



PERSONAS

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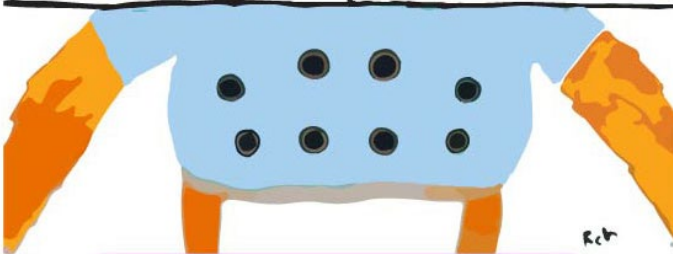
CUANDO PIENSO EN MIS ANIMALES DE
PODER.



RECONECTO CON MI FUERZA, PIERDO EL MIEDO.



EN MI HABITA LA ÚLTIMA ANCESTRA UNIVERSAL,
DE OTRO PLANETA.



MI TRANSFORMACIÓN ARTHROPODA ES INVENCIBLE.

Front Cover:
Transformación atrópoda por Raquel Castillo Salazar

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**MULTILINGUAL CREATIVE WRITING JOURNAL
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FORWARD

Thinking may sometimes defy language; certain thoughts—we have all found—to not fit so neatly into the ready-made box of language. Yet language is the primary medium through which we can convey our thoughts and make them accessible to others. When we write, we provide others with a transcript of these thoughts.

Writing across languages allows the writer recourse not only to more vocabulary, but also to another aspect of self, another persona.

For the most part, writing is limited to a single persona: the professional, the notetaker, the memoirist, the poet, etc. But in bringing these personae together, across languages, we create new means for expression and communication. We create potential to reevaluate and to transform.

And the call for transformation is always upon us, not only for ourselves, but for the world around us; the following writings are not mere exercises in creativity, but a call to consider different ways of thinking, a call to move past the flaws in existing structures and find other possibilities.

In reading on, you will encounter ripples against existing linguistic structures which may confine our thoughts unnecessarily. Some writers detail their movements from one culture to another, but never divest themselves of what they are; other writers bring languages together to consider their relative values and still others write about linguistic hegemony and take the opportunity to clarify the value of a language which may have been overlooked or intentionally suppressed.

In each instance, we see a familiar issue or idea but in new language, from a new vantage and thus insight.

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Personas Editorial Staff

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This year, the editorial staff would like to thank the submission readers, many of whom are faculty and took time from their spring breaks to ensure that we had an issue ready to print by our close deadline.

Молодец!

We'd also like to thank everyone who submitted. Without your stories, poems, visual art and essays to consider, we would have no journal, and our community would miss one more way of engaging with varied viewpoints, allowing the established, and well-rutted ideologies to take over, further prolonging our discord.

Thank you also to all our area supporters including Northtown Books, Booklegger, Eureka Books, Diversity Temple, and, especially The North Coast Coop who help with space rental as well as support for awards.

დიდი მადლობა

And of course, a resounding grazie mille to all of you for reading and engaging.

Que les vaya bien

Statement on Mechanics:

Personas selects writing based on what it communicates, not on how well edited it is. We publish writing in its original form without correcting mechanical issues unless they interfere with comprehension.

¿cachai?

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MY JOURNEY FROM A STRANGER TO A STUDENT AT COLLEGE OF THE REDWOODS

Thi Nguyen

Many people think moving to a new country is just about traveling across a vast ocean, and they don't consider what will happen to their lives. However, for me, the real journey started after I landed. I realized that there was a silent wall standing in front of me the wall of language and culture. As a legal immigrant, I had my documents, but I did not have my voice. I soon realized that language is a creative, invisible barrier that stands between me and my dignity. Day by day, working in a nail bar and caring for my son, I felt invisible to the world around me. My journey from feeling like an invisible stranger to a confident student was defined by a painful moment at a print shop and the kindness I found at College of the Redwoods.

Before I started my journey at College of the Redwoods, my life was defined by a silent border. At that time, back then, everyday, I worked in a nail bar to support my family. While I worked, I couldn't speak, and my voice felt trapped because of the language barrier. Sometimes I asked my clients questions, but they didn't understand. There were some people who understood me only a little bit. I remember a specific evening when I went to a local print shop to print a book, and I asked the employee if he could help me. He ignored me and did something else even though I knew he had heard me. He finished his work and stepped toward me with a cold look saying, "You see the scan code and could print this anywhere." I didn't understand because he spoke very quickly. What could I do? He looked down on me. I knew it and felt silenced. I faced a painful border. I felt so small

and disrespected; the mechanical screech of the printer sounded as if it wanted to swallow my soul. Ultimately, my book was printed at the staggering price of 70 dollars. That was my 'darkest' moment, when the wall of language left me feeling utterly isolated.

However, this very darkness became the motivation for me to change and to truly thrive, not just survive. I knew that the wall of language had to be broken, so I made the difficult choice to leave my job at the nail salon to focus on caring for my children and to enroll at College of the Redwoods. On my first day, the old fear of being 'small' followed me like a shadow. Yet, the atmosphere at the college was remarkably different. I met Jonathan Maiullo, an Academic Advisor who became my first guide across that border. Instead of the cold stares I had faced at the print shop, I found patience and encouragement. He never looked down on me as I struggled to find the right words; instead, he waited and listened. His kindness as he guided me through the enrollment process made me feel truly seen and understood for the first time in the nearly two years I have lived in the United States.

This kindness was not an isolated incident. I remember a staff member who gave me a USB drive as a gift. To me, it held a profound meaning; it was not just a small tool, but a bridge to knowledge and a tangible sign that I was welcomed. It proved that I was finally part of this community. My instructors followed this same spirit; they gave me the space to speak and to join the discussion. They did not just teach me English; they passed on knowledge, life skills, critical thinking, moral values, and guidance for my future. Most importantly, they gave me back my sense of self-worth. Every corrected sentence felt like a brick being removed from the wall that had kept me isolated for so long.

Reflecting on this journey, I realize that knowledge and kindness are the most powerful tools for crossing any border. The "dis-ease" I felt at the print shop was a necessary pain that pushed me toward growth. Today, I am no longer just a stranger working in a nail salon; I am a student with a voice. The border of language still exists, I still struggle and learn every day, but it no longer defines the limits of my world. I have learned that while society may impose borders on us, we have the power to redefine them, turning a place of discomfort into a foundation for a new, stronger identity.

OUTSIDER / INSIDER

Roselia Valencia

I first had interaction with English once I moved to live in the USA. I first read and heard about it. While I was on my way to my sister Silvia's apartment in Los Angeles, I saw signs on the freeway and on the streets. Some were big signs. I tried to read them but I couldn't. I didn't see signs where I came from. This was all new for me. When I went to visit my other sister Maria and her family I heard my nephew Eduardo and niece Esmeralda talking in English. I couldn't understand them. I said hola in Spanish but I noticed they don't talk much Spanish. They were speaking in English. I asked my sister Maria if they knew Spanish? She said yes but they spoke in English between them. It sounded weird. It was sounding like the mosquitoes flying around me in Mexico. I was thinking to myself what I put myself into. We went to the living room to talk. I was observing everything around me. Everything was different. Her apartment was a small apartment with two rooms, a kitchen and a living room. They didn't have a big yard to play outside like the one I have in Mexico. In Mexico, I lived in a house with three big rooms, a kitchen, bathroom and a big yard to play in. .

The next day, we had to go to the supermarket to buy groceries. I went to the supermarket with my two sisters Silvia and Rosaura. I saw all the signs around on the way to the store and in the store. I tried to read them but I wasn't able to read them. I felt like I was watching one of those novelas that I used to watch in Mexico. In Mexico, I didn't even have to go to the market. We had a person going around our town with his truck full of stuff to sell. He had fruit, bread and more. Everything was new for me. Then, in the store, I heard people and employees talking in English. I felt strange. I was not able to understand them. I was thinking and asking inside myself what I'm doing here. I'm in a place where I can't understand what people are saying. What

am I doing here? I felt lost and confused. It is hard not knowing what people were talking about and not being able to understand anything. How am I going to survive here? What am I going to do if I need to go to the store by myself without a car to drive or take the bus? This is not ok. I was exploring around without understanding anything. Feeling bad about my decision to leave my country.

It was time for us to pay. When we got to the register, I saw this young white lady behind the register asking if we were ready to pay. The American cashier spoke in English. I felt bad. I did not understand anything. I was questioning myself inside that I have to learn the language but I didn't know how. I had a lot to learn if I wanted to stay here. I told myself that it would be better just to go back to Mexico where everyone talks like you and understands. Thanks to my sister Silvia who knows and understands the language we were able to do it. I can't imagine not having anyone here knowing the basics in English. I will be totally lost. This was my first interaction in English at the register in the supermarket paying for groceries. That's how my first interaction with English was. It was strange. I wasn't able to understand anything that she was saying to us. I was looking at her. Trying to understand and see how she was moving her mouth. I was so concentrated staring at her. Inside of me, I wanted to know the language. Then, my sister said to help her to put the groceries in the bags. I did. The moment was so strange. My sister paid and we left.

When we were in the car, I asked my sister Silvia if she was able to understand what the cashier said. She said not everything but yes. I ask her how she learned it. She said she took English classes. You should take classes too. If you take classes you would be able to learn. She said that we should go to school before anything else. I felt I was too big to go to school. In Mexico, I barely finished sixth grade. We didn't have the resources to study. I was 23 years old, but I thought about it since everything was in English. After a while, I decided to learn the language. Every place I go I hear it. I wanted to be able to understand it. Instead of getting frustrated and not being able to understand what people are saying.

I started to go to school in Los Angeles. I went to school every day from Monday to Friday. It was strange to think that I had to go to school. I thought about what the school would be like when I was at-

tending it? That will be embarrassing. I didn't imagine that they would be adult people. Everything came to my mind. That night I cried and I wanted to go back to Mexico.

The first day of class was scary because I did not know anyone or speak any English. The class had a lot of students. The teacher was talking only in English. I didn't understand anything. I was with my little sister Rosaura. We were both scared and nervous. The class started. The teacher was giving directions for the book in English but I wasn't able to help myself. The class was Monday to Friday from 8:00am to 12:00pm. I sat down and listened without understanding anything. I felt that I was wasting my time. Every morning we had a routine. We had to say, Today is Wednesday January 14, 2004. She asked, what day is today? We all had to answer it. Sometimes she used to point people out and I hated it because I didn't know how to answer and I felt scared of students laughing at me when I said it wrong or something. It was hard but after time and a lot of practice I began to understand. I felt better because I started to understand a little bit. I had started to become an insider. I was able to say today's day and the ABC in English. Hello! I used to hear this word a lot even before I crossed the border. A friend told me that I will learn this word first. I did. Every morning as soon as we got to the classroom the teacher started the class saying Hello, and good morning students. Holding her cup of coffee in her right hand. I was having a hard time learning the language. Many times I thought about quitting but I didn't. I went back to the moment when my friends told me the first word I would learn is Hello and good morning. Now that I know and understand, I feel proud of myself to be able to understand and write English. I don't feel scared going to do my grocery shopping, take a bus or go to school because I am able to understand and speak some English. I am enjoying living and taking English classes because I am able to learn English and I have the opportunity to take online classes to learn more. I don't feel too old to learn and go to school. I am taking ESL classes at Mendocino College. I have the opportunity to study and work at the same time. I'm still not good at English but I'm here ready to learn and improve it. I am not scared or feeling that I am wasting time. I feel proud of myself because I'm able to write this now. I can speak and have a conversation. I make mistakes like anyone but I am able to understand others.

I have my own house now in Redwood Valley CA. All this time I have been persistent in learning the language. I've been taking ESL English classes since 2004. I go and back but I am here giving myself a chance to be something and be able to help my daughter to succeed. I am a single mom. My daughter is nine years old. I feel proud of myself for what I have been able to learn and do. Now, I'm able to watch movies in English and understand them. I used to watch novels in Spanish on Telemundo and Univisión.

