

White Magic: The Intersection and Application of Magical Realism  
And Transpersonal Psychology

A dissertation submitted to the  
Casperson School  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Letters

Advisors: Dr. Laura Winters

Dr. Liana Piehler

Yessenia Guglielmi

Drew University

Madison, New Jersey

May 2023



## ABSTRACT

### White Magic: The Intersection and Application of Transpersonal Psychology and Magical Realism.

Yessenia Guglielmi

As a Mental Health Clinician for the past twenty years, focusing on transpersonal psychology, trauma, and healing, I have witnessed not only the debilitating effects of trauma and stress, but also the potential for hope and healing. As a writer, my creative instincts have also led me to explore the use of creative writing and magical realism as integral to and part of the healing journey. This dissertation is an autoethnography, a personal narrative akin to a memoir, as well as scholarly reflection fused with other genres of creative writing. I use short fiction, life writing, and poetry to address and subsume my personal healing journey as both a Mexican American and a Mental Health Clinician coping with non-ordinary states of consciousness. This research explores the integration of a transpersonal modality based in ancient shamanic wisdom from Mexico in the form of psilocybin with creative writing, utilizing Magical Realism as part of a cultural intervention for healing past trauma. Self-awareness and self-discovery are main goals of transpersonal psychology. The use of psilocybin as a treatment modality facilitated a process of healing, re-connection to spirituality, and a deeper understanding of my extra sensory gifts. These transpersonal benefits reinvigorated my career, purpose, and sense of connectedness in order to heal past trauma. The use of magical realism in creative writing encouraged the development of voice to allow my trauma, as well as others, to be heard, expressed, and affirmed. This gift of voice—given to the previously voiceless—is manifested through the use of creative writing and magical realism, creative and artistic opportunities to process and teach ways to heal trauma.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Expanding Paradigms .....	3
Magical Realism .....	5
PTSD.....	7
Transpersonal Treatment .....	12
Trancendent Experiences .....	14
Connection With the Transpersonal.....	17
Combating Stigma .....	21
Silence and Testimony.....	24
Creative Writing Introduction.....	28
Memories, Weirdness & Wonder .....	35
Mexican White Magic.....	36
Cardinal.....	40
Valentina .....	41
El Gran Vadon .....	63
Love .....	66
Passing .....	67

Stephen W .....	77
Flowers.....	80
Reckless Driving.....	83
Eligible Recipients .....	85
High Strangeness .....	87
Follow Me.....	89
Malva .....	91
Our Song.....	105
You may not call me Girl.....	108
Thunder.....	112
Pocha.....	125
A Black Night Sky .....	129
Eye For An Eye.....	132
Pressure.....	137
Fractals.....	141
La Dama de Los Espejos.....	142
The Time I Spoke to God, A Mental Health Clinician’s Journey with Psilocybin .....	149
Sage.....	157
Still Howling.....	159
Bibliography .....	160

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With deep gratitude to my dissertation committee Dr. Liana Piehler and Dr. Laura Winters for all their support and encouragement through this process. Thank you to my professors at Drew University for a wonderful experience. This dissertation is dedicated with deep gratitude to my grandmothers, my beautiful daughters, my husband, my mother, my brother, my father, and my entire family. Thank you for your unwavering support.

## INTRODUCTION

### White Magic: The Intersection and Application of Magical Realism and Transpersonal Psychology

This dissertation is part autoethnography, which is a personal narrative akin to a memoir. It also contains scholarly reflection and creative writing using magical realism. My writing reflects the personal healing journey of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) from twenty years of service as a mental health clinician. Vicarious trauma is defined as a therapist's reaction to listening to clients' traumatic material. "Empathy in validating another's suffering makes the clinician vulnerable, vicarious trauma refers to negative changes in the clinician's view of self, others, and the world resulting from repeated empathic engagement with patients' trauma-related thoughts, memories, and emotions,"(McCann, pg131). Working in New Jersey where I was one of the few Mexican American bilingual mental health clinicians, coping with limited peer support, along with being overloaded with Spanish speaking clients while working in different hospital and clinical settings contributed to post traumatic stress over my twenty years of clinical practice.

It is difficult to document, analyze and theorize how PTSD impacts the lives of other mental health, social workers, or other health care providers, let alone the healing process they undergo because each will experience these symptoms differently. Inevitably, this dissertation is based on my own experiences; therefore, I can only write, analyze and reflect on my own journey to explore some important ideas and answer key questions to inform my own practice as a transpersonal clinician. My research is situated within the framework of transpersonal theory— "the branch of psychology that studies states of consciousness, identity, spiritual growth, and levels of human function beyond those commonly accepted as healthy and normal" (Strohl, p.397). The use of an autoethnographic approach and self-qualitative narrative inquiry research study examines the transformative and empowering dynamics of creative writing using magical realism and memoir in connection with transcendent experiences to highlight the relevance of writing as a transpersonal practice and its possible clinical application in treatment.

The effects of PTSD in my life were long lasting and impacting on many levels. As I was beginning to come to understand the symptoms I was experiencing, I also began to connect with my lifelong coping with non-ordinary states of consciousness that have been present since childhood. Utilizing research to try to find answers to my state of mind and this sense of a spiritual crisis, I became acquainted with transpersonal psychology. Suddenly, my experience was no longer so isolating and the opportunity to accept my extrasensory gifts could be acknowledged and integrated in a healing way. By highlighting the use of transpersonal psychology along with utilizing writing in the genre of Magical Realism was the first step in deepening my understanding into my own experience. Recently, by incorporating psilocybin as a shamanic healing modality I was able to expand my personal growth, transformation, and spiritual connection while reducing stigma will be intimately explored.

Transpersonal therapy is based on transpersonal theory, which is multidimensional, integral, and transformative. During my healing research, I learned how transpersonal psychology complemented the therapeutic approach, which facilitated my healing from trauma. The goals of transpersonal psychology are social transformation, while supporting personal transformation, with the aim to move away from pathology. This research explores the integration of a transpersonal modality based in ancient shamanic wisdom from Mexico (i.e. psilocybin and creative writing utilizing Magical Realism) as part of a cultural intervention for healing past trauma. Creative writing encourages the sharing of one's story even if a person is still healing or feeling fractured from their trauma. The use of psilocybin as a treatment modality facilitated a process of healing, re-connection to spirituality, and a deeper understanding of my extra sensory gifts. The transpersonal benefits extended to reinvigorate my career, purpose, and connectedness to heal past trauma. This self-awareness and self-discovery are main goals of transpersonal psychology. The use of magical realism in creative writing encourages the development of voice to continue to process and to teach others.

Stanislav Grof, a pioneer of Transpersonal Psychology and researcher for over forty years, has advocated for western psychiatry's need for urgent revision and the clarification of misconceptions. In his book, *Psychology of the Future* (2000), Grof examines non ordinary states of consciousness, paying specific attention to healing,



transformative and evolutionary potential of these experiences. Even more significantly, Grof sharply critiques those scientific approaches that take “leading paradigms for an accurate and definitive description of reality” and whose materialistic explanations of reality cannot account for recent observations in consciousness research (Kling, 2019). The continued expansion in psychedelic assisted therapy and the decriminalization and regulation of psilocybin, ketamine, and other psychedelics to allow clinicians expansion from Western psychiatry and psychology becomes increasingly urgent; especially as we begin to heal from the collective trauma of the COVID-19 Pandemic and seek to enhance trauma informed care for future generations. Stanislav Grof has been a strong advocate for the need of change, “western psychiatry is seriously biased in at least two significant ways. It is ethnocentric, which means that it considers its own view of the human psyche and of reality to be the only correct one and superior to all others. It is pragmacentric, meaning that it takes into consideration only experiences and observations in the ordinary state of consciousness” (Grof 2000). This lack of inclusion of non-ordinary states of consciousness creates gaps in care and avoids the possibility of utilizing powerful tools to create healing experiences and possible cures. Many psychologists and mental health providers are documenting their experiences in self-published books and in collections with organizations that are researching consciousness with limited inclusion from larger organizations. Changing this is ultimately the goal with the hopes of seeking more treatment modalities to treat patients in this ever-changing landscape of needs developing with ever growing diverse populations.

## EXPANDING PARADIGMS

The Consciousness and Contact Research Institute (CCRI) takes an integrative approach to the entire spectrum of psychophysical anomalies. The membership in the CCRI includes a diverse professional spectrum of professionals in the fields of astrophysics, theoretical physics, psychiatry, psychology, neuroscience, quantum biology, sociology, information sciences, parapsychology, medical doctors and an expanding list of professions learning and contributing to continued research. The CCRI uses the term

“experiencer,” whereas the British Association for Counseling and Psychotherapy define as anomalous experiences (AE’s) in the literature This term includes a person who has experienced the contact modalities in the following form/s: Near Death Experience (NDE), Out of Body Experience/Astral Travels, Spirit Communications, Psychic-Extra Sensory Perceptions (PSI-ESP), Reincarnation, Remote Viewing, Psychedelics, or UFO.

Transpersonal psychology views these non-ordinary states of consciousness or holotropic states as *transpersonal*. “This term literally means reaching beyond the personal or transcending the personal. The experiences that originate on this level involve transcendence of our usual boundaries (our body and ego) and of the limitations of our three-dimensional space and linear time that restrict our perception of the world in the ordinary state of consciousness.” (Grof, pg 56) Like Grof, the CCRI also includes phenomena from several different levels of consciousness. In Grof’s body of work, he has included the following transpersonal experiences:

Transcendence of spacial boundaries, transcendence of temporal boundaries, experiential exploration of microworld, experiential extension beyond space-time and consensus reality, synchronicities, spontaneous psychoid events, intentional psychokinesis. Within each of these transpersonal experiences are experiences such as oneness with life and all creation, psychic phenomena involving transcendence of space, ancestral experiences, visits to parallel universes, encounters with spirit guides and suprahuman beings, intuitive understanding of universal symbols, creative inspiration, and ceremonial magic all of which connect to me.

Although “transpersonal experiences occur in the process of deep individual self-exploration,” (Grof, pg 63) On one hand coming from within an individual's psyche “on the other hand, they seem to be tapping directly without mediation of the senses, into sources of information that are clearly far beyond the conventional reach of the individual.”(Grof pg. 63) These extrasensory experiences relate to the source of creativity and exploration creative writing utilizes in storytelling, story re-telling, and re-writing traumatic experiences which engage the mind into higher levels of consciousness where

“intuition, inspiration, visions of divine light, audible illumination, and higher presences of high archetypal forms of our own being.”(Grof pg 66.)

Through the CCRI people from diverse fields and backgrounds from all over the world have an opportunity to share resources, experiences, and create community. This has facilitated more clinicians and people from many different professions to document their stories in the hopes of raising awareness and educating people. By sharing these stories it promotes a sense of normalcy and limits pathologizing experiences. The limited teaching in graduate psychology, mental health counseling and social work on transpersonal and on ordinary states of consciousness, ancient shamanic practices, and the whole spectrum of different phenomena is an area that needs to increase in both visibility and in research to move from the pseudo-science realm and into the everyday life of people and science. Without this change, thousands of people who are giving voice to these experiences will remain marginalized and continue to face stigma. Underrepresented in research and treatment, and the field of psychology is underdeveloped in its potential to provide a greater depth of understanding about consciousness and its potential in the future.

### MAGICAL REALISM

I was seeing myself and I couldn't seem to get better. I struggled with the collection of memories and experiences that had accumulated inside of myself. I wanted to untangle so many emotions, resentments, fears, doubts, and helplessness without falling apart. The “show” had to go on, I needed to be a mother, wife, sister, daughter to those who relied on me. I needed to continue to work in the mental health field regardless of how I felt about it to provide for my family. I was too young to retire, not independently wealthy and had to find a way to reconnect to that side of myself that had enthusiasm for the clinical work that at times I no longer wanted to do.

El Realismo Maravilloso, which translates to “The Realism Wonderful,” has a different meaning in Spanish than it has in English. It asks readers to question if the real is wonderful, and if we can find the wonderful in our existence with the help of magical thinking. These reframed narratives provide us with the hope that we can get through our most difficult moments and traumatic experiences.

“Typically, readers of magical realist fiction must look beyond the realistic detail and accept the dual ontological structure of the text, in which the natural and the supernatural, the explainable and the miraculous, coexist side by side in a kaleidoscopic reality, whose apparently random angles are deliberately left to the audience’s discretion” (Arva, pg 11). This coexistence resonated with me and my experience in my everyday life. How could I love my children so deeply while at the same time struggle to go to work everyday to take care of them? My kaleidoscopic reality of strange fractals in juxtaposition created curiosity in me. I would write about them noticing other areas in my reality of moments where what is said vs what is done continued to contradict. The absurdity and humor began to emerge and I wanted to expand upon them in re-written stories that took parts of my reality, circumstances and expanded them into strange new places.

Magical realism was a term coined by Franz Roh in 1925 and since that time the definition of Magical Realism has continued to evolve. It is a blending of the real and the magical; since 1967, Gabriel Marquez, Isabella Allende, Toni Morrison, and many more have continued to expand magic, narrative, and history. As Rios asserts, “Magical Realism is about possibilities, so that trying to define it is a way of wounding or diminishing it. Simply said, its definition is different every time. But the reason is simple: we are different, each of us from the other, and Magical Realism is, if anything, a literature of moments involving individual human beings, not generalities about them.” (Rios, pg.52) This definition was freeing to me, it meant magical realism in my stories could be many things, many forms, and continually changing. It provided me with total freedom in my writing and characters I wanted to develop. The focus on moments in my life and trying to see the magic I had missed in those moments or could have expanded upon gave me ideas for my writing. Situations that were occurring around me in which I felt helpless suddenly gave me a new challenge in forcing myself to try to imagine different outcomes, realities, dystopian worlds, and possibilities.

Luis Leal, in his “Magical Realism in Spanish American Literature” (1967), says this:

Magical Realism is, more than anything else, an attitude toward reality.... In Magical Realism the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts. The principle thing is not the creation of imaginary beings or worlds but the discovery of the mysterious relationship between man and his circumstances. In Magical Realism key events have no logical or psychological explanation. (Rios, pg.53)

I went back to a time when I felt hopeful about my future, in college as an undergrad discovering the work of Isabel Allende's *House of the Spirits* and the connection, I had felt in her work to my own family history. I was fearful of the connection to extrasensory perception, mediumship, and unlocking something in myself that I would not be able to control or manage. I felt safer exploring these sides of myself in writing and allowed myself to connect through Magical Realism as it was the most comforting place to do so that allowed for the most possibility and flexibility. In doing so, I was able to unlock not only my gifts but to also connect to a community that offered guidance and support.

## PTSD

When a mental health clinician is living with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), an individual is acutely aware of the limitations of current treatment modalities. One is also aware that during a pandemic and when one is needed in service, it is an ill opportune time to be unable to work. "In fact, health care workers (HCWs) represent the first-line fighters treating patients with COVID-19, and every day, they face a high risk of being infected and, consequently, of spreading the virus to other people. HCWs are thus facing critical situations that increase their risk of suffering from the psychological impact of dealing with several unfavorable conditions, with consequences that might extend from psychological distress to mental health symptoms (d'Ettorre G, 2021). My experiences with emotional stress prior to the pandemic from job related trauma and illness is a good example of what many healthcare workers encounter. In lieu of presenting a problem, I offer an opportunity to explore how creative writing and a transpersonal approach helped in my healing, resulting in transformation, growth, and

empowerment. It is difficult to document, analyze and theorize how my PTSD impacts the lives of other mental health, social workers, or other health care providers, let alone the healing process they undergo because each will experience these symptoms differently.

Inevitably, based on my own experiences. I can only write, analyze and reflect on my own journey to explore some important ideas and answer key questions to inform my own practice as a transpersonal clinician. My research is situated within the framework of transpersonal theory– “the branch of psychology that studies states of consciousness, identity, spiritual growth, and levels of human function beyond those commonly accepted as healthy and normal” (Strohl, p.397). The use of an autoethnographic approach and self-qualitative narrative inquiry research study examines the transformative and empowering dynamics of creative writing using magical realism and memoir in connection with transcendent experiences to highlight the relevance of writing as a transpersonal practice. A transcendent experience is defined as an experience that goes beyond the ordinary (Raab,pg 3). The linking of transpersonal theory and autoethnography has been researched in other journal articles incorporating the work of Maslow, Jung, and Grof along with other theorists in the past. Those theses and journal articles focused on memoir by facilitating another level of processing and expanding with magical realism, may be added contributions to the ongoing exploration in transpersonal psychology, which has the ability to expand research methods by its nature of personal exploration.

Magical Realism is a form of storytelling that also involves deeper self-reflection, self-discovery, interconnectedness, self- awareness, cultural relevance, and self-empowerment. This form of writing can be therapeutic and healing in ways that help the writer to challenge themselves to expand beyond what is possible and conventionally recognized and out of an ego-centric view of our nature of possibilities. It provides for limitless exploration and potential. Raab (2013) writes that in addition to the process of empowering the researcher, an autoethnography-- like memoir writing has the ability to transcend a person’s account by linking the story to broader social implications and contexts. “There remains a minimal amount of empirical literature supporting the

transformative and empowering dynamics of memoir writing that is inspired by pivotal or transcendent experiences” (Raab, pg 6). In Pennebaker & Smyth’s 2016 3<sup>rd</sup> edition book *“Opening up by Writing It Down, How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain*, they explore a disclosure process model. “We believe that emotional disclosure and expressive writing very likely work as the result of a cascade of multiple processes that play out over time. As outlined throughout the book, traumatic experiences immediately disrupt people’s daily lives, provoking major emotional upheavals and requiring a rethinking of large parts of their lives” (Pennebaker & Smyth,pg.155). They go on to state, “a more insidious pattern unfolds if people are unable or unwilling to talk openly about their emotional upheavals.”(Pennebaker & Smyth, pg. 155). This is particularly true of mental health, social workers, and other health care workers who find it difficult to engage in their own counseling.

Utilizing different modalities for treatment of PTSD remains an important challenge post pandemic. Pennebaker & Smyth outline different approaches to expressive writing which includes,

“Standard expressive writing: Deepest thoughts and feelings about a stressful or traumatic event. Cognitive processing: Thoughts and feelings with an attempt to derive more understanding and insight (cognitive processing) regarding a traumatic or stressful event. Exposure: Deepest thoughts and emotions about the same event across all writing sessions to promote emotional habituation/adaptation. Benefit finding: Identify an event and the focus on the positive aspects of the experience; this might include a focus on how you have grown or changed as a person due to the event and how you might be better equipped to meet future challenges. Best possible future self: Think about your life in the future and write about this life as if you have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all of your life goals.” (Pennebaker & Smyth, pg163)

The inclusion of magical realism as an approach to expressive writing allows for transpersonal experiences to be considered as an important part of a narrative. It allows for the cultural inclusion of folklore, myth, history, magic, spiritualism, spirituality, and the supernatural to create an extension beyond a Western paradigm of thinking and relating to the world. The permission to extend beyond the western paradigm is expected in magical realism. It’s okay if it’s weird or does not make sense in our current understanding. Thoughts can be expanded. It allows for a writer to think beyond the Western materialist culture and confines. It helps a writer to consider stories from their

family background and have the liberties of expanding, recreating, adding fantastical elements to it, or extending these stories to improve their own mental health and wellbeing. “Writing about imaginary trauma in a deeply personal way was found to improve people’s physical health almost as effectively as writing about their own trauma” (Pennebaker & Smyth pg 162).

Gabriel Garcia Marquez is quoted as saying, “Life is not what one lived, but rather what one remembers, and how it is remembered to tell the tale.” (Rushdie, pg.1) This quote is in regards to autobiography yet can easily be applied to magical realism. How we as writers of our own narratives recall and find meaning in our stories is what we pass down and how those moments in our lives will be remembered. In *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* by Lois Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (1995) they discuss magical realism as being a world-wide phenomena, part of an international movement with wide ranging history and literary influence: “Magical realism, sprang from Latin America’s vicious dictators and romantic revolutionaries, of long years of hunger, illness, and violence” (Zamora & Faris, pg 3) This notion of history vs theory is often discussed in their book, the “compensatory vision” to respond to the harshness of the times they are living in. It mirrors Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious, “which works through artists and other spiritual leaders at any given time in an effort to heal”(Zamora & Faris, pg. 271). How magical realists confront an experience, how they emotionally feel history or in some cases repossess history or what Toni Morrison calls “re-memory” help to find new meaning (Zamora & Faris, pg 286).

In accepting his Nobel prize, Marquez said: “Poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, warriors and scoundrels, all creatures of that unbridled reality, we have had to ask but little of imagination. For our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable”(Rushdie, pg 1). Marquez draws on the parallels between the state of affairs in the United States today along with the uncontrolled reality of what it has been like as a healthcare worker during the pandemic. Salman Rushdie in his New York Times obituary essay “*Magic in Service of Truth*” said Marquez’s “imagination is used to enrich reality not escape from it”(Rushdie, pg 1). It is in this way that the use of magical realism has been helpful in my own processing of PTSD by finding the extraordinary in the small moments of during the hardest times in my life. As



Salman Rushdie continues to explain, “When people use the term magic realism, usually they only hear ‘magic’ they don’t hear ‘realism,’ whereas the way in which magical realism actually works is for the magic to be rooted in the real it’s both things, it’s not just a fairytale moment, it’s the surrealism that arises out of the real”(Rushdie, pg 1).

I knew little about surrealism; only the art of Frieda Kahlo and Salvador Dali resembled dreamlike states captured on a canvas which blossomed after the first and second World Wars. The surrealist manifesto written by Andre Breton in 1924, describes a reuniting of the conscious and unconscious realms of the human mind joining in an “absolute reality, a surreality.”

In the essay by Alejo Carpentier, “On the Marvelous Real in America, ” he argues for a uniquely American form of magical realism. Written in 1949 his essay was published during a time of transformation in American history after World War II, the Holocaust, atomic bombs, the beginning of the Cold War, and the formation of NATO. It was also just before the rise of the American Dream ideology of the 1950s which encouraged more migration for those seeking the promise of a better life. Carpentier felt the American form of magical realism differed in spirit and practice from European Surrealism. “Rather the fantastic inheres in the natural and human realities of time and place where improbable juxtapositions and marvelous mixtures exist by virtue of Latin America's varied history, geography, demographics, and politics-not manifesto” (Zamora & Faris, pg. 75). Carpentier wrote his essays, in comparison to the changes in America since 1975 and the changes in publishing to become more inclusive of marginal voices and a diversity of writers, an era of new literature began. Both Carpentier and literary critic Marguerite Suarez-Murias contend “the marvelous presupposes an element of faith on the part of the author or the audience” (Zamora & Faris pg. 268). The diversity in writing has led to author Isabel Allende and Toni Morrison sharing works of magical realism from different cultural, political, and geographical perspectives.

While many healthcare workers, social workers, and mental health workers may never publish books about their experiences, using this genre as a medium can help in the healing process of PTSD. Although there is relatively little research on the topic of writing via timed sessions, weekly, daily, or other alternative writing strategies, there

have been studies that have found benefits to expressive writing. (Pennebaker & Smyth, pg 164).

How can I tell my story so that it doesn't tell me? By taking ownership of our narratives we can find the wonderful in the real, the miracle of the moment, or the gratitude within our story helps to make it ours. Not your abusers, not your mothers, not your bullies, not your illnesses story. It creates the space for a deeper reflection and power over how you want to tell your narrative, how you want to share your story, and a new way to relate to it. We are able to connect to our humanity. By extension in finding the wonderful in the story, you begin to see the wonderful in yourself for enduring. It shifts the mind from this is what happened to me into teaching and imparting wisdom.

“Expressive writing is beneficial in helping to sort out complicated issues. Many of the most complex problems surround powerful emotions related to major life transitions. Almost all of the early writing studies focused on major personal upheavals or traumas. The research evidence now suggest that writing about a wide range of topics can be helpful” (Pennebaker & Smyth pg. 159). By encouraging the use of expressive or creative writing in therapy to more healthcare workers, it may provide much needed therapeutic benefit and long term relief of symptoms related to vicarious trauma and PTSD.

## TRANSPERSONAL TREATMENT

In June 2022 New Jersey senator Nicholas Scutari introduced the “Psilocybin Behavioral Health Access and Services Act” (Bill S2934) in an effort to authorize the production of psilocybin for therapeutic use under a controlled environment and decriminalize and expunge past offenses. This bill allows use of psilocybin for treatment rather than creating recreational markets like cannabis. The need to expand from a Western view has been well promoted by The Office of Ethnic Minority Affairs at the American Psychological Association since 1993, when it urged the creation of new paradigms for working with culturally different populations. The United States Census projects that one in four people are a race other than white. In coming decades, the racial

composition of the population is projected to change even further, so one in three Americans—32 percent of the population—is projected to be a race other than White by 2060 (Armstrong, 2020). The implications of a changing demographic, psychedelic assisted therapies, and expanding the understanding of consciousness theory and research, as well as training a new generation of clinicians, involves deeper understanding. “Psychiatry’s disinterest in holotropic states and disregard for them has resulted in a culturally insensitive approach and a tendency to pathologize all activities that cannot be understood in the narrow context of the monistic materialistic paradigm” (Grof pg 57). While an interdisciplinary approach has been a part of the evolving narrative in medicine, it has been lacking in the field of psychology and psychiatry. The usefulness of incorporating humanities, anthropology, theology, science, and the liberal arts into a therapeutic process is a necessary part of the evolution needed to contend with the changing landscape ahead. My own perspectives with non-ordinary states of consciousness and self-exploration in the field of consciousness studies offer clinicians a pathway with using Magical Realism into their own or their client’s exploration. The profound effects of using psilocybin as a treatment modality requires skilled clinicians well versed in shamanic practices and with the ability to create an enhanced experience for clients seeking this treatment. It is a very vulnerable position to be in when one is utilizing plant medicine and a journey can last for several hours. Clinicians need training in best practices in how to attend to patients in their care before, during, and after. Patient’s are in a helpless state and the atmosphere and setting in which one works with patients must be carefully cultivated to ensure their safety and the most benefit from the experience.

Having a culturally meaningful experience is also an important factor when working with clients who wish to use psilocybin therapy and this requires a deep understanding of patients intention for taking the journey, what they want to heal from, or receive healing for and perhaps what they would like to learn or explore in the experience. If a clinician is not well versed in non-ordinary states of consciousness, transpersonal theory, and the many ways in which a person can connect to higher realms they will not be able to properly utilize the rich resources and materials that a patient needs to process with following a psilocybin journey. Having an interdisciplinary

approach is also a key component in being able to integrate the many ways patients may experience their journey as often some may have connection with spirituality and different religious or non-religious experiences. With the passing of the bill, it may leave many in the position of being reactive instead of being proactive in increasing their competence in this new area of psychology.

### TRANCENDENT EXPERIENCES

From a young age, an interest of mine has been in extrasensory perception (ESP)-also called sixth sense. Often, I felt that I may have some type of ESP inherited from my mother, yet I struggled to believe that such a thing could really exist. Until early one morning in 1985, I recalled my mom screaming from a nightmare that the ground was shaking in Mexico. Several hours later while watching the news, Mexico City did in fact have an 8.0 magnitude earthquake in which thankfully my family was spared any losses. As my mother left for Mexico, she let me know that her mother had shown her in a dream that the earthquake would happen and that her family would be alive and be well. She was traveling to help her sisters with the clean-up of their homes. My grandmother had passed away before I was born and whom I had never even seen a picture of left me confused on how this could happen through a dream. It was not until years later that I would become acquainted with my grandmother in dreams myself and come to know and love her deeply through our connection in this other plane of existence.

In the book, *Maria Sabina Her Life and Chants* written by Alvaro Estrada and translated by Henry Munn is the oral autobiography of Maria Sabina. Recorded originally in Mazatec and translated into Spanish by Munn in 1980. Maria Sabina is known by her calling as a wise woman, shaman, and poet. In the 1979 film, *Maria Sabina: Mujer Espiritu*, the world became acquainted with Maria Sabina and her use of mushrooms for curing a variety of ailments. She was a sought-after healer in her town of Huautla de Jimenez near Oaxaca Mexico and eventually received visits from famous people around

the world. Her “little children” as she came to call the mushrooms were psilocybin and under their influence, Maria Sabina spoke to God.

“Bewitched by spirits, healing the sick, asking where a person's soul goes when they sleep as she believed the soul wanders sometimes to faraway places or transforms into an animal. It is in these areas that one can become hurt. The holy children can heal the ulcers which are wounds of the spirits (Estrada, pg. 64).” This deep-rooted cultural belief both in the healing practice of Maria Sabina and in my own family’s belief in the power of dreams as a way for the soul to wander to far away places and to encounter different challenges remains an area of interest and an opportunity for the field of psychology to expand in. Dreams are still too often seen as just the subconscious mind sorting through the day or week's experience. It has been long held in many ancient cultures that our dreams are doorways to more. It has been my personal experience and that of women in my family to interpret, use, have prophetic dreams, and have healing experiences through dreams. Maria Sabina cured people through the use of chants and language. She became famous for her ability to heal through the use of psilocybin. Maria did not have any formal education or training and was illiterate. Through her use of psilocybin, she claimed to be granted the ability to read, understand, and interpret what she received in her visions.

“I cure with language. Nothing else. I am a wise woman. Nothing else. I am the one who speaks with God and with Benito Juarez. I am wise even from within the womb of my mother. I am the woman of the winds, of water, of the paths, because I am known in heaven, because I am a doctor woman. I take *Little-Ones-Who-Springs-Forth* and I see God. I see him sprout from the earth. He grows and grows, big as a tree, as a mountain. His face is placid, beautiful, serene, as in the temples. At other times, God is not like a man: he is a book. A book that is born from the earth, that speaks to me in order for me to speak. It counsels me, it teaches me, it tells me what I have to say to men, to the sick, to life. The book appears and I learn new words (Estrada pg. 50).”

It is this ability to cure through language, poetry, and writing that is an essential and an underutilized component of counseling and psychotherapy today even without the use of psilocybin in treatment. In her autobiography, Maria Sabina explains that after great hardship and loss of two husbands and several children that she came to accept her destiny as a healer. Feeling fearful of her fate, she took the psilocybin and it spoke to her, guiding

her forward. Maria Sabina explains how the sacred ceremony allowed her the opportunity to convene with God and various saints to cure the sick and to speak through chants, claps, or whistles. It was during these ceremonies that Maria Sabina even felt that she had been transformed into God. This sacred book was given to her during her early vigils and she explained that she was able to read and understand all of the sacred knowledge that it contained. A similar connection helped in facilitating my healing journey. *Veladas* for Maria Sabina were to either get closer to God or to heal the sick. They had strict reason and purpose. Before my journey, I had thought about for days what I wanted my intention to be. It came down to a simple one, I wanted to know God. To understand why bad things continue to happen and reach an understanding if there really is a God after all. I was feeling doubt after so many years about what this life, this existence is really all about. I wanted to connect to God if there really was one.

