the characters who have made appearances in my life.  
Some for greater lengths of time, some at greater extents.

*Gracias Ma, mi alma gemela, dad, sisters, Jagie, my partner through it all and Kiarah, my baby.  
Gracias a mi abuela, mis tías, mis tíos, primas y primos que tengo desde Guatemala, los extraño.*  
Thank you Midori, *mi guia espiritual*, Joao, Jen and Brianna, lifetime friends.  
Thank you Jane Duffestien, Ben Sweet and Truth Hunter, my gateway to college.  
Thank you Dinaw Mengestu, Susan Rogers, Franco Baldasso, and Phil Pardi.  
Thank you Mr. Avalos, Ms. Flores and Harley Frankel for believing in my ability.  
Thank you Claudette Aldebot and Wailly Compres for nourishing my emotional side.

It is my deepest desire that my life written in these pages can change another.

In loving memory of Tia Sylvia and Cesar Morales, the grandfather I never got to meet.



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## Prologue

Spread across these pages are my blood, sweat, and tears.

The urge to write everything down came along with the need to understand.

I chose to write in a style that reflected the nonlinear-ness of memory, of progress and of life. My objective is to illuminate the complexity of my experience, with an accompanying backdrop of the immigrant community in South Central Los Angeles, through revealing an even deeper complexity within humanity. With being human comes the responsibility to feel emotion; this is why the order to the stories is not in any chronological order but in order of emotional range. I attempt to create a space where my reader can notice the weight of each implication and choose whether or not they will carry this with them to the end of the collection. First generation students often feel that they have to make their parents' immigration and struggles in their homeland worth something, most of the time this translates into being the first to go to college and find a decent job to bring 'success' back to the home.

The first part of the collection shows how I had adopted this mentality for most of my own life. How I had chosen to carry the burden of a life struggle that was not mine to carry. How I had allowed my trauma to dictate my future without checking in with my own desires. This part is my own journey, my own ghosts, my own definition of coping.

The second part of the collection focuses more on the role of women in society. How as woman we often tailor or censor ourselves in order to please others and how this can lead to depression and loneliness. I decided to write these stories because it is often difficult to discuss mental wellness in hispanic households without any ingrained prejudice.

In this second part, the environment depends more on the reader than the characters in the text. Here is where I choose to submerge the reader in an array of deep emotions in an attempt to stir away from sympathy and instead ignite rage and frustration.

The ending of Part 2 attempts to blur the line between my journey and the readers by reflecting a similar mentality in my mom's need to run with my own. This explains why in Part 3 there is a shift in not just theme but in tone. The point of this is to express how I chose to leave behind my parents' definition of success and determine my own, leaving behind the desire of steady income and instead finding a new way to understand by learning a language, Italian.



Choosing to learn Italian was a spur of the moment decision that I didn't know at the time could/would result in so much more. Along these lines, the role of language throughout the collection of stories shows how important communication is, especially in an immigrant household.

Because both of my parents immigrated and had children when they were fairly young, they were learning English at the same time that my sister and I were starting school and doing the same. This relationship with language can be seen in the way that Spanish makes its appearance in a predominantly English text. There are words and phrases, feelings and things, that I only know the name for or know how to express in Spanish because it is the way in which I was exposed to it.

In this same way, my parents, especially my dad, became accustomed to switching in and out of Spanish and English, usually when he wanted to make sure we understood him or wanted to keep certain *detalles* from us. The use of language was a conscious choice in my collection of stories as well as in my life, which inherently reveals why I was drawn to learning Italian.

I was looking for a *new* way to express the *new* mode of living that I had discovered, one that allowed me to use my Spanish background but not become so dependent of that background knowledge that I wouldn't be able to pick up on the slight differences. In the same way that I can never forget where I come from or how I grew up but can now use as a tool rather than a path.

Learning the language then turned into reading and finally writing in Italian, which also shows my individual progression of being able to recognize lessons to communicating them to others.

I hope that my story can inspire other first-generation students to remove their shackles and define their own freedom.

The songs/titles of each story are meant to be listened to, preferably during or after reading. They are supposed to accentuate the 'message' of each story, to serve as a guide to understanding, a hand to hold as you walk through my journey, in case you ever feel overwhelmed with emotion, the song will be there to bring you back.

## *El Principio*

*Ready or Not - The Fugees*

My sister, Dolores and I were constantly mistaken for twins. My mother having two kids by the age of twenty-three, had become accustomed to purchasing the same clothes in different colors, supposedly out of convenience. We walked side by side in the same ruffled, pastel, floral dresses, Dolores' hair bunched to the right while my ponytail fell to the left, our attitudes practically screaming, "one year and eight months apart!"

For those who saw us regularly, noticing the differences was easy. We worked, to the best of our ability, to highlight the parts of ourselves that the other felt insecure about. In school, for example, Dolores and her best friend quickly became first and second in the school's ranking. Thus, the following year, I was welcomed by teachers who expected the same of me. They wouldn't give up on the familial exchange that they had in mind, as they continued to call on me in class. Instead of confidently giving an answer, I observed the stitches on my shoes long enough for the teacher to realize I wouldn't be speaking any time soon. I was known in school, not for my high test scores, but my silence. "Your sister needs to participate more in class," teachers would tell Dolores, when they noticed her picking me up from school. Dolores had an authoritative way of speaking, one that demanded respect, "she will," she would say as she gave me a stern look. Her looks, however, were mostly for show, as she wanted the teachers to believe that we, in fact, were disciplined by our parents and weren't actually walking to an empty house. Thus, I belligerently remained tethered to my whispered, murmured speech, if I ever dared to speak at all. Simple things, such as the sashay in her walk compared to my trailing behind, illuminated the fact that she had acquired a confidence that was distant from my own level of maturity. She had a year without me to form these traits, according to her, a short-lived freedom.

Our parents had both immigrated to California in the early 90's, at the peak of their childhood. My mother, never having been able to complete the Guatemalan version of high school, was sent to the States because my grandmother wanted to keep her away from her boyfriend and encourage her to focus on her studies. My father, on the other hand, unable to decide whether he should fight for his country or join the resistance of his people, fled his home at the age of eighteen in the midst of the Salvadoran Civil War.

After crossing rivers, the same kids that she carried on her back, above water, across the border, waited with her to be picked up. My mother was thus liberated from the discipline of my grandmother *MamaConnie* but forced to accommodate to the heavy hand of my aunt Estrella. She was told that she had to find a job if she wanted a roof over her head and food on the table. So she began cleaning houses and babysitting in Pomona, California and never went back to school. My father, arrived in California via *los coyotes*. Because his brother lent him money for his survival, he had to quickly earn enough to pay him back.

While my mother was babysitting a fair-faced, freckled little girl with red hair and green eyes, my father was abandoning his carpet cleaning and becoming head porter, which is a nice way of saying top janitor. While my mother was coddling my namesake, my father was laying down his foundation at Gelson's market, where my mother would later work for fifteen years.

Before my father could save enough money to even consider going back to school, he was introduced to a fine young lady by the name of Consuelo. In their prime, my parents were known for being the most attractive within their social circles, each having their own trail of admirers. They were both drawn to the unattainable, each other. After dating for almost a year, they married in the same church where they met, my mother at the age of 21 and my father at 25.

Determined to pay for the wedding themselves, Cristobal and Consuelo decided to rent a small apartment from a mutual church friend. My older sister and I have vague memories of this apartment, of our dad coming home from work with a bag of gifts in each hand, my mom giving a disapproving look in the distance but my dad only noticing the light in our eyes and the smiles on our faces. Of our parents feeling they had to hold every after-church gathering in our tiny apartment, the sound of the kettle accompanied by an "*Alábalo porque es bueno!*"

The apartment soon became crowded for even the simplest lifestyle, so my parents began searching for a home, finding their place in South Central Los Angeles. Going down Florence and turning on Kansas St., planted between Gustavo's faded yellow house and a fragile old lady's tainted beige. Engulfed by cheap commerce and convenience, they remained enclosed within this small radius. They accommodated as they saw fit; my father finding Raymond Ave Elementary School walking distance from the house.

The house was coated with a wave of light blue panels, each strip of wood dimmer than the one it rested upon, gradually decaying, fading with each passing year. The driveway a ramp of piled-up cement, a jagged, unstable foundation for any minivan slowly backing out. My uncle Hilmar would soon be commissioned to lead the house's restoration, one of his first jobs as a recent immigrant. After we rode our scooters down the rocky mountain directly into the street in a speedy blur—our hands gripping the metal Razor bars tightly, our teeth chattering in the wind, right leg twisted behind the left, hovering above the brake just in case, our heads leaning forward for momentum,—our uncle flattened the driveway while we were away in school, rendering our scooters fruitless for what felt like an eternity. He cratered four gaping holes in the wall for windows, he took away our screen door and put an autumn brown, block of wood in its place, he gave us three red steps to enter the house and outlined our patches of grass with the leftover bricks.

The door opened into a small entryway before the living room began, where a stool would soon be placed to remind us young ones to identify each knocker as friend or foe. The master

bedroom, from where I would hear my sister's cries, stood to the right. The bathroom connected my sisters' and my room to the master bedroom, creating a circle of confusion that we would soon learn to use to our advantage. We were welcomed by a wormish maze of doors and locks, one room leading to the other, leading to the other. Passing the threshold into the kitchen where my mother taught my sister how to cook and me how to clean. Next to the kitchen was a smaller room, similar to the first, where the washer and dryer would go, before being replaced by the refrigerator, then moving back inside the house, leaving the fridge out in the cold.

There were three red steps at the edge of the back door, to match the ones in the front, that led to the field of grass where our tangerine tree grew. My tio Valentin would soon sacrifice this tree to build a room for my tio Hilmar and his family to live. He built the room next to the garage, that my dad would rent out to supplement his income and support his growing family.

Our parents never sat us down to tell us that we didn't have much money, instead we all naturally learned to adjust to our unspoken circumstance. They tried their best to arrange their work schedules so that one of them was with us at all times. My sister, picking up the slack, watched over my cousin and I, when accommodations could no longer be made. My uncle Hilmar trusted my nine year old sister to take care of his four year old while he tried to find more work. I stayed awake late, falling into a deep sleep as soon as I heard the front door unlock, knowing that my family was complete, all in the same place, safe and unharmed.

My mother, however, had the most to get used to. She had yet to get a driver's license and had developed a paranoid manner of driving that put everyone in the car on edge. We all feared the moments where she was forced to drive alone. She had to take the driver's test seven times to finally get her license, but that didn't stop her from getting to where she needed to go. Though there were times where she would get in car accidents every week, never calling the police or asking who was to blame because she couldn't put herself at risk, "at least I was the only one in the car," "at least no one else got hurt," she would say as she displayed the damage to my dad. But she had to get over this fear of driving, this fear of being pulled over, of being hit, of being deported, of being killed, so that she could wake up every morning at six to take her kids to school, leaving as soon as their feet hit the pavement so that she wouldn't be late for work.

### *All We Got - Chance the Rapper*

I was always the first one out of class. Teachers loved to say, "the bell does not dismiss you," but I had grown accustomed to dismissing myself. I would escape during the *rumore* of the rest of the class packing up because I loved having the hallways all to myself. As soon as I was out of the classroom, I would stroll quietly to the dismissal gate. Raymond Ave assigned dismissal gates based on what grade we were in, so I knew that I had time to get to my gate before my sister did. She had the tedious job of having to walk to the first gate to pick up my little cousin

Hilmar Jr. then coming to get me on the other side of the school, all while taking care of our little sister Esperanza. I had developed a rapport with the guard who was in charge of making sure every child went home to the right family. He knew I was going to be the first one there and yet also the last one to leave, though I quickly faded to the back of the line as soon as I noticed everyone else getting out of class. I knew I wouldn't be seeing my sister until everyone else was picked up because by the time she got to the gate, her presence was lost in the sea of towering parents. She stayed back also because she didn't want to be asked, "where are your parents?" So instead I would look over to my sister then at the guard so that each knew where I was coming from and where I was going.

When I was finally under the care of my sister, the journey home for one nine year old, a seven year old, a five year old and a one year old began. I liked the quietness of our walks, hearing Esperanza fuss in the stroller, noticing the different colors houses could come in, giving names to the puppies we met along the way, overhearing the conversations that went on all around us. Yet my sister loved filling in those lulls, she would ask us "where do we live?" And we would have to recite back "eleven eighteen west seventy first street Los Angeles California nine zero zero four four." We ended up repeating this all the way home because if we got one detail wrong, she made us start over. At five and seven, Hilmar and I could barely remember when we were born, but Dolores wanted us to know all the useful information that she too had to keep stored. My parents loathed filling out paperwork for school, thus it almost always fell on my sister to fill out her own and mine. So when she asked us "and what's our phone number?" I felt inclined to play along, "three two three seven five one three two eight one."

Other times, when I thought we had escaped the routine interrogation, she would stop the stroller in its tracks and ask, "where do we go from here?" She expected us to be able to say, "walk to the end of 75th street then a left on Budlong," what she got instead was "let's walk on the side where the burgundy house is." There were many ways to get home and she tested us on every single one. She had this far away idea that she wouldn't always be there to guide us and needed us to learn to do things ourselves. We were just kids on our way home, but she was practically an adult, always looking five feet ahead of us, her eyes wide and alert, pleading with us to keep one hand on the stroller at all times.

We only saw our mom in the morning when she dropped us off at school before work, so when we finally did get home, Dolores was still in charge. It was the same dynamic, just minus the added pressure of having to keep track of where everyone was. She hung up the diaper bag and got to work making sure we were fed and doing our homework. When it came time to clean the house, she assigned us our duties. I tried negotiating my way out of washing the dishes, yet given the fact that this was my only responsibility, I wasn't always successful. Her authority, however, couldn't always be effectively communicated; we were four kids, in a house with no parental

supervision. These were the moments I lived for, when for even a second we were on the same level, where she let herself be as scared as I was.

*Fiends are Knocking - Hopsin*

At four maybe five years old, my cousin Hilmar Jr. had a fascination with pressing the numbers nine and one on the phone, in a rather unfortunate repetitive order. He and my uncle lived in the back of our house, which gave Hilmar Jr. the chance to dial and run into our house, a knowing grin on his face as he tried to suppress his childish giggles. None of us could ever quite figure out why he was so happy.

At least, not until the police finally came over. Luckily, my uncle hadn't yet found a job and he was in the back when the police came to report, "we received a phone call from this address." My uncle, however, only spoke Spanish so they communicated with the next best thing, my sister. She told them that there was no problem, "no one here called you," she surveyed the room making sure everyone was accounted for. Hilmar Jr. had suspiciously disappeared, prompting us all to follow Dolores to the back to find him. What we saw when we got there managed to surprise us all. Hilmar Jr. was sitting on the floor, phone in hand, loud enough for us to hear on the other end, "911, how can we help?" The police giggled at the image of a blonde, curly-haired Guatemalan boy looking up at the assembled crowd with his hazel green eyes, "it seems we've found the culprit, just don't let it happen again."

We didn't know how much of the conversation my uncle picked up, but one thing we knew for sure was that we had to get out of his way. I followed Dolores into the house as we both whispered a silent prayer for Hilmar Jr. and closed the door behind us.

For a while, it seemed as if Hilmar Jr. had learned his lesson. Yet as soon as my uncle found work in construction, the unwarranted visits began. The initial shock came from the knock on the door, that's when we knew we had to stay completely and utterly silent. We waited long enough for my sister to assess the situation. Once she saw through the peephole that the police had come back, she instructed us to pretend like no one was home. As soon as we were given this instruction, Hilmar Jr. came running into the room, rambunctious as ever. My sister placed her hand over his mouth trying to calm him down, as I followed suit with our dog, forcing her to repress her bark. At first, this was all it took. But as the calls kept coming, the cops got more creative.

They tried screaming, "WE ARE THE POLICE, YOU HAVE TO LET US IN."

