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Author

Baroma, Rebecca Espiloy

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The Woman Writes a Story

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Rebecca E. Baroma

June 2015

Thesis Committee:

Professor Mary Otis, Co-Chairperson

Professor Andrew Winer, Co-Chairperson

Professor Mark Haskell Smith

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The Thesis of Rebecca E. Baroma is approved:

Committee Co-Chairperson

Committee Co-Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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Happy Puppet Syndrome

No one ever noticed the school nestled amongst the Victorian houses.

That was what we thought anyway. Until we got the memo announcing the school's definite and impending closure. Years of rumors conditioned us and we did not believe it at first. We felt entitled and small-minded and thought the district would not dare. So we did not act accordingly. We were the last of the special schools. Maybe the students knew this. They howled and clamored but no one listened.

The noise that came from within our students was drowned out by the honks and screeches of the Los Angeles boulevards and avenues and the drone of the Santa Monica Freeway. They were not cries of terror but of necessity, stimulation, recognition. Depending on the volume, pitch, pace, intonation and frequency, the ululations determined which student was who: Davonte, April, Jaimesha, or Yoon, just to name a few. We attended to their needs as best we could, but we did not heed the message of their cries, that others should know of their existence, too. Therefore, we kept our realm to ourselves. We were a rusted machine, and slogged along a highway where the speed of progress increased exponentially. We did not renovate, refurbish, or keep up. Other systems were changing, becoming global and inclusive, and we looked on as they passed us by. We wanted to remain invisible in a world transparent, brave and new.

As an institution, we needed others to pay attention to us, to care about us, to wonder where the murmurs and cries came from. To wonder where students like ours—the ones with exceptional learning issues, heavy-duty electric wheelchairs, aluminum

walkers, feeding tubes and oxygen tanks—existed. Wasn't anyone interested in what they learned? Curious about how images and thoughts passed through their minds?

Some volunteers came in to help. The district offered opportunities for others to come and do their civic duty, but the process was expensive, with a wait time of two to three months: application, interview, fingerprinting, and clearance. Unless an applicant had a mark against him, such as a felony or a pending investigation or recommendation, the applicant was rejected immediately. With all the gun violence and accusations of child abuse in schools across the nation, the district had strict orders to follow-up on unclassified and uncertificated personnel that entered a campus, especially the volunteers. To bypass this caveat, we screened our own people via recommendation from within. Therefore, most of them were family and friends, felony or not. We gave our folks access to the grounds on an as-needed basis, and this information remained internal. Per district bulletin, volunteers were only allowed a few hours a day, one or two days a month. That policy was broken, too. The garden needed tending, phones needed answering, wheelchairs needed repairing, and reports and files needed organizing. And we took what others were willing to give. We were confined within our own sense of peace as if that peace would last forever.

We had received the message from the superintendent at the beginning of the year: a mass email as well as a paper copy in our mailboxes. We didn't know what to make of the memo requesting data to show the academic progress of our students. It also implied that if the students' performance hadn't improved, the school would be restructured or closed.

We had received similar bulletins threatening closure at least once a year for the past ten years since the economy wavered from the burst of the housing bubble. We didn't make a ruckus. We were tired, overwhelmed and had our own lives. All of us, staff and students. And our reaction was a cliché: business as usual. We survived within the boundaries of conventional thought (not being seen and heard) and contemporary forces (the right to a free and appropriate education). We thought we could pull through. We thought we were protected by our inherent specialness, by benevolence, by compassion, by federal law. Especially after we had complied with and adhered to a century of guidelines and decrees ordered by representatives and lawmakers for the equity and propriety of our students. After we had attempted to, anyway. We thought we had a designated place in the heart of Los Angeles, we thought we were valued, because historically we were special.

At the early part of the 20th century, The School for Crippled Children was established. This name was not politically correct, but this was before political correctness was a thing. Right before WWII the name was changed to that of J. P. Widney, a philanthropist who believed the city was "a place for holistic healing." But the original name made others take notice at a time when the nation was more concerned with the economy, Japanese militarism, Italian fascism, German irredentism. Additionally, the burgeoning metropolis wanted to honor the man who, in 1900, the *Los Angeles Times* called "an extensive property owner in this city." He wrote a book about the city's history, was the city's first public health officer, and advocated public aid for those who could not afford health care. He developed a church, lobbied for railroads and

harbors, and believed in the progress of prohibition. The school focused on therapies and studies and was appropriately renamed after him. Thus it was nicknamed, “The School of Therapy and Health.” He believed that the city would become “a heliopolis of holistic health culture.”

We did not know this sentiment or piece of history about the man, his city, and our school. It wasn't noted on our website, printed in our brochures, or included in our mission statement. None of the administrators knew this information and neither did our support unit, the downtown office we called if we had any questions or complaints about protocols and procedures. When we interviewed for our positions, it was not relevant to the moment: we just wanted a secure paying job in a relatively mellow environment, unlike the comprehensive campuses where timelines must be implemented, testing must be done, curriculum must be followed, data must be collected, standards must be followed, and adolescent behaviors must be dealt with. We wanted to work with students with moderate to severe needs and only a few professionals knew to look for a milieu such as this one. And even if we did know this piece of history, it wasn't going to help our situation. Or would it have instilled pride and a sense of place? Would we have stepped up and fought for our place in the city? Still, throughout the weekdays cars parked and buses lined the streets out front to unload and load our students, and only the neighborhood residents knew this kind of campus existed, that we existed. Its history lost on everyone.

We should have seen it coming: the district closed the other two special education centers. Those students were mainstreamed from their small community of two hundred,

to a general campus of two thousand plus. Theoretically, the philosophy of inclusion was noble. Schools like ours always complained how we were never given priority for funding and consideration for appropriate resources. Now funding will be streamlined and the administrators on the big campuses will determine which programs will get what. It was economically feasible for the current California climate. How could we not be next?

We lamented for the old days, when interacting with and nurturing these students was curriculum enough.

Again we wondered, *Why this change?*

Someone must have sued the district, maybe even sued the school, the new horticulture teacher, Ms. Zeny Suarez suggested. We all looked at her and thought, who is this lady to say such things?

I'll tell you what I think, Mr. Reyes invited himself to the table and leaned in. *The superintendent made a surprise visit to some classrooms and saw you-know-who reading the newspaper in the middle of academics, while his assistants played dominoes in the back. They didn't even bother to toilet. The students sat in their shit all day.*

That rumor was two years ago, Ms. Suico rolled her eyes. *And that was one teacher.*

They got rid of the principal, didn't they? Mr. Reyes said.

She retired, Ms Suico said. She was bored with Reyes' conspiracy theories and wished he'd just follow through with his threats of finding a position in the more affluent areas or isolating himself on a potato farm somewhere.

If I were you, Mr. Reyes looked left and right and then focused on Ms. Suarez, I'd explore my options. The district has already made up its mind.

It's the same everywhere, Ms. Suico said.

He leaned in closer, They're setting us up to fail. Fuck this curriculum bullshit! I'm going itinerant. Floater: from campus to campus. Slip in and out. Speaking of which...

And he disappeared before the lunch bell rang.

Until Reyes' theory came into fruition, we had to teach core subjects, like math, language arts, and science. And to document their progress? Though he presented odd behaviors, we couldn't blame Reyes. The thought of more paperwork influenced some of us to retire early or transfer locations and positions, such as to the district office behind a desk, amongst stacks of hardcopies and disks forms on the nth floor of a tall building downtown off of Third Street. No lesson planning involved, but no summer breaks either. The hour lunches were a plus.

As for the new hires to replace the retirees or transfers—this school wasn't their first choice. They were displaced workers (from other locations closed or restructured) and were about to be displaced again. Crazy Mary was one of the displaced. They heard our days were numbered. So enthusiasm and learning on the job was at a lull. Therefore, management was tricky.

During supervision in the yard, the assistants vented. Sweet Mary told Crazy Mary, *Why am I always called for diapering? They need to rotate our schedules so I'm not doing it all the time.*

Crazy Mary said, *Don't look at me. I'm on break!*

A few teachers, found ways to navigate the new system of accountability. the usual reaction when changes in the curriculum came about. The health teacher, Ms. Swanson said, *I don't see what the big deal is. They wash their hands, brush their teeth. I'm giving them all A's. It's not like they're going to Harvard or anything.*

Mr. Ruffo, the computer tech said, *Exactly. I'll just create a spreadsheet with dates and marks. You know, a paper trail, add comments here and there.*

Then there was the new academic program with worksheets and multimedia presentations.

Ms. Suarez lamented, *But what about the garden? We dig, plant, harvest, and eat. Practical skills! They use their hands. Deskwork won't give them that. And the garden will go fallow.*

You realize we have a water shortage, Mrs. Frazier, who taught the more severe students, reminded Ms. Suarez. *Forget about the garden. What I want to know is how are we supposed to feed them breakfast, teach them independent living, and fit in forty-five minutes of language arts in one hour?*

Now, the tone was like that of the comprehensive campus.

But unlike those schools, our campus was serene, sparse and sterile. Graffiti, gang activity, or general teenage malaise was not a major concern. The chain link fence emphasized its lack of individualized attention and prevented others from entering. It almost looked like a comprehensive campus. But it was not. Barbed wire was not necessary. From the outside, the walls muffled the howls to low murmurs that sang with the tweeting of the birds and the rustling of the jacaranda and palm trees. Once one was inside, it was apparent that the howls and murmurs belonged to somebody, a child with concerns, like self-care, behavior, or language. But what child didn't have that?

The district, overseen by the federal government, operated these special campuses so that *all* children had the opportunity for the most complete and least restrictive educational environment possible. At the most basic level, we were in charge of determining their academic and emotional needs, especially if they were unable to articulate their desires. Was it to gain *attention* from someone, to obtain a *tangible* thing, to engage in *sensory* activities, or to *escape* them? Also, we all needed to figure out a way to record this information, though many of us left it for others to worry about. We talked about these things to each other to commiserate. However, the specifics floated through the air until someone wrote it down on paper. There were too many students with a variety of needs and abilities. There was no pipeline or system. However, per job description, the primary responsibility was placed on the case manager, who was also the child's teacher.

Some students crooned, hummed, gurgled or laughed (successive hoo-hoos vs. har-hars). Though nothing was funny in particular, it *was* peculiar for those of us new to this post. In order to learn how to read the students' chatter, the new hires dutifully deliberated their assessment of the sounds with the senior staff. Sweet Mary and Crazy Mary stood in their scrubs, arms akimbo.

I'm telling you, Sweet would say, they're trying to tell us something.

Don't be crazy, Crazy would say.

And Sweet wondered if Crazy was just talking or insulting her in front of everyone as Crazy was apt to do. Crazy loved an audience and created opportunities that made the environment a mental health hazard.

At one point, administration assigned Crazy to work in the garden with Ms. Suarez. Admin thought that keeping her outside, among the vegetables and flowers, would mellow her temperament as well as limit her interactions with other staff and students. Except for Ms. Suarez, we were all satisfied with this decision. Ms. Suarez had no room to protest. She had requested an assistant to help Charles transition from activity to activity, class to class until he adjusted to the school's climate and routine. This procedure was typical for our new students with autism.

Ms. Suarez: *Ms. Mary, Please work with Charlie today when he goes to Ms. Jefferson's class.*

Crazy Mary: *Why? Why can't I stay here?*

Ms. Suarez: *Because Charlie needs support.*

Crazy Mary: *Why can't Mando do it?*

Ms. Suarez: *It's your turn. And Charlie just needs to be escorted to class.*

Crazy Mary: *I'm going on break.*

Ms. Suarez: *You can go when Mando comes to cover for you.*

Crazy Mary: *Well, I have to go to the bathroom. You can't keep me from going to the bathroom. Per my contract I can go to the bathroom!* And she stormed out protected by her rights.

The consensus among all of us: don't stoke that fire. Crazy was crazy. Sweet Mary was the only one who tolerated her and asked the rest of us to show her some compassion.

Crazy Mary has special needs, too, Sweet said, *We just need to find out what they are.* But Sweet didn't call her Crazy to her face.

In the teacher's lounge, Ms. Suarez asked no one in particular, *Why was administration punishing me?*

She went on. As much as she loved working with the kids in the garden, Ms. Suarez wasn't sure if she could take Crazy anymore. She didn't leave it there. In addition to the new curriculum, the expectations of documentation and data collection, and the twenty-five page reports? She considered what Mr. Reyes said. *Options.* She wouldn't divulge any specifics, but gave us the impression that the status of her particular condition determined that she needed to stay and work it out in order to keep her health benefits. We were in assent with her on that. During her tirade, no one dared interrupt her. We saw that she was a good egg and if she hadn't by now, she was going to lose it.

Unlike Crazy, we chose this trade out of reverence with certain expectations, such as the intrinsic rewards from helping others, or witnessing subtle strides in self-advocacy and independence in the students. (*Yes, Davonte, you may go see the nurse about the pain in your foot. Thank you for telling us.*) Also, the schedule was very predictable and optional summer work was a plus. Some of us were grandfathered in before all the new-fangled requirements, such as goals, benchmarks, data collection and documentation. We had known someone who knew someone from the school to get us in on this *sweet gig*, where the pace was slow and the curriculum functional. Also, the district did not implement standardized testing at these special campuses until recently. However, we were warned of procedures, such as toileting, feeding, or restraining, which required a certain level of tolerance.

Though many students functioned at higher levels, some had minds and temperaments of toddlers. All were fully grown adults and each presented separate learning or behavioral challenges. For example, Ms. Suarez and her five-foot frame was able to calm all six feet, two inches of Charlie before he uprooted all the chard in the garden in one of his fits. That day was Crazy Mary's first and last assignment as Charlie's one-on-one. We could not determine exactly what Crazy did to aggravate Charlie, but we had our theories. Crazy Mary was assigned to our school directly from the district. It was rumored that this wasn't her first transfer, either. Though we understood Crazy's situation as a displaced worker, her irreconcilable disposition did not make it easy for us to sympathize with her.

Like with any place of employment, institutional or not, we did our jobs effectively as recommended. There was no room for tactics above and beyond. We modeled movements for students, such as grasping pencils, tracing lines, or pointing to pictures and objects for those who were ambulatory. If not, we adjusted students' limbs or manipulated students' hands, hence it was called *hand over hand*. This was the kind of language we used for documenting progress. We also had to comprehend the gaze: the slight turn of the head; the lift of the eyebrow; the twitch of the lips. Or the sudden grab of the hair, which startled the new healthcare attendants in the rotation. If a student kicked, bit, or punched, it was nothing personal against us (unless one was Crazy). The constant smile was not a conventional one and didn't fool anyone. If new staff asked, we told them it was a condition of happy puppet syndrome. It was an outdated term, and we explained that it was not to be used outside of these walls.

Therefore, the minutia of the moment was celebrated or cause for alarm. (*Did you see that? He blinked when I asked him if he wanted ice cream! I think he wants vanilla! Or, His lips are blue! He's holding his breath again. Rub his tummy. He might be constipated.*) We all wanted the best for the students, but strides or setbacks, created more work for us. If we observed either, we had to document specifics (*Tuesday, April 22, 11:43 pm: CW responded positively to ice cream after 4 trials in 3 out of 4 attempts in one day*), and documentation in this crowd, other than the routine checks (toileting, *check*), procedures (suction trach tube, *check!*) and balances (cerebral pressure, hyperosmolar therapy, temperature control, etc. *check! Check! Check! Check!*), was too much to ask for. We would have to change academic goals, rewrite the present levels of

performance, increase/decrease the frequency, up the ante or down the expectations. We would have to notify all major figures. One psychologist (available Tuesdays and Fridays), two administrators (one a first time principal and the other demoted from the district office), a speech therapist (still, no one knows what she did), and two nurses (for two-hundred students, where at least fifty have an *OOHC* [out of home health care] protocol). A new meeting had to be conducted and the whole team called, including the parent/s (many were single) or guardians (due to placement in the foster care system); lawyers, advocates or partners (to keep this Sisyphean ball rolling); Regional Center (nonprofit private corporations that contract with the Department of Developmental Services to provide or coordinate services and supports), *CEDD* (Center of Excellence for Developmental Disabilities), Goodwill (for possible future employment for our students) or other agency with the best interest of the student in mind.

Yes, some of us did what was authorized and taught the new curriculum since our status was probationary and not at permanent yet. Our time for observation and evaluation by administration was due by the end of the school year. The new hires hadn't been around long enough to know how to navigate the system to meet their own needs. But they eventually learned to cope, just like the rest of us who ventured to stay through all the changes and rigmarole these past years. We followed our heart and the rules until we too learned a little slack was acceptable, to take care of one's sanity. To not take it out on ourselves and on others, especially the students. Or, as the psych called it, to prevent *displacement: the transfer of an emotion from its original focus to another object, person, or situation.*

As educators, we were constantly reminded to *think of the children*. Therefore, for our own sake, some of us baked and sold strawberry cheese bites; volunteered at the local theater; worked at the mortuary; or tended bar in Inglewood. Mr. Ruffo took his family to see the desert landscape and hike the mountains since Asia or Europe was beyond means. Ms. Suarez decided to develop personally and professionally: she enrolled in online writing classes and practiced yoga every Monday night. And then there were the volunteers who helped in the offices and classrooms, like Suarez's cousin, Frazier's daughter-in-law, Sweet Mary's BFF, or Yoon's mother. They oiled wheelchairs, watered vegetables, baked muffins, buttoned shirts. Suarez's cousin had images and ideals of civic duty and considered employment in education. Frazier's daughter had a court order to complete a certain amount of volunteer hours, but enjoyed her time at the school anyway. Sweet Mary's BFF was bored and wanted something different but didn't want to work since she was receiving assistance from the government. The parent-volunteer brought in doughnuts or homemade sushi for us when she came in to make copies for the office or packets for the teachers. The volunteers also witnessed the machinations of the district and its effect on all of us, but they did not feel the same pressure as we did.

The reformation of policy and funding for education was in the air, circulating through our systems. Like Ms. Suarez, we needed to tend to our selves to keep the district's shadowy figure and all of our futures at bay, especially the students'. After a while, their murmurs and howls sang with the crickets and became one with the hum of the fluorescent lights, heater or air conditioner. But we all had our own ways of balancing and coping with the intersection of our professional and personal lives. If one was like

Ms. Mercedes, the groans blocked the ringing in her ears from too much aspirin, or from too much alcohol, which in turn, caused her to take too much aspirin. Mr. Damont was now used to the incessant meowing of his mother's hungry cat with the thyroid condition. It was rumored Mr. Zingmond was no longer bothered by his wife's weeping at least three hours into the evening after she locked herself in the study upon his arrival home from school.