The ritual or La Velada is held at night and Maria Sabina felt when she was healing the sick, the real reason was revealed to her because of her words. The *velada* ceremony was for the sick to get well to dispel whatever sickness was inside of them. The use of tobacco, candles, flowers, herbs, visions, chants, prayers, darkness, and a connection to nature were primary elements of the ceremony. Belief in the *little children who spring forth* was needed to fulfill the healing ritual. All of these elements were present for my journey as well and were a much-needed part of the ceremony. My shaman was well skilled in their use and when to implement them as I needed. There were times when my shamans prayers healed me and helped me when I felt scared. There were other times when just holding his hand helped me move further into my journey feeling his presence with me. Flowers, herbs, connection to nature were also important elements which helped ground me during intense visions.

The combination of utilizing a transpersonal approach to trauma with the addition of writing in either genre has the potential to create an innovative treatment modality for clinicians providing care and may help to attract more health care providers to engage in treatment. While the stigma of receiving or asking for mental health care is slowly diminishing, the field has a long way to go in creating culturally responsive and adaptive approaches to care. The symbolic connection between psilocybin and magical realism is

in the ability to take an ordinary, in this case mushrooms, and create a magical experience that may be seen by many as scary and because of that fear it may be deemed powerful. And since we as Americans do not believe in magic, yet are very enchanted by the appeal of it and its contradiction to science, we can easily reach the realm of the *marvelous real* using psilocybin as we unravel great mysteries that are culturally important.

### CONNECTION WITH THE TRANSPERSONAL

My journey into writing began in 2015 with the help of a lucid dream. It was the most difficult time in my life that year. I was working full time, with two small children, two mortgages, and my husband was constantly working in his high-pressure job to help keep us all afloat. I worked at Saint Clare's hospital as the clinical director of their partial hospital program and group homes. I supervised a staff and two psychiatrists along with about 80 patients. It was a high stress job working with the severely and persistently mentally ill who were being released from state-run institutions before there was much oversight from the state. This was before all the stories came out about the abuses of staff and patients alike. The position was an increase in salary and close to home so that I could be more accessible to my children when the revolving door of nannies quit or didn't show up. I had left my job at the University in Newark after a very difficult confrontation with a manager there. It broke me and my spirit and left me feeling that I didn't want to work with children or in Newark anymore as a result.

Saint Clare's offered me the opportunity, and I jumped at it feet first without really caring about the outcome. Nothing could be worse than Newark, I thought. My supervisor was a mom too who had a "family first" attitude which was welcoming and reassuring. She brought me right into the fold and connected me with all the directors and heavy hitters at the hospital. I had the respect of my supervisor that I had longed for since leaving Newark, along with the guidance and support from her as well. She understood the job was difficult and supported me while she adjusted to her new role as well.

However, that year at St. Clare's did not go smoothly; the patients were much sicker than I had anticipated. They were often sent back to institutional settings like Greystone or to the hospital collecting inpatient stays to make the case for rehospitalization at another institution. The discharge planning from the institutions were full of gaps in care for the patients who had spent many years in such structured environments that when they were released they had great difficulty assimilating back into society. Many of them were sent to live in group homes that I supervised 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The litany of problems were extensive. Crisis evaluations, staff turnover, runaways, police, 3 am on duty rotations, medication concerns, suicides, near homicides, and family conflicts of all kinds. You name it, it happened. I was exhausted, coughing constantly, feeling sluggish and watching my hair fall out in the shower in clumps. But I had no choice—I had to work to cover all the expenses of childcare and our home. So, I did, I kept going, driving myself for two years. I had finally taken a half day to go to the doctors about the nagging cough.

It turns out that my cough was the result of a tumor that needed to be biopsied, and soon, my thyroid was giving out. With little time to take off, I pushed it aside and continued to cough until the next holiday when I would have more time off. I didn't have time for cancer, so I ignored it. I found comfort in the constant calling of my work. Perhaps it was the low thyroid levels or perhaps it was the insomnia, but I needed sleep. I began a rotation of valium, Benadryl, klonopin, and lorazepam on a nightly basis to help me sleep. My mind was full of thoughts—the ever-present to-do list, constant worry for the patients in the program, and fear of my staff burning out with the demands of the job.

I know that if I hadn't felt so tired, I would have picked up on John's distress that day. He was dating Natalie from what I had overheard from the staff—a young girl with severe bipolar and a merry go round of hospitalizations, severe bulimia and matching suicidal attempts. John had declined medication for his schizophrenia and was court mandated to our program for dangerous behavior and threats in the community. He needed to be at the program daily and we hoped that he would come around to the injectable medication before it was court mandated that he take it also. The pacing and murmuring are often symptoms of schizophrenia, along with paranoia. It wasn't unusual to see patients walking up and down the hallways. But that day was different, John had



his hands in tight fists, spitting while cursing to himself, and he looked agitated. Staff had checked on him, and he was unable to sit in group therapy. We remained observant and allowed him the space to pace back and forth until we waited for the psychiatrist to come in to meet with him.

I heard his fist hit the wall outside of my office. Our crisis protocol was to call Hanover Police and to call the Psychiatric ER to advise when we had a patient from a program coming in. We had no security on site, and we handled crises fairly well for the most part. I came out of my office to see about the noise and was met by patients running away down the hall. "He has a knife," was all I heard. I got on my walkie talkie to call for staff to keep patients away and to call the police. John did not have a knife, but he did have a long screw driver that he was stabbing into the wall over and over again. He started screaming, "I'm going to kill her. No one does this to me."

His face was distorted in anger and rage. He kept muttering to himself and when I tried to speak to him he screamed at me to leave him alone, that he would kill her for what she was doing to him. A door behind me opened, the clinician running the group did not have her walkie talkie with her and was unaware of the emergency unfolding. Natalie came out of the group room and John charged at her. Anticipating his attack, I managed to slip in front of him and waved to Natalie to get away.

John screamed at her and continued to stab the walls over and over again with the screwdriver threatening to kill her. She ran into my office and I came in right behind her. I managed to glance at the other counselor who was on her phone with the police. John came in behind us and I put myself in front of Natalie hoping to be able to talk him down and buy time until the police arrived. Natalie was my patient and under my care. she was a young girl who was terrified. I didn't think. I put my hands up to shield us and to keep some distance from John who continued in his rage.

I spoke to him in Spanish, reminding him of all the other women in both our lives that needed us to come home safely from the program that day. I don't remember what else I said to him as he lunged at us with the screwdriver and I kept Natalie tucked behind me. I only remember him crying and dropping the weapon to the floor. I promised him that everything would be alright, I don't know if that was a promise to him or to myself. The police arrived to find him crying on the couch in front of my office. The damage to

the walls around us was everywhere and it was in that moment that it dawned on me that I might not have made it home.

Three of us were saved that day. John finally went back to inpatient care and received the injectable medication to treat his symptoms. Natalie lived on and was able to improve her life, and I decided that I wanted to live and began my cancer treatment. This traumatic experience was a catalyst for beginning my writing in magical realism. I never sought treatment for what happened that day or for the years of watching domestic violence and alcoholism in my own childhood that prepared me to be able to react in that moment and endure John's wrath and mental illness. What it did do was to help me release my trauma through writing and to find my own healing within so many pages. It helped me in my own spiritual and personal transformation.

In their work, Dr. Stansilav and Christina Grof's book *Spiritual Emergency-When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis* discusses through different essays the pitfalls modern psychiatry has had in distinguishing personal transformation into episodes of mental illness. Through the lens of transpersonal psychology, new perspectives are developing in seeing spiritual development that view these transformational crises as transformative breakthroughs and an invaluable resource for the emotional healing of trauma. Although my story with John and Natalie occurred pre-Covid 19 pandemic, it is not an uncommon situation that many health care workers face on a daily basis. I have worked with many nurses who have been assaulted during their shifts and other mental health clinicians who have been attacked by patients. This behavior post pandemic has only increased, and health care workers have endured through many helpless and fearful moments during these times with little support or acknowledgement from the hospitals they work for. The feeling of walking into work daily and seeing a makeshift morgue outside of one's hospital or the constant fear of being infected in the early days of the pandemic have just become a matter fact part of the job and the collective trauma still unhealed.

This creates many opportunities for the field of mental health to create a space for healthcare workers to share their experience and stories in ways that provide healing.

## COMBATING STIGMA

My mother begged me not to go into the field of psychology, she would say “te va volver loca escuchar tanto locura de la jente.” The literal translation of this is: it will return crazy listening to so much madness of the people. The use of volver/return to a state of my own state of being crazy is humorous to me now, back then when I was young in my career I wondered if hearing the stories of other people would fundamentally change my own mental health in a negative way.

These words haunted me when I was going through my own “awakening” period in 2015, wondering if my mother’s prophecy was coming true. Was I descending into madness? Now through my own healing journey, it has helped me to redefine the word “crazy” into a breaking away of the American cultural materialistic standard and coming to peace with one’s own individualism despite it being different from what Instagram or social media’s most recent trends are. This space of individualism is scary in our culture and often seen as isolating or removed from everyone else. In a country that preaches individualism it is a scary prospect for so many.

Combatting my own stigma began early for me with my mother’s comments about mental health and hearing from my colleagues later on that “it’s a fine line between us and them.” This kind of mentality perpetrated in the mental health field, a knowing that people are mentally ill and may be at their best baseline as is, or that there is “unlimited pathology” in the world so we would never be without work was set up in my mind; an us vs them approach. They are unwell. We the clinician and providers, are not. With a fine line so thin between us, I never wanted to cross over or have doubt about my own sanity or capacity with regards to my own mental health. Avoiding the “you see I told you they would drive you crazy” from my mother kept me silent for so long.

This is true in counseling as well, how people tell their story begins with opening up the possibilities within it. People’s word choices, how they define certain words to themselves and in therapy begins to reveal possibility in transformation. When I ask patients to give me their definition of a word, they are often stumped for a moment. I

begin to expand the word from the two dimensional into the third dimension. Often, once they provide me a definition then I look it up for them, read the concrete definition to them, then provide a definition of how I understood it in terms of the emotional, symbolic, or metaphorical. Now the narrative begins to expand further. I encourage the patients to consider expansion as they continue to share their story with me.

This is the beginning of wonder. When working with 2nd or 3rd generation Hispanic/Latino patients, I then help them translate it to Spanish and broaden the narrative further into a multidimensional space. This can be utilized with any other language to which patients are culturally connected. It is in these spaces where the magic in their reality can begin to reveal itself. It is scary, most people do not like to venture too far from a concrete reality especially when the person they are speaking with is actually assessing their mental health and stability. “Do you think I’m crazy?” or “Am I crazy?” is often the most common question or concern a patient comes to therapy to assess. Usually, I wonder internally “*God, I hope so.*” In my own seeking of finding people who want to expand from the concrete and into the multidimensional realms with me. Most patients do not come to therapy even thinking about consciousness, higher realms, or the many areas of transpersonal psychology. They just read my profile and hope I can tell them they are not weird, which is something I cannot do, since I seek the weird, unusual, and multifaceted. What becomes a strange conundrum while I sit across from a patient. While my therapeutic style is not suited for every client. Often, a client may struggle with their own resistance to even considering expanding their narrative. They are in therapy because they are hoping for change, momentum, or resolution although the speed varies from patient to patient on how quickly they want this to actually happen or not.

Another factor was the limited support available with my colleagues. They were busy, treating actual pathology. My confusion and unknowing in my awakening was not pathology and there was no one in whom I felt comfortable confiding. Who could understand? I had limited contact with Latino providers or professionals. When you're treating your own caseload during a pandemic where the need is so high, no one wants to hear about your issues, your grandma dreams or that you're experiencing strange

phenomena. I did not want to take medication and decided to just shut up about my concerns.

I had no other place but an empty word document to begin to write down my experiences and visions. The more I wrote, the better I felt. The more I invested into the vision I was seeing in my mind to further flush it out, the more improvements I saw in my capacity to cope. I sought help outside of the mental health field and found a wealth of support in the writing community. Suddenly my stories were not so strange, they were artistic and encouraged. I learned how to edit my work and engaged in another world of artistry. What I was tapping into was creativity and there was not only a place for it but an audience who wanted to read more of it. This was a revelation for me since most of my scholarly work was limited to only the field of psychology. Branching out left me with more tools to work with and to soften the clinical and critical language I had once clung to. “Own your story” and “find your voice” were often said to me, a language I had not heard in mental health. Perhaps because there was no time for it, in the clinical setting I was seeing patients every 45 minutes and the focus was on documentation and insurance/Medicare requirements. The “on to the next” mentality helped ensure productivity to meet the needs of the organization I was working for. The ability to continually bill was the priority. The “business” of mental health ruled over ethical practice, in 45 minutes how much could a clinician really assess when they are seeing forty patients a week. Caring in healthcare is a luxury. Most of us come into the field of mental health or healthcare out of an abundance of caring and when we are in our actual first job we quickly learn that caring is not sustainable. Efficiency is.

Another sad reality is that I couldn’t afford my own mental health. I didn’t have the money to pay for my own counseling. Writing became a free and accessible way to get in touch with my own emotions and to deepen my insight into the trauma that I was trying to resolve. Using what I understood about trauma informed care, I ventured slowly into my own process.

## SILENCE AND TESTIMONY

“See Officer? Magic is real—we all disappear”(Vuong, pg 15). The pandemic highlighted this concept in Ocean Vuong’s poetry as we saw over one million people die from Covid 19. We still do not have a National Day of Remembrance and perhaps we never will. What we will have are our stories and what we can pass down to future generations about our survival during this time. Our survival both physically and psychologically to impart wisdom, insight, and value. Poetry can help support our understanding of the collective trauma we are experiencing not just from COVID, police brutality, school shootings, government upheaval, wars, climate fears, financial instability, crime, and a host of other events pre and post pandemic.

As we continue to leave this trauma untreated, unacknowledged, and undervalued to our detriment and it robs us of an important opportunity to tap into the magic of our healing potential, learning about our own humanity, and the transpersonal modalities that could bring us deeper levels of consciousness. This is the wisdom our ancestors have tried to impart to us from their lives and the difficulties they faced during their times. For those of us who do not have a connection to our departed grandparents as I am lucky enough to have or as others with ESP gifts and perceptions able to tap into high realms of consciousness what the research at the CCRI institute demonstrates is that many people are receiving this same message through the collected unconscious of sharing as much as they can regarding their unique experiences to humanity in which ever modality they can via dance, art, writing, film, etc. which all forms part of the human experience we are sharing to elevate our human consciousness. Perhaps our shared experiences is the only way to do that. This is why that nurse being assaulted, the doctors showing up to work during the pandemic, the mental health workers serving in their communities, the sanitation workers and all the workers who had to keep going for all of our sakes may hold magical insights that can help us all before we disappear.

The term “Traumatic imagination” was proposed in 2008 by Arva and Roland in their journal article titled “Writing Trauma: Magical Realism and The Traumatic Imagination.” In it they suggest a need for a theoretical link between Magical Realist writing and trauma and coined the term as a way for authors to use Magical Realist images to work through trauma. In their research, they focused on how both World Wars affected writing experiences of German authors during the time frame of 1920-1960’s. “Keenly aware of their nation’s struggle with mourning and working through the collective trauma of war, German writers of the post-war period found themselves confronting a double bind: a culture of silence precluding any public acknowledgment of collective trauma, on the one hand, and the expectations of an appropriate (inoffensive) representation of their personal traumatic experiences, on the other” (Arva & Roland pg.11). This culture of silence is similar to what we are experiencing now as we are entering a post pandemic reality and multiple traumatic historical events. Arva and Roland discuss various literary novels which use Magical Realist techniques for the extreme reality and double reality of a post war generation. This includes Holocaust memoirs and novels that present the past using magical realist elements. By using these techniques of Magical Realism, the authors theorize it allows readers to “access collective memory and history facilitate readers affective identification and empathy when making supernatural objects palpable” (Arva & Roland, pg.11).

While the House and Senate vote on introducing a resolution for memorializing those lost to and suffering from COVID-19 as a National Day of Remembrance on the first Monday of March, little else has been considered for us as a nation to break the silence on the suffering endured during the pre and post pandemic trauma. How to mourn through this human experience remains relatively an occasional comment mainly because we continue to experience more and more trauma as events continue to unfold. While grief and sitting with the grieving is a difficult experience, the shared mourning can bring tremendous relief to suffering. The consequences of not doing so can lead to destructive and often continued maladaptive coping.

While I cannot share a step-by-step process on how to do this as a nation, I can share some strategies that I use with my own patients in a therapeutic setting. In order to have the optimism, hopefulness, and creative energy for this work, my own healing was imperative. With my patients now, I do ask them to keep a word document or a shared Google document in which I encourage them to journal, free write, or express themselves in whichever manner they feel comfortable. By sharing the document with me, I am able to offer them feedback and suggestions for them to consider in utilizing cognitive behavioral techniques and creative writing skills to expand their narratives. “Traumatic experiences immediately disrupt people's daily lives, provoking major emotional upheavals and requiring a rethinking of large parts of their lives” (Pennebaker & Smyth pg. 155). The focus of the writing is on expansion, possibility and the promotion of healing.

“The mere acknowledgement that the event occurred” (Pennebaker & Smyth pg. 156). Can bring relief and validation. It begins the connection to emotions that help patients begin to make sense of their experience. “Writing forces structure on the experience” (Pennebaker & Smyth Pg 156). This is very accurate as a patient is coming to terms with what happened in a traumatic event and to gently bring in more memory as the patient is ready to receive it. Often when we go back to re-read an initial writing, patients may find they remember more details or feel ready to expand their writing in an organic and natural way instead of via prompting questions which can be retraumatizing. They can organize and create a timeline of events they might not have from just talking about the experience. “Multiple perspectives and additional complexities of the experience can be added to the narrative” (Pennebaker & Smyth, pg. 156). Connecting experiences to other experiences can sometimes occur along with considering other perspectives of other people involved in the traumatic experience. This can also enhance insight, compassion and empathy both for themselves and for the other people who may have been part of the experience. “With continued writing and thinking, a more coherent narrative may emerge. With repeated telling, the story becomes simpler, more understandable” (Pennebaker & Smyth, pg. 156). The simpler a story becomes the easier it is for patients to understand their experience, feel empowered in it, and share it. They



grow in their understanding of themselves and the experience and with time can pull valuable lessons for it. It no longer occupies so much of their energy in trying to suppress it or avoid it. They are able to move their energy into other areas of their lives. In my experience, my sleep and stress levels were improved and I was able to devote more of my time in further story writing, engaging in more creativity, and expanding socially all which enhanced my own mental health in powerful ways.

I also integrate the use of poetry either patients own or literary works with which relate to themes patients are struggling with. I integrate an interdisciplinary approach with a client using literary, theological, philosophical, sciences, and fields of study of interest to patients. By utilizing culturally competent care practices patients are encouraged to integrate culture into their writing as well. I share with my patients the practices I have used to help in my own healing as well.

The ability to feel refreshed and invigorated for doing so required me to engage in my own self care practice first. This included my own creative writing utilizing magical realism, having a supportive writing group and peers, a daily walking practice, a daily meditation/prayer practice and having engaged in a therapeutic transpersonal experience utilizing psilocybin. This combination has left me more energized for my work in counseling since completing my clinical hours for independent practice back in 2002. I engage with a deeper understanding and a sense of empowerment, confidence, and momentum in guiding my patients forward in their lives. My writing continues to expand and improve which gives me great delight in engaging in sharing my work and now teaching students fundamentals in writing. The expansiveness that I have felt since my psilocybin journey can still bring me to tears with immense gratitude. I have been able to integrate my ESP skills, dreams, and writing in a way I had never dreamed of without the fear that once held me back for so long.

## CREATIVE WRITING INTRODUCTION

My creative writing contribution focuses on my memory of pre and post pandemic life spanning from 2018-2023. I have arranged the collection in the format of a memoir piece followed by a poem and then a short story. I was inspired by the work of Haruki Murakami, in his book titled *First Person Singular* which is a collection of his short stories that involve the use of Magical Realism, philosophy and mystery. The overlapping format used differs from Murakami with the addition of poetry which continues throughout the collection and highlights my writing process since beginning my doctoral studies at Drew University. This collection begins in a pre-pandemic and in a reflective state of mind following my departure from working in a hospital setting. It is the beginning of my writing journey when I begin to piece together the trauma of my experiences from childhood onward. Struggling with deep sensitivity and trauma left me feeling very vulnerable to judgment. I am not trained in writing, nor have I taken any advanced courses in writing. Being in a new field with limited experience with only the desire for self-expression helped me to take on the adversity of writing. I was in too much emotional pain that was seeking expression. So much of what I have acquired in terms of skill has been self taught and with the assistance of dear friends who have helped me to edit and teach me along the way.

I was acutely aware that my writing needed work and that I was greatly enjoying this new level of expression. I decided to take a chance and join a meetup group in Montclair, NJ that met weekly to review pages and work towards publication of a novel. I took my few stories I was working on to the fiction group and for the first time shared my writing with other people. This was a transformational moment for me. It was what I think patients may feel when they first enter therapy is that validation of being understood. Of other people hearing you and understanding what you are trying to say, how to say it better, and how to help you grow. It touched me deeply and I stayed with my writing group for over a year and with their help was able to publish my first novel in 2016 under my pen name Lucina Stone. It is titled *Santa Muerte-The Daniela Story*. The

goals for me in writing this was to firstly see if I could complete a book, learn about writing, learn about the writing business and improve my writing skills. My expectation was that if I could just get ten readers to read my work, then I would continue writing and investing my time and energy further into the craft. This limited attachment to results really helped to free me and to want to cultivate more work.

Thankfully, I was greatly blessed in achieving my goals and more so blessed in receiving two awards for my work with the International Latino Book Awards. This led to wanting to write even more and learn about the writing craft. When I enrolled in Drew 2019 it was with the intention of being able to write a creative dissertation and being here now is a dream come true.

The first story in my collection titled “Mexican White Magic” begins with my childhood revelation of the transpersonal. Poetry is a new medium for me and one that I have just begun to explore. Again, it is mostly self-taught and inspired by how the thoughts form in my mind and expressed without a lot of shaping or editing. I use different structures in my poems to better express feelings and where I want to draw the reader's eye and mind. The collection shows growth as a writer gaining more and more confidence as the collection evolves and a deepening of understanding in both myself and the soul's journey. It highlights the feelings of otherness and outsider I often struggle with along with these last few years of turmoil in the world around us. This collection sees the start of the pandemic, political turmoil, economic upheaval, war, motherhood struggles, climate change, fears, death, and ultimately a resolution within all of this uncertainty of the times we are enduring. It highlights at the end with the memoir piece: “That Time I Spoke to God, A Mental Health Clinicians Journey with Psilocybin.” The final poem, titled “*Sage*” reflects an understanding of my purpose in this life and the great peace in that.

The longer short stories in the collection beginning with “Valentina” reflect a time of uncertainty in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. The story is about Valentina’s journey to help her estranged father in Puerto Rico after the storm. Her character represents the outsider in both the American and Latino culture as well as with both her parents. She’s a well-educated professor in Latino Studies who knows little about herself or her culture and this trip highlights this for her. It's symbolic to the events

occurring at that time with then President Trump throwing paper towels at a press conference in Puerto Rico for the people to clean up with. The layers, the depth, and the understanding needed to heal from the aftermath of such destruction could never be absorbed by paper towels. The work is a reflection of the pain we have to sit with and the helplessness with which is so hard to cope.

“El Gran Vadon ” includes my early memories of my Uncle Nicolas who passed away from AIDS in the early 1990s and his gift to me. It includes the cultural issues related to shame, homosexuality, and my first encounter with a pandemic and the impact of his death in my life and effect to my own life path. The poem “Love You” is for him, to him, and with him in mind. His many gifts to me continue to have an impact in my life and have helped me cultivate compassion for the marginalized and the LGBTQIA+ community which remains a focal point to much of my clinical work. The poem “Cardinal ” is a reflection of our loved ones passed and the quiet contemplation of their spirit around us. The gift of being able to receive premonitions or warnings from the visits of ancestors watching over us. Themes that are part of the short story “Valentina” as well.

“Passing ” relates to the time during the last two years of the Trump presidency and the feelings of having to continue to accept the unacceptable. Feeling forced to continue to cope with ideology and a changing cultural climate. My experience of grocery shopping with my children and dealing with racist comments during a time of heightened and increasing racial divide. Having to just swallow it and allow it to fester inside of me in a way that the main character has to in the story. It gave me some relief to be able to express myself through the story.

“Stephen ” is a memoir piece written about a former patient who passed away during my time working in Newark. It’s a piece which incorporates the use of dream and the healing potential it was able to bring me during a time of suffering and unknowing. The other short memoir story is “High Strangeness” which also incorporates dreams and its ability to bring about healing and deeper understanding. It involves a story about my mother, her mother and myself. Dreams are and have been a powerful way that I connect

to higher consciousness, to my ancestors, receive precognitive dreams, and intuition. Although this creative work only highlights a small portion of the experiences that I have had, I have collected the most transformative in regard to offering me a transpersonal experience. In the story about Stephen, it is my first-time discussing police brutality and the personal effects it had in my patient's life and my own. I revisit this topic again in the poem titled "Flowers" and the poem titled "Reckless Driving" since police brutality and the Black Lives Matter Movement have been such a vital and important calling throughout many decades, with the arrest and murder of George Floyd during the pandemic the impact in my poetry and in the short story. It is the only place in the collection which features a double poem which is reflective of the impact the issue of police misconduct, murder, and brutality continues to cause trauma and despair. "Flowers" is about the shared helplessness felt when awful things happen like school shootings, terrorist attacks, and uncontrollable acts of violence. This poem was inspired from watching clips of the Paris terrorist attack in 2015 and other acts that followed after including the Pulse nightclub shooting in 2016, and the Parkland School Shooting in 2018. While these events happened pre-pandemic their impact is still felt and remains traumatic since these events continue to happen. While having my own children and sending them to public schools, along with having worked at a public high school serving newly arriving refugee children the ongoing effects of school lockdowns and active shooter drills, were an ever-present reality of our changing landscape.

"Eye for an Eye" later in the collection is a dystopian short story where the idea of prison has taken an unexpected turn. Still the issue of prison reform, the innocence project, an two tiered justice system continues to plague our country during impeachment trials, Jan 6th insurrection, fraud, classified information, and ongoing corruption remain at the forefront of most major news outlets during the time of my writing.

Within the midst of all of these events the pandemic is reflected in the short story, "Eligible Recipients" in the midst of trying to secure vaccine appointments for my parents in the early days of trying to obtain an appointment on various government websites and pharmacies. Backlog and an inability to secure appointments which often took days of constant refreshing screens, using multiple laptops to try to get any appointment for my parents. The frustration and time it took to do so and the fears at that

time with their underlying medical conditions. Fears of their death and the helplessness of the time are reflected in the short story. It was a difficult time as it was for most juggling sudden remote work and children home from school remote learning and all of the difficulties that came with those sudden shifts.

Despite all of the turmoil happening in my reality and the double reality of connecting to high levels of consciousness during this time, the poem “Follow Me” reflects on that joyfulness. The ability to find humor and laughter in my experiences and peace in a deeper understanding of the purpose of my life. Guiding others towards this optimism and encouraging them despite our shortcomings. One of the longer short stories titled “Malva” is about a young woman coming into her gifts as a lightworker. The challenges that ensue and the fear she has in connecting with her own power and purpose. It highlights the struggles I had in my own acceptance of the strange experiences I had and still have in incorporating into my life. “Malva” is a short story, one that I hope to continue in the future for a Young Adult Novel. It is difficult to complete at this time as my own learning continues and in order to give this story authenticity, I feel it's important for me to be at a higher level of understanding of my own gifts. “Malva” represents some of the struggles that migrant children face when coming into a new culture and country that does not want them. “Malva” is often invisible and unseen despite the gifts she brings where she is asked to serve.

In the memoir piece “Our Song” I begin to connect with the long history I have had and fought with a song I would hear every so often that was indicative of a bad event that was about to happen in my life, one that I would be helpless to control. As a child, into adolescence, and in my adult life, I was plagued with this song that made me feel like I was mentally ill and unable to explain the phenomena to anyone. It wasn't until my psilocybin journey in August of 2022 that I was finally able to tell my mother about my years long experience with this song. During my journey it was revealed to me in a vision that the song I was hearing was in fact for me and it was from God, reassuring me that I wouldn't be alone and that what was coming was for my higher learning in this life experience. Now, I no longer have to hear the song on the radio. It comes to me telepathically and has expanded since my journey to other songs that come to me in

dreams. Now I yearn for a song from God. A very different experience and expansion in the transpersonal sense for healing and transformation.

In the poem, “Girl” I reflect on my experience as a mother with my teenage daughter. The changing transition as a mother trying to navigate parenting along with finding my place as a mother and the sacrifice over the years. It’s the only piece in the collection that reveals personal challenges of raising a daughter. Following this poem is a short story titled “Thunder” about a mother and daughter in a dystopian future following the destruction of the planet from climate change and what's left of humanity in the aftermath. This story is inspired by current events related to climate change and the continued science and information available during my life of how far gone and how impossible turning things around with our current trajectory for our planet. Through that sense of helplessness and constant stress, anxiety, and depression that remain. The limited mental health interventions available to help our country in coping and the increasing physical impacts this will have as the impact of climate change is felt.

The memoir piece, “Pocha” continues my early experiences of living between two cultures, the struggles that ensue and the limited support for so many of us who are juggling as first-generation sons and daughters. The piece focuses on death, near death experiences, pandemic losses, and the connection to Mexico. The nearness of death and my fears in confronting the inevitable loss of my mom in the future. This fear of death and loss was another intention I shared with my shaman on my psilocybin journey. Prior to my journey, I had a premonition which I expressed in the poem “Black Night Sky” in which I try to imagine what heaven is like, my fears, and what matters on this journey.

The final stories in the collection were written after my psilocybin journey. They are inspired by a new invigorating sense of aliveness, connectedness, and a deeper sense of compassion. Not just for myself, kindness and compassion with an understanding of how fundamentally important it is in this life, this journey we are all on. I begin this final section with a memoir piece titled “Pressure”. In the aftermath of the last year of the pandemic, the health concern I cope with in regards to my heart. The emotional toll of so much that happened during this time left me continuing to heal my condition.

My fascination with “Fractals” is expressed in this poem. In seeing my reality using a microscopic view versus the larger view and the fascination it brings me now.

The way it renews my spirit and helps me to bring a deeper perspective and meaning in my life. The wonder I feel and the curiosity that renews me is what I hope a reader also feels when reading this poem.

In my favorite form of magical realism, “La Dama De Los Espejos” reflects classic techniques in a story that highlights the other world, other realms, and mirrors. This piece is something I hope to expand upon in the future. The piece shared is a version used to enter a writing competition in January 2023. Utilizing culture to highlight its importance as a healing modality is something I continue to be passionate about.

