CATCH THE NEXT

A Journal of Creativity and Pedagogy



TEACHING AGAINST THE GRAIN: PEDAGOGY AS RESISTANCE

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Introduction

Teaching Against the Grain: Pedagogy as Resistance

By Maria Martha Chavez Brummell

Catch the Next, Inc. is proud to present Volume 7, Fall 2025 of *CTN: A Journal of Pedagogy and Creativity*. With this issue, we continue our commitment to providing a space where scholarship, pedagogy, and the arts come together to inspire, challenge, and sustain our readers. We are especially grateful to our community of educators, writers, and supporters who, year after year, affirm the value of critical inquiry and creative expression in perilous times when such practices are most needed.

Catch the Next, Inc., has teamed up with Tiltwood Press to produce a professional journal that combines different platforms to accommodate readers who want quick reading access for their handheld devices and a hard copy.

The theme of our issue is "Teaching against the Grain: Pedagogy as Resistance," as democracy is under siege by forces placing a stranglehold on Freedom of Speech, Freedom of

Expression, and academic freedom. At Catch the Next, we affirm that freedom of speech and academic freedom are not abstract ideals—they are the lifeblood of a just, inclusive, and liberatory education. For us, academic freedom means the right to teach truthfully, to engage critically, and to honor the lived experiences of our students and the communities they represent. It is the freedom to ask hard questions, to explore complex histories, and to imagine futures rooted in equal opportunity and possibility.

We are deeply concerned by the growing wave of censorship sweeping across classrooms, libraries, and campuses. The banning of books—especially those that center Black, Indigenous, Latinx, LGBTQ+, and immigrant voices—is not just an attack on literature; it is an attempt to erase identity, silence resistance, and narrow the intellectual horizons of our students. Similarly, legislative efforts to restrict the teaching of slavery, systemic racism, and culturally sustaining pedagogies undermine the very purpose of education: to illuminate, to liberate, and to empower.

It is no coincidence that early Texan civil rights attorneys rallied around the slogan "Education is our freedom" as they fought for school integration in the 1940s—well before the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision declared that "separate but equal" was inherently unequal. This rallying cry reflected a deep understanding: that access to education is not just a civil right, but a gateway to dignity, opportunity, and liberation.

Even earlier, in 1921, Mexican American parents in Texas were already challenging educational inequities in court, demanding access to schooling beyond the elementary level. Cases like *Salvatierra v. Del Rio* (1921) and *Bishop v. Delgado* (1948) reveal a long and courageous legacy of resistance—families and attorneys who refused to accept second-class citizen-

ship and who understood that educational exclusion was a form of structural violence.

These legal battles laid the groundwork for future victories and remind us that the fight for educational opportunity has always been led by communities who dared to imagine more. Today, as we confront new forms of censorship, curriculum bans, and attacks on culturally sustaining pedagogy, we draw strength from this legacy. Education is—and must remain—a site of freedom. As educators, scholars, and community leaders, we reject the false binary between patriotism and truth. We believe that teaching about slavery, colonization, and resistance is not divisive—it is necessary. We believe that culturally sustaining pedagogy is not a threat—it is a promise: a promise to validate students' histories, languages, and dreams; a promise to build classrooms where all students feel seen, heard, and valued.

We call on our partners, policymakers, and fellow educators to defend academic freedom with courage and clarity. Let us protect the right to teach, to read, to question, and to imagine. Let us stand together against censorship and for a future where education is not a tool of control, but a force for liberation.

This issue introduces an expanded format designed to showcase the diverse voices that comprise the CTN community. Readers will encounter not only the work of CTN Fellows and academic contributors but also original creative works from poets, storytellers, and independent thinkers nationwide. Our goal is to keep alive the spirit of dialogue—between classrooms and communities, between art and scholarship, and between the past, present, and future of American education.

The pedagogy section includes one pedagogy piece by Mary Shaver, who teaches at The University of South Florida,

and two articles by CTN Fellows, Alfredo Torres, Jr., and Rafael C. Castillo.