But we never got used to the cries from within, such as the ones that came from down the hall near Mr. Ruffo's computer class. His students learned their *abcs*, *123s*, and the new mandated curriculum through his technological savvy. His class was adjacent to the bathroom with the changing station large enough to accommodate a six foot framed body with a maximum weight of two hundred and fifty pounds for what we unofficially called *BD* (booty-duty). Ruffo's students were disturbed by the wails of their peers during grooming and *BD*, and could not focus on his laser light show. Therefore, Ruffo offered an open lab for other classes to come in during those times. He was one of the only teachers who kept up with the paperwork and was always chosen to represent us if and when we were audited. Ruffo was the reason we received subsidies to run the *SAI* (specialized academic instruction) program for those designated *ELL* (English Language Learner). He knew how to utilize the apps and keep his files in order on his desktop.

The rest of us had *some* of our record-keeping in order. We implemented the program as best as possible, but keeping up with paperwork was another beast. We filled out questionnaires willy-nilly, checked boxes here and there, and tweaked the statement

from last quarter to fit the current quarter's progress report. We were required to hang graded class work on the wall next to the grading scale, keep portfolios to show progress, record marks for each assignment, send notes home to parents, provide two opportunities for graded work per week per subject matter per student. We had to plan lessons and activities for each student. The spectrum was broad. For example, Ryan added counting objects up to ten, while Andrew solved for x . Each class had an average of two or three staff (which changed on a daily basis), with thirteen to fifteen students with a variety of skills and levels.

IDEA (individuals with disabilities education or something or other act) was mandated by the federal government so that students with special needs, including those with *MDOs* (multiple disabilities orthopedic) or just *MDs* (not as severe) or even an *SLD* (specific learning disability), would have the opportunity to receive a *FAPE* (free and appropriate public education), just like every able-bodied American citizen. But the *FAPE* specifically entitled students with particular needs all the other services (speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, mobility therapy, etc.) necessary in order to receive the most appropriate education possible under public supervision. The law was a decent gesture. We had no qualms about giving the students what they needed, whether it was law or not. Really. Believe us, we meant well. But where were the resources?

By the middle of spring, the district started its investigation and announced that the effectiveness of the program would be best represented by the collection of data. When it came down to it, our evidence was in the form of oral narratives, which was not acceptable. Ms. Suarez, instead of Mr. Ruffo, was asked by admin to produce her data for

review. Ms. Suarez did not have the usual checklists or collection sheets. Fortunately, Ms. Suarez journaled her daily experiences as an exercise for her online writing class. She presented this to her admin and the representatives from the district. They were surprised at her undertaking, especially the tone, detail and heft, though they thought she had exaggerated in some places. She reminded them that this was more personal than anything, but because they had surprised her, she was not able to comb through and weed out specific pieces of information necessary for their reports. However, she did have proof of documentation of her efforts if they had any question about her professional duties and requirements. They were welcome to use the journal to shed light on the situation to whomever needed to see it. Additionally, she forwarded a few pages to the union and the staff who were pleased that the focus was more on the contradictoriness of their position and the lack of support. Upon reading the pages, admin and the representatives changed their minds and asked Mr. Ruffo to turn in his spreadsheets and charts. They stated that numbers and statistics were much more objective and practical for the district's purposes. Administration apologized for the inconvenience to Ms. Suarez, offered her Mr. Mando to help in her class and in the garden full-time, and gave her a budget to buy more seeds and supplies for the garden. This experience compelled Ms. Suarez to take her writing more seriously and to write a resignation letter. But, as she told us in confidence, the latter was merely another one of her writing exercises. We did not know what to believe.

Then one by one, the rest of us were asked to turn in our data.

The district followed our efforts, and took note. They saw the lack of appropriate and necessary information. Unfortunately, our neglect didn't lay bare our students' continual, slight, but substantial progress in their development and learning. Coupled with the lack of support from parents (overwhelmed and under/mis-informed about resources and rights) where no communication between the appropriate advocates and agencies was carried out sufficiently and in a timely manner, the district recommended the institution to be restructured, if not closed. There was not enough or no numbers collected, including documentation on the child's progress in his or her IEP goals, to show that the programs were effective in the child's development, which would have been conducive to all involved. Including the Marys, who sang over the grooming table to Jaimesha before she was strapped down for her bus ride home to county for the night.

Rainbow Chard

It is November and the chard still grows. The leaves are crinkly, shiny green. Their petioles, the stalks attaching the blade to the stems, are white, yellow, or red. My students, barely legal adults between 18 and 22 years old, look at these plants that grow bigger than their faces. It does not take much for them to appreciate the good in things. They have sweeter dispositions than their typically developing peers. They can name the colors, though sometimes what they say is unintelligible. Even though they are adults, they are not quite ready for what awaits them in the world. But everything they look at is lovely. When they see me, they are so happy, as if we hadn't seen each other in days, weeks, years. If they can, they gather their gear and follow me to the garden. Otherwise, I will set them up in the shade and give them a trowel or broom. Some can point if you ask them, "Which one is red?" But some can't. They too, seek and desire beauty.

The chard is left over from the late spring, April, maybe May, planting. We sowed the seeds in the soil. We have no greenhouse on campus to nurture and protect the seedlings. Nothing to protect new growth from the air of Los Angeles. The exhaust from vehicles, airplanes, shipping, manufacturing, and other sources; the effects of overpopulation coupled with the extremities of a Subtropical-Mediterranean climate, all of this alters the mood, development and production of living things. Unfortunately, these effects are at their peak over the summer, which is the best time for the garden to flourish after the fall and winter planting, though spring for these plants is ok, too. Diligent

maintenance is necessary to prevent stress from the hot conditions, followed by the dry Santa Ana winds.

In the summer the sun shines more than six hours a day, the minimum a garden needs for optimal growth. I do not teach in the summer. The plants and seedlings must be watered carefully, judiciously, to prevent run-off and waste. Summer school is only half-day, 8 am until 12 pm, and is recommended for all students with special learning needs, including my students, to attain the critical skills or self-sufficiency goals essential to their continued progress. There is no time to visit the garden. They learn their colors in the classroom, behind desks. If they can grip a pencil, they will trace, copy from a model, or write independently. If not, they will match word cards with colors, or colors to colors. They will watch the teacher model and receive hand over hand manipulation to point or match. They will hear the teacher's voice and respond with an eye gaze. It is our job to determine what the student needs to maximize his or her potential. There is no horticulture class in the summer. Only academic subjects: language arts, mathematics and science. This is district policy. I tried to find a fellow staff: a teacher, a grounds worker, or a health care assistant, to take time to water in the summer. No one was able to commit. They are too busy with following the comprehensive curriculum. They are too busy flushing tubes and changing diapers. They are too busy implementing standards-based lessons for students with moderate to severe disabilities. It is superfluous to harvest, maintain, and enjoy the garden. In the summer, no one will see the colors in the garden.

Sow seeds about a half an inch deep and one to two inches apart. I model this for the students. Take your finger or a pencil and poke a hole in the soil. They are learning to make the transition to adulthood. Pinch and drop the seeds into the hole, cover lightly, then water gently. They are learning soft skills, such as coming to class on time, being ready to work (*gloves and hats, please*), and following directions that contain at least two-steps. Be careful not to expose any seeds or wash away any soil. If necessary, the students are assisted by staff. Sometimes the students do not have patience and drop all the seeds at once onto the soil, even missing the hole. At this point, their fine and gross motor skills are pretty much set but can regress if they don't practice. Some staff also lack fortitude and do not understand why students participate in activities that they may never do again. *They ain't going nowhere*, someone says. They will go somewhere: live with their families or in a group-home, continue to be wards of the state. They will not see how the leaves grow in a cluster, and how the clusters are thinned to the strongest seedlings. The weaker seedlings cut off at soil level or pulled from the root are disposed of or thrown in the compost bin. Staff shows the students how to eat from the garden. Pull, rinse, eat. Some pull and eat, the ones who cannot wait to rinse. They learn by doing. Natural selection. Or, survival of the fittest.

Chard can grow in crowded conditions, but the leaves will be smaller and may bolt or go to seed more quickly. Successful seedlings will be six to twelve inches from each other in rows eighteen to twenty-four inches apart. This gives room for growth,

circulation and easy access. The buses line up in two rows when they drop off students and pick them up: one row at the front and one row at the side, on the ramp. The students must learn which row and bus. Some staff talk to students as they push them in their wheelchairs or lead them in their walkers, *Which one is your bus?* Many do not. Students are loaded and unloaded. Most are ambulatory. According to district policy, the students who need extra support wear safety vests during transport only. The vest must be put on prior to boarding the bus. It works like a harness, with straps over both shoulders, another strap over the chest below the breast, and a hip strap low on the student's lap. The zipper is located in the back so the student cannot tamper with it and will remain secure while the vehicle is in motion. The vest is then strapped to the seat mount and the bus seat belt must also be put to use. They are strapped in twice. Just like plants that sag and wilt when bearing fruit only good for seed. They need staking and tending, too. As for the students, many with their harnesses still on, are led to classes at arm's distance, to help manage their behavior. If a student tries to wander off after being unloaded, staff simply grabs the straps to redirect or guide him or her to the desired destination. Or, some argue, for safety purposes if the student has a history of harm to self or others via biting, kicking, hitting.

By now, summer has turned to fall and fall will soon turn to winter. The bus routes change from season to season but by November the schedule is pretty much set until the summer comes again. However, some students will age out, once they turn twenty-two, and the bus will no longer pick them up. They will have to enter into an adult day program and fend for themselves. Or, with the assistance of family and the state. We

will no longer be a part of the plan. They will no longer have access to the school's garden.

Chard grows best in well-worked, well-drained, rich, light soil. Work in compost or nitrogen-rich amendments such as cottonseed, feather or blood meal. Chard thrives in full sun, but will tolerate partial shade. In horticulture, there is a protocol to maximize the possibilities for optimal nutrition and growth. During the year, we put banana peels, apple cores, and shredded paper in the compost bin. Coffee grounds are saved from the staff cafeteria. We feed the worms the same things, except not too much coffee or citrus. Sometimes we will put leftover student lunches in the bins. We must teach the students to utilize the resources they have. Their education must carry over from the comprehensive campus.

About twenty percent of the student population is made up of students with special needs, also known as *exceptional students*. They range anywhere in the spectrum from the highly gifted to the more severe. About twenty percent of that twenty percent attend this special school. Then about twenty percent of the special school population has special feeding instructions. Not all of these students attended a comprehensive campus. But many have.

Some students with special needs need a special menu. Soft foods, mostly carbohydrates, are sometimes blended. Blended fruits with nutritional drinks and shakes high in whey protein. Blended spaghetti: pasta, tomato and red meat sauce. With the help

of gravity, those with gastrostomy tubes are fed a special mix of nutrients, shipped by the crate and distributed via the nurse's office, directly into their intestinal system. Then there are the students with typical appetites. Before coming here, they had attended a comprehensive campus, a school with a football team, cheerleaders, pep rallies, dances, where a special class, self-enclosed and exclusive, was designed just for them. They want the same things they had at the big school: the Tex-Mex beef soft tacos, Yellow Mellow corn, or the Forever Tostada Salad in full form, like their typically developing friends. They do not understand why only soft, mushy foods are served here at this school. These students with typically functioning appetites prepare and eat the greens from the garden. They grow, harvest, wash, and chop. They drizzle honey mustard over the leaves. They set the table and serve each other. They practice their manners and say please and thank you. I show them different ways to eat the leaf, like lettuce in a cheeseburger with a whole-wheat bun, or stir fried with garlic and a little bit of sea salt. Not all the students at this school are on a liquid diet.

Other than a few holes from caterpillars or curled leaves from aphids and miners, the surviving plants have no major problems. But the creeping stems, grasses and barley, invade the garden. They are stronger and will take all the nutrients from the chard if they are allowed to flourish. There is something satisfying in loosening the soil with a trowel or hand tiller, and pulling these shrubs out. To dig the fingers in the loamy earth, fill the nails with soil and smell the broken terrain. To grab at the taproot, and tug on the hairs. There is something primal, when the land won't let go, when the ground pulls back as I

tug. The students grasp at the blades, the bulbs, the flower, unable to get to the roots, the stem, the nodes. The weeds will grow back three-fold, especially those with adventitious roots, or lateral roots with nodules, creeping under the soil. The goal is for the students to do everything, to build confidence, independence, and self worth. They can't, not everything. But then neither can we, as much as we try, us able-bodied adults.

This chard that is left will provide another harvest. If I tend to it properly it will behave like a perennial and last for several years. And yet, Los Angeles has an average of thirty-five days of precipitation annually, typically during November through April. Winter is coming, and no one will tend the garden during the flurry of the holiday season. The campus will be closed, alarms set. To save water, keep weeds at bay and reduce risk of disease, we will lay mulch. Throughout the year we rake and sweep leaves from the mulberry, apricot and lemon trees. We place them in the leaf bin to decompose. We turn the leaves to help it break down into mulch. When tomato season is over, or the lettuce goes to seed or flower, we pull them out and cut them into smaller pieces to mix with the leaves. The mulch will act as a barrier, blocking the light and suffocating the weeds. In turn, the soil will retain moisture and therefore, will not need to be watered as much, especially in the summer when evaporation is at its peak. The layer of mulch will eventually decompose and add more nutrition to the soil, thus improving the fertility and health of the garden. Simple and repetitive, these activities will help the student develop their motor, social, and work skills. They will learn routine and responsibility. Even at

their best, they will reap their harvest but will never have the desire to gather their gleanings.

When we return from winter break, the soil must be tilled and weeded. Leaves must be raked, worms must be fed, mulch must be turned. And new seedlings must be sown. The students will re-learn skills. We will check for pests and return back to routine. Maybe the leaves will curl. Maybe they will have holes. Maybe they will survive the neglect, but the weather is mild and it may rain. The chard will be harvested or pulled out for new plants. Hopefully everything will still be green. The students will recognize the color green. They will match the word green to green. They will point to a variety of green things. Or else, go fallow.

Davonte

At nineteen, Davonte Turner sits in his wheelchair in front of the TV in his grandmother's house in South Los Angeles, and watches a biopic of his favorite Laker, Kobe Bryant. He feels a slight pinch in his leg, but continues to watch TV. Davonte wants to emulate Bryant's look when he was a rookie, clean-shaven and sharp. He loves to hear the story of Bryant's early years in the NBA when he still had to prove himself. Davonte admires Bryant's long limbs, slender physique and how his agility and flexibility on the court developed throughout the years. He drools from excitement, but the bib catches his spittle. If he weren't at home, he would prefer not to wear the cloth, and instead try to control his drivel. His hands curl and his fingers pull and stretch in different directions as he feels the pain crawl up and down his leg. The pain, maybe a one or two on the pain scale, is not quite enough for him to lose focus on Kobe's achievements. Davonte also knows all the turmoil Bryant's body went through for the past fifteen years -- his knees, hips, shoulders, and ankles. Bryant is no longer a sprightly rookie, able to take a beating and bounce right back up after a quick moment of rest to heal.

When Davonte goes to the shop, the barber greets him.

Hey, D! My man, You want the usual?

Davonte smiles and nods. It takes him a few seconds to say, I want my hair like that.

Davonte adjusts his arms so that his bent wrist points towards the picture of Bryant on the wall, the one where he dribbles past Allen Iverson. The barber knows exactly what Davonte wants: a slight fade with little on top, practically nothing on the sides, but a little bit left on the chin.

Davonte never tires of watching his hero's history. At 18, Bryant was the youngest man to play in an NBA game. During his six minutes of playing time, he had one turnover, snagged a rebound, and blocked a shot. Though he missed his one shot, the Lakers won 91-85 against Minnesota. The next year, he made the All Star rookie team for the Western Conference. During the game against his Eastern rivals, he attempted twelve shots in the first half and made twelve of the thirteen free throws in the second half. Even though he led with thirty-one points, his team lost the game. Davonte doesn't feel sorry for his favorite player because he knows that Bryant will win the slam-dunk competition, up against rookie and all-star players alike. Davonte remembers Bryant's famous move: he starts halfway down the court, takes a running leap, drives the ball between his legs, and slams the ball, swishing it through the net. By the end of the season, Bryant received more playing time, averaging almost sixteen minutes in seventy-one regular-season games. But Davonte knows that Bryant's first year wasn't all that easy. That same year, during the Western playoffs against Utah, Bryant's air ball caused the game to go into overtime. Two more air balls and Utah won 98-93. Davonte understands that even Kobe couldn't win all the time. Davonte also understands that losses needed to happen in order to desire more.

When Bryant earned a spot on the West's All Star team, Davonte notes that Kobe was the same age as Davonte is now. This excites Davonte. Except that he isn't too fond of Kobe's afro, even though it is only one inch all around. Davonte admires Kobe for his new look, but doesn't think the same style is for him. He prefers a closer shave, something clean and easily maintained. Also, this upkeep gives him more reason to visit the barbershop as often as possible. He loves the company of men, since it is just him and his grandmother at home.

At first it was difficult to make arrangements, not because the barbershop didn't want to serve him. The shop was generous and gave all his cuts and shaves for free. Transportation was the issue. An Access Van was needed for the hydraulic lift in order to accommodate his heavy-duty electric wheelchair. His grandmother had mobility issues herself. Her muscles ached, and the arthritis was setting in. An advocate and his social worker arranged scheduled pick-up times for his regular visits to the doctor, social time at the adult service center, and grooming appointments at the barbershop. If the pains he felt in his legs or body were severe, he went to the emergency room instead. At the moment, he feels the heat rising but the pain hasn't reached that threshold and he continues to watch the biopic on his hero.

Davonte observes Kobe keep his cool and concentrate on the basket as he bounces the ball at the free throw line. He examines how his afro and his forehead glistens with sweat, how one palm carries the ball, and the other hand supports it from the side. By the

time he played this game, Bryant was being touted as “the next Michael.” The crowd didn’t just come to see an All Star game, or “the next Michael.” They came to see “the next Michael” play against the original, the legendary Michael Jordan himself. Davonte watches Bryant and Jordan go at it, one-on-one. If Davonte could stand, he would be on the tips of his toes. Davonte also understands and admires Bryant’s desire to be a one-man-team and to show Jordan his potential as a contender.

Davonte realizes that he will be alone someday. He knows that his grandmother will not always be there. He knows he’s a ward of the state and will possibly live in a home with others like him. His federal right to a free and appropriate education has served him well and will enable him to join other programs when he ages out of school. He will meet other people, make friends. He likes jokes, listens to hip-hop, and lets others know if he needs help. He will be his own man and must advocate for himself.

