

The Lyric Essay as Resistance: A Reading & Celebration

Lyric essays are powerful tools for creative resistance. The essays selected for this reading and new anthology embody resistance through content, style, design, and form, representing of a broad spectrum of experiences that illustrate how writers and their identities can intersect, conflict, and even resist one another. Together, they provide a dynamic example of the lyric essay's range of expression while showcasing some of the most visionary contemporary essayists writing in the form today.

Event Category: Nonfiction Readings

Event Moderator:

Chelsea Biondolillo is the author of *The Skinned Bird: Essays* and two prose chapbooks, *#Lovesong* and *Ologies*. Her work has appeared in *Best American Science & Nature Essays*, *Orion*, *Brevity*, *Diagram*, *River Teeth*, *Passages North*, and others. She is a former Colgate O'Connor and Oregon Literary fellow.

Welcome to The Lyric Essay as Resistance: A Reading & Celebration, and thank you for coming. A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let me know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone's use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

Opening moderator remarks and housekeeping announcements:

[to be added by Chelsea Biondolillo]

Event Participants:

Chloe Garcia Roberts is a poet and translator from the Spanish and Chinese. She is the author of a book of poetry, *The Reveal*, and the translator of two books of poetry by the poet Li Shangyin. She works as the deputy editor of *Harvard Review* and is a freelance translator of children's literature.

Molly McCully Brown is the author of the essay collection *Places I've Taken My Body* and the poetry collection *The Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded*. With Susannah Nevison, she co-authored the poetry collection *In the Field Between Us*. She teaches at Old Dominion University.

Hea-Ream Lee is a writer and teacher. She received an MFA in creative nonfiction at the University of Arizona, where she edited fiction for *Sonora Review* and currently teaches undergraduate writing. Hea-Ream's work appears in *Shenandoah*, *Terrain.org*, *Popula*, *Hobart*, and others.

Michael Torres was born and brought up in Pomona, CA where he spent his adolescence as a graffiti artist. His debut collection, *An Incomplete List of Names*, was a National Poetry Series selection. Currently, he teaches creative writing in Minnesota.

Reading

Participants will read from their contributions to *The Lyric Essay as Resistance* anthology, followed by an audience Q&A.

Whens

Chloe Garcia Roberts

Remember when one morning we were home alone and instead of letting me brush out the tangles in your hair you asked to brush mine? Because you were so small, I sat cross-legged on the floor. At first the weight was too unwieldy for your tiny fat hand, and the brushing was more like being beaten softly about the head. But after a few minutes you got the hang of it and found your rhythm, rowing the brush roughly down the length of my hair. Lifting your arm to the crown of my head, letting it drift down again, lifting your arm to the crown of my head, letting it drift down again. Then, behind the slow shushing of the brush, behind the curtain of hair hanging around my face, behind my eyes closed underneath, an other side opened: a hallway into a when of you brushing my hair when I was no longer able. I felt just under the skin of my body, strong and capable as a mother, another body, weak and older. A self faintly felt of was what was to come not what was. I felt the weight of both of your hands, the baby, the woman, my responsibility, my caretaker all in unison for a breath (and I do not say moment, or second because that implies a unit of linear time and this was not of that rubric but rather a transversal touching together of different times). I heard the sound of the brush, the sound of your breathing, the sound of the morning behind my eyelids, but in two places, two points on a life. Together, you and I, we had brushed open a *whens*.

The reason a certain moment can seem suspended from the stream has nothing in fact to do with the present in which it occurs, but is instead a result of the number of future instances that that exact moment is recalled, remembered, replayed. This phenomenon is actually just our future selves over-thinking the happening in question, which in turn breaks down its structure, its constitution like worn cloth or hollowed stone. This is the reason why the noise of life can sometimes silence itself, thin itself, to one tenuous thought like a silvery tendon spanning two dense slabs of muscled darkness (also known as *the future* and *the past*). Some people refer to this clarity, this one-note knowing, as intuition which is false, primarily because it does not come from within (in-tuition) but from without. It is not a product of what you are (i.e. what you have become) but

of what you will become washing backwards. *Whens* then is a term for the tunnel between, the backward runnel which allows simultaneity to draw together, to bridge, two distinct times. So in this case I will be in a bed, in morning light, silent under your brushing, thinking, thinking, thinking backwards to that first time under your hand.

