

Chingonas

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DISSERTATION

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CV

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SUMMARY

Chingonas (Spanish for “badass” women) is a collection of creative nonfiction essays about women from different parts of the world who are complex, strong, disappointing, triumphant, memorable. It mixes Chicana, feminist, memoir, and travel writing. Some of the essays are short and about one woman; others find common threads through the lives of several women. Through story, it pays tribute to the women we sometimes render invisible: prostitutes, orphans, the dead. In the essays, I explore in-betweenness, or *nepantla*, and how it manifests in spaces, places, and identities.

One essay profiles Mexican singer, Chavela Vargas. Another weaves the stories of a dead artist, an old Mexican pianist, a Kenyan orphan, and me, the Chicana narrator; I thread our stories together and try to illustrate the idea that all stories produce ripples in this world that are felt by others. While the collection does include some stories of well-known women, it mostly tells my personal story along with the stories of “average” women because I want to illustrate the everyday Chingona to elevate the ordinary struggles and triumphs to which many of us can relate.

Chavela

An earlier version of this essay was first published in *Oyez Review* under the title “Chingona.”

Chavela Vargas is to some Mexicans what Édith Piaf is to France. She is called “la voz áspera de la ternura,” *the rough voice of tenderness*. She was a queer alcoholic who, when she was younger, dressed like a man and carried a gun. *When you want to cry*, she croons, *think of me*. So many of her songs, whether they’re about love, heartbreak, or death, end the same way: tan tan. Lots of Mexican songs do. It’s such a well-known fact among Mexicans that we use it all the time, whenever something ends, like a relationship, or when the last guest leaves a party, or when your mom is done scolding you she’ll say, “tan tan,” and then send you away because the scolding, like the song, is over. Although many of her songs end the same way, it’s what Chavela does in the middle that hits you in the gut. In the middle she sings slowly, with spooky guitar plucking, and she belts out her heart so raw that sometimes she sounds like an angry dog fighting for the last bone. She drags out every sad, strangled word in such a way that it makes you think twice about happiness, makes you think maybe you’d rather grab a bottle of tequila and sit in a poorly-lit room and think hard about all the things that never were. She sings beautifully tormented words making sorrow seem so attractive. She is honest, and she is shameless, and she is proud of her pain. You listen in awe and you wonder who she is, where she came from, and what she’s been through to make her sing like that. Strong like that.

You Are Here

A portion of this essay was first published in *Oyez Review* under the title “Tampico.”

The stories of our ancestors adorn ancient caves all over the world. Chauvet Cave in France has lions, rhinos, and deer painted on its walls from over thirty thousand years ago. A 70,000-year-old block of ochre was found in Blombos Cave in South Africa; it has mysterious geometric shapes carved into it. In Argentina, Cueva de las Manos is filled with stenciled scarlet hands. Some of the outlines of the splayed fingertips have faded, and some are blood red. Each frozen outstretched hand looks like the helpless last goodbye of someone drowning: their legs no longer kicking and their lungs full of water, but their hand raised in an attempt to say to the world, “I was here,” before their body sinks into the sea—their flesh to be picked away by the fish and their bones scrubbed to dust.

The animals, the shapes, the hands—what were the stories behind this art?

Animals, shapes, hands.

Flags on the moon, dates carved into drying sidewalk cement, engravings on tombstones.

Were those folks in caves—thousands and thousands of years ago—trying to say anything different than the kid who spray paints Bob Marley under some crumbling viaduct? Or the couple who carves their names, separated by a heart, into a tree? Or the person who simply writes with a marker on a bathroom stall door, “So-and-so was here”?

All these signs, these stories we leave behind, are perhaps lifelines thrown out into the world with hopes that someone someday, minutes or decades or millennia away, will feel *something* and know that we were here.

Seventy-some-odd years ago, a broken Mexican artist threw out one of these lifelines and I was there the moment my aunt caught it.

Frida Kahlo's self-portrait, *La Columna Rota*, hangs in her blue house in Coyoacán. In the painting, there are over three dozen nails impaling her naked body, a white column splits her torso in half, she wears a body cast to keep from breaking, and there are tears streaming down her face. The painting is the story of the bus handrail that ripped through her body when she was a teenager. The bus had crashed, the handrail entered her back and came out through her vagina; gold dust from an artisan's pouch sprinkled her body as she lay there bleeding. Since then, Frida spent years in bed, in body casts, in hospitals having operation after operation, taking medications to try to numb the constant physical pain. Later, she lost a leg and every child she tried to have. She had a drinking problem and a husband who cheated on her all the time. She was always in pain, always breaking, inside and out. But in this painting, through all her agony, she stands firm, displaying her shattered body without shame. Her arms are at her sides, her chest is bare, and though she has eight nails piercing her face and fourteen teardrops rolling down her cheeks, her brown eyes are unflinching, steady, as if to say, "I may be broken, but I am still here."

Frida's paintings are stories. More than anything, she painted herself: Frida in a suit with most of her hair cut off, Frida on her wedding day, Frida holding hands with Frida, Frida lying in her bed that is floating in the clear blue sky. Though many described her work as surreal, she explained that her work was her reality, the reality of the person she knew best: herself. Each one of these paintings was a way to put down how she felt, how she saw herself. They are stories she told of her sorrow and of her spirit.

Each person does it differently but telling stories to understand ourselves and our lives is something we do all the time. That's all I think Frida was ever trying to do. Because how pointless it all would have seemed—all those casts, all her pain—if she hadn't painted it into a picture, into a story.

I went to Frida's blue house some years ago with my aunt, my Tía Irene. Nobody knows where Irene's house is; we just know she lives in Veracruz, hundreds of miles away from the rest of the family. Nobody has her phone number; they only know that she works at the Cultural Center, so if there's ever an emergency, they leave a message there. She doesn't want the rest of the family to get in touch or know where she lives because she is embarrassed of how poor she is, and she is ashamed of her alcoholic boyfriend who beats her. At least that's what my mother has told me. I've heard my aunts talk about how Irene shuts off if they bring it up, if they ask her about home. They say she never says a word about it, that she just shakes her head or looks away until they change the subject. My mother only sees her sisters every few years, but Irene doesn't always show up. She tells me whenever she sees Irene, she slips money into her pockets when they say goodbye. They never talk about it. They never talk about a lot. There's a story everybody knows about Irene, but nobody brings it up around her.

The story is this.

Irene used to be in a convent in Guadalajara when she was young. Shortly before she was to take her vows, she left the convent and went to Mexico City and became a prostitute. Nobody heard from her for several years. They say she had two children and gave them to a friend to raise.

My family hardly sees Irene. I'd mostly just heard the story about her sad life from my other aunts and my mom, but I didn't really know her. That's why I went to visit her; I didn't want to think of this woman, my blood, as a sad, old, chain-smoking woman who lives with an abusive man. There had to be more to the story.

There was.

We met at the Veracruz Cultural Center where she teaches piano to teenagers. She looked like a much older version of my mother: dark and wrinkled with a husky cigarette voice. I sat in on one of the lessons. I was surprised to watch her with her student. I only knew what I'd heard, and I suppose I expected to see evidence of her hard life on her face or how she acted, but as she held her hands over the keys, pointed out finger placement to her pupil, and sat straight backed with pride as she played a tune before he repeated, all I really saw was a musician. When the lesson was over, the student gave Irene a kiss on her cheek and she called him "son."

After the lesson, we caught a bus to Mexico City. On the way, she told me stories of when she was young. How she believed the stars were made of ice and that's why the night was colder than the day; naturally, she thought that rain was the stars melting. She laughed then, at her naivety. Her laugh was throaty and deep and joyful.

She told me that while her sisters were interested in boys, dating, and gossip when they were young, she only wanted to spend time with the piano. She talked about her piano composer father, a grandfather I never knew. She said she couldn't remember a day he didn't play the piano. How she loved watching him walk in circles, waving his hands about and humming, constantly composing in his head. Out of seven sisters, she was the only one who picked it up. He was a chain smoker and an alcoholic, she told me, but he had a good heart. And when he was on his death bed, much too young to die, she said she couldn't believe how many musicians

filled their home. “Everybody loved him. Everybody wanted to say goodbye. Everybody wanted to play for him.” She said when she plays, she plays for him.

She never once mentioned the children she abandoned or the abusive man she lived with or the convent or her prostitution.

When we walked into Frida’s blue house Irene glided her boney fingers along the rough blue walls. We walked up the stones steps and saw *La Columna Rota* and stood there, staring. After some moments I looked over and saw that she was crying. No handrail had ever ripped through my aunt, and she never had to be put in a body cast, but, like Frida, she knew pain; she knew the feeling of breaking inside.

Don’t we all?

Once a story is told, once that lifeline is thrown out into the world, it no longer belongs to just the storyteller. It belongs to whoever hears it. And it can mean whatever that person wants it to mean. And if that person tells it, it won’t be in the same way it was told to them. And whoever that person tells it to can make whatever out of it they want to. And so on and so on and so on.

What I’m saying is: Irene wasn’t crying about any bus crash.

I took her hand in mine as her tears fell. Neither of us spoke. We just stood there quietly holding hands, looking to Frida. I thought about Irene’s silence, not just in this moment but always. How she never talked about the hard things: leaving the convent, the prostitution, poverty, the abusive man, her kids. Maybe they were too hard to talk about, maybe she just wanted to keep it to herself, maybe the stories were only half true, maybe the pain lived in her but she didn’t want to live in pain, so she put it somewhere else. I can’t know for sure, and at that moment, I didn’t want to know. I felt no curiosity, I had no questions. All I felt was thankful that

Frida put this piece into the world. Whatever Irene couldn't or didn't want to say, Frida said it for her in that piece.

Irene exhaled, swiped the tears from her face, squeezed my hand twice, and smiled at me before we continued our walk through Frida's blue house. We pointed out pieces we liked, read bits from her diary, admired the old painted body casts, and sat in the shade in the garden. Later, we visited the Pyramids of the Moon and Sun, listened to street musicians, drank soda out of plastic bags, and shared cigarettes on our hotel terrace as day faded and stars poked holes in the sky.

The next day, we took a bus back in Veracruz and returned to the Cultural Center, to the auditorium where there was a piano on the stage. She took a seat at the bench, and as she played, teenagers, one by one, quietly filled the seats. The auditorium was small, and Irene was wearing jeans and a raggedy yellow shirt, but we listened like we were in a great hall watching a master. Next to me, a boy put his arm around the girl beside him, and she tilted her head onto his shoulder. When Irene finished, the kids clapped and I did too. They shook her hands warmly, kissed her cheeks, and thanked their Doña Irene.

I couldn't help wondering: Had anyone else in our family seen Irene like this? If they had, would they keep telling those sad stories about her, some of which were decades old? According to all my other aunts, those were the stories that defined her. This is who she was, and the piano playing was only ever a side note. I think at first I had wanted to hear about those old stories; I think I wanted to know what she thought of them, how she processed it all. But so many moments—Frida's blue house, watching her play piano, seeing her so loved by her students—made me realize it didn't matter. The few days I spent with her were mostly filled with beautiful stories and music, and that's the story she wanted to share with me. Maybe that's

why she was silent when her sisters asked about the past, maybe that's why she moved so far from them: to give herself space to make new stories.

Irene died in 2019. I couldn't afford to go to the funeral, but I wanted to do something to honor her in some way. I'd taken some short videos of her playing the piano; I uploaded a couple online so they could be played at her wake. They were the only videos that were ever taken of her playing. One of the songs was an original composition that she wrote in memory of her father. At the end, right after she strikes the last key, she stands up with a big smile on her face and playfully claps for herself.

It's a part of Irene's story I hope endures.

The hard things that happen to us, the choices we make, the way we present or don't present these tales to the world: we're all storytellers, constantly writing, constantly editing, always becoming. Frida made art of her pain; Irene never talked about hers. I hold these women in my mind and think about a trauma in my own life; if ever I spoke about it, I skipped over the ugly parts and highlighted the empowering ending. But who do I become if I tell the whole story?

Here is the story that I never told.

I once rented a cheap apartment in Tampico. Victor lived in the apartment across from mine; he seemed nice. He was a firefighter, and he liked the Bulls, my hometown basketball team. We became friends and would go out dancing or sit on the stairs, smoking and drinking. One day, Victor invited me over for some beers. We drank and listened to music for hours.

Drunk and sleepy, I told him I was heading back home. He said he wanted to show me something first. He tried kissing me and, because I didn't want to be rude, I giggled and pulled away, gently at first then with all my might. I felt like I said no hundreds of times. He was on top of me and when I realized he had all his clothes off I felt like I'd come out of my body, like I was watching it on some stupid show. He was pulling my clothes off and I was trying to pull them back on, but he was bigger than me. He had a nasty cut just over his left shoulder that had recently been stitched up. It was protruding, red and raw. I kept looking at it. It's the only thing I remember clearly.