I was living in Los Angeles CA. Then, I moved to Ukiah in 2012. I came to visit my uncle Jose. He had a kidney transplant. He needed help, so I decided to stay and help him. He didn't have anyone to help him full time so I was the only one who was able to help him. I started looking for a job. They were looking for workers at the field. I worked on the field picking grapes. Then, I got a job as a cashier at Chevron Gas Station. I thought I was improving my English language and it would be easy but it wasn't. It was not that much to work as a cashier. Customers came to ask for cigarettes or things. I was frustrated not being able to understand what they were asking me for. They called them by their names. I didn't know the cigarettes names. They had to point it out to me. It was terrifying. I thought that they would get mad at me or something. On my second day, I told my sister Elvia that I didn't want to go back. "She said, why not?" "I can't do it." "Yes, you can."

I worked there for 3 years. I memorized most of the things to be able to make this many years. Then, I moved to Home Depot. I thought it would be easier because I had some experience but it was not. It was another nightmare. I was asking myself why everything has to be hard. I was working as a cashier. One day at Home Depot I had to help a customer who was mad. He yelled at me because of my accent. I froze and I wanted to go home. I didn't want to stay there anymore. I wanted to go back to Mexico but I couldn't. All my family was living here so I had to learn the language. I wanted everything to be different and be able to understand it. I worked, and worked hard to be able to communicate with people and understand them. I stayed and learned how to use the Home Depot cashier system. I memorized most of the information and how to look up for items in the register. After that, I was able to give better customer service by answering the

questions and helping them get what they needed. I worked for Home Depot for five years. I stopped because of a car crash. I love my job and I learn a lot. It was a school for me.

As a result of adapting to life in The United States as a Spanish Speaking immigrant. The first experiences with English were confusing and overwhelming, from seeing street signs to interacting with family, visiting stores and attending school made me feel like an outsider. Unable to understand or communicate. Despite fear and frustration, I chose to take English classes and work hard to learn the language. I faced many challenges from school anxiety to difficult jobs where communication was tough—but remained persistent. Over time, I became more confident, gaining language skills, employment experience, and a sense of belonging and insider. Now, I'm living in Redwood Valley, CA. As a single mom, I feel proud of my growth, ability to help my daughter, and continued progress in learning English.

WHEN I FIRST MOVED FROM SALVADOR, BRAZIL TO LOS ANGELES

Fernanda Santos

When I first moved from Salvador, Brazil, to Los Angeles with my husband and my son. When I first arrived, everything felt new and overwhelming. I didn't only struggle with English. Before coming US, I knew very little English. I also tried to use Spanish because it is similar to Portuguese. Sometimes I mixed Portuguese and Spanish just to try to communicate. I was trying to survive with two languages at the same time. I wanted to learn English, but I also tried to use Spanish when I could.

I lived in Los Angeles for the first year and a half, and that time was very difficult for me. Many people were impatient. When I went to the DMV to get my driver's license, I felt a lot of pressure. Some people would say, "Only English. You are in the United States." It felt heavy. I already knew I needed to learn, but hearing that made me feel small and ashamed.

One experience in Los Angeles was very scary for me and changed how I felt about living there. One Friday afternoon, my husband had just left the apartment. My son was four years old and we were alone at home. Suddenly someone started knocking very hard on the door.

At first I thought it was my husband, so I told my son to open the door. But the knocking became louder and louder, so I told him to wait. I went to look through the door hole and I saw a man holding a hammer.

He was shouting many things in English, but I could not understand him. That made me even more scared because I did not know

what he wanted. I was worried about my son and I did not know if he had other weapons.

Suddenly my neighbor started shouting at him and telling him to stop. Later I learned her name was Annette. She told him she would call the police, and he finally left.

Later she told me the man was saying very aggressive things and threatening my son. This experience was very traumatic for me. After that, I did not feel safe living there anymore.

Because of experiences like this, my husband and I decided to move to Eureka later because my husband had friends here and we wanted a safer and calmer place to live. Moving to Eureka felt very different from Los Angeles. The city is smaller and quieter, and people were more patient with my English.

As a mother, I felt even more pressure. In Brazil, it is very common for children to go to each other's houses and have playdates. I wanted my son to have a normal childhood. But I kept thinking: How can I schedule a playdate if I can't communicate with the other mother? What if a child comes to my house and I cannot explain something? What if I don't understand them? That fear blocked me many times.

I started to feel defensive. I didn't want to speak because I was afraid of being judged. And sometimes the judgment came from people close to me. My sister-in-law had studied English before coming here. She had time, no children, and preparation. Sometimes she would comment about pronunciation or correct me in a way that felt like judgment. It hurt. I thought, if someone from my own family judges me, how will strangers treat me?

All of this created a big emotional block. Even today, there are situations where I can communicate well, especially about topics I am used to. But in arguments or difficult conversations, the words disappear. I feel frustrated. Sometimes I feel unfairly treated because I cannot fully defend myself in English.

When I moved to Eureka, things slowly started to change. I understood that I needed to step out of my comfort zone. I started speaking more, even if my pronunciation was not perfect. I realized that confidence grows with practice, not perfection.

Learning about writing rough drafts helped me understand some-

thing important. Fear of mistakes was stopping me — in writing and in speaking. When I allow myself to write without correcting every sentence, I feel freer. It reminds me that communication matters more than perfection.

I am still learning. I still struggle sometimes. But I am no longer completely blocked. I am stronger than I was in Los Angeles. I understand that learning a language is not only about grammar. It is also about emotion, confidence, and feeling accepted.

I have only been in the United States for three years. That is not a long time to adapt to a new country, a new language, and so many changes. Sometimes I forget that and I am too hard on myself. There are many expectations and pressures, but I believe I am on the right path. I am learning, growing, and becoming stronger every day. I know everything will work out. It is just a matter of time.

I WAS EIGHT YEARS OLD WHEN MY LIFE CHANGED FOREVER

Janet Martinez

I was 8 years old in 1989 when my life changed forever. I came to Fort Bragg California to live with my mom after 2 years without seeing her. I was very happy to see her again but sad to leave my small-town San Lucas Pio.

San Lucas Pio was a small town in Mexico where all the streets were dirt roads. My favorite thing to do there was jump in the puddles after a rainy day. I had just finished 2nd grade in a small school where we had small classrooms and old small tables and tiny chairs. Everyone in the school wore the same thing, the school uniform. My friends and I enjoyed running back home from school, and we loved looking at the clouds and finding figures and signs. We looked similar, we had brown skin, dark hair, dark eyes, and spoke the same language. I never knew how much I was going to miss my hometown.

I came to live in Fort Bragg CA and started to attend Dana Gray Elementary School, where I began 3rd grade. I was in a colorful new-looking classroom with new students. No one sounded or looked like me. The teacher and the kids had white skin, yellow hair and blue or green eyes. I knew it was going to be hard to understand or learn anything in this class with all of them speaking so fast. I felt lonely and out of place. I missed my old classroom and my friends.

It was my first day at school and Mrs. Bush was the teacher, she asked everyone to introduce themselves, and when she looked at me, she could tell I had no idea what she was saying. She pointed at this girl, her name was also Janet, she looked different than anyone in the room but didn't look like me either. She got close to me and asked me in Spanish to say my name to the class. I was happy and part of me relieved that at least one student was able to understand me. I introduced myself. I thought that they talk so fast, I will never be able to understand them or speak like them. A few months passed, I was

very happy to learn the numbers, and letters of the alphabet. I learned a few basic words like yes, please, excuse me, thank you... but did not learn enough to have a conversation because soon after I was sent back to Mexico.

While in San Lucas Pio, I went back to school[jm2] , but it was not until 9th grade that I had English classes again. It was more of the same basic knowledge that I had learned when I was in the US. This time I was attending school right outside of our local church. We had to start from zero, one teacher, and one group of students wanting to continue our education. While attending school, all of our class would organize events to benefit our school. We would ask local bands to play their music, and we would sell pins, drinks, and food to get money so we could start building our school. Just before graduating the 12th grade in high school, we collected enough money to buy a piece of land. We were all happy cleaning the property when I got a call from my mom saying everything was ready for me to move to the US.

It was 1997 after graduating from High School in Mexico when I came to Fort Bragg CA to help my mom take care of my siblings, two younger brothers and a two-year-old sister.

My mom was in abusive relationship with a guy that threatened her and told her repeatedly that she was not good for anything. Worst of all, my mom believed him,. She could only drive to work and back, she never drove to the next town, she would pay someone to take her to the next town if needed.

One day my mom's boyfriend started making jokes and he hit me for no reason, we called the cops, but neither my mom or I spoke English. When they showed up, I was scared. They were very tall and scary looking. One of them used a flashlight to look at my face, then they talked to my mom's boyfriend and left. We did not know why they didn't take him since we could not understand them, this situation made me mad, but I could not do anything.

After a few months, I got a job cleaning rooms in a hotel where the manager gave me many rooms to clean. She was always writing the time that she wanted me to finish them. She did this with other Mexicans and wanted us to help the white girls that had less rooms to clean. Again, this made me feel frustrated and upset because I could not speak the language to tell her what I thought. I decided to go to

school but my family in Mexico wouldn't send me my high school certificate, so I went to high school again.

My first day in high school I was with a group of students that didn't speak English. We were put in a class with a bilingual teacher, he gave us some papers and sent us to the library, He[jm1] told us to read and answer the questions but most of us were speaking Spanish and I thought that I am not going to learn English like this. Besides feeling unwanted, I felt segregated and I was a burden for the school. I did not want special treatment, I wanted to belong and to be treated equal.

I talked to the teacher and begged him to let me stay in his class where all the students were Hispanics but their English was more advanced. At first he said "no", but then I said "What if you keep giving me those papers but let me stay and listen in your class when I finish them? I can pay attention to your class". He agreed and soon after he told me to read a paragraph and told me that I had to explain what I read in front of the class.

For the first time I got in front of the class, I felt like I was shivering because of the amount of sweat running down my forehead, I was on fire, feeling horribly hot. To this day I don't know what I said because I could not understand myself. [jm2]

I started asking my classmates about the meaning of some words but most of them told me they did not know. I bought a translator with the pronunciation button and started translating every word, soon after it was some of my classmates the ones asking me to translate a word for them.

During the 10th grade, I was placed in an ESL class where all of us were speaking Spanish and I was not learning much. We spent a lot of time talking about novelas or whatever we did on the weekend. Don't get me wrong, I enjoyed talking to my classmates, I was comfortable, but I wanted to learn and realized I was not learning much. I asked the ESL teacher if I could take a regular English class but he said I was not ready. Next, I went to the office and talked to the counselor, I asked her if I can get into a regular English class which I soon did. To my surprise, I had better grade in the regular English class than the ESL class. What helped me learn was my determination and that 100-dollar translator that helped me translate.

After spending 3 years in High School I found out I could go to afternoon school to graduate faster and I did. I graduated in 2001 and helped my mom study for her citizenship. I remember it took 3 attempts for her to pass, but she did, and for the first time on that specific day I felt like an insider of the USA and the English language, because I helped her with the application and translated for her with the immigration attorney. It took my mom a very long time to get ready for her citizenship test since she only attended school until third grade, she barely knows how to write in Spanish, but she practiced her writing for about a year before she attempted to do the test.

Now what happened with my ex-stepfather and my mean boss? My mom and I were able to get a restriction order from the court house to keep him away and soon after he got in trouble and got deported. With my mean boss, I was able to tell her what I thought. The next time she told me to finish cleaning the rooms and go help the white girls I said no and I ask her why she always gave us Mexicans more rooms, rush us and then expect us to help the white girls who did not have as many rooms to clean? Soon after, I quit that job.