In conclusion, the final three stories of this collection include the memoir piece “The Time I spoke to God, a Mental Health Clinicians Journey with Psilocybin” is the most personal work I have allowed myself to express. It’s an openness that I have not had with myself since this experience. The poem “Sage” represents my overall understanding of my purpose in life and my new found comfort in this along with my continuing journey forward with this sense of enlightenment. My final poem “Still Howling” represents for me this entire journey, the full intersection of Transpersonal Psychology, Magical Realism, and poetry.



MEMORIES, WEIRDNESS & WONDER

By

Yessenia Guglielmi

## MEXICAN WHITE MAGIC

Brujeria and hechizos are culturally ingrained in my Mexican upbringing as much as tacos and queso fresco. Hechizos are defined as magic spells or they can be charms for brujeria, which is viewed as witchcraft. As in the American culture, there is black and white magic.

The most useful white magic I saw in my home was my Mother's bowl of red apples carefully placed on a small altar at the entrance of our home. My Mother spent so much time at the grocery store carefully picking out the Red Delicious apples with their waxy skins and bright red color. She inspected each one to make sure they were not bruised or damaged in any way. These beauties were strictly off limits to my brother and me. They taunted us daily when we came home seeing them perfectly placed in their bowl. I felt like Eve wanting to just bite the silly apples my Mother put so much faith in. My brother, unlike Adam, was too fearful of my mother's wrath to ever try them. The apples were there to collect the negative energy or bad intentions of people who came to our home. Anyone who visited was unknowingly tested right from the start. Guests were greeted at the door where my Mother lingered with pleasantries until she felt sure the apples had done their job. It was then she would bring them further into our home. Once they left, she carefully checked each of her apples. Any that were rotten or bruised was enough evidence for her to make her decision on if that guest would be allowed back.

"It doesn't make any sense," I would argue. "The apples are going to rot, they are fruit. All fruit goes bad in a few days. It has nothing to do with your Mexican magic."

"Oh si! Veremos," was all my Mother would say. "These customs have been around for hundreds of years and some teenager is going to tell me it's not true."

My eye rolls ignored, and simple logic quickly cast aside. My experiments to show my Mom how fruit rots were laughed at.

"These apples are prepared," she would say. And every time she switched them out, I would watch. Her routine was always the same. The new fruit carefully placed on the small altar under the framed picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The bowl of apples, fresh flowers, and a votive placed on a white lacy fabric. Usually, the candle had a picture of Jesus or another saint depending on Mom's mood. She would lovingly decorate her table and spend a few minutes each day praying. Asking the Virgin to protect us, and our home. Maybe if Mom had done some elaborate gesture, voodoo dance, or animal sacrifice it might have helped my skeptical mind to consider believing. Nothing my sixteen-year-old brain could conjure to invoke the kind of power it would take to make the apples work ever happened.

"Whatever, this is America, New Jersey for God's sake. Not some remote Mexican village where people believe in the chupacabra." I continually argued with my Mom and she continued to pray and carry on with her tradition. When the apples would rot due to "explainable science" in my opinion, my Mom would place them in a plastic bag and throw them far away from the house. A useless drive by my estimation, it usually took place on a Sunday when I wanted to hang out with my friends. I would protest and demand that she do what people in every other house do, "just put them in the trash and let the garbage men take them away." But no! It was always a fight. I'd scrunch my face and get in the front seat wishing my Mom could be American. Wishing I didn't always smell like rice, fried tortillas, or refried beans. Wishing that when my friends came over they could just come inside without the extra interrogation at the front door.

On one typical Saturday, my Mom drove us all the way out to Union City to a grocery store to buy her silly apples at The Bravo, a Latino supermarket we always went to hoping to save a bit of money. We rushed home, a 45-minute drive with a car full of

groceries. My Mother told us she was expecting company and asked me to help her. She put away the meat and dairy products and handed me the plastic bag full of bright red apples.

"Set them out for the Virgin for me." This was the first time my Mom entrusted me with the task. Anxiety crept through me. I had seen her do it a million times, knew her routine but felt embarrassed to pray. She looked into my eyes and gently pressed the bag into my hands. I was thankful my brother had locked himself away in his room. I didn't want to get made fun of or deal with his taunts. I opened the bag and began to place four apples side by side in the bowl. They were perfect. I placed three more on top and then a final one forming a small tower in the bowl. I peered up at the Virgin and said to her in my mind, "You know what's up. You know what Mom wants." I felt silly, those damn apples.

My Mother looked pleased, she smiled at me when I came back to help her put away the rest of the groceries. She started dinner and I went to my room to listen to music. My brother and I went back down to greet our visitors when they arrived. It was family who came to visit, family we had not seen in a long time. They stayed for a while, talking to my Mom. They needed some help and my mom was unsure if she could assist them financially. I lingered by my Mom's side, listening in and being a busy body as most brooding teenagers can be. They didn't stay too long. We said our goodbyes with my Mom promising to get back to them. She locked the front door and I snuck back to pick at the leftover food.

"Hija," Mom called from the altar. "Hija!"

I ran over and tried to read the expression on my Mom's face. It was concern. She merely pointed to the apples. I immediately thought I had done something wrong. Did I not place them in the bowl properly? My dyslexia got me into all kinds of trouble back then. Putting things on the wrong side, miscounting, silly mistakes I would berate myself

for. I glanced over at the bowl. Fruit flies and the apple's waxy skin looked withered. My Mom came over and gently turned one, the bottom was black.

"You see. Even family can have bad intentions. The apples absorbed all the negative energy they brought with them."

Flabbergasted, I stared at the apples unbelieving at first but the evidence was clear. It would not be the last time I experienced something supernatural or otherworldly. My mind exploded with facts, figures, explanations, trying to explain the unexplainable. The moment I touched the apple and turned it myself was the first time I could feel my small world expand. The closer I examined the black and brown bruise a deeper acknowledgment between myself and the Virgin and God developed.

All of them, the small pyramid of apples rotted. My Mom made a sign of the cross over herself and then me. She placed the fruit into a bag and thanked the Virgin for protecting us. I didn't complain driving to throw the fruit away. I sat in stunned silence thinking about everything else I had dismissed in my life, seeing with clarity the possibility that exists in the world.

## CARDINAL

When a cardinal comes to visit

They say an angel is near

Who are you sweet angel

That lingers near

Are you of my past

Are you of my present

Do you come in warning

Do you come with presents

Are you a reminder of love so dear

Brilliant

Red

Burning

Near

## VALENTINA

“Good afternoon. Could you kindly let Maritza know that Val is here to see her?” Val observed the woman at the counter look her over with big almond shaped eyes drawn tightly in suspicion. Perhaps her polite demeanor was throwing the receptionist off her game.

“Yeah. Wait here.” The receptionist walked through a beaded curtain to the back. “Yo, Maritza, some lady is here to see you. Val or whatever her tight-ass name is.”

Val could hear laughter in the back. Her mother’s cackle was hard not to hear, it was usually the loudest, the most obnoxious.

“Val? I don’t know no Val. I know I shit out a daughter named Valentina. Her big ass head split my chocha in two.” The customers laughed with her mom.

Val steadied herself as best as she could. Her mother was a force of nature. No matter how hard she prepared, it was never enough. She took a breath and brushed off her blazer, making sure it looked neat.

“Oh, look who it is. So what, you some doctor now?” Maritza sucked her teeth and looked Val up and down. She adjusted her tits in the tight top, using her hand to scoop up each breast.

“Hey, Ma. Missed you at graduation.” Val instantly regretted her comment. She wanted to start this off without fighting, but instinct, the animalistic need to preserve herself, took over. “How are you?” Val tried again. Ma was too busy looking in the mirror to make sure her breasts looked good.

“Better than you. What brings you to Newark? You feel like slumming it today instead of being with your white mom?” Maritza fluffed her curly hair.

“Maggie was at graduation and she brought her whole family to celebrate. She made the effort to be there for me.” Damn it, this isn’t how she wanted to do this. Maggie was her second mom, had been there for Val since she was in sixth grade. Her mentor was everything to her. Val knew she wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for Maggie.

“Yeah, your whole family was there, huh? You planned your little party without including the people who are your actual blood. What an ungrateful piece of shit you

turned out to be.” Maritza looked genuinely pissed. The vein in her forehead was protruding and pulsing. It made Val feel like she was ten again. Getting screamed at for whatever pissed her mom off in the moment. A wave of sadness hit Val suddenly. Pito, that son of a bitch had ruined their lives but Ma always chose her husband over anyone else.

“What do you want? You must need something coming down here all suited up, looking like some landlord.” Maritza pulled Val from drowning in the past.

“Have you seen the news?” Val asked, hoping.

“Yeah, we get Telemundo. I’m surprised you been watchin’. Since when do you give a shit about Puerto Rico?”

“Pa called me. He says he’s in bad shape and asked me to help him.” Val felt the weight of her conscience. His call, the sound of his voice all came back to her. She was lying to her Ma, he had begged her to come.

“Damn, he must be in real bad shape. They say people lost everything, still no power, people dying in the heat. It’s fucked up.” Maritza pursed her lips and shook her head.

“I’m not sure what to do. I’ve never been down there, I don’t know anyone...”

“What do you mean, you don’t know what to do. You kiddin me? Your dad ain’t never asked you for shit.” Maritza looked disgusted. It reminded Val of when she told Ma she was moving in with Maggie and her family for a better opportunity. Ma never understood. Maggie offered to take care of her and made sure she went to good schools. Ma never gave a shit about grades or her future, but had that same look when Val broke the news to her.

“Hold on, I barely know my dad. He took off and never worried a day in his life for me. Now I have to drop everything and go see him? I have a life, I’m starting a new job and have work responsibilities you can’t even understand.”

“Understand? You never think that I can understand anything. Why don’t you explain it to me. I mean you only get one father and one mother in your life. Well, I guess you get two. Maybe if it was Maggie’s husband calling you, you wouldn’t even be thinking twice. Since it’s your father, who’s poor and ain’t got shit, then I guess you gotta see what’s in it for you before you get your ass out there. Am I right?”



“No. Where do you get the right to judge me? You could care less about me or to be there for me when I’ve needed you. Pito always comes first. I guess I learned this from you.”

“Oh, here we go. Let’s blame Pito for abandoning your own mother for some white lady. What did your Mom Maggie tell you to do, huh?” Maritza began talking in a white lady voice, “Val, you’re white, you don’t need to go to Puerto Rico.” .

“Stop it! Leave Maggie out of this.” Val could feel the tension in her shoulders radiating down her limbs. She looked for a seat, unable to bear the storm much longer. “Does he have anyone else out there I could call? I can’t do it.” Val sat in a metal chair. The reception area was sparse. It was painted in bright colors with posters of nail polish and long nails advertising gel manicures. Val knew her Ma was proud of the salon she built ten years ago. “There has to be someone.”

“Your grandma died when you finished high school. He’s got no one so…” She let the statement hang in the air between them.

“No cousins, aunts? That’s crazy. What happened to his family?” Val felt lost. Her new job at NYU would wait for her, but she didn’t want to go. Her father had only called her a few times ever, and occasionally had sent money to her Ma when she was little, but that was it. Pretending they were close in his hour of need wasn’t something Val felt compelled to do. What Maggie had told her was that she could make a choice without feeling guilty, so why when her Ma looked at her like that did she feel a pit in her stomach? The aching feeling confused and overwhelmed her.

“Look, I always told you that your father is your father. He may have made a whole lot of mistakes in his life, but he’s still your father.”

“What? After the way he left you, you would go?” The thought shocked Val. “You have the kids, you can’t go, can you?” Maybe her Ma would finally do something for her. If she went that would solve so much for her. The tension in her body seemed to lift.

“Na. I have got the kids, and a business to run. He called you, not me.” Maritz quickly dashed any hope Val had.

Anger swarmed through her body. It was just like her Ma to get her hopes up and toy with her emotions. “I have a fellowship at NYU, an opportunity of a lifetime here. I can’t give that up for a man who has barely ever called me. He wouldn’t do it for me.”

“How do you know what he would or wouldn’t do for you? Your dad is a good man. Just because things didn’t work out between us doesn’t mean he didn’t care about you. For someone who’s supposed to be so smart, you really are a dumb ass.”

“Oh, that’s rich. I can always count on you to put me down. You can’t stand that I’m not working here at your nail salon and dare to want something more for my life.” Val felt her cheeks flush with more anger than she could hold off. Not showing up to graduation and abandoning her was something Ma did the moment she moved out. Why did she even bother with these people? She and Ma lived in different worlds.

“Always the victim, right, Valentina? Poor Valentina, look at the kind of mother she has. Poor Valentina, her father needs her and she’s too scared to go see him. I should have named you something else. I thought you were gonna be so different.”

“You’re not the only one who’s disappointed.” Val scanned her eyes over her Ma, wanting to say so much, but holding back.

“Hey, Doctor Valentina Romero, why don’t you walk your fat ass out of my salon. Go get your nails done somewhere else. Take your bullshit problems to your white mom and leave me the fuck alone.” Ma’s eyes grew small as they peered into her soul and ripped it out.

“Fine, Ma, if this is how it’s got to be, then I’m done. Done with you and with Dad. You guys never did shit for me. You love Pito, your new kids, and your life without me. It’s taken me years to accept it, but this moment is a turning point for me. I’m gonna focus on me. My life, my career. I’m done with all of you!” Val wanted to scream and scream until her voice was raw. She hated Ma. Hated her more than ever.

“Yeah, I heard. Professor of Latino studies or some shit. What a fucking joke, you teaching kids about being Latino.” The revelation shocked Val. How did Ma know? “You wanna be Latino, then start by going to see your father.” Ma dismissed her with a hand wave, flaunting her long, red, fake nails. Maritza walked through the curtain separating them from the reception area.

Val gathered herself off the chair and left as the receptionist came back out and gave her a look. She walked out onto the sidewalk on Orange Avenue. She hated everything about Newark, everything about Ma and her shitty family. All the sofrito in the world couldn't begin to smell as badly as she felt coming here. It was time to get out of here and never look back. Time to put this whole Puerto Rico thing behind her. With each step towards her car, she imagines letting go a little more.

Alone, back at the one-bedroom apartment she rented, Val started working on organizing her syllabus for the upcoming spring semester. The light from the laptop illuminated the bedroom. She had so much to focus on and organize before the start of the year. This was her only time to get it done. Her ginger cat purred next to her feet. That reminded her of the litter box needing cleaning. It was just after midnight when the phone vibrated on the desk, jolting her: San Juan and a phone number she recognized from the last call from her father earlier in the week. Her heart sank as she tried to gather the words and the best way to break the news.

“Pa?”

“Valentina, are you coming tomorrow?” The tone of his voice was gentle. Like he was coaxing her with candy.

“Pa, I can't...”

“I need you, nena. I really need you by my side. I have so much to tell you before I die. Por favor, mi nina.” His words were softer and each one affected Val in a way she hadn't prepared for. They weren't like her mother's demanding and demeaning. She felt herself slouch in her chair, weakening. “Mamita, I just want to see your face before I leave this world.”

Val felt her throat tighten with emotion. The thought of him dying scared her.

“Close your eyes, Pa instructed and Val obeyed, holding back tears. “I must tell you about our family.”

Val kept her eyes closed and an image of her father formed in her mind. He was lying in a bed with a cell phone clutched to his ear. He looked skinny and weak. Around him was debris and darkness. “Pa, what happened?”

“The hurricane, mi nina. You see me?”

“It’s so dark.”

“No power, no water, mosquitos everywhere. I hurt my legs, I’ve been lying here for days. Please come.”

Val opened her eyes. “Yes, Pa. I’m booking my flight now.”

“You come to the mountain, you’ll find me. Just follow your instincts. I love...”

“Pa?” The call disconnected, leaving Val feeling desperate. She tried to call the number back but it didn’t go through. She turned back to her computer and quickly looked for a flight, hoping to leave in the morning. She scoured different sites but there were few flights going into San Juan. Power had only started to be restored. A five o’clock flight out of Newark was the best she could find. It would give her time to see her Ma before she left. A strong urge to talk to her mom suddenly became urgent. There was a lot she wanted to tell her. The words between them were never easy. She sent her a text saying she would come by the salon tomorrow morning.

She packed a duffle bag for three days, hoping she would be back sooner. Once her pa was secure at a hospital, she could leave. He would be fine and life would return to normal. She turned on CNN to see if there were any updates on the recovery efforts. Trump, the president said they were doing everything possible, FEMA was on the ground, the National Guard too. Things were going to be okay, she assured herself. The disturbing images were a sharp contradiction to the positive thoughts she was trying to hold onto in her mind; it felt like she was looking at a Third World country. She switched to Telemundo where the news anchors were ranting about Trump and his lack of effort to help the people. They spoke so quickly, Val had a hard time keeping up. Her Spanish needed some practice. She kept it on hoping to absorb more of the language in time for the trip.

The next morning she arrived back in the Ironbound section of Newark. Ma’s salon opened at 9 on Saturdays for the weekend crowd urgently needing a pedicure. Her mother’s name over the entrance in neon colors reminded Val how small she felt in this place the day before and always. She readied herself for another storm, telling herself over and over again as she pulled open the door that she was good enough, she didn’t

need Ma, she could handle it. The same receptionist gave her a smirk and waved for Val to come over behind the desk. She pulled back the curtain and let Val inside.

It had been years since Val had stepped foot inside the spa. Her Ma had really suped up the place. All the pedicure stations looked new, the wall of nail polish was even bigger than she remembered, and there were new manicurists who looked quite presentable and professional. It reminded Val of one of those swanky salons uptown.

“Looks like there’s a doctor in the house,” Maritza’s mocking voice announced. The staff stopped working and stared at Val walking towards her Ma. “You got an appointment, Valentina?”

“Oh snap! It’s on again!” One of the ladies called out. Val ignored her. She wasn’t here to fight.

A hand clasped hers suddenly and Val noticed her little sister, Clara.

“Hi, Ti-ti. It’s been a long time.” Clara looked all grown up, she was taller than Val now.

“Hi, Clarita. Wow, how old are you now?”

“Sixteen, Ti-ti.” She smiled, revealing her braces and colorful rubber bands.

“You look beautiful, look at all this long hair.” Clara’s hair reached down her back past her butt. It was dark with curls. An image popped into her mind of little Clara on her mom’s hip while she shouted into the phone at Pito, “Come on, when you gonna pick up these fuckin kids so I can work!” Poor Clara, she was spending her childhood in this nail salon, listening to the women gossip and her Ma fight with Pito.

“Yeah, you see Clara ain’t got to leave her family to get ahead. She’s going to Spain in November with her AP class. Getting herself into a good college and doing really great in school. Right, mamita?” Maritza winked at Clara proudly. “Learning to run a business since she was five, working hard.”

“Preach, girl!” The same busy body called out again from a corner of the room.

“Ma, can I talk to you, alone?”

“Yeah, sit down. Let me look at those nails.” Maritza used her nail file to point to the chair in front of her. Val rushed over hoping for some privacy. “Gimme your left hand,” Ma ordered and looked disapprovingly at Val’s nails. “Damn, this is a mess. Clara gimme a cuticle cutter from the sterilizer.”

Ma grasping her hand felt strange to Val. They locked eyes for a moment acknowledging that it had been a long time since they touched. Ma was never a touchy, feely type. Maritza took a deep breath and gave Val a long look.

“Soak them cuticles in here.” She placed Val’s hand in a bowl of warm water. “Why don’t you take care of yourself? I mean you can’t keep your nose in a book all day.”

Val smiled. “Ma you’ve been saying that to me since I was a kid. I’m just not girly. I don’t care about hair and nails.”

“You’re getting old, gonna get cobwebs in your cho-kon-cha soon.” The ladies around them giggled. Val scanned the room annoyed.

“I’m leaving for Puerto Rico today. I talked to Pa last night. He’s not well. He can’t walk, he’s hurt. I just came to let you know.” Val pulled her hand out of the warm water. Maritza grabbed it before she could pull away.

“You got time for a manicure then. Can’t go to PR with shitty nails, I won’t have it.” Ma went to work on her left hand and put the right one to soak. “You know, after you left yesterday, with all that shit you were saying, it made me understand that you really don’t know your family.” Val tried to pull her hand away but her mother smacked her with the nail file. “Your dad left because his mother was sick. Your abuela was all alone in Puerto Rico and in a bad way. Your dad was a good son. He took care of his ma till she passed. He loved you, always did. He sent money and would call you, you don’t remember? One time, he came to visit and brought you pasteles, toys, and dresses. But nah, you don’t remember shit.”

“I only saw him once and talked on the phone a few times. He never came back. Excuse me if I needed to think about dropping everything to go see him.” Maritza was carefully cutting around Val’s nail bed and holding her hand firmly, ignoring the last comment.

“So your grandma left behind some land that needed to be taken care of. She only had your dad and he had to stay there to take care of his responsibilities. He went through a lot out there. I met Pito and it was over. He understood, ya know.”

Val shook her head, yeah she knew. Her whole life changed too. She spent her childhood taking care of the half siblings who came later, and trying to wrap her mind around the drinking, drugs, and fighting that happened every weekend.

“A lot of shit went down for your dad out there,” her mother said. “I’m sure he’ll tell you all about it.” Maritza finished shaping Val’s nails and started putting on a red nail color.

“No, Ma! I hate red.”

Maritza laughed. “You gotta represent Boricua.” The other ladies smiled and gave Val a thumbs up. “Yo, Cha-chi, put on some salsa!” The music blasted from the speakers and the customers got hyped up with the song playing.

“Oh, yeah, old school. El Gran Combo.” Ma moved around in her chair, grooving to the music. “Get used to that sound, Valentina. It’s all your father would play.”

Val smiled listening to the man sing about Puerto Rican food. Two women stood up to dance and Clara took over the register. Business was booming for Ma from what Val could tell. Women were coming in and waiting for their turn. She sat quietly watching the hustle and bustle. Clara came over and touched Val’s hair curiously.

“You straighten it every day? Seems like a lot of work.”

“No, Japanese hair straightener. It stays like this for weeks.” Val looked at Clara’s curls, wondering if hers would ever look that beautiful if she stopped processing it.

“You better get your ass to a salon when you get down there. Ain’t no Japanese gonna compete with the humidity in PR,” Ma interrupted. “Put your hand in here.” She placed a nail dryer on the desk and a UV light flashed on. “Now these nails will last two weeks, at least. I put an extra coat on just in case.”

Val looked down at her hands and saw Ma had added a Puerto Rican flag on her index fingers. She tried not to roll her eyes. Clara giggled behind her.

“Thanks, Ma. I’ll check in when I get back.” Clara leaned over and gave Val a hug. Ma came over and gave Val an unexpected hug.

Val wrapped her arms around Maritza, smelling the faint scent of her shampoo and feeling the softness of her skin. “Bendicion, Ma,” she whispered softly.

“Dios te bendiga, Valentina.”

Val hugged her again, fighting back tears. It had been years since her Ma had offered her a blessing.

The woman next to her on the plane moved around in her seat distracting Val from her thoughts. The lady seemed nervous or anxious.

“Are you okay?” Val asked.

“Yes, it’s just gonna be terrible. I’m so scared of how bad the island is. I hope the pilot has some information for us before we land.”

“It will be fine, tourists are already going back. The plane is full.” Val tried to sound reassuring. Inside the butterflies in her stomach had multiplied. She surveyed a map over and over again, but really had no idea of where her pa could be. She prayed the phone number he called from would work and she could locate him. He was near San Juan, that much she knew. She reassured herself once she got settled, everything would be okay. Val closed her eyes and tried to rest. A picture of her father formed in her mind again. She could see him asleep in the same spot he was in last night. This time she looked around the room and out of a small window, surveying everything around. She could see mountains everywhere, a dirt road, and a sign, but she couldn’t make out the words.

Val opened her eyes. This had to be a projection from her subconscious mind trying to help her cope with the stress of the situation. It happened last night too, seeing Pa in her mind. Google pulled up the words “remote viewing” and “psychic abilities;” there were articles about it but not anything Val believed in. She would prove it to herself soon enough. Val closed her eyes and this time let herself drift off to sleep.

\*\*\*

“This is the captain. We are close to landing and I wanted to advise you that most of the island is still without power. It’s still pretty chaotic and hope you all stay safe out there. There is limited cell service so if you need to make any phone calls, the best spot is from the airport. Once you leave this location, most of the cell towers if not all of the cell towers are still down. San Juan is probably your best bet safety-wise. The National Guard is present and you can find water and supplies with the Red Cross. Most hotels are still down, but if you are lucky enough to secure a room, I imagine they will have what you



need. On behalf of myself, and the rest of the crew, we want to thank you for flying United. Please keep your seat belts buckled until the seat belt sign turns off.”

Val opened her eyes. She used the time to draw a sketch from the dream she just had. Mountains and some letters, nothing that looked familiar to her and the letters did spell out a word she knew. She kept sketching till they landed and all of the people got out.

It was hot, muggy, and the smell of body odor was all around. Val removed her jacket and tied it around her waist, regretting her decision to wear jeans. She quickly rolled up the sleeves of her blouse as she walked out into the terminal. She could see lines of people waiting to board flights, people crying, some sleeping on the floor with their children, and airline staff trying to deal with the countless frustrations of an airport running on generators. Val began feeling her stomach turn, and with jittery hands she quickly powered on the phone and took it off airplane mode. The thought of getting stuck in Puerto Rico with no return flight scared her. People were yelling at airport staff; it looked like some had been waiting for days to leave. Val tried her father’s number, praying he would pick up. The phone rang a few times and then there was just a beeping sound. She checked her text messages but there was nothing since she boarded. Only one bar of cellular, and no Wi-Fi. Val felt the pangs in her stomach worsen. She looked around and followed the signs for taxis, hoping to get to the hotel quickly before dark. Frantically she looked around but there were only military vehicles, unloading supplies.

“Oye, nena, oye!” a man’s voice called out to her.

The last thing she needed was to be cat-called at a time like this. She ignored the man and kept looking around for a cab, running her hand through her hair and starting to bite the polish off her fingernails.

“Oye! You lost? Are you a volunteer?” The man’s accent sounded familiar. Like the guys from the Bronx, a mix of Spanish and English. “Mira, chica, hablas espanol?”

“I need a cab, I’m not a volunteer.” Val swung around towards him to let him know she wasn’t interested.

A man with a black goatee and dark straight hair pulled back into a small bun looked surprised. His dark eyes had a look of disbelief. “Hey, you look lost. All

volunteers are supposed to be at terminal B. Which organization are you with?" He was slim and taller than Val. His navy blue tee shirt said "Policia".

"I need some help. I'm trying to find my father and get to my hotel. I need a cab." She felt herself start to calm down. He looked like someone who knew what he was doing in all this mess.

"Okay, what hotel? I just have to help these people over here. Puedes esperar?" He spoke in both languages, switching between them effortlessly. Speaking to other people walking by, military, and volunteers. He commanded the entire space.

"Yeah, I'm at the Marriott." Val called out as he directed more people. She waited, hoping he would be quick. He looked down at his wrist checking the time and shaking his head.

"Mira, that hotel is closed. They aren't gonna let you in this late. You're better off staying here and trying in the morning. No lights, it's dark now. No cabs." Other police officers approached him and he started talking to them.

Val shook her head nervously. She couldn't stay here. "No, look I'm a doctor. I have to get to that hotel tonight."

"Doctors and nurses are with the Red Cross in the tents. You'll have to walk." He looked up at her quickly and kept talking to the other officers.

Shit! Val's mind sputtered, trying to quickly explain. "I'm a professor from NYU, not a medical doctor. Look, I just gotta get to my hotel."

The man rolled his eyes. "Look, if you're not essential staff, find yourself a seat somewhere before they're taken. Check with me in the morning." He waved for a group of volunteers in red shirts to come over and ignored Val as she kept trying to explain her situation.

Unwilling to accept defeat, she grabbed her bag and kept looking for a cab or another person who could help her. This guy wasn't the be-all or end all for Puerto Rico. Val approached strangers pleading for some help to find a cab.

"Oye, nena, it's dangerous. Please go have a seat." The officer was right behind her and Val spun around feeling angry.

"Its Doctor Romero, don't call me nena!" She was eye to eye with him. She could smell his Right Guard deodorant.

“Perdona. Doctora vaya sientese.” He pointed to a row of uncomfortable chairs. He picked up her bag that she was dragging on the floor. He seemed to soften as he led Val over to sit down.

“Thank you. I’m sorry about yelling. I’m just…” Val stumbled on where to even begin.

“Esta bien. It’s okay.” He gave her a thumbs up and a goofy grin. “Tomorrow morning, I can get you a cab. Do you know what an apagon is?”

“No, what’s that?” It sounded serious; Val’s brow furrowed, concentrating on what he was saying.

He scowled, “It’s a super power outage. Everything is in total darkness.” He stood up and crossed his arms. He looked down on Val in her seat with a serious expression. “There’s a mandatory curfew, 6am to 6pm.”

Val swallowed, feeling her jaw clench tightly. Gazing up at the officer made her think of the word “eye candy.” She looked away quickly, embarrassed. His cocky smirk and expression of “Yeah baby, take a good look.”

“So get comfortable in this chair, Doctora. Don’t look at my butt when I walk away. I’ll be able to feel you staring at me.” He looked her in the eyes and grinned, turned and walked off.

She tried her father’s number again. The spot she was standing in, by the large windows, had better reception. No answer. She grabbed her bag and walked to get online to use the bathroom. The smell around her was giving her a headache. Her stomach grumbled and everything seemed to be going wrong. Her plan of attack at first light was to get the hell out of this airport and find some help to get her father off the mountain and into a hospital. She needed to talk to someone in charge from the Red Cross. Val held her breath as she went into the stall and unbuttoned her jeans quickly. The heat and humidity just made everything worse. She got done and went to wash her hands. One look in the mirror startled her. Her hair was a mess. Frizz with straight and curly pieces were fighting for space on her head. She searched for a hair tie at the bottom of her bag. She wet the top and pulled it back as tightly as she could into a bun.

“Excuse me could you tell me where I can find someone in charge?” She stopped the first person she saw with a red volunteer tee-shirt.

“Serving dinner, you should be able to find someone.” The lady pointed to a long hallway.

“Thanks.” Val scurried down the hall, keeping a quick pace. People were sitting on the floor or in chairs, eating. The volunteers were handing out sandwiches and water. Val got in line and kept asking for a person in charge.

The lady who handed her a water bottle and sandwich told her to ask for Alex then pointed to a group of men standing in a corner of the room. Val approached them barging in on their conversation. She stopped in her tracks when she saw the eye candy officer again in the middle of the huddle.

“Si, Doctora. What do you want?”

“My father, I need to get him to a hospital as soon as possible.”

“Write his name and location on the list and we will get to him when we can.” He handed her a clipboard with pages of names.

She flipped through to the third page. “No, this isn’t acceptable. He needs help right away.” She looked him in the eye. Trying to will him to understand her distress.

“Every name on this list needs help right away. We’re working with a third of what was promised. We have resorted to carrying people on our backs to get them to help. We’re doing all we can.” His face looked somber.