The pain in Davonte’s leg becomes more pronounced, the heat rises and the muscles tighten. But he tries to focus on the sweat of Kobe’s brow when he makes a shot at the free throw line. The multiple surgeries: bilateral hamstring and abductor releases; proximal femoral and periosteal acetabular osteotomy; and right hip hardware removal, all due to his cerebral palsy with spastic quadriplegia from static encephalopathy, has not healed the pain. He has missed days and weeks of school. But his teachers excuse his absences, make accommodations, even modify his workload. They know his grandmother doesn’t keep him in the house for the sake of keeping him home. She wants what is best for him, too. Sometimes, when the sciatica in her legs or arthritis in her

hands act up, she feels frail and has difficulty getting him ready for the bus that picks him up at 6:30 in the morning. She does not want him to miss any opportunities to socialize with his friends or be around other people. Many times she just wants some alone time, to sip orange pekoe tea or to watch *Days of Our Lives* without interruption. And, of course she must keep him in school if he is to receive the extra benefits she needs to keep her household afloat. Though she never would have wished this for her grandson, his disability gives him rights to receive that free and appropriate public education where he will also receive the proper occupational, vocational, speech, and physical therapy until he turns twenty-two, as well as resources for a variety of home, healthcare and social services for the rest of his life. He would love to go to a college program, one with a basketball team.

He likes school, mostly to get out of the house. He enjoys interacting with his peers, the transition specialist, and especially Mrs. Frazier, his case manager and homeroom teacher, who sneaks him an orange soda every once in a while. He knows it's not good for him but then the gardener, Ms. Suarez will balance it off with juiced fruit and greens from the garden. Though he groans during this activity, he loves it when she makes him choose and harvest what he wants in his healthy cocktail. His absolute favorite are the adaptive PE staff and coaches who also revere their city's basketball team. Mostly they talk about his idol or games with other California teams such as the Clippers or the Kings. Or classic rivalries, before Kobe, like when the Lakers played the Celtics, during the Magic and Bird days. Also, going to school indicates that he does not

experience the cramps and aches above a five rating on the pain scale, which is the best reason of all.

Since the very beginning, his individual educational plan team—which included his grandmother, teacher, nurse, administrator, and other related service providers (OT, PT, language and speech therapist, psychologist, etc.)—had to make sure his needs were due to his inability to access the curriculum. In the old days this was based on the child’s IQ. Per the paperwork, the team must determine that Davonte’s needs were not primarily due to “social maladjustment” (bad behavior); “lack of instruction in math or reading” (missing school); “temporary physical disability” (his physicality was permanent!); and/or “environmental, cultural, or economic factors” (socio-economic factors). The team had recommended he take full advantage of a free and appropriate public education for his (and his grandmother’s) social and emotional needs. Though Grandmother receives aid from social services and the county for Davonte, she is overwhelmed, and she worries what will happen to him when she can no longer manage his care. She blames herself for his state even though she did not give birth to him. Davonte’s grandmother had to work overtime and/or the night shift, since the father of her child disappeared (it is still unclear). Once Davonte’s mother was born, she could no longer work in order to care for the child, and thus turned to social services.

Davonte’s mother, when she was a young girl, displayed aggressive behavior as a toddler and into pre-school and kindergarten. No one at the school was able to control the

child when she had fits because she couldn't find the words to express herself, grip a pencil tight enough, or color in between the lines. In turn, Grandmother and Davonte's mother did not know how to take advantage of the services the public schools offered. Additionally, because they too were overwhelmed with too many students or not enough pencils, books, desks, training or emotional support, her teachers were not able to service her appropriately either. Therefore, Davonte's mother did not do well in school. She had potential in sports, mostly basketball. But the mentoring of her coach wasn't enough. Her temper was too volatile and she had no self-control when she fouled or was fouled, accusing the referee of making unfair calls or the other team of being vindictive. She made friends with like-minded peers who tried to control their anger or fulfill their desires by experimenting with substances that were passed behind the gym or in the girl's bathroom. School was where Davonte's mother was exposed to white powdery substances, crystal-like particles, and dried sticky buds. If she needed something else to keep her mind off of her situation, Davonte's mother was sweet as saccharine and asked an acquaintance in a loving drawl if he could please just buy her a forty or a bottle of strawberry wine. She lacked models for positive behaviors in the community; she got pregnant while she was strung out and she continued to use. Davonte's state is associated with preterm birth and in utero exposure to cocaine.

Davonte is no longer able to ignore the pain in his leg and Kobe does not matter at this moment. He tries to look to the left but his neck won't let his head turn and he must move his chair in the direction he'd like to see. He pushes the knob on his wheelchair and

searches for his grandmother, his sole guardian and caretaker, to inform her of the burning sensation. He wants to tell her the rate of his pain is a bit distressing, probably a four on the pain scale, so that she can try to massage it out or document this information for the doctor on his next visit. He rolls through the hall and finds her sitting in her easy chair, the glow and flashes from the TV reflect on her face. Her eyes are closed. The buzzes, dings, and requests for vowels and consonants, from *Wheel of Fortune* project from the TV. Sometimes he will watch this with her and try to predict the letters before Vanna turns the panels. He sees his grandmother's chest rising and falling and he is relieved that she is breathing, though his legs still burn. Her naps are more frequent. Davonte knows she struggles more than before. She has changed his diaper since he was a wee baby and now he is 150 pounds. Her sighs and grunts when she lifts and changes him have become deep and weary. But she smiles for her grandson. She smiles for him as she slices his pork chop in small pieces, or shaves over his upper lip and around his chin because the Access Van was double-booked, or they forgot about Davonte's appointment at the barber. He doesn't want to wake his grandmother, but he doesn't want to predict or identify any letters either.

For now, he rolls back to his usual position in front of the TV and tries to focus on the biopic; on the number eight jersey; on the reverse pivot jumps, the left-handed hooks, the fakes, and drives; on the afro that dripped with sweat and glistened under the stadium's fluorescent lights. The four has increased to a five, maybe a six on the pain scale. He closes his eyes as the fire moves up and down his legs, almost feeling ecstasy.

He dreams of playing ball with his favorite team. He is lifted from his electric power wheelchair. His limbs straighten, long and lean. His wrist is loose ready to flick forward to pass the ball. He jumps and his fingers spread as he palms the ball and blocks a shot from the offending team. Because of moves like this, his agent will renegotiate his salary, and he will be able to support his grandmother, pay for her healthcare instead of waiting for approval from her state sponsored provider. They will move into a bigger house near the beach or surrounded by more trees. He will hire people to bake pork chops and make home made applesauce and he will feed himself. He will cut his and his grandmother's meat, because he can wrap his fingers around the handle of the knife and move the knife in subtle back and forth movements until the tender piece is cut all the way through. He will massage his grandmother's legs when they tighten from cramps or stiffen from the cold. His head sits perfectly over his perfectly curved neck and swivels on his perfectly arched back as he looks for his teammate, the one teammate that will make the winning shot. He calls him by his first name because they are teammates and best buddies. He calls out to Kobe and says a secret word, like *lift*, *step*, *walk*, or *dance*, with a series of subtle gestures that show how fine the motor skills in his fingers are as they bend at each joint. They have already planned their next move.

As they run to their defensive positions, Kobe approaches Davonte and gives him a high five. Their hands meet and they are the same size. The other team shoots the ball and it bounces off the rim. Davonte boxes out the man he is guarding and Kobe catches the rebound. Kobe dribbles behind his back and in between his legs as he heads to the

other side of the court. Davonte follows as Kobe changes speed and stops with his back to the basket. He fakes a pass but does a bounce pass to Davonte, now the point guard, who steps forward, and catches it. Davonte's balance is impeccable, his control tight. The ball is secure in both hands in a triple threat position. With only seconds on the clock, the crowd chants, Shoot! Shoot! Shoot! Shoot! In his peripheral vision, he sees Kobe and senses his signal, the special one they share: their teammates, the head coach, the assistant coaches, no one knows or recognizes their communication because it is almost telepathic. Davonte's knees are flexed and he begins to pivot: his left foot fixed solid, his body turns and he brings his right foot around dropping it slightly in front of him. Davonte now faces the basket, feet planted as his weight is attuned to the ground. But instead of shooting, he looks left but moves right and passes from the chest, his thumbs turned inward and his fingers push the ball forward as his wrist snaps. Kobe flies by to receive it, leaping and dunking the ball into the basket. The pain has reached a seven maybe an eight, the same number on Kobe's jersey. But at this moment Davonte feels rapture and euphoria as his teammate lifts him to celebrate the excellent assist that made the final shot possible. Davonte, arms outstretched and filled with elation, continues to fly as if Kobe threw him up in the air towards the fury of the sun.

OMG

The reason Crazy Mary decided to protest and pick a fight with Sweet Mary was a surprise to everyone, especially Ms. Zenith Valignota Suarez. It was Ms. Suarez's first year at this school and she had never seen anything like it. Sure, she had broken up fights between girls twice her size, dodged stray bullets in the parking lot, and busted students smoking pot behind the gym. But she started to doubt her decision to transfer to this campus from the high school in the south part of the inner city. She even asked her principal at the last school if he'd take her back, but per district policy, once an employee transferred to one school, the employee couldn't transfer anywhere for another three years. So she needed to cope, to think about her blessings, butterflies, and flowers. Breathe. In. Out.

She had thought this milieu was going to be different, more peaceful. Especially as the resident gardener and new horticulture teacher at a school for students with moderate to severe disabilities. The students on this campus didn't behave in the typical teenage fashion, and had the sweetest dispositions. She learned very quickly it was the staff that was the challenge. She had never encountered two adults, assistants assigned to her class, coming to blows over who was going to do what: stay with Charlie in Ms. Jefferson's class or go to the store with the rest of the class to peruse the grocery aisle and practice community based instruction. It was determined that Sweet was trained in CBI and Crazy wasn't, so the decision was easily made. But at the last minute, Crazy didn't like the plan and, *OMG*, provoked her only ally, Sweet, during breakfast in the cafeteria.

It began as a simple conversation, where the misunderstanding could have been clarified with Ms. Suarez or even with administration. But it was clear to Ms. Suarez that other issues were deep between the two or within themselves. It had only been two months since she started and the Marys just didn't trust Ms. Suarez quite yet to turn to her for guidance and clarification. She had been the third teacher for that position since the beginning of the school year. Also, the dialogue happened so quickly, Ms. Suarez didn't have room to intervene.

Crazy: Why do I have to go to Jefferson's class?

Sweet: Why does it matter? We all have to work with students.

Suarez: Excuse me but...

Crazy: Why wasn't I involved in the decision?

Sweet: Because, really, it's not your decision to make.

Suarez: We had talked about this last week...

Crazy: Why can't I go with you guys?

Sweet: You're with Charlie. He's not ready to go out yet.

Crazy: Well, I'm not doing it.

Suarez: But we agreed that...

Sweet: I don't think you have a choice.

Crazy: This is not fair. You always get the good assignments.

Sweet: It's not a matter of fairness.

Crazy: I'm entitled to my opinion.

Sweet: You need to stop this mess.

Crazy: Why don't you try and make me?

Sweet: Oh no you didn't.

Crazy: Oh yes I did.

In front of everyone, over oatmeal, eggs, and blended smoothies, their voices escalated in a matter of seconds and the rest of the exchange was incomprehensible because they yelled over each other and were held back by other staff members, screaming for them to stop.

Poor Ms. Suarez just stood there with her mouth open and thought, OMG, OMG, OMG. She didn't like to say God's name in vain and technically she wasn't. Even though it was just a fleeting moment, there had been other similar moments and she wanted out of the cafeteria, out of her class, out of this school. But she was stuck. She already heard the whispers from colleagues and the rest of the staff about how she had no control over her class, more particularly the staff assigned to her class. Her breath quickened and felt restricted, she became lightheaded and noticed the strong beat of her heart. She had to figure out how to survive the moment, put things in perspective. She had this feeling before, but under different circumstances. This time it wasn't a disease that took over her body but of something she could control, her attitude. She closed her eyes and breathed.

A lifetime of events flashed through that part of Ms. Suarez where panic set in, from fighting, flighting or almost nearly dying. She talked to herself. It was not that serious. You've been through worse. Breathe. Focus. In. Out. She laughed though it definitely wasn't an LOL or LMFAO moment. Not at the time anyway. If she were to

retell the story in the near or far future, with some distance in between, she could say she learned from the situation. But she couldn't even determine what it was she learned yet. If she let the moment worry her, she'd lose ground and it would take over her psyche, and possibly over her body, making it vulnerable to disease and giving her something real to OMG about. She didn't want that. She had had that. Not again, not if she could help it. Breathe. She had OMGed about that condition when she first learned she had it, and then had to remain calm until she finally recovered. Now she was in remission, and she Thank Godded for that one. But this squabble in the cafeteria at breakfast was petty.

But she couldn't help herself. She just didn't understand why Crazy was crazy. Compared to the last school Ms. Suarez was at, with the drive bys, gang bangers, and overdoses, this school was cake, could be cake. She just didn't get it. Ms. Suarez didn't want to obsess over something that really had nothing to do with her. The Marys had their own thing. After all, it was just a little scuffle between two people at work involving a decision that was made because of the inherent nature of those involved. It wasn't politics or favoritism. It could have been no big deal. But the sense of doom and hopelessness she felt at the time of the incident was not good for Ms. Suarez's spirit or constitution. A confrontation happened and Ms. Suarez had to cope. It happened.

But this kind of thing, Crazy contradicting or ignoring her, seemed to be a common thing among the staff at this school. Maybe it was just with new teachers. Or just with Ms. Suarez. Unfortunately, she was slighted and disregarded on a weekly basis, so she had already OMGed enough and she just couldn't deal anymore. If this was the norm, she understood how the school put itself on the district's radar. She understood

why the position for the school's gardening instructor was open when she applied. She also understood why the school would close. And when it did, she would have to look for another job. Things looked grim. She had to gain composure, remember who she was, and not lose sight of where she came from. She especially had to remember how something like this could affect her health. Breathe, goshdarnit! she told herself.

What went through her mind after she OMGeD was what helped her cope, all day, into the afternoon, until she was home, in the safety of her duplex. She *had* to do it this way. It was what her mother had taught her: *Be thankful for what you have, what graces you have been given*. Ingrained into her psyche by her father who reminded her what came before her: *We came to this country for a better life, for opportunities you would not have if we were not here*. It was how she dealt with life. Strict Catholics, her parents taught her: do not use God's name in vain. But she slipped and let her obsessions get to her. Ms. Suarez had to bring herself back to what her parents taught her. And she thought about what had been given her, including her contemporary life as a schoolteacher, which if she thought about it, was a blessed life. If she were in the same situation but in a different time-period, how would she have coped with conflict?

If she were alive a hundred years ago how would she have thought it? She wouldn't have said, OMG. She would have been in a different country in a different social system, most likely, if all were pretty much as is except for the time factor, she would be working in a rice field with a baby on her back and possibly two on the tow, bending, thrashing, sloshing through the muddy waters and claylike soil of a paddy, mud

fish swimming around her ankles, calves, knees, hoping she wouldn't lose her footing, killing the infant. For if she did, she would mourn for the appropriate period of time, keep slogging along, and just have another one later. And if the baby incurred some permanent physical or mental damage, it would be a burden to the small village. She would have to abandon the infant, for it to die of hunger, thirst, hypothermia, to be eaten by giant ants, or else she would be shunned. For how could it grow up to be a productive member if it could not harvest ripened crops or cast a net in the open seas? In any case, no matter what choice she made, she would be ostracized whether by the village, her self or family. And turning to the local church, pastor or priest would backfire since the female persuasion of the peasant class had no clout with the Father almighty where she would not be forgiven for the sins of her sex. She would have to turn to the patron saint, most likely San Guillermo or Saint William the Hermit and possibly the Virgin Mary, though Her role within the church and in the life of ordinary Catholics as advocate, auxiliatrix, adjutrix and mediatrix did not start until November 1964 when the *Dogmatic Constitution of the Church* passed during the Second Vatican Council, where she would not actually be able to pray to Her for support and forgiveness since it would be the 1930s when the dreadful deed of her child would have happened. Our Lady was not ordained for said role yet. Or, if the baby survived whole with no injuries, and made it through its first year of life, she would have to plan a large party, a town fiesta practically, a celebration because the child defeated disease if not accidental, occupational death. Thank goodness, she was not sucked in by the mud only to slip on her back, crushing the child with her weight, drowning the child in the shallow opaque pools of the rice fields, or suffocating the child

from heat exhaustion working under the merciless sun for a few centavos a day. If she saved all her coins it still would not be enough to throw a grand party for her surviving one-year-old, or to arrange a funeral if tragedy were to occur. Also, if she had had a child back then, the chances of her developing cancer in her reproductive system would have been very slim. Oh, yes, she would have had plenty to OMG about anyway, but how would she have said it?

If it were 75 years ago and she were born in the familial line she was in now, but much, much, much younger, say maybe 12 or 13, she could have been taken from her family, lured away by promises of work in factories or restaurants, but instead taken to become a comfort woman during World War II, servicing the men of the enemy as her innocence quickly slipped away. If her family wanted to avoid abduction, she would have been married off to a family friend or a neighborhood boy slightly older than she, since the enemy did not take those who were technically spoken for. She would have started bearing children in her early teens. Or, if she were the same age then as she was now, she could be a grandmother and *her* granddaughter taken away. Or, if dysentery, the butt of a rifle or a stray bullet got her first, she would be—respectively—disoriented, dismembered, disfigured, if not a memory of a woman who fought for her family. If she had not done so already, she would have OMGed left and right, the way they OMGed back in those days. Probably Dear Godded, hands clasped, praying to the sun, or else losing faith, and staring beyond what could be seen.

If it were in fact 50 years ago from this very exact day and she mistakenly announced the phrase in its entirety, loud enough for others to hear (if she simply wasn't thinking it in her head as women were socially apt to do in these situations), making particular formations with her mouth, tongue and throat, which would deem her as unrefined, and create the following specific shapes and sounds: her pharynx and oral and nasal cavities producing a sequence of articulatory configurations of discrete units flowing continuously, smeared together, starting off with a tense mid back (rounded) with an accompanying high back offglide (*oh*); followed by the next utterance which begins with a bilabial nasal with the lowered velum allowing airflow and sound energy into the nasal passages blended with a tense low back vowel with an accompanying high front offglide (*my*); finalized by the last combination of three sounds which begins with a voiced velar stop blended with a lax low back vowel finished with a voiced alveolar stop (*God*). Completely vocalizing each unit of sound coupled with barbaric mannerisms (arms raised, eyes blinking wide, mouth agape) her true nature would be revealed. She wouldn't have held back and she'd be judged for saying such blasphemy. "Oh my God!" Whether she produced a hesitant whisper meant only for her ears or an impulsively abrupt emotional exclamation created at that special moment, where an elder or younger (who tattled on her) accidentally heard such an expression, that raw energy would have had to be harnessed. She would have received a lashing. She would have had her mouth washed out with soap and sent to confession for saying God's name in vain. That was, if she was still a child or young lady, born within a family of similar sensibility as her

present family: the same religious beliefs, social status, level of education and parenting skills—and it was 50 years ago today.