I looked at my sister with frightened eyes as she shook her head no, actually we did not.

Next, they came around the house, passing through the gate into private property, peering inside every open window. When we heard the gate close, Dolores had taught us that we had to stay low and away from the windows. She hunched over the baby and gathered us all into one room.

When they knocked on the back door, we all felt like we had lost. They unsuccessfully attempted to persuade four unaware, innocent children to let them in. Little did they know, that we had been trained by the best.

We had memorized the speech mom gave us every time she left for work, “don’t open the door for anybody, never open the windows, don’t answer the phone unless its mommy...”

We had memorized our assigned positions for moments like these.

I hid in the closet, Esperanza clinging to my chest, I rocked her, hushed her, bounced her, anything to keep her quiet so she wouldn’t blow our cover.

My cousin was small enough to hide under the bed.

But my sister, my brave sister, she would leave for moments at a time. Leaving us alone, confident that upon her return we would be where she left us. Whenever she came back, I knew that the danger had passed and that she had once again come out triumphant.

This level of underhandedness, however, only came with years of erratic routine.

We had been through this so many times before that I was brought to my knees when at last, it didn’t work.

We had done it all, whisper, windows, closet, bed.

Maybe we weren’t as thorough.

Maybe they had come prepared as well.

Maybe our luck had run out.

Maybe Hilmar Jr. left the back door open.

Either way they were in and no one could throw them out.

“Please, you have to leave, I’m going to get in trouble,” Dolores pleaded.

As of now they only knew of the three of us, but almost as if on command, from my parent’s room came a distant whimper.

“Who’s in charge here?”  
“Where are your parents?”



“How old are you?”

Their questions came in a rushing blur, but we stayed silent; we had been trained to do as much. Once again, we allowed the burden to fall on my sister’s shoulders.

“I’m in charge.”

“My parents are at work.”

“I’m twelve and you have to go.”

She handled the situation with confidence and ease, more scared of the repercussions that would come at the hand of our parents than the two police officers that stood before us.

Accepting Dolores’ answers as truth, perhaps even complying to her pleading eyes, they left.

When our mom finally came home, Dolores turned back into the sister I always knew was there. She told our mom what happen in between gasps for air, tears streamed down her eyes as she told our mom she did everything within her power to keep them away.

“I did everything you told me to do.”

“I know baby, you did great.”

She was my sister again and my mom was my mom, order was restored. At least until the cops came back, only this time with a social worker.

*I am - Jorja Smith*

Dolores and I have always gone to the same schools. In my head, she was the only ‘friend’ I needed, we’d still see each other everyday, no matter what I did. So I didn’t look for other friends, instead I was content with sitting under the shade of the tree to read. I made sure to bring a book with me every time our class was instructed to go outside. It wasn’t that I didn’t enjoy the breeze of fresh air on my fair skin or the ants that crawled from the mud onto my shoes and fingers, it wasn’t even that it was almost eighty degrees and I always had on the same black hoodie that was a couple sizes too big. It was just that I would very much rather feel the cool bark on my back then have the sweat pouring down my forehead be the result of kicking around a ball all day.

I couldn’t for the life of me, muster up enough courage to join the team of kickball aficionados. Sure at times I could be found enjoying a good round of double dutch, someday you might have even seen my ponytail flying down the slide. These occasional slips of social interaction did nothing to please the faculty and peers that surrounded me. They couldn’t do anything to stop me

though, recess and lunch were my designated moments of ‘free’ time, so I read my favorite collection of books, the Judy Moody series, ‘freely.’

It was during class time though, that they got me, under the pretense of mandated physical activities. An hour before the bell would ring to dismiss us, we were all guided to the handball courts in single-file lines.

“Go ahead and hit the ball around,” Ms.Bailey spoke with a wave of her hand.

We were meant to each hit the red rubber ball with our fists, while Ms.Bailey recorded on her clipboard whether or not the ball hit above or below the designated faded yellow line. We were told that we only had three chances to hit it, three tries then the next person goes.

I had maneuvered my way down to the end of the line, moving shyly behind one person every time Ms.Bailey looked down at her clipboard. All I could hope for now was that the bell would ring before we could ever get to me. Luckily, it did. Seeing as though there were only two of us who had yet to go, rather than come outside for another day, Ms.Bailey insisted we quickly keep on going. She assured us our parents wouldn’t even notice us getting there a few minutes late, she clearly did not know my sister.

I don’t know if it was because I knew my sister was out there waiting for me, or that everyone would be in a single-file line, waiting for me to mess up so that they could point it out, or the fact that the bell had rung and the least Ms.Bailey could do was respect our time. Maybe it was all that and more, it had to have been for me to stand there and refuse to hit the ball for what felt like an eternity before I agreed to just take the zero so that everyone could go home.

The next day I showed up with my nails painted red. Red to symbolize the anger that I felt for being put in that situation. Anger towards that stupid red rubber ball, for the color my face turned, for the humiliation I felt. “That’ll show them,” I told myself, not even knowing then who the ‘them’ was that I wanted to show.

### *El Plan - Gatta Catana*

I sat next to a boy who loved to try and get a rise out of me. He leaned over to whisper to his friends often enough for me to know that they were giggling over something he had said about me. I sat close enough to him that, if I really wanted to, my left arm could extend, under the table, over to his. I used this little perk to my advantage, pinching his arm every time his or his friends’ laugh pierced my turned back.

Pretty soon, he had proof going down his arm of how many times he had laughed in class. In my head, I was getting even. Hoping that when my nails went through his epidermis that he'd think twice about having something to say. I never would of thought that this could catch up to me.

One day after school, after I spotted my mom's beige van across the street, I began walking towards the *semaforo* when I noticed from the corner of my eye Luis with his sister attached to him, her arm protectively draped over his shoulder, his arm being used to point over in my direction. They began to creepily walk over to me, as the light changed; I sped walked, maybe even jogged over to the van, dodging his sisters shouts behind me, hoping they get caught in a red light.

"Hey mom, school was fine, can't wait to get home!" I shouted in a jagged hurried breath as I leaned over her, attempting to block her view through the rearview mirror of Luis and his angry sister only getting closer.

She had just turned the key in the ignition when a pale arm came through the passenger window, "Hello, are you Gabrielle's mom?"

*"Si, esa soy yo."*

*"Hola señora, solo le quiera dejar saber que su hija le está haciendo a mi hermanito. Mire su brazo, vino un día a la casa con su brazo todo marcado, hasta sangrando y no me quiso decir quien le hizo eso hasta que lo forcé- "*

Before she could finish her accusation, I blurted out "It was me mom, I did it!" I whimpered through suppressed sobs, "It's just that. He was being so mean to me that. I had to do something. I'm sorry mom. I won't. Ever. Do it again. I promise."

I thought that admitting to it early on would help me. I tried to get air into my lungs, tears streaming down my red, puffy face. I waited in agony, clutching her seat, I pleaded with her with my eyes. All this while the engine was still running, I continued to wait, to see whether she would explode here in front of two strangers, just as I had.

She looked at me, then at her "You heard her," she said, as she drove off.

*Tammy's Song (Her Evils) - Kendrick Lamar*

*Si tuvieras fe como un grano de mostaza, eso lo dice el Señor.  
Tu le dirias a esa montaña, muévete, muévete,  
Y esa montaña se moverá, se moverá, se moverá*

Her faith, greater than the size of a mustard seed, could move mountains. She believed so wholeheartedly in the American Dream that she immigrated at the age of seventeen. She had heard testimonies of the siblings who had made it to the other side and who could come back with blessings to boast about; she wanted to be one of them. After she watched her dad get shot from the bushes of her *finca*, there was only so much that *MamaConnie* could do from keeping Consuelo from looking for his replacement. She trusted the idea that a man could provide her with the safety she lacked that she got married at twenty-one. She had hope that the children she were to have could amount to greater things than those that her country allowed for, so much so that she had three girls by the age of thirty.

When her dad was alive, she paid her way through school. Using her sweet innocence as currency, exchanging his money for her passing grades. So she believed me, every time I told her that school was hard, that I didn't want to go today and "would much rather stay with you."

"Okay, just don't tell your dad," she would say in a singsong voice. The smell of pancakes and coffee jolted me up from bed faster than the prospect of school ever could. I sat in the stool in the kitchen across from her and watched how swiftly her hands moved. I knew she had to go to work soon by the blur that her multitasking created, she was stirring coffee, making her lunch, our breakfast, dad's dinner, leaving no trace that she had ever occupied the kitchen.

I admired her for her loyalty, for the strength it took to keep on pushing, to stay with my dad after all he had put us through. She wanted to keep him happy more than any of us ever did, she had hope that if she did all she was 'supposed' to do, things would work out. She played the role of wife well, but she was more than just my mother. I saw myself in her despair, I felt my weight on her shoulders, my success in her shy smile.

I saw your tired eyes from across the room, delicate hands gripping your scalding cup of coffee, your grey eyes that followed my every move. I stayed up to work on projects, to get in the last detail before the presentation, to make sure everything was just right. You stayed up to keep me company; you said, "You can do it, don't give up now," as my arms moved with gradually less fervor, my face getting closer to the trifold on the floor, it looking more and more like a pillow than a piece of cardboard. You believed in me, you had faith that I could one day get out, even if you couldn't.

Yet you believed in God in a different way. You didn't go to church religiously because you worked most nights. You didn't greet everyone as you made your way to your seat, but when you cried I saw the ghost in you, when you sang I felt the columns shake, when you held my hand, instead of joining you, I remained bewitched through the corner of my eye. I hoped, almost in the same way, that whatever it was that kept you going forward would keep me going too, that

somehow it could move down your arm into the palm of my hand, I just needed a little, just enough to get me by for a while.

You believed dad when he said that your ‘sadness’ would go away with prayer, when he assured you that you had nothing to be sad about. You believed him like you believed your brother when he told you life would get better once you left Guatemala. But you were still a girl then, you just went from crying amongst sacks of beans to finding yourself standing at an intersection, *really* contemplating whether or not you should jump into ongoing traffic.

You believed in me like I believed in you. And maybe that's where I had gone wrong, believing in someone who was willing to be a sacrificial lamb, who would stay, hands tied by the belief that there was no other way. Yet I saw myself in you.

I knew that when you got sad that it was nothing personal, when you told me to not get dad started that it was for my own good, when you could make dinner but not help me with my homework that it's what you were good at. But I didn't want this for you because I didn't want it for me. I refused to believe that happiness came from the extended hand of a man and that the only way I could attain it was through suffering his cold, hard grip on my life. I wanted you to get out so bad, mom, I did.

But now I can see that this is what you were okay with, what you had settled for when you left Guatemala but it wasn't anything that you had chosen for me. You left *me* with that power. The power to choose whether or not I wanted to go to school, whether or not I decided to stand up in church, whether or not I introduced you to a boy, because you wanted more for me.

You knew that since before I was born, that I would find a way out of the mess you made. But I could never leave you behind, believe me.

*Tracks of my Tears - Aretha Franklin*

“I never understood how a woman could stay with a man after he hits her.”

“You know it's a lie when they tell you it'll never happen again.”

“I couldn't understand why your aunt would want to stay with her husband.”

“I mean, you stayed with Dad.”

“Yeah, I guess you're right.”

I remember being at the park, not how we got there or even when we did, I just remember being there. Your eyes were a swirl of purples and blues, puffy as if you had been crying the night before. I know you wanted me to play and leave you alone but all I could do was sit by you on the sand. I watched you as you let the sand slip through your fingers, palm out, almost like you were waiting for someone to help you up.

His hand print coiled around your arm, you held it close, to try and stop me from noticing. But the blues slipped through your fingers. You never liked showing too much but today I noticed that you wore your skin like armor, dents and all.

We sat under the jungle gym for what felt like hours. Tears streamed down your cheeks and onto the sand. I could only see your lips move, your lip, your swollen lip.

I asked to hug you because I knew it would hurt. You laughed and said, “Of course, baby, come here.” I know I was supposed to be comforting you but in that moment the only thing that could keep me together was you. Your acceptance, your strength, your forgiveness.

I never understood how a God-fearing man could put the fear of God in this woman.

*Poe Mans Dreams (His Vice) - Kendrick Lamar*

His dedication had always astounded me. He had gone through several blue collar jobs since he had migrated. From carpet installer to mailman, he willed himself to keep moving forward. Even at times when he had been laid off for months and there seemed to be no end in sight. He was dedicated to this idea of progress, of never staying in one place for too long, of always moving forward. During those times is when he would sit on the couch, rubbing his belly, trying to mask his own worry, “*Dios proveerá, de eso estoy seguro,*” he would say.

Of course this only forced Consuelo to work harder, working days she was supposed to be off and staying there until midnight. So we were all glad to see him get off the couch when he did. He decided to be a truck driver, whether or not he chose this profession out of convenience or genuine interest, he remained dedicated. He woke up at four in the morning to get to work on time, many times hogging the bathroom from Dolores who was up at five to get ready for school. He was out of work at the same time we were out of school too. So for us, it felt as if he continued to do what he had always been doing, because as soon as we all got home, he headed straight for the kitchen and went to sleep with a replenished belly.

But he was dedicated, drawn to this routine of yelling at Dolores through the bathroom wall and waking me up in the process. He adored coming home to a clean house and food on the stove. All he wanted was to feel appreciated, supported; all he wanted was for us to take off his shoes

while the other served his food. He was dedicated to this idea of the traditional man-run household, him at the top and us literally bent at his feet.

He was always sleeping, always tired but never tired enough not to force us to go to church. Church is where he came alive. He was dedicated to this image of himself, of his family that he had created, of god-fearing people. His arms raised in exaltation, his voice cracked with his singing, his eyes hovered between open and closed, turning to look over his left shoulder to make sure we were doing the same. Though I was sitting down, my eyes were closed and my head was bowed; he gripped my right arm and pulled me upright as I began opening my eyes, refusing to participate wholeheartedly.

Pretty soon he was the Sunday school teacher, he was guiding the beginning prayer, instructing everyone that it was okay to sit down as he thanked “*Dios por este privilegio.*” He began reading from the Bible before dismissing the youth to their respective classes. For the many times I begged to stay with the congregation, wondering the difference between what they were teaching us and what they were telling them, I was allowed to stay zero. Everyone knew us by name, the phone calls and worried texts began after one of us missed one service.

We all feigned interest for as long as we could and almost as intensely; Dolores joined choir and was baptized at thirteen, she sat with the youth during service, even dated a few. I showed my interest in other ways, winning a gift card for most biblical verses memorized, reading aloud in class, tapping my finger on the chair to the rhythm of the song. He was dedicated and wanted his children to be just the same.

But I could only keep it up for so long. I tried to read the Bible but got as far as Leviticus, three chapters in, the one with all the names, he begot him who begot her who begot them; suffice to say I got bored and moved on to other things. I tried to stay awake during the service but after naming all the things that came from the Devil, I kinda put two and two together and figured “what’s left?”

Let’s face it I wasn’t going to take a knee at the altar and wait for His blessing, the same way I wasn’t going to kneel at your feet and ask for the same. When I had homework to do and there were dishes to be washed, nine times out of ten I was going towards my books. It wasn’t until you would take out your voice and raise the belt that I knew I had to, only because you were *so* dedicated to this idea you brought with you of woman below man.

*Estabas dedicado a preservar lo único que pudiste traer contigo, tus ideas. Las ideas con que tu creciste, “mi mama me pegaba, yo trabajaba de joven, yo me enfoque en mis estudios, me casé y tuve hijos.” De todas las ocasiones en que pediste cambio, hiciste poco para cambiar. Cambio para ti no es cambio para mi. Pero algo tenía que quedarse no?*

*Por un buen tiempo pensé que la escuela era mi única manera de salir bajo tu mano, debajo de tu techo, de tu juicio. Tu te fuiste de tu casa a los dieciocho yo te hice uno más mejor y me fui a los diecisiete. Me amaste como inversión, entonces me dedique a hacerlo valer la pena, valer tu dinero, valer tu esfuerzo.*

*Pero solo pude mantenerlo por tanto tiempo.*

*Runaway - Kanye West*

Whenever he would come into the room, rage in his ears and coming out his nose, all I had to do was give my sister a quick glance. She knew that it didn't matter what I had done or whether or not I had done anything to begin with, she knew what she had to do because I would have done the same for her. He punished impulsively, fortunately never coming prepared, giving me enough time to mentally situate myself.