The **poetry section**, once again featuring the contributions of *Las Voces Cósmicas*, affirms the resilience of artistic voices in San Antonio and beyond. These poets remind us that words are not only aesthetic but also political—that they carry with them the power to resist, to affirm identity, and to celebrate the multiplicity of cultures that shape our region and great nation.

We are also proud to include **two short stories** that reflect the diversity of contemporary fiction, one of which is authored by Arthur Carvajal, Jr., an attorney from Illinois, and the other by Julian S. Garcia, a respected Texas writer and critic. Their contributions reflect our belief that creativity transcends profession or geography; storytelling belongs to all who dare to give voice to their imagination. The last article is a **book review** by Rafael C. Castillo, who also serves as Editor of CTN: A Journal of Creativity and Pedagogy.

As always, the **academic essays** remain at the heart of this, whose prose bridges the worlds of law and literature, and another by a nationally recognized fiction writer whose narrative voice resonates with diverse journals. This issue's contributions explore the timely theme of freedom of expression. We chose this focus deliberately, aware of the mounting pressures and challenges to the First Amendment in classrooms, public discourse, and the larger civic sphere. In a political climate where the right to think, teach, and speak freely is increasingly contested, our contributors remind us of the constitutional guarantees and natural rights that protect these freedoms. They invite us to revisit the ideals of the Constitution's framers, who understood that a democracy without free expression cannot endure.

Together, these sections—poetry, fiction, pedagogy, and

critical essays—form a mosaic of intellectual and creative energy. They testify to the power of collaboration and the enduring need for spaces where ideas and art converge. We invite you, our readers, to enter into this conversation with us. May these pages provoke thought, stir imagination, and strengthen your commitment to the values of education, creativity, and freedom that unite us.

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Maria Martha Chavez Brummell, Ph.D., is *CEO of Catch the Next, Inc*., an educational services organization. She is a former assistant dean at Yale University, holding a Ph.D. in Sociology and a Master of Philosophy Degree from Yale University. She also holds an MS in Curriculum and Instruction and Counseling from Kansas State University

Pedagogy and Creativity

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Making Space for Emotional Processing in Early Writers

By Mary Shaver

I began teaching students how to write stories through my work in college admissions advising.

With each incoming cohort of students, we immediately began working on personal statements and supplemental prompts. Every fall, I met one-on-one with students as they tried to condense the most important parts of themselves into 650 words. And every year, without fail, I saw the same pattern.

About half of my students dove straight into the most dramatic or most painful moment of their lives. They wrote about losing a parent, their battle with depression, an experience with assault—the list goes on. Their ideas centered on the notion that a story must be shocking to be considered reasonable. The other half wrote nothing, produced no ideas at all. The idea of writing about themselves arrested them, as they were convinced their lives weren't interesting enough to be worth telling. They had no big tragedies, nothing to shock an

admissions officer into accepting them to their dream school. Or maybe they did, but the thought of putting those experiences into words felt unbearable.

At first, I thought this was just a quirk of the college application process. The idea that a single essay could have a large impact on the next four years of one's life can send their mind to dark places. But then, when I enrolled in a fiction workshop during my junior year of college, I found myself in the same position.

Faced with a blank page and the expectation to write something meaningful, something that the fourteen students around me would pass their judgment upon, I felt split between two options: write a terribly devastating story or write nothing at all.

Even though we were all meant to submit fiction, the same problem prevailed throughout the stories we workshopped. Protagonists were killed and revived for shock factor, arguments were elevated to screaming matches, and antagonists committed the ultimate acts of betrayal. The most dramatic stories seemed to elicit the strongest reactions from their readers. Trauma became currency. And by the second round of workshops, we were all spent.