Val knew people were dying and would continue to die.

“It’s not enough.” Val whispered. His face changed and flushed red.

“Don’t you think we know that! You just got here! We’ve been doing this for days with no sleep. Bearing the brunt of this storm, day in and day out.” Another officer clutched his shoulder and pulled him back. Whispering in his ear to calm down.

“Let it go, Alex.” He took the clipboard from her and handed it to another officer.

Val was out of the circle and cast aside. Feeling terrible, she tried to reach out to Alex to apologize. An officer handed her a pencil and pushed the clipboard back towards her. She scribbled Juan Jose Macandal and the cell phone number. On the side she wrote, *I’m sorry officer Alex, my comment was careless. I apologize* and signed her name.

She walked away with her sandwich and went back to her seat by the taxi exits to try and sleep grateful to find the seat was still available.

“Hey. Wake up.” Alex stood over her, pulling his wet hair back into a small man bun.

Val tried to stretch in the chair. All her muscles felt tight and pain radiated in her back as she moved. “What time is it?” She could smell the scent of zest soap. Lucky bastard was able to get in a shower somehow.

“5am. Go freshen up and then come see me,” Alex ordered. The look on his face was stern, urging Val to comply. “I’ll be down this hall.” He pointed to an area past the taxi station.

Val stood up and grabbed her bag. “You’re gonna help me get my father?”

“I’ll do what I can.” He walked away.

Val quickly got herself together and changed into some fresh clothes and came rushing back to meet Alex.

“The number you wrote down doesn’t work. I’ve tried it a few times. You didn’t list an address.” He flipped through the paperwork and stared at her. Val quickly fumbled through her bag.

“I hope this makes sense to you.” She showed him the picture she drew on the plane. Praying it could be something, though she didn’t believe in remote viewing and wanted to tell him she never drew pictures like this. Alex took the notebook and stared at it for a few seconds.

“This is near Manati, about a 50 minute drive, but now it will take longer. Roads have been washed away, downed power lines, it’s dangerous.” Alex handed the notebook back to her.

“Really? You know where this is? It’s an actual place?” Val felt excited and scared at the same time.

“Look, you need to know where you’re going. We can’t guess, or fool around here. Every minute counts. Are you sure he’s there?” Alex’s tone was stern and all business.

“Yes, he’s there. I’m sure of it.” She grabbed her bag, ready for action.

“Okay. Let’s go quickly.” Alex searched the table for a set of keys. He led the way out of the airport, pausing to give quick orders to his men as they walked away together. “I have to get back here as soon as possible. I’m the captain and have to be back here to keep things running smoothly.”

“Thank you for helping me.” Val gave him a grateful smile. She understood it was a big deal for him to leave his post to help her.

San Juan looked like a ghost town in ruin. Stores were empty, abandoned homes with open doors, streets full of debris, and the few people around looked shell-shocked. The traffic lights were all out and traffic followed a haphazard pattern. Alex continued reporting over the CB radio advising his department along the drive of any concerns. They drove towards the Expreso Jose De Diego. The toll booths were abandoned frames, and cars drove through without stopping. Val had been told San Juan was similar to Miami in culture and appearance, but now as she looked out her window, there was no way it even shared a resemblance. Many streets were still flooded and the smell of feces permeated the air.

“So what do you teach at NYU, Doctora?” Alex asked politely, seemingly numb to the horrors around them.

“Mostly on revolutions in Latino America. It’s exciting stuff.” Val smiled thinking about her syllabus for January. Wondering if she would bore the kids to death.

“This is your first time visiting la isla?” Alex reached down and turned on the air conditioning in the car. The cold air against her hand felt luxurious. “It used to be bonita.” His eyes surveyed along the expressway with longing.

“Yeah, I’m sorry it took me so long to get out here. I imagine when things get back to normal it will be more beautiful than ever.” Val tried to infuse Alex with a drop of hope. His eyes cast down on the road. They were going farther out of the city and still had a ways to go.

“So they say. Some things you can’t unsee no matter how pretty they try to make it later.” He turned to look at her with his dark eyes swirling with sadness.

Val said, “These mountains are amazing. They seem to never end.” The expressway transformed into a smaller highway. They were on backroads with tight turns. Alex informed her about the towns they were passing, imparting background and

history on the ones he was familiar with. Val asked a lot of questions, hoping to keep them both distracted from the devastation around them.

The road came to an abrupt stop. Fallen trees and powerlines blocked the way forward. Alex parked the car and they both got out to assess their options. The trees were too big to move and another way around would take too long, Alex told her. Without a chainsaw, the road was impassable. He looked at his watch nervously.

“I can walk from here. Don’t worry.” Val placed her bag over her shoulder and let it hang across her body. “My Pa has a house, I’ll be fine. You need to get back, they are waiting for you.” She urged Alex back into his car. He was busy checking her phone for a signal.

“I can’t leave you out here alone. What if he’s not there?” Alex looked worried. “There’s been a lot of looting and bad stuff happening.”

“I’ll be fine, I’m from Jersey City. I can handle it.” Val checked her bag for a water bottle and bug spray. The mosquitos were already eating her up. She killed one on her arm. The sweat was attracting them. “You said it’s a few miles ahead. I’ll stay on the road and follow it up the mountain.”

“You added my number to your contacts? I’ll come back in a few hours to check on you. I won’t be away long.” Alex looked around the desolate surroundings, with not a soul in sight. He popped the trunk of his car and fumbled around. He handed her another water bottle and some chips. “If you run out of water, crack open a coconut.” He handed her a long Swiss Army pocket knife. “Keep this close.”

“Thank you, thank you for everything you’ve done for me. I’m truly grateful.” She gave his hand a squeeze and smiled. His hair had escaped the bun and fell loose around his face. She thought the black hair against his olive skin looked beautiful and in some way exotic. It was neither straight or curly, yet perfect. He smiled back, knowing Val was checking him out again.

“I’ll be back soon, just stay safe, por favor.”

Several hours of walking made Val’s quads burn in resistance to the steep incline. She fashioned a walking stick from a long branch discarded on the ground and gripped it

tightly as she climbed up the mountain and sometimes to clear a trail. Her water bottle grew empty as she continued towards her father's house, up and up the muddy path. Pools of water collected mosquitos and rotting fruit littered the ground made the air smell putrid. At the top of the mountain Val finally stopped to catch her breath. The sweat glided off her face collected on her saturated clothes. Her body felt heavy. Down the path she could see what was left of her father's house; it was the only one in the area with no other houses nearby. The plantation looked just as she pictured it in her drawing on the plane. Denuded trees lined the pathway, some with roots exposed from the force of the hurricane. The cataclysmic ruin of crops and vegetation made her feel hopeless. Quenepa, pineapples, bananas, and other fruit was scattered around haphazardly with flies everywhere. The muddy walkway leading up to a wooden fence with missing planks framed the small house.

She could see a window and knew it was her Pa's bedroom. Exhaustion and elation hit her at once. She surveyed his home, it was decimated. The recovery would take months. But at least he made it, Pa was hurt but he would be okay. They could think about the repairs together later.

"Pa! I'm here." Val raced into the concrete structure. Her heart was pounding in her chest. So many years without seeing her father so many emotions bubbled to the surface. She was already crying thinking about the last time she saw him. Most of the roof had been destroyed and there were palm leaves everywhere. The home was full of drying mud and other debris. Her Pa lay still on a small twin sized bed. She approached the bed and grabbed his hand. "I'm gonna get you some help." His hand felt cold and clammy, he squeezed her hand. She blew warm air on his fingers trying to heat them.

"We have to move you Pa, the hospital is nearby."

"Valentina. Sit. There is no time to move me. My mother is here already." His voice sounded soft, he gazed at her and tears streamed down his face.

"No, Pa. I've got to get you some help." Val placed her hands under his shoulders hoping to sit him up. He winced in pain, stopping her from proceeding.

"Mi mama will take me home, Valentina, don't worry for me. I need you to cremate me and bury me with my mother. Promise me that you'll bury me with her,"



he pleaded and grabbed her hand. The look in his eyes helped Val understand the importance of his request. The profound loss of Pa dying hit hard making her chest feel hollow.

“Pa, I don’t want to lose you. I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner. I wasted time, I wish we had more time.” Val kissed his hand. “Why didn’t you want me? Why did you wait so long?”

“I wanted you to have a normal life. I didn’t want you to bear the responsibility until it was time. My mom did the same for me.” He stroked her hair and gazed into her eyes.

“I’m responsible Pa, what do you mean?” Val wondered if this was delirium. She touched his forehead and it felt cool. She removed the blanket covering him and saw his legs. They were grey and the color seemed to be spreading up his body.

“The responsibility of our family line. Don’t be scared, we will be closer than ever. Love can overcome death, and I love you so much.” He touched her cheek and wiped away her tears. “My mother is buried outside of the Catholic cemetery. The family curse, it scares them and they will give you trouble. I left you my book. It will guide you.” He took a short, labored breath. The grey color continued spreading up to his bare chest.

Val hugged him. “Pa, don’t go.” She didn’t understand everything he was saying. It sounded like he was hallucinating.

“You see her, Mami, she is beautiful. She’s gonna be the best one, the strongest one.” Pa seemed to look through Val.

Val shivered as if a cold draft was passing through her body. “Pa, don’t go. Stay, I need more time. I’m not ready to lose you.” Looking at him she could see so many of her own features. His cheekbones were well defined and his eyes though tired were a bright jade color reflected a deep knowledge. Helpless she wished there was something she could do. But she was so small against death. Accepting her powerlessness, she held his hand and cried.

“Play me a song. I would love to hear music as I go.” He stared at her. The bright jade color suddenly becoming a dull green.

“Okay, Pa,” she scrambled in her pocket and pulled out her phone. She pressed on her salsa playlist and tropical sounds began to flow. Her father smiled as the grey color moved up his chest. The song started with the sound of rhythm sticks tapping and the man began singing about Puerto Rican food. The Gran Combo sang about salsa, chivo and vino, pescado con jugo de limon, and lechon. Pa closed his eyes, smiling. “Don’t go, Pa.” Val pleaded one more time. She gently rubbed his black hair noticing the grey color move up past his heart. He took another labored breath and opened his eyes wide.

“It’s soon. I love you Valentina.” They locked eyes. The color now just a tint of green. “I’m leaving,” he whispered. The music continued to play.

Valentina watched the grey move past this throat and up his jaw. His soul was slowly leaving his body, exiting out from his head and looming over them. The music stopped. She could see twinkles of light all around the room. Pa was everywhere now. The lights went up to the ceiling and floated around. Val stood up mesmerized. She reached up her hand to try to touch the lights and cried. Other lights swarmed around and they flew out of the window together and into the night sky. Val rested against the open window for a while searching for the lights. She looked at the body of her Pa on the bed. It resembled a shell, hollow in appearance. With his soul gone, Pa didn’t even look like himself anymore. She covered the body with the blanket and gently stroked the hair.

Alex would be back soon, he had promised. Moving Pa down the mountain would take time. She looked around what was left of the house. Anything concrete had withstood the brunt of hurricane Maria, leaving most of the home intact. The dwelling reminded Val of her one bedroom back in Jersey City. Just the basics. But if her Pa was anything like her he would have a writing desk. She didn’t need to search long. His desk sat up against a window like her own back home. She looked through the drawers and found a leatherbound journal. It was full of writing and dates, luckily her father kept meticulous notes in English. Each entry began with Dearest Valentina. She hugged the journal to her chest and placed it in her bag.

Little knick knacks on his desk gave her more information about her father. He collected rocks with white petroglyphs on them. Val recognized them from her studies about the indigenous people from Puerto Rico, Tainos. Her mind quickly scrolled through her memories and the knowledge about this symbol came to her.

Val didn't know how much time had passed as she sat in the corner of the room. Darkness consumed her Pa in the bed and the bright light from a flashlight woke her from the daze she was in. The rock from her father's desk still pressed against her chest.

"Doctora, it's me, Alex." He gently moved her arms away from her chest and placed the stone back on the desk. "Easy, nice and easy. I'm going to help you up. I have some people with me. We're going to take your father to the funeral home. It looks like he died a while ago."

"No, he just died. He just left through the window." Val looked up at Alex. He had a sad expression on his face.

"I'm going to take you out of here. It's not good for you to stay here alone. Give me your hand and follow me out." He illuminated the walk with his flashlight. "That's it, nena, hold on to me." They walked out among the debris towards headlights about 100 yards out. There were three other men waiting by the car as they approached. One had a shovel in his hand.

"No, my father wanted to be cremated. He wanted me to put him with his mom." Val's voice felt faint and she wondered if they heard her. The men started arguing with Alex, not wanting to go into the house. "Alex, what's wrong?"

"They won't go in. They say your dad was some kind of Santero. I'll have to go back for the body." Alex walked her to the car and opened the front passenger door. "Wait here. They will help me once he's away from the house."

She looked over at the men staring at her suspiciously. They stayed away from the car too like she had some kind of contagious illness.

"It's okay. I can bring him out. The morgues are full, there's no place to store the body. The nearest crematorium opens in the morning and it depends on how many kilos of gasoline they can get to run the generator. It may be a few days."

Val knew it meant her father would be left to decompose. Everything felt wrong, the condition of the island, the way people had been just left to survive, it didn't feel like America at all and more like a nightmare. There was nothing she could do.

"I'll be right back. Stay in the car, the men are afraid," Alex warned.

The statement brought Val back to the present. “Afraid of my pa?” The tears returned and she cried into Alex’s shoulder. He hugged her for a few seconds and then gently closed the car door. He sprinted back to the house with the flashlight. Moments later he stepped out dragging her Pa behind him using the sheets from the bed.

“Ayudame!” Alex called out to the men. The men stood still, frozen. “Aparate, Ayudame!” Alex called again, this time in the stern voice he used when he directed the people at the airport. The men started to move, one speaking rapidly in Spanish.

Val watched the other two men cross themselves like they were approaching the altar at church. Alex had to physically place their hands on the sheet, he kept reassuring them that her Pa was dead and that he wouldn’t do anything to them. Val struggled to understand their resistance to helping Alex. The trunk opened and her Pa was loaded into the back. The car moved as they tried to fit him inside.

They drove for what felt like a long time. Val was in and out of sleep, waking up to the nightmare of her father in the trunk of a car. Too emotionally exhausted to keep replaying the situation in her mind, she kept falling asleep instead. When they arrived, Alex opened the car door and helped her out. He walked her inside of a concrete house which was more intact than many of the others she had seen. He guided her to a room and sat her down on the bed. Alex grabbed a bottle of water and poured some onto a towel. He gently wiped Val’s face. He had placed her bag next to the bed.

“In the morning, you can clean up and change. There’s a bowl near the sink. No running water but there’s a bucket with some clean water.” He felt around the bed. “Here, lay down on this pillow.”

Val clutched the soft pillow and melted into it. The comfort made her cry. Alex consoled her whispering in her ear. He talked about God, her father, and promised to help her. He placed a flashlight by her hand and kissed her forehead before he left the room. Val gripped the pillow trying to ground herself in some way, thinking about Alex’s words and praying.

## EL GRAN VADON

I remember the day my father told me that his youngest brother Nicolas was in the hospital in Newark. My father cried telling me that he was dying of AIDS. It was 1990 and I was in 8th grade. I remember bragging to my friends later that my uncle who died had left behind a Porsche and all kinds of expensive things. But that's not true, the truth is that I wasn't allowed to go and see him. My brother went with my mom to support my father through this loss. My brother had never met my uncle Nicolas and neither had I. We were estranged from my father's side of the family after the messy divorce. My father was the injured party and my mother was seen as a degenerate and awful person. She had come out to my father after he discovered her affair with a woman. Her promiscuity was unforgivable and my father's family were from the old school mentality that homosexuality is a sin and those who engage go to hell. My father did not want us to grow up with a mother who was knowingly and wantonly going down the path to hell. He felt her influence would damage us. How could a woman who is a lesbian, sinning against god raise children?

I remember my mom telling me in 5th grade that she was gay. She still uses this term gay today. She kneeled in front of me crying, telling me her secret and telling me how sorry she was for it. It didn't seem like something she could help. I remember hugging her and telling her it was okay. That I didn't mind. I didn't know then that the rest of the world would. My world being all of my aunts, uncles, cousins, and three generations of my family. That we couldn't go to church anymore and that we were on our own.

Accepting her meant accepting looks, stares, comments at the mall, hiding from my friends. Questions from teachers asking if my mom was a man. Taunts and jokes about gay people, what scared me the most was "AIDS kills fags dead." I didn't want my mom to die. I didn't want her to get AIDS. With my father crying about his brother I felt the old fears come back. I didn't know my uncle because during the divorce, he also came out and like my mom he was excommunicated by the family. Left on his own. Now he was dying and I was told not to tell anyone it was AIDS. The shame of it affected my father and his other siblings. A song in 1989 by Willie Colon titled "El

Gran Vador” may have been the one thing that got through to my father and his siblings who made the decision to come together for my uncle. The song advocated for compassion and acceptance about a father and his transgender son, Willie Colon, is a legend in Puerto Rico and people listened. After the funeral, my father came to visit me on the weekend at my mom’s house. He brought with him two cardboard boxes full of things. He told me that he and his brothers went to help empty out Nicolas’s apartment in Paterson. His boyfriend whom I had seen crying at the funeral gave them some of Uncle Nicolas’s things. He didn’t know what to do with it and thought I might like some of the stuff. I helped my dad bring the box to the garage where he had built me the biggest bookshelf I’d ever owned. It was full of my collection of books and knick knacks.

I opened the first one and found a stamp collection neatly organized in a binder. I liked my uncle Nicolas already. Each page had a gold replica of the stamp and a story about each one held in a protective cover. There were blank pages at the end where he had hoped to collect more. He was only thirty-three years old and he should have had many more. There were movies in English which surprised me, Woody Allen’s “Hannah and Her Sisters.” I looked up at my dad and he just shrugged. It was not what I expected, I would have thought anything in Spanish but not Woody Allen. Then there were books, lots and lots of books. My dad told me that my uncle was a student at Rutgers, studying something called social work. I’d never heard of the term before and it was my first introduction to Psychology. He had a big book about Abnormal Psychology, Developmental Psychology, and others. The one that caught my attention was the bright red book titled Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, volume one.

I spent hours in the garage learning about psychology and my beloved uncle. He left me with the greatest gifts of hope, love, pride, and purpose. It was out of this love and admiration for my uncle that I was honored to work under the Ryan White grant. When I meet him in heaven one day, we’ll talk for hours about cases. For how could someone who leaves behind so much good not be in heaven?

I’ve asked God for signs to know that my uncle is okay. That he be allowed to be with me when I’m working with a difficult case. That my uncle, my mom, and all the people I’ve worked with over the years have a place in heaven. After so many years of

working in HIV, I've had to say goodbye to people I care deeply for. The question of do LGBT people go to heaven has troubled me greatly. And so when I least expected it, I finally received an answer to this question after my patient Stephen died.

## LOVE

I love you

Because of your suffering

Your pain

Your endurance

I love you

Because of your strength

The moment that almost broke you

many times you wanted to cry

The feelings you wanted to hide.

I love you

Because you took my hand

understand my gaze

When we lock eyes

And speak.



## PASSING

Here it was, the opportunity of a lifetime to finally have everything that I wanted. No more of the desperate longing to look like the images I saw on Instagram. My self-doubt would be gone, replaced by an inner confidence that only I would know about. I had done everything possible on my own to pass and fit into what society deemed presentable but had always come up short. This long-awaited advantage would even things out for me and save me years of wasted time and money. So when it was my turn to order, I didn't berate myself.

“I'll have a chocolate chip Frappuccino, please.”

“What size?” the barista looked at me with a judging eye.

“Large.” I know that I confirmed her suspicion of yes, a fat person wants a large. Go figure. But I would have the last laugh.

It might take away a little of my health but it was a bargain that I was prepared to accept because, as they say, nothing feels as good as being skinny. Skinny, to me, meant having the body I had always longed for. My current body is flabby and husky by JLo and Tic Tok standards.

I am not a size 2 nor does my waist have that trim hip bone that sticks out or those ab muscles that peek out from below a tight crop top. My legs feel like tree trunks with soft skin trying to desperately hold in rippling cellulite and jiggling as I walk. I do walk, I do try to exercise and make my body transform but it just won't and my will power is always lacking. I love salty chips, and puffy cheese doodles, and I can never say no to anything sweet. I love a well toasted sesame bagel with cream cheese and a side of Taylor ham. I'm a slave to French Toast with warm butter and silky syrup. I am weak, a pitiful fool around food and the delicious carbs that seem to wake me even from sleep to consume. So yes, I'm obese according to the BMI charts at my doctors office. I blame society and my iPhone for the way I am. The combination of technology and societal expectations makes me compulsive, helpless, and constantly seeking pleasure with apps, games, social media, and addicted to self-indulgence.

I stand waiting patiently for my drink and look around at the people in the shop. All trim with yoga pants and ordering what they want. Why don't they have to worry? Why don't they have to think constantly about their bodies? I can't wait to be like them.

This is why when the opportunity presented itself, I grabbed it no matter the cost. It's what the world expects of me and I will not let it down. Before they can even call my name, I grab my drink and scurry to my car to enjoy it. I check my phone waiting for that text message with the address of where to go. The lady told me to have a high fat meal before arriving so this should be plenty. I scroll through my phone to remind myself of what the goals are and what's at stake. I need to pass, I need to fit in, and in order to do it I must be thin. I felt nervous suddenly; this would be the last time that I would look like this. After today, my whole life would transform. I looked in the back seat at the duffle bag with the money. I had worked so hard to get the eight thousand dollars for the payment. I would owe two more and then all my money could go towards my new look. I would finance it from my followers who were eager to see my transformation.

My phone buzzed in my hand. "Chinatown. Text when you arrive for the rest."

"Okay, leaving now," I sent back. I set up the navigation. It would take me an hour. I took a big sip of my frapp and set out.

The drive was usual Jersey stuff, nothing I couldn't handle. When I arrived in the bustling Chinatown district, I sent a text. Parking on the street would be hard so I left my car in the nearest garage for safe keeping. I got out and walked out to the street and looked around at the open markets and the array of fish. I wondered if I would feel like having lunch afterwards, maybe some dim sum or something else yummy. I kept a close watch on my phone just waiting for the final address. The duffle bag felt heavy on my shoulder and I hoped that no one would rob me. It's all the money I had.

The text came in with a street address and apartment number. I quickly pulled up my navigation on my phone and started walking. It was about three blocks away. I adjusted the strap to the duffle bag and took a deep breath. All journeys start with a step forward and this was the way to my dreams. I told myself nervously.

I arrived at the address and took the stairs up to the third floor. Out of breath and sweating, I knocked on the door.

“You got the money?” a voice behind the door asked.

“Yeah. It’s all here.” I had counted it a few times and was sure.

“Once you come in, that’s it. I take the money no matter what you decide. Do you understand?” The voice sounded serious.

“I know. No take backs, I’m not changing my mind,” I affirmed.

“This is it, okay. I’m gonna open and you are going to give me the money and then we will get down to business.”

“I understand. It was explained to me.” I could hear the chain and locks on the door turning. My stomach felt heavy with dairy and chocolate chips. I moved the strap off my shoulder and prepared to hand over the money. I took a deep breath as the door opened up to reveal a dirty apartment. In the center of the room was a chair like a dentist would have and big lights above it. Inside there were three people, two men and a woman.

“Money.” A tall man with red hair approached me with his big hand out.

“It’s all there,” I said. He grabbed it and turned around to a table with a money counting machine. He ran the first bundle of money through it.

I noticed he had a gun in the back of his jeans. The seriousness of my situation began to hit home. If they didn’t deliver, there would be nothing that I could do. No one knew I was coming out here today and whatever happened, I was on my own. The sound of the machine counting was the only sound in the room. When it finished the redhead spoke out.

“We’re good. Your next payment is due in two weeks. I will text you the drop off location.”

“Okay, I understand.” The woman approached me and gestured for me to sit in the chair.

“Now, you do not go to any medical doctor. You better not show up at any hospital or urgent care. The first couple of days are rough but you have to deal with it. Got it.”

“Yes. Is it gonna hurt?” I asked. The other man in the room approached and strapped my hands and legs down. My heart started beating faster and my body felt hot.

“You have your choice of a blind fold or not. You decide but once we get started we won’t be able to stop to cover your eyes, so what do you want?” The redhead asked. The woman standing next to me showed me options for the blindfolds.

My mind raced; part of me wanted to see what they would do but the other part of me was terrified. “What do most people do?”

“Varies. Hurry up and decide so we can get started.” He came over by me to check the restraints. Assured they were tight, he walked back to the kitchen area. I could hear things moving around and banging on the floor.

“What’s gonna happen? Can you tell me what to expect?” I looked over at the woman hoping she would have some compassion for me. “Please, tell me,” I pleaded.

“You’re going to be skinny and perfect. Your body is going to transform into exactly what you’ve always dreamed of. Look at me.” She lifted her shirt to reveal tight abs and a perfect torso. “You can change anything once you do this.” She stroked my hair and offered me the blindfold again.

It was exactly what I needed to hear. I looked at her again and knew I was making the right decision. “No blindfold, I’ll be okay.”

“Everything is going to be fine. Just listen to my instructions.” She placed her hands on my face and tilted my head back. “Now, it’s best to keep your mouth open as wide as you can until I tell you to close it. Just don’t bite down and relax your jaw muscles.”

“Yes, I can do that. Will it hurt?” I could deal with pain but if I knew how much then I could prepare myself.

“It hurts and then it may burn. It will hurt later in your chest and then in your stomach for about three days. After that, you’ll be fine.”

Somehow that helped me calm down more. I could focus my mind on getting to the three-day mark when I would feel great again. A shitty week was a price I could pay. The other man came over and stood behind me.

“He’s going to hold your head steady. I will direct you and Red will drop it in, understand?”

“Yeah. I’m good.” I felt big hands over my ears.

“Good, tilt back and open as wide as you can,” she said.

I did as she asked, feeling the pressure of the restraints tighten against my skin. My eyes wandered around the room and I saw a large glass container with liquid in it. Red's footsteps approached. He stood over me with metal tongs holding a large slithering snake like creature. I felt something heavy against my stomach.

"Here it is, we got you a good sized one so it can get to work quickly. This type of tapeworm usually takes a few months to grow to this size so you got lucky."

Red used his big hands and held the bottom of it's tail, trying to keep it still. It was about a foot long in length with shiny black skin. It was black with a strange mouth. Smaller tentacles protruded around its body and it thrashed violently against the tongs.

"In the Amazon these things live inside all kinds of animals for years and grow as big as the animal they inhabit. It's not going to hurt you, it's going to learn to live in symbiosis with you and take all those extra calories away from you. Once it's full then it will allow those nutrients to go to you. You think you can do that?"

I was terrified. Didn't think it was going to be this big or this scary looking. I wanted to back out. I wanted to scream, "No!"

"Easy now, it's not going to hurt you. It's just hungry and I think you have enough calories ready for it to eat. Open wider."

"It's okay, open just a little more," the woman said.

My head was trying to thrash no but the hands on the side of my face put plastic blocks in my mouth preventing me from shutting my mouth.

"Promises made are promises kept. Just think about how skinny you are going to be. How perfect your body will be. You can shape yourself any way you like, look the way you have always dreamed of. Make yourself great again." The woman tried to ease me again but the slick body of the worm scared me. I could see the square head with an eye in the center. The tapeworm looked at me and we locked eyes to my horror. The top of the head all of a sudden produced spikes that protruded all around its head dripping with a clear mucus. I screamed and the man holding my head yelled out too the red head to hurry.

"Drop it in head first otherwise it won't go down like the last one," he said.

"No!" I screamed.

“Open your mouth wider!” Red commanded and I watched the head of the tapeworm come closer.

My body shook in protest and I pulled hard against the restraints to get away, lifting off the chair and thrashing around.

“Do it now! Transition to greatness.” The woman howled.

The smell of the worm reminded me of formaldehyde and the stale smell of a high school biology classes pig dissection. I tried to turn away from it and watched the spikes around the head retracting. I could taste it on my lips a sourness, and there was a pungent smell coming from the worm. Everything in my body fought to resist but the slimy body was already squirming against my tongue and the roof of my mouth. I screamed again and felt the spikes of the worm's head cut the roof of my mouth and tongue. I shook, feeling pain rip through me, begging them to stop but my screams garbled by the tapeworm.

“It’s going down, stop screaming so it doesn’t hurt you again. It’s distressed trying to defend itself. Calm down so this can end quickly,” Red begged.

Blood flooded my mouth and I was choking, my esophagus having spasms fighting against the intrusion. I couldn’t breathe and it hit me, I am going to die.

“Breath through your nose, it’s going in.” The woman’s voice called out.

I couldn't, the pain in my throat burned me. I was suffocating.

“Try to swallow the blood down with the worm. Keep trying to swallow.” The woman tried again but all I could see was the body of the worm sticking out of my mouth. Red had dropped the tongs which meant the worm was almost completely in my mouth. My neck and throat hurt so badly my eyes felt huge and flaming, the blood from my mouth had smeared all over my face and chest. The tail of the tapeworm whipped around. I tried to take small breaths from my nose but there wasn’t enough air. I wanted to throw up, the gagging reflex made my stomach spasm and I felt the man holding my head wrap his arm around tighter to keep it tilted back further.

“It’s almost in, just a little longer and you’ll be able to breath better.” The man holding my head whispered to me. I kept gagging unable to throw up with my head in this position. I felt something deep in my neck making it impossible to swallow. I gave up fighting, resigned to die in this chair, just willing the pain to stop. After several

agonizing minutes sitting like this, I could feel myself start to breath only slightly easier. It felt like forever since I had been able to catch my breath a bit.

“Okay, it’s in. It’s going to take a few hours for it to settle. Don’t eat or drink for the next five hours. It’s going to make its way down to your intestines. Some do it faster than others but once it’s in place you won’t feel it anymore and you can go on with your life. But your body is going to try to fight it. Your body has a defense mechanism that’s going wild right now, so expect a fever, diarrhea, stomach pains and spasms, like the worst flu ever. That’s all normal, just ride it out and you’ll be okay. Don’t flake out and go to the doctors because they will remove it and get us all into trouble. We don’t want trouble, you understand me. We don’t want anything to get in the way of our business. In two weeks, you bring us our money. Do you understand?” The Red was looking me in the eyes and I knew if I didn’t agree, he could finish me off right here and now.

Tears streamed down my face and with blood still dripping from my mouth, I nodded. I was feeling outside of my body at that moment. The woman’s hands went to my mouth to remove the guards, allowing me to finally bring my lips together. A copper taste mixed with the lingering sour taste of the worm and I still struggled to catch my breath. I felt a knot in my throat that burned and made my whole chest hurt. I could only take shallow breaths with hiccups.