Things had happened so fast and it was hard for my brain to keep up with my body until I was out of the apartment. Then, standing right outside his door, it all slowed down and I noticed everything: garbled voices in an apartment downstairs, the sound of a crushed soda can scraping across the ground, the shape of blackened gum at my feet, a faint breeze, the smell of burning trash in the distance. Everything was too close and too much.

I felt my legs working again, somehow, and I slowly walked the twenty feet between his door and mine. I glanced down toward the parking lot—we lived on the fourth floor—and saw the most beautiful little girl I'd ever seen in my life. She must have been nine years old. She was all lit up by intense streetlights. She was cutting through my building's parking lot to the fenced shanty town she lived in. She had on a thin-strapped orange dress. She had pretty brown skin. Her orange dress had little yellow and blue flowers on it. I think they were flowers, but maybe they were butterflies. Her dark hair hung loose, damaged by the sun. The dress fell a little below her knees. Old black dusty sandals. She had two one-liter bottles of water. She carried them home in one arm, her left arm. When she was walking a sandal came off. She put it back on with the help of her other foot. I couldn't stop staring at her. She was so beautiful. Her dad—I think it

was her dad—he let her in through a tear in the fence. She slipped in, the girl in the orange dress with the two one-liter bottles of water. I think her dad saw me staring at her. For a split second, I could understand how it is that a man might want to assault a woman. I wondered what went on in Victor’s head when he was on top of me. He never looked in my eyes. That girl, I wanted to spit in her face. I walked into my apartment, locked the door, crumbled onto my mattress, and didn’t move for days.

Here is the story that I have often told.

I was a teacher with the Peace Corps for a couple of years in Oshekasheka Village in Namibia. It was Christmas break, so me and my friend, Devon, another volunteer, decided to hitchhike, bus, and train up to Kenya. We didn’t have solid plans for the trip, we didn’t have visas for the countries we’d enter, and we didn’t have a lot of money; we basically threw our backpacks on and figured it out along the way. We caught several rides with truckers on long hauls. We got stuck for hours with one trucker, Mario, at a checkpoint in Zambia; we sang songs together and entertained ourselves with his small stash of Disney movies. We met volunteers from Peace Corps South Africa on a train, and Devon used her sewing kit to mend a tear one volunteer’s pants. In Dar es Salaam, we chatted with a street vendor who’d studied for years in the states. We spent hours walking along roads, waiting for hikes along roads, talking along roads.

In Nairobi, we were eating lunch in a crowded café when a stranger introduced himself and asked to join us since there was nowhere else to sit. His name was Boniface. He told us he was from Kenya but lived in the states now where his job and wife were. When we told him that we were volunteer teachers in Namibia, his face lit up. Boniface excitedly told us about Light of

Hope, an orphanage he founded for abused and neglected girls in Naivasha, just an hour or two away from Nairobi. He asked if we'd like to visit the girls and hang out with them for a day or two since their teachers were away for the holiday. I don't even think Boniface got out the entire question before me and Devon said yes. So many people had been kind to us along the way, it felt good to be asked to do something. The three of us beamed at each other between sips of steaming coffee, and every word that tumbled out of our mouths seemed to carry with it an emotion we couldn't quite articulate at the time: I'm so glad you exist.

At Light of Hope, we spent the morning removing dry corn from cobs by hand for hours; we sat on a giant tarp with some of the girls working, talking. At first, because we were all strangers and because me and Devon were adults and they were children, our words came slowly, but as the sun moved across the sky, our words came easier and laughter came more frequently. Later, we sang songs and played games together; I taught them how to sing "La Bamba," and Devon played Simon Says with them. At night, we all slept in a large dormitory; I'd never before fallen asleep to so much giggling and farting.

The next day went a lot like the first. But after dinner in the evening, one of the girls asked if we could tell stories. So, we lit candles, gathered crossed legged on the floor, and shared our stories.

One girl, Ruth, told of how she lost her parents.

"My mother was at the river washing clothes and was shot because of clashes. War. And my father, they said he was a thief, but he was not a thief. They killed him. I was alone, but then I came to Light of Hope and—" Another girl cut her off, "And you became beautiful!"

All the girls perked up, nodded, agreed that she was beautiful.

Ruth smiled and sat a little straighter, a little more sure of herself.

And you became beautiful!

Nobody had to say it out loud; we all understood it wasn't a surface beauty she meant. She meant the beautiful that happens through nurturing. When Ruth arrived at Light of Hope, she wasn't alone anymore, she was welcomed, loved, listened to, accepted. She was seen. The girls weren't just bunkmates, they were sisters, and threading their lives together made them all stronger: beautiful.

Four words: *And you became beautiful!*

Words can bring people to life. Even the smallest of words can work magic.

I believe in the magic of words so much that I walk around with one all the time. My left arm, from the shoulder to the wrist, is tattooed, covered with gray and black flowers. Hidden in this garden is a word that saved my life.

The girls at Light of Hope asked me to tell them about my tattoo. I told them that I always thought flowers were so pretty and I believed that if I put something pretty on me, I could become pretty. I showed them how the word *sway* was hidden in the tattoo. I told them that once, a man who I thought was my friend hurt me. How I felt ugly and dead inside after he hurt me. How I lay in bed for days, not eating or sleeping. But how, after four or five days, I heard this beautiful song come in through the window and I got up and walked outside. I looked up at the stars and, before I even realized it, I was moving, swaying to the music. And I started to cry because I realized that as long as music moved me, as long as I could sway, I was still alive. I was still here.

The girls clapped and said it was a good story.

It is a good story.

It's my best story.

Sometimes there are crashes and clashes and war. Sometimes we give up on ourselves and lose our ways. Sometimes we lose our children or our parents. Sometimes we get hurt so bad we don't want to feel anything at all. And sometimes entire civilizations crumble and all we have left are their symbols, their stories.

When we share our stories, we share our lives.

And though many stories say the same thing, not one of them says it in the same way.

Nobody can play the piano like my Tía Irene. Nobody can do a painting like Frida Kahlo. Nobody can tell stories like the girls at Light of Hope. Nobody can sway like me. And no two handprints in Cueva de las Manos are the same.

What is your story? The good and the hard.

Put it in a song. Sing it at a party. Take a picture of it. Create a mural. Dip your hand in paint and touch something solid. Write a play. Make a movie. Get a tattoo. Plant a tree, and then carve your sweetheart's name in it.

Make it your best story.

Because you survived.

You were here.

You are still here.

You will always be here.

Blip

In 2009, Vintage Books released Christopher McDougall's *Born to Run: A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, and the Greatest Race the World Has Never Seen*. It sold millions of copies, influenced running footwear, and five years ago *The Guardian* reported that a movie was in the works and Matthew McConaughey would star in it. The book is a few hundred pages and it's a pretty good read, but there is one single sentence about one nameless woman that has stuck with me over a decade after reading it.

Born to Run is a nonfiction book about running and runners. McDougall injured himself by running too much, so he went to a bunch of doctors and experts to figure out a better method of running and to find a shoe that would allow him to keep running without getting hurt. This led him to eventually find out about the Tarahumara, an indigenous group of people from Chihuahua, Mexico; they live deep in Copper Canyon and are known for endurance running. They run in sandals and can run for days.

The stunning sentence is about a Tarahumara woman. When I read it, I looked at the bottom of the page for a footnote. Nothing. I turned to the back of the book. No index, no endnotes, nothing more about this woman. I read the acknowledgements page. The woman is not named. No Tarahumara is named. The white runners are named. The folks at *Men's Health* magazine and *Runner's World* are named. Editors, friends, the wife: all are named. The Tarahumara get two sentences; they are described as "rare and wonderful," like artifacts in a museum.

The book goes into great detail about the kinds of different running shoes, the marketing of shoes, how some running shoes can actually promote injury, and it also explores the idea that barefoot running might be better. It dips into the lives of American and Tarahumara runners. If

there is a main character, it would be “Caballo Blanco,” a white American runner who met some Tarahumara runners in an endurance race in the states. To make money on the backs of the Tarahumara, an American promoter brought a few of them to the states and had them wear some name brand shoes in a race. That’s where Caballo Blanco first met the Tarahumara. He ended up going back with them to Mexico and lived the rest of his life in the Copper Canyons, welcomed, fed, and cared about by the locals in nearby towns. He started an annual 50-mile race where runners from all over the world come to run alongside the Tarahumara. *Born to Run* tells the story of the first group—just a handful of people—who participated in what would become this annual event. It’s not in the book, but when Caballo Blanco died, the 50-mile race was officially renamed after him: Ultramarathon Caballo Blanco. Truly, it’s a heartening story: a man feels a connection with strangers, follows them to their country, renames and reinvents himself, is accepted in this new place, brings what eventually becomes thousands of people to this new place, and builds a fulfilling life.

To journey into the unknown: what an adventurous spirit.

“In 1983, a Tarahumara woman in her swirling native skirts was discovered wandering the streets of a town in Kansas; she spent the next twelve years in an insane asylum before a social worker finally realized she was speaking a lost language, not gibberish” (28).

Truly, it’s a heartbreaking story: a woman goes for a run, finds herself in a new country, is labeled insane because she looks and speaks differently, is locked up and separated from the rest of the world, and has her whole life stomped out for twelve years.

To journey into the unknown: what did she think was going to happen?

No way, I thought. No way does McDougall drop a line like that and move on. The book goes on for another 250 pages; the woman is never mentioned again. A blink-and-you-miss-it moment, like a blip on a radar screen, there and then gone. Gone so fast you wonder if it was ever even there to begin with. Gone so fast you wonder if it ever even mattered. Gone so fast you forget it before you can even really wonder much at all.

The day I read about her, I googled “lost Tarahumara woman,” “Tarahumara in Kansas,” “lost Mexican in Kansas,” “insane running woman in Kansas,” and several more variations. Mexican restaurants came up, info on upcoming runs and marathons, and something about the Insane Clown Posse, but I found nothing on the woman.

There was no source material and no name, so I wondered if McDougall just made her up. I considered writing to him or his publisher to find out more about her. When I thought of what the letter would say, though, the idea fizzled. For what purpose would I say I wanted to know about her? Why did I care? I was a 20-something-year-old who just wanted to know her story. I wasn’t an anthropologist, I wasn’t conducting any research, I couldn’t speak her language. I just wanted to know, and that didn’t seem important enough. So, I put it out of my mind. I’d still google her every now and again, knowing I wouldn’t find anything but always hoping. After a few years, I gave up completely.

A few months ago, I was at my bank where they set up a little community book exchange table; you could take a book, leave a book, return the book you took, pass it along to someone else, etc. I saw *Born to Run* on the table. I picked it up and turned to that sentence, as if more would be uncovered, as if this time her name and her story would be revealed. No such luck.

Though I knew it would lead to nothing like it had years before, when I got home, I googled variations of “lost indigenous woman in Kansas.” I cannot remember what combination of words I strung together, but I finally found her.

Rita Patino Quintero Carillo. Her name was Rita.

She ended up suing Larned State Hospital and several doctors there. A 2000 court filing explains,

While Ms. Quintero was at Larned, psychotropic medications were administered to her, which she alleges was against her will. Eventually, she developed tardive dyskinesia, a condition that often results from long-term treatment with psychotropic medication. It is characterized by involuntary movements of the face, shuffling gait and other symptoms.

In 1983, the Mexican Consulate in Salt Lake City informed Larned personnel that Ms. Quintero matched the description of a Tarahumara Indian from Mexico. The information was placed in Ms. Quintero’s file but no effort was made to tailor her treatment to her culture or to return her to Mexico.

They made her sick. And they knew what tribe she belonged to, but they didn’t do anything.

McDougall must have known her name, but he didn’t name her. I spent the next several hours reading everything I could about Rita. There were fragments of her story scattered online. I’d find out one detail about her and then search about that detail, which led me to more pieces. My face was glued to the computer screen. Why hadn’t I found any of this before? One of the hardest things to wrap my head around was the fact that in the very same year *Born to Run* came out, a play and a documentary came out about Rita.

In 2009, just a few months before the release of McDougall’s book, Teatro Vision, a small theater in San Jose, put on *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky*, the story of Rita Quintero. It was written by Victor Hugo Rascón Banda and directed by Elisa Marina Alvarado, both with roots in Mexico. It got a mediocre review in *The Mercury News*. There are nine pictures on Facebook of the 2009 performance; they show a dark stage, few props, and a screen in the

background with English and Spanish subtitles. In one photo, three men stand over Rita; two are wearing white doctor coats. Rita sits slumped over in a white hospital gown, looking confused and defeated, her feet pointing inward.