I would continue to encounter this problem in many different presentations, regardless of age, skill level, or genre. Maybe this shouldn't have been so surprising. For years, it has felt like grief and trauma are more in our faces than ever before. Social media provides unlimited access to the suffering and pain of strangers worldwide. Wars unfold in real time on our screens, pandemics steal millions from the world too soon, and political decisions shape and reshape the futures we thought we had control over.

And people write about what they know, especially when they're just starting out.

It's no wonder that so much pain erupts in stories. But if

writing is one of the few places where we feel we can control pain and suffering, then why weren't we teaching students how to do it well?

As I began to develop a curriculum that teaches students how to engage with tender experiences, I asked myself: How can we help students write their emotions without feeling like they have to perform them? How can we create an environment where the ones who are ready to process their grief on the page can do so safely, while also making space for those who aren't there yet? How can we teach writing in a way that validates all experiences without reinforcing the idea that only the most shocking stories are worth telling?

Brainstorming

One way to address this issue is by developing robust curricula and activities that encourage students to brainstorm ideas for their work. If we don't teach students how to generate ideas, they will likely default to one of the two ideas discussed above.

Students need to see that they have more to contribute to the world of storytelling than just their most challenging moments. But often, they don't believe that. They assume they have no good ideas, or worse, that someone else's story will always be more interesting than their own.

One of the first activities I use to combat this is the Four-Square Brain Dump. It's a simple, low-stakes exercise, but one that often unlocks surprising ideas. I have students divide a blank page into four squares. Each section gets a different label, but I don't tell them until right before they begin working on that section:

1. People (family, friends, teachers, mentors, rivals, anyone significant in your life, real or fake)

2. Places (your childhood home, a grocery store, a city you visited, a town you want to see)

3. Memories (moments in your life that you can remember, happy, sad, funny, infuriating, etc.)

4. Things You Know a Lot About (hobbies, skills, obsessions, facts they could teach someone else—this one usually takes them by surprise, but it's essential!)

Then, for five minutes per square, they brain-dump as much as they can, filling the page with anything and everything that comes to mind. There are no wrong answers. The only rule is that their pencil must keep moving at all times.

I like to tell them, "You have to write faster than the little devil on your shoulder can tell you the idea is stupid."

After twenty minutes, their brains are thoroughly dumped and their papers are filled with ideas, some good, some bad, but I only ask them to circle three that they'd be interested in exploring deeper. Of course, they can circle more, but three is the absolute minimum.

With at least three prompts to give them a starting place, we begin exploring where else we can find inspiration. As we read stories, we begin to develop an understanding that anything can become an idea when one's mind is tuned into the intrigue around them. Between classes, I encourage students to bring items, pictures, articles, and other interesting materials. I, then, model how to expand thinking with questions. Who, what, where, when, why, and how can we expand a seemingly boring item into a story?

Beyond "mining" activities (of which there are many), it is also our pedagogical responsibility to teach young writers how to find inspiration beyond the confines of their heads. When working with self-proclaimed "new" writers, my first topic is this idea of inspiration. To demonstrate, I pass out notecards, each with a strange headline (or an intriguing sentence from beneath said headlines) written on the card. As students shuffle through the stack, I tell them they are simply looking for a

Spark. Some line that makes them stop for a moment and think, *huh*. That's the card they're meant to choose. Using that sentence or headline, they will then write whatever comes to them. This can be a continuation of the following sentence, an entirely new world in which this headline feels true, or even just a focus on one specific word.

After this activity, I pass out a second set of notecards. This time, I don't preface with anything, but the same rules apply: search for a spark, then write.

By the end of this 10-15 minute exercise, I explain to them that these are all selections from within the Notes app on my iPhone. I then show them the single note I have titled "Collection of Random Ideas" and scroll for several scrolls to show them just how many random phrases, headlines, or images I've taken down. And just like they shuffled through cards to find one Spark, I shuffle through this note when I'm looking for inspiration.