It was certain, generally speaking, in the old society and/or old country, her dark skin, sharp features, and lack of wealth would have limited her choices to certain boundaries not of privileged descent. But it was now. Today, the twenty-first century. On the southern west coast of the North American continent. She was in an urban suburban city occupied by a diverse population in of about 3.9 million people. (Imagine, all these people OMGing at the same time.) She was well into her forties, a second generation American, with no offspring, but longed for her own. In the meantime, she was responsible for the safety, wellbeing and education of about forty children in a school district with a budget bigger than the city it resided in (and a bureaucracy much larger). And to top it off, she had to worry about the security of her job in addition to the politics of its present condition. This moment, with the drama escalating between her two assistants because one of them didn't agree with the day's plan, gnawed at her. So she had to keep on memorializing, paying tribute to what others went through in order to keep grounded.

But even if it were 20 years ago, half the age she was now, she would have verbalized the expression, using God's name haphazardly, in between every other three-to four-word phrase: *oh my god* are you *crazy, kidding me, serious?* Maybe that was when the division of cells began, when she was indiscreet, careless, and not so thoughtful

about the state of her body and especially her mind. When the node was just a little cyst, before it became the mother lode. She had felt the tenderness in her groin for what she misconstrued as the typical burden of her sex: cramps, aches, swelling. In between drunken poetry readings and department or graduate school parties her blood rose and fed the frenzy. Between sleeping indiscriminately with artists, accountants, and an occasional schlub here and there. Between pseudo-angry intellectual conversations about theory, politics, purposes of art and language, or her favorite, *the power structure!* She tried to express how her writing was a response to the long-lasting political, economic, and cultural effects of colonialism and how women like her were affected in the postcolonial world. She even employed the Socratic process or post-structuralist deconstructive techniques, but she mostly spouted platitudes she just learned and memorized. For someone who OMGed quite a bit, she was a bit pretentious.

What came next, 5 years ago, was the big OMG. In a nutshell: she was diagnosed with cancer. It was why she OMGed in the first place. It was how she learned to control some of her physiology and adjust her attitude with meditation, breathing, exercise and healthy eating. Also, she often revisited the sentiment her parents instilled in her to keep things in perspective.

It had been proven in study after study, that stress, for example, produced from dealing with inconsolable people at her work, may have contributed to the uncontrollable division and invasion of abnormal cells in her ovaries that had spread throughout her uterus and the greater omentum. But thankfully, thankfully, thankfully (she had

genuflected and did the sign of the cross) not the surrounding lymph nodes and other major organs where, in turn, the request for a leave of three months to a year for surgery and healing had been absolutely necessary for her survival. She had learned and discovered that working under nerve-wracking conditions, as it has been researched, coupled with a diet consisting of too much processed foods and animal protein (she did love her instant ramen and Spam sushi), was a breeding ground for such a disease to prosper. Though these habits were not the main and original cause, to help with healing she had to modify her frame of life and mind. And we were in the *now*, not 100, 75 or 50 years ago, thank goodness, because if it were any other time, the coping, memorializing, and reflecting would not have been enough.

We've All Got Work to Do

Duh. Zeny hated these banal statements. She was already getting it at work and now here, on the couch! She knew what bothered her and what she needed to do. But when she tried to get a prescription from her primary care physician for her anxiety and her sleep deprivation, he told her to explore other options. He suggested that she take advantage of the kind of services her benefits offered her: physical therapy, occupational therapy, acupuncture, nutritional food counseling, etc. She liked the idea of exploiting something that the district paid for. She might as well. Her deep breathing and meditation exercises weren't working, she was losing interest in her yoga and exercise routine, and she was irritable. If she had to she'd exhaust as many measures as possible. So, yes, her doc suggested it. He was the guy with the medical degree, the MD specializing in family practice, and she had known him for some time. He knew her medical and health history, so she knew he knew her. She also liked his suggestions for a good buckwheat noodle dish, gyro pita pocket with special sauce, broasted chicken on rice, or a prosciutto sandwich with locally sourced vegetables and fresh-baked baguettes. So she accepted his referral. Why not see what he recommended for behavioral modification therapy?

So here she was. Zeny wondered what they were going to do for the whole hour. The therapist looked at her. Waiting for a reaction, Zeny thought. But maybe the therapist already accepted her silence as a reaction. The therapist didn't take notes. Not yet.

The therapist looked into her brown eyes. Zeny looked back, but not with as much intent. She was a bit older than her therapist. But the therapist didn't say so or didn't seem to think so, not that she expressed it anyway. She wasn't sure how she felt about someone younger analyzing her issues. Maybe her therapist didn't perceive the age difference or she knew it was an issue for some. Oh, she was good, her therapist, making her guess whether she was thinking this or that. Plus, it was only her first visit so could she call her *her* therapist?

Zeny saw the therapist watching her as she tried to make herself comfortable on the couch. Really, it was more of a love seat. Zeny wondered if the therapist noticed that her feet didn't touch the ground and that this made Zeny a bit self-conscious. Zeny always had to adjust to furniture too large for her small frame. She would have lifted her legs and folded them in a cross-legged position with her feet tucked underneath her. But she let her feet dangle. When she stopped shifting, the therapist addressed her.

Zeh...

Zee... Zeny interrupted her mid-name.

Zee-ny? Zeny noticed the therapist's accent.

No. Sorry. Zeh-ny. Or, Zee-nith.

What do you prefer?

Zee-nith, please.

Zee-nith. Like Zenith? The highest point?

Yes, Zeny answered. Zeny thought, *Ok, she knows some things.*

In Russia, we say Zenit, with the accent on the nit, the therapist said.

Zeny thought, *Wow. She really tries to connect with her patients.* Zeny responded, Hm. In the Philippines it's the same. Accent on the second syllable. Except the z has an s sound: Senit. But generally, I just use the American version: Zee-nith.

Well, what would you like me to call you?

Zeny is fine.

Zeny.

Dr. Lensky.

Marina.

Marina. Zeny repeated then said, *Muh-ri-nuh*, accent on the last syllable, *nuh*. She smiled, trying to show she had a sense of humor.

But Zeny didn't want to call her by her first name. She was tired and wondered what would happen if she were to lay across the love seat, propping her feet up on one arm with her neck bent awkwardly against the other arm. The therapist would then know what kind of person she was: someone who would lie down on a couch clearly meant for sitting. On the first visit. Boundary issues, no doubt.

But she was tiny and if she curled up just so, she would fit perfectly on the couch, as if she were watching TV in her apartment. She wouldn't be full-on rude. She would take her shoes off. But she didn't. She shifted more, looking at her legs, trying to figure out what to do with them. Her feet still dangled.

After she settled and looked up at the therapist, Zeny noticed the therapist looking back at her, into her eyes. Zeny knew this look. This was the same look she did when she observed a student for a behavior assessment. Zeny altered her body again, then her stare. Her head shifted and her eyebrow twitched, her gaze fixed back at the therapist. They studied each other.

They both shifted and uncrossed their legs at the same time.

Then Zeny uncrossed her legs again. For good measure. She needed the blood in her legs to circulate. Then, she thought, what does it mean that I uncrossed my legs? The therapist didn't flinch. Zeny wished she hadn't uncrossed her legs. Clearly the therapist must have thought she was insecure.

Zeny turned to look out the window and saw the Getty in the distance. The white travertine walls reflected the sunlight and stood out against the native California brush and the hillside houses. She noticed the ringing in her ears and saw the minutes on the digital clock go from ten to eleven. She was being charged for the time. Was this what the co-pay was for? Her legs were being pulled down by her weight. She wanted to put her feet up on the loveseat and hug her legs, but she didn't dare. They began to chat.

The tale itself was less central than the telling of the tale. She bored herself with the details.

The therapist summarized her statements judiciously: So she micro-manages you, she micro-manages everyone, gives negative feedback and no positive feedback.

Zeny responded, I don't need anyone to pat my back or give me a biscuit every time I do something good, but if all one gets is criticism, it's gonna drive one crazy.

One? You mean, you? The therapist sought clarity. Or clarified.

Zeny didn't think she explained the bigger picture. Maybe she didn't know how. Once she started talking, the details sounded absurd. The therapist encouraged her.

It's ok. Take your time.

Zeny looked out the window again and saw birds flying across the walls of the museum. She looked at the clock and saw the zero turn to a one. She turned to the therapist and looked into her eyes again, but not the same way as before, this time squinting a little.

Tell me again what this lady at work does to bother you.

It's her emails. Her tone. The tone of her emails. And her nonresponsive responses. She imitated her administrator in a high trilly voice: If there's a will there's a way.

She said that?

Yeah, can you believe it? I mean, who says that anymore?

And this makes you mad.

I guess.

What exactly does she do?

She sucked in some air, laughed quietly and shook her head.

She sends memos, cc's admin making up policy when I know for a fact they're *her* made-up policy. We do not have to put these test scores on the reports. What parent wants to see that their kid is far below basic *again*? Every year they're far below basic. That's why we have these meetings in the first place. They are not mandated by the district, not even by the state! It's a completely separate report. And she keeps telling me to check these boxes that I know under federal law do not need to be checked. We are only required to check two boxes. Two. Not three, four, or five. But two. She's making up these rules that can get us in trouble. I mean if a lawyer gets involved in a meeting, and I've checked the box that says *other* and write in *student collected data* because she wants me to—for what reason? I don't know, except maybe she thinks it's a way to force us to collect student data—but mind you, I'm not going to record every time that Michael

blows his nose or whether Shamika could tell the difference between a one dollar bill and a five dollar bill! I mean I would if they gave us the time. But they keep changing the curriculum and want us to do more than we can fit in two hours. She's crazy! Oh, am I allowed to say that word?

You can say that word.

Anyway, if a lawyer gets involved and we don't have "teacher recorded data," we are just shooting ourselves in the foot. A lawsuit's gonna happen. And besides, I've already checked *observation* and *informal assessments* and, as a favor, *curriculum-based*. I mean, geez, what more does she want? Compliance is compliance, how much more compliant can one be? Are you following me here? Yeah, *we've all got work to do* but she adds a load to the load!

She looked out the window and saw the tram slowly climbing up the hill to the museum. She tried to slow her breath and wondered how many people were on the tram. A tram filled with people who dealt with their own bureaucratic details and the egos that went with it. But not this afternoon. This afternoon they would see the Mexican cypress, admire Van Gogh's lilies or sip six-dollar lattes. Unless they were coming back from their lunch break, going back to work at the Getty, dealing with that highfalutin mess.

And another thing: I'm finding out she's making other people crazy. So that's kind of making me feel better. What's crazier is that I was losing sleep before that. That's why I went to see the doc in the first place. Maybe get some sleep aids, wink- wink. Then he suggested I see a therapist. But you see? This problem was going on months ago. When it started, I called to make an appointment with my doc. Three weeks was the earliest appointment. Then he referred me to you, and I had to wait for authorization and that took another two weeks. Then I called to make an appointment and the earliest you were available was two weeks after that. Well, here we are, and from when I started to really be affected by the sleep thing, till now, I'm finding out she's crazy! Literally, certifiably crazy. I mean she takes pills! And I got nothing against pills. And I got nothing against crazy. I teach high school for crissakes. I just don't like the crazy when I don't know the crazy. Now I know everyone knows she's crazy. Now I know she's making everyone check boxes here and there on these reports that no one reads. But if someone, a lawyer or advocate maybe, sees that we checked these boxes and we don't deliver, then we are in big trouble. Hey, I think we should service these kids and give them whatever they need, but big bro doesn't give us any love to do this. But boo-hoo cause that's the education system for you and I know it's like that everywhere so I should just accept that right? Or find another job right? And I'm just coming down from my own crazy just waiting for you guys to authorize my visits and get back to me. It's enough to make everyone crazy.

Again, she tried to control her breath. She looked at the clock and saw the zero turn into a one again. She was feeling heavy and she crossed her legs. Was it the benefits? Was it the security? Was it secure? Zeny knew the school was at risk for closing in the near future. Why did she stay? What was it?

You know, the only person that can make you crazy is yourself.

The digital minute turned from one to two. She did like kids. She wanted her own some day. Zeny saw the tram moving down the hill. The patrons were probably chatting about the art or the architecture, how the lines of the walls followed the grid of the city from all directions. Maybe the docents, curators, administrators were on their way home, complaining about the traffic report or looking forward to the next exhibit. Maybe they complained about each other. There was always something, no matter where one worked. The clock was moving, closer to the hour, fifty-seven, fifty-eight, fifty-nine...

Yes, I see that. I know. Yes, we've all got work to do. She took a deep breath. We've all got work to do. Yes, yes, you're right. So yes, Dr. Lensky, please, let's do this.

Marina. Please. Call me Marina.

The Trip

After they married Zeny and Jim tried to start a family. Unfortunately, Zeny had cancer. She rested, healed. Jim worked, helped with the dishes and other chores. She was no longer able to conceive. They were sad, but happy they had survived the ordeal. That's the way it goes, they thought. They explored other options.

Before we adopt, let's go on a trip, Jim said. Let's go to Asia, he said. Zeny had already been there. Asia? she questioned. Why not Europe? I've never been to Asia, he said. I've never been to Europe, she said. But she couldn't complain. She was glad she was going somewhere. *That's the way it goes*, Zeny thought.

But two months in other countries with only each other was new for them. Jim looked at all the wares the natives sold. A crowd gathered around him everywhere they went. Buy from me, buy from me! they all said. Zeny thought, *How can we enjoy the sights surrounded by peddlers all day?* She stepped in and haggled with the natives. You want the best price, don't you? Zeny asked. Well, yes, but I don't want to insult them either, Jim said. He had never seen her in this element and wasn't sure if he liked it. It came natural to Zeny and she did get the best price. So he was happy about that. *That's the way it goes*, Jim thought.

And that's the way it went, back and forth, until old age. They even adopted and raised a son, Rhyan, who rolled his eyes when they bickered. But he knew they'd be fine because that's the way it went. And his dad always volunteered to do the dishes.

The Coconut

I went to visit my grandparents that summer. More like, my father sent me to the island as if seeing where I came from would make me act right and stop back talking. Living in the middle of a rice field and all its supernatural noises made the myth about the ghost who ate children seem real. I slept by kerosene lamp and read books, wrote journal entries and letters, perused the same *Tiger Beat Magazine* over and over under the flickering light. I was fourteen. What would Holden Caulfield think of this? If a white rabbit ran by, I'd chase it and we'd trudge through the rice paddies with the mudfish.

My lolo climbed coconut trees like he was drawing shades, zipping up and down the trunk suiting his fancy. Same with his son, my uncle, and his sons, my cousins, but not my uncle's wife, my namesake, Auntie Zenith. She spent her youth among fishponds and ocean. I didn't grow up around any of those and the most I did was operate the rice cooker and help mom with grocery shopping at the commissary, both a total drag.

When everyone but the Zeniths went to harvest more coconuts, I scaled fish and washed vegetables. When auntie was ready to cook, I started the fire in the dirty kitchen after collecting kindling, and kept it going with a bamboo fan. She spoke to me firmly but didn't yell at me for nothing.

Maybe dad was tired of marching, saluting, and following orders. Maybe he longed to ascend trees and fell coconuts. Before I left the island, I wrapped a rope around my waist and the trunk of the tree and tried and tried again to climb toward those green husks. Just to feel what my father was missing.

There It Was

All you wanted was the company of your cat. The kneading of her claws in your lap, the light purring of her motor while her face rubbed against your chest. Lately, you've been calling for her after your oatmeal and tea, during cookie time, in between commercials on TV. You've been working on paperwork for the background check and home visit required by the county to see if you and your husband are fit to be parents. You've been thinking about Lava, how you left her outside even after the warnings.

Back then, when you lived in Hollywood, you stayed out late and let Lava out to wander. You forgot to leave the window open for her, didn't pay heed to the notices about the sightings. Your first cat death by coyote.

Lava. Poor kitty. It wasn't *all* your fault, you tell yourself. You can't stop a cat from being a cat, a coyote from being a coyote, humans from being human. You didn't want to keep the kitty from the life of a cat, under lock and key, not to hunt or be hunted. You felt for the loss. The need to nurture and be nurtured, protect and be protected.

Now that you were married, and living close to the beach in a duplex on thirty-first street with its restricted parking, Halloween jamborees and neighborhood meetings, you still wondered if you were capable. Will you make the right choice when a bee stings, a marble is swallowed, or a finger is burned? Your husband, finally committed, was working extra hours to help pay for possible expenses.

After yoga's hands to heart, forward folds, mountain and warrior stands; after the thrift stores, the craft depots, the baby shops; after the spa for a little steam, sauna, and scrub; after stopping at Norms for a tuna melt, a not-so-ripe side of honeydew, a Perrier and some people-watching, you came home to a cat that had been alone in the house for a few hours. She curled her body tighter, paw over her face, forgiving you for leaving her or forgetting that you did. You were happy in luck, living in the Westside. You just walked three miles in sweet Santa Monica, up and down the silent streets pumping your fists in your matching wick-away hoody, technical track pants and clima-cool trainers. Unlike in Hollywood, before you were married into the bucolic beachside, where you wore cut-off sweats and an oversized sweatshirt and had to watch your back when you power walked the sparkly boulevard. Where you haunted the bars and stumbled home, where you were hunted and devoured. Where the coyotes devoured Lava kitty.

The cat too was comfortable living in the Westside. You leaned over her. Quincy, you said, and gently poked at her, the lucky kitty. Outside, you told her, hoping to train her, hoping she understood what she must do. She must have outside time and be a kitty! You've heard stories of cooped up kitties battling ottomans, loveseats, and mattresses. She untwisted herself, stretched, trotted, then leaped and swerved around you agile and snakelike. Good kitty! Go do cat things.