I knew I had to be fast but silent. Just the same, we ran in circles. I methodically closed doors behind me, hoping that the shimmy of the knob would warn me of his arrival. He reached out, thinking I would just stand there and take it, but today was not one of those days. I dodged his attempt and hunched my way over to the bathroom, swinging the door behind me.

His heavy footsteps marched through the room to tell me I had no time to find a hiding place, I needed to keep running. I ran towards his room, his breath increasing behind me. I prepared to run into the living room but he fooled me into believing he was behind me; I realized this once I saw him at the other end of the living room.

If he would have stayed there, he would have caught me, but he finds a thrill in the chase. He charges toward me and I hover giving him the idea that he's won, that I've given up. But as soon as he's close enough, I run back through the way I came. This goes on for a while, he doesn't tire. Through his room, the bathroom; the last time I pass our room, I look my sister in the eyes, letting her know that I am tired, holding my rib cage, gasping for breath.

I can't keep running and she knows this feeling very well. My next task is getting one of the doors unlocked-- any door, because no matter how many laps we run around the house, he would never chase us outside, where everyone can see the man that he turns into. Unlocking the door, however, is no easy task. Because no matter how out of shape he is, his irrational rage surges him. We always have to weigh the risk of being caught with the freedom that comes with getting a door open.



Our back door has three locks but the front only has one. My best bet is to run out the front. On the next lap, I hover over the door, hoping he doesn't notice the intent in my eyes. *I'm sorry dad but I can't live with you when you're like this.* I charge out the door, faster than I've ever run before, leaving the door open so that he knows I've left, I've given up in a different way. I hear him yelling behind me, "And don't come back, you hear me? Don't come back!"

I knew that whatever he was yelling, though it was out of anger, that he would back up his threat. He was stubborn that way, knowing that he was wrong but never willing to surrender. I knew from when it was my sister running the race, that he would turn around and lock the doors behind him. That he would lock the windows and block the doggy door. That he would tell mom and tell Dolores, "I better not see her in here in the morning."

Sometimes when the door was closed behind me, I waited by the gate. With no sweater for the cold and often no shoes either. When the races hadn't yet become regular events, I waited naively for my mother to open the door and let me back in, but she couldn't, she would never go against his word. I put my arms through the sleeves of my pants, curled next to our black garbage can, t-shirt over my nose and knees. I tried so hard to keep my eyes open, not wanting anyone to pass by this late at night and see a little girl sleeping outside next to a trash can.

When my eyes grew heavy and I could no longer stop myself from dozing off, I got up to walk around the block. I rolled open the purple gate that was keeping me guarded, loud enough for my mom to hear and feel guilty. I knew that she couldn't sleep unless we were all in the house. I strolled to the end of the block, peering in every illuminated window, wondering if every family had a dad like mine.

I turned the corner and sat on the church steps, peeling leaves off my socks and rubbing rocks off the heels of my feet. I sat there a while, thinking about nothing and questioning everything.

I got up as the sun rose, expecting that the 7am church crowd was soon to arrive. I hoped, on my walk back, that by this time, he had fallen asleep, giving my sister enough time to unlock the back door and get some sleep herself. Whenever I walked back into the house, I never felt like I was coming home, I felt like I had just punched in, starting the clock on the duration of my next visit. I placed a blanket over mom sleeping on the couch, moving the hair away from her face. *Why can't you ever stand up for us?*

My sister always waited up for me, "Where were you? I went outside looking for you."

"I was at the church steps on the corner of Kansas."

"Next time he comes after you, run to the church steps so I know where to find you."

But she was already asleep.

I buried myself in my blankets, leaving only a small hole for air to come in. I knew he would come check my bed before he left for work and I didn't want him to think that he had won, once again.

*Treat Me Like Somebody - Tink*

We had just finished saying goodbye to Consuelo who was on her way to a women's church retreat. She wasn't really one for social events but we convinced her to go, pleading that she take some time for herself, reassuring her that we would survive. At the last minute, my older sister Dolores managed to talk her way into tagging along. I was therefore left under the care and supervision of my father, Cristobal.

When all the ladies of the church left, the men stayed behind to pray for their safe arrival and overall productive stay. We were all encouraged to pray at the front of the altar, men and children alike. Because more than half of the congregation had left, we could comfortably fit in the space between the pulpit and the first row of chairs.

I hated being put in the spotlight and forced to talk to God *en alta voz para que me escuche*. My mom was always lenient with these sort of things, letting me sing sitting down and tap on the chair instead of clapping. When they came together, my mom would distract him from giving us those stern looks that made our knees quake making us feel like we would be standing up for hours. She wasn't there then though, so I had to be creative.

I feigned a stomach ache but he insisted I power through it. As Cristobal gradually moved closer to the pulpit, I inched slowly towards the row of chairs, looking over at him periodically, making sure he was still in trance, making sure it was safe to sit down.

As I began slowly sitting down, a stabbing pain in the lower part of my stomach began developing. The closer I got to the chair, the more it intensified. I hugged my stomach as if at any point it could explode and I should keep it contained as to not disturb the prayer circle. I sat in agonizing pain for what felt like forever, as I coiled myself in a sitting fetal position.

Through the corner of my eye I saw this boy I knew making his way toward me.

His name was Robert, I was one month older than him in age but a couple years wiser, in my opinion. Our interactions over the years consisted of him stuttering the question, "would you want to go out with me?" and running away before I could answer. Though I'm glad he left before I could say no. He started asking me when I was eleven and continued asking me several times a year up until we were both in high school. It was the worst possible time for him to show up.

I couldn't get up out of my chair without writhing in pain. I was therefore forced to suffer both physically and mentally as he sat down right next to me, cringing as soon as he looked my way. I gave him a smile of someone who is obviously in pain, hoping he would feel sympathy and walk away graciously. I was out of luck as the congregation slowly began opening their eyes, closing the prayer with applause.

In order to solidify our community, I guess, it was announced that the congregation was invited to walk together, hand in hand, around the block. We were given possible phrases that we could chant as we walked, if we were to find ourselves at a lack for words, I guess. Random acts of spiritual advocacy were customary in our church that I figured I had to take part in since it was just me and dad. It was the perfect excuse though, to get away.

“Alright Robert, I'll see-”

“Hold up, I'll walk with you.”

He began to lead the way. As I turned around to check if I hadn't left anything in my seat, I noticed that there was a chair with a big red stain. Every other chair was a faded purple, almost blue, but in that chair lay a deep red circle almost as if outlining the space where someone had sat. How strange, I thought, someone must have spilled their punch on the seat. I didn't give it a second thought, as I tried to find my dad in the crowd of church members eager to start walking.

Even though I wasn't able to find him, I figured the walking would do my stomach ache some good; Robert couldn't have been more thrilled. The crowd easily began to disintegrate as the youth, speeding ahead, seemed to show more interest in the number of times we went around the block than the number of people the message got across to. Still clutching my gut, I lingered behind with the older folk, and Robert. I hoped to run into my dad at some point and warn him of the weight pushing down on my bladder, the force pulling at my ribs, the needles that were so obviously sticking out of the space right above my belt buckle.

As the service came to an end, the trail of walkers made their way to the altar, pouring in from all angles, shouting their praises. I was able to spot my dad, though as I began to hunch my way over to him, a youth leader, *llena del espiritu*, began to run around the church. I followed her with my eyes as she sped up after every “Hallelujah.” Mesmerized I thought I had lost track of my dad once again just as he ran before me. Following in the steps of this girl, a marathon broke loose. I could no longer tell whether the room was actually spinning or whether, with neglect, my pain had somehow made its way to my head.

On the way home I asked my dad whether he had ever felt a stomach ache that made him think he was going to die. He glanced at me over his shoulder, both hands still on the steering wheel,

he asked, “*Todavía te duele?*” He went on to tell me that I was probably just holding onto gas and wondered if I had gone number two yet. Even though I know he meant well, it still felt icky talking to him about the regularity of my poops. “Uh-huh,” I murmured, unofficially confirming his theory, looking out the window the rest of the way home.

Before he could turn off the engine, my seat belt was off and my door left slightly ajar. I ran to the restroom to officially confirm his suspicion.

“Daaad, I’m bleeding,” I shouted through the closed bathroom door. I immediately thought of the red stain on the chair that bore a significant resemblance to the shade that lay before me.

I stood there stunned, replaying in my head all the laps I walked with a notably large stain on my jeans. Frozen with shame, I wondered whether the church would be able to somehow connect the mishap to me and force me to pay for the damage. The blood began to crust over my thighs the longer I tried to piece together what happened, *what’s happening to me?*

“Oh that happens to your mom all the time, here I’ve seen her use these.”

My dad showed me how to put on a pad the first time I got my period. When my mother and older sister weren’t there, my dad stepped up and explained to me that this wasn’t a one time thing. He laughed at the luck he was given to have “not one, not two, but three moody women in his house.” I didn’t get his remark at the time, I was simply grateful to have someone, however awkward it might have been, to help me understand.

I didn’t know at the time that this knowledge in his hands could easily be used as a weapon. That whenever I got emotional, he would blame the tears on my ‘moods,’ “It must be one of those times,” he would say as a way to justify his disinterest. Whenever I tried to get through to him with any pure emotion, he quickly called upon my hormonal rage.

There was no way that he could understand the confusion I felt every time an emotion was irrationally amplified in my head. Or the days I spent on the floor, fetal position, yelling in agony, feeling closer and closer to death but not being able to do anything about it. Or the wet pants I sacrificed to be able to put a hot towel on my stomach, the coffee I gave up to drink chamomile tea. Only to be denied the expression of anything resembling vulnerability simply because blood was periodically pouring out of me.

There was no way he could understand. How could he? He was only living with three other women.

*Madman Across the Water - Elton John*

“Do you repent of your sins and acknowledge your need of a Savior?”

“Yes”

"Have you put your faith in Jesus as your Lord and Savior?"

“Yes”

“Have you been pressured or is anyone forcing you to say ‘Yes’?”

Shaking head no.

“I’m going to need you to say it out loud.”

“No.”

I heard the words being mumbled above me. I could see the glee in my parents’ eyes. I felt the Pastor’s heavy hands on my shoulders as he instructed me to remove my glasses and prepare to be immersed.

But I choked. I didn’t let the water wash away my sins. I felt the cold water rush through my lungs and taint my white gown.

I didn’t leave that place reborn, a new woman. I emerged with the sins of those who went before me tacked on my grey gown.

I didn’t feel at peace. I felt cold and wet as the gown gripped my frigid body.

Yet everyone was crying. They all congratulated and welcomed this ‘new’ member of the church. I plastered a smile on my face so well that I was certain a lightning bolt would fall from the sky.

I knew I was only doing this to please my parents.

And if I knew, Jesus very well knew I had no intention on changing my way of life.

And if I knew and Jesus knew, couldn’t my parents notice?

Didn’t it seem rather strange that a thirteen year old would ask to be shoved in a pool of cold murky water?

Yet they remained oblivious as they purchased the DVD of such a momentous occasion on the way out.

*Ignorance is Bliss - Kendrick Lamar*

I had developed an anxiety of having to speak in class. Butterflies bubbled in my stomach, blood coursed through my ears, it became harder to breathe, harder to see. Sometimes, I knew when it

was coming, it was easier to decode the pattern the teacher had constructed in her mind of who she was going to call on next. They were at times quite obvious, reading in a circle, going down the line, alphabetical. I would rehearse what I would say, the subtle movement that I would make where the teacher would become privy to the reason I had chosen not to speak, yet the students would never assume that I was just too shy to answer, or so I thought. Other times I was called on randomly, often caught in a daydream, or scribbling in my notebook, never ready for the accusatory, “Do you have anything to add, Gabrielle?”

I seldom did have anything to add, though I couldn’t let the teacher know that I had lost my breath, any sense of time, and that I would rather have an earthquake crash the walls than answer any of her questions.

Once, in the seventh grade, rather than answer a question, the class was instructed to simply read off the board. We were told that we each had to read at least one sentence; I could do that, or so I thought.

“Gabrielle, can you read what’s on the board?”

“No.”

She took her eyes away from the board to focus them on me.

“Gabrielle, can you read what’s on the board?”

“No, actually I can’t read it.”

She placed one foot inches above the other and placed one hand on her hip, “and why is that?”

“Because I can’t see what it says.”

The reading progressed as the class chose to take the silent pause as permission.

“... what do you mean you can’t see what’s on the board?”

I squinted real hard, “I cannot see Miss, the screen is blurry.”

Occasionally, optometrists like to take time out of their busy schedules to go to low income communities where they provide students and their families with services that we might not have otherwise been exposed to. It was under this context, prompted by my teacher, that my parents decided to sign me up for the free eye exam that year.

“Can you read to me the first line?”

“No, it's too blurry.”

“Seriously? You can’t see that? Get up. Go choose your frames.”

It was that easy, yet that hard. She could tell me in the first few minutes of knowing me that I would need two square pieces of glass in front of my eyes to see for the rest of my life, that a dramatic change in lifestyle would have to occur in order for me to live comfortably as others had the pleasure of indulging in since birth. Yet, my parents couldn't tell that I held books way to close to my face, that I had to squint to change the channel on the tv, these people who I saw everyday and who I thought saw me.

When it came time to wear these glasses, I quickly became ashamed. I had chosen a dark brown speckled frame with rounded off square pieces of glass. I kept them in the pink plastic container that they came in, choosing to only take them out when squinting became too much work. This is what I would like to believe, really they were floating at the bottom of my backpack. I only considered putting them on after a friend yelled, "why aren't you wearing your glasses?"

"Because I don't want to."

"Don't you need them to see?"

"What do you think you're too cool for glasses."

"No," I said as I slowly took out my glasses for the first time.

"You shouldn't feel embarrassed to wear your glasses, you know."

I had said nothing to prompt this response, yet it could not have more accurate.

I waited until the night fell; it was as brisk as a California night can be. I sat in the back of my mother's black Nissan Pathfinder, my sister sat in the passenger seat. We were on our way to the market when I thought it'd be the perfect time to try on my glasses. I opened the window enough so that my mother wouldn't complain about the noise but also enough to let a breeze in.

I remember thinking how crazy Abraham must have been, claiming he couldn't count all the stars in the sky. I looked up at the sky, my head tilted out the window like a recently rescued puppy, the stars in the sky battling with the leaves on the trees for my attention. I remember thinking all that man needed was a good pair of glasses.

The wind tunneled through my ears as I shouted, "You guys always get to see like this?"

"Like what? Normal?"

*Back Home - A\$AP Rocky*

Before leaving we lock the door three times, double checking that the windows are locked too, hoping that the metal bars and the camera facing the front door are enough. Our dad always taught us to yell, “make sure to put the password!” Even though he knew and we knew that our alarm didn’t work, yet we all hoped that if someone were to overhear, the idea of an active alarm would discourage them from breaking in. We grew accustomed to this routine, placing the little things of worth that we possessed—my dad’s digital camera with pictures from when we were little, my mom’s savings hidden in an old wallet, a gold necklace that would be given to one of us eventually— in the top drawer, because the last one is always opened first. We learned through experience not to stash our cash away in obvious places like a piggy bank or under the mattress. We held our breath whenever we left the house, and hoped that everything would be in its place upon our return.

But after the sixth time, we stopped replacing our valuables and learned to live without luxurious items such as cameras, laptops and jewelry. Sometimes, we even forgot to “set the alarm,” we left windows open and instead just drew the curtains because we had nothing left to lose.