About two months after the play, Kathryn Ferguson's documentary, *Rita in the Sky*, premiered at the Arizona International Film Festival; she'd spent 15 years working on it. In a 2012 clip from a Tucson public access show, the host asks Ferguson how someone can watch *Rita in the Sky*; Ferguson says "they can contact me" if they want to see it.

An independent film you had to personally call the director to see, a play that ran for a few weeks at a Latino theater in San Jose, and a dramatic sentence in a bestselling book. It didn't seem fair. Millions of people would only know that one sentence, and only a handful in Arizona and California would know Rita's name and her story. I felt something in the middle of angry and sad, and the more I read, the bigger that feeling grew.

In 2006, McDougall wrote a piece about the Tarahumara for *Men's Health*; he titled it, "The Men Who Live Forever." It opens with McDougall and another man driving through the Copper Canyons; they're on their way to meet the mythic Tarahumara when a sensational and dangerous tale of a near run-in with menacing Mexican drug runners unfolds. McDougall goes on for four paragraphs about all his fears, all the horrible possibilities, the speech he needs to stammer out when these treacherous *narcotraficantes* approach them. A car with tinted windows drove by them is all that happened; nobody stopped them, nobody said a mean word, and nobody tried to kill them, but I suppose a savage Mexico is much more interesting to read about. In her public access interview, Ferguson said she'd often go by herself into the Copper Canyons, a woman alone, and nothing bad ever happened.

I thought about the perceived, almost hoped for, danger McDougall writes about and the actual danger Rita experienced, the actual abuse she endured; I thought about the real people Ferguson traveled alone to interview and learn about and the villains and heroes McDougall romanticizes: perhaps this is why so many of our stories are blips on the radar screen, because the fantasies of men entertain better than the realities of women. What fun it is to see a car with dark windows and imagine all the danger that might lurk inside, and all clever ways you would escape. What incredible discomfort it causes to sit and think about Rita being given medications she didn't need for twelve years, sitting for hours and weeks on end in a room alone, going for over four thousand days without a single person to talk to.

I am certain I'm not the only one who would rather sit with the discomfort, who would take the real over the fantasy. So, let us keep our eyes peeled for the blips in books, art, songs, life, the blink-and-you-miss-them moments that shout for our attention, because maybe they're signals from women trying to be heard.

Mexican Archaeology

Thirteen years ago, my father and I went to Mexico in search of two relatives who I'd never met and had long been buried: my grandparents. My grandmother died in the 1930s—when my dad was just a boy—and nobody knew where her grave was. Lucano, my grandfather, died in the 1980s and, for some unknown or long forgotten reason, shared an unmarked tomb with my dad's first wife. To fix these grave mistakes, my father and I rented a car in Guadalajara and drove to Teocuitatlán, the lawless little town where he was born, to find my grandmother, unearth Lucano's grave, and give them both proper headstones.

At the cemetery, Lucano was an easy find. My dad had pictures of the funeral and spotted the gravesite quickly. While two hired men dug up my grandpa, my father and I spoke with the graveyard man. He told us burial records had long ago been burned so he couldn't tell us where to find my grandmother.

"*Burned?*" I blurted out. "Who burned the records?"

The graveyard man ignored my question, then said that there were shattered tombstones all over the place and we were welcome to scour the burial grounds. He walked away with his hands in his pockets, whistling. My dad pointed to the far edge of the cemetery, indicating that's where we should start to look for his mom.

"Did he really say *burned*? Why would anyone burn burial records?" I asked my dad as we stepped over the dead.

"That's just how they did things," my father said. "Someone tried to steal your pig, or land, or woman, you kill him. You don't want someone found, burn the record."

I'd learned when I was a kid that it was no use trying to get my dad to engage in too much conversation. He never chatted on the phone. He didn't have any friends. He didn't hang out in bars or on the front porch like some other dads did. And if we went to a gathering or party, he'd mostly sit alone or with my mom, or he'd walk around slowly, with his hands held together behind his back, looking down at the ground or up to the sky. Most of my *why?* questions resulted in a quiet shrug or an "I don't know, mija." And if he did answer, the few sentences that came out of his mouth were all he'd say about it. Follow-up questions were never entertained.

As a child, I remember him always being angry and abusive. And when the steel mills closed down and we had to go on welfare, he was really angry and more abusive. He would hit us for the smallest things, like laughing too much or spilling a glass of milk. I hated him then. I thought he didn't like me or my mom or my siblings. Now, I just think he was frustrated because we were so poor. It's not something I could have possibly understood at the time, the impotence he must have felt when he couldn't provide for us, when he couldn't even feed us. The spilled milk wasn't just a child's accident, it was money out of his pocket, food out of our bellies; it was a complete and total loss. He wasn't mad at us; he was mad that he couldn't just go buy more milk. He must have felt useless to not be able to do something so simple, and he took it out on us.

We walked the graveyard in silence as I tried to put it together, put him together. "That's just how they did things," he'd said. Someone steals your pig, you kill him. You don't want someone found, you burn the records. You're a dad to three kids, you provide for them. You just do the things you're supposed to do. That's it. Every problem has an obvious solution. And if you can't fix the problem, what else is there to do but be angry. As a girl born in 1980's Chicago,

it's hard to understand the black-and-white upbringing of a 1920's Mexican village kid, even if he was my father.

I tripped over a broken tombstone.

"Careful," my dad said.

We reached the edge of the cemetery. We started at one corner and worked our way along the crumbling rock wall, picking up dusty slabs and bits of stone for some sign that maybe my grandmother was beneath our feet. My dad, in his 70s at the time, grunted as he bent over and lifted stone after stone, pebble after pebble, hoping for the gem that would resurrect his mom. We searched for hours. I knew from the start that we would not find her, but seeing my dad's hands, spotted with age and shaking from exhaustion, I also knew we couldn't stop looking.

"Finish every job you ever start," my father used to tell me. He hated being on welfare, and when he couldn't find a job after the steel mills, he and my mom borrowed money from neighbors, the church, the bank, anywhere they could find, and opened up a small cornmeal and tamale shop. At seven years old, I was their first employee. Work was the center of my dad's life, and he was the head of the family, so it was the center of our lives too. We'd get up at four or five in the morning to stir the nixtamal, start grinding the corn, mixing the lard, soaking the *hoja*, bagging the *chile*. Thanksgiving was work, Mexican Independence Day was work, Christmas was a whole lot of work. We'd work in 13- or 14-hour shifts, scooping thousands of pounds of *masa preparada* into buckets until there were blisters on our hands.

When I think of my family, when I think of my father, I think of work. He was a man who worked. Who didn't know what to do with himself if he wasn't working. Or thinking about work. Or showing his kids how to work. After a little over a decade of our store's opening, when it was clear we were going to be okay, when the bank and the neighbors and the church were all repaid, when there was even some money for college, my dad wasn't so angry anymore. He'd done his job.

I looked over at my dad clearing the dust away from a slab, trying to read the name of the deceased. I knew it wasn't his mom, but I wished so much it could have been. Back home, well into his 70s, my dad would throw 100-pound sacks of corn over his shoulder like nothing. He wasn't a big man, but he'd always seemed like some kind of giant to me. Watching him hopelessly looking for his mom in all the surrounding rubble made him look so small.

As the sun dropped and covered Teocuitatlán in a soft, orange glow, the gravediggers shouted that they'd reached a casket. The filthy, turquoise coffin was deeply rusted along the edges; the men would have to crack it open to make sure we had the right one. With the backs of their shovels, they took turns slamming down on the rusty latches until it creaked open. We all stood silent, staring at Lucano's skeleton.

"That him?" one gravedigger asked.

My father asked for the head. He held it and pointed to each tooth, "One, two, three, four. Yeah, that's him," he said, and then returned his father's skull. It rolled to a corner of the coffin, the jaw pointing skyward.

*

We sat on a rickety bench as the gravediggers packed their gear; tomorrow they'd dig a fresh resting place and erect a tombstone for Lucano. Drained from searching, my father and I slumped on the bench, the sweat drying from our bodies.

"Hey," my dad mumbled, "We ain't gonna find her."

"I know."

"They took her from me." He snapped his fingers, "Just like that."

I heard in his voice a kind of helplessness that was unfamiliar, unsettling. I said nothing in return. I didn't know what to say, but mostly I didn't want to rupture whatever delicate sentiment was brewing. Scared to break it, I tried to not even breathe. I remained as still as the graveyard residents until my father continued.

"She made a pozole. Man. I could be out in the field, milking the cows, shit all around me, but I could still smell her pozole. Nothing like it."

It was a small thing, pozole. They didn't just have cows; they had pigs and chickens, too. Lucano made my dad start working almost as soon as he could walk. My dad, at four or five years old, must have been surrounded by the snorts and stink of pigs, their pooled urine drying in the Mexican heat; the clucking of chickens shuffling in and out of their wire-and-pallet coops, years of their collected waste spotted on the splintered wood; and the mooing of cows as he pulled on their udders, producing the buzzing splash of fresh milk into his bucket. But overpowering all this racket and stench was the pozole. I wondered if the smell his mother's pozole could be that strong. Was it really the smell or was it the idea of this woman, his mamá, working a kind of magic over a pot to feed her son, to show him love. It was a small thing, pozole. But it was mighty.

My father continued, “And she could put Lucano in his place. Nobody could. You didn’t fuck with Lucano. But she was tougher than him even. Worked harder than any man in town.”

I wanted to ask if that was why he worked so hard, to be like his mom, or to make her proud. But I didn’t want to interrupt his thought. I was scared he would stop talking if I spoke.

He sighed heavy.

“She got sick fast. Lost all her weight only in some days. I was maybe five, but I remember. Her eyes, they sunk into her face. Dark. Then Lucano sent me away. My tías took me for a couple weeks. Brought me back. Set me in front of some other woman and said, ‘This is your mother.’ I stared at her. She tried to touch my head, but I stepped back. I said, ‘This is not my mother.’ Lucano hit me. I said it again. ‘This is not my mother.’ They kept telling me it was my mother. But I knew who my mother was, and this was not my mother. Later, when nobody was around, I took my ma’s, my *real* ma’s apron and hid it under a one of the pallet boards in the chicken coop. Lucano never found it. I would take it out sometimes. I could always smell the pozole.”

*

I wonder if my dad ever really thought we’d find his mom, if he truly believed we’d exhume her bones as easily as he did her apron from the pallet board. I wonder if she was the reason he left Mexico in the first place, to run away from the man who disappeared his mother. I wonder if that trip had anything to do with the dead, or if it was just his way of showing his daughter that he wasn’t just a man who worked, that he was once a boy who loved his mom, he was a boy who clung to the smell of her for comfort, he was a boy who had everything taken away from him and he grew into a man who left everything he knew.

I wonder who he would have been had she not disappeared. Would he have been so silent? Would he have been as angry? Could he have laughed easier without the mystery of what happened to his mother? What is the result when one loses the presence, the life, the story of a strong woman?

I think of this single story. This one trauma. The erasure of one woman. The absence in a boy's life, and his soothing himself with her smell. The what-could-have-been is impossible to know, but I'm sure it changed him, (mis)shaped him in ways unknown even to himself. In my mind, I picture my father walking along with threads attached to his back, endless threads. He turns around and pulls the thread that holds his mother's life and her story, but he only finds a frayed end. He doesn't have the words for it, but he senses something wrong; something is missing, someone belongs there, where did she go? He keeps walking, feeling the weight of what isn't there.

I think of this single story. This one trauma. The erasure of one woman. And I scale up. The frayed ends seem incalculable. How many women were there whose threads have been cut from all of us? And what is the result? I wonder if we have all been altered by the stories of women withheld. I wonder if the weight of what's missing will diminish for each story we recover. I wonder how many stories there are that we can never recover. I wonder if we can look back at the frayed ends and still weave lasting threads for the girls ahead.

I wonder if with transgenerational trauma there also comes transgenerational comfort: my dad has been dead for seven years now and my grandmother for almost ninety, but sometimes when a breeze blows in from the south, I swear I can smell her pozole.

Feeding the Family

And with coarsely chiseled logs in their brown hands, my host sisters pounded mahangu. Barefoot and sweating under the thatched roof of the small hut, the girls, six of them, slammed the logs down tenaciously, not letting exhaustion or drippy foreheads stop their rhythm. They stood in pairs on the rough cement, two on either side of the three wide, shallow holes in the floor. As one slammed her log down into the hole half filled with mahangu grains, the other raised her log with both hands as high as she could then slammed her log down. They repeated this motion rapidly and for hours. Slam, slam. Slam, slam. Slam, slam until the grains were a fine powder and ready to cook. The girls swept flying grains and powder back into the holes with their feet.