Eventually every life will prove the existence of innumerable tiny currents running like this one from the future to the past, even if they are largely undetectable and invisible, even if like lines of faint embossing they are easier felt than seen. And experience of this phenomenon, a face you remember loving before you saw it for example, is a clue one could use to determine that in this way the true future lies. To experience a *whens* is proof we live in a river that runs all ways, always.

+ + +

I've always thought that the best birth story I've ever read is that part in *Huckleberry Finn* when departing his own bloody murder scene, he unfolds himself into a boat and drifts into a mist shot with voices from the shore, this one and the other. Because he was in two places at once and also neither one; because he was between the shores; because he was a bridge or maybe better, he was becoming a bridge; because he was a *whens*.

At least this is how it was for me when I reached for you, when you came to me. Blind as a boat, floating on the currents of other voices, the waves of other's touch, the deeps of pain. When we were both listening for the other. When I was a body of water in which you were surfacing. When I was the sway, the stretch, the snap of molecules. And when from beneath you rose.: *Una ola*, a wave. *Una ala*, a wing.

My own birth story, or the one that is not my mother's to tell, happened one afternoon several years ago in a blackout over the whole lower half of the city. I wanted to be home and foolishly decided to try and navigate the lightless hallways of my apartment building alone to get there. After climbing the stairs in muffled light from high and far off windows, I opened the heavy fire door to my floor, taking a quick look in the grey of what direction I needed to go. But when the door shut behind me, it shut so darkly it was as if it never existed. And when I stepped with fingers outstretched into the deepness, I was unmoored, eyeless. At first I refused to believe in my powerlessness and floundered forward. But with each step I lost myself a little more, feeling that strange vertigo particular to pitch blackness when the borders of the body start to inflate then reduce then waver. When finally I realized I was unable to reach my home, and that I was also incapable of returning the way I had come, I began to cry for help. And after a few minutes someone silently opened their door behind me and an oar of sunlight cracked the dark. I found myself just a few steps from my own door, in a corner. I had been asking for help from a wall.

For the rest of my life, as long as I am, I am there. Pressing myself against the faceless unanswering wall of god when behind me a door opens, a slight wing of light. This was a *whens* also, though a different type. Not a bridge connecting two points but the surge under the span—the flood.

+ + +

A decade ago I was driving with my mother across the country. As we drew closer to the Mississippi we began to hear on the radio that the river was swelling its banks and slowly spreading and cutting off all the passages back east. As we drove, we flew by empty houses next to the highway filled with dark water. Great mouthfuls were torn out of the countryside, and replacing that missing land was a waving stillness whose rising was so incremental, so unstoppable, it was answered internally with an equally black spill of fear.

When we finally made it to the banks of the great river itself, wide as a small sea, we drove straight across its turgid waters on a vast suspended bridge. And just under the surface of that suspended moment of crossing, I carried another moment: when less than a day before in northern Minnesota, I myself had spanned the infant river at its clear source in Lake Itasca, so slight and slender I had put one foot on this shore and one foot on the other.

A flood is just a widening of the between that causes a spilling of what was carried into what had carried it; an eclipse of the holding by what was held. *Après moi le deluge*, the French king says. And what he means is that he is the first singing sign of a reversal of the order of the world (another definition of to flood). But of course, we all can say this. The key is the word *après*, which yes means after, but also means below and most importantly, beyond—the direction whose mercy we all float along.

This is the moment where I admit to you that I have discovered time travel to be possible. And that I was ultimately taught this by translating the pain of a 9th century poet into English. To clarify, I do not mean that a body can move to a different time than the one they were born into, but rather that like a stitch one can gather not just all the shores the self has touched, but others that have been shown to you clearly enough that you may claim them rightly as your own.

Let me explain: we know the way fiction works is that the words cause certain chemicals in your brain to go through a mirroring dance without action that makes the rest of the brain feel as if what is read is happening to it. The way poetry works is similar, but instead of action it involves emotion. And this is where it gets a bit complicated, because emotion isn't mirrored or aped. Like light, it is perceived or it isn't. And if it is perceived or felt then it is original, inseparable from any other time that it is. So a man burning in grief can send an arrow of words forward in time, can through centuries, touch, can prove that years are not opaque but translucent, and thus can let those words, like light, pass through. Perhaps this is why to write is to

dissipate the gloom, dilute the viscosity of the dark, because sometime, somewhere, now, someone else is lightening you.