Now, we decide to simply lock the door once and go on our way. We pass a house we assume to be a daycare based solely on the fact that there is a jungle gym in the front yard, choosing to believe that the brothers sitting on the front steps are partaking in a communal cannabis induced daydream only to fill up time before their children are released.

On this route to the 111 bus stop, we pass by Lucy. Lucy is the name that Esperanza once innocently called the African-American lady that lives on Florence, outside of JC Flooring. She recently acquired a mattress that continues to be accompanied by the occasional offering of food and beverages, which today is a leftover Big Mac from down the block and a 2 liter orange Fanta from 7/11. We had gotten used to seeing her around, walking barefoot in the middle of the street yelling at cars that got in her way.

The bus stop is in front of Metro PCS, which is next to Fred Loya Insurance, next to Dragon Loco, next to 7/11, which took the place of my friend’s shop. I would step into his Beauty Shop on my way home from school, greeting him with a timid, “Hello Friend,” walking around until finally landing in front of the nail polish, looking for new colors. He noticed me debating between a bright green and a glossy orange, “you get two, get both, I give you good price.” He always sold me nail polish for a dollar, but on days where I took my time, he couldn’t wait to offer me more deals. I never learned his name and he never knew mine, but he always asked how my family was doing and I always left there feeling like I had a friend down on Florence.



The bus stop looks onto Church's Chicken, which depending on the time of day, is overcrowded with children on their way home from school, or crammed with Lucy's friends who just need our spare change to get by, but we only have a dollar each for the bus, which isn't even enough for the \$1.75 bus fare. I developed a habit of inserting only a dollar and communicated to my sisters to do the same. Then I would look down at my feet and walk quickly to the back of the bus, even well after the prices had gone up.

Now, however, I insert the dollar as if I have all the time in the world, straightening the dollar out on my jeans, looking at the bus driver straight in his eyes. When I finally choose a seat, I lay my head against the window and close my eyes, knowing that only luck and not my sisters sitting beside me will wake me up.

Oftentimes when I woke up too late, I would have to walk back to Figueroa, where I had initially planned on getting off. Other times, when my luck ran out, I woke up several stops before, in angst expecting to be miles away, yet still having hours left to go. In these times, I'm forced to look out the window. Forced to see yet another crack house being raided, the red and blue lights still on, now more decorative than authoritative, as the pigs line up the dogs, but these dawgs bite back. On the corner of Figueroa these women remain, wearing tank tops as dresses with worn out sandals to match their well-used wigs. As cars inch slowly closer to the curb, they bend gradually closer to the window. One hand holding down her dress, the other pushing up her assets.

We pass by Los Angeles Academy Middle School where Dolores and I went. Where we were sent home for having a red shoe lace or a blue bow in our hair yet the teachers could never stop the fights that went on every Friday during the last months of school in stairwells, blocking anyone trying to get to class on time.

We pass our house, the house where we all grew up. The house we knew even before the metal bars went up, before the cops patrolled our block, before the alarm system broke. Where we moved to welcome Esperanza into the world, where she could recognize family and learned about community. Where we all found our place, our starting point.

*Swim Good - Frank Ocean*

I remember the deceiving buzz in my pocket on the two hour bus ride home from school. I looked down thinking, "this is it, any one of these emails can determine my future." I left my phone in my pocket untouched because I didn't want to be *that* girl that cries in the bus. So I waited until I was half a block away from the house, if I couldn't cry in the bus there was no way I would cry in front of my family, "if I needed to, I could probably just go to Tam's until the puffiness wears down." I opened the most recent one first,

“Dear Ms.Gabrielle Reyes, We regret to inform you...”

My eyes began watering, my footsteps, shorter with each step. I had 6 more emails to open.

“Dear Ms.....”  
 “.....Gabrielle Reyes.....”  
 “.....We regret.....”  
 “.....to.....”  
 “.....inform.....”  
 “.....you.....”

I stopped walking and impulsively looked around. I was almost home; I started walking faster, hoping that I could at least get my key into the door before the first tear fell. I made it all the way to the bathroom, timidly greeting my dad and sisters on the way, never looking up, choosing not to make eye contact, “I have to pee really bad,” I spoke to no one in particular. I quickly locked the door and sat on the toilet seat, grabbing my head, careful not to get too close to the shower so my cries wouldn’t echo.

I remember the deceiving buzz in my pocket on the toilet seat that I had taken hostage. I looked down thinking, “this is it, the last blow.” I opened it immediately, hoping the final rejection would force me to muster the courage to tell my parents.

“Dear Ms.Gabrielle Reyes,”

I had just begun to read the first couple words, when the email exploded with online confetti,  
 “Congratulations! We are pleased to inform you....”

I remember practicing how I would tell my family that I was moving to New York, that I was going to be a writer. I wondered whether they would cry and ask me to stay or if they would cry and tell me how proud of me they were. I had imagined a presentation that I would give listing all the benefits of moving to New York, naming the several breaks I would have where I could come visit, the classes I would take and the things I would see. I had prepared a special speech for my little sister, who I consider to be my first child, where I would promise her that I would call her everyday, “I can even write you letters the old-fashion way,” and told her no matter how far I was that she would never be alone. I cried simply reciting these words in my head, thinking “if she tells me to stay, I’ll do it. It’s really hard to be a writer anyway.”

“So I got into this school where I can study writing, you know, like I’ve always wanted to.”

“That’s great baby, how much is it going to cost?”

I remember the flashing screen in front of me that took my dreams away. “This school cost \$70,000 a year. We can give you \$58,000 but you have to figure out the rest,” it taunted me. I went back to my dad and reported these numbers, failing to look him in the eye as he asked me, “\$12,000? We could probably move a lot of stuff around,” he turned his head, “we’re going to have to make a lot of sacrifices and be smart about how we spend our money from now on in order to save for the first \$3,000. I think we can start by cutting the cable..”

“It’s \$12,000.”

“*Si, pero el colegio no es por cuatro años?*”

“Yea, it's around \$12,000 every year.”

“*Ay Dios mio hija, we can’t afford that.*”

He slipped in and out of spanish the more he tried to make himself understood.

“We can try to help you *un poquito* but *eso si que es* a lot.”

“No papi it's fine I know it's too expensive.”

“*No puedes ir a uno más barato? Así también puedes buscar un trabajo que te quede cerquita.*”

The next day I was spending 25 cents a page at John Muir Public Library down the street printing out the Gelson’s Market application where my mom has worked for fifteen years, where my dad worked in the late 90’s and where my sister now works. It was basically a family business, I was sure to get hired. I told my mom to put in a good word and I told my sister not to tell anyone we were related. The next week I was in training. My sister and I worked side by side, she bagged groceries in one lane as I asked the customer in mine, “paper or plastic?” On slow days, our mom liked to wander around the market, passing by each of our lanes almost a hundred times. We all shared knowing glances, anticipating the tick of the clock that let us know it was time for the first one of us to go to lunch, 5 minutes later then the next, 5 more then me, so that we could all have at least 5 minutes together.

I enrolled into Los Angeles City College where during my first year I was paying \$12 to take four classes in one semester. I was taking Child Development, English 101, Intro to Philosophy, and Survey of Rock and Roll Music, none of which had anything to do with writing. I woke up every morning at six to take the 754 Expo Line, a thermos filled to the brim with coffee in one hand while the other firmly gripped the bus fare in my pocket.

I got to class at the perfect time; early enough where I had options of where to sit but also not too early where it's just me and the professor sitting in awkward silence. I was beginning to fall asleep in my chair when I noticed him walk in. I looked to my left hoping no one was sitting next to me yet but there were only so many seats left to choose from. He finally chose one in the same

row, close enough. The professor began taking roll and I immediately became more alert. I waited to hear which name would cause him to raise his hand and say “here!”

The next day I wake up a little earlier. I count the rows until I get to where I was sitting the day before, only this time I choose to sit one seat closer. The following day, almost as if he picked up on my tactic, he sits one seat closer. This goes on until one day, I wake up late and miss my first bus. When I finally get to class, sweaty and out of breath, there he is sitting in the seat directly next to where I was sitting the other day.

“Hey,” he says, “It’s about time you show up, I was beginning to think I chose the wrong seat.”

Pretty soon I’m asking him, “Do you remember the first words you ever said to me?” He’s lying in my bed, his arms wrapped around my waist, our legs tangled into each other, as I’m running my fingers through his hair then outlining his back with the tips of my nails, soothing him to sleep. He groans grudgingly, letting me know that sleep is forcing him to only half listen. Before long his head is warm on my belly, he purrs with every light snore. I turn up the music ever so slightly, allowing the twitch of his left foot be his response.

I doze off slowly, my head nodding off to the rhythm of the song. My fingers still impulsively making circles on his back. I think back to that day in the restroom, my rigid body shaking on the toilet, my hands holding on tightly to my head, my muffled cries and silent scream lost in the cloud of disappointment. I think back to the screen that started it all. I remember thinking, “I’m going to live in this house forever, I’m going to have to work just as hard as my parents did to just barely make it by.”

Now as I force my half closed eyes to look at him one last time before sleep completely takes over, I think about how comfortable I am here and how much harder it would have been to leave everything behind.

*She Knows About Me - Roy Woods*

The ghost of a past *coyote* breaths down my neck; the spirit of domesticity immediately clouds my mind and forces me into a submissive silence. But my thoughts still run free.

“I can’t follow this plan that was set out for me.”

I want to create an image that my parents can see from within the comfort of their own home. I need them to understand what I left behind and what was chosen to take its place, not by them but by me.

Let's watch the water cover over the rocks that lay in the bottom, an obstacle placed in our way. I'm sure you'll feel at home. They lay in disarray like the words that I'm holding back but need to say. Varying in sizes and textures, ones that you can pick up and the ones that you slip on, reaching your arm out for support to regain your balance.

But I can't help you anymore and the water knows it too, it's roar raging louder above us. I close my eyes and let the steam bathe me, before long we're both neck deep. The cold nips at our toes, the fish making ripples that remind me of what I have to say.

I notice when our feet can no longer touch the floor beneath us, you wriggle in a worried way, making ripples far beyond the mind of the fish around us. You don't know how to swim, and neither do I, "...but we'll get in anyway." I raise my arms above my head and you watch me confused, a stomach-punching laugh wants to escape, but instead I let the water overpower me one last time.

I notice the stars first, because they're not above me but on the same playing field. Everything was methodically placed at an arm's reach, who am I to negate the world from what goes on in my head. I was made to reach. The words come in a jumbled heap, but when I'm through with them the trees stop shaking just to hear me.

I found the privilege you hoped to find at the plant of your foot- but you fumbled, like a deer learning to walk, into conformity and stayed there, whether you'd like to believe it or not- but *what am I doing with it that sets me apart?*

You don't come looking for me, I'm not the daughter that you once knew so well.

### *Hide In Your Shell - Supertramp*

My mind is made up of parts that weren't made to fit together. Every so often pieces begin to chip off, making it harder for the image of a whole to seem possible. There are moments when I need to isolate myself from my surroundings, where I allow my mind to fold into itself. I place myself at its center and deliberately gnaw away at the pieces no longer of use to me and mend the ones that still need work.

During these times, I can speak to no one but myself. We discuss our progress and note what changes need to be made, we weigh the significance of the relationships kept and the ones abandoned, we consider our observations and interpret each detail. We can't talk to anyone until everything is back in its place, until I'm whole again, until I'm human again.

I never know when these moments are going to come or even how long each time will take. Though I am quickly able to notice the consequences of neglecting this urge. So I'm forced to embrace them as they come. I get to work as soon as I feel my steps grow heavier, when words aimed at me hit my skin but can't get past the barrier, when short daydreams become agonizing daymares.

*Yo soy la dueña de mis pensamientos y también la creadora de lo que me hace sufrir.*

*Veo mi interior sin ver lo que está a mi alrededor para crear una persona única, una persona completa. Si me tratas de desnudar,-- si me quitas el cuerpo que me hace mujer, si me quitas la familia que me hace latina, si me quitas las amistades que me hacen parte de la sociedad, si me quieres quitar el amor que me hace débil, si me quieres quitar la pelea que me hace fuerte-- no me puedes quitar la identidad que he construido sin todo eso desde el principio.*

*Alma Mestiza - Rebeca Lane*

She sits at the table, rectifying her posture, going over the folds in her skirt with her hands. She finds a napkin on the table and a wooden pencil that has been used to a stub. Over the napkin she begins writing the letter "m." She traces over it to darken the imprint, then traces over it again, and again, forcing her hand to memorize the rhythm. Her face inches away from the napkin, her breath fogging up her glasses, she pushes onward, taking her time with each letter. When she's done, she brings the napkin to me, her eyes speckled with pride and worry, "*Leemelo. Que dice? Es mi nombre verdad?*"

In front of me is a woman that possesses an ambiguous age, having turned 85 for as many years as I've known her, she has no memory of when she was born and no help from Guatemala's government to ease our curiosity. She raised twelve kids on her own, never having gone to school, never learning how to read or write.

When I think about my relationship to writing and my grandma's lack thereof, I'm forced to consider what I'm doing that she is not and what I'm missing out on that my grandma has mastered.

Yo escribo en la niebla, rodeada por oscuridad y confusión.

I submerge myself back into this profound whole of memories.

I cut myself from reality and relive each experience so that when I go back I won't miss a thing.

And if I don't miss anything maybe then I'll be able to realize where things went wrong.

I can only imagine what my grandma must feel, when she tells us her stories.

Though, we've heard many times before, we don't tell her to stop, can't actually.

We let her go on, no filter.

Her eyes always water before she begins, whereas I tend to shed a tear at the end, once it's all out. She takes off her glasses and rubs her eyes violently, trying to erase the memory living in her head. She looks out, past my head, if not down at her lap, refusing eye contact, letting out a sigh.

*The Middle*



*Hood Politics - Kendrick Lamar*

I lived down Kansas St., within the parameters deemed “South Central.” Every morning I had to partake in a two hour bus ride to get to school. Often times I was accompanied by a naturally tanned Mexican, lacking in stature, with long sleek black hair that passed the small of her back. Mariposa and I had been introduced midway through our first semester in high school, each of us encouraged by our sisters to maintain the familial alliance. We had gravitated towards each other by our own will, noticing the significance in being two of the few hispanics that had to be bussed to school. We later learned that we had also gone to the same middle school, furthering our suspicion that our relationship was bound to happen, if not destined. Since then, however, it transformed to one of pure dependency as we lacked the sufficient social skills to create connections outside of the ones presented to us.

Our companionship had consisted of several walks to the bus stop. We took turns deciding whether or not, either of us, would, that morning, be able to withstand the viral, preempted small talk initiated by our peers. And, whether or not, we could, as two hispanic adolescents, give up a dollar seventy five to escape those minute acts of comradery.

We lived there along the metaphorical border that distinguished “the hood” from “the hills.” From her house to mine, you could count three very distinct car washes. One boasted about an affordable “five dollars for five minutes,” hoses hung from the graffiti stained walls, announcing a tiresome self-service system. The second, in comparison drew a different crowd with the allure of extinct animals, vibrantly green dinosaurs waved you in, a ranger ushered your car upon the conveyor belt that guided you through the jungle, promising amazonic cleanliness. The third had outlived many of the members within our own community, endangered by the will of glock, threatened by the ever present gang violence that forced many public schools to discourage any, however minimal, article of clothing tainted by the Crip’s navy blue and the Blood’s competing red. This was the carwash I was accustomed to seeing, where my dad was given a generous discount solely based on his friendly demeanor. He called everyone *jefe* and always let me choose the scent for the interior of the car.