Maybe fifteen minutes passed and already you missed the company of your cat. You heard the honking on Pico, the screeching and the humming from the 10 Freeway. Something pinched at your heart. You heard a noise outside, like a package on your doorstep. You opened the door to call to Quincy, but she was on the welcome mat, ears pricked forward, tail wagging. You squinted to take a closer look and tried not to panic or act surprised. You sucked in your breath and held it. The poor lizard twisted, writhed, curled and uncurled. Entrails pulled out of its body, gashes on both sides of the skull. This, for some reason, you did not expect. Not in Santa Monica, with its restricted parking and urban runoff. Not on Pico and Thirty-first. Not with Quincy, the sleepy rescue kitty. But you were not surprised. You cried silently to yourself, Oh no, oh no, oh no. Why? Why? Why?

Because you didn't want to keep the kitty from the life of a cat. You didn't think it through, had no reason to. What did you expect from a cat? What were the possibilities? She liked to chase and swat at things. Climb up to get away. What were you to expect from a child? They were curious creatures, too. You would give to and protect the child as much as you could, as much as he or she deserved. And you remembered that day, that very day you promised you'd let Lava have her cat life the way you thought it to be.

Quincy. You found her on the street, soaking in the sun.

That day you didn't understand the heat behind your ears and within your chest. The sensation was odd, like you needed to be around someone or something, maybe because your breasts were tender, your abdomen aching and you wanted salty noodles and dark chocolate on a hot summer day. Or because you and your husband had these conversations about journeys, circumstances, decisions: What's the next step? Travel? Buy a house? Bear a child? This was before you learned you could not have any. Before the ordeal.

You were with your assistant, Ms. E, getting ready for the first day of school, talking about your summers and how you and your husband have been trying to conceive. As you left, driving down the street, you looked into your rear view and noticed a gray ball of fur next to the tire of a parked car. Not underneath the car, but open to the street under the sun. What is that? you asked yourself. Is that a kitty? Aw, the poor kitty is on the street, you thought. Is it dead? Then you felt sad and thought about Lava. I wish I could have that kitty, you thought. You mused if that kitty were alive that would be your kitty. But that kitty's dead. You said to yourself, Poor kitty. Poor dead kitty. But then, as you drove away, through the rear view mirror you saw the kitty's head pop up. You swerved to the side and locked your eyes on your side view mirror. Ms. E looked in the same direction and you asked her, Should I move the kitty? She responded, What kitty? As she rubbernecked and searched. Then she said, Uh-oh! You know Jim's allergic. And you told her, I gotta save the kitty! But Ms. E knew you and knew that you were a cat girl, and she said, Once you pick up that kitty you won't be able to put it down. And you

sort of smiled at her and shrugged, Oh well. You ran out of the car, engine running, gear in park, and picked up the gray ball of sun-warmed crusty kitty and felt the scabby mange. The kitty looked at you with lazy eyes, comfortable in your grip, and you almost d-i-e because she fits in one hand, weightless in her soft little bones. Then you walked up and down the street (if only for twenty seconds or so) to do your duty in an attempt to find the owner. You jumped in your car and quickly dropped the kitty in Ms. E's lap with no room for protest, and lumbered down the narrow street in your sedan. You apologized to Ms. E because you knew she was allergic too, but she took to the kitty right away. Ms. E wriggled her fingers over it, examined it as she pulled the legs apart to determine its sex and said, She sure is a crusty kitty, tiny but feisty! On her back, mouth open, claws extended, the kitty batted at Ms. E's fingers.

I will foster this kitty and find her a home, you said to no one in particular. Ms. E chimed in as if she could read your mind, Don't be choosin' no cat over your husband! You keep that cat and all the cat things that go with it, especially with that man of yours being allergic. Puh-lease! I don't wanna be around Jim when he finds out, woo wee, no thank you. You can drop me off right now!

And you laughed as you thought back and remembered Ms. E holding your mangy-second-chance kitty. You had brought her home and your husband narrowed his eyes when you told him how you were going to foster her until you found a suitable home. He saw the kitty in your hands and knew you better, too. Because here she still

was with you. Your husband, allergic to cats, understood your need, and has even taken to the kitty. He was the one who named her Quincy.

And still this wasn't enough.

After Quincy settled in she kept you company when you were healing through the ordeal. The one that you and your husband survived, the one that affected your reproductive health. Sometimes you thought finding her was an omen. You knew deep down inside, when you saw that grey ball of fur, something had possessed you to stop the car to pick up the kitty, your companion, your girl. But now you thought of more involved matters.

You and Jim decided to consider other options: fostering, adopting, surrogating. He agreed to work on the house, things that needed to get done anyway, put a wall up, update the electricity, install insulation, new paint, new floors, as the conversation continued. International? Local? Private? Public? Legal? Not exactly legal? It was not unusual, you told yourself. It happens everyday, you explained to your husband. You see it in the classroom. The kids in the system. Children with parents who didn't look like them. Children whose caretakers were older siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents, family friends. Some who didn't know the whole story yet. To some extent, many did. They, too, had their own set of survival skills. Some made it. Some slipped through. Just like everyone else.

Like Lava and the hungry coyotes. Back then Lava did not return. You did not see anything. Only tufts of hair outside her window. And stories of the coyotes walking the streets, digging in the trash, taking small pets. They needed to survive too. That was how you survived the loss.

But here on the welcome mat was Quincy, batting at the lizard, her ears pricked, eyes intent. What do I do? You wondered, Will I be able to make the right decisions, prevent a scraped knee, a cut finger, a broken arm? You needed to act quickly. This was your chance to redeem yourself.

Because there it was on the welcome mat, writhing, twisting, insides hanging out. You picked up the lizard. Its tail was detached, probably flailing about somewhere waiting to be found. Quincy's ears twitched and her head moved looking for something that was just there. The slim muscle of the lizard curled and arced in your hand. Its eyes closed, arms and legs propelling, you imagined, in pain. A string of flesh, like a snag from a sweater, hung from the belly of the lizard. It could lose its tail, why couldn't it have survived this? Dumb lizard, you thought. Poor, dumb lizard. Then you thought, What in God's name do I do? You ran to the bathroom and dabbed antibiotic ointment on the bite marks, its skull, and the gash on its side. It continued to thrash and writhe and the longer you held it the more you regretted interfering. What made you think you could save it? You wondered what could have been done to prevent this. You remembered: the

coyote was just being a coyote, the kitty just being a kitty, the lizard a lizard. And you, just being you.

You thought, Should I give it back to the kitty? Smother it? Break the neck? Drown it in a bucket? You thought of Lava, Griffith Park, the coyotes. You thought of Pico, the spa, the tuna melt sandwich. Maybe it will survive. The nausea kicked in. Again, you wondered if you'd be capable. You are a teacher, you told yourself. You can manage a whole classroom. But, you reminded yourself, this mothering thing is different. Quincy rubbed up against your legs and you looked down at the bad kitty. Bad, bad, bad kitty! You squatted down to pet her. In your other hand was the lizard, her gift to you, thrashing, dying, squirming.

Good kitty. Thank you for my gift, Quincy.

You placed the lizard back down on the welcome mat where you found it and shooed Quincy away. Go away, bad kitty. You shut the door behind her and heard her meowing that piercing meow. You looked at the lizard one last time. You stood and raised your leg, your foot over its head and counted to three.

Puddles

I think Francis forgot that it was his idea for me to call him if I needed anything.

My brother answered the phone, “Aqua Studios, this is Frank.”

“Francis, it’s me,” I said. Usually I called him about nothing in particular. But this time I had something to tell him. It was in the early stages but I had met someone special. For the two weeks that I’d known him, we’d been seeing each other almost everyday. Francis would be very happy that I wouldn’t be calling him so much. I just couldn’t wait to tell him.

“What do you want?” I suppose he was expecting me to cry or complain about something like I usually did.

“Why aren’t you answering your cell?”

“Grace,” he said. I could picture him rubbing his brow with his thumb and index finger.

“What?”

“It’s just not natural,” my brother said, “You calling me all the time.”

“You mean *normal*,” I said. I should have just told him the good news, but once he set the tone I got sucked in.

“Whatever. *Normal. Natural.* Either way, you’re regressing again.”

You’re regressing, I thought.

If he had answered his cell or texted back then I wouldn’t have called him at work. No, I couldn’t wait until he got off work. I had this *urge* to tell him. He called me *compulsive, manic, obsessive*. I wanted to tell somebody *I* trusted, another thing he said I

needed to work on. I wanted to tell him that I met someone who was good for me, with honor, integrity, and high ethical standards. Someone who I trusted. It was *his* idea for me to keep him abreast on my progress, for me to call him about my “urges and needs.” More specifically, when I felt like hurting myself.

Thanks to my brother, I was in love again. No, not with a man. Well, not yet, anyway. But with a little white terrier, Puddles. If she was baked and braised, she’d fit on a platter like a Thanksgiving turkey. Her ears and tail pointed up, and her nose was a little black olive, shiny and plump. I just wanted to eat her. At first she took some getting used to, taking care of something that couldn’t really take care of itself.

When Francis first dropped her off, I was still in my funk over my breakup with Leonard. “I coming over,” Francis told me over the phone.

“I’m about to leave.”

“Oh, really, because I’m right outside,” he said. He always tricked me.

I opened the door. It was three in the afternoon and I was still in my pjs. He was holding a leash with a little white dog darting back and forth at the end of it. Normally, I didn’t care about my appearance in front of my brother, but he’d seen me this way a lot lately, and I didn’t feel like dealing with his opinions.

“What’s with the dog?” I asked.

“She’s a rescue,” he said. “Isn’t she cute?”

The dog jumped up, her paws in the air, like we were about to do the tarantella. I bent down to pet her and her tail wagged. The dog was cute. But I wasn't in the mood. I still needed to brush my teeth.

"What about your cat?" I asked.

"Well, that's the problem," he said. "It's not working out."

I stood up. "No," I said. I knew what he was doing.

"Just for a little while," he said. "Until I figure something out."

"I'm not working," I said. "Shots. Food. Whatever. I can't."

"I'll cover all that," he said.

"What about mom?" I asked, "She has a yard."

The dog jumped up on him, on me, pawing at our legs. She sniffed everything as far as her leash would let her. She didn't know what to do.

"Look at her," he nodded towards the dog sniffing in the corners and jumping between me and Frances, "mom's too old for this."

"I dunno," I said, "she keeps bugging us about giving her grandchildren."

And we both laughed, something that didn't happen too often. And that's when I gave in.

Puddles needed to be walked. Puddles needed to chase balls. Puddles needed to investigate crevices and dig holes. Or else she'd take it out on the ottoman, the linoleum or the legs of the table. There wasn't room for that kind of destruction in my little apartment. It was in her terrier nature to nip at flies or jump at my every move. And watch my every move she did. When I stood up, she stood up. When I lifted or turned my

head, she lifted her head. She was a yarn ball of enthusiasm ready to be unwound. Now, we walked to the park almost every day.

Frances was always the smart one even though I'm older. But he didn't have to be such a showoff about it. He took a few psychology classes in community college and he diagnosed me all the time. He really thought he was helping me. He said things like, *You need to stop rationalizing why you can't find a job*, and, *You're displacing your desires by sleeping with that big stuffed teddy bear since Leonard's left*. I wanted to ask him if there was a word for wanting to punch someone you loved because the love they gave back to you didn't feel like love. But we didn't say the l-word in my family. We just showed it.

Since I've been seeing a therapist I've learned a little bit about all the psychobabble he threw at me. He used the language correctly, but his bedside manner toward me was short of choleric. Of course, he didn't think any of us needed professional help. He was like our father that way, may he rest in peace. Just like daddy, he thought all we needed was family. Daddy taught us to try to work things out ourselves. But he lost his job at the post office and he took to drinking more and more. Just like any other night, after a few drinks, he'd get into an argument with mom and left to think and drive as he mulled over a problem. But this last time he didn't come back.

My parents planted the seed of hard work and perseverance in us and constantly reminded us that when they first came to this country they figured things out on their own. We grew vegetables to help save money and collected our grocery bags before the

whole renew, reuse, recycle thing. Back in the Philippines, when mom was little she gathered duck eggs to sell at her family's stall in the market. And when daddy was growing up, outside of school and before harvest season, he picked up extra work polishing shoes at the bus stations and selling bread the size of fists in the early mornings when the cocks flapped their wings and crowed. They both talked of how their parents and their parent's parents pretty much did the same thing. But they wanted different for us, something better for our backs and in our wallets. So whenever we complained about anything—school, homework, chores—we got that whole *land-of-opportunity* speech and *when-we-got-here-we-started-out-with-nothing-and-made-something-out-of-ourselves* speech. And if that didn't work, we got the final *we're-going-to-send-you-to-the-Philippines-if-you-don't-get-your-act-together* speech. I should say that I got that last one more than my brothers. Baby brother was only five and that's not enough time to prove anything except love.

Before daddy and baby brother passed, we had visited the province from where my family descended and got to see what my parents kept going on about when they talked about the homeland. In the center, near the plaza and market, the air was sultry and steamy, filled with the putting noises of diesel engines and the constant beeping of horns. But my mother's mother, Lola Linang, lived near the beach, white and bright, the water a warm blue and salty soft, and the silhouettes of fishing boats in the distant shore bobbed up and down with the swells. Daddy's side lived more inland, at the base of the mountain near all the rice farms. If my parents still lived there, they would have never married. A merchant would never let his daughter marry a peasant farmer.

While we were there, the humidity and mosquitoes alone kept me in check. It was way too hot and I got bit behind my ears, between my fingers, and underneath my clothes. I did not want to be sent there without my family, though I liked playing with my cousins. There were so many of us I wouldn't have been alone. And I never noticed the lack of electricity and didn't mind so much when we all had to pitch in to get water from the well on an as-needed basis. Francis and baby brother used to hold my hand and never fussed when I dragged them around. But when we returned to California, we didn't foresee the serpentine curves that were ahead of us.

My dad had a younger sister, my Auntie Lorna, who had her own family and lived a few miles from us. They were our only relatives stateside, while the rest of our extended family lived in the Philippines. My cousins, Zeny and Amy, were my best friends. But dad and Auntie Lorna had a falling out over family money, his drinking and some ancestral land, and he forbade us to have any contact with them. With all this talk about family being important and working things out, I didn't understand why he had cut us off from them. I didn't see my cousins anymore after that. Even after daddy died, mom kept the grudge going and wouldn't accept any help. Not until later, after baby brother died, was I able to see Zeny and Amy. But by that time, things were weird between us, like they didn't know how to act around me. Sometimes I'd get really angry when I thought about it. Mom had to accept help from Auntie Lorna and let them back into our life, or else social services was going to take Frances and me away from her. I wasn't sure why, but I still tried to find answers to what happened. It was one of the things I talked about in therapy.

I wanted to tell Frances about what happened at the park that special day. It all started with a wave hello toward the police cars when Puddles and I went on our morning walk. It was the citizenly thing to do. Before, I didn't look people in the face. Even from a distance, I would avert my eyes and pretend I didn't see them. But they're the police, they protect and serve, and I should let them know of my presence: a woman, alone with her dog at the park. I read that somewhere in *Cosmopolitan*, *Family Circle* or *Self Magazine*. And for me, these boys in blue were a good place to start.

I had met one of the police officers. He was *my guy*. But we had to keep it secret. He was still in a relationship. But it was going to be over soon. Then he'd be all mine. I had moved on from Leonard. And Frances needed to know it was all because of him and Puddles.

But now that I was seeing a therapist and getting over Leonard, I was slowly getting the rest of my life together. I asked my cousin Zeny about her job as a teacher and offered to volunteer at her school to help her in the garden. I got a part-time job at the bank as a teller. I moved in with mom to help take care of her. And Puddles now has a yard to play in. Zeny and Amy and I are getting along better. I'm even thinking of going back to school to be a teacher, like Zeny. She says they're always hiring teachers, especially at her school. I'm gaining perspective. I've always had it, but I when I get depressed my vision was skewed. Thank goodness I had my brother. He could be harsh

sometimes, but he really was patient with me and he meant well. Like daddy would do, he reminded me that things are just not easy and I just have to keep on keeping on.

It was by chance that I started seeing a therapist. I visited the clinic for separate issues, coughing fits and the burning sensation I felt when I had to pee. I was sick all the time. The doc asked me about my energy levels, how long I've had the cold and why I was so blue. I asked him, "Am I?" My ponytail had loose hairs tangled, poking out in several places. The doc noticed how my eyes sunk in and the dark circles under them were pronounced, even with my brown skin. I looked down at my black velour tracksuit, which had lost its shine a long time ago. And only I knew that my toenails needed trimming. Then he asked me more questions, and I told him about my family, my ex-boyfriend Leonard, and Caesar our cat. Leonard didn't have to leave a note. I was there.

"What are you doing?" I asked him.

"Packing." He said.

I didn't move. I knew it was coming. *Bye*, I thought.

Leonard waited for a reaction. "Geez. At least get out of bed."

I rose up slowly to sit. I thought I cared, but I didn't know what to do.

"What's that for?" I said, pointing to the cage. I didn't even push the bangs out of my face. My throat was dry. *Don't leave*, I thought.

"Caesar. I'm taking him."

The cat? I wanted to ask where he was going, but I couldn't. All of a sudden I was completely exhausted. I needed some water. But my legs felt heavy, like they were glued to the bed.

Then Leonard said, "If I leave him here with you he's going to starve."

At that point, all I could think about was how fat that cat was. I pictured his furry skin stretched sagging on an emaciated frame. For some reason this was funny. I started to laugh. Leonard kept asking me what was so funny. But I kept laughing. In between I coughed, and hacked but I laughed and laughed and laughed.

"You stink," he said.

And I laughed harder.

I told the doctor everything except the laughing part. The doctor recommended that I see a psychiatrist specializing in mood disorders. The specialist asked me more questions and then gave me a prescription to help with anxiety and depression. I didn't tell my brother or my mom because they would know that I was talking about our family to other people and we just didn't do that.

For the first time in a long time, probably since baby brother's death, I started to feel things, to pay attention to things. To things like the trees that reached up to the sky, how the leaves shimmered in the sun, how the dust kicked up from Puddles' feet when we were on the trail. Those things were always there I just never paid attention to them in that way. Francis told me these things before, but I didn't get it. "There are plenty of things out there for you to enjoy. You just need to get out there and enjoy them." I even

started to pay attention to people, the regulars at the park, the old men, the young men, the joggers and hikers, the mothers and their babies, including the officers and their police cars. I still had problems opening up, but at least I got outdoors and started to see things.