“That’s your diaphragm trying to expand, it will get better as the worm makes its way down. Just keep taking small breaths. Now since you were such a trooper, I’m gonna offer you a discount for every new customer that you bring to us. Now you can work off your debt that way by bringing us customers. For each one, I’ll knock off two grand. You understand? You gotta work that social media and bring me serious customers with cash. Now you get good at this and we can make a whole lot of cash fast. Got it?”

I just listened to him. I felt sick and my body was exhausted. I just wanted to lie in my bed and forget any of this ever happened. My head pounded with an excruciating pain any time I moved. The toll and the cost of this felt heavier than I had imagined. My quest for perfection felt empty and hollow. Being thin seems ridiculous compared to this torture. The other man released the restraints and helped me sit on the edge of the chair.

“Easy now, you will be lightheaded. All that adrenaline is slowly leaving your body. The fever is going to start soon. You gotta get back to your car and get home.” The

red head gripped my arm to help me stand. “I’ll text you from a burner phone so make sure to answer. We stay on the move.”

The room spun as I stood, I felt terrible. My throat burned and the pain radiated through my body in waves. “Teddy here will walk you a few blocks to your car. Then you haul ass home. You look like dog shit.” The red head walked back to the kitchen and was ransacking through it filling the duffle bag full of money.

The woman helped him and they walked out of the apartment. My body didn’t want to move. I felt frozen in my pain.

Teddy started to pull me forward. “Hurry up or I’ll leave you out in the street. Remember small breaths and keep moving. We don’t want to draw attention.”

My feet dragged and Teddy half-carried me down most of the steps. Once outside we walked until I ran out of breath and stopped so I could clutch a wall. After a grueling three blocks we reached the parking garage. I turned to tell Teddy which one was my car, but he was gone. I reached into my pocket for some cash and my ticket for the valet.

The man came over to me. “Yo, you okay? You have blood on your shirt. Dude, you need an ambulance?”

“No, just my car. Please hurry.” My voice was hoarse and low. I felt something move in the back of my throat.

“Okay, okay. Just hang on a minute.” The valet hustled to get my car out to me and I slowly moved into the front seat. I shivered and turned on the seat warmers to the highest setting. I pulled the seatbelt and clicked it into place. My hand kept shaking as I set the car to self-driving. It was all I could manage to do before collapsing in the seat. I curled into the seat with cold sweat covering my body. I couldn’t get warm enough.

I don’t know how long I sat in the driveway of my apartment complex. It was dark out when I awoke in a daze. My body hurt everywhere and my breathing was still very shallow. The knot in my throat would not go down. I turned the visor down and looked in the small mirror. I was horrified by my appearance. My nose kept running and I could see a bulge in my neck just above the collar bone where the tapeworm was still resting. My lips were tinted blue and I struggled to breath. Panic hit me, but I was too weak to do anything. My mind raced with thoughts to punch the worm and make it move down but I was afraid of its sharp teeth like spikes. I looked again at my reflection and



noticed the bulge move in a snakelike slithering. I slammed the mirror shut and attempted to open the car door. I needed to get in my bed fast.

When I entered my apartment I made it to the kitchen and collapsed on the floor. Laying there on the tiles on my stomach made it easier to breath and I fell into a fitful sleep full of nightmares.

I awoke wet with sweat and slowly lifted myself from the floor. I reached for my neck, feeling the same pressure as before and wishing this was all a dream. My stomach hurt urging me to get to the bathroom. I pulled myself across the floor and stumbled to the toilet, and sat listening to what had to be my insides falling out, a stream of diarrhea and pain, my body trying to empty out the pathogen without being able to. Evidently, the worm was still making its way down, avoiding this level of defense from my body.

I was still so cold and reached for a towel to try to warm myself. The urge to fall forward and never wake up was tempting. I didn't know how I would get through three days of this. I got up and cleaned up as best as I could. I shuffled forward to try to get to my bedroom. I needed my covers.

I don't know what day it was or how long I had lain in bed for. I was dreaming of food and felt thirsty and hungry. Still weak, I moved slowly until I was standing in front of the fridge, looking for anything edible. I took a slow swallow hoping the worm had moved. My breathing was better and I attempted to drink some water. I couldn't taste the water, something strange had happened to my tastebuds. My throat felt raw but the cold water was soothing. I licked my lips and felt something on the corner of my mouth. I touched it and felt a tentacle that whipped around my face. Scared and having nothing left inside of me to scream, I sobbed, regretting every decision I'd made. The tentacle reached towards the fridge whipping around and it dawned on me, the worm was hungry. Scrambling through the shelves the tentacle wrapped around a carton of eggs. I opened it and ate them raw, shoving them in my mouth. I bit down eating the shell and all until the carton was empty. The tentacle crept back out of my mouth again, still hungry. I ate everything I could find, half full Chinese food containers, an old rotisserie chicken, a raw steak, leftover pasta and went to my small pantry to devour all the chips and junk food I had. I burped feeling the food rise in my throat and quickly being sucked back down.

I sat on my couch, dizzy from the exertion and tasting my breath. It was different now with the scent of the worm mixed in with all the food I had just eaten. How often would the worm need to eat like that? Would my breath smell this bad all the time? Would that tentacle hang out of my mouth? I searched for my phone in my pockets and scrolled through Instagram and other social media, searching for the guy who referred me to Red and introduced me to all of this. I looked at all of his pictures searching for any clue his experience was anything like mine. Nothing, just a perfect body and some filters.

## STEPHEN W

42 yr old African American Male

Diagnosis: Major Depressive Disorder, PTSD, Anxiety Axis 3: AIDS t-cells >12  
Axis 5: Recovery of gunshot wounds following police altercation, wheelchair bound,  
wasting syndrome, colostomy bag recurring infections, inconsistent with medications.  
Prognosis is poor.

I scoured through the notes to learn more about this police altercation and when it was. But there wasn't a lot of time since he was in the waiting room. I checked Dr. Lim's medication regime and didn't see any antipsychotics. I said a little prayer which is my custom before meeting with a patient. I usually ask God to help me assist the person I'll be working with and to allow me to be more compassionate and patient. I also ask God to help the person heal and to guide us both towards their healing. Once I know the patient better, then I get more specific. I didn't know what to expect with Stephen.

I saw the wheelchair first and a thin black man sitting patiently in the waiting room. He had a woman with him who stood up to greet me. I'm sure I spoke too fast and smiled too much as I tend to do when I'm nervous. They were kind to me, patient, and allowed me into their world. Stephen's world was full of appointments to see a variety of specialists and social workers. My work with him was listening to what he needed and trying to coordinate his care effectively between his medical providers. When he couldn't see me because he was admitted to the hospital, I went to see him. He was the first shooting victim I had ever worked with and his story of mistaken identity in the early 2000's with a knock on the door in the middle of the night which he did not want to open led to a SWAT team invading. He was shot six times and the bullets in his back left him paralyzed from the waist down with limited use of one of his hands. I remember he always worried that his colostomy bag would smell and he worried for my comfort during our sessions. He taught me a lot about HIV medications, Hep C treatments, and about the adjustment from walking and talking one night before bed to fighting for his life the next. He had overcome using heroin in his youth and contracted HIV from sex

with men and women and/or through shared needle use. He wasn't sure which since at the time he was deep in his addiction. Stephen fought for his life a lot, his t-cells were often so low that I didn't know how he was alive. Most times he had no t-cells, they were in the negative numbers and I would wear a mask for his protection. He came to all of his appointments and when he couldn't make it, I would get the call early from him to let me know what floor he was on. I loved seeing Stephen and learning about his life, and trying to bring him some comfort. In the end, he struggled greatly. The pending lawsuit with the city had taken its toll on his frail body. He became thinner and slowly stopped eating. John came to tell me that Stephen had passed. I sat in my office and cried. Stephen could have been like Blair, living into his 80s but he was black, poor, and lived in the wrong housing complex.

There were no marches for Stephen. He died alone in the hospital with his partner Yolanda by his side. Losing him left me feeling raw, I didn't take time off and kept on working through my feelings and tried to find even more purpose in my work. Although Stephen was gone, I had a lot of patients who needed me to show up everyday. This went on for a few weeks and then early one morning I had a very strange dream. In the dream, I was in the parking lot of UMDNJ trying to get into my car when three men approached me. They were there to rob me and were pulling on my purse. I was crying and screaming for someone to help me when one of the men showed me a gun. He pushed me so hard that I fell to the ground and sat there crying. The men stood over me and cursing and threatening me. It was so real and vivid that I could feel my hands against the asphalt and the tiny pebbles between my fingers. My hands were dirty and I wiped the back of my hand against my face to wipe away tears. A man calls out from across the street and runs over to us. He tells the men to leave me alone and shoves the men away. He's not afraid of the gun and they take off running. A hand reaches out and helps me up, I wipe my face again trying to catch my breath to thank him. I look up at his face and of course it's Stephen.

He was standing! He wasn't hurt anymore and I hugged him. He picked up my purse, keys, and helped me straighten myself out. We walk together to the entrance of the building and he says that I don't have to be so scared anymore. I hug him again and as I pull away I stare at his face one last time. I woke up crying and spent most of the

day thinking about the dream. I still think about it.

Freud would say it was wishful thinking, my subconscious wants Stephen to be okay and therefore my brain creates this fantasy to help me heal. Perhaps, perhaps my wish for Stephen to be in heaven makes my mind create the scenario in which he is. That was not the first time that I've had a dream like this nor is it the first time that I've had strange experiences. My mother believes that sometimes God gives permission to our loved ones to come visit us. Not just on the day of the dead but when we need them as well. Some people can access the dead better than others. I am one of those people and so is my mother. It looks like my daughter may be as well. My gift comes to me in the form of dreams mostly, sometimes it's in small sensory details that I might observe and receive strong intuition from. Sometimes, I can pick up from people that I'm speaking to in the form of emotions and body sensations that are not mine but theirs. This started for me at a young age. With a song.

## FLOWERS

When all you have are flowers,  
The world is a brutal place.

Flowers bloom for beauty.  
Adding to our landscapes  
Giving our imagination flight  
They help us to envision beyond  
They fill us with hope

When all you have are flowers  
The world comes at you hard  
It's cold, calculating, and primal  
It destroys and kills

It leaves children crying  
asking why  
It leaves us with grief  
And our despair  
When all you have are flowers  
You leave them as memorials

You add the beauty to your pain

You leave it for all to see

You stack them against each other

trying to create some beauty

Out of so much pain

It reminds others

It's the small thing inside us all

“They have guns but we have flowers”

The Paris Terror attack

Floral tributes for the victims

Flowers give protection

To fight against the guns

They don't form a barrier

Tanks

Pepper spray

Dogs

Threats

School shooting

Necks squeezed

Night club massacres

Terror

White supremacy

When all you have are flowers

It feels insignificant against so much

Flowers remind us that from this can come beauty

From this can come healing

Can come change

We defy the fear

We defy the terror

We reclaim the space

And fill it with love.



## RECKLESS DRIVING

I ask my brother to end his pride  
So that he might live  
through a traffic stop.  
Lower his eyes  
Soften his gaze  
Answer  
Respectfully

Show his hands  
No fast movements  
Enough already with that smart mouth  
Be quiet  
Stay small

Shave your beard  
Cut that hair  
Afro curls  
Mexican face  
Broad shoulders

You could pass, maybe  
If you finally listen to me  
And not wind up like Tyre  
Dead on the street  
No one will help  
If that's you, lying there  
A dead black mexican.

“I know,” he says  
As he grabs his bike  
And his keys to go  
I'm terrified of you out there

In a country that doesn't want you.

## ELIGIBLE RECIPIENTS

She wanted to pound the keyboard in annoyance and aggravation. Another week had passed and still no appointment. Constant refreshing and checking for any available spots had proved successful for her mother's appointment but her father was still going to Costco unvaccinated. The surgery sweet voice she had to use with her father's new wife had left a sour and bitter taste in her mouth.

"Any luck?" Her husband came into the room to ask. His voice sounded hopeful.

"Nothing. Just re-registered him to all the websites using my information now."

Her tone tart.

"Don't worry. Something will open up soon." He came over to offer some support.

"Can you believe that he hasn't been checking his email? He waits until his wife gets home in the evening to check his alerts. I could just kill her and him, at this point!" She squeezed her laptop wishing to bend the metal frame. Seething, a wave of rage came over her. If she didn't need this Macbook so badly she would throw it against the wall.

"Try to calm down. They're doing the best they can," he offered.

"What? He missed an appointment in Jersey City for the vaccine because he didn't want to drive." Outraged she got up and started tossing dirty clothes into the hamper. "I mean who does that? Like take an Uber! Why do I have to spell everything out for them? I mean God, you put their heads together and you get a giant asshole!" She kept muttering curses under her breath. She has weeks of clothes piling up and so much cleaning to do. Kids to drive around, dinner to get ready, her mother to care for. She felt stretched thin like the fabric of the black leggings that she kept wearing over and over again. Nowhere to go, being locked indoors too afraid to risk her mother's health. A year like this. The same clothes, the same chores, the same endless day after day. She went

into the bathroom to grab the dirty towels no one bothered to pick up and added them to the mound of clothes.

“When was the last time I changed the sheets?” She asked her husband.

“I have no idea.” He looked at her curiously. “Let it be, don’t worry about it. You’re so upset. Come sit.” He tried.

“Something else no one worries about but me.” She started to pull off the bedding in angry huffs. She glared at him, daring him to say another word. He put his hands up and got out of her way.

“You know, how do they expect seniors to do any of this. My dad is 75 years old. He can just about answer a text message. He has maybe a third grade education and barely speaks English. With all his medical appointments, I mean it’s just crazy.” She threw the pillows to the floor, kicking them as she tried to walk around them to pull off the fitted sheet. “His stupid wife can barely drive herself to work. She’s as useless as a mule!” Her voice rose.

“That’s why, I’ll keep checking the site. There has to be something this week. Don’t get like this. It’s really not his fault.” Her husband tried. “Easy, momma.” He approached slowly and picked up the sheets she’d thrown. Carefully unraveling the ball she’d made it into. Her ears and cheeks were bright red. She got this way before she broke down crying.

“Stop it, just stop it! Take the laundry downstairs. Leave me alone and refresh the fucking CVS site.” Her voice was cracking, the veins in her neck revealing the emotion they tried desperately to hold.

## HIGH STRANGENESS

My Mother received the call that her mother had died on the day she was set to fly out to Mexico to see her. The stomach cancer left my grandmother with only a few months of life once she was diagnosed. My Mother and her sister Kathy were flying out together on AeroMexico that afternoon hoping to see my grandmother while she was alive. The flight was agony and when my mother arrived my Grandmother had already been taken to the funeral parlor for the arrangements. She screamed and begged to see her Mother but it was too late. That evening in the small one floor apartment my mother and her family came together to grieve. My Mother told me later that she wanted to die. She wanted so badly to leave with her mother that she was despondent much of the evening sitting and rocking herself with the grief and the guilt of not being with her Mom when she passed. She had been in the United States for a few years by then sending money home to help her mom have a better life. In that time, she had gotten my grandmother new furniture, kitchenware, and modern amenities that my grandmother had never known about. The TV that she had purchased for her was where they watched soap operas when my mom was able to visit, always on Mother's day which is May 10th in Mexico. There they watched their favorite novela, Yesenia. The tale of a gypsy girl with long black hair that marries above her station and into a better life. My Grandmother loved Yesenia and told my mom to name her daughter after the novela. My Mother would swear up and down that she would never, ever have children. My Grandmother knew about my mom's feelings back then but urged her to marry and try. My Mom says that my grandmother didn't want her to be alone. That she would die one day and that she needed her own family.

My Mom and her sisters went to bed in the early morning. She slept on the floor next to her sister Kathy and cried herself to sleep. She doesn't know if it was a dream but she awoke to the sound of someone walking in the room. The steps were slow and she could hear one foot dragging behind the other. My Grandmother at the end of her life had a feeding bag attached and began to drag one of her legs from nerve damage. My Mom was too afraid to open her eyes but felt a cold hand against her face and then

felt my Grandmother's hands slowly give her the sign of the cross, "no llores Lola." she had said. Then she heard my Grandmother slowly walk over to the other side of the bed to her sister Kathy.

My aunt Kathy says that she felt my grandmother's cold hands on her face too. When they talk about it, they of course cry. They are grateful my grandmother was able to say goodbye to them. They always say that God gives special favor to mothers.

## FOLLOW ME

Don't be afraid my sweet

The past is behind you

It's time to make new mistakes

Without fear

Or worry

The kind of mistakes that leave you rolling

Laughing so hard

Belly aching

Bewildered with yourself

Fascinated at your failings

New and wonderful mistakes

No longer tied to your childhood

No longer tied to your parents

No longer tied to your siblings

Freedom to be

To try

To wonder anew

At who you are blossoming into

Do not be afraid my lovely

The past is further behind you

Leaving you open

Creating opportunities for yourself

In ways your younger self could have never imagined

So tied to past pains

It's all you knew

Breath deep

I will guide you



## MALVA

I sit quietly in front of my mother as I watch her trying to think of what to say. I'm changing. It's happening fast and I know my parents have noticed. It isn't the gradual change I had hoped for. I keep wondering who else knows, who else sees? It's been a strange journey, one that I didn't quite expect. Sure there were hints, signs of what was possible but the fear, always the fear kept me still. It kept me silent, I always thought the silence would protect me. If I kept pretending to be normal that perhaps I would pass, fit in somewhat, avoid discovery. Now, I know I'm different. So many questions, still the doubts. I get mad at myself for the doubts, for how can I have any after everything that I have been shown.

"Aye, Malva. You are not going to like what I need to say to you, but we really don't feel like we have a choice." Mom stared at me and I already knew what she was going to say before she said another word.

"I'm not going. This is so stupid." A feeling of resentment and annoyance washed through me like a wave. A building wave that feeds into a tsunami of anger towards my whole situation with my parents. I knew I was pushing them and pushing them but I just can't help it sometimes. It's been hard integrating all of this and accepting my duty. The pressure, the expectations they have of me.

"Malva, it's time. Your nineteen and well trained." Mom reached out to touch my hand.

I pulled my hands away and regretted it instantly. The smile on her face fades and she looks away from me. She puts her hands together and pulls them close to her body. I want to tell her to give me her hand, I want to hold it but the words sit tightly in my throat and would not come out. I just sit there, feeling dumb.

"Malva, I know you are upset with me and I've tried to make things work better between us. Maybe some time apart will help us both. It's time for you to learn more and with your aunt and uncle, we think it's a great opportunity for you. You'll be able to

grow in your gifts and learn more about humans you will serve. It's time for you to get to work, the need is high.”

I'm just beginning to understand. Finally beginning to put things together for myself and in my life that is starting to make sense. Now this, now she wants me to just leave.

The conversation replayed itself over and over in my mind. There was no long goodbye, just pack and go to the nearest portal and then make my way to LAX to hop on a plane. I stopped fighting it and decided to just go with it. I've been training for a long time and a part of me was ready to see what I could do. Maybe I'm not as ready as I think I am to be away from home, but I'm willing to find out. I've traveled to the human realm with my parents plenty of times. I noticed right away that people are walking around with unimaginable pain inside of them. Almost in a dream state they trudge through their days waiting for something to heal them.

Mom says that's where we come in, sometimes what is causing them pain is a negative energy that they have picked up. Most are completely unaware and they feed and carry this energy around for a long time. It slowly destroys them and people around them but they never see it or want to acknowledge it. We see it, people like my family have been helping humans for generations. My parents weren't sure that I would have the gift.

Honestly, I'm at a loss that I was even chosen. I'm nobody. There is absolutely nothing special about me. My looks are plain, I have no stand out achievements, I'm not honored or revered in any way, I don't know or have achieved anything remarkable and if you asked anyone who knows me to describe me, they would probably just say that I'm nice. The common answer when you don't have much to say about someone. I love my parents, I love my family, I don't have a lot of friends or community connections. Most people walk right past me without a second glance. I'm a quiet introvert who lives mostly in my head.

A few minutes inside of the airport and I think I'm starting to get the gist of what my parents have told me about humans in the past. I try not to refer to stereotypes about them but man they need help. Now on my own, I'm seeing them and this realm with a fresh perspective.

"Caramel cloud macchiato with extra foam," the barista confirms. "What size did you say?"

"Large," I manage to say while trying to remember what this place calls the large size.

"Next." The cashier waves me over once my payment goes through.

Around me will be constant work, my mother had warned me about just before leaving. The coffee shop is full of people clicking away on their laptops too self-involved to notice much around them. A familiar feeling creeps over my skin. A tingling sensation raising the hair on my arms and I know that I have company. In the far corner of the shop is a man furiously typing and next to him is an ancient evil. It looks like a black cloud and as I fix my gaze on it, it takes the form of a floating man. The apparition has charred black skin from fire. It whispers in the typing man's ear and he continues to click away. The Jinn at his side looks like it's been with him for a while. Feeding him stories and ideas which he thinks are his own. The human could be a journalist, writer, or teacher. Anyone who reads this work becomes infected by the jinn and it grows stronger, doing more harm. The words that the human types are like an incantation that convinces people of harmful things. Sometimes it's encrypted in the writing and sometimes they don't even waste the time to hide their malevolence.

The guts on this Jinn, so blatant and daring. A human could probably see it if they had any sensitivities. I try, really try to go to that healing place in my heart and remember that humans are flawed. Limited in so many ways, unable to harness their power effectively. Feral and easily misled. I need to muddle around them now doing what I can to help. This is my job now going forward. I am a lightworker, a destroyer of darkness. One of my skills is the ability to sense dark energy and destroy it. I already have compassion fatigue and I just got here. I exhale and get ready. My thoughts go to my parents, their expectations of me, my lineage, my family legacy leaves no room for my feelings, mistakes, or misgivings.

“Caramel cloud for Malva,” the barista calls out.

“Mine,” I answer, annoyed that I won't be able to drink the whole thing. I grab a quick sip and leave it at the counter.

I was brought up to believe nothing is more powerful than a lightworker. Several generations of my family were all lightworkers and the family honor lays heavily on me at this moment. Show no fear, no mercy, serve, and protect. The job is twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, no breaks, no vacation, and always ready to answer the call.

I put the drink down and feel my bow staff extend in my left hand. Usually, the staff is made of bamboo or rattan. Mine was formed from a metal not found on earth. Handed to me at a young age by a guardian angel who told me that being a lightworker was my purpose. No one knew I had received it, I didn't think to tell anyone because I thought it was a dream. The staff is practically part of my body. It conceals itself inside my arm and is the only tool I need. A small shake of the jitters runs through my body.

The Jinn grows larger, taking up more space extending into the ceiling and sucking the energy out of the people sitting nearby. Some of them will leave feeling tired, with body aches, and other pain while the entity grows stronger. With my bow staff, I make human kung fu, aikido, or any martial art look like it's on super steroids. Taking out this jinn would be quick and if I'm fast enough, no one will steal my drink.

“Oops, sorry didn't see you there,” a man steps on my foot as he makes his way to pick up his order.

“No problem,” I say and quickly walk behind his tall frame. I follow him to the back of the coffee shop seating area.

The work makes me hum with anticipation, alert, always ready to move in. It's the unexpected that gives me a thrill, forces me to relearn old skills, remaster what I thought I knew and keeps me on the edge of my seat. I approach unseen and extend my staff so quickly the Jinn doesn't even get to scream. The human stops typing suddenly and looks up at me. He lets out a deep breath and his shoulders relax. He looks relieved.

“Sorry. I saw a bug behind you,” I say awkwardly. The body of the jinn lies on the floor with half its skull missing. Humans don't see this, thankfully. The body starts to release dust particles through the air as it disintegrates. I put my arm down by my side feeling my staff conceal itself again.

“Thanks for getting it.” he says standing up to look around for a dead bug and moves to another seat. He puts away his laptop and sits there rubbing his head no longer looking at me. I wish I could do a dance or something to celebrate my first take down. These humans don’t care, don’t see. The human society and culture are so strange to me. They wait to be taken care of and need helpers yet devalue the helpers in their society and even set up obstacles against them to keep them from doing their work. Contradictions run rampant in the human world which will be challenging for me to decipher. I glance around the room to see if anyone notices me or what just happened. My mothers voice comes back to me.

“They won’t see you Mija, being Mexican there means you’re almost invisible” Mom said while helping me pack some of my stuff. “It’s like they see you but you won’t matter much to them. You don’t have to worry.”

“Why Mom? I don’t understand. Won’t I stand out? Fitting in and going about as unnoticed as possible is a priority, isn’t it?”

“It’s hard to explain Mija, but you’ll see. Watch the others like us and watch the human Latinos. You’ll understand.”

My Mother’s words made sense to me.

“Hey, I think that girl took your drink,” a lady informs me as I make my way back to the counter.

It’s just as well, I don’t need the caffeine after ending that Jinn. I board my flight to Newark and prepare for the work ahead thinking about my mothers words.

“Mija the earth is ravaged and the humans don’t seem to understand the severity of the state they are in. Some do, some fight, some push, some harness their light and spread it around the globe. The tools to crush evil seem so simple, accessible, and powerful. A kindness, being a willing listener, a friend, someone who gives love, all are powerful and simple ways to change the energy and promote healing but there isn’t enough.”

My Mom is worried for humankind. There aren’t many like me on earth. Apart from my parents, I have yet to meet another lightworker.

\*\*\*\*\*

My parents must hate me, making me fly coach to the armpit of the world, New Jersey on a six hour flight. I try to get comfortable and stare out the little round window listening to music the entire flight. Once we arrive I grab my stuff from baggage claim and make my way towards the taxi station.

I jump in a cab and fumbled with my keys. “Just drop me off by University Heights. I’ll tell you where to stop.”

“Okay. No problem.” The cabbie starts the meter, and we take off. It’s night time and I can’t really make much out. I’ve been to my aunt and uncle Ruben’s house before when I was younger. It’s been a few years and I feel nervous as we get closer.

“Miss, you sure you want me to leave you here? It’s dangerous for a young lady.”

“It’s fine, thank you.” I threw cash at him and hopped out. I would need to walk about two or three blocks to the church to reach their house. Newark was full of darkness, the evil kind. I needed to be alert. Demons were sometimes bold enough to go near the Sanctum. My aunt and uncle are protectors of this church. It’s a sacred spot that is impenetrable by demons or dark forces. Like humans, immortals come here to pray and connect spiritually. My family offers help and protection to those who need it. My parents think I need it. Through the back entrance of the church, I go down a set of stairs and knock on the door. This section of the church is invisible to human eyes and is the heart of the Sanctum. The Cathedral Basilica Of the Sacred Heart is just that, sacred. It’s Gothic architecture, a symbol of holiness. Being here makes anyone feel a sense of reverence.

The door opens and a light fills the darkness around me. “Mija! What a wonderful surprise.” Ruben stood there with open arms, I jumped into them and hugged me tightly. “Que paso! With this visit out of nowhere.”

“Hey, Tio. It’s good to see you.” I hug him tighter and smell zest soap on his skin. He’s shorter than I remembered and he has a round belly like my dad. The sides of his hair are gray giving him a distinguished look. He kisses both of my cheeks and hugs me again. My Uncle Ruben is known for being vain with his hair. I pull the ponytail he has like I would when I was little and he would chase me around the kitchen.

“You are still the same little pain in the butt, I see.” He shakes his head knowing he’s got his hands full with me and holds my shoulders pulling me back to get a good

look at me. “Wow, are you ever gonna age? Man, I can’t even begin to imagine what you did to piss off those gnomes the way you did. You look like you’re only fifteen.” He laughs, staring at me in disbelief.

“They were Duende, taller than gnomes. And maybe one day, I’ll tell you the story.” I suppressed a flashback of the entire Duende community chanting over and over again.

“Damn, they cursed the shit out of you, huh.” His eyes wide as he looks me up and down and takes me inside. “Come, Maria made pozole, you must be hungry. Don’t tell me you flew coach?”

“Yeap. Mom and Dad hate me.” I say, knowing he’s had an earful from them. He already knew about the Duende but I was surprised he knew about the curse. When Mom says she won’t tell anyone, it’s a long list of anyone.

“Maria! Look who is home for dinner,” Ruben exclaimed.

“Mija! Wow, look at you.” She comes running over and covers me in kisses.

“Hi, Tia.” I kiss her back and hug her tightly. She looks so much like my Mom. The same chestnut colored hair, the same warm olive skin and all the same features. It’s like holding my Mom and I realize that I haven’t hugged my Mom in a long time. Tears fill my eyes and I wish things were different, that I was different.

“You look just like your mother.” She says to me, shocking me out of my sadness.

“What? no way. She looks like me.” I say proudly

She pulls my hood down and places her hands against my cheeks. “It’s like holding my little sister again.” She plants a big kiss on my forehead. “It’s incredible.” She runs her hands through my hair and quickly braids it. “Look at her, Ruben. You tell me this isn’t Ester.”

“Ejole!” He says, “Ester chiquita.” He claps his hands together.

“Come sit, let’s eat.” Tia pulls me towards the table.

“Come sit, let’s eat.” Tia pulls me towards the table.

I sit and adjust my long braid to keep it out of the food.

“How are your parents? I haven’t seen them in forever,” she asks.

“Good, everyone is good.” I say taking in the kitchen and all of her knick knacks and casuelas on the walls. The table is just like I remember, solid oak from Mexico.

“Here, take a tortilla, I just made them. Tell me if they taste like your mother’s.” She sprinkles cheese on it and lets it melt a bit on the comal. She adds some crema fresca just before she hands it to me.

“Yummy! Tia, these are even better than Mami’s.” Maybe it was the hunger, but somewhere my mom must have died a little with that statement.

“Aye, Mija. Don’t say that so loud.” She giggled with delight. “You haven’t even tried my salsa yet.” She winked at me. I take my seat at the table and wait eagerly.

“So how are things going?” Ruben asks as he serves up the spicy pozole soup. I know what he’s really asking. He wants to know why I’m here, why now.

I add some radishes and cilantro, then hit it hard with limon. The mix of spices explodes in my mouth.

“Damn, Tia.” was all I could say.

“Si, Mija te gusta?” She smiles with pride and my uncle Ruben clutches her hand.

“Me like.” I say with a full faced smile plastered on my face.

My uncle released my aunt’s hand and gave me a hard pat on the shoulder.

“Orale!” he says proudly.

“Uh, so things are complicated.” I say, trying to answer my uncle’s question.

“Shit Malva, that’s putting it lightly.” Ruben put down his tortilla and my aunt smacked him.

“Yes, your energy is not good.” My aunt says. She is a powerful aura reader and healer. “you must be very careful,” she warns.

“Maybe those duende rubbed off on you a bit, huh?” My uncle said in a cheery voice.

I knew he was half joking but serious. They wanted to know.

“What do they look like anyway? You said they are taller than gnomes. My mother would tell us that in Oxaca there used to be so many. They would throw rocks at the women washing their clothes in the river. Nasty little buggers.” He looked over at my aunt who concurred.