Within those same two blocks between Mariposa and I, you could count two Tom’s burgers and one Tam’s. The fluorescent neon signs; Little Caesars pizza’s blinding orange, Pizza Hut’s bright red, Burger King’s faded royal blue, McDonald’s enticing yellow, though they forced our eyes into a squint, also let us know that the bus stop was just two crosswalks away. We normally stood in front of the Speedy Cash that announced *mas efectivo pagos bajos*, where single mothers came as a last resort, trailed by three kids told to wait “here, where I can see you.” We acknowledged every passerby with a generous but swift avoidance of eye contact. We realized that even though we were up at five in the morning to get to school, among the hardworking construction workers with rough, calloused hands and the tweeking crackheads begging for a fix

or “at least a slice from your pizza box, man you got eight in there,” we would never be caught complaining.

When we were awarded the luxury to be transferred from Highland Park to South Central on the school bus, we were dropped off on the steps of Fremont High School. Fremont High was much more known for the chaos that lived within their walls than for the fact that it was one of the few high schools that still deemed uniforms necessary. Burgundy or grey collared shirts were mandatory, at least we assumed so, often noticing the liberties these students took when dressing the other half of their bodies; sporting tribal leggings or the same tight khaki skinny jeans we were forced to wear in middle school.

It was rare to see any of the Fremont kids, as we called them, wear colors that steered away from the color palette offered by the administrators. We often reveled at the invariability but we never envied them. Because even though we had to take special precautions from the walk or drive from our respective houses to the bus stop at Fremont, we could finally dust off the few red or blue clothing items we had kept just in case.

It was rather easy to assume that going two hours away from Fremont would keep us safe. Taking into consideration the many times the schools in our district had to undergo a lockdown: turning off the lights, placing furniture by the windows, hiding under the table, nobody making a sound, hearing footsteps outside, the doorknob jiggling, but not being able to do anything because we haven’t gotten the “all ok” from the principal, therefore we had to assume the crazy man is still outside, I can see why leaving would be an easy idea to digest.

But Highland Park had its own aura of delinquency. Deep red and royal blue were dethroned by white tees. Still, we walked with our noses in the air, knowing that what we feared wouldn’t find us here.

Instead it was that same minimal distance, those few blocks between the bus stop and home, that made my legs shake, quiver, tremble. The sweat above Mariposa’s upper lip and the drops down her forehead made her glisten; I could see the top of her head baking under the sunlight. She walked quickly and unsteadily. I walked calmly knowing no one was awaiting my arrival. I enjoyed allowing the breeze determine my speed, watching bus after bus pass me by, the dollar seventy five growing heavier in my pocket.

There was nowhere to walk but straight. This fact was convenient but also paralyzing under certain circumstances. We hadn’t even reached the bridge that let us know we were halfway; we had walked barely two blocks from our starting point. His head fell perfectly between the mint green bars of the gate, he raised his arms to cover the fragility of his face, but his stomach was still taking some heavy blows. His eyes danced around then locked as they met mine.

We continued under the bridge; passing the carts converted into houses, sharing the sidewalk with the pigeons, letting our silence echo as guilt bubbled from our toes into our teary eyes.

*Revolución - Paisano*

Catcalls are quick and easy; they punch then slide off your body like granulated sugar, leaving behind thicker skin. As a woman, unfortunately, these instances have become normalized, not widely accepted but largely expected. These scenes are often the same; same expression of superiority, same irrational impulse of control. In Los Angeles they live in the bodies of *cholos* and older Mexican men, they droop out of their battered up trucks just like the drool that drips off their urge. Usually half of their bodies hang there, out the window, throwing caution, ironically out that same window. They replace any resemblance of safety with the illusion that their objectification will be received as adoration.

*Adoracion de que? Si tu obsession no tiene normas. Me mezclas con el cuerpo de mis hermanas, me pierdo en la expresion de sus traumas. No me mientes, tonto, que solo eres un hombre.*

Simply on the way to the bus stop I could count;

12 up-and-down stares  
 3 honks  
 2 “hey, good looking”  
 7 judgement stares

I wasn't wearing anything particularly enticing, nor did I need to have a sign on my forehead that read 'Objectify me,' because it happens either way. It's in that skin-crawling feeling, when his eyes roll up and down my curves that make me want to hide them. It's in the honks that remind me not to exacerbate the aggressor for he has a car and could easily capitalize on this upper hand. It's the friendly faces that catch me off guard, starting with an inviting smile, I can recognize the appreciation but it falls short of the heavy maintenance that my reciprocation requires. How quickly this can turn against me, how often I've been fooled, you're no friend, you're an enemy, this world was made for you, so why are you angry at *me*?

*Me siento culpable, tengo vergüenza, perdí mi cuerpo cuando lo imprimiste en tu memoria. Soy muy debil, no te puedo decir nada y pues me quedo callada y tu sigues viviendo en tu parranda.*

*Get Away - Mobb Deep*

When Dolores and I went to the same school, on my birthdays she loved making sure that everyone knew. For my 16th birthday, she enlisted the help of my best friend. We all took the same bus from South Central to Highland Park, so there wasn't much she could hide from me, but she did a swell job at trying. She had brought eight balloons with her, insisting that I take them with me on the bus, refusing my plea to leave them home. We were close to not even being allowed on the school bus, but boy did she have a way with words.

When we finally got to school there was Mariposa, waiting for us at the front of the school. She waited for my sister so they could complete the sixteen, then there I was left, with sixteen balloons around my wrist at 7:20 in the morning.

How did I get from class to class with these balloons? With a lot of 'excuse me's' and 'sorry's.'

The real peril is what waited for me in the bus ride back home. We wouldn't have been able to get away with the same birthday speech my sister gave the school bus driver so I forced them both to accompany me in my journey against the wind, on my adventure home.

We stayed around the school to celebrate, leaving just before it got dark. After the two hour bus ride though, by the time we made it to South Central the moon had declared her territory. The bus left us at a fifteen minute speed walk - thirty minute stroll to the house, but under the curtain of the unknown, a few minutes of walking can easily transform to hours of paranoia.

Almost as if my nervous jitters had manifested this outcome or maybe it was the sixteen balloons I was dragging along. But from an audible distance, a faint "Happy Birthday" rang in the foreground.

"Keep walking," Dolores warned me.

But like Lazarus' wife, I was drawn to turning around and getting a good look at what was going on behind me.

He had caught up to us and looked me in my eyes as he reiterated, "Is it your birthday today? Happy Birthday!" Unsatisfied with our trained mute responses, after pausing he asked, "Can I celebrate with you? I love birthdays."

I wanted to reply and assure him that it wasn't in fact my birthday and that I was just lugging around a handful of balloons for fun. But my sister kept us moving; she caught me looking at

him again and threw me an angry eyebrow arch forcing me to look down at my feet as they carried me through.

It didn't take us long to notice the guy had stayed on our feet, slurring out the happy birthday song as he followed. I thought he was a funny drunk and believed in the strength we had in numbers; I was interested in seeing how far he could get, how close he would dare get.

But Dolores had other plans, we were almost home when she insisted on taking a detour through the park. "We can't let him know where we live," she warned me as we began circling the same block before finally giving up and going home, this time without looking back to see if he was there.

*The Message - Jay Rock*

It's a different feeling walking those few short blocks, being accompanied and alone. When I walk by myself, I worry about my safety; I force myself to stay quiet from the fear of possible irrational retaliation. When I walk with Dolores, though she's worried, I feel at ease. While she plans out our next steps, I'm allowed to laugh about what's going on around me.

When I walk with Esperanza, though her insecurity causes her to cower, I feel invincible. She hunches over, trying to hide her developing figure, balling her fists in her baggy sweatshirt.

*"Enderesate,"* I tell her, "Walk with your head held high."

I do the same, trying to set an example.

When the inevitable catcall comes our way, she walks faster trying to get out of his sight.

"Don't let these fools influence how you walk girl," I say as I begin to slow down my pace.

I unzip my sweater on this hot California day, inevitably giving them something to gawk at.

A honk sounds in the distance, "Eyes on the road asshole!" I yell as I feel Esperanza's stare on my left cheek.

I want her to grow up without fear. I want her to see that if there wasn't a place made for her she shouldn't choose to change but make a space where she can fit comfortably. I want her to know these things because at that age, I didn't. I wish she could walk home without the dogs nipping at her feet, but for now she'll just have to learn to strut while she drags their drooling heads *beneath* her.

*Help! - The Beatles*

When Dolores was in her first year of high school she got her belly button pierced. She had leaned over from the passenger seat of Cristobal's green Toyota truck while he stopped at Auto Zone and whispered, "I have to tell you something."

We hadn't been going to the same school at this point, so I was used to living in the sidelines of her social life. I knew to say "I don't want to go," whenever our parents would say "you can only go if Gaby goes." It wasn't like I was lying; I preferred staying home, waiting for her to come back and tell me what she actually did compared to what she had told our parents she was going to do. She told me everything, well, everything that my bashful demeanor could handle.

A thousand worst-case scenarios ran through my head as she thought of how to tell me. *Oh my gosh, she's pregnant, she got in trouble in school again, she's going to get kicked out, she has a new boyfriend.* "You know what, it's easier if I just show you."

I remember the exact shirt she was wearing because she had taken it without asking permission to borrow it. It was my faded blue Frosted Flakes t-shirt, it was one of my favorite shirts because of how much it hugged my torso, giving the illusion that I had boobs. I hated when she took it because it was obvious she could get by without the same illusion, she had actual boobs that stretched out the chest area, leaving a loose droopy feeling around my grape-sized chest.

She looked behind her to make sure dad wasn't coming, before lifting up her shirt.

"Oh my god, I cannot believe you, you actually did it."

She had been talking about piercings for a while now but could never articulate a flawless argument that would convince our parents of the benefits of having yet another hole on your stomach. "What do you think?"

"Did it hurt?"

I thought about her answer, I thought about the conversation that followed her response, about the smile she had on her face when she first lifted up her shirt. I thought about all of this as my dad asked me later that week, "Do you know anything about Dolores?"

My mom was pacing back and forth behind him, "*Esto no puede ser. Dios mío, cómo pudo pasar esto? No puede ser, ay Dios, ay Dios. Porque a mi hija señor, porque?*"

They had me cornered in their room. I was sitting on their bed as my dad towered above me. I thought about what I knew, what they wanted to hear, but also about what Dolores would want me to say.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Isn’t she your sister? Doesn’t she tell you everything?”

“You think she tells me everything? That’s funny, she never tells me anything. We’re two different people, dad.”

I chose to lie through my teeth, deny, deny, deny.

He stared intently at me, probably trying to figure out whether or not me telling the truth was worth finding out, before saying, “*llama a tu hermana, dile que necesitamos hablar con ella.*”

I ran out of the room as quickly as I could before he could change his mind about letting me go. I didn’t call Dolores, I knew what would be there waiting for her.

“*Dolores, ven para ca,*” my dad shouted from the room. I hoped that he would forget, that he would’ve calmed down by now. I jumped up to intercept Dolores before she went to the room, “Be careful what you say in there, he looks really mad.”

“I know.”

“No you don’t, I mean it, don’t talk back, just let him talk and get out as fast as you can.”

I watched her walk into the room, thinking that if I sat close enough to the open door, I’d be able to hear what they were going to say.

“*Cierra la puerta.*”

I walked over to our room, head hung over my shoulders in defeat. I started to do my homework when I noticed that the floors were shaking. *It must be an earthquake,* I thought as I began to make my way to the living room to make sure that everyone was accounted for.

As I got closer to my parent’s room, however, there was no denying that the shaking was coming from inside. Cristobal’s furious stomps shook the floor, his shouts echoed through the walls, his pounding matched the rapid beating of my heart.

I stood frozen in time. I had to make a choice, had to make a choice.

I reached out for the door.

My hand shaking, his voice ringing, Consuelo's cries muffled through the door, the door, the locked door.

I doubled back and ran to Esperanza in the other room.

She was just a child then, she had no idea what was going on.

How *often* this used to go on.

Her eyes looked up at me, oblivious of what was going on right next to us.

I grabbed her arm and pulled her to the kitchen.

She pulled back, resisting, not knowing why we had to leave.

She didn't know why we were crouched on the floor, why we were far away from the front door.

She didn't know why I hugged her tight, covering her ears, my tears falling through her curls.

She didn't know why it was just us two this time, how I tried but failed to save Dolores.

*How I banged on the door, begged them to stop,*

*How I would much rather be shielding...*

We were used to staying together, but this time they took her away from me and all I could do was wait until they were done. Wait until they let her out, let her into my arms, where her body stayed hunched and fragile, where her body shook in memory of his voice that pummeled the walls.

I could tell something was different. I could tell in the way she couldn't even look me in the eye anymore, in the way that she used to say anything as a means to pick a fight with me.

They loved putting us against each other and I hated to see them win.

*Give a little bit - Supertramp*

But I can only like you from a distance. I can write your name down in my notebook because we have the same last name and only I'll know that you're there. I can overhear your conversations with your friends to learn more things about you, but I could never ask about them myself. I know that your favorite color is blue, that your favorite number is seven, that your birthday is in December. I've learned all these things from my seat, you didn't make it that hard after all, everyone likes you but I'm the only that hasn't talked to you. Because whenever I think about it my stomach dips and my ears overheat and I start to mumble and talk really fast. But I like you so when I saw you holding hands with another girl the only thing I could do is wait to get home



to cry, cry my little eyes out and hope she isn't good enough for you and wish that it was my fingers interlaced in yours, but you don't know who I am because I've never gotten out of my seat.

But I had to write a paper and couldn't say yes to your date. I hated how you used my sister to trick me into meeting you outside of class. I figured you were nervous but couldn't you have walked up to me yourself. I told you I had a paper because I knew my sister was waiting, waiting for *you* to report back. I said I had a paper, but I didn't have to finish it that night, I could've waited to write it but something told me not to. And I'm glad I listened because within a week my sister came home to tell me you had asked her out. She wondered whether I liked you and I asked whether she liked you. We were trying to figure out who you liked, which one of us would be the best for you. And I hate that, I hate how you put us against each other, how we began to think of ourselves in relation to you. I told her she could have you; I didn't want a guy who could change his mind within a week.

But no one could see us together. When it was just us two, you could make me laugh and I enjoyed that about you. I enjoyed that side of you but couldn't overlook when your pride took over, when you were with your group of friends who couldn't see someone like me with someone like you so you came over constantly to prove to them that I would, in fact, talk to you. You made them laugh by embarrassing me and I saw who you really aimed to please. I warned you that I wouldn't go out with you but you kept trying. For years you were persistent, but so was I. I didn't want to be anyone's arm candy, I didn't want to be something to parade around, a proud catch in a sea of bothersome consistencies.

But I only liked you when you didn't like me. I cringed when you replied to me right away but checked my phone constantly when I hadn't heard from you in a while. I couldn't tell whether or not this was part of your charm. I mean we only spent a day together and I was so nervous that I wasn't even myself. I didn't want to blur the line between who I was and who I was with you so I let the line be there and forgot about ever crossing over it.

*Vile Mentality - J Cole*

*“Gracias a Dios que durante todo lo que hemos pasado  
nunca les ha faltado comida en la mesa.”*

My parents pride themselves on being able to provide for us without ever having to ask for help, whether it be from family or the government.

But then how is it that I remember hunger so vividly?

I had become so used to getting sent directly to the principal's office at this point—for pinching boys, for never raising my hand, for reading under the table, for regularly choosing not to do homework—that when Ms. Givens sent me to the main office, I was relieved but confused.

I was told I would be going home early, that my mom was waiting for me outside in the van. Usually when I was being picked up early, it was on my own accord, something that I had done in order to be sent home I guess. Because of this regularity, I knew that it was necessary for whoever was picking me up—my neighbor, my uncle, my cousin—to sign me out so that the school knew that I hadn't gone missing; yet they let Consuelo stay in her car.

Never being one to complain about spontaneous fortune, I said goodbye to the lady who was usually in the main office. She looked down at me with somber eyes, giving me a gentle wave as I left.

I found my mom parked right in front of school, she probably had been trying to get inside but could only get up to that point before having to run back and just wait.

As I opened the door, her sobs began pouring out, echoing through the car and ringing in my ear. As I got into my seat I was able to notice that she had picked up Dolores too.