Francis kept what was left of the family together, especially when baby brother died. Mom's physical and mental state was not right after daddy's accident, and she forgot about us. She wouldn't even let anyone help us, and all she did was pray. At one point in her mourning she lamented and spoke in tongues, her words and stories all jumbled and made up, as if she was possessed. Francis and I fell down on our knees, bowed our heads and clasped our hands in prayer. I didn't know about Francis, but I prayed for the spell to be over soon or for the next one to happen when I wasn't in the room. But that's how she sounded when she performed the plenary indulgences so that the souls of daddy and baby brother would not stay in purgatory any longer than they needed to. Whatever she did, Francis followed after her, and I followed Francis. In November, we'd go to the cemetery every day for a week where she'd lay a pillow on the grass for her knees, her veiled head and body rocked back and forth while she prayed for our deceased ancestors. It freaked Francis out when he heard his name, but mom was praying for our great uncle, his namesake. Or maybe she was praying for Francis, as if he was going to be next after Ninoy, our baby brother.

Eternal rest grant unto Francising and Ninoy, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.

Francis and I almost always followed with, "Amen." Mom continued with the Apostles Creed, more Our Fathers, Hail Marys, and Glory Bes. At one point I'd look at Francis and he'd nod. And we'd both stand up and ease a short distance away as mom got lost in her prayers. We'd wander the cemetery or go back to the car and wait or do our homework. It was always cold in the cemetery at that time of the year. One time gave he me the signal to get up.

"Where we going?" I asked Francis. I wiped my knees and felt the indentation of the blades of grass on my knees.

"To the car," he said.

"What about mom?" I said.

"I'm just getting her sweater," he said. And when we came back he draped it over her shoulders as she kept on praying.

Somewhere in her prayers, she mentioned another son, as if we had an older brother, older than me.

Eternal rest grant unto Boboy, O Lord, my first born, and let perpetual light shine upon him. May the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.

But *I* was the eldest.

“Who’s Boboy?” I asked her.

She looked at me then beyond me, maybe looking within her self, something she did quite often back then.

“Someone before you,” she said.

And she would leave it at that. Maybe he wasn’t that important. I meant to ask her more when the ordeal was over, but I never got to it or forgot about it altogether. It was such a long time ago, maybe I made it up. Maybe she was referring to the Son of God, and praying for the souls in purgatory. Maybe I misheard her and she spoke in Latin. These days the name came up in my head once in a while. I thought about him, recently and tried to ask my mom.

“Mom?”

“Huh?” she said.

“Do you still do those prayers?” I asked. She had been disappointed because Francis and I didn’t pray with her anymore.

“I always pray. Why? Are you going to pray with me?” she said. We had stopped right after baby brother died and we only did it during daddy and baby brother’s death anniversaries. And even then, we haven’t prayed for them for at least fifteen years.

“No, I...”

“Why are you asking then?” she said.

“Because I just want to know...,” I said. We still lit candles though. They are a lovely glow in the dark. Quite relaxing actually.

“Oh, yeah? Well, you will just have to pray with me then,” she said.

Why did I think that I could ask about Boboy when I asked her about her prayers? Why couldn't I just say, *Who's Boboy?*

She prayed to ask the Lord to save the poor souls of the deceased. She asked me to make sure I do the same prayers for her when she died. I can't imagine losing anyone right now. I've only had Puddles for a little bit and I would lose my mind if something happened to her. Yes, Puddles was a good gesture by my brother. But who will pray for me and my brother?

Behind his back we called Francis a *pert*. He's not quite an *expert* but a *pert*. He's a *pert* at everything! This joke was between mom and me, a little something for us, when she wasn't harping on me about meeting a respectable man, learning a practical trade or going back to church. He paid off mom's house, gave her an allowance and took her to Bingo. He was practically doing the same for me. He didn't like it when we called him a *pert*, even in jest. He was sensitive that way. But he is a true professional, a project manager at some architecture firm, where he sells and oversees projects: fancy water fountains for hotels, corporate buildings and houses owned by the oil tycoons and actors. He's good at managing people, including me and mom. Ha-ha, I made another joke! Francis did say I needed to work on my sense of humor. He didn't see that I had one or he just didn't get me. Instead, he accused me of subconsciously controlling my anxiety.

“I was gonna call you back when I had the chance,” Francis said. I heard a voice in the background. Someone was on an intercom or speaker or something telling him he had a call on line three.

“This is a hard time for me,” I lied. Whenever I needed help was when Francis paid attention to me. This wasn’t supposed to be that kind of a call. It was supposed to be fun and full of good news. I just didn’t know how to get to it when he came at me like he did. When I thought about it, I don’t think we ever had a conversation where I didn’t need something from him.

“When is it *not* a hard time for you? Are you cutting yourself again?” That last question was his way of joking. I used to cut myself back in high school though I still took a paperclip or a tiny staple and make little scratches on the thick skin of my elbows once in a while. I was way beyond those years now.

I picked at my hangnails. They weren’t bleeding, but I felt the sting. We were on the phone so he couldn’t see me doing this.

“It couldn’t wait?” He asked. “Some of us are contributing to society by working.”

“Yes, I supposed it could have,” I said.

“Well, good. That means you won’t be asking me for money.”

A few seconds passed. Maybe he was picking at a hangnail, too. But he was more of a hair-puller. He pulled at this spot where the back of the neck met the hairline. He kept his hair long to cover his neck, but it was no longer than his shoulders. Mom said his

hair was curly like daddy's was when he was a young man. She'd talk about how he used to laugh, how happy he was to work even if they were menial tasks, and how he promised to take care of his family no matter what. Sometimes she'd stroke my brother's hair and cry. He'd sit there all stiff and respectful and not move until she had finished weeping. If she tried to lift the hair off the back of his neck, he would grab her wrist or pull away and tell her to stop. He used this firm voice, which always surprised me because it sounded like daddy when he was mad. She would stop immediately and apologize as she cried and hugged him. I couldn't tell if he was disconcerted for making mom feel bad or for the bald spot behind his mane. He just looked miserable.

When Puddles and I went to the park on that special day a few patrons were scattered around the pond area, where Puddles ran around and went into the corners of bushes, trees and boulders. I never used her leash but had it in hand just in case. Puddles pretty much minded her business. She didn't get in any dog or cat business on our walks, and would hang back, until the other animal was a safe distance away. Or, I picked her up and held her, her legs dangling from underneath my arms. But once we were in the park, she chased squirrels, dug holes and bit at little creatures that scurried or flew in her path.

At a picnic table near the path, a group of men with peppered hair huddled and argued in a language I didn't understand. They waved their arms when they talked. They were a body of sweaters in different shades of brown with dark patches on the elbows: a cardigan, a crewneck, a v-neck, and a fisherman. The man with the fisherman wore a driver's cap and was quite dapper, probably a dandy back in his day. He watched

Puddles, her hips switched from side to side as she trotted by unawares that he was watching her. I liked that about her. She was very focused at getting to where she wanted to go. I started to switch my hips too. When he turned to look at me, I nodded then I turned towards the police cars and pretended to discern the figures in the driver's seat. I wondered where the wives and daughters of these sweated men were. Were they like my mother and me, walking their dogs and making inside jokes? Would my father have found a group of men to congregate and contend with? A hand emerged from the driver's side of one cruiser and waved. I wasn't sure if that was for me but I waved back. Then I fiddled with my hair, just in case it wasn't.

Puddles and I passed a woman crying on the phone, too distraught to notice us. A child—her child I suspected, tottered towards the playground. The police cars in the lot faced in opposite directions and the drivers talked. It was their duty to man the park I suppose, or maybe this was where they took their breaks. Usually one was parked in the lot at that time in the morning. One or two, I felt safer in their presence during the times Puddles and I were alone in the park.

Once we arrived at the pond Puddles darted around, her tail in the air and her ears alert. A lady did a supermodel sashay as she walked a tall, sleek dog that wore special socks and trotted like a horse. Its leash was attached to a collar that sparkled in the sun. I saw her wave towards the police car and a hand waved back. I started to think about the leash law and wondered if I should put one on Puddles. She seemed extra excited today, running a bit further from me than usual. Puddles looked towards the lady and the fancy dog, her whole body pointed in their direction. I couldn't sense if Puddles was going to

dart for them or not. She too had needs to be fulfilled and she didn't have any sense of logic to tell her otherwise. The police car in the distance made me a bit nervous too. The last thing I needed was a silly violation.

I did not notice right away but I did recognize the woman crying into her phone. Usually, she crooned at this man while her child romped around in the park. Maybe the man was her husband, or a lover she secretly met at the pond. But today she paced and cried on the phone while her child played in the distance. Maybe her lover was late. Maybe he was on the phone, telling her he didn't love her anymore, that there was someone else. Maybe that was why she cried. Then she stopped talking on the phone and screamed. At first I thought, wow, talk about dramatic. But then I saw that she was running towards her child who was about to slip into the pond.

I apologized. Francis hated it when I apologized.

"Will you quit saying you're sorry," he said. If he hadn't pulled his hair yet, he was pulling it now. But he was really great with his employees. "Hey Liz," he'd say to the receptionist, "let's try that BBQ off of Temple Street. Order some extra for the back room. My treat!"

I pulled on the side hangnail until it poked out, wedged between the nail fold and the nail plate. It was stiff, sharp, the skin around it was inflamed. If this happens, I'm supposed to soak my fingers in warm water or oil, soften the skin and mitigate the pain. I dragged it across the palm of the opposite hand. The graze felt good, but the area around the nail burned and turned red.

He turned to his receptionist while I was still on the phone and announced that he was going to buy lunch again. This time, it was Mexican. I was hungry myself.

“Oh, I love Mexican,” I said. “I can come over and talk to you. I’ll bring Puddles.” I wanted to have a nice conversation with my brother, though I wasn’t sure what that was like.

“No, don’t come to my work, please. I’ll bring some food over later. When I get off,” he said.

Why couldn’t he be nice to us like he was to his people at work? He was the go-to guy at his company, a real people pleaser, which was kind of funny because he was the kid who didn’t share his fries when we went to Carl’s Jr. after church. He was the kid who made a small crossbow out of pencils that crossed and a clothespin at the end, bound by duct tape, to shoot rubber bands at Little Mayor, the special boy across the street. Sometimes he burned holes in leaves, his clothes, bugs, anything, by magnifying the sun’s rays with the glass paperweight that he took off of daddy’s desk. After my father died, my mother never cleared his desk and didn’t notice when the paperweight was missing. One time he burned a small spot on my scalp, holding that paperweight over my head. I still have the scar on my scalp. If mom noticed anything missing or any burn holes in the curtains, sheets, slipcovers, or my head, she didn’t say anything. Frances wasn’t always like this. Not until after baby brother died. Now that some time has passed my brother had developed into a responsible guy. He was still a bit intense, but I figured it was for the best. Someone had to make the right decisions. Mom eventually came around after her grief, but she had her moments, not quite recovered after a loss of a

husband and son. Same with me, I guess. Or, in my case, a father and a baby brother. But my brother, Mr. Project Manager, he took care of mom and he gave me Puddles. For that, I am thankful.

It made me sad that Frances only saw me a certain way even though I made efforts to improve myself. He thought I'd never be able to contribute to the family, that he'd always be the one to care for us. I wanted to show him that I thought of him, that I started to think about all of us. When I moved in with mom I also knew I had to put up with her opinions and comments about my life: my marital or employment status, what I wore, what I ate. Moving in with mom and taking care of her should have showed Frances that I felt better about myself. That I could handle almost anything.

"You know if you had married in the first place..." mom would start, her mouth in a frown, but not because she was sad.

"I know, I know. You'd have a grandchild by now," I'd interrupt. Which wasn't entirely true. How could we have had children when Leonard and I weren't having sex?

"No. I wasn't going to say that. I was going to say that you would not be so lonely," she'd say. Which wasn't entirely true either. But she didn't know Leonard like I did.

Then she'd go on. "Still, you should have followed the sacrament instead of living in sin." She blamed that for the life I had lead. She'd declare as she always did in these kinds of situations, *Aysus mariyosep!* And she'd look up into the sky and ask what she did to deserve this and she'd talk to daddy and do the sign of the cross. And I'd want

to say, *Jesus, Mary and fucking Joseph!* Just to mock her, spelling out what she just said with in perfectly clear American English. She did not like it when we used the Holy Family's name in vain, though she used it all the time in a slang that a whole nation used as an emphatic exclamation. But in reality, I wasn't able to be outright profane and blasphemous to my mother or to the Holy Family. Sometimes I doubted if I was getting better, but I reminded myself that even God needed some time to create a chaotic and imperfect universe.

I liked to believe that my guy planned to meet me some day as he sat there in his cruiser and watched me and Puddles play in the park. He could have picked the lady crying on the phone, or the woman with the sleek fancy dog. But my guy chose me with my Puddles.

As usual, Puddles just did her thing. She patrolled the pond and sniffed about. I felt the eyes of someone watching me, maybe he was watching Puddles, or maybe he was watching the lady on the phone. It was one of the police officers. He was out of the cruiser and his looming figure came toward us, the highlights in his hair glistened like a crown under the morning sun. He walked in the direction of the pond. He walked toward the lady. She continued to fuss but she was no longer on her phone. She was making a ruckus because her child chased Puddles into the pond.

I would have told Frances that Puddles almost caused a major disaster, where a child almost died. Then I would have turned the story around, to show that the situation turned out in my favor. The lady on the phone chased her child while the child chased my

Puddles, who sensed nothing of the pursuit, and chased a butterfly that fluttered towards the pond. The butterfly flew for its dear life, I thought, for when I saw these turn of events, I felt for that butterfly. But the butterfly was probably just as oblivious as my Puddles. Perhaps my heart was the only thing that fluctuated wildly. As I ran for Puddles, the leash unraveled in my hands and I tripped over it. I scraped my knees and sprained my thumb when I tried to stop my fall. By this time, Puddles leapt into the pond, the butterfly fluttered away from the scene, and the child slipped, and muddied his bottom and his white toddler shoes. His mother screeched and the child started to cry. He was dirty from the muck, but not a scratch on him. Thank goodness the pond was shallow where a trickle from a brook fed into it. Puddles, who came towards me and shook her tiny frame, still sensed nothing of the events that incurred. Puddles the wet dog! And I laughed in relief because nothing more happened. Her fur clung to her little doggie figure, and accentuated her big eyes on her little head. As I rose to sit up, my thumb ached. The mother marched toward me and gave me advice: You need to use a leash and control that dog!

Frances needed to know how I coped in a variety of situations, especially in ones where I had no control. He would have seen that I handled this particular situation well. If I were my old self, I would have yelled back at the woman on the phone for not taking any responsibility. Or I would have just made myself sick about it for not doing anything at all. Maybe I would have picked up Puddles and stormed off before anyone could say

anything to me. But I didn't. That day, when I tripped over Puddles' leash, I felt different, like I knew something more was going to happen.

The rush I felt when I tumbled to the ground and injured myself was exhilarating. It was like the burn on my head from the light of the sun delivered through the thick glass of my father's paperweight. The officer came over and asked me if I was all right and I said I was, though my thumb was boiling with pain. He helped me up to my feet and seemed to have his hands on me longer than necessary and the way he lifted me was awkward: one hand rested on the lower part of my bottom, and the other, brushed the bottom of my right breast. He grazed my waist when he let me go and I felt a tingle in my bones. For a few seconds I forgot the pain in my thumb. He gave me a second to collect myself. I felt him study me and I was a bit conscious, flustered and nervous. I didn't look at him, couldn't look at him straight in the face. He told me that he saw me with my dog in the mornings and he asked me my name. If it weren't for his uniform, I would have turned the other way, quickly taking Puddles with me. But she was being silly. I told Puddles to stop barking at him.

"She never does that," I told the officer and I took a quick peek into his eyes. I reminded myself that I needed to trust the right people. At that moment I wondered, if Puddles barked at him would she also bite? Was she going to ruin this moment for me?

I just wanted Frances to be happy for me. I just wanted Frances to be happy.

The honest to goodness truth of it all was that I was scared of my brother, but not anymore than I was of my mother, but I didn't know this until Puddles. There was

something else that went on in his head, as much as he held things together. He would be present one moment, then his eyes went somewhere else the next. And when other people were around, he turned something off and something else went on. Like when we were on the phone, he was burdened, cheerless, and dismal. But when he turned to talk to whoever interrupted our conversation, he was Mr. Project Manager, understanding, organized, a people-pleaser. Yes, people acted differently in different settings, but I watched him as much as he watched me. He tried to fix something with himself via the family. Maybe this was his way of doing what he told me to do. He recognized whatever he needed to recognize and he worked on it the best way he could. Or maybe he needed what he gave to everyone else, like he needed a Puddles, too?

Frances would have reveled in my initial interaction with the officer. He wouldn't like the fact that I was cited, but I was forced to talk to people, defend myself, and deal with the situation. Frances would surely have an opinion of how I should have handled things. The officer flipped through his little book and cleared his throat. He stated, "Every person owning or having charge, care, custody or control of any dog shall keep such dog exclusively upon his own premises provided, however, such dog may be off such premises if it is leashed."

"Yes, sir," I said even though I wasn't sure what he recited. My thumb throbbed. I thought, *Who reads out of the code book?* The most that's happened to me was getting parking tickets. A lot of parking tickets. And even then I didn't read the fine print. Won't Frances be thrilled I got another ticket that I could have avoided?

“So you understand? If I have to give you a ticket?” the officer asked.

“Yes, sir.” All I could think about was my brother. Puddles was his idea, he should pay for the ticket. Frances said he’d take care of Puddles’ needs. Maybe this time I’ll figure it out on my own. This time I won’t ask Frances for money.

“Next time, use the leash,” he stepped toward me when he said this. Surprise and unease took over and I felt my muscles tighten. He softened his stance and he took another step. I smelled a combination of his breath and his fabric softener, mint and soap. He stood a bit close, which was quite weird. I stepped back a little and looked at Puddles, pretending to fuss at her.

“Stupid dog,” I said, surprised at my tone. But I caught myself. I can’t blame her. I’d be reverting back to old behavior. I wished I had the gumption to ask the officer for a warning. But I couldn’t. Thinking about asking Frances for money made my throat twist and my neck hot. The officer kept me standing there while he took his time looking through his notebook, assessing the situation.