I started working in a nursing home where they offer a 6 week training to become a CNA. I began working as a Nursing Assistant and I have been doing the same job since then because it is something that I love doing. Now I have the ability to help more people from my community at the place that I work. I am certified to translate for our patients and I am constantly looking up new words from the medical terminology, but there is a lot of work to do still.

I am very happy to be an insider of the United States after becoming a US Citizen and learning English, but I have to say it was not easy since there are many words to learn, and it feels like I can continue to improve and learn every day. Now, for people that have two or 3 jobs it can be really hard, but it is very important to try and learn the language of the place we live in, especially to be able to communicate with others and to defend ourselves from unfair treatment.

Even though I think my accent makes it a little difficult for people to understand me, I don't think I will ever get rid of it because that accent is like my roots. I came from Michoacan Mexico and the accent I have is from my native language so I don't want to try and erase that.

A WOMAN REBORN

Tuyatsetseg Nadmidtseren

The streets of my native Arkhangai used to resonate like a symphony of life. The ringing laughter of children playing in courtyards, the warm, familiar hum of neighbors' chatter, the lively bustle of my students, and the rhythmic pace of my colleagues as they hurried through their workday... Those sounds were the heartbeat of my existence. To any outsider, I was a woman of enviable abundance—a respected teacher, a devoted wife, and a mother to a beautiful daughter. Yet, behind this glittering facade, I realized far too late that I had utterly lost the woman I once was.

I had grown far too accustomed to wearing the heavy mask of being “good” for everyone else. In my relentless pursuit of being the perfect mother, a caring daughter, and a selfless wife, I forgot to look into my own reflection. One day, staring into the mirror, a question pierced my soul: “What is love? Am I truly loved? Why does my husband never say those simple words to me?” At the time, I chose to deceive myself, shielding him with excuses: “He is a military man; he is stoic, and that is why he keeps his emotions under lock and key.” And so I remained, loving him through my own justifications, carrying a flickering candle of hope deep in the cold hallways of my soul.

To the outside world, we appeared to be a happy couple, but in truth, a strange, chilling silence greeted me the moment I crossed our threshold. Every time I said “I love you,” he would look at me as if I had done something bizarre or offensive—a memory that still sends a shiver through my heart. “There is no obligation to say it,” he would reply with a coldness that felt like ice. His words slowly locked the doors of my heart, snapping my self-confidence branch by branch like a tree in a winter storm.

We celebrated March 18th—Soldiers’ Day—with immense grandeur. Yet, around that festive table, there was never any room for my voice or my joy; instead, it was filled with his colleagues, countless bottles of vodka, and mindless chatter. As the alcohol flowed, his tem-

perament would shift, and bitter arguments would begin. To avoid provoking his sudden anger, I learned to shrink myself, completely forgetting who I was or what I needed to be happy. I was living like a “living doll,” a mere shadow moving only to suit his whims. In this storm of life, I forced a smile for the world, but the “me” inside had long since died.

But life eventually forced me to face the harsh truth. The cold declaration that he would leave me once our daughter reached adulthood, and the final discovery that for eight long years, my husband had been pouring all his love and resources into another person—in that moment, my world shattered. After the divorce, with my daughter away at university, I was left in a silence that was deafening. I tried to fill the void by throwing myself into my work, becoming the best teacher in the province. I had professional success, but every evening, the same hollow “silence” was waiting for me at home. I had gained the world, but I had not yet learned how to love myself.

On May 6, 2025, the music in my world stopped entirely. It was an ordinary weekend morning when everything turned upside down. A sudden crash, and then I was lying on the cold floor, covered in blood. “What did I hit? What is happening?” Amidst these fading thoughts, I somehow managed to call a friend—a pure instinct for survival. The doctor pronounced the words: “Brain Tumor.” In a state of profound despair, a silent scream echoed within me: “I don’t want to die!” For the first time, I felt the raw value of my own life. All those years spent sacrificing myself for a man who didn’t love me felt utterly meaningless in the face of such a diagnosis.

“Will I ever walk again? What if I become a burden, paralyzed and helpless?” This fear throbbed in my brain more painfully than the tumor itself. Just before surgery, when the nurse came to shave my head, the world seemed to come to a standstill. As my long hair fell to the floor in clumps, I felt as though my very identity was being stripped away. Staring at my reflection—pale, with a bare head—my heart broke: “I cannot face my daughter like this. She shouldn’t see her mother so broken.” While she waited with hope outside the hospital walls, I leaned against the window inside, weeping for the life I had wasted.

“What a loveless, cold life I have been enduring,” I lamented. Yet,

the moment I thought of my daughter's face, that resentment transformed into a fierce, maternal fire. "How will she survive in this world without me? No one can ever replace the warm love of a mother or that sacred connection of the heart." Determined not to let her see me in such a frail state, I fought my battle alone behind closed doors. Out of that solitude, a powerful new "Self" awakened. "No, I am the mother of such a beautiful child. For her future, I must rise. I still have so much to do. For all those years I spent without ever feeling truly cherished, I must be reborn and experience what true love really is."

As I was wheeled toward the operating table, I promised myself that I wasn't just leaving my illness behind; I was burying the old, weak "me" forever. Terrified that I might wake up having forgotten the names of those I loved, I recorded a video on my phone, stating my name and my story. That recording was the "will" of my old life and the "beacon of hope" for my new one. "Before the surgery, the doctor marked on my head where the incision would be. As the nurse administered the anesthesia, I looked around the room. The walls were green, and the metal instruments looked cold and terrifying before I drifted off into sleep..."

I woke from a dream of flowering Mongolian fields to the doctor's steady voice. As clarity rushed back and I reached out to touch my own body, an overwhelming joy swept over me. "I am alive... I am reborn. My name is Aisha," I whispered. Facing death gave me the courage to shed the wounds of my past like an old skin.

At the time, my parents and all four of my sisters were living in the United States. During this most difficult trial, though they were half a world away, I felt their presence in every breath. They constantly asked, "Should we fly to you right now?" But I held my ground, telling them, "I'm okay. Please, just stay put and wait for me." This was the greatest act of patience I could offer them. As my strength slowly returned, I set out on a journey to join them in Eureka, California. Wrapped in the warmth of my family's embrace, both my body and soul finally found the sanctuary I had craved for twenty years. It was in this peaceful haven that Sayan—the brightest light of my life—stepped into my world.

We had known each other as friends for years, but this time, our meeting felt like destiny. His warm smile and genuine care began to

dismantle the cold, thick walls I had spent a lifetime building. Sayan's love transformed me into a "renewed" woman, and for the first time, I truly understood my own worth. When I first stepped onto American soil, my hair was just beginning to grow back, soft like a newborn's. I felt deeply self-conscious, but Sayan saw me through a different lens. Each time he gently stroked my head and told me, "What a beautiful, perfectly round head you have," the shame inside me began to melt away like spring snow.

Sayan surprised me every single day with small gestures. When he would walk in with fresh flowers, for no reason at all, I felt what it truly meant to be a woman who is cherished. But when he finally said, "I love you," I was frozen with shock. Those precious words were met with the haunting echoes of my past. "Is this real? Is he just saying it to be kind?" I wondered. Seeing my hesitation, he simply smiled: "It's okay if you aren't ready to hear that yet. But I will continue to love you every day, regardless of whether you say it back." From that day on, he said it often, yet those three words remained locked behind my lips. My heart was a bird that had been caged too long; it didn't know how to fly yet.

Then came a certain rainy day in Eureka. Sayan arrived at my door shivering, drenched to the bone, yet smiling with a bright bouquet in his hand. After handing me the flowers, as he turned to leave, something inside me snapped. My heart pounded with a force I couldn't ignore. "I love you!" I cried out before I could even think. Those words, which I had guarded and feared for a lifetime, dissolved into the falling rain, marking the moment Aisha's heart was finally made whole. We were wed on the tenth of October. My new life blossomed in pure happiness, and now, we pass our days lost in a joy that knows no time and no silence.

But I am not someone who can sit idle. To navigate this new society independently, I decided to get my driver's license. Due to the language gap, I failed the written exam five times. Many told me it was too hard, but I refused to give up. Each day, I practiced relentlessly, translating the manual word by word, making the English my own. When I finally heard the words, "You passed," on my sixth attempt, I felt as though I had graduated from university all over again.

Fueled by that victory, I enrolled at the College of the Redwoods.

Finding that English classes were free for the community was a gift from life I couldn't ignore. Ravenous for knowledge and a voice of my own, I signed up for three different classes at once. I once stood at the front of classrooms in Mongolia, respected as a veteran teacher. Now, I find myself behind a desk once again—a student, learning the basics as if for the first time. I see this not as a step back, but as a priceless, golden opportunity to build a bridge to my new world.

Truly, life is abundant if you have the courage to see it. I am living proof that at forty-five, after facing death and heartbreak, one can start over and rediscover who they are. The illness, the fear, and the years of silence did not break me; instead, they fortified my spirit and allowed me to finally taste the true richness of existence. Now, when I look in the mirror, I no longer see just a “survivor.” I see a woman reborn—confident, free, and full of grace. How magnificent it is to rebuild myself, to craft the “Aisha” I am today using the wisdom and the scars of everything I have survived. My story is beginning anew, brighter and stronger than ever before.

“...I haven't just conquered an illness; I have conquered my fears and, finally, I have found myself. Now, I, Aisha, look forward with optimism to every new morning, eager to see how the rest of my life's journey will unfold with exciting adventures.”

FINDING IDENTITY

Maria E. Mata

I was born in a small town in Guanajuato Mexico, more than thousands of miles away. I never imagined that my destiny would take me to a place far from my homeland. I used to go to school in the morning, and in the afternoons, I helped my sister with her two children. In return, she paid my expenses. But my biggest dream had always been to Speak English. Therefore, I left my country, my family, and friends, to pursue the American dream. To look for a better life, like well-paid jobs and safe territory. But I never expected to face discrimination against my language. Gloria Anzaldua says, *“If you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language.”* My language is me. It includes my Mexican folklore and my complete identity. It hurts when I hear someone saying that I am not smart or polite, just for speak Spanish. Some people do not like to hear speaking Spanish because they do not understand it. I would like that teachers and students take some responsibility and make a slight change in the environment of English learners helping to diminish discrimination against us. I ask Standard English speakers for empathy, tolerance, and patience. Linguistic discrimination and the power of bilingualism, and the dream of teaching my children my language, have been important experiences in my life.

Linguistic discrimination has been one of the most noticeable forms of discrimination against Spanish speakers like me. Ph. D. John Baugh claims that “linguistic profiling” is too often use to discriminate and diminish equal opportunities to the non-Standard English Speakers. Baugh showed that Latinos and black Americans are discriminated against because of the way they speak English. For example, when they hear us talk English, they at once recognize us because of our accent and pronunciation. Linguistic discrimination results in a lack of opportunities, like better jobs, equity housing, and healthcare. Therefore, feeling linguistic discrimination makes us lose confidence to talk in public and thus, we often avoid social spaces because of fear of judgement and rejection. For example, one day when I went to Trader

Joes, a cashier told me that he did not understand what I was saying to him, and he made me repeat again, and again. After that, I realized that the cashier was racist, he discriminated me against my accent and pronunciation. The next time I went to that store, I ended up going to a different cashier. It should not be like that. This is unfair, especially when the cashier's job is to attend to people. Facing linguistic discrimination has never stopped me of speak English with my unique accent, even when I feel ashamed or powerless.

Another characteristic of my linguistic identity is the power and opportunities that come from being bilingual. Being bilingual is a privilege for me. Since English is a global language, I can communicate wide variety of people from all around the world. Natalia Sylvester a Peruvian writer confirms that being bilingual has given her the opportunity to help others. She has had the opportunity to volunteer and translate for Spanish speakers. Being bilingual to me has helped me and at the same time has given me strength and confidence to advocate for me and my children. For example, I used to have an interpreter when talking to doctors and teachers about my children, a resource that I do not need anymore. Speaking English as my second language has given me power and confidence to succeed in this country. Nowadays we can see influential people like Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez embracing her bilingualism and showing the importance of her two languages. As a Congress member she can advocate for us, and at the same time I can talk to her in my native language since she speaks Spanish; to ask for help about my needs and then she can share it in Congress. According to the National Institute of Health "Being bilingual enhances brain-power offering cognitive benefits like improve multitasking, better focus and delayed onset of dementia." In general, being bilingual for me has not been just the ability to speak two languages; it also has given me health benefits, confidence, and success and this Country.