“Mom whats wrong? What happened?”

“She hasn't been speaking clearly for a while,” Dolores cautioned.

From the driver's seat Consuelo tried to explain, “*Nadie podría haber sabido que esto podía suceder* (Or maybe it was we all knew this could happen?) *Necesitamos llegar a la casa. Tu Tía,*” her sobbing continued.

“Is she talking about Tia Angustias? Is she okay?”

Our aunt had been diagnosed with breast cancer a couple of months back.

Dolores was taking this lighter than expected, probably because she was allowed to see her when she was in the hospital a few weeks before she passed away. I wasn't allowed in, I was too “young,” I wouldn't have been able to handle seeing her like *that*.

When we got home, I looked for a better source of information. Among Consuelo's tears, Dolores' nonchalance and Cristobal probably at work, the only truth I had to grasp was that she was gone, I could never see her again, in the hospital or in health.

I began pacing backing forth, remembering every hysterical character in movies that pace back and forth to express their frustration.

But I didn't feel *sad*. I was still in elementary school, I couldn't have known her for that long. From the time that I did spend with her, I could tell that she was a good person but *good* people die all the time. It just so happens that now we're the family that got left behind. I considered my moms grief, mourning the wife of her husband's step-brother, no blood relation, just love. I wondered whether I loved my aunt, whether she knew that I did before she left this plane. This made me think of where she would go, was she *good* enough for heaven? But could she ever deserve burning in hell?

“Mom, can people float in between heaven and hell?”

I don't remember her answer. It could have been a long description of the differences between heaven and hell. She could have mentioned God's mercy, told me a little more about my aunt. But most likely she gave me a short unsatisfying answer, one that would force me to go back to pacing.

I considered the different ways that people could react to having a loved one die. But this only made me feel guilty for not loving her enough to cry at her departure.

“I'm not going to eat anymore!”

This made my mom chuckle, “*Porque no?*”

Seeing a smile on her face for the first time that day, I continued, “I'm too sad to eat. I'm not going to eat until I'm not sad anymore.”

This is the first vivid memory I have of refraining from eating. It couldn't have lasted long. After all, I wasn't even *sad*.

### *The Question - Mac Miller*

It's surprising to me now realizing how given a chance to feel sadness, I chose not to take it. Especially considering how afterward all I ever felt was sadness *without* reason.

I didn't want to die. But I wasn't afraid of death either. I just didn't want to be the one to do it. Yet that did not stop me from trying and hoping.

“Ugh I don’t want to do this anymore.”

“I know how you feel.”

A friend in middle school and I had bonded over our mutual anger at having to live. We talked about how there was no point if we would never be happy and how when we told our parents they don’t believe we have reason enough to be this moody. She told me how she kept a journal of the different ways of which she would/ could kill herself. She told me how she listed the pros and cons of each attempt in order to improve and find the ultimate attempt. She told me when she started cutting herself.

I thought that *one* of those things was a pretty good idea at the time.

I started keeping a journal. A journal that if I were to read now would show the different ways in which I managed to blow things way out of proportion. In that headspace, however, everyone was against me; it was the only reasoning I could find for my sadness, for my failure, for the way my life was turning out.

I wasn’t eating. But it wasn’t because I cared how I looked, I was never in *tune* with the times. I wore what was comfortable not what I thought others would appreciate. Yet, I refused to eat.

Food just wasn’t appetizing anymore. I didn’t eat at school and when I got home, I went straight to my room to rest my vibrating earbuds directly next to my eardrum. I rolled onto my side, caressing my head. I lay under my blankets until I was hungry. Until I could feel the stomach acid bubbling inside me, eating away at *me* because there was nothing else for them there. Them, the village inside me crying out for help, for nourishment, for attention. The music served to drown out the cries, theirs and mine. Because I was sad but their suffering made me feel better because it made me feel worse and I had to feel worse because it was the only way I knew to get better.

I wanted a *reason*; I wanted to know why. But everywhere I turned for help, a finger turned back to blame me.

Instead of asking why I *couldn’t* speak in class, teachers were quick to send me out of the classroom and into another if not into the principal’s office. They claimed I was defiant, but really I couldn’t bring myself to say anything *wrong* in class so I said nothing to make sure I didn’t give anyone the opportunity to ridicule me.

Cristobal’s solution was to pray. He says that suffering on earth can only equal a greater reward in heaven, I should be so lucky. When I wanted to stay home, he took me to church. He took me

to listen to the pastor say that people who think about killing themselves are sinners, they'll burn in hell for not respecting the body that Christ has created.

I took the opportunity when I was a teen, no longer seeing a pediatrician, to talk to a doctor. I asked my family to wait outside in the hall for me; I thought about how I could summarize years worth of suffering into one doctor's visit... But all he heard was that I hadn't been able to sleep for seven days straight so I must need this Benzo to knock me out.

It wasn't until my second year in college, while taking a class on "Identity in the Classroom", where reading a book titled *The Disappearing Girl* by Lisa Machoian, I was able to successfully encounter my *own* demise.

The heaviness around me had grown so overbearing that I just accepted that it was up to me to find out how to carry it. I stopped looking for help in different places and realized I was meant to leave this world the same way I came in, *alone*.

I was so used to being alone at that point--with my parents always working, Dolores finding escape in her group of friends--that nothing really changed but my acceptance, my submission. I didn't go to school if I didn't want to, I wore my baggy clothes even if it was hot outside, I bit my nails to a stub, I started wearing dark, somber colors and stopped wearing my seatbelt. There were just so many things that I felt I had to worry about, that no matter how hard I tried I couldn't keep up... I had to look at everything around me, notice what was accepted, realize where I could squeeze in but by the time I wanted in everything going on around me had already changed. I wasn't meant for a world filled with people and I accepted it.

So I finally found an outlet where I could strive without anyone's help and I started pouring myself into my schoolwork, determined to find happiness, to find a way out of that hole. But I found myself submitting to a whole new regimen, molding myself to the punches of others.

On page xxii of *The Disappearing Girl*, Machoian states "some girls begin equating isolation and loneliness with independence and autonomy."

*Fragile - Tech N9ne*

Cristobal was sitting at the dining room table leafing through some bills. Esperanza and I were on the couch across from him, when we all heard sobs coming from the kitchen.

*En Guatemala, a veces me sentía triste pero nunca así como cuando por fin me fui.*

Her arms were stretched wide above the kitchen sink, she was trying so hard to breathe.

*Me iba entre los sacos de frijoles para llorar pensando solo en querer salir huyendo.*

In a dark place, one can feel heavy, as if we're taking up too much space.

You often told me that you yearned to run away but never could.

You thought that you were alone but you never were.

Because I saw when the grey would hang over your head, drooped down into your soul that forced you to drag your feet. Each step felt heavy; you moved slowly throughout the day.

You thought I didn't notice when you looked right through me because you wanted to be anywhere else but I kept you standing.

Yet here she was, darting eyes around the kitchen, looking for a safe place to land. Her fragile body laid against the cold hard tile, her complexion matching it's tint.

On the kitchen floor her body shook.

She tried to explain to me why she was crying but everything came out in heaves.

Anyway, I knew from experience that the reason hardly ever mattered.

I took her hand in mine, interlacing our fingers, trying hard to keep her grounded. Esperanza followed suit, holding her other hand, hesitant but caressing it gently.

I didn't want her to see you like this, I didn't want her to know.

But she had to learn eventually, how to talk you off the ledge you were so obviously teetering off of.

Her mind was clearly elsewhere, I had seen this all before.

Her breaths shallow, I asked her what day it was, "Do you know where you are?"

I held her hand tightly, fearing if I ever let go that she might fly away permanently, because she was always in her own head.

*Why iii Love the Moon - Phony Ppl*

I know what it's like to look down and see the world crumbling around you.  
Fog in the distance, rocks in your soul.

Looking down at you on the floor, I thought of the woman who threw *arroz y frijoles crudos* on that same floor, how she yelled at us to keep our arms raised as the beans began imbedding themselves into our knees. I thought of those times without break.

It reminded me of then, how time stood still.

Usually when things got this way it was a result of one thing being blown several degrees out of proportion. I knew it all too well, after all I had practiced this maneuver many times before. Not on her, but on myself.

*En ese día que decidí irme a los Estados Unidos, era de pura rabia. Yo no estaba pensando claramente; en que le pudiera pasar a mi hermanita, en que me pudiera pasar a mí. Solo sabía que iba a ser todo lo posible para salir. Ya no quería vivir allí.*

My mother and I had never had the words to describe how we felt to others. Yet, her and I were able to establish an unspoken understanding. Thus, when I discovered *The Disappearing Girl*, though we were only assigned a chapter to read, I ordered the book online and seriously contemplated sending one to every member of my family.

I wanted them to experience the same revelation I had; I wanted my mom to rid herself of the guilt she felt for having depression. I wanted my dad to stop categorizing emotions as problems and stop looking for solutions. I wanted Dolores to know that she was not alone and I wanted Esperanza to feel what we had, even if it was through the contains of a book.

None of them committed to reading the book. Cristobal and Consuelo both asked for a version in Spanish, Esperanza didn't like to read, Dolores didn't have the time.

When I saw my family again in person I read to them from the book.  
I recited to them, with hope in my eyes, a few of the many passages I had highlighted.

*“Es que yo no entiendo, porque yo no tuve una vida fácil, pero nunca me pongo así.”*  
I turned to look at Consuelo, astounded at what Cristobal had just uttered.  
With tears in her eyes she murmured, *“Así es él.”*

*La Fine?*



*School - Supertramp*

My left leg ached then like it does now. Ache might not even be the right word, it's hard to explain. It ached at first, a small swollen feeling at the center of the sole of my foot, enough to cause me to unnoticeably limp but not enough where I couldn't walk anymore. It started at the sole of my foot, but the more I tried to ignore it, consequently, the more prominent the feeling became. It spread quickly to my leg, making it feel oddly out of place, like in those crime shows where a stranger's amputated leg is sewn into someone else. This only exacerbates my anxiety, as I've noticed, the two come together often, in times of curiosity-fueled panic. I look down several times a minute, making sure *my* leg is still there; when I'm not constantly looking down, I shake it as if to wake it up. Ironically, I could sure use some sleep.

From panic comes habit; fear of the unknown that physically translates to the shooting pain coursing through my left leg. I don't sleep, can't sleep, even if I wanted to. This revelation could only have come from years of putting two and two together. Of the first time I left home on my own to the last, yet knowing any of this doesn't make the pain go away.

My leg starts twitching when I'm already on the plane, after I've dropped off my luggage and managed to find my seat. Only then am I allowed to ponder the interaction I had with the station attendant who hesitantly gave me my boarding passes, looking at my high school ID, asking if my parents would be accompanying me on my trip, at the time I could only suppress a polite chuckle and be on my way. In my seat, however, I thought about how many parents would love to drop their children off to college, how many times I had seen in movies parents moving in boxes, parents introducing themselves to everyone, parents pridefully admiring their child. Yet I had gone to all those college visits on my own, hovering around the tour guide as to hear what might not have been important to me then but information that could have nonetheless eventually come in handy. I was the one asking all the questions, writing down what retrospectively became meaningless statistics.

So of course, I thought then, I would be enduring this nine hour flight on my own. *How else could I have imagined it*, I asked myself, sighing to the rhythm of my irksome twitching leg.

I had somehow made it through the flight without ever getting a wink of sleep. Thanks to my restless leg, every time I tried closing my eyes, I'd be jerked awake five minutes later unable to recreate the serenity I had once found. Thus, when I arrived to New York, besides the two suitcases I was allowed to bring with me, I pulled along a set of extra heavy eye bags.

As scholarship kids, we all had to start college a little earlier than most. After graduating in June, we were all expected to be at Bard in July. Though this only gave me weeks to say my goodbyes,

I was eager for the quick change of pace, knowing that if I was forced to think about it any longer I could have easily changed my mind.

Of that group, being one of the few out-of-state students, I was the second to arrive. The first person to get there was Gabby, she had driven from Texas with her dad and was amidst their goodbyes as I was walked through the door.

“Gabby meet Gaby,” I said my hellos and nice to meet yous but in my second breath I asked where I would be staying.

Within my two suitcases I had managed to consolidate my entire wardrobe, soon to be referred to as my ‘summer attire,’ seeing as New York experienced four seasons compared to Los Angeles’ sun and the occasional breeze. I had done my best to bring with me only the things I felt I couldn’t live without, things that if I had left at my parents’, I’d be able to feel its’ absence, irreplaceable things. Then to fill up room I packed certain rather small items that I felt would be best to bring along, just in case I were to experience the infamous homesickness.

Of those day-to-day items, I didn’t think to bring bed sheets, a comforter, or a pillow. Instead, at the last minute, I managed to squeeze in a thin blanket, that my grandma brought from Guatemala, in the space that is usually allotted for the zipper to be able to close completely.

Before unpacking, I chose to lay this blanket out on the bed, in the place of bedsheets. I figured I’d make do with the Pillow Pet’s distant cousin the Fuzzy Buddy that I was allowed to bring on the plane. With one hand, I draped a towel over my limp body, inching my knees closer into a fetal position so that most of my body was covered.

The next morning I was woken up by what seemed to be two short hispanic ladies bursting into my room. I knew they were hispanic by how quickly they were speaking, this was either due to genuine excitement or in hope that I wouldn’t understand what they were saying; it wasn’t until later that I was able to recognize the language they had been speaking was Spanish.

I remained lying in my bed, feigning sleep, planning on figuring out what was happening before officially declaring myself awake. With my head laid on its side, it took a little squinting before noticing the slightly taller one was commentating about the room to the other. Hoping to put the little amount of time I had spent in the space to use, I sat up, “Hello.”

I noticed that they had left the door wide open as our counselor popped his head in to formally introduce us, “Gaby! I’m glad you’re up, meet your roommate Midori.” His hand extended outward toward the slightly taller one.

She turned over to look at me, “Hey,” before turning over to what I could have only assumed to be her mom. Their conversation hovered between a whisper and an outside voice, never truly picking a side, they spoke quickly, this time I’m sure as to make sure I wouldn’t overhear.

I got up to go to the restroom and to get out of their way. I had no one to show anything to anyway; I wanted to grant them the space where they could speak freely of the room, of me even. If my mom had been there I probably would have been doing the same thing.

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It was another one of those mandated activities that our scholarship had organized to promote the feeling of community among our cohort. We had congregated to watch an opera, *Iris*. I wasn’t very fond of the idea of indulging in an event that normally I wouldn’t have been able to afford, so I was very careful in choosing who I would sit next to for the next couple of hours.

I sat in the first row of empty chairs that I saw, not knowing who would sit beside me but prepared to leave as soon as my obligation had been fulfilled. I had my arms draped over each chair on my side, hoping that it discouraged anyone from sitting next to me. As the lights dimmed and the chairs filled, I noticed Gabby making her way towards me with Midori not far behind. They had made it with just enough time to luckily claim the chairs next to me.

The show began somberly, allowing us a preview of the storyline about to unravel before us and allowing me, at least, to notice the text on the screen above the stage. As the opera went on, the more intrigued I became, picking up a few words here and there, repeating the ones I didn’t.

To my left, Gabby had begun falling asleep, inching closer and closer to my shoulder. I gently nudged her awake. I couldn’t believe she could fall asleep during this orchestra of colors, but I let her rest her head on my shoulder anyway, giving myself yet more of a reason not to strain my neck by looking up at the subtitles.

I watched the rest of the opera stiffly absorbed, letting the Spanish that I knew fill in as many blanks as it could. Yet, when the opera finally ended, I left unsatisfied.

I had no clue what I was missing out on. I told myself that there was no way I’d be able to fully enjoy a social event of such caliber without first being able to adapt to the performances around me. Thus, the following semester I decided to learn Italian, to never feel out of the loop again, to be able to appreciate art in its entirety.