In the place of my childhood floods came like lightning, they were immediate, a flash, an issue, an opening of water in the desert, an apparition made real. The rivers there are born torrentially like gods, whole and fully formed. Once in the spring after the snowmelt, a friend and I went out to the arroyo in to throw sticks into the whipfast current that had appeared overnight. Suddenly, for a reason I no longer know, I stripped down to my underwear and stepped into the rushing water. I remember being hypnotized by the speed as I walked into its center, the way its force hit me, enclosing me in its power. And then where I had been standing, smiling, feeling the insistent pushing of the water against my legs, I was under, I was spun, I was thrown, down, around, away from the air. Time moves quick as water when you are about to drown, your flailing, your ragged breaths just so many droplets forced to rush in tandem along. Greater force holds you now, and not playfully in the least, tightens its hold.

Then just as I went completely under, I was thrown against a bank, a thin outstretched arm of sand, and suddenly I was free. I walked back upstream to my friend crying on the shore and we went home. My mother made a fire, wrapped me in a blanket, and while I sat cross-legged staring silently through the flames back into the mouth of the water, she brushed my hair.

Fragments, Never Sent

Molly McCully Brown

Dear F,

Throughout high school and college, when I was trying to be a writer, I also tried, regularly, to be a person who kept note- books, because I understood it is what writers do: Joan Didion at the *hotel bar, Wilmington RR on an August Monday morning*. Our father, always with a black Moleskine and a bleeding Pilot pen. I knew I was supposed to be paying attention, taking notes, feeling my head fill up with fragments of language I couldn't afford to forget. So I bought journals, and began them, and left them off, and bought others, and did it again. It's not surprising I was never any good at it: It's hard for me to write more than a few sentences by hand before my spas- tic fingers start to hurt, and then my wrist, and then my arm if I press on for long enough. And, anyway, I'm too precious about objects, too opposed to error, for that kind of record keeping: the whole book always seemed ruined once one page was ugly, or false-started, or banal. But that's less than half the story. I still have all those partial notebooks, boxed up in a storage unit with the rest of what I own, because I am a writer now, and working on a project somewhere between permanent addresses. And, though I haven't really looked at them in years, I know that nearly every started page is fashioned not just as a note, or fragment, or idea, but as a letter meant for you. They all begin *Dear Frances, Dear Franny, Dear F, Dear Sister, Dear Ghost*.

Then, mostly, I go on to talk about the weather, or the book I'm reading, something I overheard, someone I'm drawn to: as if you know what *summer* is, or *September*, or *coffee* or the *radio* or *Jupiter* or a *bruise* or the *stretch of Highway 1 that runs up California's coast*. As if you've ever seen a *cliff*. Everything is something I want to tell you. Or, the whole world feels remarkable when I imagine you in it. Or,

often when I'm bored, or crabby, I remember you are dead and have never run your fingers through your hair, or lit a match, or looked out of a car window or heard anybody call for you across a room, and that knowledge makes things sharp and worthwhile again.

But, after a few paragraphs of any letter, I always run into the fact that I don't know you at all. That you're just a figure I've made up in relief against myself. An imaginary friend, continually conjured way past childhood. An absence I've spent a lifetime papering around. You're just the page, and anything I write to you is selfish. You're a way to lend more weight to what I'm saying to the air.

*

Dear F,

I've been collecting stories about separated twins since I was old enough to look for them. Castor and Pollux hatch from a single egg and grow up riding white horses of foam formed by the ocean waves. When Castor dies in battle, Pollux asks to be a star positioned alongside him rather than go on living alone. Given the choice, he'd rather keep his brother than his body. In an updated *Parent Trap*, which I watched hundreds and hundreds of times, two versions of Lindsay Lohan discover one another at summer camp. They reunite their parents, do the rest of their growing up together. In a newspaper article, two brothers, adopted to different families at birth, know nothing about one another. They are both named Jim. They both get married twice, first to women named Linda, then to women named Betty. They pick up identical smoking habits; they both have dogs named Toy. They live forty-five miles apart, but don't meet until they're 39. They discuss their identical tension headaches and woodworking hobbies. Move in next door to one another. Are never apart again.