I went with the way things were with the family, though my therapist suggested that maybe I cared too much. I didn’t have a problem caring about things in the way that I did and maybe my way wasn’t the best way, but that was all I knew. Or maybe I didn’t care at all and I just started caring because of Puddles. I was not sure. Things like the lady yelling me at the park didn’t bother me, though she taught me a lot in the few seconds we interacted. What she taught me was everywhere. Tripping over Puddles’ leash, scraping my knees and spraining my thumb made me see it too. It was there all around, in my

mother's house, when daddy was alive, before baby brother died. It was probably in my brother's office, too. Maybe more so. He just needed to open up to see it. I didn't know how to put myself out there like he did, but he didn't see certain things. Like when daddy died my brother and mom thought they could have prevented it, but daddy was the one who left. I imagined my brother blaming himself because he didn't want to play sports with daddy, or didn't want him to come to parent/teacher night. But the way I remembered daddy, he didn't have the sense to want these things, too. And to this day, momma believed she didn't pray hard enough. I've been in the car with daddy after he's had a couple glasses of bourbon and we never had a car accident. But it certainly could have happened. Though sometimes, I wondered if I had just talked to daddy or paid attention to baby brother, would things be the way they are now? People always said things like that after the fact. Like I said, I didn't have a real problem with the way things went with family because I didn't know anything else.

The officer eventually gave me a ticket. I looked at his badge: "Ward."

"Tell you what Ms.—" He looked at my ID, "Va-lig-no-ta." He widened his stance and studied me.

"I've seen you around. You and your dog," he said and put his hand out to pet Puddles. She growled and almost nipped him, but I pulled her away.

"Puddles!" I scolded her, "No! No biting!" And I stroked her, trying to calm her.

"You and...Puddles are here almost everyday. Just you and Puddles, right?" he said. I wasn't sure where he was going with his questioning, but I had a good feeling.

I held Puddles away from the officer when he leaned in closer and handed me my ID and winked at me. He touched my hand.

“How about I’ll take care of that ticket, and you owe me one?” He said. My body started to loosen up. The grip on my dog eased. Puddles relaxed a bit too.

He looked at his ticket book, “*Grace Valignota*. Is this your current address?”

“Yes, it is,” I said. I didn’t tell him that I was moving in with my mother.

“You’re not too far from the park,” he noticed. “Maybe on my break, or after work we get something to eat?” I thought of Ponch and John from the old show, *Chips*, when he adjusted his sunglasses at the bridge of his nose.

I wondered if Puddles sensed the chills through the length of her leash. With dirty blonde hair that verged on brown, he was a foot taller than my five-foot frame.

He held out his hand, “Benjamin Ward. Ben.” He had a small paunch too, but not too prominent and overbearing. The sunglasses gave him an air of mystery about The City’s finest.

It was an odd proposal, but it was the first time in a long time I was asked out. In fact, Leonard was the only other person who had ever asked me. And it was not this romantic. I would have gone out with Ben anyway, even if he gave me the ticket. When I thought about it, I totally divined what just happened. I wanted to get off with a warning and I got more than I wanted. Faith really worked. Even a minute amount of hope. I knew something was bound to happen.

Like I knew, one of us was next after daddy died. Momma had been in a stupor. She wore black lace over her head, kneeling in front of her altar, reciting the Sorrowful Mysteries, and praying for the pains and souls in purgatory. The altar had daddy's picture with pictures of saints and lit candles. Momma had put a veil over the house for nine days straight and didn't see us as we were.

We didn't shower, we didn't go to school, and we hardly ate. Even back then, my brother took care of us. Though I was the eldest at twelve, I wasn't clever like my brother and I needed to be told what to do. He put me in charge of finding money while baby brother was baby brother. He was five and my brother ten. I took money from momma's wallet so we could go to the liquor store to buy milk for cereal. All three of us, my brother leading baby brother and me, walked down the street in the rain while mother grieved.

The only thing was, Ben was not quite available. Not yet. For now, he thought it was best to keep our meetings quiet until he worked things out. He was in a troubled relationship and planned on breaking up with her very soon. He said they co-signed on a lease and he didn't want to leave her because he was not that kind of guy. To keep our relationship safe, we were only going to meet at the park. I told him I understood about commitments done in faith even though after a while we didn't want to keep them. I wanted to tell Frances that I met someone. But the part about our secret meetings, I could not tell my brother. Girls needed to keep some things secret. I read somewhere in one of

those magazines that men appreciated mystery. Telling my brother *everything*? *That* would be unnatural.

After walking in the rain for so many days we were bound to get sick. We all three got the cough, the chills, the shortness of breath. But only two of us made it out alive. After that, my brother took the glass paperweight off my father's desk and started little fires all over the place. But he put them out before my mother noticed

The Woman Writes a Story

A woman suffers a disease. The disease is taken out but her body cannot bear children. She and her husband apply to be foster parents in hopes to adopt. They wait. Also, they need to save money so they work a lot. The husband works at a special effects company, which offers a lot of overtime. She continues her job as a public school teacher. But being around students makes her think about having children. In the meantime, the woman does other things than bruise her psyche purple and gray with anticipation. Do whatever you want, her husband tells her. You've always wanted to go back to school, he encourages her, to work on your writing. But, he adds, you need to keep your job, at least until the baby comes. His motto: A happy wife is a happy life.

The woman sits down to write a story for her class at a very expensive school. (She needs to make sure she gets her money's worth, her husband's money's worth, *their* money's worth.) A very short story less than one thousand words. She feels it has potential to be a longer story (over seven thousand words, at least), but it will work as a short story for now. It is not a good story, but that part doesn't matter. As long as the character has ambition, purpose, a goal. The woman feels an imperative to write the story she would like to read but she is not sure if she has the will to do this. Also, the story needs to have structure, plot and tension, which it lacks. The woman doesn't necessarily start from the beginning, but near the end, at the beginning of a major turning point at least, whenever that would be. Opinions are subjective. The woman knows, but still, she has written it, and so it makes her feel proud, literary. Mostly, because of the way she

writes her sentences. She employs a few strategies: metaphor, repetition, contemporary diction, allusion, foreshadowing, etc. She exaggerates in order to give emphasis or focus. She knows her story is horribly bad but that if one read it right now and didn't put it down then there is something possibly wrong with that person. Really what she means is *interesting*, not *wrong*. If someone likes her sentences, then there is something possibly interesting about that person. Maybe that person is as desperate as the woman.

The woman is a bit scared at the moment, and she knows that thinking these things is part of the process.

Oh, there is plenty of conflict, especially inner conflict. But her character doesn't deserve to be written about if she doesn't desire something! Maybe the woman can parallel the character's desires with her own desires. Not to be cliché, but it wouldn't be the first time. What would stand in the way of her achieving what she wanted? *She does want a child*. What does her character believe and what does her character need? *She would need her husband, for sure. Or does she? He supports her in her desire to be a writer as well*. What is the lie and what is the truth? *Technically, she could do it alone. Or, could she?* What if, in all cases imaginable, everything was out of everyone's control? Even the author's? *What if the cancer comes back? What if the child has special needs? But everyone has special needs. The woman's needs are fulfilled via the adoption process, right? Please. Like really real special needs. Like the students at her school, the ones she teaches, the ones who cannot fend for themselves.*

No. There are other options. Also, she needs to think about her health. She does not want the growth to come back. She does not want the white cells to multiply and take over her body.

The truth is, the woman can't write a story. She cannot separate herself to write the story. The truth is: she carries the story, like she's pregnant with the story, and it develops inside of her while she shops for almond milk at the coop, downward dogs at the yoga studio, and diagrams sentences on the whiteboard. Thus she neglects her duties at the school. Her students wait for her to give them a lesson, some structure, directions. Her mind is not present one hundred percent. But then who is present a hundred percent of the time?

The woman needs to focus on her day job. She needs to develop her curriculum, to teach her students about starting seeds, planting seedlings in the garden, choosing healthy food options, incorporating a regular exercise and grooming routine. That is not what she is supposed to teach them. Or if she does, per district requirements for testing, she needs to incorporate math, reading and writing. The district hovers over her principal who hovers over her. Really, they do not physically hover, but she pictures her principal, pear-shaped with little wings that flutter, flying around looking over shoulders. And the district's superintendent, small like King George III, but proportioned, balding with wire-rimmed glasses. He is a busy bee in a tailored suit and slippery shoes, but that doesn't matter because he holds his little clipboard and pen and his feet dangle as he zips airborne

from location to location. His shoes are still shiny and unworn at the bottoms because he doesn't bear any weight on the ground.

They want to see data, work collected and graded to show the student's progress towards their educational objectives, to see that the teachers are conscious and informed about their students' abilities and lack thereof. Also, to prove that the teacher is utilizing the curriculum required by the district. The woman knows what her students need but it is not necessarily in relation to the mandated lesson plans. She would have to create a checklist of things that characterize relationships with other people, their interpersonal skills: social graces, communication, language, personal habits, friendliness, managing people, leadership, etc. She has files filled with student work: tracing, writing, cutting and pasting (the literal kind with scissors and glue, not the word-processing kind) in the corner of the room. So far no one has bothered to look at the files. Maybe she could get away with fudging their answers on the standardized tests. No one has bothered to visit her classroom. But, she is told, she is at risk of losing her job if the data does not show progress. She has not actually heard this at this specific place and time from any entity, but it is insinuated in a monthly memo where "action will be taken" if things do not improve. In fact, two schools ago, she had been displaced from one school into another school that had also reconfigured their staff for the same reasons: the student scores were not high enough. The tests are evaluated and the scores made public: A list of scores, from highest to lowest, and their corresponding schools will be made and sent via mass email throughout the district. If the scores do not improve, the principal looks bad, the teachers look bad, the students look bad. The school will not receive funding. For what,

the woman is not sure. But she does know that the money does not help improve the conditions of her room. The woman has informed building and maintenance that the clock in her room is stuck at 12:20; the electrical outlets buzz very loudly when a glue gun, a light, a phone charger, a computer is plugged into them; and the temperature of the thermostat functions only at the extremes, the air con works when it's cold, the heat when it's hot.

She has seen the newspaper articles of teachers who have done well as well as done poorly. Of course, this is unreliable. How can a student's and a teacher's progress be gauged in one year of bad (or good) scores. She is sure the study has their methods, which she assumes, is way over her head. Does it take into consideration other causes, like health, home life, social factors, economic issues, for both the teacher and the student? In either case, she does not consent to be put out there like that if it were up to her. It is all too distracting. It doesn't tell the whole story. She simply wants to teach her students how to sign-in with their name, date and time, on time; how to take the chairs safely off the table and arrange them with their corresponding desks; how to clean up after breakfast and say please, excuse me and no, thank you. But she could easily manipulate the answers of the tests if she wanted to. She fills in the bubble for them anyway, based on their response to the questions. She has heard of other schools giving or changing answers, to save their jobs, to save their schools, to get the funding from the federal government. But she has also seen the headlines of teachers, administrators, districts, manipulating answers, and eventually getting caught. It was not worth it. So for the most part, she does what she is told.

The woman tells her students to take out their notebooks and their pencils. She diagrams a simple sentence on the board. She tells them, in order for their sentences to have meaning, a sentence needs a subject and a verb. She'd include a predicate to add more detail to the sentence, if she wanted to push their frustration level. According to her assessments via observation, they still do not know what a subject does. She knows they do, but not within the confines of a sentence. Therefore, she is required to show them, re-teach, intervene. She shows them a picture of a woman at a desk.

She asks, What is the woman doing?

Dennys says, It's my birthday!

It's not your birthday, she says.

Oh, yeah, I forgot. Look, only one bar, Dennys points to his phone. I need more reception.

Put away your phone and focus, Dennys, she says.

Yeah...Dennys...put your...phone...away, Davonte says.

The woman looks at Davonte. Davonte gives her a big smile and laughs when she tells him, Thanks, D, but I got this. How 'bout you turn your wheelchair towards me so you're not distracted by Dennys?

Just...trying...to...help, Davonte answers back as he operates the knob and turns his wheelchair towards the woman.

On the board the woman writes: The woman. Her students copy the words. Some just grip their pencils and scribble. They know the drill.

She points to the two words. Is this a sentence? she asks.

They blink at her. They know it is reading and writing time. If there is a point, she will get to it after she asks them the second or third question. Sometimes they do not understand the point. But they watch her wave her arms, use the dry erase marker, and erase letters, lines, curves and other marks. The woman knows that what matters is consistency. This is part of the daily routine. It is written in the agenda on the board under Period 2, "Language Arts." She would rather do something functional, practical. But she needs to collect data, to show what they can and (mostly) can't do. This is part of her requirement. She will show that she is using the data she has collected. This informs and influences *how* she teaches, as well as *where and what* she reviews, re-adjusts, and re-teaches. That is the language she has to use to show this anyway. Just in case someone from the district walks in, which has never happened. Just in case a parent walks in, which happens about once a semester. Sometimes the principal walks in. Not to observe but to take one of the woman's assistants from her room, so that he or she can do necessary odd jobs: fill up the compressed natural tank in the school's van; fix a wheel chair; go to the store or another school to pick up something or other. The woman is not privy to the details unless she asks. And when she does, she does not get a simple answer. Really, the woman is just curious. Instead, she gets an explanation: Mike is the only one who knows how to put gas in the tank; Mike is the only one who knows where to pick up the parts for electric wheelchairs; Mike is the only one who's available to go to the store. But Mike isn't the only one who can do any of that. She is sure of this. The odds declare it. Out of the fifty other assistants who work there, how is Mike the only one who can do these things? But other things are more pressing at the moment.

She completes the sentence on the board: The woman writes. The students scribble on their papers. The woman waits. She observes to see if they are on task. She is required to teach them this.

Jewell nods, agrees and smiles because she always nods, agrees and smiles. Charles looks away and hums because he always looks away and hums. She asks Kevion, Kevion, do you understand? Kevion, do you understand? Kevion repeats the question she just asked him. Then Andrew raises his hand. She ignores Andrew. But he insists and makes his comment anyway.

Your birthday is March 30th, Andrew says.

Yes, Andrew, the woman says.

You were born in the Philippines, Andrew says.

No, Andrew, I was not. I was born in Illinois, the woman says.

Your dad was in the Navy, Andrew says. He's Filipino.

Yes, Andrew. We've already been over this, the woman says. Yes, Andrew, we both are Filipino, you and I.

Yes, I know, Andrew says. Sorry.

Andrew is obsessed with the military and with certain racial backgrounds, such as his own. The woman understands this. But because of his disability, his obsession is more of a tick that he must release. This conversation with the woman happens almost everyday. For him the limbic system, a neurological theory responsible for our primal reactions, to find others of our kind for protection and safety (from, say, a saber-toothed tiger) is alive and well. The woman concedes that others must have brought the subject

matter up as often as he did. But then again, she's transferring her own issues into the situation, where others, not necessarily of the same background, ask her, Where are you from? But for Andrew, it was only when he met another Filipino, which the woman was. She wants to support Andrew as he tries to make his own story, too.

The woman thinks about her story. She thinks about the character, the action, and the setting. She is at the board for a long time as her students watch. Do they wonder what she is looking at? Do they know that she is thinking of the baby she might adopt? Do they sense her anxiety? Excitement? Do they notice when she laughs to herself, fondly with tears, or when she gasps and cringes in foreboding? Do they know that she is thinking of the story she needs to write? The sickness she must avoid?

She does not believe that the students should just do busywork at their desks. She would not want that for her own child. It would be easier on her if she does just that. She wouldn't have to plan activities for her and her assistants to do with the students if she followed the district mandated curriculum. She knows they can do more. She wants to see it. Not just in her students but in herself, in her assistants. She wants to believe in the public school system. She wants to believe in everyone. I will not let petty things let me down, she tries to convince herself. Especially after she has survived via surgery, chemotherapy, and attitude adjustment. She will not let the malignancy take over. Plus, the curriculum bored them all. She couldn't take the yawns, stretches, and bobbing heads, and mostly she means those of her assistants, of herself. The woman tries to maximize all possibilities so that everyone benefits.

Coach Mike, Ms. Lisa, we need to pow wow, the woman says. New activities this week. It says here, the woman points to the poster of standards on the wall, that we are to instill independent living practices. And over here, she points to another section, they need to develop their fine motor skills (Gently move the brush back and forth in short [tooth-wide] strokes.) and over here, she points in another section of the poster, they need to follow two to three-step directions (1. Get toothbrush, 2. Put toothpaste, 3. Brush teeth.).

Coach Mike scratches the back of his head. Ms. Lisa shifts weight from her bad knee to her good knee.

The woman continues: Coach, money: recognition, names and amounts. Ms. Lisa, grooming, health issues. They will brush their teeth at your station. Please use the language, have them repeat it, and also body movements. Demonstrate. Model. We rotate every ten minutes.

She tries to give her assistants room to be creative. She doesn't tell them exactly what to do.

So, how do I do this? Coach Mike asks.

The woman ignores him because Ms. Lisa also speaks up. Besides, Coach has his own kids who, he complains, ask him for money for all their extracurricular activities in and out of school. The woman knows that Coach is really bragging: bragplaining. The woman knows he is proud because his children excel in sports. But the uniforms, he complains, are very expensive. He has asked the woman and other staff at the school if

they'd like to buy chocolate bars to help support his kids' endeavors. Of course she does.

She wonders, how does he teach his own children about money?

Don't they brush their teeth at home? Ms. Lisa asks.

Are you sure about that? the woman says.

It's not our place, Ms. Lisa answers, even though she complains of the malodor of several of the students.

Independent living skills, the woman points to the poster of standards again.

Can't we just do it as a whole group? one asks.

We only have them for two hours a day, the woman says. Let's try to work it all in.

Why are we changing the routine? the other asks.

What routine? the woman says.

The woman looks outside and beyond the fence she hears the thrum of the freeway, the bounce and suspension of metal and rubber, and the whir of diesel engines.

The woman continues, This rotation gets everyone moving and provides a different situation so that they can learn to be flexible. She changes the subject and tells the assistants, Make sure they take their folders with them before they go to the next station.

You can't do everything, Coach Mike says.

For Crissakes! the woman wants to say. *Don't you think I know that already?*

But the woman says, Yes, but we will try to do some things.

As if they asked, but they didn't, she says, I'll assess them on their ability to

transition from one activity to the next and whether they can handle small changes in routine. This is a very important skill to have as an adult.

The woman knows that some do not do well when there is change. But they need to pass this threshold to develop new skills. So she must prepare them the best way she can. She rings a bell to signal change, she sets a timer for an alarm. And on the board, she writes the names of the activities, the times it begins and ends. She frontloads as much information as possible before the rotation begins. Then she will do this for the students. Maybe she is transferring her own issues on to all of them. But that is why the woman is a teacher. Because she needs to fill a lack. She also needs to know what is next, what to expect. No surprises. But this not-knowing, this waiting for a phone call. Will it be a boy, a girl? A one-week, month or year old? She wants to control her own story.