### Literature as a Lifeline

In *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Eagleton refutes the attempt to homogeneously define literature as “any actual language consist[ing] of a highly complex range of discourse, differentiate according to class, religion, gender and status.” Instead, he proposes that the true definition of literature depends exclusively on how somebody decides to read the nature of what is written. This theory is brought to life in *Survival in Auschwitz*, translated from the original *Sequesto e un uomo* or *If this is a man*, a testimony of times during the Holocaust. In his first book, Primo Levi showcases the power of literature and utilizes it as a means to bridge the gap between the distinct perspectives of victim and witness. He provides a reflection of himself and his unique resilience in the face of imprisonment within the confines of the camp by channeling characters he met along the way and forcing his audience to relive the experience alongside them.

Levi expresses his debt to Auschwitz because it was within the barbed wire fence that Levi was given eyes to the dehumanization of society, where imposed on him was the guilt and responsibility to memorialize the lives that could not speak. Therefore it is due to his selective memory, what he decides to share and what he chooses to omit; the locus where the audience is allowed a glimpse of Levi as a human being instead of a spokesperson for an entire population. In Chapter 11, titled “the Canto of Ulysses,” his readership is allowed to visualize Levi’s struggle within the camp through his attempt to remember Canto twenty-six of Dante’s *Inferno*. In this essay I will outline how Levi’s relationship with literature unconsciously depicted his internal conflict.

Throughout the testimony, Levi provides the audience with what seem to be chanced events that ultimately resulted in his “survival.” An important aspect that can not be neglected in Levi’s account is the role of memory in the development of a testimony dedicated to humanity. In his preface, Levi expresses his intent to remove himself from the personal connection he had with the subject matter in order to combine these various perspectives. Thus creating a universal outlet that allows the audience to visualize and empathize with the pain that these internment camps generated. By referring to literature during these desperate and hopeless times, Levi inherently chose the mentality of the “Saved.” The Saved being a group characterized by Levi as having a relatively higher probability of survival as compared to the “Drowned” who gave in too quickly to the structure of the internment camp. Literature managed to fill the void that the absence of communication created.

Levi also presents the varying levels of memory; establishing historical memory as the story that has been told so often that no one bothers to question it and collective memory as one that generalizes several experiences in search for a common thread. In order to combat the idea that only “winners” can write history, Levi combines selective and collective memory with the introduction of literature as a lifeline, as a means to replace the confusion and fear that language

provided. In this instance, literature can be seen as the mascot of the Saved because it allowed Levi to remold his mindset as tragedy continued to strike. Levi relied heavily on prose that is well-known to the reader but extracts a different underlying message. For example, he uses different parts of the *Inferno* to represent the unique personalities within the camp. He stresses how unique each life is in order to highlight how the only thing they had in common landed them in the same misery-stricken place, later replacing this commonality by proposing a different one; a similar way to cope. By utilizing Dante's *Inferno* as a reference point, Levi is thus attempting to explain the inexplicable.

In an attempt to offer a subjective perspective onto the scientific experiments that the Germans were forcing Jews to undergo, Levi allows his audience to infer that his testimony does not come from a place of anger but instead from a need to tell the story. With a tragedy as profound as this one, it is evident that by referring back to his memory Levi is simultaneously attempting to uncover the reasoning behind his suffering whilst allowing his readers to empathize alongside him. The way in which no one character is seen in more than one chapter speaks to the temporality and fragility of the experiment as well as Levi's own mentality. When rationality no longer suffices we begin to see the experiment of human degradation yield success for the Germans.

In "The Canto of Ulysses", we see Levi cleaning the inside of an underground petrol tank. One of the characters that uncovers Levi's malleability is Jean, who, because of his status as Pikolo or messenger-clerk, was granted certain liberties and allowed to bask in rare "privileges." Levi later develops a relationship with Jean that consists of them having hidden encounters lasting an hour. Levi describes this as the most ideal moment to teach Jean Italian to accompany his already well-established proficiency in French and German. In order to accomplish the difficult task in the abysmal conditions of the camp, however, Levi once again relies on the help of Dante, author of *The Divine Comedy*. It can be argued that this choice was based solely on Dante's reputation. More probable, however, is that Levi unconsciously made the choice because in this moment he has become Virgil. Similar in the way that both of their roles become malleable depending on the need of their student, exhibiting traits of teacher as well as mentor and guide. Virgil guides Dante through the depths of Hell, using characters that they encounter along the way to extract life lessons, defining different ways to make it into Hell. While Levi guides Jean through another form of Hell, presenting him with different ways to cope along the way, one of them being literature, Levi's personal method.

In his reciting of this important text the key component that defines the value of each phrase lies in memory. The tone in which they are presented correlate to another preface made by Levi, admitting that the sequence of events do not follow a chronological timeline but are instead presented in order of urgency. By analyzing the phrases that Levi remembers and those that he conveniently forgets, his audience becomes privy to which specific passages relate more to how

he feels at the moment and the passages that remind him of aspects within the camp that he would much rather forget.

Firstly, it is worth noting that Levi chooses to quote from Canto Twenty-Six, the eighth circle of Hell, where “their sin was to abuse the gifts of the Almighty, to steal his virtues for low purposes.”(220) Readers are thus able to safely assume that this is directed towards the Germans who utilized the development of science to deteriorating a population. Creating technological advancements with the sole purpose of finding the limits of humanity, without which the Holocaust would not have been possible. This theory is further proven because their punishment is to be engulfed in flames, symbolizing their guilty conscience, which would have been ideal for the Germans to possess because it could have stopped them from being mere bystanders.

Within the camp it is clear that language has managed to provide a barrier for communication due to the fact that it gradually becomes increasingly rare to find a person in which you share a first language with. The presence of many languages bares a resemblance to the biblical story of the Tower of Babel. In attempt to wipe the earth of violence and corruption, God sent a flood. Thus, it was Noah’s sons who after creating a city, wished to build a tower that would reach the heavens, wanting to make a name for themselves. (Genesis 11:4) God had to then force a migration, with the implementation of diverse languages, due to their arrogance in directly defying his order to scatter all over the earth. Comparably, as an antithesis to God’s plan, the Germans’ intent was to force a cohabitation among these different languages and watch them decompose. It is clear that language plays a vital role throughout the story, as the audience is able to see when Levi begins by transforming a stanza and a half into six lines, adding a focus on the use of the tongue, “vibrant to frame/Language, the tip of it flickering to and fro.”(120) Specifically, in this instance where Jean and Levi, instead of allowing it to hinder their relationship, use language to create a common thread.

In the opening lines, the comparison of fire to horn in order to paint the picture of a tongue yields a strong resemblance to another biblical story in Acts when the Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost. Fifty days after celebrating how the Jews left Egypt, “there was a sound from heaven like a powerful wind.”(Acts 2:2) Then tongues of fire were seen about their heads as the followers of Jesus soon began to speak in tongues. This ability to speak in tongues is also presented in Levi’s recital, “...like a speaking tongue vibrant to frame,” whereas Dante refers to it simply as a “voice above the roar.” What is most evident is the significance of different languages, though they were only able to understand amongst themselves, those looking from the outside in, could easily be caught off guard to say the least. This paradox of the presence of different languages accompanied by a lack of communication is seen constantly throughout Levi’s testimony, though in this case the specific action of speaking in tongues holds a more spiritual connotation. Speaking in tongues serves the purpose of creating a community in a church but arguably most

significant is for personal edification. The ability to speak in tongues provides a means for one to express what is in your spirit of which you cannot express in words.

After an accepted gap in his memory, Levi continues by speaking of the open sea. Specifically, how no one was brave enough to “venture the uncharted distances.” This aspect of the recount greatly resembles the biblical story of Noah’s Ark. Overcome by violence and destruction, God decided to wipe the earth and start over, choosing Noah to repopulate. Though Noah attempted to warn others of the flood, no one was, in a way, brave enough to aboard the ark with him. Levi uses this word choice in order to introduce another recurring theme of story telling. Due to the temporality and fragility of their imprisonment, those being held captive are inherently forced to tell their story so that their legend can live on. An important aspect of this activity however, is whether or not people choose to listen. Clearly, no one listened to Noah but Levi made it his own personal mission to hear as many stories from within the camp as he could, which is evident in the way that it is only through the secondary characters’ eyes that we can really see Levi as a human being as he shows us what is really important to him.

We can see Levi most in what he does mention. Levi represses his own sensibility because his book was meant for humanity but it spills out in his language/diction. Specifically when he most energetically Levi begins reciting Ulysses’ speech to his men in an attempt to build in them a desire to persevere. This stanza could arguably be the most significant as it paints Levi in such a vulnerable light. Though he takes a moment to warn Jean to listen the most attentively now, it is clear how much of this speech he needs to hear for himself, “...open your ears and your mind, you have to understand for my sake...”(113) Here his vulnerability is seen when he admits to forgetting where and who he is. Levi places the focus on ignorance compared to Dante’s intent to depict encouragement to push onward. This comparison could be interpreted as a representation of the Germans who instead of encouraging their pursuit of knowledge, wanted them to remain ignorant. Ignorant in the way that the Germans removed any possible method of understanding, starting with language, they attempted to construct an environment in which there would be no choice but to go along with the hierarchical structure of the camp. In a correlative sense, the Germans chose to strip these prisoners of their humanity because it was the only way that they could push onward with their experiment.

A relative yet distinct obstacle that is raised with the already present limitations of language is the art of translation. Already noticing how *If this is a man* was presented as *Survival in Auschwitz*, we become aware of how significant themes can be lost in translation. *Survival in Auschwitz* relies on the commercial selling of the story having a happy ending. Though by focusing on the “survival” this title belittles the entire lived experience and trauma of the camp. While *If this is a man*, questions the moral integrity of the perpetrators as well as sheds light on the struggle to define humanity after its degradation. Nonetheless, in the original Italian Levi’s

reciting seems to hold more resemblance to the original text, where the opening lines are the same, “Lo maggior corno della fiamma antica” (117).

The differences between Levi’s reciting and the original work can most be seen in the diction, specifically where each author chooses to add stress and in their choice in adjectives. Where Dante chooses words like “ancient” and “greater” to describe the power of the wind against the ringing of the horn, Levi utilizes words such as “age-old” and “loftier” to depict more profound strength in the perseverance of each separate entity. Although, he does also acknowledge the toll of the metaphoric flame in competition with the horn in his use of the word “over-worn.” The weight of the words that Levi is exhibiting here shows a reverence for tradition and longevity, implying a clear undertone of biblical significance.

The Bible is alluded to either in reference to one specific story or as a way to allow for various interpretations. One example is when Levi likens the speech to the “blast of a trumpet, like the voice of God.”(113) Here we can refer to the voice of God as the same one who spoke to Noah to warn him of the flood. This reference is significant because though Noah was told that only him and his family would be saved, Noah decided to warn everyone else, eventually to no avail. The power of storytelling is seen continuously in Levi’s testimony as he is the only one who listens to other characters’ stories, well aware that they may not live to tell them themselves. Along with the role of credibility, which Levi shows as a nightmare in his concludes chapter where he fears that no one will believe his recount. Levi revealing his ultimate fear continues to showcase his vulnerability instead of the triumphant ending that was expected.

We can also relate the voice of God to the one present in the Tower of Babel, where God separated the Babylonians by language in order to halt their attempt to reach the heavens. In the similar way that the Germans ensured confusion and discomfort by removing the ease of communication from within the camp. Comparingly, the Germans are likened to God, both possessing the power to scatter a population through fear. Lastly, the voice of God can be seen in Pentecost, as he announces his arrival but also as he anoints his followers with the ability to speak in tongues. Thus creating a language that they all have in common, accompanying their fear of God, where only they can comprehend one another. Similarly, literature was the tool used to relate to more than one testimony, creating a community of suffering and introducing a productive way to cope.

The ways in which the original work of Dante and what Levi can recite from memory are similar is in the way that they both include the image of the mountain top. Furthermore, Levi develops a closer resemblance to the original work when he begins to describe the mountain peak sighted from a distance.(114) Mountain tops are significant in the Bible for many reasons. Among them are; Mount Ararat where Noah rests his ark after the flood, Mount Sinai where Moses received



the Ten Commandments, and Mount Carmel where Elijah calls to God to light a sacrifice on fire to show that he is the one true God.

In a more profound sense, however, the sight of the mountain top was that of Purgatory. Purgatory being defined as the intermediate state in which sinners remain before going to heaven. Compared to Limbo, which is permanent, Purgatory infers a purification or cleansing of sin that will eventually result in being accepted to heaven. The state of the camp itself can be defined as a similar temporary suffering, however, it is also possible that viewing the mountain of Purgatory signaled that the pain is not yet over. One must endure a different type of pain in order to consider the relief seen in heaven. This different level of pain is often neglected in traumatic experiences; in reality, the trauma never leaves you, even when the it has passed, the resonance will always remain. The feeling of endurance is seen most in Levi's nightmare which shows that even though he has made it home, he can never forget what he had to endure because it made him who he was, made his books possible and even lead to his own mental destruction. It is even more significant to be able to present this reality because it is not what the audience would have liked to hear but is, in fact, what happens. Therefore, readers are forced to realize and accept the brutal reality and are not given a way to escape Levi's accusatory tone towards the bystander who, consciously or unconsciously, let this happen.

The view of the mountain top along with the sound of the Trumpet, though, would in any biblical story foreshadow the coming of Christ. An arrival, in which, Levi would have needed then more than ever. In the Bible the Second Coming is foretold by, signs of which the existence of Auschwitz has redefined. Here I will detail the signs of the Revelations and correlate them with aspects of times during the Holocaust. The first sign being the emergence of wars, violence, and lawlessness, specifically it is believed that there will be a rise of an aggressive power where an ascendant european union will seek global primacy. Comparingly World War II was the most global war in history, which included the vast majority of the world's most powerful countries and resulted in the deadliest conflict. This same tyrannical rule that Hitler possessed in the invasion of the Soviet Union, was also exercised from within the internment camps, built to impose the greatest amount of pain and suffering. Though there was no clear reasoning there was an obvious hierarchical structure of which whether or not one chose to follow there was no certainty of life beyond the barbed wire fence.

Several other signs include drought, famine, earthquakes and disease epidemics. This is seen continuously from within the internment camps, where the source of most of the prisoners pain is hunger. The scarcity of bread rations also results in the steering away from hierarchy and instead produces the outcome of a secret structure which in turn produces a community of equals, all sharing a growling stomach. The flourishing of diseases can be seen in the various visits that Levi makes to the infirmary. It is important to note that it is from within the infirmary that Levi

discovers the most prevalent secondary characters. Finally faith becoming a matter of life or death, evident in the random chance of survival where the only thing to rely on is faith.

In the beginning, it is evident how much difficulty Levi is having with remembering the specifics of the Canto. However, once he realizes that he needs this back and forth as much as Jean, the audience is presented with a line of communication, that was lacking up until now. Which showcases Levis character development, as the more he encounters people and listens to their stories, he begins to establish stronger relationships and see a reflection of himself in each story. The role of telling a story and being listened to in a place where people have begun to believe the only way to survive is to detach themselves from their surroundings.

By focusing on the words of Dante, Levi is distracting himself from the misery around him. By retelling them to Jean, Levi is unconsciously telling Jean how he feels about the circumstances. This is where the roles are reversed; instead of Levi doing the listening, it is Levi who is being listened to. A dynamic unconsciously created by Levi as he introduced literature to Jean as a way to learn a different language. However, this exchange was not a mere use of time. Jean was allowed to place another language on his utility belt, casting a wider net for interaction and a firmer grasp on communication. Levi benefited by having an excuse to refer to his literature that had been what was keeping him pushing onward.

## L'effetto della Mancanza della Comunicazione in Ginzburg e Levi

L'atto di ascoltare e di essere ascoltati sembra una banalità quando ci pensiamo in quanto parliamo ogni giorno. Ma anche c'è una comparazione di cui dobbiamo essere attenti, la differenza tra parlare e comunicare. La parola "comunicare" viene dalle parole latine "*communis* e comunicare," alcune volte è relazionata con 'comunità,' inferendo l'importanza degli altri nell'atto di condivisione. Ogni società, definita soltanto come gruppo di persone, ha bisogno di buona comunicazione alle base per poter funzionare. Se non conoscono questa differenza vedremmo gente che parla senza dire nulla.