It's often at this point in the activity where I will scroll to a specific section and read out what I find to be the most useless of the Sparks in that note, which is "How many licks to finish a dumdum without chewing?" I explain that while this will likely never make it into the stories I plan to write,

It's more indicative of the active ear I have tuned to my inner thoughts. What would have once been a fleeting thought is now immortalized in this digital form. And while many of those immortalizations are seemingly useless, I'm now trained to listen a bit more closely to those passing thoughts. One of them is bound to be useful eventually.

The goal here is less about giving students a very intimate glimpse into my mind and more about teaching them the necessary skill of observation, which will allow them to find meaning in small things as much as they find meaning in extreme situations.

Brainstorming can give students the option to write beyond their personal experiences, but to tell students that individual stories are off-limits would invalidate one of the most natural impulses behind writing. For many people, writing is a means of processing emotion or experiences.

But at the same time, we can't ignore the pitfalls of allowing young writers to mine their trauma without offering them any guidance. When students feel that their personal pain is the only thing worth writing about or when they relive difficult experiences without the proper support, it can lead to exhaustion rather than catharsis for both the reader and the writer.

And this is how distillation and transplantation were born!

Distillation

This method came to me as I began to question my own writing process. Often, the act of brainstorming for me involves digging through memories I feel I'd like to write about. As an early writer, I'd select a memory and begin to dramatize it, changing names and exaggerating dialogue from a moment of extremity in my life. Now, that memory becomes just the starting point.

The next part is the most time-intensive, but usually the most rewarding. I begin to wonder why that memory stands out to me. Among other questions, I ask myself: Where is the emotional strength of this moment? What's the climax of this memory? What would an outsider find to be the most interesting moment?

For example, let's say the memory is the time I tried to catch a bus. As it pulled up to me, I stood from the bench, stepped toward the curb, and even made eye contact with the driver. The bus whizzed right past me, and I was left confused as I slowly sat back on the bench.

The most poignant moment here seems to be the shock and confusion that overcame me just as I realized the bus would not

be stopping. It's not quite yet the emotional heart I'm looking for (more like the emotional torso), but I've narrowed my search a bit. In my mind, perhaps I'll turn the camera inward, trying to imagine what my face might have looked like as the bus blew past me or how my heart sped up for just a moment. I'll also start feeling around in some fourth dimension. What was the context of this moment? Why is this a challenging experience for someone like me?

By asking these questions, I recall that I was in a foreign country for the first time in my life. A few weeks prior, I had read a Reddit post about how annoying and stupid American tourists were. I had just spent two weeks avoiding taking the bus because I was certain I'd miss some unspoken social cue and make a fool of myself.

And now, we're closer to the emotional heart. Sure, there was shock and confusion, but these are sorta everyday emotions, the kinds that live in hundreds of stories and feel a bit too familiar to be surprising. With a little more investigating, I've discovered this feeling of knowing you're going to look like a fool and being right about it. I've found the feeling of isolation that comes from a lack of understanding. I've discovered the sense of abandonment and betrayal.

Each of these feelings is a story of its own. Sometimes I'm lucky enough to find three or four or seven different hearts inside a memory, but all you need is one.

I, then, pluck the heart of my choosing from memory and place it carefully in the metaphorical cooler box, where it will live until it finds its transplant recipient.

Transplantation

With an emotional heart in tow, it's time to find a place to put it. It can be tempting to drop it right back into the memory you started with, addressing the moment with a newfound sense of understanding and direction. There is absolutely

nothing wrong with this option, especially with the silly example that I just used. There is inherently less trauma or extremity to be found there. For moments that require little processing, the return to the original memory would be fine (so long as you are writing nonfiction). However, for some of those more emotionally raw moments, it can be safer and easier to process an emotion in a different scenario.

For example, I might use that feeling of isolation to write a story about a woman who hears her neighbor's life through the walls of her high-rise apartment.