A pressure builds up inside of the woman. Her assistants continue to question her about the way she teaches her class. She answers them and her words are sparse and her voice is curt with no inflection. They sense something else in the air, and wonder at her intensity. She has told them her philosophy of teaching, for them to engage the students as much as possible, to provide a language rich environment, to instill independence and self-advocacy. Is it too much for her staff to reciprocate conversation, play money games and interact with the students? To let them hear what language sounds like so that maybe they will become better communicators? However, her assistants sense another layer of emotional tension. They've seen the woman on her breaks, on the computer, perusing

high chairs, pack and plays, tubs, baby seats, jumpers. Or with her notebook, scribbling thoughts, transcribing them onto her laptop, editing the pile of words until the students file in and distract her to start class again. Maybe Ms. Lisa thinks she has marital problems. Coach Mike has probably reduced his opinion to one word: Women. Or not. This is not the point of the problem though. By the time the assistants get used to her idiosyncrasies, a new set of staff will be assigned because the present staff are also unhappy and have turned in a transfer request to go to another school or a different classroom. This failure to create consistency in the classroom sucks her capacity to create out of her. But it is not any different than what she has been through most of her teaching career. Learning to transition was a necessary skill indeed.

The woman needs to face reality and understand that she does not have the constitution to write a proper story. Or maybe her executive functioning is not functioning properly. She needs to take the same advice she gives to her staff, her students: Just do one thing at a time. That is all one can do. She finds it hard to focus, to sit down for thirty minutes, an hour, to get words out. When she does have a string of words, a thought, or brilliant idea, she is standing at the board, discussing lessons, doing dishes, washing rice, harvesting broccoli, prepping chicken. She worries about her husband. She wants him to want what she wants. He is giving you room to write, she tells herself. But why can't she do it?

At work her eyes burn and her stomach wrings when she stands in front of her class and obsesses about her writing assignment. The night before she sat under the dim

light at her desk until midnight, and woke up early to write some words in the dusk. She wants to give birth to some thing—the Great American Novel. *Ha!* What a lofty goal, she thought. Just like she wants for her students, she has to aim high. Or does she?

She writes a short story instead.

She needs to write outside of her head in order for others to understand her thoughts. She needs to be accessible and think about structure. She cannot fit in other characters. Maybe she can. But she can't get out of her dear diary phase or her rant about work phase or bitch about school phase or complain about family phase. But she also wants to be thinner before the summer. She can't stop eating noodles, ice cream, and mung bean pie.

The teacher wants to quit her job and live the life of a writer. She wants to agonize over words without having to prep chicken, wash rice, or stand at the board to diagram simple sentences. She wants to sit at her desk in the middle of the day, stare at the screen, the blank page until the letters come spewing out. She wants to make a cup of tea, chew on dried apricots, or nibble on some short bread on her breaks.

The woman starts to write her resignation letter. She pictures Jewell's nodding head; Charlie's turning away and humming; Kevion repeating after her, I want to live the life of a writer! And Andrew, his doting fixation over her.

I can't do it! she cries.

But she writes the letter just in case. At least as a writing exercise. To write more sentences with words she may or may not use.

Also, the woman needs to continue to save up for a baby. It's been at least six years of putting away for the baby account. That is what the woman and her husband have named it. The Baby Account. Since before she was diagnosed and had surgery. She still wants a baby. But must now consider other means. She cannot quit because of this. But until that baby comes, she focuses on the story inside of her.

Sometimes the force of her sentence is less than what one might normally expect. Sometimes they suck. Are boring, tired, cliché, you name it. Whatever her faults, she writes a word or two at different times and at different places. She is told that some of her sentences are pretty and heart wrenching, like when she sends her monthly or follow-up emails to her colleagues about the progress of the school garden. As a result they send donations and notes of sympathy for the beanstalk that dried up, the artichoke plant that withered, or the pick-ax that was stolen. The latest loss was the forty-dollar gallon jug of concentrated kelp extract. She laments, gets to the emotional core. She writes that it baffles her: who would steal such a thing? Did it have a special value on the street? What kind of hooligan would steal from a garden tended by adult-children in wheelchairs, walkers, and leg braces? So yes, she has potential. Also, reflecting on these kinds of things gives her something to think and write about. So if she quit then what would she be up against?

Besides, she needs the health benefits because she is at risk. She has a history. Especially since she's been nursing this abashed state of mind, which does not help for healing. She is outraged at her abashedness, but she applies the coping strategies she learned at the Wellness Community Center: tai chi, meditation, controlled breathing. Others, she thought, had it much worse than she, no options for healthcare, no steady income, no daily routine. She was not brave at all. No. And she felt a nip in her heart. Still she could not stop thinking about the story inside of her. And how she will endure when this baby comes. Also, she does not want the cells to collect and multiply. She does not want them to metastasize, to come back locally, regionally or distantly with a vengeance. Because that is what cancer does. That is what she needs to think about. Especially, if this baby comes.

Everywhere she goes she thinks of phrases: long, short, fragmented, run-on. She feels the rhythm and enjoys the sound. If anything, she likes her sentences. She remembers some sentences. Everywhere she goes, she recites them in her head. Even the ones she kills. She smiles and thinks that this is all she needs. Then she is sad, irritated and bothered again because what is the point if one doesn't have a story and one has all these phrases? Why go to school for writing and not do anything with what she produces? She can't buy groceries or pay rent with these sentences? Or can she. She thinks about what to do. But she is hungry.

Then one day the woman has a great idea.

Duh! I will send my story off to be published! she says. I will use this story to apply for a Wallace Stegner Fellowship, too! she exclaims.

And so she goes online to send it out via Submittable. She wants to pay for it with her American Express card. But her husband has restricted her spending. She is in a panic, because the deadline is very soon, in a couple days. She is sure she will get in if she makes the deadline.

You have used the card for too many knick knacks! And books, her husband tells her. We are overloaded with books! Do you actually read all of them?

Yes, she lies.

Her husband reminds her, We still have to pay the last bill. Also, your tuition is due. Over five thousand dollars between the both of us. That does not include the mortgage.

She wonders what fifty dollars difference will make. It is like blowing air in a balloon the size of the Earth.

I'll get paid at the beginning of the month, she reassures him. And besides, we need the points. We can use them to buy the ticket to fly your mother out for my graduation in Palm Springs this summer. Mama LaRose has always wanted to come to the Southern California desert, the stomping grounds of Old Hollywood.

The woman sees her husband thinking about this very carefully. His lips pucker and eyebrows wrinkle. She knows he is unsure of his investment in her and the writing program she will graduate from. She knows that he wonders if two years of dusty

shelves, dirty dishes, soiled laundry, uncooked dinners, inattention toward healthy desires and needs is all worth it. But she also knows that his mother would be thrilled to ride the gondola, visit the native California gardens, or shop at the outlets, antique and thrift stores. This would be a two-for-one for him: his wife and his mother at the desert keeping each other company. He gives her back the American Express.

Many weeks later, she receives two emails.

Her story has been rejected.

Her application for the fellowship has been rejected. The letter is addressed her by her first name and says:

It is through the vibrancy and commitment of work like yours that the program is able to depend on an applicant pool of immense talent. Every year, after reading the submissions, all of us wish we had more fellowships to offer.

But she is no fool. But then again, she did apply and had secret hopes. In any case, she is sad.

I knew I should have sent it to workshop, she thinks. But still, I thought it was pretty good for not going through a workshop session.

A moment later she becomes livid. Warmth charges through her ears and her neck is hot, her shoulders tense. She is in the third stage, anger and bargaining, of the seven stages of loss and grief.

Who are they to say what's good and what's bad? she thinks. They probably never wrote a story in their life! Not like this!

She thinks about work and her students and what they need, what she needs, what they are missing, what she is missing. Again, she is unhinged.

The woman notices that her husband is relieved that she wasn't awarded the Wallace Stegner Fellowship. He is relieved that she will not move four hundred miles away to live the life of a writer in Northern California. Why would you wish that? she asks him.

Because I don't want you to lose your health benefits. What if the cancer comes back?

Oh, yeah, she thinks. I forgot about that part.

Maybe it isn't the story that is stirring inside of her.

Also, remember. The baby, her husband says.

Yes. The baby. She and her husband still wait for a baby. At this point, any baby. But she thinks about her students. Again, she is scared.

Fortunately, it is her turn to be work-shopped in her writing class. They tell her what she suspects though she can't articulate it herself. It is like behavior modification therapy. She knows the answers: she just needs to hear it from someone else.

We need to cheer for a larger-than-life character, they say. She winces at the cliché. Someone notices and rephrases the note: We need to care about her.

Your character sits and thinks, her instructor tells her. She needs to move, the woman presumes. She must be hard at work, sweating, beating her brow over a moment in crisis. She must exhibit herself in a characteristic moment.

Yes! the woman feels the need.

But what?

Someone asks, Why are there no markers for dialogue?

Someone else says, Scenes. We need scenes.

Ok, got it, she says. But she does not get it. She thinks she does. She is not sure.

She writes the note down anyway.

Her instructor suggests for her to cut off the last two sentences. She thinks, That is a brilliant suggestion.

A few weeks later she decides to send her story out again.

The woman sends the story out many, many, many times, and every time it comes back rejected. She wonders what she is doing, what she has survived, and does she think this is the best way to spend her time? Again, each time, she experiences the stages of grief as if she was diagnosed and has survived over and over. She wonders if her emotional state will aggravate and weaken her immune system. She wonders if she needs something else, but she is not sure what. Her husband does not say anything, though he is silent when he makes himself a sandwich or does the dishes, or when they get ready for bed after watching PBS Mystery. She practices her breathing exercises when she agonizes, going over the same questions. She hopes this helps. She hopes.

Even though she has already agreed, she questions her instructor's suggestion. But she had changed a different part of the story for each submission. In one version, she describes the dog in more detail. She gives the police officer a name in another. She adds more scenes with the brother. Then she adds a sister. And another lover.

This is crazy, the woman thinks. The world is insane! What the hell is wrong with these people?

She breathes. She closes her eyes. She tries to think of her happy place, a memory of a beach in the Philippines: Jello blue water lapping against soft white sand with the woman laying under a shady thatched hut.

So the woman decides to publish the story herself. She gets on her computer and discovers a thing called an ebook. She tries to figure out how to make an ebook for her one story. She does not have the patience. She opens a Pinterest account but it's the wrong application and she does not need to post pictures. She does not want to post it on social websites because she thinks it will cheapen its value. Then she thinks, what value? Who does she think she is? Plus, she is barely on social media herself, mostly because she is practically a Luddite. Or, technologically lazy. Plus, she has no more room inside of her. The story within her is malignant and piques.

The woman takes the story down to the corner store and makes seventeen thousand copies. She does not know what comes over her but she uses her American

Express Card. Her husband is at a loss. But he understands the temperament of an artist. He works in film, more particularly post-production. He makes and enhances pretend worlds for pretend situations. To him, things are almost normal. But he keeps his comments to himself. Fortunately, he has been working overtime. He does not see the woman mull over her writing at home. She cannot blame her husband as a distraction. It is a good thing that movies these days require a lot of car chases, space blasters, and other worldly special effects. This will help him cover the cost of the copies.

The woman takes her copies and wanders all over the city handing them to people, going downtown to the flower mart, the fashion district, Little Tokyo, San Pedro, the LBC, even Oxnard, taping them onto signposts, over lost cat and dog signs, and sliding them under doors and folding them into paper airplanes and launching them off of buildings. She does this for days and days and days and days and days, until finally all her copies are gone. Then she goes home to sleep on the couch with her cat.

She does not go in to work for a few weeks. She gets calls from the secretary, the assistant principal, the payroll clerk. She tells them she is sick but they do not believe her. The woman's students wonder where she is but because she has been consistent with the routine, the class practically runs itself. Coach Mike and Ms. Lisa tsk and shake their heads, but they too know what to do when the woman does not show.

The principal tries to report her to human resources in the district office. But she has applied for FMLA, the Family and Medical Leave Act. However, it was for her

previous condition—not for her present shenanigans. Therefore, according to the union, she is protected. This time she got lucky.

I have done everything I can do, she thinks, and decides to get a steamy bowl of egg noodles and dumplings in a part of town away from her house. A place where she goes when she craves the comfort of steamed rice, boiled chicken, or stir-fried Chinese broccoli. While she is there she walks into Happy Happy Foot Spa, where she is sure no one knows her, and requests a pedicure. She watches the TV at the foot spa. She looks at the subtitles, because the TV is on silent. Her feet are tired. She is tired. She is tired of language right now. She does not want to see any letters, words or sentences. She closes her eyes.

She knows the foot ladies talk about her feet, some of the nails are falling off and broken. The calluses at her heels are cracked and bleeding from walking through the city. She is worn from distributing her story. The foot ladies talk to each other while they dig underneath the good toenails and clean her cuticles.

The foot ladies are annoyed at the news because it is all about the woman. Or, rather, news about the story that the woman wrote. They change the channels, but the news is all the same: it is the story about the story. The foot ladies do not know this but it is about the woman with the broken toenails and the bleeding heels who is in their foot massage parlor. To them, all faces pretty much look alike with some subtle and not so subtle variations in textures, features, and tones. So even if the news showed a picture of

the woman, they would not recognize her. They would only be able to tell who she was if a profile of her feet were featured. They only know that the big news is about a story that someone wrote and it is everywhere. Everyone is talking about it. Everyone—everyone! People on the street are being interviewed.

The massage ladies change to another news channel. The chattering of the massage ladies bothers the woman and she peeks to see what all the fuss is all about. Maybe they want to watch other shows on syndicate TV like *Wheel of Fortune*, or maybe on public TV like *Antique Road Show*. The woman will suggest that they turn the TV off while the woman is getting her feet massaged. But this was not her neighborhood and she knew people did things differently everywhere. Also, what did she expect for half the price of what she would pay in Santa Monica?

The woman is in a relaxed state but discerns the headline, *Story Found*. She sees that people on the street are being interviewed. The subtitles stream across the screen.

I like it, I guess, one person says. It's interesting. But why waste all that paper?

I think she could have sent it out electronically. Email. Blog, someone else says. But, hey, to each her own.

I like how it lay there on my doormat, says another. I thought, oh no! Not another brochure! But it didn't have any pictures, so I was curious.

I read the first sentence and then I read the second sentence and then, I thought, I don't have time. But I appreciate the effort. Kind of sad, isn't it?

Turn off the TV, please, the woman asks the foot ladies. Since the story was about a story they did not read they turned it off. The woman does not believe the news was about her story, a story that was not really read. She gives the foot ladies a tip bigger than the cost of the foot massage.

The woman goes home to her cat. Her husband is not home. He's still working overtime.

She thinks, there must be other people who distribute their not-so-good stories all over the place, too.

The woman sits down on her couch with her cat on her lap. The cat purrs and digs her claws into her thigh. She thinks about turning on the TV but she doesn't want to disturb the cat as she digs her claws into the woman's lap.

There is a knock on the door.

Dang it! the woman exclaims. This always happen when I finally get the kitty to sit and relax on my lap!

But she is a bit relieved because the cat's claws are quite sharp.

There is a man outside. He is wearing tight pants and a slim fit shirt. He has a disheveled hairdo and a bushy beard. What is a hipster doing on the West Side? she thinks. But he is cute anyway.

Are you the lady who wrote the story? the hipster asks.

I am, says the woman to him.

I am a writer for a famous magazine, the hipster says. I'd like to interview you about your life and the story. Would that be ok?

She thinks this is a joke but she goes with it anyway. The hipster is very cute.

The interview lasts for a couple of hours. But it seemed to go by quicker. He asks her many basic getting-to-know-you and how-did-it-all-come-about questions and she gives him many answers. She forgets to give credit to her husband. (He has been silent lately, especially since the seventeen thousand copies.) In fact, she completely forgets about him during this interview. She mostly focuses on the artistic process and her tumultuous inner life of trying to navigate between working, going to school and writing. She talks about how work is a nuisance but serves as fodder for her stories and is thus inspiring, especially her students.

You must really care about your students, he says, I can tell.

Well..., she starts to say.

Don't deny it, he says, you are dedicated to your profession...and your craft.

He makes her blush and giggle. She is not her usual self-reflexive self. She makes him tea and warms up a few pieces of the sweet red bean bun. The woman describes her childhood in the Philippines, Jacksonville, and Oxnard. She expresses her views on life and talks at length about her job as a teacher and how much she dislikes it.

So what's next? asks the Hipster.

Next? says the woman. What do you mean?

You know, what are you going to do next? What's your next project? Another story? A book?

The woman frowns. She hadn't thought about that. She hadn't thought about writing more. She doesn't want to write more.

I don't know, she says.

Well, says the hipster, you won't have to walk all over town to distribute your story.

When the hipster is gone, the woman sits for a while, thinking. Then she gets out her notebook and takes out her fine point sharpie. She tries to write. She tries and tries and tries. The story that was inside of her did not seem to be there anymore.

But every single thing she writes is about the hipster.

She giggles when the hipster calls. She agrees to meet him for drinks while her husband works overtime again.

The woman and the hipster go out for drinks that night. The hipster tells her about his childhood in this city and that city and his views on life: how everyone is given an equal chance and why doesn't everyone take advantage of it instead of fighting and blaming the system. And he goes on at length about his job and how much he likes it.

Suddenly, something inside of the woman gurgles and awakens. She burps.

Excuse me, she says. She is self-conscious. She looks around to see if she knows anyone.

The hipster smiles and ignores the burp.

Seriously, the hipster says, We need to talk.

We do? the woman says.

He leans in closer and puts his hand on her forearm. We need to talk about your next story, he says.

The woman feels uneasy. She realizes that she is in a bar, she is wearing make-up, and showing some cleavage. Suddenly she is thinking about her husband and pictures him at his desk, late into the night working overtime to save for the baby.

Well, the woman says, if you want me to be honest, I am not sure what I am doing here.

The woman excuses herself and starts to walk to her car. But she passes her car and continues toward the beach. Before she reaches the sand she takes off her shoes and feels the concrete, flat, cold, comforting. She looks at her feet and sees that her toenails are growing back and her calluses have softened. She walks in the sand, cool, grainy yet velvety, as her feet sink in. She stands there for a while and looks toward the ocean and listens to the lapping of the waves. She leaves for her car and hopes to be home before her husband gets off from work. She will take off her make-up. She will pet her cat and listen to her purr. She will call her principal tomorrow and apologize. She will go back to that part of town where no one knows her and order a bowl of noodles. Maybe even visit Happy Happy Foot Spa so that the ladies can tend to her healing feet. Something stirs

inside of her, but mostly it is an ache in her chest. She knows this feeling. She is scared, but it is a good sign.