Grandmother came in, bare-chested, with a big straw basket. She had brightly colored green cloth wrapped around her head like a turban; matching cloth wrapped around her waist, and her black Converse gym shoes were old, laceless, and dusty. She got on her knees, her pendulous breasts swinging freely, and gathered the powder into the basket. Her arms were still firm from years of pounding mahangu. She told me once that mahangu was the oldest thing in the world. "Older than the sun," she said, laughing.

It was an everyday scene during harvest season in Namibia. Harvesting the mahangu, pounding it, storing it, and cooking was all women's work. Mahangu is what everyone ate for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The powder is cooked in water into a porridge and eaten plain. Sometimes it's dipped in a broth for flavor. It can also be fermented into a thick drink.

Invariably, one of the girls would stop pounding, interrupting the rhythm, and halting the other pounders. She would turn and gesture toward several baskets lined against the wall filled with mahangu grains waiting to be pounded. She would ask for a break. Grandmother would

wave the request away like a fly. Stopping would take away too much time and the mahangu needed to be pounded. They couldn't stop, they needed to feed the family.

The "family" wasn't just the people currently living on the homestead; most of my host siblings weren't related. They were friends, visitors, children of parents who had to go to town for work. Family was anyone who was around at the time. Family was anyone walking by who might see the fire and ask to eat. With an unknowable number of mouths to feed, Grandmother never let the girls take breaks.

When the girls would finally finish, they would flex to see who was the strongest.

Jinx

I meant to destroy my opponent when attempting a flying sidekick with my eyes closed; I was standing on the back of the couch, the highest part, when I took to the air. In my mind, I could sense his every move, I was one with the space around me, I would soar gracefully into the sky, and I would annihilate him when my ninja foot met his lizard face.

I was five years old in the summer of 1987 and *G.I. Joe: The Movie* had just introduced me to the bravest, most badass woman I'd ever seen on television: Jinx. In the film, the Joes must battle the Cobra; all the Joes help, but in the end it's Sgt. Slaughter, one of the leaders of the Joes, and Jinx, a new Joe who does things her own damn way, who defeat the Cobra leader, the evil Serpentor, and save the day.

As soon as the credits rolled on our old rabbit-eared t.v., I yelled to my brother, "I'm Jinx! You're Serpentor!" I jumped onto the couch. I wanted to be just like Jinx, and she did her best work blindfolded, so I shut my eyes. When I leapt into the air, I felt like the best me I could ever be. Then, I fell and broke my arm. I cracked both bones, the ulna and radius.

I was a quiet kid, and I never much liked being around people or talking with them. It's a running joke in my family, how I was born moody, how I came into the world with the temperament of a grumpy old man. In almost every picture of me as a child, I'm glowering. In one picture, where I can't be older than four, a cousin is holding me back by my arms; another girl next to me is weeping. When I asked my parents what was happening, they laughed and said she wanted a toy of mine. They told me her parents bought her lots of toys and I only had a few, but when I pointed out this fact to that girl, she didn't care and still wanted *my* toy. So, I yelled at her and had to be restrained, apparently.

In another picture, it's my third birthday. I have a pointy hat on my head, there are a few friends around, and there's a cake with a number three candle burning on it. I'm staring at the candle intently and I look utterly dejected, as if I'm thinking, "Three. Where did the time go? Today I'm three, tomorrow I'll be 60. What's the point?"

The photos of me looking angry or sullen as a child are innumerable. But there is one where I'm smiling: I'm standing on the hood of my dad's station wagon, my curly hair blowing in the wind, and I'm proudly holding up my broken arm, newly wrapped in a cast. I'm standing up straight, my chest is puffed out, and I am beaming. That cast is the first thing I ever earned, and I earned it by being a fierce fighter, by being brave and determined, by being Jinx.

It's funny to me now, how kids pretend to be the characters they see on television and in books, how it feels like more than pretending when you're a kid. I didn't feel like I was *imitating* Jinx, I wanted to *be* her, and when I jumped, I felt like I *was* her. I wonder what attracts us to the characters we want to be. Why did I gravitate towards Jinx? It couldn't have just been that she was a woman; there were two other women Joes in the movie, Lady Jaye and Scarlett O'Hara. And I'd watched *She-Ra: Princess of Power* and liked Cheetara from *ThunderCats*, but I never pretended to be them.

Jinx was the first non-white female hero I ever saw. And more important to me as a five-year-old was that she was the first female hero I saw who wore what looked like really comfortable clothes; the woman wore loose-fitting clothes. And she had slip-on flat shoes and short, black hair. Up to that point, all the women heroes and superheroes I'd seen wore high heels or tight boots that went up to the thigh. They wore swimsuit-like outfits that seemed like they would cause problems when they had to go to the bathroom. Everything was skintight. If

they wore dresses, the dresses were so short, usually reaching to just under their butts. As a kid who ran, played Tag and Kick the Can, as a kid who knew what it was like to roll around in the dirt, none of their outfits made sense to me. I did only a fraction of the physical activity they did, and I couldn't imagine doing any of it in clothes like that. Words like "sexualizing" or "objectifying" weren't a thought in my mind. I just knew their clothes didn't make sense to me, so while they may have been women, I didn't see myself in them and I didn't see them in me. With Jinx, I couldn't have articulated it then, but I think her practical clothing choices resonated with me. Loose clothes and flat shoes, that was an outfit I had; I could be Jinx any day of the week.

She was also the only woman who joined the Joes in a ragtag group of new Joe recruits: she was an outsider in a group of outsiders. In one of my favorite scenes of the movie, five new misfit Joes line up in front of Beach Head for training: two are white men, one is a black former basketball player, one is a Latino who speaks Spanglish, and Jinx is Japanese American. I'd never seen so many heroes of color on the screen. Beach Head puts them through a series of physically demanding training activities and not one of them completes them in the manner in which he expects; instead of running through an obstacle course, Tunnel Rat crawls into a large concrete drainage pipe and comes out on the other side; instead of launching a missile at an enemy from a rocket launcher, Chuckles throws it with his bare hands. The new Joes exasperate Beach Head with their unconventional methods, but they all get the job done doing it their own way.

One by one, the new recruits prove themselves to Beach Head. He works with Jinx last. She's working out alone in a gym when Beach Head interrupts her. He references her name and says he's heard she's "one bad luck lady." She pushes back on this claim. Beach Head picks up

Q-Tip style jousting poles and throws one to her. He tells her to keep her “mouth closed, eyes open.” She does as he says, she fights his way; he sweeps her legs and she falls down. He calls her “pathetic,” says she won’t make it as a Joe, and turns to leave. She stands up right away and says, “Care to try it again, *my* way?” Then, she breaks her jousting pole in half, ties a blindfold over her eyes, flips in the air, disarms him easily, and knocks him on his back.

As a five-year-old, I just thought the scene was cool and knew I felt drawn to her. As an adult, I can better understand why I loved her so much. Beach Head is condescending and bossy. He tells her to keep her mouth closed and her eyes open, but she does the exact opposite: she covers her eyes and talks as she kicks his ass. Then, she literally breaks the master’s tools before breaking the master. The men Beach Head trains don’t spar with him; they are put through obstacles by him. Jinx is the only one from the oddball recruits who actually fights with and defeats him, and she does so by defying him. She’s the ultimate rebel.¹

While I no longer attempt blind flying sidekicks from my couch, when I’m teaching in front of a classroom, in flat shoes and comfortable clothes, I’d like to think there’s a little bit of Jinx in me.

¹ Jinx is voiced by Shuko Akune, a Japanese American woman. Today, over 30 years after *G.I. Joe*, many white actors are starting to step away from voicing cartoon characters of color; Akune, like her character, Jinx, was a badass ahead of her time.

Love Letter to My Addict
Fight Song for the Anonymous

An earlier version of this essay was first published in *Blood and Thunder:
Musings on the Art of Medicine*.

It was our first date. We were in your room. You were renting one room in a three-bedroom apartment. You had drawings and paintings hung on every inch of wall. Floating eyes with dragonfly eyebrows and flower petals surrounding the lids. A twisted version of Mona Lisa with uneven features and skeleton fingers. A faceless man sharing oatmeal with a parrot. And your self-portrait: your head was detached from your body, and it was as if a layer of skin had been ripped from your face, the bloody pieces cut into a puzzle, and then everything carefully set back in place.

These twisted, surreal images were, somehow, beautiful.

“Where’d you study art?” I asked.

“I taught myself,” you said, “in prison.”

I froze.

“Please don’t be scared. Let me explain.”

You’d spent seven years in prison for robbing banks. You robbed banks for money to buy heroin. You were on heroin for twenty years. You lost your roofing job, your home, two wives, two sisters, your daughter; you cashed out your veins, and your teeth were crumbling out of your head. On your last robbery, a dye pack exploded on you, and you were caught, literally and figuratively, red-handed. You were sentenced to seven years.

You were sure you’d be dead if you hadn’t been caught. You went through withdrawal in a jail cell. *It feels like dying*, you told me.

In a way you *were* dying. The junkie criminal couldn't exist in prison, so you reinvented yourself because you'd wasted half your life already and didn't want to waste seven more years. You walked away from trouble instead of into it. You grew a funky goatee and started doing yoga. You found a small, supportive community in the prison's art room. You taught yourself how to paint. You were so scared to put the brush to the canvas; you were afraid of making a mistake.

It blew my mind that you could rob banks willy-nilly, but doing a painting frightened you.

The only fear an addict has is running out of drugs, you told me.

You much preferred fearing the canvas.

Your first painting was of a woman, curvy and nude, her arms raised above her, caressing her hair. You found an abandoned XXXL federal correction issued jacket in the prison yard and used it as a large canvas on which you did a painting for your daughter. You started doing portraits of inmates' wives, girlfriends, pets, and children.

Most people don't rob banks. Most people don't use heroin for two decades. Most people don't spend years and years in prison. But I doubt most people have brought as much comfort as you must have to the families of these men, to the sons and daughters of incarcerated fathers who maybe felt their dads a little closer with your art hanging in their living rooms.

It was our first date. Your honesty was disarming. We sat on your bed. You slipped off one of my shoes. You read aloud the brand of my socks stitched across the toe: "No Nonsense."

"These socks don't fuck around," I told you. And you smiled before kissing me.

* * *

Four months later my father died. In just a few days, you drew a stunning portrait of him for the wake. His jet black hair. His crazy eyebrows that resembled frayed electrical wires at the ends. The deep lines across his forehead. And the cuts in his chin. At the wake, my mother kept pulling people over to the drawing; she pointed out every detail and told them how you'd captured his spirit.

A year later you moved in with me. We fought over how to wash the dishes, how big the garbage bag should be, and which way the toilet paper should dispense. It turns out you were right about the toilet paper. We planted sunflowers in the yard and made a killer vegetable lasagna. You were very thoughtful when preparing breakfast for our cat. We watched *Antiques Roadshow* together and tried to guess how much items were worth. Sometimes the ugliest things were the most valuable.

* * *

The arthritis in your hips and your degenerative disc disease were causing you more and more pain. Your doctor prescribed Tramadol, an opiate, in large quantities. I gave it no thought. I knew nothing of opiates. And all I knew of addiction was that I had a boyfriend who'd overcome it. You ran out of Tramadol before a refill was due. You told me the doctor gave you the wrong amount; she gave you too few, you said. You asked my mom for some of her prescription pain pills. I gave it no thought.

You sat me down one evening and told me you lied about not getting enough Tramadol. That you hated lying to me and you wanted me to know the truth. You said you were abusing them, and you were scared. We hugged each other and cried.

* * *

You were slumped in a chair facing white powder in a tin foil square. There was powder around your nostrils. I shook you. Your eyes rolled up, and slurred speech dribbled out of your mouth. I dragged you to my car and to the hospital. The doctor knew my family; he told me, “You can’t put your mother through this.”

We tried to keep you busy and give you reasons to stay sober. My mom offered you odd jobs at her little neighborhood store. You liked helping her out. I looked for places to hang your artwork. You patched up the leaky roof. You put in new pantry shelves. You tried doing yoga again, but it was too painful on your back.

The next few months was chaos.

You were on the floor face down with a small pool of blood beneath you; I shook you, screaming your name.

*

You called me; you were just around the block, but you were too high to realize where you were.

*

You begged your sisters for money.

*

Frantic, sweaty, and naked, you were making a mess looking for heroin; when I asked what you were doing, you said, “Cleaning.”

*

You sold your old coins.

*

My mom and I found you passed out in the park with a needle in your hand; there were mosquito bites all over your face.

*

You told my mother you were sorry and that you were no good.