“Si Mija, I had heard that they steal children in the forest but until they took you, I had never known anyone who had lost a child.” The tone of her voice dripped in sadness and pity. I wasn’t sure if it was for me or my parents.

“They’re about four feet tall, they have bodies like ours but their faces are different. Long noses, big mouths, bad teeth, and they love mischief.” Hoping my answer would put an end to the conversation. I didn’t feel like going into any more details. “But that’s long behind me and I wish my parents would let it go. It is what it is, I’m back now and I’m ready to get to work.” I say, trying to lighten the mood a bit.

“It’s this anger Mija that worries all of us. You try to pretend everything is fine and if you keep doing it, the anger will overtake you. If you’re not careful it can put you on the wrong path. Listen to me, I would not steer you in the wrong direction.”

“Anger is anger, I mean what can I do. I just need to settle in more. I’ll be alright, it’s not such a big deal.” I say praying they won’t be as dramatic as Mom.

“It is, it can be, is what you need to understand. Look at me,” she says, trying to accentuate her point.

My eyes graze over her quickly. Point taken. I take another spoonful of soup and let it burn down my throat.

“What do we do when the weight of responsibility feels like it’s crushing us?” Uncle Ruben looks at me sternly, as if I should already know the answer. But I don’t. I squirm in my chair and wait for him to answer his own question.

He smiles, “We rise, Malva. We rise. That is what makes us different from humans. We don’t let the weight of this responsibility crush us, we have faith that what shall be, will be just as God has determined.”

Do I have Uncle Ruben’s faith? I’m supposed to. My training tells me that I do but do I really believe it? I sit taking in his words and nod to him and my aunt. They expect me to accept this as gospel and to not question them or myself.

“You’re here to have a human experience, Malva. Your parents sent you because ready or not, it’s time. It’s time to put all of the lessons and all of the training together. Do you understand what you are undertaking?”

“I do. I’m ready.” I give them both a smile. “I get it, I’m here to learn. I’m here to work.”

“Work you will. The realm thinks that humanity is on a straight and narrow walk to extinction and doom. Maybe, maybe not. They think that the faster it happens the better so that things can restart. I disagree, I believe that we are on the precipice of unlocking great glory.”

It would be rude to disagree with my uncle, it would signify a lack of respect so I just sit there rolling a tortilla in my hand. My uncle didn't spend 6 hours doom scrolling like I did on the plane. This human realm is done, canceled as they say. It's what my realm has been preparing for. I'm just here to check it out, learn what I can and get home to report.

“What do you know about your work?” My aunt asks.

“I'm to protect any potential light workers, destroy dark energy. That's about the gist of it.” How I do that is my business, I don't think they want to know the details.

Uncle Ruben laughs and looks at my aunt.

“That's it, huh? That simple. I won't spoil the fun for you Mija. Just be aware,” He pauses for a moment to think about his next words, brushing his hand over his beard. “That what you think and what is, can sometimes be different. This human realm will mess with your mind.”

“When in doubt, go to your training. Go to your source.” My aunt adds in. “We have been here for over 70 years, Mija. We can help and guide you.”

“Yes, thank you, I know that.” As the words leave my lips it dawns on me exactly how old they are, how my being here may be a burden to them. I don't want to disrupt their peace and their work. I need to be independent, I need to get to work.

“It's late. I'll leave you guys to rest. Thank you, Tia, for this amazing meal.” I eat the last tortilla and start gathering the dishes on the table for my aunt.

“It's been so many years since I was last here,” I say letting my hands run across the stone walls with stained glass windows depicting angels in heaven.

“Mija, come rest.” My aunt and I walked to the spare room which is just as I remember it. The same twin size bed with thick blankets from Mexico. The stone walls

make it feel like a crypt impenetrable to sunlight deep in the old church. The bed is soft and smells like my aunt.

“You’ll be cozy here,” she says and lifts off a few layers of blanket from the bed. “It’s drafty at night so keep these extra blankets close.”

“Thank you, Tia.” I give her a quick hug and she shuffles out of the room.

I get comfortable and just stare at the artwork across the room. It’s a picture of Mary holding a baby Jesus. I rested my eyes on it for a long time until I fell asleep.

I awoke to my aunt sitting next to me on the bed with both hands hovering over my heart. Her eyes were closed, and I could tell she was deep in prayer.

“It’s okay, Mija,” she whispered, “I’m going to give you some healing energy from my hands, just to make some more space for you. This will give you some time to get things in order, but you must not wait too long to understand this anger inside of you.” I could feel warmth and then heat over my chest and the feeling radiated throughout my torso and then down my legs. We stayed like this for several minutes.

“Thank you, Tia. I feel much better.” I felt the tears well up in my eyes and my throat tightened. I made a sound like a wounded animal.

“Let it out, don’t hold the anger,” she urged me and placed her hands over my chest again.

“I feel so ashamed, I should be the strong one giving to my family instead of taking from them,” my voice cracking with each word. I didn’t understand my own words; it’s like they came from another place in my body. A realization I had never admitted to myself.

“No, that’s not true. Accepting and asking for help will make you stronger. Release this pride.” She positioned her hands closer and it felt like a punch to my chest, leaving me breathless. I couldn’t move, all I could do was sob.

Later that morning, I sat in a pew near the back of the church at my aunt’s insistence watching the humans settle in for morning Mass. She said by going to church, my healing would be more powerful. Getting right with God is important, since my anger was in part with God and all that had happened to me with the Duende, their curse, and the years that they took from me. The sermon was about love and forgiveness, topics that

felt foreign to me. I have never experienced love in a romantic way and as I listened, my list of “nevers” seemed to accumulate. Having a normal childhood or upbringing was of course out of the question given my family line and my time away with the duende. But now, I have free will to make my own choices and I feel scared. Demon hunting has helped me avoid so much in myself, it distracts me and keeps everyone at arm's length. I didn't feel ready to change that just yet. I waited for the sacrament and left quickly and quietly to see who my aunt was having over.

I was in the kitchen already when Tia came in with someone close behind her. He was taller than her and had a lanky frame. I noticed his head was full of tight curls that framed his face under a Yankee's hat.

“Malva, this is Allister. He will help you navigate and acclimate.” Tia took Allister by the arm and pushed him forward. He had his head down avoiding eye contact and took off his baseball cap.

“It's an honor to meet you,” he said, bowing his head further.

“Hey, you can skip the formality. I'm cool,” I say to both of them.

He clutched his cap and his eyes widened but he continued to keep his head down.

“It's okay, really. You can look at me and you know just relax.”

He continued to look down.

I gave my aunt a side glance hoping she would help Allister unwind a bit. I looked him over some more and noticed he's of mixed breeding. He is human but also something, I keep looking at him.

“Empath,” he blurts out.

I inhaled deeply, this was going to require a lot of patience. Empaths take years to regulate their gifts. Since he is human perhaps he would need even more time if he even has much of a gift. I looked at him suspiciously not really knowing what to make of his demeanor. He looked older than me but not by much. My aunt was vouching for him so I imagine he's had some training and education. Especially if this pairing is her idea.

He popped his head up and looked at me. His eyes were a hazel green that looked stark against his mahogany skin. He was a handsome young man.

“Thank you and yes,” he said, now his gaze was on me, sizing me up as well. His eyes stared into mine for a brief moment.

“I’m not a telepath. I can’t hear what you’re saying.” I said to him, clearly Allister was trying to assess my gifts while revealing more of his own. “So rule number one, stay out of my head. My thoughts are my own. Second, are you at least dual dimensional? We will be traveling and I really don’t want to be slowed down? Third, you know what I am and what I do, correct?”

“I can travel with help and no, I don’t have full possession of my gift. I am still training and I know what you are. I have studied extensively.”

“Great, bookworm. Well, I can tell you that what you read about versus what we will encounter is totally different.”

His head tilted slightly taking in what I said. Since he’s a mind reader, I visualize a recent encounter for him to try to wrap his mind around.

His mouth opens and stays that way for a few moments, his eyes darting back and forth as he sees.

“Exactly, kid. This is not for the faint of heart. Demons are ruthless. Sometimes, I get the upper hand and sometimes, I don’t. Can you protect yourself?”

“My degree is in demonology and the demonic arts. I have helped people rid their homes of entities. I can block them from my mind.” He shares rather proudly.

“Well this is a few levels above that.” I look over at my aunt unsure if she’s made the right selection in Allister. He looks over at my aunt too and she lead us towards the table revealing nothing to either of us.

“Come sit,” she says.

We sit and wait for my uncle to join us. I continue to watch Allister wondering what my aunt sees in him. He looks like a regular guy, nothing was standing out to me. Maybe that was it, he would not attract attention and could go about unnoticed by demons.

My uncle joins us and I make sure to laugh at my uncle's jokes when he slides one in and listen without interrupting his sermon about the state of Catholicism. Allister sat across from me watching and likely reading me. I was careful with my thoughts.

“Maria, I think this is going to be a good pairing,” Uncle Ruben announced. “It’s like watching a mongoose and a cobra,” he laughed.

“Yes, I feel that way too. Let’s hope they can learn from one another,” she replied.

“You will leave and spend the next few days together exploring. Come back and we’ll see how this works out.” Uncle Ruben said casually as if we were going away for a weekend holiday. He seemed pleased nodding to my aunt, both of them were placing a lot of trust in Allister so I knew I had to give him the opportunity.

“Questions?” he asked.

“None from me.” I looked at all of them. Asking or doubting would show disrespect and I had to trust my family.

Allister sat silent as well. I could only hope he understood what he was getting himself into.

## OUR SONG

I remember that we were in New Orleans on an alligator adventure boat. My husband's friend Danny and his then girlfriend Laura were with us. Michael was holding the small alligator and I snapped a picture with my camera. It was around 2004 to the best of my recollection. We had a wonderful time in the city, visiting Cafe Du Monde, walking around Bourbon Street, casinos, fried green tomatoes, all the po'boys we could eat and the hurricanes we could drink. It was while I snapped the picture that the song came on. The one that has filled me with terror since I was a child. It felt like a lighting bolt had struck me and I felt all the joy of the weekend seep right out of my body. My husband noticed the color from my face drain and helped me to sit. I was trapped on the boat with nowhere to go to get away from the song and I had to endure every last syllable of the ballad. I felt a flood of emotion and I started crying. I remember repeating over and over to my husband that it was the song, the song I had told him about that meant something very bad was going to happen. He tried to calm me down and tried to reason with me. Our friends were terrified to see the usual happy and bubbly person they had come to know look so shattered suddenly. No one understood the significance of the song, they had no idea of the number of things the song had warned me about as a child. I couldn't communicate the feeling of doom that had just destroyed me.

I wasn't the same afterwards, the premonition was received and registered in my soul. It would be a really bad thing, whatever it was that was coming. I had never endured the whole song before. I was kind of at peace by the time we arrived at the docks. My worst nightmare had come to pass and I was still standing. It was a popular song back in the 80s and 90s and back then it would send me running from the room or quick to snap the radio off, or beg the driver to turn off the radio, then I would go and cry, often shaking in fear. No one understood it when I was a child, my brother tried to distract me and comfort me. My mother would say in Spanish to enjoy laughter because we never knew when we were going to cry. The song was the metaphor for the other shoe to drop, the moment we all know is coming. The song just confirmed it to me, yes it's time for sadness. Once I heard the first melody of the song, it was over. It would take the bad thing to pass for me to feel okay again.

As we got into the car to drive back to the hotel, I remember looking over at my husband and knowing that it was grandma. She was going to die soon. Michael's grandmother was very kind to me. We had hit it off instantly and she welcomed me to the family wholeheartedly. It was a few days later that we learned of her diagnosis and she didn't last long.

It's hard to sit with a premonition when everyone else around you doesn't believe it's even possible or just coincidence. I tried to talk myself out of it and remained hopeful for my husband's sake. I kept my thoughts to myself until my own grandmother came to see me in a dream.

I remember walking into a bright, white room. It reminded me of a cafeteria with long tables all around and people sitting down. I felt out of place in the room and looked around taking it all in. In front of me I saw a lady who looked like me sitting. I recognized her instantly and came over to sit across from her. She was holding a deck of cards and next to her was Michael's grandmother. She was teaching my grandmother how to play cards. They were speaking to each other without words, through telepathy. I could see my grandmother nodding and smiling as Grace displayed her cards for my grandmother to see. Grace was winning and seemed happy about it. They continued their conversation and I realized that Grace couldn't see me but my grandmother could. I was a ghost here.

My grandmother rose and came over to take me by the hand. We looked at Grace continuing to win and more people surrounded her. She was with loved ones. My grandmother led me by the hand and pulled me away. The next part reminds me of the cartoon version of a Christmas carol with Jim Carey. I was pulled and lifted off the ground with my grandmother leading the way forward. We flew through many doors that slammed shut behind us as we went through them. We went faster and faster flying through the air and I could feel myself hanging on tightly to my grandmother's hand. We stopped suddenly and it took me a moment to catch my breath and my grandmother opened a door in front of us and pulled me in. I asked her where we were because the room we entered was dark. I looked around and felt my grandmother's other hand reach and grab both of mine. She came closer to me and we stared at each other for a moment. She placed my hands down on what looked like a



piece of wood to help me anchor myself since I was still weightless. I was scared still searching the room anchored to this piece of wood with my grandmother next to me. Her eyes were wide and when I looked down, I saw that I was holding on to a wooden crib. Inside was a baby.

“Abuela, is this my baby? Is this my baby?” My hands reached for the baby and I pulled her close to me. I stared at her face in disbelief. “Abuela, is she mine?” all I could do was cry, she was so beautiful. I kissed her little face and cheeks.

I woke up with a jolt, like when you have those dreams that you trip and wake yourself up before you fall. I was pregnant soon after and endured a very difficult pregnancy. The image of my daughter in her crib kept me going during long months of bed rest, hyperemesis, and hypertension. Often, I reflect back on the dream and try to decipher the many metaphors in the dream. I think that my grandmother was trying to show me that Grandma Grace was playing the cards she was dealt in her life well. She won and in the end was surrounded by her loved ones. My grandmother showed me that I would need to travel through many doors and endure hardships for the best prizes in my life. I just had to hang on.

## YOU MAY NOT CALL ME GIRL

“Girl, calm down” she says

As she sauntered down the stairs

Off to her friends house and on with her day.

I stop her from above

and remind her

You may not

call me,

girl.

My name came hard earned

A name that started with three months

of bedrest, stillness to ensure you grew to term.

That your lungs formed

And your heartbeat in rhythm

with mine, while I tried to stay calm

To keep the swelling down

Blood pressure steady

To give you

the opportunity

to grow.

A name that came as I labored in pain

Felt my body break open

Tear

as I made space

for you to crown your head

For your shoulders to reach the world

Covered in my blood

Your body left mine

and become your own

While the stitches in jagged lines

Left me scarred

The name that came to me

The burning

The painful first latch

As I nourished you

From my body again and again

A name that came

as tears streamed down my face

The joy to hold you

The joy to nurture you

You may not  
call me,  
Girl

As you leave angrily down the steps  
Annoyed at my questions  
Bothered by my voice  
The one that sang to you  
Comforted  
And eased you.

My name came from  
Years of staying home  
Watching promotions come and go  
Watching my dreams  
On hold.

My name came from  
Long nights  
Story books  
crying  
Vomit in my hair  
Sickness

and health

You may not

Call

me,

Girl

As you take your keys

And drive to leave

Me behind

to explore the world.

*They tried to bury us, they didn't know we are seeds.-Mexican Proverb*

## THUNDER

Some people believe we are born with a predetermined fate engraved in the palms of our hands, revealing itself by deep lines forming an M or W, depending on how you choose to view it. My Mother says there are actually five lines; one represents life, others the heart, wisdom and love, and the last line, marriage. In these configurations, ancients believed the revelation of one's destiny could be discerned. Some think it is a pagan superstition, but my parents believe it to be true. They would go to palm readers who would carefully study each tiny mark and explain it as a symbol to reveal the path of your life.

Looking at my hands, I can't help but think about how devastated my parents must have been when I was born, the moment my small fist opened for the first time and they discovered there were no lines on my palms, just a pale color lighter than the rest of my mahogany skin. There were just faint lines on my fingers.

I am Ixchel. The last born child of the human race.

They hoped over time something would begin to form. As I have grown up and still every day, Mother asks me to show her the palms of my hands and she carefully looks for lines. "Nothing yet, but soon," she always says and then gives me a hopeful smile. Mother thinks my destiny is somehow tied to the lifeline of the human race. But there is nothing imprinted in my palms and the sooner we accept our fate the better.

I sit next to Mom, handing tools over when asked. Anything mechanical she can quickly get back in tip-top shape. The Moxie Mom that works on is vital for converting carbon dioxide into oxygen. The man who invented the machine used to live in the village but he died some time ago. He taught Mom everything about the machine and they even improved it together, but with so much use, it too is on its last legs.

"That's all I can do." Mom brushes off the dust from her hands and looks lovingly at the Moxie. "Come on, old girl, just a little longer," she pleads with the machine. "What are the readings?"

Mom's voice sounds far away and it takes me a second to reorient myself. I look up at her face, caught off guard from thinking about my stupid hands and notice the deep lines around her mouth and eyes. It makes me worry about what those wrinkles mean and how much time we still have together. I shake it off, otherwise the thought will consume my mind and make a deep pit in my stomach that will fill with worry.

“Well?”

“It's up, better than before. Eight percent,” I smile, always impressed with Mom. They still have a lot to work on before tonight. Next are the monitors in the hibernation room.

“Why do I still need to call them Elders? Why do they have to treat us like this?” I go back to the conversation we were having before.

Mom put her arms around me and pulls me in for a big hug. “Just be respectful. Don't get stubborn like your dad. It is what it is, we gotta just focus on what needs to get done.” Mom slings her tool belt over her shoulder and locks her arm into mine, pulling me down the hall.

“Didn't one of the Elders conclude my hands to be further proof that the Earth will in fact implode and we, the final species on the planet, will be nothing more than cosmic dust in the vast universe?” I use a mocking tone, deliberately trying to rile my mother up.

“So why the hypocrisy if they really think there's no hope?”

“Ixchel, none of the Elders really believe all that palm reader stuff. We have to stay the course, now stop it.”

We walk together arm in arm until we reach the farming section of the village. Mom pulls open a glass door and pushes back a white curtain that encloses the room. Large fans built into the walls are always on, circulating the air in the room to keep a constant temperature. When I was little, this large area was full of plants. It was a courtyard with a glass ceiling covered by a retractable roof. Over a mile in length, this farm supported three hundred people. Now they rely on film farming and the use of polymer technology to grow plants without soil. Hundreds of strings attached to the ceiling anchor plants upright under magenta-colored lights.

I used to play hide and seek with my Mom in this room. She would be camouflaged in the dense green leaves and I would panic looking for her and thinking she was gone. Now the vegetation is sparse. Plants still grow but no longer as nutrient rich as they once were. The colors of the leaves are lighter shades of green, far from what I remember. The village grows the very basics needed to keep the last hundred people in the community alive.

“Water levels are low too,” Mom says. “I’ve been working on making a new water recycler from spare parts. If I can get it going, then it might win us some very nice perks.” She winks. Behind her is a table draped with a drop cloth. Mom had been tinkering while Dad and I were away. She pulls off the cloth and I can feel my eyes widen looking at all the materials. Since I was small, I have been helping her on most of her projects. She has learned a lot about engineering and building. I can quickly see where she left off in the repair and go to work, my mind quickly began visualizing where things needed to go.

“Our strategy needs to change,” Mom says. “These expeditions are going nowhere. Maybe if the Elders see what we can do here, they won't send you out anymore.” My Mother runs her hands through my hair. “Your grandmother would have been so proud of you. I grew up a lot like you, following my Mom around and learning everything I could from her.”

I don't know why my Mom is proud of me. *I have no destiny. I'm a mistake, a child who should never have been conceived.* The thought comes to me like breathing. Automatic, a constant reminder of the crime my parents still pay for daily. Aside from me, it has been decades since a child was born. I am the last one.

I can feel my lips forming a smile, imagining my Mom with a small tool bag instead of a doll. “Do you ever wish you had stayed with your village, Mom?”

“Momma died young. I was eighteen when they said they were coming here and I jumped at the chance. Momma always spoke well of this NASA. She was able to get her education here, opportunities that weren't available in Africa. My father had worked for NASA too in his youth, but he died of disease.”

I can see her eyes tear up. Mom always gets like that when she talks about her time with Grandma. I struggle in my mind to bring up images of the places my mother



spoke of. All she had were old videos and stored images. The pictures of Europe and Africa are from after the Earth was destroyed. The omnipresent reality of death and destruction and the obliteration of the earth's resources wrought great suffering and those who remained had to survive in torturous extremes.

“If you ever have an opportunity to leave this place, I hope you take it.” She smiles at me and gives me a kiss on the forehead. “Your grandmother always thought all her research was to terraform Mars, but it proved to be so important here. Life and all its twists and turns makes your head spin.”

“Yeah, the timing of life too. If Dad's agency hadn't run out of supplies and come here, the two of you would have never met. He would have died out there.”

“Timing is everything.” Mom agrees and leads them out of the farming section and they make their way down the long hall to and see the sleepers resting peacefully in suspended hibernation. The pods have frosted over, making it impossible to see who is in there.

“Let's hope tonight's awakening is exactly what we need.” Mom switches on some monitors and goes to work coding and running sequences to ensure tonight will go without a hitch. “Get under that desk please and start working on the jinx.”

Fighting hard not to roll my eyes, I make my way over. “I hate working on this machine. It never runs right and it needs all kinds of coddling.”

Mom quickly dismisses me, busy with her work. “Unit 9123 is all we need it to do. Whatever else it spits out is for another time. Just make a note of the error codes and I'll look at them tomorrow.”

“Got it.” Trying not to groan as my legs bend into a kneeling position. My body still hurts from the expedition, days out scavenging with Dad to bring back probes. After a little while of working and running an analysis, it looks like the damn thing is going to work after all. The Elders will get their awakening. “So who is going to sleep?” I call out while holding my breath, praying it's not Dad. Only the essential can stay, those deemed vital to the Elders. Resources are limited.

“Looks like they are putting down ten. Waking up three. Get ready. I'm going to power down and restart.” Mom stands up and walks across the room to the main power grid and pulls a lever down. Everything goes dark for a few seconds.

“Yikes!” Ten people gone meant there would be a lot more work to distribute among fewer workers. The lights and monitors power back up.

“Something wrong?” Mom walks over to review my work. Everything is fine.

“Yeah, all good. So who are they waking up? They must be major contributors to replace all those people,” I say.

“Top secret. I just know the unit number.” Mom tilts her head toward the pods and I stand up to follow her. “Lucky for them, I guess.” She pats on one of the pods.

A sinking feeling settles into my chest as I look around and notice one pod for each of the Elders is all that remains.

\*\*\*\*\*

We walk back towards our room. The village was already over capacity before my parents got here. People had died from various radiation illnesses and other diseases, reducing numbers, but they were still straining their resources. I knew my birth caused an uproar, yet keeping my parents around was vital to the longevity of the village because of all the skills my mom has and all the data Dad and I have collected over the years.

“Go take some time for yourself,” Mom urges as we walk past the farming section again. “You look like you have a lot on your mind. Rest up before the ceremony.”

“Right, you mean a night of kissing the Elders’ butt and hoping for even more work to be placed on us while they enjoy the fruit of our labors?” I bump Mom with my shoulder trying to get a rise out of her. She shoves me back, not willing to commiserate.

“Speaking of extra work,” Mom starts to say, but I cut her off.

“No way. I am not helping anyone acclimatize. Don’t even volunteer me or I will leave here with Dad and not come back for a year.” I can feel my face flush. How can she even think of it?

Mom put her hands up. “All right. It was just an idea .”

I let it go and think about my favorite spot in the family's living quarters. How warm and inviting the small space is. Being an outcast has its benefits. No one ever comes by them and her family has been able to create a better space for themselves compared to how others, who are living in much closer quarters. Mom can make the best of anything and reuse items in clever ways, like the collection of broken tile she has used as wall decor around our kitchen.

I thought about my hammock bed and how wonderful it would feel to be off my feet. Dad would sway me in the hammock when I was little and the gentle back and forth always put me right out. I don't know how my parents sleep on the floor. Their bedding is stuffed with some hemp filling and by now I am sure my father's blanket must be draped on the end of the bed. His prized possession that he will only share with his wife.

The home's stone floor, despite all the sweeping, somehow always has dust. Mom's small stove in the corner has a large stone grinder next to it for making tortillas. Mason jars are filled with stored food and any masa she has been able to grind in another one.

"Is that your stomach growling?" Mom asks, giggling.

"Yes, I hope you have some food." I pray Mom has made us something special tonight. Usually we eat the tofu, veggies, and herbs we are rationed to. Our home smells like oregano and chepil. Mom loves to season everything with dried herbs. My mind wanders to tamales wrapped in green leaves stuffed with veggies.

My mouth waters, "Perhaps you made some panucho?" She nudges at her mother's arm, thinking about layered tortillas with beans and greens, another special dish they get when she and her father return from long journeys.

"Maybe, you'll have to wait and see," mom teases.

It feels great to be walking with mom and back to our home finally being able to rest. Once inside I will search through the clay dishes and other household items like cooking cazuelas and pots to discover for myself what my mother has cooked because I knows that Mom will insist I wash and clean up. My hair is a mess and there is no way Mom will be able to sit and eat knowing my hair needs braiding before the ceremony.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Wow! This is not what I expected." I look over at my parents who are filled with excitement. There was an awakening years before I was born that my parents told me about, but this is so much more than I am used to seeing. Everyone has gathered in the region of the atrium and surround the three pods. There is drum music and people are dancing in celebration. What little food people can part with is on display for everyone to

partake of. The Elders are seated near the empty pods preparing to announce the names of the soon to be depart.

“Quick, take something.” Mom urges Dad and I to eat.

I stuff my mouth with something, too nervous to eat any more. I look over at my Dad, praying to any gods left that he is not selected. The drum beating calls all of us to attention. The Elders are ready to start.

Dr. Bennett steps forward and everyone falls silent. “We thank you for all of your service and now the time has come for you to take your well-earned rest and to awaken to better times ahead.”

I feel Mom tugging at my arm, we need to run diagnostics of the pods as people are placed inside. We walk forward towards the Elders and get to work. Even though I was instructed and ran different scenarios in the past with mom, this is my first time doing it all live. There’s a lot of pressure to perform. Mom and three other workers are busy clicking away as the pods fill with fluid. I pull the plastic body bags into the proper position to ensure they fill evenly. My fingers graze the warm liquid and it feels smooth and slippery. Moving quickly from pod to pod, I turn on systems and listen to orders from Mom. Everything is happening so fast, I don’t even hear the names being called. One moment, I’m working and the next I’m helping someone inside. I hear crying and goodbyes, but can hardly stop to take in everything happening. I manage a quick, “Good luck” to the person I’m sealing into the body bag.

“Are we sealed on one?” Mom calls out.

“Set, loading two and three.” My hands fumble for a moment and I look down at the face of the person in pod 2. Farm workers, I quickly notice. I guess we will all have to learn to cultivate our own food going forward. It’s a shame, but there is not a lot of time to lament. Pods four through six are announced and I have to move on.

“Lock them down, wait till they settle to set them on slumber,” Mom reminds me.

I hear banging against the first three pods. The people are panicking inside. A natural reaction as the lungs fill with fluid. They must feel like they’re drowning. Once the sound stops I bolt the opening down and drill a small name plate handed to me on top. It has all their data inscribed to be scanned in the future, including their DNA profile for

breeding, if there is a time when breeding resumes. I move down the line repeating the process over and over again.

“Eight, nine and ten are ready to go.” Mom comes over to help with the final three. I can hear her saying comforting words as she seals them in. I forgot to do that, not a lot of time for kindness.

“Ready? Now comes the hard part.” The ten are taken wheeled away to be stored in the hibernation room and I take a moment to change my gloves. Mom looks me over to make sure I’m ready. The three Elders are working closely with Mom as they prepare for this next segment of the proceedings. My body feels jittery as I go through my part over and over again in my mind. I manage a quick glance at my Dad who is thankfully still here. He looks proud and gives me a thumbs up. But inside, I get a bad feeling. Unit 9123 is wheeled out and the three pods are lined up in order of awakening.

“Connect the wires we need to run a full viral scan and get a reading for any decomposition.” Mom hands me heavy black wires to connect while she quickly sets up monitors to each pod. The Elders’ come close as they whisper to one another. I can’t hear what they are saying as I crouch down to connect everything. I hear the air being released from the first pod and watch the liquid spill out onto the ground. I run for the large 26-inch broom so no one will slip and get to work brushing it all away from our work space. There’s a slight commotion, something is wrong. I get that bad feeling again and I look over at Mom.

“He’s not acclimating. The body is shutting down, oxygen levels are too low.” One of the Elders calls out.

“Sit him up more, get all the liquid out of his lungs.” An awful gurgling sound comes from the first pod. “We’re losing him. What are the readings?”

“All major organs are compromised. He’s not going to make it.” I hear my Mom’s voice calm and steady through the chaos. “Move on to the second pod. We will clear this one.”

I walk over and see the naked body of a man. I stumble, taken aback by the grey color of his skin. He looks very old. Why would the Elders waste resources on someone like him? I glance over at his name, he’s a doctor probably one of their old colleagues. I wheel the pod out of the room so the others can take care of the mess.

“Ixchel, looks like this one is the same.” Mom comes over by me as the Elders are struggling with the second body. She removes her gloves and reviews the data on the screen. “Too much time under, they are from a different time. Their bodies are just not able to work with our conditions.”

“When are they from?” I check the screen. “2058, how is that possible?”

“Looks like this third pod is faring much better. Look at those vitals.” We stare in awe at the screen, watching the heart pump and the blood flowing.

“This one is going to make it.” I tell Mom. We walk over to help Dr. Bennett.

I scan the name plate of Dr. Nikka Coba and all his data loads onto the screen. Twenty-year-old, male. A little young to be a doctor. I think and continue reading. Child prodigy dual doctorate in quantum physics, engineering, biology. Great, another useless thinker without practical skills. At least there will be an extra pod for someone else.

\*\*\*\*\*

“Stay with us Doctor Coba. Keep taking deep breaths, your body needs time.” Dr. Bennett tries to sound reassuring while watching the monitors. “Asha, get me another viral scan,” He calls out to my Mom.

A little late to be worrying about viruses, I think to myself. I walk over to help my mother. Nothing is coming up for the good doctor.

“He’s clean. Nothing to worry about,” Asha responds.

We wait as Dr. Coba regains consciousness.

“What year? What year is it?” His voice is raspy and his hands grip onto Dr. Bennett, desperately trying to pull him closer.

“Easy, Dr. Coba. We will explain everything. You’re alive, revived from suspended sleep. What do you remember last?”

“Is it all gone? Is it all gone? We tried to stop it.” Dr. Coba starts weeping, clutching onto Dr. Bennett even harder, his teeth chattering.