When I was a child, I used to imagine one day I'd discover you were out there somewhere living a parallel life. I wanted your death to be a fiction because then my loneliness would be a fiction. And, *look*, I've done it again, arrived already at the selfishness of missing who you could have been for me.

*

Dear F,

Sometimes I think I want to make a list of the things you did feel, and know, when you were alive, those hours when you were. Right here in the world. *The air. The fabric of a hospital blanket. The skin on more than one set of hands. The small heat another body makes while it holds you.* But the list is only solid and comforting like that for a moment before it includes: *The heart monitor yowling. A tube down your tiny throat. Pressure. Electrodes peeling off your skin. Pain. The burning when you can't breathe.* I've had so many tubes down my throat, when I was old enough to recall them. I want none of that for you. I wrote, once, that I wanted a body for you, and it's true. But this is what our body means, as much as any of the rest of it. I should say *bodies*. But now there's only mine and the way it holds the ghost of yours.

*

Dear F,

This is my second year of living, essentially, out of a suitcase. Two Julys ago I paid two men and their wives to pack up the apartment where I'd lived through graduate school and move everything I own into an improbably small storage unit off a highway on the outskirts of a town in Mississippi: All my books, my framed artwork; my bed and the bulk of my clothing; the huge, cheap corkboard where, for years, I'd pinned drafts of poems in progress and postcards from people I loved. I left my guitar there; the black cowboy boots I'd bought and had refurbished when I lived in Texas; the two

stuffed sheep that belonged to the two of us in the NICU, wrapped in a blanket, safely in their own box. They're the only thing I own that you ever touched.

I spent a few weeks visiting our parents in Virginia, and then ten months in Arkansas for a short-term job at a literary magazine. Before I arrived, the magazine's staff outfitted an apartment for me, furnished with donations, garage sale finds, and the labor of volunteers. Because they were kind and conscientious, and because they knew the move was jarring and disorienting in the way such temporary relocations often are, they devoted a lot of attention to ensuring the apartment didn't feel sterile and staged. They hung framed paintings on the walls, left a woven throw-blanket on the couch and a blue clay rooster with wire legs on the little kitchen table. The whole place was haphazard and warm, but without any of my own things, it had the effect of making me feel, in the months I lived there, as if I'd stepped into the frame of some- one else's life, someone with their own particular taste, and rhythms, and eccentricities. On the phone with friends, I joked wryly that I sometimes had the sensation I'd ousted the apartment's previous inhabitant and just assumed her life in the middle of a workweek; sat down on her beat-up green couch, used her checkered oven mitts, her scuffed blender, her blue poly-blend towels as if they belonged to me, as if no one would notice I had taken her place.

What I didn't tell anyone: Occasionally, I convinced myself the room around me was filled not with the cast-offs of strangers, but with things you had accumulated and loved. That it was your life I'd stepped suddenly into the center of: quotidian, tangible, ongoing. I picked up the soap dish in the bathroom: a cheap plastic clamshell, just some beachfront souvenir, and felt a rush of tenderness, thought, *Thank God, she's been to the ocean.*

Dear F,

I always think of you more around our birthday, but the summer I turned twenty, I couldn't stop thinking, *She'll have been dead for twenty years*. Something about the roundness of the number, the magnitude of two decades, some presumed arrival of my own adulthood, threw your absence into sharp relief. I dreamed about you every night for weeks. You were always far away, across a river or a wide field, looking back at me with my own eyes. You were always still and sitting on the ground. You never came for me, or reached toward me, but you looked and looked. In the dreams, I always had to be the one to walk away and leave you.

*

Dear F,

You come to me at the strangest times. It isn't always my face that does it, although that's an easy trigger. More often, actually, it happens when I am putting on my shoes and my eye catches on the slight, pale plank of my foot, or when I am calling to someone across a great distance and I hear my own voice ringing in the air. A man brings my hand slowly to his mouth, kisses the heel of my palm. My first thought: *This could be your hand*. And then: *You'll never have a lover*.

*

Dear F,

I wonder how often our mother looks at me and misses you.

*

Dear F,

We were born too early to have ever opened our eyes. I just realized that means we never saw each other.

*

Dear F,

I hope you weren't afraid.