*

You were missing for four days. I called you several times each day. My mom called you, too. Finally, you answered. You were at a hospital far away from home. You were in the ICU. If you hadn't parked at a bus stop, you would have died. The cops were just going to put a ticket on your truck. They found you slumped over the steering wheel. They found heroin and dozens of prescription pills scattered everywhere. They called in a suicide attempt. You'd had a tube down your throat because you couldn't breathe on your own. When I walked into your room, you burst into tears. You said you were tired, so tired.

*

Drenched in sweat you shivered violently in bed. I didn't know if you were withdrawing or overdosing. I called an ambulance. They sent the police instead. You were arrested for possession of heroin. You were taken to the hospital and handcuffed to the bed; two armed guards watched you. They wouldn't let me in the room.

They later took you to the county jail. But you are just one of thousands upon thousands upon thousands of addicts. And it wasn't much heroin anyway, so the case was dismissed.

*

I got a call from an officer at six in the morning saying you were crawling in front of strangers' homes. I picked you up. The officer escorted us to the hospital. They started to recognize us at the hospital. Countless times you overdosed, nearly stopped breathing, or passed

out in public. They would see us come in and know exactly what the problem was. A nurse who was about eight months pregnant was taking your blood pressure. She said, “Those people who sell drugs to you, they’re not your friends, you know. Don’t hang around those guys. They don’t care about you.” She nodded towards me, “She loves you.” You turned away and said, “I don’t know why.”

*

You called me early one morning; you were high and lost. I was walking into work as I ended your call. I saw my supervisor and said, “Good m—” and then broke down crying. I asked if I could have a personal day and walked out sobbing. I found you and took you home. You said you were putting me through too much and you didn’t want to live anymore. I held you and sang. *You are my sunshine, my only sunshine / You make me happy when skies are gray / You’ll never know dear, how much I love you / Please don’t take my sunshine away.* You cried so hard and made me promise to sing it at your funeral. I promised. I held you until you fell asleep. Then, for hours, I lay next to you awake to make sure you didn’t stop breathing. I don’t know how many nights I stayed awake with my hand on your heart, ready to dial 9-1-1 if the rising and falling of your chest ceased. I loved when you snored loudly. It was so irritating, but it meant you were alive.

Sometimes when you went missing for a day or two, I would lie alone in bed and speak aloud in the dark everything I might say at your funeral. I would definitely tell the story of how you saved the yellow Tums for me. You used to take Tums for your stomach before meals. I tried them but thought they were gross and chalky. But I told you I liked the yellow ones; those tasted like candy. The next morning, I found you in the kitchen with all the Tums spread on the

table; you were picking out all the yellow ones and putting them in a baggie for me. And I would talk about how you were this tough, ex-felon, blue-collar guy, but you had the most adorable and ridiculous pet names for me, like Dr. Fluffy Hair and Professor Soft Bottoms, and so many more. Sometimes you'd walk in the door and proudly announce that you'd come up with a new one. It always made me smile.

I would lie there, alone in bed, talking and laughing and crying, hoping that maybe tomorrow the man I fell in love with would come back to life because I didn't want to tell these stories at your funeral; I wanted to make more stories with you.

* * *

I started reading everything I could about addiction, what it did to the brain, how it affected families. I kept lists of the signs of enabling by my bed and tried to make sure I didn't do those things. I would go see you in the hospital. I would not give you money; I never did anyway, but now it was a rule. I would love you. I would not lie for you. If you wanted to try to get sober, I'd be there for you. If you were in the thick of using, I'd detach. I gave you a deadline by which to move out of my house. I loved you so much, but I couldn't live with you anymore.

I watched the show *Intervention*. I saw several episodes, but none of them felt true for me. They all had the same addict: someone who stole from their family, yelled at their partners, lashed out; they'd have loved ones who'd bring them drugs or alcohol, let them live in their homes indefinitely, and they'd even give them money. They'd all gather around their addict and tell them they'd leave their lives forever if they didn't get sober, as if the addict was making the choice to use, as if threats of cutting emotional ties could cure the chemical changes in the brain. I couldn't relate to any of it. You never yelled at me or lashed out, you never stole from me, I

never gave you money or bought you drugs, and I would never in a million years for any reason ever tell you I'd leave your life forever, especially when you were sick.

I tried my best to walk the line of loving and supporting without enabling. But even so, friends gossiped about us. I found out one friend said to another about me, "Doesn't she love herself?" It made me mad. If I had been there, I would have told her hell yes, I love myself. I love myself enough to fight for the man who has seen me more clearly than anyone else I've ever known. I love myself enough to read and believe the science and make my decisions based on that, not the judgements of others. I wasn't trying to fix or change my man, which is how I think people saw it; I was trying to find a cure for him.

A nurse told me, "He's not your boyfriend anymore. He's just as addict, like any other addict." She said I had to live my life for me, that you were dragging me down, that I shouldn't be spending all my free time in hospitals. Friends told me I could do better. That you were putting me through hell. Coworkers said I had to decide if you were the guy for me. An officer told me he had no idea why women stay with men "like that." I told him that you didn't steal from me, you weren't violent or mean; you were a good man and you were just sick. He looked at me sideways. "No, really," I said. "He's got a good heart." The officer shook his head. I kept talking, "And he's an artist. You'd be blown away if you saw his work. Really. And he's gentle and kind and . . ." The officer snickered and kept shaking his head. I felt foolish. Like a battered woman explaining away a black eye.

Nobody looked at me as a woman who loved a man with a horrible disease. I was pitiable, a stupid enabler girl in a codependent relationship. Sad and sorry. Pitiful. Pity by the barrelful is what I got. Pity to spare. Pity and judgment and shame. It's confounding when people

say addiction is a disease but then treat us like it's a choice. They think you're awful for "choosing" drugs over a good life, and they look at me like I'm too weak to leave you. As if dealing with this nightmare of an illness wasn't hard enough, we both had to do it under a judgmental gaze.

Around the same time, a coworker's mother got cancer; she was going to find out in a few days if it was terminal or easily treatable. She told all our colleagues how scared she was. How she couldn't imagine life without her mom. And what about her dad? How heartbreaking it would be for him to lose his wife. It was hard for her to focus or even care about work. Our colleagues got together and planned a night out to support her because "this must be so hard for her." The cancer turned out to be treatable, but she was thankful for the support.

When I shared the story at work of when I found you bleeding on the floor, barely breathing, they silently shook their heads. Nobody offered to take me out.

People don't choose to get cancer, I hear. But you didn't choose to be an addict.

My God. Who would?

After nearly a decade of sobriety, you didn't give yourself the giant 90-pill bottles of Tramadol. I try not to think about it, but once in a while I wonder why that doctor gave you such a high dosage and large quantity of opiates when she knew you were a recovering addict. Was it because it was a crowded clinic in a working-class neighborhood and she just didn't have time? Or resources? Did she forget you were an addict? Did she not know the danger? Did she not care? And why is finding help so much goddamn harder than buying heroin?

The phrase *Do No Harm* echoes in my mind, and I think of you and the epidemic in our country, and I do not know what to do with my rage.

* * *

Shortly after my father died, his doctor said to my mother, “Your husband would have died five years ago if it wasn’t for you. You gave him more time. He was lucky to have you.”

My mom took such good care of my dad. She cooked healthily. She kept my dad away from salt. She made sure he took his pills and checked his blood pressure. She would scold him harshly when he tried to lift heavy things. She walked with him to the bathroom at night so he wouldn’t fall down. She reminded him of doctor appointments. She spent countless visiting hours next to his bed when he was in the hospital. So much of her life was taking care of my dad. People said she was a good woman. A strong woman. A loyal woman. Later, after my dad passed, she admitted what a heavy burden it was to take care of him. “But that’s what love is,” she said, “for better or worse.”

I still try to wrap my head around it. In the eyes of so many, my mom is an amazing example of love and loyalty, but I am a sad case. I need to get a life. I need to find a man who won’t “put me through this.” People told my mother God would give her strength to support my dad. But they told me I should leave you because it was “too much” to handle. When I wanted support, I only got people telling me to walk away.

Both your sisters had and beat breast cancer. My father had prostate cancer and a host of other conditions. A friend of mine did a breast cancer walk; I asked her to write your sisters’ names on her shirt. Another friend ran a marathon for cancer research. My mom pinned a ribbon to her with my father’s name. We say their names. We celebrate their survival, their struggle, their victory, and their memory.

But when it comes to addiction, you and I are members of the anonymous. Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous for you. Al-Anon and Nar-Anon for me. You are

Anonymous; I am Anon. We meet in church basements in the evenings. Or tire shops. Or empty lots. Or dark cafés with sticky floors. At my first meeting, a woman spoke about how there would always be a part of her that hated her addict. There was violence in her voice. But there was also a lot of hurt. We thanked her for sharing her story. We listen to and tell our struggles, our heartaches. We offer no solutions; we are offered no solutions. Step One is to admit we are powerless over the drug and the addict.

Fuck Step One.

The first step for any other disease is to arm yourself with knowledge of the disease and of treatments, and to surround yourself with doctors and loved ones who will suit up and fight.

We tried a methadone clinic. It helped you a little, but it wasn't the best fit. Sometimes you'd mix prescription pills you bought off the street with the methadone to get high. You went to rehab but left after two weeks. In rehab, you had to attend six or more hours of meetings a day, and you couldn't take all the talking. AA and NA didn't work either; you said it was helpful sometimes and you were glad it worked for others but sharing war stories didn't keep you away from heroin. We found a residential farm where recovering addicts and alcoholics lived and worked; they would run the children's petting zoo in the spring and summer. Physical labor and working with kids and animals was therapeutic for the men. As there were only short meetings once or twice a week, this farm seemed like a perfect fit, but your arthritis and degenerative disc disease meant you couldn't be cleared to work there. After a year and a half of worry, dozens of overdoses, countless trips to the emergency room, and so many sleepless nights, we found a doctor who prescribed you Suboxone. And it worked.

You put a few thin films of Suboxone under your tongue each morning and, like magic, you don't want heroin anymore. Just a couple of days after you started taking it, you texted, "It's crazy, I am driving close to an area where I would buy heroin and don't have a thought of using."

Medicine.

It turns out all you needed was medicine.

You're part of a collective art studio now. Your work has hung in so many galleries all over the city. We plant sunflowers every spring. You clean the snow off my car in the winters. You give me all the yellow Tums. You once visited a composition class I was teaching; our theme was addiction and you were a guest speaker. The students asked you questions, and you did your best to answer honestly. One student asked if you think you hurt anybody because of your addiction. You said you hurt a lot of people, you said you hurt me. I choked back tears, kept my teacher hat on, and explained that any addict is going to hurt their loved ones, but it's not malicious; it's part of the disease. At the end of class, the students clapped for you and thanked you for coming.

As we walked off campus I stopped and hugged you. I'm sure it wasn't easy to face a bunch of college students and tell them about your addiction, about how your heroin use hurt their teacher. I was so proud of you. You said the students' applause felt nice. You deserve it, Paul. You *all* deserve it. All our addicts, and all the anonymous. You all deserve a standing ovation. You deserve ribbons and walks. You deserve parades and charities and marathons. Floats and flags and cheering allies. You, too, are fighters. You, too, are survivors. Soldiers of sobriety. Armies against addiction. Your struggles are real and worthy. And your strength

immeasurable. Let us say the names of our fallen, honor their battle, and never forget. Let us share our weapons and make new ones because maybe what will work for you hasn't been invented yet. Let us gather our exhausted, broken hearts and keep fighting.

Paul, my love, while I hope you stay sober for the rest of your life, know that if you ever fall over the edge again, into the depths of a hell I cannot imagine, I will take your hand and drag you through the fire until you are strong enough to slay your own demons. And then I will be by your side, with every kind of ammo I can find.

Inadequate

During our two months of in-country Peace Corps training, we participated in activities that were supposed to help us learn about each other. In one activity, the trainers had all 70 of us stand in a giant circle; they would read statements, and we had to step forward if the statement was true about us. They started with harmless statements. “I like ice cream.” Everyone stepped forward. Slowly, the statements became more personal and revealed more about our backgrounds. “My parents bought or helped pay for my first car.” About two thirds of the group stepped forward. “A language other than English is spoken in my home.” Only two of us stepped forward, me and the one Indian volunteer. “I’m the first in my family to go to college.” I stepped forward alone. I was shocked and felt suddenly small. Nearly everyone I knew from back home who went to college was the first in their family to go. How could I be the only one in a room with so many people? I stepped back quickly. Out of 70 volunteers, only six of us were minorities; I was the only Latino.