As a first-generation immigrant, and Spanish speaker I have the responsibility to teach my children my language and culture. I want my children to be able to communicate with their relatives in Mexico as well that they can experience my culture and folklore through my language. Also, I want them to be bilingual because they can have better opportunities in life and at the same time they can help others. Since Spanish is the second most spoken language in the world, I want

my children to be part of the millions of Spanish speakers around the world. My children must take advantage of the privilege that they have grown in a bilingual environment. We are no longer living in a space where in the past speaking Spanish in public was punished. Gloria Anzaldua claims that in 1971 when she was a High-school teacher, the principal reprimanded her for speaking Spanish and she was forbidden to use Chicano texts. In recent years we have seen an effort in government and institutions to allow and accept the diversity of languages in this country. I want my children to feel free to speak English, Spanish, or Spanglish. I want to pass on my children my culture and Spanish language, also, I want them to feel free and do not feel ashamed of their Mexican heritage.

Overall, learning a new language is hard, but at the same time it is rewarding. It does not just have social benefits; it also has health benefits. Even when at the beginning of the process you feel ashamed of your pronunciation and unique accent, little by little, Speaking English will happen. I did not choose where to be born or which language to speak first. Therefore, I do not deserve to be judged and discriminated against by my Spanish language. Once again, I will not deny my Spanish language and Mexican heritage, to please someone who does not know me, to please someone who judges me only by my appearance. Despite my linguistic discrimination, Learning English has been one of my greatest achievements. Even when that will not change my identity, I have been decided, because I know that Speak English is an important tool to succeed in this Country. Listening my children speaking Spanish gives me comfort and pride. They are embracing and connecting with their Mexican heritage. I hope that teachers and Standard English Speakers find a motive through our stories and help us by providing a safe environment where we can continue learning and where we can let out our brilliance, power, and all that we can contribute.

THREE WORLDS, ONE JHESMIN

Jhesmin Zenteno Vargas

In my native country, Bolivia, I am a happy person with a loud and funny personality.

I am the one who makes everyone laugh at parties and talks with my hands to tell stories or dance with my cousins or grandparents. But three years ago, when I moved to the United States, I discovered how difficult it is to start everything from zero. Some people who have lived here all their lives don't understand the vulnerability of losing their voice. It feels like I am trapped in a version of myself that is not real or natural. Sometimes I prefer not to speak for fear of saying things correctly; I just prefer to nod with my head and smile. In Bolivia, I studied English in a classroom with books, so I thought my level was good, but the reality was very different. I realized that learning grammar is not the same as acquiring a language through participation. James Paul Gee explains this with his idea of Discourses. For him, a Discourse is more than just a language; it includes the way of speaking, acting, dressing and thinking that allows us to be recognized as part of a social group. He calls this an "Identity Kit," which is like a set of instructions for how to talk, behave and even what values to have so that a specific group recognized us as part of them. I began to notice these different "identity kits" as I move between three worlds: the "safe bubble" of my home, the everyday interactions with strangers, and the challenge of building a new academic identity in college.

In my home with my American family, language is a tool to build a "safe bubble" and a deep connection. This environment is what Amy Tan calls a "language of intimacy" in her article: *Mother Tongue*. She explains that the language we use at home shapes the way we see the world. While James Paul Gee would categorize my American family as a Secondary Discourse, since it is a community I joined after my initial upbringing, it feels as a primary one. Unlike a classroom, I acquired this 'kit' by participating in a community that accepts me. I came to learn their discourse: their language, values, beliefs, and routine. My experience

was special because I acquired English through daily routines. By helping with the kids and having dinner with them, I heard the same words every day. I remember playing “hide and seek” with the kids or sitting on the floor with Lego blocks. Every day I heard: “It’s your turn, ready or not here I come”, “Where are you hiding?”, or ‘Let’s clean up. Or when I used to help my host mom make the dinner and repeat the words; “please could you chop the lettuce, wash the tomato, boil the broccoli, please turn on, turn off the oven”. Because we did this every single day, the words started to feel natural in my mouth. When I made a mistake, they would just say the word again for me. This constant repetition was very helpful because it made me feel comfortable. I didn’t have to study a book; I just had to participate in our family life. Because they included me, I was able to acquire the language naturally. In this bubble, the connection was more important than perfect grammar. They kind of protect me from all the outside comments, but not in a bad way, they help me to build the skills to survive outside. They give me the tools to feel confident using my English. This not just by teaching me the words, but more about how life is in the United States.

Outside my home, the experience is different because I don’t always have all the required tools in my identity kit to be recognized by others. In the streets or stores, I didn’t have the correct “native speaker” kit, so people didn’t recognize me as part of their world. I spoke English with a Spanish accent. For some Americans, accents and Spanish reflect “less than” or “foreign”. Gloria Anzaldúa calls this hierarchy of languages “linguistic chauvinism, in which people judge others as superior or inferior based on the way they speak language. I remember when I just arrived here, I used to go to the stores for a cup of tea. At a specific time, I tried to order something else, but the cashier didn’t understand me. She just ignored me. There were more people there that could help me, but they just didn’t. They treated me like an outsider. It was not that they used their kit to attack me, but because I was different, they did not recognize me as a peer. Here is where the exclusion happens: when you don’t have the “correct” identity kit, people could judge your worth based on your accent.

This makes me feel as if I wasn’t being heard, as if my voice doesn’t have the same value as theirs.

Finally, the third part of my transition is the challenge of building a

new academic “identity kit” in college. According to James Paul Gee, a Discourse is like a set of instructions on how to act, talk, and even see the world within a specific institution. This is exactly why I feel “small” in my classes. It is not just about formal vocabulary; it is about learning how to discuss with peers, and how to give detailed explanations using terms like “evidence,” and “claim,” learning new rules that could change. For example, I was finally getting the hang of formal rules for academic essays, using evidence and claims, following one structure. I felt like I was winning the battle. But then, for this assignment, the teacher asked us to use free writing and be more personal. It feels like I have to change the chips in my brain again. Just when I think I have the correct instructions, the rules change and I feel like I am starting from zero. Because I am still learning how to navigate these different academic kits, the “playful Jhesmin” from Bolivia stays in the background while. I am in the process of building the tools to finally feel like I belong in this academic world and trying to figure out which version of me I need to be for each teacher. While some teachers would need me to be the silent, disciplined student who prioritizes order and listens more than they speak, other teachers encourage me to be an extroverted, high-energy participant; and still others push me to be a more analytical, critical thinker who digs deep to access and share the knowledge I bring.

In conclusion, my journey is a transition through three different Discourses. This process is not easy because sometimes my playful Primary Discourse and my formal college Discourse are in conflict. Before I use to think that I couldn’t be myself because of my proficiency in English, but I learned that I am not just learning a language with basic grammar and proper words. I am building a new, multicultural version of myself, in which I bring them together and powerfully. I am trying to recover my voice: the playful Jhesmin, who can talk without limits and fears in Spanish, and also can be the same fearless person in English, who can participate in class without panic or trying to organize and translate the words, have a good communication with my peers and just be me. I want to say that behind a broken accent, there is always a person working hard to belong, to be on the same page as the rest. In the future, I want to keep practicing my academic “tools” until I feel as comfortable in class as I do at home. I am proud to keep my Bolivian spirit while I grow in my new American life.

VOYAGE OF A DREAM

Olena K.

How many times in life has each of us dreamed about an exciting and extraordinary vacation, so you can tell your story afterwards and be proud of yourself; guide your friends through all the intricacies of a traveling routine as an expert, or maybe even make somebody jealous that you had such a great time.

It happened in the fall of 2013. I had my first trip to the United States. It was a dry and warm autumn in Kyiv and New York promised me the same weather. I put my blue jeans, T-shirt, and a pair of comfortable tennis shoes on, and to make sure I am well protected from the sudden weather change, I took my favorite leather jacket, as it would be good for rainy and windy days and has a look. My English skills those days were barely at the Ukrainian school program level, so I took my tourist's phrasebook and a small paper dictionary to help my communication with Americans. I felt I was ready to meet New York.

It began on a plane at the airport in Kyiv. First of all, the airlines had to stop the plane from pulling away from the gate because an elderly lady, one of the passengers on my flight, didn't feel well, so they had to open the doors, and take the lady off. After that adventure, my flight was late for the transit connection in London. Then I had only one hour left to jump on my next plane to New York. I was running through all the corridors and security checkpoints, and I made it successfully, except, the surprise was waiting for me on the other end at my destination point.

When the plane landed in New York, I walked like all other passengers to the baggage claim, and guess "what"? I didn't find my suitcase. Even after one hour of waiting, it didn't pop out from that little opening on the carousel. It turned out that I made it to my flight on time, but my suitcase didn't. I only had my purse on me with my passport, cellphone, lipstick, and luckily, my money and credit cards. My carry-on bag, where I thoughtfully kept the fragile surprise for my friend in Florida, had nothing for me; no extra clothes, no hairbrush

or toothbrush, not even a spare set of underwear. You would ask me, “How did I end up with such a strange set of belongings?” My school best friend moved to the USA with her parents years ago, and, finally, we had an opportunity to see each other again after all this time. So, her mom left behind their family inheritance crystal set, and I was the lucky one to bring it on the way. Of course I couldn’t say NO, especially after they kindly offered me to stay in their beach house for a week, and it was a small favor to fulfill.

My next destination was a Niagara Falls tour. What could I do? I opened my tourist’s phrasebook and dug for advice. Yes! It has a section “At the airport”, and here it is; “Lost luggage.” I came to the assistance and read, “I cannot find my suitcase.” Could you help me please?” And, oh magic, they understood me, and gave me instructions for my next step, but, I couldn’t understand a word from their speech, also, it wasn’t the same answer that my phrasebook had as an example. I was standing and looking at the assistant with an expression of complete incompetence on my face. She probably had this experience every day; she pointed with her finger to a further right corner behind the carousel, hinting at the direction I needed to go, and turned away from me. “Thank you kind lady,” I said to myself and headed to the corner. The next challenge didn’t make me wait too long; an assistant in the window handed me two pages written in English, of course, NO translation, of an application to fill in. I did the first part pretty easily: my Name, my Second Name, the number of my flight. Now the hard part; name the items you had in your lost luggage. My dictionary was the first thing that came to mind. I could’ve definitely used it right now, but it happened to be one of the lost items from(in) my suitcase. I wrote everything I remembered from the school program: pants, shirts, socks, a hairbrush and a toothbrush, a book. The assistant-lady gave me a scorned look and asked, “You came to the US to read books?” I nodded like a dog who understands the master but can’t speak a human language. She took my application and said something about a hotel and they will contact me. After that, I headed to the bus station. Honestly, I already said goodbye to my favorite things I brought with me on my vacation.

When I made it to the bus station, our tour guide, Gulmira, handed me a schedule. We will have two stops at the Indian reservations

for food and souvenir shopping on the way to Niagara Falls, and on the way back we will have a stop for lunch at a Chinese restaurant. The next sentence says, "Take warm and comfortable clothing with you; the daytime temperature is 55-65 F and nighttime is 35-45 F." I forgot to mention, my flight from Heathrow to JFK landed at 3 a.m. and my tour bus picks up at 6 a.m., so no shopping for me yet. I was hoping to get my necessities at the souvenir shop or a gas station. It seemed like she read my mind immediately, as she said, "I hope everyone has a spare pair of shoes for a Niagara boat trip, if not, there may be something left in the Pucumtuk Indian shop. It is the end of the season."