Egg Face

Hea-Ream Lee

My face is peeling. I bring the back of my hand to meet my cheek and when I rub, white flakes of skin peel up and slough off in little rolls. I used to try to mitigate this with moisturizer, spackling thick creams and pastes onto my dry skin like impasto on canvas. I'd smear on oils, viscous and shiny and aromatic, sucked out of apothecary bottles with little glass droppers. But now I know once the skin starts to peel there is nothing to be done except help it along.

Sometimes I want to take the industrial strength green Korean loofah, my sandpaper mitten, and just scrub at my face until huge chunks of flesh tear away and roll into brown fleshy noodles and fall to the floor. Afterwards, I won't be bloody and flayed, all raw nerve endings and hamburger meat, I'll be smooth as a peeled egg, soft and firm and pliant to the touch.

When I was a girl I went through a ghost story phase. Not white people ghost stories, which I felt immune to somehow—another thing, like being grounded and getting C's, that didn't apply to me—but Korean ghost stories, starring young female specters in white robes with long, bedraggled black hair. One of them involved a ghost who was often glimpsed from behind on dark mountain paths, her limbs luminescent in the moonlight. When a traveler would catch up to her, wondering why a beautiful young woman was wandering the mountains alone, she would spin around and her face would be totally blank, no features. She's the 달걀귀신, the egg ghost, terrifying because you have no idea how she feels, and isn't that the most dangerous kind of woman?

My mom and I talk on the phone and the last thing she tells me is to wear sunscreen and a hat. *Always*, she says. Lest my face go wrinkly, lest my visage be marred by a spray of sunspots, lest my features sink into the vast plain of my face, eyes like gleaming stones in a dried up stream bed.

Lately I find myself falling silent in professional settings, in classrooms, casual conversations. A self-inflicted erasure, a scrubbing away of words and thoughts and ideas. I wish I could locate this muteness, prod it the way I once dissected fibrous grey owl pellets in science class as a kid, metal probes gently teasing apart the clot of tissue until I could see tiny mouse bones, delicate and pearly white, amidst the fluff. What part of my silence is who I am, and what part is how I was brought up? What part is external, structural, the part that tells me I am other, and therefore undeserving of a voice? What part of it is about a desire for control, a fear of being misunderstood?

Nobly born Korean children in the *Koryŏ* dynasty used to wash their faces with an essence made from peach blossoms. This was said to make their complexions as clear and light as white jade. Koreans' obsession with flawless skin, that is to say, pale skin, that is to say, white skin, predated the country's growing post-war obsession with western beauty ideals by millennia.

I think about Korean farmers in agrarian times wearing full faces of makeup--thick layers of foundation and eyeshadow--to protect them from the sun as they bent in rice paddies, submerged to the knees.

I ask my Korean friends about this story, believing it to be common if apocryphal, and to my surprise, they don't know it, nor can I locate any trace of it on the internet. I always assumed it was my mom who told it to me when I was a child, but when I ask, she has no idea what I'm

talking about. Was it something I read in a book? Was it something I made up, the natural outpocketing of a desire to connect to the people who looked like me, who seemed so far away? The agglomeration of a life lived in skin, the accumulated debris of two societies to which whiteness equals beauty, purity, power? I touch my face and it's like I'm standing in the rice paddy, too. I can almost feel the perfectly winged eyeliner and pale, flawless cheeks turned to the sun, unmarred by the sweat of hard labor. I feel the swish of cool water around my calves, the warm cloth stretched across my back as I work and I'm protected and strong, and beautiful I suppose.

To me, female Korean beauty is really about silence. About demureness, about winnowing oneself down not through exercise, which would yield unsightly musculature, but through self-denial. Or through surgery, the skin of the face peeled up and the bones underneath broken and ground down and fused and then blanketed again with the skin, always the skin. A certain slimness of the limbs, a sexless and pure kind of silence. It's about being unthreatening, about emotional blankness conveyed through blurred eyeshadow, or blush buffed out just so. A beauty of a certain kind of body, a certain kind of whiteness--not Whiteness exactly, but whiteness nonetheless.

But who am I to say? I'm not Korean, not really. Not quite American either, of course. Can you hate something and still, shamefully, desire it?