My chest feels tight. I can feel the sadness inside Dr. Coba, as if he has shattered and little pieces of him are floating around the room, landing on me and filling me with emotion.

“We survived. We are still here.” Dr. Bennett signals to my Mom to come over.

I gripped Mom's arm trying to keep her from getting too close. I can see my father's dark eyes begging her to stay back. Cobra keeps crying and muttering to himself. I glance at his vitals on the monitor. "He'll be fine. Just let him calm down," I urge Mom.

"Easy, let's stand him up slowly," Mom directs. "Ixchel, get the heating blankets. Let's wrap him up."

I moved quickly and glue myself to Mom's side, helping her to cover the naked man. His skin is a warm tan color and his hair is black and of similar texture to my father's. I wondered if he is also of Mexican or Hispanic origin. Slowly he stands and towers over me, easily about 6'2 maybe 6'3 in height. His body is lean, not like the other two who didn't make it. I feel embarrassed, it's the first time I've ever been so close to a naked man. My Mom must be sensing my discomfort and quickly holds up the blanket to cover him more.

"I've got it, Ixchel. You can go over by your father. Guillermo, come take her."

Dr. Cobra leans on my Mom, placing another hand on my shoulder for support. My dad swoops in and leans against Cobra to help my Mom move him to medical. I squeeze out between them and decide to wait.

"Let's get this all cleaned up. Thank you everyone, we can rejoice in having Dr. Cobra here with us now. He will be an excellent leader and innovative with ideas that will help us immensely," Dr. Bennett says. He and the other elders walk together towards their meeting room. I can tell he is disappointed; it's the same as the expression on his face when we run out of rations.

I look over to the tables to see if there is any food left. My body feels weak from hunger. I walk over and grab whatever is left. Others watch me and do the same. No sense letting these scraps go to waste. I put some in my pocket for Mom and wait.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Ixchel logging in. We are heading south towards the outpost." Once I checked in, we could talk uninterrupted. Someone is always listening and recording our every move but, as long as they do it quietly I don't care.

"Thank you, Ixchel. We have your position." I don't recognize the voice. "Check in when you reach the outpost. Your estimated arrival is in 6 hours."

My body slumps a little. There is a long walk ahead. I glance over at Dad, hoping he will acknowledge my sentiment. He gives me a thumbs up instead.

“Easy walk, Ixchel. Don’t get lazy.” I can hear his voice in my helmet as I move. “Just follow the map.”

Always following the map, which wasn’t entirely accurate no matter what the Elders said. I have noted errors on several occasions, all of which were dismissed. I prefer to follow the compass and my own intuition. It has led us to some really great finds in the past. The biggest was a few weeks ago when Dad got his blanket, among other things. I power on the loader from my suit. Bright light from the loader turns on behind us.

We move quickly through the terrain. Just vast darkness and dimly visible openness ahead of us. Nothing but dusty earth and heat. Occasionally we find salt mounds. The loader follows closely, the six-wheeled vehicle able to hold what we find in its compartments. If we leave it out in the sun to charge during the day it can run over fourteen hours at night. I control it from my suit. It floats three feet from the ground. It also holds our supplies to build camp and some tools. My visor displays our current pace and data about the environment around us. Inhospitable for humans, or anything else for that matter. I wonder about my father’s stories and try to imagine the surroundings full of trees and some of the species we watch from saved files. It helps pass the time. We are walking forty miles south west from the village located in what was once known as Houston. In what was once known as Texas, in what was known as the United States. Not that it mattered, it was just another barren landscape to me.

“Lightning ahead, Ixchel.” My father’s voice pulls me from swirling thoughts. I stop to look ahead and listen. There is nothing. We wait a few more minutes and everything remains quiet.

“I swear, I saw a streak of light.” Dad looks up to the sky.

“Let’s keep moving.” I urge Dad on. The estimated time is increasing instead of decreasing when I check our pace; now it will be six hours and forty-five minutes until we reach the outpost. Why? I check the monitor to see what the problem can be. As we continue walking I see the light out of the corner of my eye. It is a split-second flash of brilliant white.



I stop. “Did you see it?”

My Dad gives me a nod and continues to search the night sky. It is hard to see anything with the sulfur clouds that form, blocking the stars as usual.

I turn my body in the direction of the flash. I can see my father has a smile across his face. After walking for so long in darkness, any hint of light is exciting. I can't help but smile back at him. His enthusiasm is leaking from his suit like carbon dioxide.

“Let's follow it?” He suggests eagerly.

“No. Follow the map, remember. We have a long journey.” I reviewed the power left in our suits and the loader. We have to be smart with the time left and secure shelter. Another pop of light flashes quickly. It cuts through the sky between two clouds some distance away. I can feel the low rumbling sound vibrate through my body.

“It's close. Let's move.” Dad gestures for me to follow.

“Dad, it's dangerous. We're exposed if we get....” He cuts me off by jumping on the loader. Not even considering the consequences of a lightning strike, his fingers are busy overriding the system. I hate when he does that. His codes were always messy and easy to trace. “Dad, wait. I'll do it.” Impatiently I run over and nudge him out of the way. Trying to seat myself evenly on the loader. They aren't meant to be ridden on, and our weight sets it off balance. We usually save the ride for the last mile or two of our walk when it won't matter much.

“A quick off-course and then we go back. Okay?” I say sternly.

“Yes, yes. Hurry!”

I give it power and we speed off, the tools clanking along the way. My dad is looking up at the clouds, pointing.

“There's more! This type of atmospheric activity is important. It could signal promising changes.”

A sharp crack of thunder cuts him off. This is dangerous. I quickly go through a list of possible outcomes, all of which are bad. A lightning strike on our loader would have terrible consequences. I reduce power and the tools stop clattering.

A flash of light illuminates the entire sky, allowing me to see far out ahead of them. The barren landscape looks beautiful suddenly, as if it too has awoken. I turn the

steering wheel hard to the left to get further away from the danger. Dad grabs the wheel, forcing us to continue straight where we are heading. The ground rumbles beneath us and the thunder roars and cracks so loudly I panic. A primal survival instinct to seek shelter takes over. I wrestle for the wheel again.

“Let go! We’ll get hit. We have to go back!” The scenery around us lights up again. The lightning is above us, angrily streaking the sky, looking for anything to target. I pull the wheel and give the loader full power. Dad is too mesmerized by the sky to notice. A deafening crack jolts us.

“You’re losing your grip on the wheel!” He tries to help me regain control. The display on my arm begins flashing and powering down.

“We’re hit! We’re hit!” I scream.

“Ixchel, wake up honey. You’re having a bad dream.” Mom is next to me, gently trying to calm me.

“Mom, you’re back. Is everything okay?” I feel disoriented from the dream, which are memories from our last trip. My mind still trying to make sense of it all.

## POCHA

They call me “Pocha” in Mexico. It's what my cousins say to themselves to excuse my behavior or comments. “Ella es pocha,” one will say and they all nod in understanding with each other. It’s slang for a Mexican American who is from the United States and is adrift between two cultures. It’s a pejorative term. They say it in a joking way, hoping that I won’t understand. This is a cultural aspect I am learning about my family in Mexico. What they say usually has a double meaning, a joke in jest carrying a hurtful truth.

This strange in between is something I’ve learned to navigate throughout my life. Never fitting into Mexican or American culture, not being normal enough for either. A strange alien with big eyes watching, waiting for that feeling where things align. Where I click suddenly with the people and fit in like a missing puzzle piece. Writing a memoir is an unusual place to try to find that connection. I can't tell my own story from those of my patients, my kids, my husband, my parents, my brother, my colleagues, myself. It’s an interwoven fabric like the thick blankets made in Oaxaca. The kind made for over 2,500 years in Teotitlan. Large looms with hundreds of strings suspended and a wooden needle bringing each thread through to be pressed down and added to the woven blanket. The weavers work out in the open, exposed to the elements using pigments from insects and parasites grown on cactus to produce their works of art in bright indigo and pinks. Perhaps this memoir can imitate their bravery and ingenuity. Maybe I can carefully select through the sharp barbs in my life to pull off an insect and pulverize it to create a new vibrant color in my own life.

Weavers say a good blanket requires patience, good energy, and lulling yourself into an almost meditative space to receive inspiration to create. My blanket begins with the first time I heard the song, the song that fills me with an awful premonition that something bad was going to happen. A hot summer day, getting out of a pool and hearing the song playing on the radio.

I remember being in the back seat of the car. We, my parents, brother and I were in my father’s car driving home from a company picnic. My parents had spent the day

drinking, actually binge drinking with my mother's work friends. It was all you could drink and eat along with swimming for the kids. There was a clam bar, burgers, chicken, and all the ice cream you could eat. It was a joyous day by all accounts, I was tired, and sun burnt by the time the day was winding down. I remember as I gathered my belongings to leave that the fear set in. I was afraid as I got into the car. I had seen the look on both my parents' faces before, on the weekends they drank a lot. It was their release from a difficult week of working and worry. Alcohol would quench their thirst of aggravation and pain. Their drinking started on Friday and Saturday and included all the fights, music, chaos, and domestic violence that they could muster. On Sundays my Mom would spend the day recovering, hung over and angry.

I sat in the backseat and prayed, both my parents were very drunk. Just able to stand. No questions were asked when my father started the car and began the decent home. There was nothing I could do at that age or at that moment but pray, pray we made it home. No one else seemed scared or as terrified as I felt. My parents had grown used to driving drunk. I closed my sunburned eyes for the 45-minute drive back home.

When we got to an area of town that I recognized, I began to feel relief and calm thinking that my dad had sobered up by now and could get us home the rest of the way safely. We were almost home, as the moment passed a sense of panic set in as if I was sensing that something bad was about to happen. A strong sense of knowing, feeling throughout my body. I didn't see the car hit us, I didn't see my Dad run the red light, I just remember the impact.

Patience is a virtue that I'm running low on these days. We are two years into a pandemic and I'm waiting for my aunt in Mexico to come home from the hospital. She had asymptomatic covid that destroyed her lungs, no one knew she was sick until she couldn't breath. She will need to be on oxygen for the rest of her life. I only have three aunts left, a startling realization because my mom is one of ten children.

They say that our days are numbered anyway. From the moment we are born, the countdown begins and we are allotted only so many days depending on our predetermined agreement with god or the gods depending on what you believe. I've used 16,425 days so far and I may be at the midpoint of my life. I

think about this often, especially with the pandemic and with so much death around. We lost seven cousins to covid and now my aunt, who we know her allotment of days are coming closer to an end.

Her own son succumbed to covid earlier this year as well. Leaving her to exist with a missing part of her soul. I was recently in Mexico to visit her and to celebrate with my family the loss of our loved ones. We made several ofrendas for our relatives as is the tradition and we remembered them throughout the week sharing stories and memories. It's the first time since I was a teenager that I can remember spending such a nice time with my family in Cuernavaca. Mexico is a place that makes me acutely aware of the fragility of life and how easy it is to leave. I was ten years old when I had my second brush with death.

I was at my aunt Irene's house, sleeping over with my cousins in a large king size bed. There were four of us sleeping close together. It was late, everyone was tired and I remember that I was at the edge of the bed. I began to drift off when I felt something on my leg. I twitched and moved a bit hoping it was nothing. The sensation stopped after I fidgeted for several minutes until I felt it again. Light grazing over my skin moving up my leg. I sat up and called out to my older cousin Alma sleeping in a bunk bed next to me. "Something's in the bed, it's crawling on me." but everyone had fallen asleep and my cries went unanswered. I stayed still in the bed hoping it was my imagination and tried to go back to sleep. I must have dosed off slightly until I felt the thing crawling on my hand and moving up my arm. I called out again and again to my cousin who shushed me to sleep. This time when I flinched I felt a sharp stab to my forearm and I sat up crying. I don't remember much else. A strange smell and being lifted off the bed, feeling a tight tourniquet around my arm. Everything was a haze, my mother coming into the room to bring me some water. Laying still, waiting, in and out of sleep. A cool towel over my forehead.

It was three days later when I was helped out of the bed. My aunt offered me a cold sprite and when I drank it, I couldn't taste anything. I couldn't smell anything, my brain felt foggy. Food had lost all it's flavor. I was lucky they said, the tourniquet was applied on time before the poison went to my heart. Years later, I'm not so sure that that's true. The scorpion that stung me that night was never found. My cousins had

scoured the room and nothing. It went on to sting again.

There are some scorpions that can kill a horse with a sting in Mexico. I was lucky my 90 pound body had put up a fight. It left me wondering if this is what death is like, something we can sense coming and yet do nothing about. Laying still and enduring the best way that we can. Does it need to leave us in paralyzing fear? I didn't know that I would be facing death that night, that it snuck into my covers and made its way up my small body. My recovery took several days, I could taste food again, my tongue was less swollen, and the brain fog lifted. I didn't know anything about neurotoxins or how lucky I was until later in adulthood. My scorpion survival became legend with my family. The pocha who survived the scorpion sting like a real Mexican. I didn't feel anymore Mexican as a result, but it let my family know that I have strong blood running through my veins. It left me with a sense of freedom about death. When my days end, I hope I'm dressed for death like La Calavera Catrina, in a long dress with a big hat and say to death, *I knew you were coming and I'm prepared. I'm ready, I lived my days fully without regrets.*

I think my aunt Reyna did this. She was the bold one, the brave one of my mother's sisters. Number seven of the siblings. Before she died last year, she told my Mom not to worry. "Hermana, when it's your time don't be scared, I'll come and bring you over, hmm." My mother put up a fight, "No Rey, I want to be here for a long time. I'm not ready to leave." To which she replied, "Hermana, es pronto no tengas miedo."

## A BLACK NIGHT SKY

Often, I wonder about the day I die

Lying alone in a bed

A last breath

short and sharp.

My soul leaving this body

into nothingness

A black night

Sky.

Searching for someone

Hoping to find

Ancestors

Relatives

Those long gone.

Nothing

only darkness

Hopes, dashed

No afterlife

No reincarnation

Only a lost soul

Energy.

A star appears

Dim and distant

I think about my life

The work

The journey

More stars appear

Marking each one

Those helped

Those healed

A kind word

A gesture

Brighten the darkness

Illuminea path

Celestial splendor

Built on a life well lived

Sacrifice

Suffering

Compromise

Useful



Love

I journey into heaven.

## EYE FOR AN EYE

“This country was built on the founding principles of truth, justice, and liberty for all. It’s in support of those values that the American Justice system was reformed.” The president's face flushed red with anger. Again having to explain to these reporters was a waste of his time. His press secretary insisted upon it because of the brutal way that the family took care of their prisoner. “Our ancestors didn't have the problems that we had with mass incarceration, mental health housing facilities that our prison systems had become. Going back to the Old Testament and cementing Eyes for an Eye became our salvation. Our country, our economy, and our safety as a nation are more vital than ever. Who wants to go back to the mass shootings, the injustice of our previous court system with its two tiered justice?” He looked out into the crowd, the press surprisingly quiet as if stunned for a moment, just as *quickly recovered and hands began to shoot up as if released from springs.*

“Mr. President, what can you say in response to the criticism that a Third World form of justice in a First World nation will only accelerate an erosion of our democratic values,” a man from the front row shouted.

“We have a justice system that honors our democratic values. We are leaving justice to the families of the condemned. We are leaving justice to the people. We are offering prisoners options on how they will account for their crimes. We will no longer house them. If they feel they serve no useful purpose in our society, then they can pick what is best.”

“Mr. President, how is mob justice a better alternative to rehabilitation? Can you comment on Savannah?,” another journalist shouted.

“Mr. President, how can death by firing squad still be a best option to prisoners? What’s next public stoning?”

“Law and order. That is a bedrock value and the values that my administration will uphold.” The President turned his back to the press and waved them off as he made his way back to the Oval Office. Of all the problems the country was facing, at least justice was secure and would see him through the next election. Of that he was sure, despite all the liberal cry baby slander they could not change the numbers. The number of murders and crime continued to dwindle. The message was clear, the United States would be a safe and secure nation. No more domestic threats.

“Did you hear that, Ramirez?” The guard turned off the glass monitor on the bus as soon as the President left the press conference, leaving the prisoners seated in shackles to further cement their fate. He looked right at Ramirez and smirked. “You might be the last of death row. After you, there’s no more prisoners. No one is stupid enough to kill their wives anymore.”

The ride up the mountain, through the snow left Ramirez with plenty of time to think about his life, his mistakes, and what lay ahead. The fear came in waves choking him. It was this or death. Death by firing squad seemed too good even for him. He deserved what was coming, he knew it. The day he killed Gemma was the day he also died. He felt like a phantom here in this hellish existence.

The guard handed him some crumpled papers with a raised seal. “You know what that is?” he asked, gesturing to the dark ink.

“Yes, ” he didn’t need to read it, “my lawyer explained it to me.”

“Good, I have to read it for the camera and get your verbal understanding,” he cleared his throat and began. “You are no longer a citizen of The United States of America. From this day forward you are the sole property of Mr. and Mrs. Murphy. Stripped of all human rights unless an appeal is submitted on your behalf by your new owners. You will be in their service until the day you die at which time your death will be recorded as time served. If you outlive your new owners, you shall be passed down to

their estate. Where you shall continue to serve until your death. Do you understand prisoner 9123?

“I do,” the bus came to a halt.

“You may get up. Any unauthorized movement and I will unload my weapon into your skull,” He nudged me hard with his gun at the side of my head.

The doors opened letting in the snow and Ramirez walked forward taking his first steps outside in over two years. He had been held in a holding cell until the trial ended and a jury of his peers found him guilty. Guilty of murder in the first degree. Premeditated they felt on account that his wife had a life insurance policy with Ramirez as the sole beneficiary.

“They’re waiting.” The guard shoved him forward hard, almost making him fall over.

The chains on his hands and feet were positioned awkwardly making it hard to step off the bus. He knew who was waiting but he didn’t know how bad this reception would be. Ramirez shuffled forward in the snow which was a few feet deep. He wore only his prison-issued jumper, white socks, and orange slides on his feet. The cold snow quickly soaking his socks. He stood there waiting for the guard to direct him. They stood silent until two trucks pulled up with men in the back hanging on with guns. Ramirez counted four men in each cab and the driver of one of the pick up trucks was his father in law.

“Damn, looks like they got a little gang waiting for you. This can’t be good,” the guard sneered and shook the chains on Ramirez to show the men he was unarmed and immobile. The men unloaded from the trucks and approached. The guard handed his father in law the papers.

“Mr. Murphy?” The guard asked.

“That’s right,” he said and reached into his pocket to show his identification card.

The guard quickly glanced at it and nodded. "I am releasing into your custody, prisoner number 9123 rightfully convicted of murder in the first degree of your daughter Gemma Ramirez. He has no appeals and will no longer be in the custody of the State of New Jersey, no longer a citizen of the United States, and has no humanitarian rights. We release him to you as your property from this day forward. Do you accept?"

The men around Mr. Murphy chuckled.

It's funny where your mind goes when you're dangling from a meat hook in an abandoned shack set in the middle of the woods. Cold, hungry, aching and still bleeding from a beating you endured at the hands of your father-in-law and his paid prison guards. They check in once a week to beat me and leave me here to hang from the hook. My mind wanders back to Gemma, and every single moment we had together. Some days I like to start from the beginning and imagine my way through our relationship. I get stuck on the details, the little things like how she tucked her hair behind her ear. Her lovely hands, the rings she wore, the shirt, the smell, the sound of her voice. I get lost, the hours pass quickly that way. She's with me and I hope that she has forgiven me for taking her life. I'm here because I'll never forgive myself. I can never let go of what I did to her and that I deserve every cruelty that her father needs to do in order to forgive himself. I hang here, arms stretched tightly, legs weak in a daze most days waiting.

Sometimes, I think about those old zombie movies. The ones Gemma hated where the walking dead mercilessly pursue the living and eat them. I understand it now, my fascination with these movies. At the time, I didn't. I just thought the fascination with the gore, horror, and action sequences was the appeal. Now as I hang from this hook, I think more about the realization of what people are capable of. Our own inhumanity, watching ourselves kill other people without mercy or caring. Our capacity to ignore suffering and destroy. We are the monsters, we are both the undead and the living looking for ways to

justify our cruelty towards each other. I was the undead with Gemma. My drinking was my choice. I had no mercy for her the day I took her life. My lawyer says I blacked out. I was in a drunken coma unaware of my actions. That I hit my head so hard against a door that I gave myself a concussion. That's a lie. The coroner's report says I strangled her after I got tired of beating her. I remember looking at my fists while I sobered up in lock up. They were bruised and bloody, scrapes and fresh cuts from Gemma's nails. She tried to stop me, she tried to save herself. I screamed and moaned like a wounded animal when they told me I had killed Gemma. All I could do was look at my hands while they spoke and shake in my chair. I still scream and cry in anguish when I think about Gemma's last moments. She must have been so scared, the terror in her eyes when she realized that I was not even there in my own body. That my hands had taken on a life of their own and I had no feeling inside of me.

Sometimes, I let myself sway on the hook. It's almost like rocking myself and thinking about my life. My father was a religious man, he was a doomsdayer and always talked about the end of time. He was raised Pentecostal and made sure we were at church on Sundays. I learned early that God doesn't answer all prayers. His eyes just can't see every corner of the world. My house by the ridge was a forgotten spot. My brothers and I had to endure my father's drinking and beatings every weekend. God never helped us. My father was always really fond of the Adam and Eve story in the bible. He had his own interpretation of the story. He did believe that Adam and Eve were cast out because of their sin like the good book says, where he differed was the after effects. His theory was that this moment solidified man's ruthless desire to survive despite God or even in spite of God. My father died alone, cirrhosis. I don't want to see him when I die. I don't believe in God or heaven.

## PRESSURE

“Please don’t take my blood pressure until I’ve settled in for a bit.” I inform the nurse who’s typing in my medical information for the doctor to review. “It’s called white coat syndrome. It’s silly, I know but it still happens to me.”

“I know, there’s a note here in your chart,” she smiles at me in a sad way.

Her rapid-fire questions resume—the usual stuff—wanting to know of any medication changes or surgeries this year. She notes that I was just at my primary care doctor a few days ago.

“Everything is fine. I just have these six questions for the cardiologist.”

“Okay, he’ll be in soon. Let’s get your height and weight.”

I jump off the exam table and take off my shoes and jacket hoping on the scale. I feel pretty confident, I’ve been working out and taking better care of myself.

“152 and 5’2,” she says to me.

“I’m 5’3,” I say to her.

“Not anymore,” she walks back to the computer and enters the information. “Your weight is up too.”

“Great.” I hop back on the exam table.

“So, try to relax. I have to take your blood pressure now so that I can do the EKG.”

“Fine.” I take a deep breath and exhale trying to think of the ocean, reminding myself that I just finished walking five miles and that my pressure was normal this morning. She comes over and begins while I sail off to Antigua in my mind.

“140/91,” she peels off the cuff and gives me a look.

I lay back for the EKG and when she’s finished she reminds me to relax, the doctor will be right in. I dig through my purse for my latest blood labs and questions I’d written down.

The gentle knock at the door from Dr. Singh puts a smile on my face. I put my mask on when he enters the room because he’s wearing one too. He comes over and extends his hand to me to shake it.

I take his hand gently, they feel soft yet strong; we lock eyes, and I can tell he's smiling behind his mask. He remembers me, it all clicks with the handshake.

"It's nice to see you again, how have you been feeling?" Dr. Singh gently releases my hand and walks to the computer to read my notes.

I hand him my most recent labs, and he slides over in his rolling chair close to me, carefully reviewing them.

"I have questions, I wrote them down," I say. I notice his white turban is held in place by a small pin with a white pearl at the end. "I also have my most recent blood pressures for you." I pull out my phone and begin to scroll.

"Okay, hang on, let's go through one thing at a time." His voice is soothing to me. It makes me feel like he's going to listen, that he cares. He looks up at me and our eyes lock again. I wonder if he's smiling at me or with me.

"Your labs look great," he flips the page.

"I never took the cholesterol meds you gave me, do I need to? I'm trying to lose some weight."

"Let's calculate your risk." He pulls out a calculator from his white lab coat.

He tells me about my calcium score being zero and my risk of a cardiac event being miniscule. He motions me over to come see and I do, standing close to him. From this vantage point I can see how elegantly wrapped his turban is. I wonder if he has long hair—if asking him would be racist or would it be something he would answer. I want to know about his turban, did it have a deeply personal meaning for him or was it just something he had to wear? I decide against my questions when I realize how little I know about Sikhism—how different we must be from one another in our private lives. I notice his eyes scanning my face. I wonder if he's wondering if I could pass for Indian with the exception of all the curly hair.

"So is it okay?"

"Yeah, I'll bet if you lose 5-10 pounds I can take you off or at least lower your blood pressure medication. Not that you need to lose weight, you look fine. It's just to come off the meds and lower your cholesterol. It would be best."

"I'll work on it." I realize I've been standing too close to him for too long, and I walk back to the exam and review my list again. "I'm concerned about my high blood



pressure before and during my period. Here are some readings.” I hand him my phone and he reviews the information in my heart app.

“Should I take something when it gets that high? Like CQ10 or something? Or another medication? I don't like the fluttering or dizziness.”

“Hormones, there's not much that can be done about it,” he says in a matter-of-fact way. He looks into the computer and stares at my EKG reading. “Everything looks good, stress test and all the other tests you took last year all came back great. Work on the weight and I'm sure that will help it get better.”

He gets his stethoscope and comes over to me preparing to listen to my heart. He places his hand over my collarbone as he listens, telling me to breathe as he moves the scope around. I want to tell him that I'm afraid. I'm fearful that my heart won't bear aging and menopause. I want to tell him that I'm scared of my health declining—diabetes, arthritis, and all the horrible things that can happen as I'm aging and shrinking and getting fatter. I think back to an article in the Atlantic last year about the joys of mid-life, written by a white man who probably has a small cock and lots of money. What can he tell a Mexican American woman about joy? He doesn't have to worry about sagging breasts, a droopy ass, and a face that feels like it's gonna fall off every time you wash it. I'm still looking for that “joy” he described.

Dr. Singh moves his hands to my back and I take some deep breaths. I want him to not just hear my heart, but to listen. To use those soft hands to open it up and reveal where it's clogged with fears and emotions. I want him to look into my heart. I want to share it with him.

“Good, very good,” his hand rubs my back and he goes back to his rolling stool. I notice how fit he is, how tight his pants fit his legs. Dr. Singh has an athletic build. I wonder more about his life. I want to ask him if he read *The Joys of Midlife* in The Atlantic that made me so mad, I want to ask him more questions so I look down at my list.

“Should I get another Covid booster? This all started for me with the second dose of the vaccine.”

I watch his chest rise taking a deep breath, his hand goes to his mask as he contemplates for a moment. “How many boosters have you had already?”

I motion one with my finger.

“Look, I’ve had the first two doses and a booster. I’ve had Covid and I think, enough already. I’m not going to do any more boosters. You’re young, your heart is good, you’ll be fine. I can’t tell you what to do, this is just my opinion,” said. Dr. Singh.

Enough, it felt good hearing that word. Like relief and sorrow lifting all at once. I realized how tired I am of this whole pandemic. I took a deep breath too and looked up at Dr. Singh wondering when he had reached this realization for himself. Did he feel as exhausted as I did being a healthcare worker too? We had to just get through, keep working, keep serving. I wondered how many hearts he had healed during this pandemic and if he had lost people too? My cousins in Arizona and California who died, my aunts with extended lung problems, my friends with long covid, my patients still struggling with the ongoing mental health concerns, the constant worry for my parents, my kids, my own heart's arrhythmia. Was I healing? Would we all heal eventually?

“Okay, I think I’ll pass on the booster then,” I exhale and look down at my list again.

“Anything else?” He comes over to read my list. He stands close to me and extends his hand out for a parting handshake. I take his hand slowly. Sad to part ways.

“See you next year?” I search his brown eyes again seeking that connection, a sense of understanding.

“Better make it six months. Let's see if we can adjust your medication then.” Our hands release, and he gets the door for me. I grab my belongings and follow him down a small hallway to the front desk. I look at him from behind and feel deep gratitude. He was there for me when I came into his office over a year ago in total panic and fear after an episode with my heart that landed me in the hospital. He held my hand then too, he read all my questions, he offered me medicine, he even treated my Mom for her high blood pressure, he was kind to me— maybe more than he needed to be. Maybe that’s all we can do— offer kindness in all of this unknowing and uncertainty.

“I’ll see you soon. Be well.” Dr. Singh moved on to the next patient waiting for him.

I am healing, I tell myself, maybe we all can.

## FRACTALS

I've been thinking a lot about fractals  
Fractals of light  
Of sound  
Of precious ground.

A tiny piece of the whole  
I wonder if these fractals are like you  
And me.  
Splintered pieces  
With nowhere to go  
Set off course  
To explore

Does God pick up these tiny pieces?  
Hold them in his hand  
Raise them to the light  
Look inside  
Bond us with gold  
Reconnect us  
Or leave us a new whole  
Contained within  
All we need to know.

## LA DAMA DE LOS ESPEJOS

“Hey mister, you like pachanga?” Enrique turned down his car radio for a moment.

“Pachanga? What is that? We don’t have that in Haiti.”

“Party, dance, drink,” he smiled in the rearview mirror.

“Oh, no, I’m here to work. But thank you.”

“Okay, if you change your mind let me know. I know a fun place.” He gave me a thumbs up, and I warily smiled back at him.

The children out front of El Panteon De La Leona were delighted to see me and offered to carry my equipment. I set up my tripod at the grave of La Dama De Los Espejos. Before photographing, however, I decided to explore.

My hands gently stroked the two-centuries-old angels in front of the grave. One was missing its hands and had black mold growing on its face. I kneeled down to read the names on the grave stones and noted dates ranging from the 1800s through the 1970s.

The chapel built on this burial plot was beautiful. Small cut out mirrors covered every inch of the chapel both inside and out. It was unlike any burial site I had seen. Inside of the crypt, the design of the small mirrors really came to life. Cobwebs and dust covered every inch and gently coated everything like newly fallen snow. I noticed the dust on my skin and brushed it off. I removed the sinewy cobwebs and then decided what to photograph first.

“Bueno,” I heard a woman’s voice calling from outside.

I turned to look but saw no one.

I stepped out of the crypt to see who was calling. It was a woman with two small children carrying flowers. She was pointing to something above me.

I called out to her, but she just pointed again, grabbed her children, dropped the flowers, and ran away.

I turned to see what had so visibly scared her. I saw nothing; I looked down at my hands and noticed cobwebs dangling from my fingers and dust covering my clothes. Perhaps she thought I was a zombie escaping the crypt. I went back inside the chapel; gently, I used a paint brush to dust the inside, revealing even more beauty. I wanted to

leave this chapel squeaky clean, better than I had found it. I wanted it to reflect not just the professionalism of the Smithsonian but of myself. Some of the mirrors had fallen off over the years, but many still remained. I noted the spots that were missing mirrors and kept brushing. I heard something small drop over a spot I had just cleaned and looked down to see a small round mirror by my foot.