On our first stop, I left all the other tourists from my group behind running to the shop, but, to my big surprise, I was overpassed by previous groups, which didn't leave much for me except one pair of man's shoes size 12. The only choice of clothes was a handmade Indian blanket with a price tag of \$150. It was equal to my three-day food budget, but I didn't want to freeze, catch cold, and be sick until the end of my vacation. So be it, I got the blanket.

We arrived at Niagara Falls National Park with a sunset. It started to get cold and humid quickly, and I was very happy to have my blanket on me. I couldn't wait to see Niagara Falls and our tour was scheduled for tomorrow morning, so I snacked away from my group to run to the main viewpoint. No one picture from commercial booklets could've transferred a spectacular and breathtaking image expanded in front of me. A huge, enormous amount of moving cascades of water was coming to the edge of a cliff and rolling down like a roaring giant, like an old hidden spirit awaiting to be freed for thousands of years. I was speechless, the guardian of all the eternal secrets of the Earth, he was sending a message to everyone who was brave enough to approach, "I was here before you walked this Earth and I will be here after you perish away." That's how I felt standing in front of this immense force of water; water which traveled through every single cell on the Earth and has known every secret from billions of years ago on the planet. I felt like a little sparkle which flashes for a split second in the Universe compared to this greatest picture of Mother Nature.

Everything that happened to me in the last 24 hours started losing its importance...

THE POMEGRANATE TREE

Xochitl Garcia

I am a 3rd generation Mexican, and Spanish was my first language. However you would never guess it now, I practically forgot it all. My grandparents were both born, met, married and had children in Mexico. They loved Mexico but there was no work, no income, no way to provide for their children. My grandpa made the difficult decision to emigrate to the United States alone to find work. His first job was being a dishwasher, spending as little as he could to save and send to his wife and children. After lots of sacrifice, he earned enough money and was able to bring my grandma, my aunt and my uncle over. They eventually moved into the home they have today, after my grandma gave birth to my dad and then my other uncle. She loves to grow plants and got to work immediately on her new backyard. Today, she has a beautiful garden where she picks fresh fruit and veggies from and everyone who had ever seen it before it was worked on says the change is incredible and completely unrecognizable. I'm curious about the change and I wish I could see how it was before she brought nature back into the world.

She also planted a pomegranate tree. I only knew the tree when she was already big, and covered in glossy green leaves, blooming tons of fruit but she was her first grandbaby, since then she has had 9 other grandkids who she has loved attentively. As a kid, I spent a lot of time with my grandma, it was an escape, it was peaceful. She was a stay at home mom for her children and then for her grandchildren. Naturally I spoke Spanish because I spoke it with her. At school I couldn't find the words because I only knew them in Spanish.

My grandma always saved me the best pomegranates and my grandpa would pick the seeds out so they were ready for me. To me these moments were so special because I had felt so loved even when I wasn't there. As I got a little older, situations had drastically changed for me and I didn't see my grandparents as much and I began to forget my Spanish. However there was one word I didn't know how to say in English for the longest time, which was pomegranate.

No one ever talks about pomegranates and when I realized I didn't know the word was during a conversation with my friends when I was far too Americanized. My whole vocabulary was in English and I didn't know this word. I had to describe the fruit, not a cherry, not a strawberry, it's a big, bright red fruit with a little flower on top, you peel it, pick the seeds out and eat them!

Today my grandma is taking care of her youngest grandbaby who is 3 and my grandpa still goes to work but as a welder. Both are also United States citizens after years and years of waiting. Pomegranates have always and will always make me think of my grandma and all that my grandparents have done for our family.

MY FIRST LOVE

Chong Geyer

You are my first love. You carried me for nine months and gave me life. You gave me unconditional love no matter if I was sick or sad. You were always there for me. You worked at the farm in that scorching hot weather in the summer time, and at night tried to tie the Shibori knot so you could provide for me..

I know that through all your pain and suffering you are a selfless person. If I asked you to move the mountain you would move it for me. I know there's nothing you wouldn't do for me. You don't need to say how you feel because I already know that and beyond.

It is not about how much you can give me, but about how hard you tried – sometimes only just a one spoonful of the rice was all you could give me. As a mother you wished you could do more for your kids but your resources were limited so it was OK. I don't blame you for hardships, and you did best that you could. I remember even in those days, I knew you could not give something that you didn't have, so how could I blame you? Moreover I admire your strength and courage to never give up on me.

When I was young, I never heard you say that four letter word to me, but it's OK. What is the true meaning of the word "love"? For me love is not empty words, it is about actions. And you have shown me all throughout your lifetime, enduring hardships. I remember it was in my 40s when I first said it to you. I said I loved you, and how awkward it was for me to tell you this – I wasn't raising in this kind of environment.

This is very simple word, but I did not hear it when I was kid. Now I have grown up, I wanted to tell you how much I love you and how much you mean to me. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you. I wish I could have told you every day back then, because you are the apple of my eye.

When I was young you took care of me. But now I am older, I feel like you are my kid. After I went to visit you and got ready to leave you, I felt like I left you on the shoreline. I would always worry about

how you were doing or if you were safe. And who would take care of you when you got older?

I always wished I was there to love you and take care of you, but you were so far away from me, and this is one of the biggest regrets, that I was not able to take good care of you when you needed me the most. In my wildest dreams I never ever thought we would be separated so long.

It has now been ten years since you've left this earth. In 2016 late January I got a phone call from my older brother saying that mom's doctor told him my mom don't have much time. She was going to die soon, so he informed me. And I flew to Incheon airport.

As I got closer to the airport, I felt enormous sadness and I just wanted to cry and I didn't know why I felt this way. I never experienced anything like this, I couldn't even describe how it made me feel. The only thing I can tell you is that my soul was crying from inside. I was trying to control myself - not to lose it front of so many people.


When I arrived at the airport at 5pm, I called my brother, and he told me my mom had already passed away at 5am. I was 12 hours late. When I went to take care of my mom, I didn't expect to lose her. I will never forget how it made me feel. I couldn't even think straight. I lost my mind that evening. And I went strait to the mortuary to discuss with my brother because he had already planned to cremate her. I explained to him that my mother wanted to be buried, and after a couple hours, he said OK.

In her life she only had one wishes when she died: she wanted me to bury her where there was lots of sunlight, not nearby water. And I promised I would give her her wish no matter what, or how much it would cost me. Although my brother didn't agree with me, but I didn't care, because I made a promise to my mother when she was alive and I would keep my promise.

Now, mother, I buried you on a sunny mountain side and away from the water, so I will see you soon. When I see you next time, I will welcome you with my open arms and love you, and take good care of you. You won't have to worry or lift a finger - this is my promise to you now. Now you are with me, and you still guide me from other side. Now I can only see you through my dreams.

When I lost you, I know my tears will be turned into ocean. Losing you was the most difficult thing I ever experienced. I cannot even find the right words to describe how empty my life is, but I am not worried because I believe I will see you very soon when the time comes. Now I wanted to say thank you for loving me. It's because of your love that I am who I have become today. Because of you, I wanted to be a better person. I don't want you to feel that you wasted your time on me.

I know you gave your life for me. I know I am not perfect, but I can always strive more for personal growth, so you can be proud of me someday. I love you.

Love, 
사랑

BALADA DE DOS MUNDOS

Audrey E Baeten-Ruffo

Sombras de manos.

Sombras de oro.

Hands or iron, makers of, or suffering

Camina Audrey.

Camina.

Una abuela llega del otro lado del mar.

El idioma la corta en dos—

una mitad muda, la otra cansada.

Las calles no la entienden.

Las caras no la miran.

แต่เธอยังเดินต่อไป (dtae ter yang dern dtor bpai)

But she keeps walking.

ในกระเป๋ของเธอมีรูปถ่ายเก่า (nai grabpao kong ter mee ruup tai gao)

In her bag, an old photograph.

จดหมายไม่มีคำตอบ (jod-mai mai mee kam-dtop)

A letter without reply.

Trabaja en un taller lleno de ruido,

cosiendo para cuerpos que no son el suyo.

El vapor le arde en la piel.

บางครั้งเธอร้องไห้เบาๆ (bang-krang ter rong-hai bao bao)

Sometimes she cries softly.

เพื่อไม่ให้ผ้าเปียกน้ำตา (peua mai hai paa bpiak nam-taa)

So the fabric won't get wet with tears.

Un abuelo se levanta antes del sol,

Una estrella generacional
camina hacia la fábrica de cámaras,
donde la luz vive encerrada
en pequeños cristales.

His hands build the world's vision,

แต่ไม่มีใครมองเขา (dtae mai mee krai mong kao)

But no one looks at him.

Los dos se encuentran en un país de inviernos,

hablan poco,

aman mucho.

Tienen un hijo.

Un hijo que sonríe distinto,

que ama sin permiso.

Y el abuelo baja la vista—

¿no soñó él también con ser visto?

Las manos que tejieron el futuro
aprenden a sostenerlo con orgullo.

เรียกเขาว่าลูกชายของฉัน (riak kao waa look-chai kong chan)

She calls him my son.

เรียกเขาว่าหัวใจของฉัน (riak kao waa hua-jai kong chan)

She calls him my heart.

Del otro lado,

brillan vitrinas,

rostros suaves,

copas que suenan como promesas.

Ahí camina Audrey,

con la herencia del esfuerzo

convertida en elegancia.

El lujo la viste,

แต่ความทรงจำเดินเคียงข้าง (dtae khwaam-song-jam dern kiang-kang)

But memory walks beside her.

Los abuelos dicen:

—Nosotros fuimos la raíz.

Ella responde:

—Yo soy la flor.

และเราทุกคนคือต้นไม้ (lae rao thuk-kon kheu ton-mai)

And we are all the tree.

Walk, Audrey.

Walk.

Shadows of hands.

Shadows of gold.

One single blood.

One single story.

That travels.

That loves.

That shines.

That remembers.

DIASPORA: TOWARD A LIVING ROMANISTAN

Des Valenzuela

This is not the museum piece they want from us.
This is not heritage frozen in folklore, curated and consumed.
This is not the token seat at the table built from our bones.

Diaspora is a map, yes—
but a drom (*road, path*) that builds the world it sketches.

A Romanistan not of borders and passports,
but of kitchens where the lights stay on,
locks that hold,
languages whispered in lullabies,
braids that carry seeds of resistance.

It is a homeland carried in pockets and scars,
a homeland written into songs,
into tattoos,
into the stubborn act of staying alive.

This Romanistan does not ask permission.
It does not need recognition from states, NGOs, or hashtags.
It declares itself in every act of survival that becomes joy,
in every refusal to vanish,
in every body that says *yo pertenezco porque existo* (*I belong because I exist*).

To decolonize is to refuse their maps.
To refuse tokenism is to build our own.
Diaspora is not an anthem—
it is the tierra (*earth, homeland*) itself.

MY CULTURE

Cinthia Hernandez

My culture is a sea that flows
under the sun, the air, the warm sand,
the swaying of the palm trees marks
Every beat of my heart.

Seeing the waves of the sea move towards the
horizon where dreams mix with the breeze
where the foam sings in each wave
stories and journeys of our ancestors.

Each word that blankets us like colorful
fabrics stitched from memories
where the past embraces the present
where the smells of the kitchen are
a feast of flavors while grandmothers
prepare a broth.

The murals that tell stories of yesterday.
Colors that vibrate in my heart. The
festivals with paper lights, dancing and
singing in the plaza, the laughter that
mixes with the music.

My culture is like a tree that knows
no borders-- it is like a song that frees
souls in a union of struggle for
what is ours, for what is sacred,
toward our destiny. I am from
the water. I am from the wind. I
am from the fire. I am from the
Earth.

A RESPONSE TO KA VANG'S "I AM THE EXTRAORDINARY HMONG"

Pakou Her

Enormous green
mountains and high peaks
I am not ocean or urban
I am high mountains, rural person
I am rice, not beans or tomatoes or corn.