There were so many moments during training when I felt like I wanted to disappear, moments where other volunteers seemed to gawk at the differences of our upbringings. They were small things, but they made me feel stupid. Nobody could believe I’d never played Scrabble. Why would poor, uneducated immigrants who don’t speak English buy a word game? Of course, I’d never played Scrabble before; it makes sense to me that I’d never played before. It didn’t make sense to them. When a few of us were talking about maybe going on a hike, something I’d never done before, somebody said, “They have an REI in the capital; we should go.” I asked what REI was, and they all stared at me and then at each other. One said, “Seriously?” I felt like an idiot. But I also felt annoyed: I couldn’t believe that anyone would assume all Americans would know about an expensive outdoorsy specialty store. Had *they* never

heard of “the inner city?” Good God. I didn’t know any Beatles songs. Gawking. I’d never celebrated Thanksgiving. Gawking. The Peace Corps sends Americans all over the world to serve all kinds of people who speak all kinds of languages and have all kinds of backgrounds; why did so many of my fellow volunteers feel like the same kind of person?

When they decided to throw a Mexican fiesta party, I was ready to be done with training. I, the only Mexican, hadn’t heard about the fiesta until the night of. A few volunteers had gone to the capital and came back with tequila, sombreros, fake mustaches, and colorful ponchos. During the party, they posed as if they were passed out drunk, with tequila bottles in their hands and sombreros on their faces. Though I often felt like an outsider, I did get along with most of the volunteers. I didn’t know how to tell them what they were doing was hurting my feelings. I thought they’d think I was being too sensitive. I took an if-you-can’t-beat-‘em-join-‘em approach. I went to my room and got some CDs I’d brought from home, a few with traditional Mexican music and some Latino pop. They played two songs before going back to their stuff. I took my CDs and went to sleep. I couldn’t wait to go to my village.

We pulled up next to a gravel road in a packed taxi. There were old women in bright dresses smashed on either side of me and a small child half-sitting on my lap, resting his sweaty head on my shoulder. Oshiwambo R&B blasted from the radio. A giant cloud of dust rose as the driver screeched to a halt. Everyone got out and walked off in various directions. I met the young driver by the trunk to pay and get my bags. Exchanging money for bags, the driver said, “You are not from here.” I couldn’t tell if it was a question or a statement.

“No, I am not from here,” I said, speaking slowly and without contractions the way we were taught in training.

I took a look around. There were women across the road selling candy, fruit, drinks, meat, and vegetables from big baskets. Flies were buzzing around a large basin that had skinned goat legs sticking out. A filthy, skinny dog sniffed around the goat's corpse, was shooed away, came back to sniff it, was shooed, came back. The women vendors all wore bright head wraps and dresses: pinks, blues, greens, oranges, purples, reds, yellows. The dresses were traditional for Owambo women. They had short sleeves, one pocket in front, and came down to about mid-calf. From shoulder to calf, the dresses got bigger and bigger, so much so that six or seven small kids could fit inside. If a strong wind blew low enough, the dresses would balloon like tents. The brilliant colors were striking. None of the women wore socks; they all had on blue or black Converse shoes. They all stared at me, some pointed and chattered about me in Oshiwambo. All I could understand from what I heard was *oshilumbu*, a derogatory word for white people.

"They are talking about me," I said to the taxi driver.

"How do you know?" he asked. He had a medium build and was wearing tattered blue jeans and a thin white t-shirt frayed at the hem.

"I can hear them saying 'oshilumbu' and," I looked all around, "and I am the only person around here who isn't black so it must be me."

The taxi driver laughed, "You know Oshiwambo? Me I am never hearing a white person speak Oshiwambo."

I had only been in the country a few months, so I was still getting used to the way many Owambo people spoke English: Me I am having a car; Me I am tired; Me I am needing to get home. It made sense when translating from Oshiwambo to English, but it would be something I would work on with my students once the school year got started.

What was harder to get used to was being called “oshilumbu.” I wasn’t used to being called a “white person.” *Offense* isn’t the right word, not at all, but maybe *discomfort* is what I felt. In Chicago, I was Mexican or Chicana or Latina. I was often mistaken for Jewish, too. I got the question a lot: You’re Jewish, right? With fair skin, curly black hair, an aquiline nose, and a brother named Saul, people just assumed. I’d never take offense; I’d usually make the person who asked the butt of a harmless joke about stereotypes, drop some knowledge about colonialism in Mexico or ancient Mexican art that has long depicted my people with eagle-like noses, have a laugh about ignorance, assure the person they weren’t the first to think I was Jewish, and move on with the conversation.

But this was different. It was different here.

White people in Namibia benefitted from apartheid; all the decades that Namibia was under South African rule, the racist apartheid laws applied. There were 22-year-old students in 8th grade classrooms because it had been against the law for black people to learn. Black people lived in *locations*—shanty towns—because white people took most of the land. White people wanted black people to forget their tribal languages and speak Afrikaans instead. White people would stick tips of pencils into black people’s hair to determine if they were black or *colored*; if the pencil went through the hair and touched the scalp, that person might be considered colored, a notch above black; if a person’s hair was too kinky for the pencil to go through, they were black. White Namibians degraded black Namibians in so many ways.

But I’m not a white Namibian. I’m a first-generation American, the daughter of Mexican immigrants, the daughter of an “illegal” father and a mother who, after four decades in the US, still doesn’t speak English and doesn’t care to learn. I could go on, but none of this really mattered. There was no joke to make here, no statement about stereotypes or assumptions. My

skin is, after all, white. I pushed all the thoughts, all the discomfort somewhere else. Those ladies across the street were strangers, and the taxi driver was only making conversation. He'd never heard a white person speak Oshiwambo; it was an innocent comment. I was a kind of curiosity is all. Like in training, people were going to gawk at me, but it didn't bother me as much here; I'd expected to be watched closely once we left the village, I'd expected culture clashing and learning.

"I can count to ten," I said.

"Show me!" he said with a big smile.

I held up my fingers as I counted, "Imwe, mbali, nhatu, nhee, nhano, hamano, heyali, hetatu, omuwoyi, omulongo."

As I counted, his eyebrows rose in surprise and he nodded along. When I was done, he told me I did a good job.

"Tangi," I said.

"That is my name!"

"Your name is Tangi?"

"No, in English."

"Your name is Thank You?"

"Yes," he said, extending his arm, "I am Thank You."

"I am Cecilia," I said, shaking Thank You's hand and smiling.

"Cecilia!" he exclaimed. "This is an Owambo name!"

This was news to me, and I was thrilled to learn it. Later, when I thought about it more, how Namibia and Mexico were colonized by Europeans and that's why we share the name, my delight in meeting African Cecilia's was mixed with complicated feelings about unjust histories.

“Cecilia, my friend, why are you coming to Namibia?”

“I am a teacher. I am going to teach in Oshekasheka. It is that way?” I asked, pointing down the gravel road that extended off in the distance.

“Yes. You walk maybe ninety minutes and then there is a crossroads and you turn left and walk maybe thirty minutes and you are there.”

Toward the road, there was nothing but sky, some trees, and a couple of huts and shacks separated by a whole lot of sand.

“How will I know when I am there? Is there a sign or something?”

Thank You laughed, “No sign. When you reach Oshekasheka, there is a big tree and a foot path. It will be on your right. There are tracks from cars of the people who are living there. You must look for the tree and the foot path and the car tracks.”

“Right, big tree, foot path, track marks,” I nodded, confident I would miss all the markings and get lost.

“You walk maybe ten minutes on the foot path then you will see the school. It is very ugly. Behind the ugly school there are many, many *cuca* shops. You can ask there where you must go. It will take you maybe two hours,” he said, with a strong emphasis on the *h*: it would take maybe two *h*owers.

“All right,” I said, knowing there was nothing else to do now but walk. I looked across the road once more, at the colorfully dressed women still whispering *oshilumbu*, and I waved. Some of the women had no reaction at all, but a couple smiled and waved back. *Good enough*, I thought. Then, I threw my arm through the strap of my enormous dark green backpack, everything I’d brought for two years. Wincing, I stood up, threw the weight of the backpack with my shoulder, and shoved my other arm through the other strap. I snapped the buckle across my

waist and tightened the sternum strap. Thank You picked up my small blue duffle bag and placed it in my hand.

“Thank you, Tate Thank You,” I said, slipping one arm through each strap so that, now, my body was sandwiched in between my backpack and duffle bag.

“You are welcome, meme.”

Extending my hand, I said, “thanks for the ride and the directions, man.”

“No problem. Maybe we will see one another again,” Thank You said and shook my hand.

“Oshili nawa, tate” I said, smiling.

Thank You flashed his bright, toothy smile once more, “Your Oshiwambo is *good!*”

As I set off down the gravel road, I listened to the door from Thank You’s car slam shut, the engine start up, the crackle of gravel under his tires, and the loud Oshiwambo R&B get softer and softer the farther he got. I resisted turning back to watch his car get smaller. I breathed in deep and, with my thumbs stuck under my backpack straps, I walked. The sky was solid blue, not one cloud above me. Everywhere I looked was the same: trees—large and small—packed with dull leaves, corroded log-and-wire fences around tiny cement structures and huts, 6-foot-tall mahangu stalks, thorn bushes, and miles and miles of sand.

Ten minutes into my walk, rivulets of sweat ran down my thighs, between my breasts, and from my neck to the small of my back. The gravel road beneath my feet was narrow; I couldn’t imagine two cars passing each other in opposite directions without one being forced off and into hostile thorn bushes along the sides.

Suddenly, a cow, brown and white and filthy, appeared and crossed in front of me. My heart jumped and I stopped, suppressing a gasp. I’d never been this close to a cow before, not

without some kind of barrier. I'd never heard of cows being violent or aggressive, but the size of the animal and its horns frightened me. Images of one of its horns ripping through my eyeball or chest flashed in my brain. I stood as still as I possibly could, hoping it wouldn't notice me. I was reminded of nights growing up in Chicago; when I'd wake up and go to the bathroom or into the kitchen for some water, I'd turn the light on and all the cockroaches would freeze as if that would make them invisible. I remembered thinking how stupid cockroaches must be, and yet here I was, freezing, holding my breath in broad daylight in hopes that this colossal cow wouldn't crush me like I wanted to crush those roaches. The cow stepped slowly, its dirty horns level with my face. It walked an inch or two in front of me and didn't seem to give me a second thought. I watched its tail sway as it reached the other side of the road.

I looked in the direction the cow had come. There were several more cows coming, all being guided by a small shoeless boy with a stick. Remaining still, I watched as they all passed. When, finally, the boy walked by me, we stared at each other for a long time. Even after the boy was across the road, he looked back staring with harsh, steady eyes. I tried to smile and lifted my hand in a weak hello. The boy spit and said, "Oshilumbu."

I kept my head up, but my heart sunk, and I walked a little slower. All the thoughts I tried putting somewhere else bubbled inside.

My skin color makes them think that I hate them and that makes them hate me, not all of them, but definitely that boy, and maybe others. Probably others. I'm not a "person of color." A person of color is my mother, and my aunts and uncles and cousins back in Mexico, and my grandparents who I never met; even my nieces and nephews are people of color. But not me.

People in the village will look at me and see an Afrikaans-speaking, racist-thinking, biltong-eating, apartheid-benefitting, spoiled white girl.

I thought back to when I first heard about apartheid. I was only about ten when it ended, but I remember seeing bits on the news about it and thinking: *that's bullshit*. In my ten-year-old mind, it made me think of how segregated Chicago was, how all the Latinos and African Americans lived on the south side while all the white people lived on the north side. In my ten-year-old mind, I always felt that there was something *less* about us on the south side; I didn't understand why I felt that way, but I was sure there were reasons. I gathered that apartheid was like that but worse. Those bits on the news made me angry and sad.

I walked on, thinking about all the steps that had brought me to this gravel road in Sub-Saharan Africa.

In the '90s there were several shootings around my neighborhood high school, Bowen. My parents worried about sending me there, so they made me go to Morgan Park, which was farther west. It took three buses to get there. I hated that I had to wake up so early, and I hated the reason I had to go there in the first place. I hated teachers who would warn us about the responsibilities of "the real world" and would jerkily tell us they got paid whether we did our homework or not.

I'd started going to concerts around that time on the north side. I talked with north side kids and found out they had *psychology* class in *high school*. It made me mad. Why did north side kids get psychology class and we didn't? That's a class I'd be interested in. I was angry that there seemed to be better schools on the north side, there was better public transportation on the north side, and all the concerts were on the north side. When I rode the Red Line home from

shows, it always pissed me off that the last of the white people exited at Roosevelt, and the train was left with *minorities*, going back to our side of the city.

This is bullshit was my attitude about most things all through high school. I joined the Stage Crew to get passes out of class; I much preferred setting up speakers and taping extension cords down in an empty auditorium to going to class. When I wasn't working backstage, I cut school as much as possible. When I got an F in Spanish, which I'm fluent in, my dad asked—in Spanish—if it was the best I could do. “Si,” I answered. He, who didn't finish high school himself, shrugged his shoulders, said “OK,” and then we washed the giant tamale cookers in the back.