“Shit!”

I inspected the location from where it had fallen and photographed it. I debated if I should leave the piece on the ground or if it could be restored. Something inside me said to just leave it, but the shape of the mirror grabbed my attention. I picked it up. My fingers traced the outline of it carefully and when I held it up, it caught the light beautifully. I decided to put it in my bag and bring it back with me tomorrow morning.

The time went by quickly. I barely had time to pack up my stuff before I heard Enrique outside honking at the front gate.

“How did it go?” He helped me load my stuff into the trunk.

“Good, very good. The light was excellent for pictures. I think I scared a lady though. When she saw me, she ran away with her kids. Maybe she thought I was some kind of voodoo man?”

“You know, people who do *hechicería* or what you call voodoo spend a lot of time at La Dama. They say there is powerful magic there. This is why you should come meet locals with me tonight. More people will get to know you, maybe even talk to you about their stories surrounding La Dama de los Espejos.”

I understood Enrique’s logic, he perked up when he noticed my inner deliberations.

“Ahora sí para la pachanga?”

I rolled my eyes in disbelief. “Fine. Let's go.”

\* \* \*

The cantina was a beautiful sight to behold—full of color, music, drinks and lots of locals. People laughed with Enrique and gathered to be close to him. His Spanish was too fast for me to catch everything that was said, but I laughed along anyway. I learned about *botanas*, *micheladas*, *rancheras*, and most of all *tequila*.

“Hey, that one’s been checking you out all night.” Enrique pointed to a beautiful woman with long, dark hair fixing her dress in the mirror. He gave me a playful shove.

“*Órale*,” he joked.

“*Órale*. Okay, what do I have to lose,” I stood up and made my way over to her. Marlana and I danced most of the night, shared some jalapeno poppers and laughed at Enrique’s antics picking up women. Somehow he was kissing someone new most of the night. When we were leaving, Marlana asked me in a whisper if the rumors about black men were true.

“Come find out,” I invited. We kissed by the car.

Enrique and his new lady friend dropped us off at the hotel.

\* \* \*

I awoke needing to pee badly, barely making it to the toilet—still a little drunk. I kept missing the toilet, so I held on to the wall for balance. Looking in the bathroom mirror reminded me of Marlana’s insatiable curiosity and her kink for watching us in the large dressing mirror. I let my head fall back waiting for the stream to end; my aim was steady now. I remembered the small artifact I had placed in my camera bag. I put on a pair of underwear and quickly rummaged through my equipment, searching.

It was there, still so perfect and round. I placed it in the palm of my hands giving it another look, staring at my small reflection in the mirror. Suddenly, my face changed. Instead of my symmetrical features and full lips, I saw a pale, misshapen and gaunt reflection. I walked to the window to observe the mirror in the moonlight. The moon illuminated and radiated the light beautifully, the strange face no longer there.

I turned to glance at the small clock by the bed, 3:33. I returned the mirror to my bag and went back to bed, hoping not to wake Marlana.

\* \* \*

Enrique was in the same clothes as last night; clearly he had slept in his car. He handed me warm bread and coffee. I thanked him and he drove me to the cemetery.

“No more pachanga,” I begged him. “My head felt every sip of tequila this morning.”

He laughed at me and called me a gringo.

No one was around so I used my key to let myself in, waving goodbye to Enrique. I put the key in my bag and pulled out the mirror.

On the cobble stone path towards La Dama De Los Espejos's grave site, I heard children laughing. I wondered if the flower sellers were already here stealing flowers back.

The children sang in unison. "Espejito, espejito en el bolso del moreno. Cuanto cobras mi negrito para dar nos el espejo?" Marlina then emerged from the crypt.

I froze. My mind trying to comprehend what was happening.

"You took a mirror from my crypt." Marlina smiled at me—the way she did last night—but her face was distorted with her eyes off center and a much longer chin and mouth. No longer the sexy seductress from last night, now a demonic abomination.

I opened my palm revealing the mirror.

"Guilty," she laughed at me and the children giggled.

A large glowing light began emanating from the glass, illuminating so brightly that my eyes squinted. The small piece of glass started to float above my hand, twirling and getting larger with each turn until it engulfed everything, imprisoning me inside the mirror.

\* \* \*

"What do you mean no one has seen him?" Enrique walked up and down the cobblestone path. Police were photographing the camera bag still on the ground and had roped off the crime scene. Enrique gave the detective an account of the events.

"Look at this!" Enrique held up a small piece of mirror on the ground. He picked it up and walked into the crypt of La Dama to place it where it belonged.

Enrique's voice woke me from a deep slumber.

"No! Don't leave me here!" I pounded against the glass over and over again.

I felt hands pulling at me trying to stop me from punching the glass. It was the children.

"I'm not dead. I don't belong here, Marlina! Let me go!"

The little hands were trying to soothe me. "Duerme," they said in unison.

I pushed the children away and hammered the glass until it dislodged from the wall again. The children screamed as we tumbled towards the ground. I braced myself against the edges of the glass hurling through what felt like a vast space. We landed upright and I could see the chapel's ceiling.

“Dama! Dama!” The children screamed and went running.

I watched them leaping from glass to glass making their way up to the steeple. If they could do it, then so could I. I jumped, stumbling from glass to glass, following the nimble children. Outside I could see Enrique talking to the police. I noticed the reflection of his iphone in his hand. I could hear Marlana's laughter surround me. My only choice was to leap into his phone.

\* \* \*

Enrique walked to his car and got inside. I jumped into his rearview mirror and screamed.

“Enrique! Help me!”

He looked into the mirror and gasped, twisting his head back to see if I was in the back seat. His hands shaking, he started praying, mumbling to himself trying to look away from me. I could hear Marlana's laughter again. She was close.

The tires spun loudly, Enrique was erratic and still mumbling. His hand swung at the rearview mirror, tilting it away from him.

“Santísima virgen ayuda me!” Enrique swerved all over the street.

I clung to the mirror and felt cold fingers clutch my neck. Marlana was here. My hands tried to fight her grasp but her hand tightened, digging her nails into my neck—gouging it.

The brakes slammed and I felt myself pull apart into hundreds of little pieces. Enrique crashed. I jumped from side-view mirror to side-view mirror making my way to a storefront where I could use the large glass displays to run through the center of town. I kept leaping and running, knowing Marlana was at my heels. I would never let her take me back to the chapel, I would run for eternity if I had to.

I continued this pace for what felt like days at a time. Marlana was always at my heels clawing and screaming for me to surrender my soul to her. I resisted and kept moving, my body ached and I felt myself weakening. I made my way back to my hotel



room, sliding from mirrors to any small fragments of glass until I arrived. My clothes were in tatters, I was bleeding from claw marks and gashes. They burned like the fires of hell. My things were still scattered about the room, they had brought my camera equipment back and my phone was on the desk. I leaped into my phone which displayed missed calls from the Smithsonian and my mother.

They knew I was missing. She would be in prayer for me. I closed my eyes, imagining her sweet face. I rested for just a moment catching my breath. The scent of my mothers lavender and honey soap overwhelmed my senses. I inhaled it deeply, trying not to cry. All of this was my fault; I turned to look at the bed where I had slept with Marlana and wanted to scream.

I leaped into the long dressing mirror by the bed, prepared to keep moving, when the scent of my mother's soap surrounded me again.

"Jean Pierre, come to me my son," my mothers voice came from the mirror. I turned to see if she was somehow in the room and noticed the small bedside clock displaying the time 11:11. I felt my body go limp, I didn't have the strength to run anymore. I just wanted to rest. I fell forward into the mirror and began to descend for what felt like a fall off a steep cliff. My body crashed against glass, thumping hard as it landed.

"He's here! Sara, Ruth bring me more light!"

Small candles began to surround me forming a circle. My mother's hand pressed against the mirror bringing everything to an upright position.

"Anchor yourself to me, Jean Pierre, like you did in my womb. Take my hand, son" she spread out her fingers firmly against the mirror.

I could barely lift my head, my body felt broken.

"Come now, don't leave me waiting."

I forced everything in my being to stretch my hand out to her, my fingers trembling as I touched the base of her palm. I could feel her heartbeat rhythmic and strong. I lifted my head slightly trying to raise my hand higher. I could hear screaming, snarling, and shouting. Marlana was outside of the small circle of candles using the darkness to conceal herself, waiting to devour my soul. She hurled threats at my mother and my family.

My fingers finally intertwined with my mothers, and I felt my mother yank me forward. The strength of her grasp pulled my whole body out of the mirror and I could see her living room and my sisters in the background. My mother's face came into my full view.

“There you are my son.”

She wore a white head scarf and was in her Sunday whites. The beautiful white dress she wore to dance for the spirits. My family and friends were seated in a circle. The drumming began. They would honor the spirits and ask for my continued protection. I was overwhelmed with relief. I looked at my mother, perhaps for the first time, and understood that she was a goddess.

“Do not be troubled by a bully my son.” My mother tightened her grasp on mine and with her other hand picked up a bottle of rum. She took a long drink from it, holding the liquor in her cheeks. She then pulled the mirror aside and vehemently spit all her mouth's contents onto the mirror. The rum hit the small candles and ignited a massive fireball. I watched Marlena burn. She ran screaming, and the candlelight brought a beautiful glowing light into the dark space.

THE TIME I SPOKE TO GOD, A MENTAL HEALTH CLINICIAN'S JOURNEY  
WITH PSILOCYBIN

I'm a careful person, not one to take chances or unnecessary risks. Controlled, measured. I take my job of being a mother to be the biggest responsibility of my life. To accommodate this, everything else is secondary including myself. I maintain a steady schedule that my family can rely on. They know I'm in bed by 8:30 watching TV. I'm not out, I don't see friends, I work from home, and am available to my family including my own parents and brother. It's this consistency to routine and balance that helps my children feel supported and steady in the craziness of this world and in the difficulties that they encounter. This is why my calendar is full too, my patients can come to me and ground themselves in the calm energy that I offer to them.

I listen more than I ever talk, a patient person with reasonable expectations. I study and continue to learn best practices in my field and it keeps me well informed, knowledgeable, and resourceful to help those whom I am guiding. My free time is spent in research for my doctorate. By all accounts it's exactly the kind of therapist a person would want to talk to. Good marriage, good kids, close relationship with parents, a dutiful wife and mother. These are the areas that I often pride myself about and promote on my website, for it's not been an easy task or come without great sacrifice.

So it was strange that I was sitting on a bed, on the floor that Glenn had made for me at his condo. Stranger that I had accepted his invitation during a pool party back in June to take a journey. My husband gave me a look back then and when he drove me to Glenn's on Saturday he lingered in the parking lot to make sure I was still serious. I had an out, my youngest was getting over a stomach bug and I could have canceled on Glenn. He responded that morning not to worry, that everything will be how it's supposed to and to just keep him posted. I felt bad, he had carved out over four hours of his day to

accommodate this journey and I understood as a clinician the great value of one's time.

I told myself that I would get a feel of the vibe and ask my questions. If I felt uncomfortable, then I would treat Glenn to dinner and call it a night. My husband would happily pick me up and I could watch reruns with my daughter of our favorite shows. Safe, secure, comfortable. Glenn is family. He married my husband's first cousin about four years ago. There is a kinship we share in that he is Latino, queer, and coming into an Italian family. He would understand and understand many things left unsaid.

I don't recall the exact moment it started, I remember that I wasn't feeling anything and asked Glenn to try the third piece of mushroom. It was a long white stem with a small cap. We had waited about thirty minutes and nothing seemed to be happening with the first two. I felt scared yet resigned to take this journey. I had asked for it, and already stated my intentions. Now thinking back, it was rather bold of me. I tend to cut to the chase in matters and my intentions for this journey is to know if there is a God, truly. How could so much bad be happening in the world? Why did the bad people seem to keep winning all the time? I wanted to know what was out there. I clung to my eye mask with shaky hands and laid down on my back. Glenn motioned for me to put it on if I wanted to and I did, feeling too scared to watch the room change. I closed my eyes and geometric shapes started to form slowly, I was leaving and I was terrified.

I didn't want to die, I was so scared of dying. Leaving this world and blaming myself for taking this journey. What if I died doing this? What if my heart wasn't strong enough? I worried about my blood pressure and my responsibilities in this world. I was cold, so cold that when Glenn covered me with a blanket I was deeply thankful. He held my hand and told me I would be okay. I felt cared for. I could hear the music in the background, the notes reverberating in my body and around the room. I clutched the

blanket and suddenly I was in the ground buried deep in the earth watching plants and roots around me. I was at peace, watching all the white lines of the different plants I was blooming. I felt warm and safe as if in the womb of the earth being nurtured and well cared for. There was no fear, only comfort, gentleness. I don't know how long I was in this state for, time was suddenly non-existent. Time didn't matter. The roots around me appeared and then died only to do it over and over again like the seasons.

I could hear singing around me. The lyrics were asking me to let go of illusion, let go of the mask, release the illusion. The voice chanted over and over again. I felt myself let go and separate further from my body. I felt the earth begin to slowly birth me out with each push I was more connected to the world. I rose to walk into a tent-like structure and began to walk around feeling more connected to the earth, seeing the beauty of the grass and nature around me. I was in God's infinite garden. I was energy no longer a body, taking in the vivid beauty. God was singing to me, it felt like it was all around me, angelic voices singing to me about being a flower on this earth and in this garden. I was surrounded by a feeling of love all around me with an understanding that I was deeply loved. This love felt never ending, infinite and that it anchored the universe.

The lyrics were asking me again to let go of illusion, let go of the mask, release the illusion. The voice sang over and over again. I came to a place of prayer. I was sitting and breathing deeply in a prayer pose with my hands going to my forehead, to my mouth, and then to my chest over and over again. I understood that my death is only a rebirth into something greater.

I saw myself dressed in white, praying and my prayers were going directly to God. I was aligned in my purpose of helping others heal pain. People were coming to see me and I prayed for them to heal. I was like a deity illuminated in white light. The more I prayed the more I was able to heal. I could see Glenn in my vision. He was sitting across from me on his small couch in meditation. As I prayed for him he was getting better. I

could see white light come down over his head and enter into his body healing him. We were healing each other. I remember feeling intense gratitude and having to thank God over and over again for everything in my life, all the blessings that I have received from God's loving energy throughout my life.

I don't know how long I was crying and with every kindness Glenn did for me it would fill me with immense gratitude that I had to cry and thank God over and over again. I kept doing my prayer pose and holding my hands tightly together. The message I received over and over again was that this was what I was supposed to do to help people heal. Pray for them, heal their minds and that this is my gift, a gift that could grow into something more powerful. I felt like Glenn was praying with me and I felt that he was healing and crying too. I just continued to pray for him over and over again. We were in a white room and I was watching myself sitting on a table of some kind, dressed in white praying for people, praying because of the suffering in the world. There weren't enough tissues or tears to express my gratitude to God, the tears just flowed down my face and all I could do was to continue to cry. I felt exhausted, thirsty, and Glenn gave me water. I was sitting up and the eye mask was off.

The message I received was that I am a flower. A flower in God's garden, like so many other flowers here to serve God, that love is all that God is, God is everywhere and in everything. The universe and the mysteries of the universe were bigger than I could ever imagine. That God's plan is perfect, that I could rest in him and I would be cared for. I could unburden myself with him, that he understands. That I need to unburden myself with God to heal and to do my work. Also that my ancestors were with me, my grandmothers were with me guiding me. I could see a white door with a frosted glass and saw shadows behind it. I felt they were my grandmothers, that I was being divinely guided in this life. That as things happen around me, the world, that I didn't need to worry, God was in all of it. Things have already been determined, I didn't need to worry.

It was okay.

The other message I received was about my grandfather's story. That I would find myself in that story and that it would be powerful. I kept thinking that I didn't have enough words to describe what I was experiencing and what God was revealing to me. How would I write it all down? I also remember God reminding me to sing my song. God is asking me to open up to express myself, to teach, that was another message I received. I could see myself teaching others and finding great joy in this. I felt like God was speaking to me in chants over and over again. God has many voices and speaks through many forms of life. And that God has sung to me before and that I heard it. This is true, I know the exact song it is that I feel is a direct message to me and I was always afraid of the song it came on the radio since I was a child.

When I feel afraid, I need to pray for those around me and ground myself in God's love, this would make me heal as well as those I prayed for to heal and lessen my fears. Gratitude, humility, kindness, love, and thanking God are the keys. I also felt the responsibility of my experience to do more in my life, to teach others. To trust the healing medicine of God, the gift that God has given to us. I felt healed, I felt my chest radiate in healing, my heart was good and that I didn't have to fear being sick. I saw my husband Michael in my vision as I lay down, my heart felt hollow without him and I understood that he is my heart, my life without him is empty and felt the profound love that I feel for him.

I also remember laughing because Glenn's pants made strong sense to me, I could see the design come alive and spin. I also remember not wanting to share what I was experiencing because I didn't have enough words to do so. I still don't, this writing feels like I'm using a crayon to describe the experience. Yet, that's all I have. I think I understand the passion and inspiration that went into each psalm of the bible and into the

Song of Solomon 8:6. "Set me as a seal upon your heart, a seal upon your arm."

Everyone has experienced love in one form or another and this is God. God is in everyone through love. Love is the expounding energy in the universe, love is everywhere.

I also remember hearing God's voice say to prepare myself to receive healing and that the healing was coming. When it did, I was overcome with emotion and was crying, releasing years of pain I didn't know I was carrying. Not just my own pain but also the pain I have carried for others. Jesus carries the cross for all of us. Was another message I received and I could see Jesus carrying the cross walking freely. I was healed by love, God's love. The voice sang to me, telling me it was time to come home. That I would be awake soon.

The sound of the singing was in the rhythm of a drum, when I would lay on my side it would muffle slightly and when I turned my head I could hear it strongly. It was a consistent sound and energy going through my body. The chanting would repeat to make sure I remembered. I thought to myself, wow this is some playlist that Glenn has. Yet, it was what I believe was God's voice guiding me and my silence helped me hear it even more. The singing I heard was beautiful, like a celebration.

I suddenly felt so bad asking Glenn for water, he was already doing so much for me. And God's voice kept telling me that Glenn understands, that Glenn already knows, that it was okay. Glenn's kindness to me and to this world through his work left me in deep humility and gratitude. When I began to come back to my body and the effects of the mushrooms began to dissipate, I was still tearful and cried easily. Glenn says I cried for four hours. It felt like I had gone through ten years of therapy. Glenn and his husband drove me home and I was embraced by my husband and went to bed.

An insight that came to me this morning as I recalled this experience was in



regards to LGBTQ and how it didn't matter to God at all. That it was such a teeny tiny detail compared to the larger picture of life. To even think such a thing would bother God at all is silly. It made me reflect on my patients, and those suffering so much with this concern of being transgender. I thought to myself that I would remind them of God's love for them and tell them what God told me, that they too are flowers in God's infinite garden and they can bloom anyway they want to. That God is connected to the love, kindness, and compassion in our hearts. That's all that matters. I reflect deeply in regards to the transgender community. I have always been drawn to working with those that identify, perhaps it is because of the bravery entailed in transformation. So visible, so vulnerable, so hated in our society. My heart feels that they, those who identify as trans are our great teachers. Their suffering is our own, it mirrors back to us our own need for transformative change and that it's possible. I pray for them and thank them.

Now living in between two worlds will take some balance. On one hand there is a feeling of less regard for the material, that it truly does not matter while at the same time having responsibility in this life to complete for the others whom I care for. My final thought is that I must be grounded so that if/when I do another journey, more will be revealed that I will really need to be ready for. Glenn says these insights or downloads will continue to come to me and I welcome them. The learning continues after the journey.

It's been almost a week since my healing. I awoke this morning in tears. My dog Sophie jumped on the bed to hug me. She did this when I came home from my journey too as if to ground me. It occurred to me that my Sophie knows God too, through her love for me and my love for her. This made me cry more, the kindness of our pets. It's been several days of vivid dreams, new insights, crying, and continued prayer. Glenn sent me some affirmations to use. He also suggested buying some grounding stones like black

tourmaline, jade, or obsidian. I could also use Agua De Florida, sage or palo santo. He reassured me that these reactivations are normal. And so I journey on. Perhaps it wasn't death I was afraid of after all, perhaps it was this transformation. I am changed. I am in awe of my life, the great blessing to be able to serve my community, to help people heal their minds and to receive enough to sustain my family with my work. It's a miracle, really to be able to do my work. I am, after 25 years in mental health, reinvigorated in the importance of this work. I feel wealthy, with enough richness to share with those who need it. My mind feels rewired, with more neuroplasticity, expanded with more neural connections than before. Connected to ancient knowledge.

As a clinician, I would guide people who want to try this medicine to proceed with caution. To find a skilled practitioner to guide them, someone who has themselves had the experience, and who has the knowledge, tools, and sensitivity to guide. When you journey, you will be in a very vulnerable position where you are unaware of time, space, or being. After care is also very important, having a counselor to talk to or a network or support since healing continues well after the journey itself. Perhaps it's where it really begins.

SAGE

I am a woman who listens

My ears are tuning forks

Two prongs

One in this world

The other with God

I am a woman who cures with language

Vibrating with your words

Listening to each sound

Each syllable

Finding fractures

I am a woman who heals

Once the vibration begins

It draws me close

Closer than you realize

I think deeply on your phrases

Your word choices

I see your dreams

Visuals forming in my mind

I am a woman who speaks

I listen between the lines of what you say

I hear the truth

Sort through deceit

I am a woman who counsels

Once I begin tuning

You feel my balance

I catch you

Hold you close

Begin to align

Hear your imbalance

I am a woman who understands

We begin to resonate

Atune

Create harmony

Find peace

Resolution

Wisdom

I am a woman who speaks to God

Restoring inner balance

Reaching higher levels.

## STILL HOWLING

Mushroom eyes hallucinating, big round pupils dilated  
seeing the world for the first time. Screaming out the window  
To the pool deck below “I can see the universe!” but it’s empty because  
I’ve eaten all the stars. Left in a supernatural darkness wandering.

Passing through another university where no one understands the language  
I speak. “Time stands still” sometimes, I tell them but they don’t understand that  
I’m a greedy time traveler. Using the windows of their skulls on this voyage

I tried to sneak a joint through airport security once. I get drunk on the weekends with  
Pinot Noir and Merlot. They have a lot to say about the state of affairs in this pandemic  
world  
full of hand sanitizer and littered facemasks that no one wants to wear anymore.

I enjoy platonic conversation even though I know you want to see me naked. Soft Puerto  
Rican breast, a Taino tongue tasting you. Long Mexican hair against your chest. “We’re  
newlyweds,” I say knowing it’s been twenty years.

I steal my poetry from Allen Ginsburg because we share a birthday. When he was  
wandering the railroad yards in Newark and Paterson hungry and lonely, I hid in the  
corner and offered him some of my mushrooms. His eyes brilliant with understanding.

Allen agrees about Mexico and tells me about the volcanoes exploding, leaking lava,  
burning everyone with empathy. “Migrant children matter,” he says. Even though the  
detention centers are full of agony and broken down jungle gyms.

“I have a manuscript” I tell Allen but he doesn’t want to read it. It’s full of intellectual  
gems and magic. The kind of craftsmanship I know he’ll appreciate but it’s not suicidal  
enough for his taste. He wants a floodgate of pain, the lightning of my mind.

Steamy sex and torrid threesomes that would make my mother mad ripping tortillas in  
half, the salsa too spicy for the chilaquiles. I keep looking for “*the orange crates of  
theology*” Allen describes. I know he wants me to write real incantations and spells to  
destroy the mass media. To get to the heart of what matters and stop paying subscriptions  
to everyone who tells me how to think. But I just renewed my Netflix.

“Moan in their ears,” Allen tells me “let them hear you, groan, lose yourself in passion”  
But I’m scared of the man on top of me pressing into my body, impaling me. “Please stop  
arguing with me Allen!” I beg him but he won’t listen. He wants me to take it all in and  
be like a quartz crystal.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Allende, Isabel. *The House of the Spirits*. New York: Bantam Books, 1986. Print.

Arva, Eugène, and Hubert (ed. .. Roland. *Writing Trauma: Magical Realism and the Traumatic Imagination/ L'écriture Des Traumatismes et Le Réalisme Magique*. Jan. 2014. EBSCOhost, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsair&AN=edsair.od.....1493..992d8511acd9c49c27422c9a0e05b4d4&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

Barba, Helen Nienhaus. *Songwriting and self discovery: A heuristic study grounded in the arts and supported by the theories of Carl Jung and James Hillman*. Union Institute and University, 2005.

Belz-Merk, Martina. "Counseling and Therapy for People Who Claim Exceptional Experiences." *The Journal of Parapsychology* 64.3 (2000): 238.

Biggs JB, Collis KF. The Psychological Structure of Creative Writing. *Australian Journal of Education*. 1982;26(1):59-70. doi:[10.1177/000494418202600104](https://doi.org/10.1177/000494418202600104)

Blatty, William Peter. *The Exorcist*. New York: Bantam Books, 1972/1971. Print.

Butler, Lisa D., Filomena M. Critelli, and Elaine S. Rinfrette. "Trauma-informed care and mental health." *Directions in Psychiatry* 31.3 (2011): 197-212.

Butler, Octavia E. *Kindred*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003. Print.

Chrisinger, David. *Stories Are What Save Us: A Survivor's Guide to Writing About Trauma*. John Hopkins University Press, 2021. Print.

Comas-Díaz, L. (2006). Latino healing: The integration of ethnic psychology into psychotherapy. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 43(4), 436–453. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-3204.43.4.436>

De Rios, M. D. "Magical Realism: A Cultural Intervention for Traumatized Hispanic Children." *Cultural Diversity and Mental Health*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1997, pp. 159–70. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cmedm&AN=9277017&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

Fechner, Gustav T., et al. "Bridging Psychological Science and Transpersonal Spirit A Primer of Transpersonal Psychology."

Marquez Garcia, Gabriel. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Translated by Gregory Rabassa, Penguin Classics, 2000.

Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Guiley, Rosemary Ellen. *The Encyclopedia of Demons & Demonology*. Checkmark Books, 2009. Print.

Grof, S. (1996). Theoretical and empirical foundations of transpersonal psychology. In S. Boorstein (Ed.), *Transpersonal psychotherapy* (pp. 43-66). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Grof, S. (2000). *Psychology of the future*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Grof, Stanislav, and Christina Grof. *Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis*. Los Angeles: Tarcher, 1989. Print.

Hastings, Arthur. "A counseling approach to parapsychological experience." *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 15.2 (1983): 143-167.

Irlema Chiampi (1983) *El Realismo Maravilloso*. Trans. Agustín Martínez and Mária Russotto Monte Avila Editores Caracas

Irwin, Harvey J., Neil Dagnall, and Kenneth Drinkwater. "Parapsychological experience as anomalous experience plus paranormal attribution: A questionnaire based on a new approach to measurement." *Journal of Parapsychology* 77.1 (2013): 39-53.

Jerónimo Arellano. *Magical Realism and the History of the Emotions in Latin America*. Bucknell University Press, 2015. EBSCOhost, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login>.

Jung, C. G. (Carl Gustav), 1875-1961. *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. New York :Harcourt, Brace & World, 1933.

Jung, Carl Gustav, et al. "The New Age Psychology of Carl Jung." *New Age* (2018).

Kaufman, Scott B, and James C. Kaufman. *The Psychology of Creative Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Internet resource.

Marquez Garcia, Gabriel. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Translated by Gregory Rabassa, Penguin Classics, 2000.

Maslow, Abraham. *Toward a Psychology of Being*. Princeton: Van Nostrand 1962

McCann, IL, & Saakvitne, K.W. "Treating therapist with vicarious traumatization and secondary traumatic stress disorders". In. C.R Figley (ED.) *Compassion fatigue: Coping with secondary traumatic stress disorder in those who treat the traumatized* (Pg. 150-177). New York: Brunner/Mazel.

McCann IL, Pearlman LA. [Vicarious traumatization: a framework for understanding the psychological effects of working with victims](#). *J Trauma Stress*. 1990;3:131-149.

Melanie R. Anderson. *Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Univ Tennessee Press, 2013. EBSCOhost, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=533190&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

Paulsen, Sandra. *Looking Through The Eyes of Trauma and Dissociation. An Illustrated Guide for EMDR Therapist and Clients*. Brainbridge Institute For Integrative Psychology, 2009.

Pennebaker, James W, and Smyth, Joshua M. *Opening Up By Writing it Down: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain 3rd Edition*. The Guilford Press, 2016.



Plasa, Carl. Toni Morrison, *Beloved*. New York, N.Y: Columbia University Press, 1998.

Puspitasari, Firda Budi and , Titis Setyabudi S.S., M.Hum (2017) *The Motivation To Chase A Dream Of Main Character In The Novel The Alchemist By Paulo Coelho (1988): Individual Psychology Analysis*. Skripsi thesis, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta.

Rabeyron, Thomas. "When the Truth Is Out There: Counseling People Who Report Anomalous Experiences." *Frontiers in Psychology* (2022): 5918.

Reeds, Kenneth S. *What Is Magical Realism? : An Explanation of a Literary Style*. Edwin Mellen Press, 2012. *EBSCOhost*,  
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=543070&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

Richards, Douglas G. "Dissociation: Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 083-091: A study of the correlations between subjective psychic experiences and dissociative experiences." (1991).

Rios, Alberto "Magical Realism and The Sociology of Possibility." *Poetry Northwest* Winter/Spring edition (2020). <https://www.poetrynw.org/magical-realism-and-the-sociology-of-possibility/>

Roxburgh, Elizabeth C., and Rachel E. Evenden. "“They daren’t tell people’: therapists’ experiences of working with clients who report anomalous experiences." *European Journal of Psychotherapy & Counselling* 18.2 (2016): 123-141.

Roxburgh, Elizabeth C., and Rachel E. Evenden. "“Most people think you're a fruit loop’: Clients’ experiences of seeking support for anomalous experiences." *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research* 16.3 (2016): 211-221.

Roxburgh, Elizabeth C., and Rachel Evenden. "Clinical parapsychology: counselling experiences of clients who report anomalous experiences and the training needs of therapists." *Bial Foundation 11th Symposium: Behind and Beyond the Brain: Placebo Effects, Healing and Meditation*. 2016.

Rushdie, Salman. "Magic in Service of Truth." *New York Times Book Review*, April 16, 2014 Pg. 1

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/21/books/review/gabriel-garcia-marquezs-work-was-rooted-in-the-real.html>

Targ, Elisabeth, Marilyn Schlitz, and Harvey J. Irwin. "Psi-related experiences." (2000).

West, John O. *Mexican-American Folklore: Legends, Songs, Festivals, Proverbs, Crafts, Tales of Saints, Of Revolutionaries, and More*. August House/Little Rock Publishers, 1998.

Zamora, Parkinson Louis and Faris, Wendy B. *Magical Realism Theory, History, Community*. Duke University Press, 1995.