The key here is to ensure that you are sufficiently distanced from the memory you began with, especially if that memory is traumatic. Our goal is to produce stories that address the underlying intrigue that bubbled the memory to the surface, while also creating art that is moldable, revisable, and readable from an objective standpoint. If I were to use my distilled emotion to write about a woman starting a new job, I might want to avoid having her miss the carpool to the bar after work. It addresses that emotion, but it's much too similar to my bus memory. Instead, maybe I write about a man who returns to his hometown after years away and finds that even the corner store he once frequented has changed owners, the cashier no longer recognizes him, and the street names feel unfamiliar.

The therapeutic aspect comes in at this point. I like to think of it like trying to clip a dog's nails and distracting them with a spoon of peanut butter, so they'll sit still long enough to do so. Rather than looking right at the clippers as they close in on their nails, their mind and senses are occupied with something else. The clipping is still happening, but there's a distance now. Transplantation is

The peanut butter spoon. While examining the nuances of those difficult, unnamed emotions, we allow the initial stages of processing to occur. We are holding that emotion to the light

and turning it 70 degrees or so, looking at it from a different—and hopefully less scary—angle.

Safer Storytelling

When I reflect on those conflicted early storytellers, I realize now that they were lacking the necessary tools. Brainstorming, distillation, and transplantation are just one option to hold in their toolbox, giving them an approach that values their most minute curiosities and quietest memories just as much as their most profound grief. By creating classroom practices that emphasize processing over performance, we demonstrate to students that writing is not only about what they produce, but also about how they engage with their own experiences. And in a cultural moment where public life is saturated with narratives of pain, teaching students to work with emotion in thoughtful, measured ways feels all the more urgent.

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Mary Shaver is a writer, educator, and MFA candidate in fiction at the University of South Florida, where she teaches undergraduate courses on form and techniques of fiction. Her work has been published in T*he Vanderbilt Review, Writing Queensland*, and T*he Colored Lens*, among other notable publications.

Examining the Past to Preserve the Future

By Alfredo Torres, Jr. and Rafael C. Castillo

Over the years, enrollment in the humanities has declined across American universities, while modest growth has occurred at community colleges serving first-generation students. Employers increasingly emphasize practical skills over critical thinking because, they claim, we must reconsider our societal needs. A paradigm shift is occurring before our eyes as dominant powers do not want an educated citizenry. Why? An engaged, well-educated, diverse citizenry would ideally serve the collective good rather than an insulated group with narrow self-interests.

What is the study of the Humanities? It is literally the study of what it means to be human in the cosmos. The Greeks were not the first to describe, study, and question the human world around them; they embodied a zeitgeist, examining character, duty, and honor through their classical texts, which were passed down through their associations and cultural exchanges with the Egyptians and other Mediterranean cultures (Bernal).

The Greeks, however, developed critiques and philosophies that asserted the individuality of spirit, body, and mind, all part of the Hellenic ideal. Yet, readers can clearly see how their influence affected the Romans. Their contributions are directly related to the ancient Greeks, as evidenced by the reading and study of Marcus Aurelius' Meditations, which attest to their influence. Aurelius offers powerful reflections on maintaining ethical behavior while holding power. His insights into controlling reactions to events and preserving inner peace despite circumstances remain valuable guides. Undeniably, Plutarch's Parallel Lives offers character studies of Greek and Roman leaders, examining how virtues and flaws influenced their actions and legacies.

The late Egyptian-African Christian is Augustine, who served as bishop and was later canonized by the Roman Catholic Church. His *Confessions* contributes profound insights into character development through its honesty about moral struggle. Augustine models deep introspection, demonstrating the relationship between reason and faith, exploring character formation through understanding and choices, and offering remarkable psychological insights about human nature. His famous admission, "Give me chastity and continence, but not yet," captures the universal struggle of knowing what is right while struggling to commit to it (Augustine).