My senior year, I was told I'd have to see the school counselor because of my poor performance in some of my classes and because I was one of the few seniors who hadn't applied to any colleges. I only went to her office a few times, and I don't even remember her name, but that's where I saw a pamphlet for the Peace Corps. It was tacked on a corkboard with tons of other pamphlets. Countries that wanted volunteers were highlighted, and I could see that South Africa was highlighted. I immediately thought about apartheid. I asked the counselor if I could have the pamphlet; she said no and that we needed to talk about my grades, so I humored her and took the pamphlet when she wasn't looking.

In my roach infested home, I read the pamphlet over and over. I couldn't believe this thing existed. The government *paid* for your plane ticket to other countries, and they took care of you and made sure you had a place to live for two years, *rent free*, and all you had to do was work. It blew my teenage mind. Why weren't these pamphlets in homeless shelters?! Certainly, people fallen on hard times had skills, skills that could be put to use in South America or Asia or Eastern Europe. Surely! Why weren't they plastered all over African American and Latino

churches?! Wouldn't we minorities want the chance to visit—for free!—the places our ancestors came from? Wouldn't we want the chance to do some good in those places? Why weren't there commercials on television for this thing, this unbelievable, too-good-to-be-true thing?

I now had a plan. I'd get through bullshit high school, march down to the Peace Corps office in downtown Chicago, tell them to sign me up, and go to some faraway country to do good. I just barely got through the first step; as a high school senior, I wondered how many classes I could fail and still graduate. Two, apparently. But I got the diploma and that's all I cared about. Then, in the summer of 1999, at 17, I marched down to the Chicago Peace Corps office and told the lady behind the counter I was ready to go, sign me up. She stared at me with wonder and, I think, a little pity, and asked, "How old are you?"

After the shortest and most pathetic interview of my life, I slunk out of the Peace Corps office, defeated. I'd tried to convince her I could totally help with small business startups since I'd worked in my family's tamale store since I was a kid, but she firmly, though kindly, shook her head.

I wandered downtown for hours. Part of it was that I was crushed and needed time to process what my life would be now. And part of it was that it took two hours of walking and bus rides to get back home. So, I wandered. I used the washrooms at Marshall Field. I sat on the steps of the Art Institute and watched tourists come in and out, wondering where they were from. I stole a handful of gummy worms from a fancy candy shop. I went to the Cultural Center, to the room with the Tiffany Dome; supposedly, the glass was cut to look like fish scales. It's this huge, lit up, sparkling ceiling, surrounded by zodiac signs and intricate, flowery designs. I walked beneath it, to what I guessed was the center, and lied down. I didn't care that people were

walking around me. I stared up at that dome, wondering what the hell I would do, until a security guard told me to leave.

Eventually, I found myself at the Picasso in Daley Plaza, this 50-foot steel bird-like artwork. The bottom forms a sort of giant slide, and there are often kids running up and gliding down. The slide forms a hollow alcove on the other side, and I'd often see homeless people take shelter there. Kids sliding on top, homeless people finding warmth on bottom. It's my favorite thing about that piece. Just a few dozen feet from the Picasso is the Daley Center, which houses courtrooms, so the area surrounding the sculpture was peppered with lawyers and judges and cops and criminals. I would sometimes go sit in on the court hearings. It was mostly poor people in for traffic or drug stuff. Without fail, whenever the judge set a fine that was over a thousand dollars, everyone would gasp. I thought about going into a courtroom, but it would be too depressing. I climbed the Picasso and sat at the top. I slid down and lay at the bottom, looking up at the sky and the skyscrapers for a long while. I was heartbroken. If I wanted to join the Peace Corps, I was going to have to go to college. Fuck.

It was only supposed to take about two hours to get to Oshekasheka, but it took me almost four. I walked straight by the big tree where I was told to turn right. There were two kids on the road, two boys, holding hands, walking towards me, curiously staring at me the whole time we were getting closer to each other. They were tiny, they looked like they were five or six years old. Both were shoeless. One of them was pushing a small toy car, or like the frame of a car, made out of wire hangers. He pushed it with one long wire that extended from the car's bumper to his hand. The wheels were made out of hangers, too: imperfect circles that made the car roll on, rickety and bumbling, as if it were driving over mountains. I asked where

Oshekasheka was, I asked in Oshiwambo and in English, but they just stared at me. Then I asked, “Oshekasheka?” and pointed in front of me then behind me, asking which direction to go. One of the boys, not the one with the car, pointed behind me; I had passed it.

“Ila,” he whispered, crooking his finger, and I followed them. They walked slowly, as if time didn’t exist, and their small callused feet walked naked over the burning gravel as if it were a linoleum floor. They held hands the whole time. The boy with the wire hanger car pushed it so it curved to the left then to the right, over and over again. After a good while, the carless boy tapped the other boy on the shoulder and the other boy passed the wire car over, never letting go of each other’s hands. It was sweet watching the two of them like that, holding hands, pushing that wobbly bunch of wires. It made me feel something I couldn’t quite name. It was like I was learning something new, something useful for my heart.

After a while we got to the big tree and one of the boys pointed at the path I was to go down. He crouched and touched the path and then pointed to my feet. I smiled and said *tangi unene* like four or five times before waving goodbye. After ten or fifteen steps, I looked back and saw them, hand in hand, walking down the gravel road, pushing their jumbly little car.

It was so nice watching those boys while I followed them that I hadn’t realized how exhausted and thirsty I was until they left. My feet were throbbing and my back was completely soaked in sweat. Following the path, sandwiched between gloomy trees, my feet sunk into the sand, and the sand collected in my shoes. The weight of my bags seemed to multiply with my shoes full of sand. So close to my destination, I wanted to sit down, wipe the sweat from my face and drink some water, but then I thought: what if someone sees me? I thought of that kid with the cows who looked at me with so much hate.

What if I stop and someone sees me and the first impression they'd have of the oshilumbu would be that she was weak and easily beaten? That she was lazy? Then word would spread, and the villagers would say in Oshiwambo, See, I told you so.

Joining the Peace Corps was something I'd really wanted to do, but walking into Oshekasheka Village, I questioned everything. All my enthusiasm and passion seemed to slowly crumble away until I couldn't even remember my reasons for wanting to go in the first place. If one of those Teach for America people were stationed in my school growing up, how would I feel? I guess it'd depend on the person, but I'm sure my first thoughts would be cynical. I'd be suspicious of their motives; they'd just want a good story, proof that they were a decent person—not one shred of racism, and mostly they'd want an impressive entry for their résumé. It would take a lot for me to trust them. And once I did, they'd be moving on, bettering their career, moving out of South Chicago, but I'd still be there, and maybe I'd feel hurt.

How was I any different than that? Just because I'm a Mexican from a working-class family? Was this progress? In the future, will white saviors come from all backgrounds and in all colors? A part of me wanted to turn and leave, and another part fought to remember my intentions. They were good intentions, weren't they?

I thought about how much I'd hated school, yet I'd flown halfway around the world to be a teacher. College was different, though; that's where my attitude about school changed. I started in community college and fell in love right away. It wasn't like high school. Everybody really wanted to be there—the teachers, the students, the staff. I loved being in classes with 30-, 40-, and 50-year-olds; it was like having a dozen teachers in one room. Everyone seemed to truly believe in what they were doing, and everyone did their best. That was the difference. In high

school, it seemed like most people weren't doing their best—not the City of Chicago (lackluster resources and course offerings), not the staff (counselors who didn't listen), not the teachers (got paid no matter what students did), and not me (truant). Any place becomes drab when nobody really wants to be there, and when nobody wants to be there, nobody does their best. Community college made me want to be a better person, and it strengthened my resolve to join the Peace Corps and go to a country where leaders—past or present—not only did *not* do their best, but made great efforts to do their worst.

As I kept walking, I kept thinking of all the reasons I shouldn't have been there and all the reasons I should have. South Chicago, the neighborhood I'm from, is nicknamed "the bush," and that's what they call villages out here. It implies the wilderness, a place where there's nothing, where people shouldn't live. When I was a kid, all the men had worked in the steel mills and when those closed down, there was nothing. It was like a kind of ghost town, one where everything worth living for disappeared, but all the people stayed. I never thought of it as *the bush*, it was home.

A lot of the other volunteers said they'd joined "to give back" because "we" grew up with so much in our country. Some had big plans for their villages before they were even there, before they even met the community. How can you make plans for a place you've never been to? I had no plans but to go and see. And I knew I would not save my village, I would not bring sweeping reform that would make everything better; I just wanted to do a little bit of good in a place and for people who didn't get a fair hand, and that included me.

I kept moving my sandy feet, my sweating head face down and my mind whirling when I finally came upon it: Oshekasheka Combined School, the place I would teach for the next two years. I walked closer to get a better look. It sort of resembled a trailer park; there were about a

dozen gray, rectangular buildings lined up in rows of three or four. Every last window was broken, doors were hanging on their hinges or had completely fallen onto the sand, birds were flying in and out of these narrow, one-floor schoolrooms. Chickens ran in circles inside the fenced school, and one goat strolled the perimeter as if he was the security guard. The goat pooped as he walked by me. If he'd said *oshilumbu* as he pooped, I probably would have left. Thankfully, he didn't.

I wondered how many of the volunteers in my group would leave after seeing their sites. We started as a group of 70 but were in the 60s by the end of training. Some people couldn't take the heat, or the bugs, or the sand, or peeing in pit latrines, or being asked constantly to have their hair and skin touched, or having to hitchhike. Some people realized quickly they had no patience for people who couldn't speak fluent English. Some people missed home. By the end of service, we were down in the 50s. We were told it wasn't uncommon for a group to lose a quarter or more people before the end of service.

"We need more volunteers *like you*," my recruiter told me soon before I left the states. I didn't give it much thought at the time, and I hadn't thought about it at all until this hours-long walk to my village, alone, away from the other volunteers after months together. Walking, thinking about home and training and everything that brought me here, I finally realized what he meant. I made the diversity slice a little bigger on the pie chart in the pamphlet.

When I returned from service, Peace Corps got in touch right away asking me to speak on panels at the Museum of Mexican Art and Harold Washington Library about diversity in the Peace Corps. They asked me to do an interview for Radio Arte about being a Latino volunteer. I

always agreed to whatever they asked me to do, but I never felt 100% good about it. It wasn't so much that I felt used, though there was that feeling, it was more that I wasn't sure if Peace Corps was a good thing. In addition to talking about my "unique perspective as a Latina volunteer," they wanted me to praise the Peace Corps. But from the moment I stepped into Oshekasheka until the moment I boarded a plane home, I couldn't say with certainty that teaching village kids in Namibia how to read, use commas, switch from active voice to passive voice, use a dictionary, etc. was a good or useful thing to do. The majority of the kids I taught would never leave the village. There was one college in the entire country and only town kids went. Most of the kids I taught failed several grades several times. They had to take national exams that made references to city life my students knew nothing about. And even if they did do well in the village school, they could not afford to move to a town to continue in high school.

Of what use was I?

There's an official document, the Description of Service, that lists what I did: I raised the pass rate in the English classes, I raised money to renovate one of the school buildings, I ran the library, I had HIV/AIDS awareness classes, I taught girls how to use condoms, I ran art classes, I made posters for the other teachers, I was the English Subject Head and helped create new curriculum. I did a lot of work and I did my work well; there's no question there.

But of what use was it? Did I just show a sliver of a life that was not a real possibility to a bunch of kids who never asked me to come? Did I show my older students how to write cover letters for jobs that didn't exist? Are other volunteers filled with doubts?

It's been a decade since I finished my Peace Corps service and left Namibia. I have no doubt I had good intentions, I have no doubt I did the best I could, and I have no doubt that the

tears—and there were a lot—that my host family and I shed at my leaving were real, but I still wonder if I was more useful to the Peace Corps as a Latina than I was useful to the village community as a teacher.

Plaiting

Kandina lost her comb, so she parted my hair with a pencil. She told me the skin on my head looked like the skin beneath her fingernails.

She said, “The pencil is feeling good on your scalp.”

“How do you know?”

“Your shoulders are letting go. I know.”

It was winter, but winter in the village is still hot, so we sat under a very big tree where the leaves shaded us from the sun. Kandina was my 14-year-old host sister and my best friend in Oshekasheka. She had been teaching me “Ekundungu,” a RuKwangali song, the last few days, so we practiced as she plaited my hair. She sang the first verse,

*Zuvha ekundungu lyompepo
Nokundunduma kwalo
Pindunka tatu lifire
Otu popere hompa.*

I repeated. Then, to show her I remembered what she had taught me, I sang the second verse on my own,

*Kapina kupin duka
Hagararera simpe
Niye si kepa tasidama
Jesuzha tuzuvha.*

Kandina was thrilled I remembered. “You are like a Namibian now!” she exclaimed. “Now you are knowing English, Spanish, Oshiwambo, and RuKwangali.”