Someday I'll be beautiful, with panna cotta skin, poreless like a puddle of milk. Someday my face will gleam, luminous, and that light will get brighter and brighter until you can't see my dark eyes, my smudge of a mouth, until all that is visible is the contour of my face, an oval of resplendent light, and I'll turn and all will regard my beauty and my terrible, terrible silence.

As If To Say

Michael Torres

AMERICAN DREAM

In the United States a man can make a profit fixing used cars and flipping them. My father fills his driveway with vehicles. Parks them in the street. “Five cars at one time,” he tells my mother in Spanish. “Can you believe it — a poor boy from Mexico with all this?”

BREAKFAST

Step 1: Sit next to your father at the table.

Step 2: Pour milk into a bowl of cinnamon Life.

Step 3: Position the cereal box between the two of you.

Step 4: Read the back panel.

Step 5: Repeat Step 4 until he leaves the table.

CONSTITUTION

My father memorizes the Preamble to the Constitution for his naturalization interview. He records himself reading it on a cassette tape: “We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union . . .” He plays it back, studies his voice.

Before leaving Mexico, my father worked on his grandfather’s ranch, but the opportunities he was hearing about in the North seemed too great to pass up. At nineteen he decided to cross the border for the first time. My father learned English from John Wayne movies. Now he listens to his own voice on the tape recorder. He rewinds and records it again, trying to sound more American.

DEGREES OF SEPARATION

If I need to ask my father a question, I ask my mother. I've always done this, to get around the fact that he and I hardly speak. It's not that we have nothing to say. We just don't know how to say it. He doesn't speak English very well, and I don't speak Spanish very well, so neither of us is even going to try. We talk through my mother. She is the only one in the family who really knows him.

All I have learned about my father's childhood has come from her. Here is a story she told me: My father had never seen a bicycle until the day his friend rode up on one. The boy taught my father how to find his balance, how to ride. The boy wanted the bike back, but my father wouldn't stop pedaling around the ranch, and the boy finally left. The next day the boy retrieved his bike. So my father decided to make his own bike from wood. For days he gathered scrap lumber and worked on it, a hammer in his hand, nails in his mouth. He built as much as he could but was unable to finish it. There was no way for him to construct a wooden chain, to get the gears to turn.

ENGLISH

My father wants his four American-born children to speak to him in English so he will learn the language better. He thinks he'll find more job opportunities this way. My first-generation Mexican American mother speaks perfect English *and* Spanish. Her family owned a ranch in Southern California. She went to charm school. She's not dark skinned. She helps my father navigate his double life as a Mexican and an aspiring American.

FIGHT

I'm fifteen when I come home with a black eye. I hang my backpack on a chair and yell, "I'm home!" A moment passes; then my father yells, "OK!" He says my mother and sister are at the store. Our conversations are like this: short and in English. I call to him again, asking if I can borrow his car so I can go see a girl. He enters the kitchen with the keys and sees my eye. I wonder if he'll be mad, but he doesn't say anything. He just winces. I want him to ask how it happened, but he doesn't. He stares at me as if it hurts him, too. Does

this make me happy? He drops the keys in my hand and asks if I need money. He presses a twenty to my palm, his way of showing love.

GETTING HOME

My father starts the car after the swap meet and says, “I don’t know how to get home.” I’m only eight. He wants to know if I can find my way back without him. I sit up and look over the dashboard. My father keeps his foot on the brake, waiting. “Go straight,” I say. He drives straight.

For the next fifteen minutes I direct him to turn left and right. He is pretending to be lost, claiming a sudden case of “amnesia.” I begin to wonder if he knows who I am. Somehow it is easier for us to speak to each other like this. “Turn,” I say, watching the road. “It’s that way.”

HIJOS (SONS)

In my early twenties I tell a friend that I don’t talk to my father much. She says it’s because I don’t speak Spanish. This friend doesn’t let her sons speak English at home. All day they speak English at school. At home she insists they use Spanish. If her kids don’t speak Spanish, she says, how will they talk to their grandparents, learn their stories and history?

IDIOMS

In the rare conversations I had with my father growing up, he used American sayings he’d picked up. On Sundays, heading out for the swap meet, he’d say to me: “You ready, Freddy? Let’s get this show on the road.” To him, being an American was like being an actor: you just had to learn your lines.