L'effetto della mancanza della comunicazione si può vedere più chiara nei libri di Primo Levi e Natalia Ginzburg. Primo Levi scrive una testimonianza, intitolata *Se Questo è un Uomo*, sulle sue esperienze di essere stato imprigionato ad Auschwitz e utilizza questa piattaforma per mettere in discussione la base di un essere umano. Natalia Ginzburg invece crea un'immagine più intima in *Lessico Familiare*, mostrando gli effetti di non avere comunicazione tra famiglia durante la guerra, un tempo che può essere descritto come traumatico. Attraverso l'analisi di come diversi autori hanno scelto di riflettere su ciò che hanno attraversato, posso aggiungere anche io come ho potuto trovare ragione nelle parole scritte per comprendere le parole che avrebbero dovuto essere dette nella mia casa.

I miei genitori cercavano di mantenere mie sorelle e io sempre nei ruoli di figli, mai potevamo guardarci negli occhi e dire il perché. Creavano una nuvola di ignoranza, mantenevano una routine, sempre la stessa, sempre semplice, ci siamo immersi nel comfort. Innocentemente pensavano che questo aiutava, però mai noi possiamo ignorare quello che ci circondava. Ho potuto capire velocemente che la nostra vita non era simile a quelli degli altri. Ho potuto capire questo la prima volta che la polizia ha sbattuto la porta, quando le sbarre sono state messe sulle finestre, quando dovevamo addormentarci al ritmo degli elicotteri che si libravano sopra di noi. Sì, noi abbiamo capito che succedeva, ma senza la comunicazione mai potevamo cercare la ragione.

In questi momenti quando non potevo capire il perché, cercavo i libri. La libreria era dieci minuti di cammino dalla mia casa e lì era rimasta. Lasciava la mia casa, la mia famiglia e i miei problemi, per vivere nella casa dei personaggi e raggiungere i problemi che loro avevano. Mi piaceva stare seduta sul piano, curva su un libro, determinata a finire in una notte. Cento pagine non era niente. Lo dovevo finire perché se la mia vita non aveva bel fine, questo libro sì lo aveva. Alle fine, tutto era collegato, si poteva sapere come questa scena ha prodotto questo risultato. Ho sempre lasciato lì con un altro strumento nella mia cintura che mi poteva aiutare di più nel cercare la ragione nella mia propria casa.

Nel campo di concentramento, anche Levi ha dovuto cercare modo di sopravvivere per poter rimanere legato alla realtà nel tempo dove non si vedeva fine. Quasi nello stesso modo che io ho cercato i libri per ragione, Levi ha utilizzato *L'Inferno* di Dante per non dimenticare la sua umanità. In un posto in cui l'obiettivo era quello di spogliare una popolazione della sua identità umana. Levi è rimasto legato alla sua memoria della letteratura per fare rivoluzione dove non si poteva vedere. Ma noi come pubblico distante possiamo vederlo nello scontro che ha creato nella mente tra lui e la sua memoria. Levi fa finta di aiutare Jean, "Ecco, attento Pikolo, apri gli orecchi e la mente, ho bisogno che tu capisca..."(143), ma in realtà aiuta se stesso nel processo, "Per un momento, ho dimenticato chi sono e dove sono"(144). Invece di cercare di vedere la ragione dove non può esistere, lui si porta a un'altra dimensione con il canto di Ulisse.

D'altro canto, nelle lacune della comunicazione tra la sua famiglia, Ginzburg riempie le assenze con riferimenti culturali. Non soltanto per poter vedere quello che possono piacere o pensare ma per farvi capire l'influenza della guerra mondiale. Si vede nel modo intimo che scrive il narratore, che anche lei non sa come giustificare la peculiarità che la sua famiglia rappresenta, "Cosa si sussurrassero Terni, la Paola e Mario su quel divano in salotto, io non lo sapevo e non lo so ancora adesso; ma a volte parlavano davvero di Proust"(60). Proust è noto per le sue frasi 'transcontinentali' che contribuiscono alla apparenza di una trama immobile, questo scopre il modo in cui la famiglia sceglie di nascondersi dal cambiamento generale. Si dice della madre, un personaggio veramente vivace, "mia madre non amava molto a Baudelaire, il suo poeta era Paul Verlaine"(140). All'opposto, Baudelaire è accreditato coniando il termine "modernità" e ha influenzato Verlaine che evocava sentimenti utilizzando dei suoi ripetuti e la cadenza del verso. Questo aiuta a creare un'immagine della madre che nel romanzo si vede cercando di rimanere pertinente, sempre gelosa quando la sua figlia Paola esce con le sue amiche e non la invitano.

Con la possibilità di sopravvivere, o in un senso più generale, superare, viene legato la responsabilità di raccontare e anche qui possiamo vedere l'importanza di comunicare e di essere ascoltati. Le testimonianze cercano di creare un'immagine della sofferenza non solo personale però invece di un popolo intero che coincidentalmente può anche essere la sofferenza del narratore. Ginzburg crea una distanza tra lei e noi perché vuole che noi possiamo vedere l'effetto della guerra mondiale in un ambiente più intimo, vederlo nella sua famiglia. Si dipinge come personaggio nel libro per creare un punto di riferimento per quello che leggono e possono relazionarsi con lo sviluppo e le riflessioni di lei, "Io ero, a quel tempo, una bambina piccola; e non avevo che un vago ricordo di Palermo, mia città natale... Mi immaginavo però di soffrire anch'io della nostalgia..."(25). Per il resto del libro vediamo il narratore come persona oggettiva, senza bisogno di bugie perché non ci sono relazioni personali tra lei e loro, conseguentemente creando una possibilità più ampia di credibilità. La prima volta che possiamo inferire che Ginzburg è il narratore è quando dice, "Mi sposai, e immediatamente dopo che mi ero sposato mio padre diceva, parlando di me con estranei: <<mia figlia Ginzburg>>"(128). In

questa istanza è più pertinente il ruolo della donna in relazione agli uomini nel libro, di cui parleremo dopo.

Levi, per creare credibilità, non sceglie di portarsi alla frontiera dello sviluppo, tutti invece contribuiscono all'immagine totale della esperienza nel campo di concentramento attraverso gli occhi degli altri prigionieri. Essendo il proposito del Lager quello di togliere una comunità della sua umanità, bisognava che i prigionieri creassero una silenziosa struttura sociale tra loro. Questo incluso scambio delle lingue e un'accettazione che c'era bisogno di tutti per sopravvivere. Mentre i nazisti cercavano di utilizzare le lingue come modo di divisione tra il popolo, integrando la diversità nel loro lavoro, "La Torre del Carbuio, che sorge in mezzo alla Buna... siamo noi che l'abbiamo costruita. I suoi mattoni sono stati chiamati *Ziegel, briques, tegula, cegli, kamenny, bricks, teglak*, e l'odio li ha cementati; l'odio e la discordia, come la Torre di Babele..." (90). Con tante lingue bisognava cercare una base fondamentale per avere un livello di compressione più alta e conseguentemente perdere o lasciare l'originalità di ogni lingua nello stesso modo di cui i prigionieri erano trattati. Allo stesso modo quella struttura interna bisognava che tutti accettassero il valore portati a ogni cosa per poter scambiare uno con l'altro. Questo creava una fedeltà umana dove la sopravvivenza di uno dipendeva di quello che aveva capito o acquisito l'altro e per questo la sofferenza comune si lega alla realtà fuori dal filo spinato.

Entrambi Levi e Ginzburg mostrano come c'è bisogno di compassione o comprensione di una persona che sa della stessa esperienza. Dove non rimane questo bisogno di spiegare perché lei già lo sa. Con questo, aggiungo il personaggio della mia sorella maggiore per mostrare la comunicazione senza parole. Anche per noi bisognava creare una struttura interna, separata a quella di famiglia. Lei non era semplicemente mia sorella però era mia alleata nella guerra di casa. Collegato alla struttura abbiamo creato segni specifici che solo noi come soldati possiamo capire. Alcune volte lei correva nella nostra camera, a corto di respiro, mi fissava e velocemente io potevo capire quello che dovevo fare per aiutarla.

Non può esistere un'identità isolata, c'è bisogno anche dei racconti degli altri. Con questo in mente, Ginzburg ha scelto di creare un punto di riferimento per il suo pubblico invece di mostrare un effetto distante dove il pubblico solo può sentire simpatia e non compassione. Ginzburg presenta una famiglia comune e le differenze si vedono nel cambiamento della guerra, questo aiuta perché il pubblico può pensare a come reagirebbero loro e non soltanto "poveri loro." Due personaggi in cui possiamo vedere come la guerra ha potuto mirare alle ideologie tradizionali e nei genitori. Il padre, sempre nel ruolo di uomo autorevole, era legato a quello che conosceva, "Mio padre invece usava gettare sulle cose nuove, che non conosceva, uno sguardo torvo e pieno di sospetto" (54). D'altro canto il pubblico ha di fronte a sé anche un personaggio vivace e ottimistico, "Mia madre non aveva scelto né l'uno né l'altro di quei due mondi, ma abitava un po' nell'uno e un po' nell'altro, e nell'uno e nell'altro stava con gioia" (53). Questo mostra la fluidità del cambiamento che non si può seguire senza personaggi con cui relazionarsi.

Levi utilizza un modo di narrare quasi simile, dove crea un'immagine di se stesso negli occhi degli altri prigionieri. L'effetto si vede in come lui cambia il pensiero basato su con chi parla, mostrando il bisogno degli altri per combattere il proprio pensiero e conseguentemente solidificarlo. Lui introduce ogni personaggio con questo obiettivo in mente, "Ho scordato ormai, e me ne duole, le sue parole diritte e chiare, le parole del già sergente Steinlauf dell'esercito austro-ungarico... il suo discorso pieno di buon soldato..."(48). Nel parlare con Steinlauf, lui ha potuto capire che per poter sopravvivere c'è il bisogno di voler sopravvivere. E in questo, mentre traduce per Steinlauf, che può formulare il pensiero che lo guida nel Lager. Dopo, nel capitolo che distingue la differenza tra i sommersi e i salvati, Levi introduce Elias, "In Lager, Elias prospera e trionfa... per chi non sappia trarre dalla conoscenza di sé la forza necessaria per ancorarsi alla vita... alla bestialità subdola"(123). Quando inizia ad analizzare le azioni di Elias, comincia anche a capire la struttura interna e dopo capisce che deve anche cercare il suo posto nella struttura che gli altri prigionieri hanno creato.

Io stavo seduta nel mio letto, innocente, senza poter sapere quello che stesse per accadere. Vedo mia sorella, terrore nei suoi occhi, e dopo ascolto i passi pesanti di mio padre, non così lontano. Sapevo che avevo due opzioni, potevo scendere dal letto e aiutarla a combattere o potevo creare per lei una via di fuga. Con ogni scelta che potevo fare, mi stavo mettendo a rischio anch'io. Nei due secondi che servivano a lei per guardarmi, dovevo fare una scelta. Ho scelto, come buon soldato, di distrarre nostro padre, per darle tempo per correre al nostro posto di salvataggio, che avevamo coordinato molto tempo fa. Sapevo che appena nostro padre dimenticava perché la stava inseguendo in primo luogo, la potevo io incontrare lì, lei mi aspettava con freddo e rabbia, "posso rientrare?" Il nostro padre utilizzava la violenza, esasperantemente, come modo di comunicare.

Ma ogni caso si deve giudicare avendo tutta l'atmosfera in mente. Nel Lager, la violenza era utilizzata invece di avere comunicazione con i prigionieri. Non erano solo disumanizzati fisicamente però anche psicologicamente; erano forzati a tagliarsi i capelli, indossare gli stessi vecchi vestiti e lavoravano senza fermarsi, tutto questo senza giustificazione. Loro hanno dovuto ragionare tra loro, cercando il perché in ogni cosa che dovevano fare, "E allora perché ci fanno stare in piedi, e non ci danno da bere, e nessuno ci spiega niente, e non abbiamo nè scarpe nè vestiti ma siamo tutti nudi coi piedi nell'acqua, e fa freddo..."(25). In questo caso, la violenza era un modo di dire "tu sei sotto di me." I nazisti hanno utilizzato diversi modi per far capire la stessa dinamica. D'altro canto hanno anche utilizzato il proprio linguaggio come arma per distruggere la loro identità, "La confusione delle lingue è una componente fondamentale del modo di vivere di quaggiù; si è circondati da una perpetua Babele, in cui tutti urlano ordini e minacce in lingue mai prima udite, e guai a chi non afferra a volo"(44). La Torre di Babele è un simbolo importante che viene integrato nello sviluppo più d'una volta. In questo istante e per modo di paragonare la divisione che Dio ha fatto con i babilonesi e la divisione che i nazisti

hanno fatto con i prigionieri. Possiamo dire che Dio l'ha fatto per fermare l'unificazione della gente che poteva risultare in ottenere potere allo stesso livello di Lui. Mentre i nazisti, visti qui come un potere onnisciente, l'hanno fatto per lasciare altro ostacolo nella comprensione della realtà dei prigionieri.

Mentre la testimonianza di Levi mostra come la violenza può essere utilizzata come modo di comunicazione, questo non si può dire per il libro di Ginzburg. Anche a volte vediamo il personaggio del padre frustrato con le decisioni della sua famiglia, mai è aggressivo e invece vede la forza nelle sue parole. Quello che Ginzburg porta alla tavola invece è la prospettiva femminile. Parlando del padre, possiamo vedere il suo impatto nella vita delle sue figlie e come la sua opinione effettua quello che fanno. Anche come questo stesso effetto è stato portato al marito, "Mia sorella, appena sposata, si tagliò i capelli; e mio padre non disse niente, perché ormai non poteva dire niente..."(80). Questo mostra come le donne hanno bisogno di una approvazione maschile per poter fare quello che vogliono fare; questa approvazione porta alle donne un senso di sicurezza che non permette di vedere come sono state sottomesse. D'altro canto Ginzburg anche mostra come i ruoli possono essere invertiti. Utilizza il modo di Balbo di crescere i suoi figli come esempio, "Balbo cercava di insegnare ai suoi figli una cosa che sapeva bene... e lui non voleva offrire ai suoi figli giudizi già formulati"(201). E sceglie di paragonare quello di Lisetta per creare un'immagine delle due estremità, "Non appena i suoi figli cominciarono a ragionare, lei entrò subito polemica anche con loro..."(194). Tradizionalmente le donne sono riconosciute come buone mamme, ma in questo caso Balbo è il buon esempio. Secondo me Ginzburg sceglie di fare questa comparazione per mettere in dubbio le definizioni dei ruoli tradizionali di genere.

Inoltre, i modi di cui Ginzburg e Levi differiscono sono nel modo in cui interpretano la definizione di comunità. La famiglia di Ginzburg crea un linguaggio tra loro che solo quelli che sono nella famiglia possono capire, "quelle frasi sono il nostro latino, il vocabolario dei nostri giorni andati, ... quelle frasi sono il fondamento della nostra unità familiare, che sussiste invece saremo al mondo ricreando e riuscendo nei punti più diversi della terra"(22). Mentre nel Lager, il sapere un'altra lingua oltre alla tua lingua nativa, aiutava a sopravvivere perché dava una prospettiva diversa con cui interpretare ciò che veniva detto. Questo si vede in come Levi ha voluto insegnare a Jean l'italiano anche se già sapeva tedesco e francese, mostra come uno deve voler essere capito e poter capire. Allo stesso modo, ho potuto io imparare l'italiano per accompagnarlo allo spagnolo e l'inglese per poter darmi un'altra prospettiva per raggiungere meglio la vita.