There are dozens of languages spoken in Namibia with even more dialects; because of the language diversity, most people can speak a little bit of a few languages. RuKwangali was close enough to Oshikwanyama, my village’s dialect, that Kandina could pick it up from hearing songs on the radio. We went over the chorus together.

Kandina asked if I could teach her a song from my country. The only thing that came to mind was “Itsy Bitsy Spider,” so I sang it. When I finished, she told me she would sing it but that it was a bad song. When I asked her why, she explained that she didn’t understand why there would be a song celebrating the revival of spider. I laughed, remembering that Namibia is home to the sand spider, one of the deadliest on the planet. I told her our spiders were friendlier and she felt better about the song.

I held sections of my hair while she plaited. We were mostly silent now; I stared out at the thin cows in the distance, and she hummed every once in a while. We would switch places when she was done. When she had just a few more to go, we heard the ramblings of a man coming near us. He got louder as he got closer.

“Oh no,” I heard Kandina whisper. I could feel her limp hands on my head.

“It’s okay. He is just drunk. Don’t let it bother you.”

I had seen him before, mostly at the cuca shops, the little bars in the village, and sometimes walking around drunkenly. He seemed harmless. I’d see my students walk by him or some of the other alcoholics; they usually just walked further away to avoid them. I’d been living in the village over a year and had never seen any altercations.

When he was just a few feet away, we could smell the stale alcohol coming off him. Shoeless and unsteady, he stopped in front of us and wobbled around. He slurred words I couldn’t understand; then, I heard “oshilumbu” and realized he was badmouthing me. I figured he was angry at seeing a white person in the village. I was sure he’d seen me before, but he’d never said anything until this moment. Kandina said something I didn’t understand; it sounded like she was defending me, but I wasn’t sure. They were both talking faster than I could keep up with. His voice rose and he made like he was going to throw his nearly empty beer bottle at

Kandina. I jumped up immediately and threw my arms in front of her. She pushed my arms down, pointed away, and yelled at the man, telling him to go away I assumed. Was he mad at me or her? They were both quiet for a moment then she took a deep breath and said something calmly. I was confused by their tones and gestures.

“Do you know him?”

Kandina ignored my question and pointed again, seeming to tell him again to leave. He waved his hands at the both of us as if to say, “Forget this!” Then, he walked off. Silently, we watched him stagger off towards the cows. He started talking to the cows as he stumbled between them. Kandina shook her head.

“Do you know that man?” I asked her again.

“Come, let us keep plaiting.”

I sat back down, and she finished up the last few sections. We were both totally quiet now. No talking, no singing, no humming, no laughing. When we switched places, I asked if she was okay. She only nodded and then sat down. She was clearly upset, but I didn’t want to push her. So, I just got to work. I started undoing her loose braids, hoping she’d explain what had just happened, but I undid them all and she hadn’t said a word. I asked for her pencil so I could start parting and plaiting. She handed it to me. As I dragged the tip across her scalp, I could hear her breathing deep, almost like she was meditating. I wanted to ask again, but I let it be. It wasn’t until I was more than halfway done with her hair that she finally said something.

“That man, he is my father.”

My hands stopped moving. I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t believe she had never told me. We spoke every day. I had asked her about her parents way back when I first learned that she wasn’t related to anyone on the homestead. She only told me they were “away.” I just thought

they worked in a town or maybe in a neighboring country, like the parents of so many kids in the village. I would have never guessed her dad was in plain sight this whole time.

“How come you never told me before?”

“It is more easy to be free with your secrets when a person is touching you but not looking at you.”

“Yeah.” I wasn’t sure what to say. We were both quiet for a beat. I started on her hair again. “What were you saying to each other?”

“Nonsense. I hide from him. If I am seeing him, I am turning and going another way. Today he is seeing me first and I cannot hide. Sometimes he is seeing me and he is so very nice. Sometimes he is mean. Sometimes he is saying he is not knowing who I am. Sometimes he is loving me. Sometimes he is hating me. Today he is saying I am stealing his goats. I am telling him I am not stealing his goats. He is not knowing who I am today. He is sick,” she said, pointing to her head.

She didn’t sound angry or frustrated; she didn’t even sound all that sad. If anything, she sounded tired, like she had long ago understood that her father was mentally ill and an alcoholic, and to protect herself from emotional exhaustion, she decided she’d rather not deal with him.

“I’m so sorry, Kandina.”

There were differences, but her father sounded a lot like my brother. He was always drinking or getting high. One minute I was his best friend, the next I was the worst person in the world and the reason for any pain in his life. I couldn’t believe Kandina had never told me about her father, but I’d never told her about my brother.

“I have a brother like that. He is nice and funny and makes you feel loved. Then, for no reason, he turns mean and angry and says awful things.”

“He is like my father. It is confusing.”

“Very confusing.”

Kandina pointed to her head again, “They are not okay.”

“No, but me and you, we are okay.”

She gave one strong, assured nod of her head, rocking her whole body forward, “Yes!”

The sun would be setting soon. I pulled a section of her hair and smoothed it with my palm. Kandina started to hum softly. I divided the section into three thinner pieces and slid them between my fingers several times. I tightly threaded one through the other through the other, strengthening the braid with each intertwining strand.

Tan Tan

Appendix A

Villarruel, Cecilia. "Chingona." *Oyez Review*, vol. 38 2011, pp. 12.

Villarruel, Cecilia. "Tampico." *Oyez Review*, vol. 38, 2011, pp. 53.

An earlier version of "Chavela" was first published in *Oyez Review* under the title "Chingona." Also published in *Oyez Review* is a portion of "You Are Here" under the title "Tampico." *Oyez Review* allows contributors to re-publish their work. The following is from their website: "The journal seeks First North American Serial Rights on all literary submissions. You will be able to re-publish work with acknowledgement."

Villarruel, Cecilia. "Love Letter to My Addict / Fight Song for the Anonymous." *Blood and Thunder: Musings on the Art of Medicine*, 2019, pp. 292-301.

An earlier version of "Love Letter to My Addict / Fight Song for the Anonymous" was first published in *Blood and Thunder: Musings on the Art of Medicine*. *Blood & Thunder* allows contributors to re-publish their work. The following is from their website: "*Blood & Thunder* acquires first publication rights. After publication, author can reprint work(s) as long as appropriate acknowledgment to *Blood & Thunder* is made."

CITED LITERATURE

McDougall, Christopher. *Born to Run: A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, and the Greatest Race the World Has Never Seen*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009.

Quintero v Encarnacion. No. 99-3258. United States Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit. 29 Nov. 2000.

VITA
Cecilia Villarruel

Education

- University of Illinois at Chicago
Ph.D. in English, Creative Writing (Nonfiction) **2020**
Dissertation Chair: Luis Alberto Urrea
Creative Dissertation: *Chingonas*
- Roosevelt University, Chicago, IL
M.F.A. in Creative Writing (Fiction) **2011**
Thesis Committee: Peggy Shinner and Janet Burroway
Creative Thesis: *Sway*, Winner of Best Thesis Award for Creative Work
- Smith College, Northampton, MA
B.A. in English Language and Literature **2004**

Teaching Experience

- University of Illinois at Chicago
Teaching Assistant, Department of English **2015-2020**
Courses taught:
 - Native American Studies 112 / English 112: Introduction to Native American Literature
 - English 113: Introduction to Multiethnic Literatures in the United States
 - English 160: Academic Writing I: Writing in Academic and Public Contexts
Topic: Chicago: Cuisine, Culture, and Crime
 - English 161: Academic Writing II: Writing for Research and Inquiry
Topic: Exploring addictions in our lives and communities
 - English 201: Introduction to Creative Nonfiction
 - Humanities 100 + 101: Immigration, Race, and Social Justice from the Japanese Internment to the Muslim Ban
A course funded by a grant from the Mellon Foundation
- Richard J. Daley College, Chicago, IL
Instructor, Department of English **2012**
Courses taught:
 - English 101: Composition
- Peace Corps, Oshekasheka Village, Namibia
Teacher / Community Organizer **2006 – 2008**
 - Organized HIV/AIDS education activities
 - Taught English, Religious & Moral Education, Basic Information Science, and Art
 - Collaborated with village community and fundraised abroad to renovate several classes

Related Experience and Service

Wilbur Wright College, Chicago, IL Writing Consultant	2014 – Present
University of Illinois at Chicago Search Committee Member for Associate Director of First-Year Writing	2019
University of Illinois at Chicago Placement Reader	2019, 2018
University of Illinois at Chicago Assistant Director of First-Year Writing Program	2017 – 2018
University of Illinois at Chicago Reading Series Committee	2017 – 2018
University of Illinois at Chicago Second-Year Visiting Writer Committee	2016 – 2017
Reading in Motion, Chicago, IL Spanish Reading Coach	2013 – 2015
Olive-Harvey College, Chicago, IL Writing Tutor	2012
Roosevelt University, Chicago, IL Editor for <i>Oyez Review</i>	2009 – 2010
Peace Corps, Oshkasheka Village, Namibia English Subject Head	2008
Peace Corps, Namibia Editor for <i>IZIT? A Magazine for the Namibia Peace Corps Volunteer</i>	2007 – 2008

Publications

Nonfiction

“Mexican Archaeology” <i>Chiricú Journal: Latina/o Literatures, Arts, and Cultures</i>	forthcoming in 2020
“Love Letter to my Addict / Fight Song for the Anonymous” <i>Blood and Thunder: Musings on the Art of Medicine</i>	2019
“Blackbirds” <i>Another Chicago Magazine</i> (as Cecy Villarruel)	2018

“Tampico”
 “Chingona”
Oyez Review **2011**

Composition Instruction

“Grammar Lesson Presentation”
 “Public Art Profile”
 “Review Beyond the Food”
During Office Hours **2016**

Fiction

“50 Cent Accomplishments”
Pyrta Journal **2011**

“Footnotes: Mexican Evolution”
CAF Review **2010**

“Chicago Love Story,”
IZIT? A Magazine for the Namibia Peace Corps Volunteer **2008**

“Mama’s Cryin”
 “Cheater”
 “Speechless”
Paper Atrium: A Collection of Literary Works Written and Edited by Chicagoans **2004**

“Jingle Jangle”
Start Magazine **2003**

“Mr. Harris”
Alchemy: A Collection Written and Edited by Apprentice Authors of Gallery 37 **2001**

Presentations

Panelist, “Beyond the Event,” NonfictionNOW Conference, Arizona State University, Phoenix, AZ, 2018

Presenter, “Participation: Techniques and Assessment,” First-Year Writing Program TeachWrite Series Session, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2017

Presenter, “More Spanish Literacy Instruction in Less Time with Music and Drama,” 37th Annual Statewide Conference for Teachers Serving Linguistically & Culturally Diverse Students, Oak Brook, IL, 2013

Panelist, “The Importance of Place in Story,” Undergraduate and Graduate Humanities Conference: Humanities, Power, and the Public, Roosevelt University, Chicago, IL, 2010

Awards and Honors

<i>Distinguished Teaching Award</i> University of Illinois at Chicago	2020
<i>Katharine Bakeless Nason Award (Nonfiction)</i> Bread Loaf Conference, Middlebury, VT	2019
<i>2nd Place, Image of Research Competition</i> University of Illinois at Chicago	2016
<i>Best Thesis Award for Creative Work</i> Roosevelt University, Chicago, IL	2011
<i>Vicente Fernandez Award for Latino Artists</i> Allstate Arena, Chicago, IL	2010
<i>Peace Corps Franklin H. Williams Award for Community Service</i> Washington, D.C.	2010
<i>1st Place, National Society of Arts & Letters Literature Competition</i> Illinois Chapter, Urbana, IL	2010
<i>School building named in my honor: Cecilia Villarruel Block</i> Oshekasheka Village, Namibia	2009

Fellowships, Grants, and Residencies

<i>Ragdale Writing Residency</i> Lake Forest, IL	2019
<i>Bread Loaf Environmental Writers' Residency</i> Middlebury, VT	2019
<i>Luminarts Fellow Project Grant</i> Union League Civic & Arts Foundation, Chicago, IL	2018
<i>Blue Mountain Center Residency</i> Blue Mountain Lake, NY	2018
<i>DFI Fellowship (Diversifying Higher Education Faculty in Illinois)</i> University of Illinois at Chicago	2017 – 2019
<i>Hedgebrook: Women Authoring Change, Writers' Residency</i> Whidbey Island, WA	2016