I remember a field over the mountains with
a little bamboo house. I see smoke coming out
of the little home's chimney in the morning.

I hear dogs bark, roosters crow early in the
morning from the village and birds singing from the forest.
This is music I heard every day when I was a child.

We are gorgeous without make-up. We have
brown and round eyes like a full moon shining
at night. Our cheeks and lips are pink as water
lilies. Our hair is black, thick, long and straight
like a big river rushing with no sound. We are not
smart, but we are wise and have wisdom inside
our backpacks.

*Note: Every person, every nationality, has something different and
valuable inside them. Don't judge them by their appearances. You
might want to say "I apologize" after you know them well.*

HOW LONG HAVE I SOUGHT TO CALL THEE MY HOME

Ishika Sidhu

How long have I sought to call thee my home
A land where I can truly, freely roam
And place my eternal fire's spark
And when I no longer remain:- leave my mark
Although I have walked thy streets
The same song always repeats
Yet, within my heart, lies a constant beat
That I may never accept this defeat
And in the end when I arrive to the west
Those that pass by me do loudly attest:
"There goes the woman that we call DREAMER
God, I wish that Hell just go keep her."

आखरि मैं क्या हूँ?

WHAT AM I AFTER ALL?

Meenu Taneja

आखरि मैं क्या हूँ? क्या? क्या मैं कुछ भी नहीं हूँ? क्यों नहीं, कब तक? या मैं सब कुछ हूँ? नहीं, सब कुछ नहीं, पर मैं कुछ हूँ। आज नहीं, पर कल हो सकता हूँ। तुम्हारे लिए नहीं, तो क्या? पर अपने लिए मैं सब कुछ हो सकता हूँ। इसलिए: मैं क्या हूँ?

After all, what am I
What? Am I nothing,
Why not until when?
Or am I everything
No, not everything but
I am something
Not today, but can be tomorrow
Not for you, so what?
But for myself I can be everything
That is why: what am I?

TÚ YA NO ESTÁS

Pedro Cantú

La luna se desvela junto a mi sueño
los luceros parecen parpadear,
tu sombra en mi mente está presente
y la música de tu voz me hace soñar.

No sé cuánto he llorado en silencio
no sé cuánto he brindado sin asombre,
cuando pienso en los momentos tan hermosos
cuando escucho las letras de tu nombre.

La luna me susurra suavemente al oído
tu nombre con opaca claridad,
el vino oscurece tu imagen de mi mente
y mi alma se lamenta que no estas.

La copa entre mis manos se desvanece
el vino que estaba, ya no está,
mis ojos entristeces suavemente
y mis pensamientos pierden claridad.

De repente te miro nuevamente
y mi alma se desvela de ansiedad,
creyendo que mis ojos encontraron
tu imagen tierna que me da felicidad.

Busco y busco en los rincones de mi mente
abro mis ojos para ver con claridad,
me canso de andar buscando ansiosamente
y me doy cuenta de que, tu ya no estas.

WHEN MY TIME WAS UP

Jonathan Chibuike Ukah

Reflecting on the glory that departed,
I remembered the things I saw in my town
that reminded me of how slow I saw the end
of my journey in this uphill city of blood.
How the skin of trees dried up like thirst,
turning grey and brown in the middle of Spring,
salt seeping into the sea, smelling of the salt,
The sky was a pitch of sinking stain,
wearing grave clothes at all times of the day.
The birds were silent in their nests.
chickens huddled together in their barns,
as though some hounds lumbered in grass,
waiting for them to sneak out at night.
I saw the buoyancy of the flowers fall
like stars cascading down the pond

where snakes, pythons and vipers yawned,
for the next victim to quench their thirst.
Our rivers have turned to pools of blood,
where only vultures visited at midnight;
they too, were prey to the crocodiles,
hunting down fish that no longer swam.
Pitch dark was the climate of the town,
known for boisterous rolling and rocking
at such times that men went to sleep,
but now fear was the naked visitor in town.
The language of leaves and flowers
turned into invectives and dismal fowl,
even the occasional celebration of children
morphed into mourning at the break of dawn.
I saw three fingers poke out of the clouds,
their nails bleeding, blackened, bad blood;
I knew it was time for me to disappear,
and seek my forgiveness beyond my pain.

GRACIAS A TONANTZIN

Luna H. Bogart

Hay un dicho en maya que se traduce a
"Tu eres mi otro yo"
IN LAK'ECH ALA K'IN

Respiro pa fuera y me recuerdo
Que todos son una extensión de mi
Inhalo y el olor de copal llena mis pulmones
Y escucho la repetición del huehuetl

Los danzantes
La diosa
Sagrada lenguaje de mis abuelos
Purepecha
Maya
Azteca
Nahuatl
Sangre indígena
Vibra dentro de mi
Dandome visiones
Ilusiones de nuestro mundo
Antes de 1492
Y le pido a Tonantzin
Perdón que cree que la brujería era del diablo
creado en el infierno
Y ahora entiendo la manera que conquistaron mi
mente totalmente

Malditos

Buscando y no encontrando lo que busco
Porque realmente no busco a nadie
Nomás me busco a yo misma
Me recuerdo en cada paso
Paso a paso
Mano en mano con mis paisanos unidos
Tu eres mi otro yo
IN LAK'ECH ALA K'IN

Y ofrezco mis gracias a la virgencita
A Tonantzin que nos a protegido desde antes de
1492

ON THE RESERVATION

Laurie Nicole

Reservation winds carry honor like smoke,
 raising embers of love that refuse to fade.
Our cultural memory walks beside us, each step a promise to restore
what generations guarded through pain and fight.
Our elders stand steady at the edge of memory.
Their words and teachings, strong enough to hold the world together.
They show us that love is a lineage,
 passed hand to hand, heart to heart.
The babies crawl and laugh at their feet, tiny sparks of tomorrow.
Their joy reminds us that every sunrise is a promise.
We stand in sovereignty, steady as cedar,
with dirt on our feet, and every small hand
is a future being shaped.
Our families move through each day,
caring like the woodpecker's constant, steady, protective
keeping the heartbeat of the people strong.
Above us, eagles in the air
when the world presses down, we rise
we remember our strength, high, unbroken, focused,
seeing the land the way our old ones saw it:
Whole, sacred, ours.
And the salmon, cycling round, and round,
teaching us that return is a kind of strength:
To endure, to keep moving even when the waters rise against us.

Their journey is our story too.
The courage that never left us.
And when we must defend,
when we must speak our truth, we stand roaring like the bear
rooted, fearless, protecting all we love with a voice that echoes
through the pines and generations.
Our ceremonies glow like embers carried forward,
 lighting the path for generations.
Songs rise, drums speak, and stories weave themselves
by every voice that refuses to be forgotten.
We move through the seasons with purpose,
hunting not for conquest, but balance, survival.
Fishing with gratitude for every life offered.
Water running through the land speaks the oldest language we know,
telling us where healing still lives, where memory still grows.
All of it
the elder's wisdom, the baby's laughter,
families caring like woodpeckers,
eagles rising, salmon returning, protecting like bears,
rooted forever, ceremonies burning forward
the holding of our names woven together, strong as braided beargrass,
enduring as the spirit of our people.
And still we rise.
And still we love.
And still we belong.
Here, in the circle of all things, we are never alone.
This land remembers us, just as we remember it.

FAREWELL OF AN IMMIGRANT CHILD

Renata Dumitrascu

Farewell curtains, farewell pillows
Farewell to linden trees and willows
Farewell to friends and bonds I cherished
Farewell to all the hope that perished
Farewell to streets where I roamed free
Where there's no longer room for me
Farewell to language and belonging
So much that's real, and will be dreams
Hello to restlessness and longing
Inheritance of bad regimes
Hear ye, hear ye
Farewell to country and relation
All homeless souls will be my nation

ANYONE YOUNGER

Douglas Jornlin

For my sister Debbi

Run your fingertips
without hurry
down the back cobble skin
of toads and wait
for another year.
Turn around to swallow
the next rain before it falls
and continue turning:
before your breath catches you
easily and unguarded—old,
before the night ring
of night sounds hobble off
to fall asleep inside the trunks
of already sleeping trees,
before the earth seeps away
the moisture of dwarf crystals
in glass pane webs,
before the children
of unborn seasons
steal the frost off your grave.

BEYOND BALLS, BEYOND WORDS

Aaron P. Ge

百花齐放 ——李汝珍《镜花缘》

Let all flowers bloom –Li Ruzhen Flowers in the Mirror

“English is a primitive language with inherent flaws. For example, in China, you can easily tell that *pú táo jiǔ* is made from *pú táo*. But in America, many don’t know that. Why? Because in English, *pú táo* is called ‘glape’ and *pú táo jiǔ* is ‘wine’; these are separate words and must...”

“Hogwash!” Lin Xiu sneered, putting down her phone, “Douyin is going downhill thanks to these idiots—duller than TikTok ever, nowhere near.”

The screen dimmed, only a slow, rhythmic “dong-dong” remained in the tiny apartment—the sound of a wooden mallet rising and falling, echoing from the kitchen as dusk light slanted through the window. Grandma Li, fresh from Wenzhou, bent low over the countertop, pounding croaker into a silken paste. Her Mandarin was patchy, let alone English—conversations with Xiu only existed in a limbo of hand gestures, and Xiu’s half-remembered and broken hometown snatches.

She grabbed a handful of fish paste—its sheen catching the golden hue, shimmering like crushed mother-of-pearl mingled with thinned honey—and chattered: “鱼^{ngy} 圆^{yv} 着^{dji} 用^{ion} 嫩^{noe} 显^{xi} 搭^{taq} 搭^{taq} 的^{gheh} 鱼^{ngy} 鲜^{si} 啊!” Her gnarled fingers pressed the paste gently; it bounced back, firm yet yielding. “落^{lo} 镬^{huo} 焗^{vu} 到^{teh} 两^{lo} 头^{the} 尖^{tisi}, 中^{tson} 间^{ka} 胖^{pho} 便^{pie} 好^{ho}—吃^{ci} 在^{tsai} 嘴^{tsei} 里^{li} 弹^{da} 牙^{nga} · 闻^{men} 着^{dji} 透^{theu} 鲜^{si}!”

Sitting at the table, Xiu scribbled in her notebook, trying to get those words. But her pen kept stuttering—it was the nuances that she couldn’t quite capture. Elusive, “*noe xi taq taq*” couldn’t be forced into

“very tender”—the “xi” and “taq taq” harbored a lushness and jauntiness, carrying a raw, uncompromising vividness, like Grandma’s way of loving things fiercely. “Da nga” was more than “chewy”, it was the spring of the fish, the resistance that gives way to a burst of succulence and juiciness. And “ngy yv”? Its nasal resonance got lost in “fish balls”, like picking a dewy flower and drying it into a pressed bloom—retaining the shape, but drained of all its vitality.

“细si¹ 因na⁸, 食si¹ 饭va⁴ 噱ia!” Grandma’s voice roused Xiu from her thoughts, Li emerged from the kitchen, holding in her hand was a white porcelain bowl, tendrils of mist curling up to her cheeks. “尝dji¹ 尝dji¹ 看kha⁸ 阿a⁴ 婆bu² 的gheh⁶ 手shy⁸ 艺ngi⁸, 鲜si¹ 得teh⁸ 你n¹ 会hue² 跳thie⁴ 起chi⁵ 呐na!”

Setting the bowl gently in front of Xiu, Li dabbed her brow with the back of her hand, casting a soft shadow that tempered the luminous amber of the clear broth, with emerald scallions sprinkled across the surface; bathed in were jade-white strips—some resembled silkworms curled in repose while others unfurled like half-bloomed plum blossoms, their margins frayed into fine, petal-like filaments—glowing with an ethereal luster as if carved from submerged ivory.