JAULA DE ORO (GOLD CAGE)

There’s a song by the band Los Tigres del Norte that includes a bilingual exchange between an undocumented immigrant and his Americanized son. The father in the song can neither forget nor return to his homeland, and because he fears deportation, he hardly ever ventures out in public. The United States for

him is a gold cage. He asks his son, in Spanish, if he would like to go back to Mexico: “Escúchame, hijo. ¿Te gustaría que regresáramos a vivir a México?” The son answers in English: “I don’t want to go back to Mexico. No way, Dad.”

KITE

I’m ten and looking through the window at the neighborhood boys, who are talking to my father. I know they are speaking Spanish because he is smiling. The language must sound like home to him, like his village, Yahualica, a place I have never been and whose name I can barely pronounce. I picture a dirt road, a wooden bicycle. The boys want to fly the kite my father has made for me. I hate those boys for the access they have to him. Spanish is the key that unlocks the door to my father.

LENGUA (TONGUE)

My tongue is uncomfortable with Spanish. I speak it slowly and carefully, if at all, certain I will use the incorrect verb conjugation. I fear native Spanish speakers will wonder who I am, where I belong. There is a video of me speaking Spanish on my fourth birthday. Just one word, but it’s there, clear and confident, as if even my thoughts were in Spanish: My extended family — *primos, tíos, y tías*; cousins, uncles, and aunts — have gathered under the shade trees in our front yard. My father is performing his favorite party trick, roping my older brother with a lasso. Then my brother walks out of the frame, and I cross my father’s path. He swings the lasso above his head, throws it over me, and pulls me toward him. Angry, I shrug off his rope, toss it to the ground in front of him, and yell, “¡Tu!” — *you*. But that’s incorrect. Watching the recording, I shake my head at my younger self. I should’ve used the formal *usted*, as a gesture of respect.

On screen I run away. Again my father swings the lasso over his head and lets it fly.

MACHOS (MALES)

My best friend's uncles live next door. These macho undocumented Mexican men talk to my father from their side of the fence. If I go outside and say, "Hi," they demand I say it in Spanish: "¡En Español!" These men tower over me and bend down to speak with their Marlboro breath. I never reply to them in Spanish, but my father doesn't yell at me for this. He just laughs. My father won't speak to me in English — not in front of the neighbors. Still, he is proud to have produced a son who can fully embrace an American identity. At the age of eight I am cocky, brazen. I stick my tongue out at the neighbors when they ask for Spanish. I am an extension of my father's American Dream. At the same time, he cannot fully embrace his own Americanness, because he's afraid he will forget where he came from. And he cannot do that, especially not in front of these men. He remains loyal to his Mexican identity. Ultimately our loyalties will begin to divide us.

Perhaps my father didn't realize he was raising a son who would become a contradiction to him: A son who is both Mexican and American. A brown boy with a Spanish last name and English pouring from his mouth.

NATURALIZATION

The parents of the woman I am dating have some cement in their yard that needs to be broken up. I offer to help. They are naturalized American citizens originally from Mexico, and they like their daughter's suitors to be Spanish speaking, college bound, and *con respeto* — respectful. I bring my gloves and shovel, a cap to keep the sun off. I prove my worth through my work. I have a lunch bag with almonds and a frozen bottle of water. I swing a sledgehammer through the California summer morning and stay until the job's done. When my girlfriend's mother speaks to me in Spanish, I try to think of the Spanish words to reply, but I can't. I imagine she doesn't see me as a real Mexican. I'm a foreigner wherever I go.

Sometimes I wonder if my father ever stopped feeling foreign. When he first arrived in the United States, his job supervisors could not or would not call him by his name, Juan. Instead they called him Johnny: "Good morning, Johnny." And my father had to smile and say, "Hello," in his best John Wayne English.

I imagine my father getting ready for work. He buttons up a shirt with a name stitched to the chest, over his heart. A name that is not his.

OBSERVATION

When I move to Minnesota, no one I meet speaks Spanish. I should be relieved, but here my brown skin is loud. I learn that some white people pay good money to make their skin as dark as mine. I learn a dead deer in a truck bed can be a rite of passage for a boy. I've never felt as Mexican as I do just standing at the gas station in Minnesota, filling up my tank. It would take me twenty-six hours, driving southwest, to get home to Southern California.

PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Be a go-getter, but don't get caught up in the moment. Keep that poker face and play it by ear. If you're last but not least, you can work your way up. Little by little. It's all in a day's work. Actions speak louder than words. When opportunity knocks, reach for the stars on the other side of the tracks, where the grass is greener. In the home of the brave. Where the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Who is the father of this country? Name one of the two longest rivers in the United States. Where do you work? What does "We the People" mean to you? Name one state that borders Mexico. Name one problem that led to the Civil War. Who are your friends laughing on the other side of the fence? What time is your son coming home?

RESULTS

My father passed his citizenship test. He prepared by memorizing the answers to common questions, so he could pretend to speak English during the interview. Perhaps my father and I are not so different. I've been

in school all my life: taking tests, collecting degrees, refining that résumé, pretending to speak Spanish and sometimes, with a lot of luck, succeeding.

SKIN

When my father decided to leave his grandfather's Mexican ranch to pursue a better life in the United States, he waited three months. Three months, he figured, is how long it would take for the calluses on his palms to heal; for his skin, out of the sun, to lighten. He knew he could get through the border patrol on a seventy-two-hour visitor's pass with his hazel eyes and smooth hands and light complexion.

TORRES

The first time a publication arrived in the mail with a poem of mine in it, my mother said my father pointed to our last name on the back cover and smiled at her as if to say, *I told you so*.

UNDOCUMENTED

For many years I didn't know my father was deported multiple times and had to cross the border again and again before he finally got a green card and lived here long enough to become a citizen. The only story I knew was of his arrival and the realization of his dream: a house and car for his family, a large front yard for his kids to run around in. Now I know that he worked in cotton fields and factories at first, places that could pay him under the table. I know that for a while he wrote the name of my mother's high school on job applications that asked about his education. (It was easier to get away with this back then.) When Mom said, "But you didn't go there," my father would laugh and say, "Technically, I did *go* there" — meaning, to talk to her.

In the summer of 2005 I took a job as a gardener, mowing lawns and raking leaves with my best friend's father and uncles. These men were Mexicans who had entered the United States without legal papers, men who never took their eyes off the road, who always drove the speed limit. They worked from early morning

until all the houses and businesses they'd been assigned that day were done. I worked by their side in triple-digit heat because Curtis, our boss, reasoned, "If the mailman can work, so can you." Each day I'd come home more sunburned. In the shower I ached as I watched dirt swirl down the drain. I was nineteen, the same age my father was when he first crossed the border.

The day I started the gardening job, I wanted to prove I could endure, and I made the mistake of bringing only a bottle of water for lunch. At noon, when I had nothing to eat, my best friend's father, José, offered me his cup of tapioca pudding. I shook my head. He smiled and lifted the cup to me again. I took it, said, "Gracias," and slurped it down. I never failed to bring a full lunch again.

In the fall I left to attend community college. My courses were planned out. Curtis said I could come back anytime.

A few years later Immigration picked up José. Within a week a new worker had arrived to take his place: drive the truck, sculpt the rosebushes, and shape an elephant from a client's overgrown hedge.

VERIFICATION

I consulted spanishdictionary.com to check some of the Spanish words in this essay. I won't tell you how many times.

WALLS, TYPES OF

Language. Machismo. Border fences. Silence.

X _____

When I first dreamed of being a writer, I chose the pen name Michael de la Torre. I thought de la Torre projected power and a European heritage. I practiced writing it in cursive. I imagined signing documents, contracts.

Y

Spanish for and. A connecting of what might otherwise remain separated. *Tu y yo*. You and I.

ZACATE (GRASS)

When I remember my father at his happiest, he is watering the grass: his thumb over the end of the hose, spraying the front lawn in a slow back-and-forth motion, his other hand in his pocket. He scans the street, watches each car that goes by. Is this — his house, his cars, his American-born son, his well-maintained lawn — what he dreamed of? Or is he thinking of what he lost, what he can't go back to?

Perhaps this is actually the memory of when I was happiest.

My soccer ball thuds against the wall in the front yard. I could be seven or eight. I kick the ball closer to him, stop it under my foot, exaggerate my breathing. He takes his thumb from the hose. I don't need to say anything. In this moment we are un *papá y su hijo*: a father and his son. I turn my head to the hose and drink.