“这tsa⁸ 是z² 我ngu² 屋oh⁶ 里li¹ 福hu¹ 气chi⁵ 菜tsai⁸ 哟io!” said Li, sitting down across from Xiu.

“什shén 么me ‘福hu¹ 气chi⁵ 菜tsai⁸’ 哪na, 外nga⁶ 婆bo²?”

“鱼ngy² 圆yv¹ 听tīng 起qǐ 同tóng ‘余Yú 圆Yuán’—年nián 年nián 有yǒu 余Yú, 事shì 事shì 圆Yuán 满mǎn.” Her voice grew solemn as her calloused finger traced the rim. “你n¹ 妈妈mama 考kho⁸ 试si¹ 前tsi⁴ 头deu² 吃ci¹ 个ka⁸, 你n¹ 舅舅jiù-jiu 要gio¹ 出tshy⁸ 国ko¹ 也ja² 吃ci¹. 好ho¹ 运y³ 啊a, 就tsiu¹ 勒leh⁶ 弹da² 牙nga¹, 勒leh⁶ 透theu³ 鲜si¹ 里li¹!”

Several days later in class, Lin Xiu poured all this into her essay—Ngy yv, Da nga, Theu si and the homophonic blessing—like weaving a fragrant sachet with every colorful thread of her childhood memory, embedding the fragrance within. But it was slashed through by Professor Tisdale’s scarlet pen, a D at the top, and a comment at the bottom.

“Literary writing demands strict adherence to an established framework that resonates with most people. Your linguistic choice indulges in unrecognizable dialect phonetics and obscure indigenous idiosyncrasies, catering only to a niche instead of the majority. Remove and rewrite purely using universally comprehensible expressions, and I will

reassess your grade.”

“Hey, what are you looking at?” said Mia, her friend; slinging one arm loosely over Xiu’s shoulder, she swept over the page. “Cool story, but what are those weird words underlined?” she giggled, “Look like secret codes for cracking.”

Xiu stared at the paper, biting her lips. Should she sand away the rough edges of her mother tongue, and smooth out the dialect’s cadence so her work could be standard—fluent as tap water, clear as a windowpane, yet void of the terroir of home and traces of her own? These thoughts pressed down on her like a stone, leaving her constricted as if caught in a vice. Her fingers curled into the edge of the paper, crumpling the corner, as if clinging to the echo, so fragile that would fade away at the slightest breath.

“Well, they uh...they’re little pieces of my home.” Xiu sighed, “I feel stupid, maybe they just don’t belong here.”

“Nah, it’s him being stupid, y’know, Tiz the Tough.” said Mia, squeezing her shoulder gently, “Your writing’s great, feels real, could use a little hint tho. Anyway let’s go or we’ll be late.”

On the weekend, at Grandma’s insistence, Lin Xiu accompanied her to the market. Javier, the vendor, was a warm-hearted Mexican with sun-kissed, tawny skin. Beneath a well-worn canvas cap, black hair peeked out in unruly ringlets. His eyes were brown, crinkled at the corners with laughter lines that spoke to years of easy smiles with others.

“鱼² 鲜¹!” Grandma called out to him, “要¹ 嫩³ 显⁵ 搭⁸ 搭⁸!”

“Hello, we’d like a croaker. We need it to be—um,” Xiu said, then hesitated, fumbling for suitable words, “super fresh, and...tender?” Javier frowned a little, his lips parted. But still he reached into the tank and lifted a plump croaker. “This one?” he asked, handing it over.

“Catch of the day! ¡Absolutamente fresco!”

Grandma took the fish and pressed its flesh firmly, then pulled away; it bounced back instantly. “嫩³ 显⁵ 搭⁸ 搭⁸!” she uttered, tapping the spot where she’d pressed.

Javier glanced at Xiu, who was standing a little way off, fidgeting with the hem. He stepped closer curiously and imitating grandma’s pressing motion with his own thumb several times. Feeling the sub-

tle give and the flesh springing back against his skin as he released, his eyes lighted up. “¡Rebota inmediatamente y no deja ni marca!” He smiled widely, nodding his head. “Queda perfecto para baking or pan-frying. Yo le mezclo un poco de harina de maíz, ah, cornmeal—not much, una capa delgada nomás.”

Grandma’s eyes crinkled with delight. “嫩noe³ 显xi⁵ 搭taq⁸ 搭taq⁸!” she repeated, louder this time. Then, she brushed the scales, they rustled crisply; tilted the fish to expose its gills, they were crimson as ripe cherries. “鱼ngy² 鲜si¹!” she beamed, giving Javier a thumbs-up, “指tsz¹ 定ding⁸ 透theu³ 鲜si¹!”

Xiu stepped forward to help steady the fish shaking violently in Grandma’s hand, her shoulders relaxed a little.

Heard the rustled sound like dry autumn leaves under the brush, Javier laughed. “¡Claro! ¡El verdadera Sabrosura del mar!” he said, pointing at the croaker. His voice warm with pride, as if he had caught it himself.

“还ha² 一ji¹ 准tshy⁸ 弹da² 牙nga¹!” said Grandma, as she mimed picking up a bite with her index and middle fingers like chopsticks, and popping it in. Then looking at Javier, she continued mimicking chewing, her jaw working slowly as if savoring something, interspersed deliberately with the bright clink of teeth; her cheeks puffing out, like a contented chipmunk. Javier’s brown eyes narrowed a little as he watched attentively, a furrow crept onto his brow. After pausing for a beat, a slow, broad grin spread across his face as the faint frown imperceptibly smoothed away. He nodded vigorously. “¡Sí! Esa textura que rebota al morder—tierna pero firme.” he chortled, tapping his front tooth lightly.

“¡Igual que el ceviche del Puerto! Se comía con el gusto padrísimo...”

There, he paused. Lowering his arms, his countenance softened. Throwing his head back slightly, he gazed into the distance; his lips murmuring gently, shaping whispers light as thistledown.

Then, as if coming to himself, Javier smiled at Xiu, “Your grandma... good food...¡Chido!” Looking back, he nudged grandma’s arm gently with his elbow. Grandma chuckled, patting his arm in return.

“好ho¹ 今sei⁵ 好ho¹!” she said, her voice firm with approval, giving him two thumbs up. And they both laughed, like two old friends. Xiu stood there; her initial urge to translate had faded away softly, like the last wisp of mist under the afternoon sun. Looks like they’ve built rap-

port...no words needed; she mused, they get each other...through that pressing, nodding and laughter.

Professor Tisdale emphasizes words that resonate with most people, but what truly resonates may not be words, but the recognition of ingredients, the longing for hearth and home, and the empathy for the unadulterated “genuine goodness”—those behind words, only to be felt and intuited. Perhaps, languages—standard or dialectal—are never solely meant to define things into words; their greater purpose is to let every vibrant moment speak for itself.

And literature shouldn't be about sifting expressions to meet the standard, but about embracing all lively experiences. At dusk, sitting at the table, Xiu sent the messages to Professor Tisdale.

“*Ng yv*, Wenzhou Fish Balls, aren't of common round shape, like balls; rather they're irregularly long strips, with slightly uneven surfaces and subtle twists. That's exactly what sets them apart at a glance.

“*Ng yv* isn't one of those seafood snacks churned out to fit the shared convention. Its true uniqueness runs deep, embodied in *Da nga*, the springiness that says ‘persistence’; *Theu si*, the flavor that evokes ‘remembrance’; and *Noe xi taq taq*, the delectability that epitomizes ‘distinction’. All of these are woven into the texture of the blessing, *Yú Yuán*—the plain wish for Abundance and Contentment.”

“I guess, not every word needs to be crammed into translation, nor can they be tamed into standard. I should polish my expressions and add annotations for better understanding—they are the bones that sustain my writing; but I shall also keep the dialect for they are the flesh and blood that breathes life into my words.”

“Literary norm should not be a cage, but a bridge; / A bridge that leads to lands where multiple tongues can bloom.”

Putting down her phone, Lin Xiu stepped into the kitchen. Linger- ing quietly at the side, she watched Grandma deftly stirring a pot of simmering broth of fish balls with a bamboo spatula.

“*Yú Yuán*” she murmured to herself, as one floated to the surface— irregular, yet perfect.

A NEW WORLD

Jatziry Wendy Cantú Castillo

“We are moving! You will meet a new world in a few days!”
Those were the first words Citlali heard that morning before going to school.

“A new world? What do you mean?” she asked.

“Yes, a new world. We are moving to the U.S.”

“U.S.? What is that?” Citlali was confused.

“It is a different country. A place where we are going to have a better life, and you are going to learn new things and a new language.

“And... when are we coming back home? I’ve got school, and I will miss my friends.”

“Well... that’s the thing.”

Her dad sat her on his legs.

“We are going to live there from now on. You will go to a new school, and make new friends.”

Citlali looked at her dad, scared and confused.

“But I like school here, and my friends, and my dog.”

“I know but you are going to be okay, I promise you. We will go to Disney, and I’ll take you to a lot of beautiful places, big parks, theaters, zoos. You are going to have your own bedroom, and the best thing is that we are taking your dog with us.”

Those words made Citlali’s facial expression change instantly.

“It sounds fun! When are we leaving?”

“In two days. Today is your last day at school.”

That day, Citlali said bye to her friends and teachers, and two days later, she and her family were flying to their new life in the new world. Flying felt fun, and seeing the world from the air was one of the most beautiful things she had ever seen. However, when they landed, she discovered that the new world was cold! That was the first thing Citlali thought, and she didn’t like that. Also, everything

in the new world was really tall, people, building, trees, etc. she had never seen anything like that before.

“Dad, what are those big things?”

“Those are buildings. People use them to work or to live, but we are going to live in a normal house.”

Their new house was prettier and bigger than the old one. Citlali was so happy when she saw her new room. Finally, she was going to have her own space. After dinner, she put her new backpack next to her bed. She was so excited for the next day, her first day going to a new school. Citlali fell asleep thinking about making new friends and telling them stories about her home country.

The next day, Citlali woke up earlier than usual, brushed her teeth and ate breakfast. Her dad took her to her new school. When she entered the classroom, she felt surprised and scared, because there were a lot of people, more than at her old school, and the scariest thing was she could not understand anything... She had been so excited about everything that she forgot about the different language.

“Ci-ci-ci...? how do you pronounce your name? it is weird I've never heard that name before,” said a boy while he was going to his seat, looking at her with curiosity, Citlali just looked at him, she didn't know what he was talking about. Then, the teacher started the class, and Citlali felt confused and sad. She didn't understand anything. And she was worried about her grades. During lunch, she just followed what the others were doing. She grabbed her plate and sat alone, watching everyone sitting with their friends. At that moment, her tears began to fall from her cheeks. Citlali felt alone, something she had never felt before. Suddenly, all the noise in the room vanished, as if a bubble had surrounded her, as if she were trapped in it and no one could notice her. The bell rang and she had to go back to the classroom. The rest of the class, she just stayed silent, watching the clock every five minutes hoping the time would go faster so she could go home. A few days passed, and everything was still the same. Her dad was busy and stressed, so she didn't say anything about the way she was feeling and her struggle at school. The only one who listened to her was the dog, and it was also the only one who played with her, until one night at dinner when her dad asked her a simple question.

“How was your day?” he asked. Then everything flooded out of Citlali.

“I want to go back. I can’t understand anything, I don’t have friends, I don’t like the food or the weather, and I miss my grandma.”

Citlali started crying. Not just because of what she said, but because she was felt bad about adding more worries to her dad. She knew he had a lot of work to do, and he was also adapting to the new world. Her dad looked at her, sad, and hugged her.

“I know,” he said. “It is difficult, especially when you don’t know anything about this new place, but we can’t go back, not for now at least. But you will be okay, I promise you in a few days you will make new friends and you won’t feel alone anymore. You will also learn the new language. Take your time. I will try to help you more.”

Citlali wiped her tears and went to sleep. The next day she was going on a field trip, and she was curious about it. The next day, classes started as always, but this time she tried to pay attention, though she had no idea what the topic was. After the first class, the field trip began. They visited the zoo. Citlali was delighted with the new animals, animals she had never seen before, and for the first time, she really enjoyed being with her class. Everything was so interesting. She felt good, until lunch hour.

Again, Citlali sat alone, watching her classmates together, smiling and talking to each other, while she felt invisible. The sadness returned, and the bubble surrounded her again... but then, a voice popped it.

Can I seat here?”

Citlali saw a girl she hadn’t seen before.

“Umm...”

The girl sat down across from her.

“My name is Valeria. Are you new?”

Citlali tried to tell her she didn’t know English using gesture. She felt nervous and embarrassed, thinking the girl would laugh at her, but Valeria understood very well.

“No hablas inglés? No te preocupes, yo tampoco sabia cuando llegue aquí. Pero mírame ahora, ya puedo hablarlo, solo me tomo unos meses.” Citlali felt like her soul went back in to her body. They ate together while speaking about their native country. They also sat

together at the bus.

“I didn’t come last week because I was sick,” Valeria said. “Let’s sit together in class.”

The rest of the day was good. Finally, Citlali had someone to talk with, a friend. At the end of the class, the teacher gave her some papers for homework, and told her not to worry too much about doing it all perfectly, and that she was going to learn step by step.

“If you need extra help,” said the teacher, “just let me know, and I will help you.”

That night she told everything to her dad, and now she was excited to go back to school.

The following days were better, Valeria helped her a lot during class, and also introduced her to the other kids. Now Citlali was feeling happy. She had friends, and the lunch hours were full of laughs and stories. She also started learning English, and the classes became easier to understand. With the help of the teacher, and her classmates, she got good grades. Now, the new world didn’t scare her at all. Citlali felt that she was starting to get rid of the bubble that had surrounded her. There were still challenges, and she was still trying to adapt, but now she knew she wasn’t alone. Besides, her old world was still there, in her dad, in her dog, in her memories, and inside her heart. But now she had two worlds to belong in.

BALLAD OF TWO WORLDS

Audrey E Baeten-Ruffo

Shadows of hands.
Shadows of gold.
Hands of iron—makers, or sufferers.
Walk, Audrey.
Walk.

A grandmother arrives from the other side of the sea.
Language cuts her in two—
one half mute, the other tired.
The streets do not understand her.
The faces do not see her.
But she keeps walking.
In her bag, an old photograph.
A letter without reply.
She works in a workshop full of noise,
sewing for bodies that are not her own.
Steam burns her skin.
Sometimes she cries softly,
so the fabric won't get wet with tears.

A grandfather rises before the sun,
a generational star,
walking to the camera factory
where light lives imprisoned
inside tiny crystals.
His hands build the world's vision,
but no one looks at him.

They meet in a country of winters,
speak little,
love greatly.
They have a son.
A son who smiles differently,
who loves without permission.
And the grandfather lowers his eyes—
didn't he too dream of being seen?

The hands that wove the future
learn to hold it with pride.
She calls him *my son*.
She calls him *my heart*.

On the other side,
windows glitter,
soft faces,
glasses clinking like promises.
There walks Audrey,
with the inheritance of labor
transformed into elegance.
Luxury clothes her,
but memory walks beside her.

The grandparents say:
—We were the root.
She replies:
—I am the flower.
And we are all the tree.

Walk, Audrey.

Walk.

Shadows of hands.

Shadows of gold.

One single blood.

One single story.

That travels.

That loves.

That shines.

That remembers.

CONTRIBUTER BIOS

Aubrey Baeton-Ruffo asks: Languages are the twinging vines which hold us together. You can't see me, you can't see them, but can you hear, can you understand?

Luna H. Bogart is a life-long writer born in Arcata, CA and educated at UC Santa Barbara. For the last four years, she has split her time between Mexico City and Humboldt County. She has been writing renga and sijos lately, and she is currently working on a Small Business Management minor from College of the Redwoods. In her spare time, you might find her shooting and developing film, however nothing compares to her love for writing.

Pedro Cantú was born, raised and studied in Oaxaca, Mexico. A little while ago he came to live in the US with his family. In his free time, Pedro enjoys painting, writing poems, and studying English. He continues to study and hopes one day to communicate in English.

Jatziry (Wendy) Cantú Castillo was born and raised in Oaxaca Mexico. She moved to Humboldt County, California in 2022, and I've been living here since then. She really likes reading books and writing stories, she also loves gardening and to listen to music, she enjoys playing the piano in her free time.

Raquel Castillo Salazar-Phylum Salvaje

Renata Dumitrascu moved to the US from Romania as a 12 year old. She has lived in different states and now resides in Arkansas.

Sierra Fosnaugh a born and raised local from Redway, California. Majoring in Aquaculture with a minor in fine arts, she is passionate about conservation and restoration of the Eel River. Most of her summer days are spent helping lower the invasive pikeminnow populations. During the long winter months, she makes jewelry, as well as many other types of art.

Aaron P. Ge, an automation undergraduate, loves scribbling at leisure. No systematic literary courses taken, but devours books of all kinds and picks inspiration from nooks of daily life. Favorites are *Zhuangzi: The Inner Chapters* (庄子 · 内篇) and *Jean-Christophe*.

To me, literary writing is like cooking dishes. Some dazzle with glazes and garnishes, yet taste thin and bland; while ones with simple plating may burst with flavors that delight the mind. And mine? Well...eatable, I guess.

Chong Geyer grew up poor in rural Korea without the chance for a decent education, but now she is very excited about the opportunity to finally attend school.

Pakou Her God creates us equally, don't judge others before you know them, they may have something more valuable than you do. Everyone has their own strengths, be kind to others and you will see their amazing qualities. No matter how far you go or how successful you become don't forget where you came from.

Douglas Jornlin - Resident since journey to attend HSU 1968, never guessed ticket was one way. Minnesotan septuagenarian Viking nurse to mushrooming craftsman wordsmith poet.

Olena K. is originally from Kyiv, Ukraine. She studied French language and literature, and has some degree in Economics. She is passionate about art, literature, traveling and meeting people from different cultures, she enjoys painting and has created several oil paintings of local nature.

Laurie Baldy Marshall is a Hoopa tribal member and multidisciplinary artist rooted in the landscapes and living traditions of the Hoopa Valley Indian Reservation, where she was raised along the Trinity River. Laurie's poetry and visual art explore identity, memory, and resilience, drawing from personal experience and ancestral history. She honors heritage and storytelling while reflecting both beauty and struggle to uplift future generations. Laurie is a full-time student at College of the Redwoods, completing her Associate of Science degree in Political Science next spring, strengthening her commitment to indigenous advocacy and cultural preservation and community empowerment efforts.

Maria E. Mata was born in Guanajuato, Mexico. She grew up speaking Spanish, but with the dream of being able to learn to speak English. A dream that she has reached. She is married and I have three children. She is a student at the College of Marin. Her teacher is Dr. Liz Boner. She works as a senior caregiver three days a week. She likes to do exercise and spend time with her family. She likes to read, her favorite authors are Isabell Allende and Reyna Grande.

Tuyatsetseg Nadmittseren is a veteran educator from Mongolia who dedicated decades to nurturing and developing the young minds of her students in grades one through five. After triumphing over a life-threatening brain tumor and undergoing a profound personal transformation, she relocated to California to start a new chapter. Now a student at the College of the Redwoods, she is mastering English and finding her voice through creative writing. Her work is a poignant reflection of resilience and motherhood, proving that life can truly begin at any age and that with courage, one can rebuild their world regardless of the hardships faced."

Thi Nguyen- is an immigrant who moved to the United States two years ago, bringing a strong legal background from Vietnam. As a Notary Public with a bachelor's degree in law and a master's degree in Economic Law, her professional work has primarily focused on legal research. However, Thi's transition to life in the U.S. has inspired her to begin exploring personal narrative. Currently a student at College of the Redwoods in Professor Kendra's ENGL-C1000 class, Thi is proud to share my first narrative essay, 'A Stranger to a Student at College of the Redwoods,' which chronicles her journey of adaptation in a new academic environment.

Ishika Sidhu is currently a student at the College of the Redwoods. She is taking Biology classes and has been enjoying it. She looks forward to where her education will take her. In Ishika's free time, she likes to read and write.

Meenu Taneja is a mother to four talented daughters. She strives to work hard to create a better future for her daughters. She has sacrificed much and endured many obstacles that have challenged her in my lifetime. However, it is her faith and dream that keeps her going despite life's many trials and errors.

Jonathan Chibuike Ukah's debut Chapbook, *A is for Anfang*, was published by The Island of Wak-Wak (December 2025). His awards include Poem of the Month at The Literary Shark Poetry Contest 2025, Winner of The Atlantis Poetry Award 2026, Alexander Pope Poetry Award at The Pierian, 2025, Vivian Shipley Poetry Award, at the Connecticut Poetry Contest 2025, Third Place Winner at the Hemlock Journal Poetry Contest 2025. His poems have appeared in Atticus Review, The Pierian, Propel Magazine, Journal of Undiscovered Poets, TAB; The Journal of Poetry and Poetics.

Roselia Valencia lives in Redwood Valley CA. She likes to exercise and spend time with her daughter. In her free time She also likes to learn new things like English or something that will help her to be better in life.

Des Valenzuela is a writer and social work student at College of the Redwoods. Their writing explores diaspora, gender, and cultural survival through the lens of multilingual and multigenerational identity. Their work appears in Seven Gill Shark Review and in their forthcoming collection *Maps and Ashes*.

Jhesmin Zenteno Vargas is an international student from La Paz, Bolivia. Her journey at the College of Marin began with ESL classes; she started at Level 20 a few years ago, and currently, she am continuing to take English classes at Level 120. At the moment, she is studying Early Childhood Education. She has always loved working with children, and her goal is to combine what she has learned about language and culture to create a welcoming space for children of all backgrounds, whether in this country or her own.

PERSONAS SUBMISSION **INFORMATION**

Personas is published each May. Submissions are open annually from October 1 to March 15. We accept writing and art in any medium which consider or embody multilingualism. Please label submissions “Personas Submission” in the subject line and include a brief bio (of less than 50 words) in the body of the email. Include the submission as an attachment with no name. Email to jonathan-maiullo@redwoods.edu or hand or postal delivery to 527 D st. Eureka, CA 95501. And, of course, thank you!

Personas se publica cada mes de mayo. Las presentaciones están abiertas anualmente del 1 de octubre al 15 de marzo. Aceptamos escritos y arte en cualquier medio que considere o incorpore el multilingüismo. Etiquete los envíos como “Envío de personas” en la línea de asunto e incluya una breve biografía (de menos de 50 palabras) en el cuerpo del correo electrónico. Incluya el envío como un archivo adjunto sin nombre. Envíe un correo electrónico a jonathan-maiullo@redwoods.edu o envíelo personalmente o por correo a 527 D St., Eureka, CA 95501. Y, por supuesto, ¡gracias!

Personas tau luam tawm txhua lub Tsib Hlis. Kev xa tawm yog qhib txhua xyoo txij lub Kaum Hli 1 txog Lub Peb Hlis 15. Peb lees txais cov ntauv sau thiab kos duab hauv ib qho nruab nrab uas xav txog lossis muaj ntau hom lus. Thov sau cov ntauv xa tawm “Personas Submission” hauv kab ntauv thiab suav nrog cov ntaub ntauv luv luv (tsawg dua 50 lo lus) hauv lub cev ntawm email. Sau cov ntauv xa mus ua ib daim ntauv txuas nrog tsis muaj npe. Email rau jonathan-maiullo@redwoods.edu lossis xa ntauv xa mus rau 527 D St., Eureka, CA 95501. Thiab, tau kawg, ua tsaug!

Back Cover Art: This 24x18 charcoal still life was done spring 2025
in ART-17 Basic Drawing at CR, by a miss Sierra Fosnaugh.

Title: Still Life After Death



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