Another notable figure is Plato's student, Aristotle, who was Alexander the Great's tutor. His *Nicomachean Ethics* provides a practical guide to developing a strong character in Alexander. His doctrine describes the virtue of the mean position between extremes—courage, for instance, balances cowardice and recklessness. Aristotle emphasizes that virtue develops through the formation of proper habits through practice: we become brave by acting bravely. His concepts of *eudaimonia* (human flourishing achieved through virtue and reason)

and *phronesis* (practical wisdom developed through experience) offer timeless guidance.

These humanistic works and their predecessors provided an ideal compilation of readings, scholarly works, and rhetoric that build character and a strong ethos. These works treat character development as a practical skill that requires practice, judgment, and experience, rather than merely following rules or holding certain beliefs.

Another humanist who profoundly influenced the French Revolution was Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He approached individuality differently in *Emile* and *The Social Contract*. He argues that humans are naturally good but corrupted by civilization. While Augustine sees human nature as inherently flawed and Aristotle considers virtue as something we must cultivate, Rousseau advocates an educational approach that preserves natural goodness by protecting it from corrupting social influences.

Rousseau's *Confessions* presents a nuanced perspective on character development. Unlike Augustine's journey toward virtue through faith, Rousseau's autobiography frankly acknowledges flaws while justifying them. His "Reveries of a Solitary Walker" offers readers reflections on authenticity and living in accordance with one's nature rather than social conventions, thereby raising important questions about developing genuine character versus conforming to expectations.

Exploring these diverse perspectives—from ancient virtue ethics to Christian theology to Enlightenment thinking—provides a rich foundation for character development. The ancient focus on excellence, particularly as demonstrated by Augustine's overcoming of weakness through grace, and Rousseau's emphasis on preserving natural goodness, are all reflections of Greek and Roman ideals. We can even trace these humanistic ideals to Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin

Franklin, who, ironically, believed that the evil nature of human character is connected to a lack of knowledge.

Studying Bernal's *Black Athena* provides readers with a profound historical perspective on the development of classical studies and the humanities, revealing how they not only expanded but also evolved from a general acceptance of their historical roots, becoming entangled with vested interests in empire and hierarchical systems of hegemonic dominance. What better way to revitalize the Humanities than by studying it with fresh eyes and viewing it with a different critical lens? By revisiting these classics, we may gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be human and how we have evolved over the centuries.

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Alfredo Torres, Jr., is an adjunct professor of humanities and history who teaches at Austin Community College and the Alamo College District. His writings have appeared in NISOD, the San Antonio Express-News, the Laredo Morning Times, and CCHumanities Review. **Rafael C. Castillo** teaches English and humanities at Palo Alto College and is Director of Special Projects for Catch the Next, Inc. (New Haven).

Ancient Greek culture was not born out of isolation—the ancient Egyptians were their benefactors.

By Rafael C. Castillo

In the late 1980s, the iconoclast scholar Martin Bernal heralded the influence of Egypt on Ancient Greece, with an Afroasiatic twist, in his *Black Athena*[III] trilogy, which engendered a backlash from classically trained scholars. Most of them took issue with the fact that he was not specifically trained in classics, but rather in the field of Chinese and Middle Eastern studies. His scholarship, however, remains viable even after 30 years because it provides scholars and teachers with an opportunity to re-examine cultural diffusionism in all its aspects.

When teaching Sophoclean drama in translation (*Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*), instructors often face questions about geographical influences. Students question why Sophocles chose to set his plays in Ancient Thebes when that city is usually associated with Egypt, not Greece. Even more confusion reigns with the Greek Sphinx, which differs anatomically from its Egyptian counterpart.

Sophocles depicts the Greek Sphinx as a hybrid creature with a lion's body, eagle's wings, and a woman's head—a

distinctly Hellenic interpretation that reverses the Egyptian convention of animal-headed deities with human bodies. The Greek Sphinx and its Egyptian counterpart reflect the Greeks' attempt to personalize foreign mythological elements and reconstitute them so that they align with their cultural framework and Hellenistic designs.

Egyptian mythology and its religion profoundly influenced ancient Greek culture with their rich symbolism and complex pantheon. Herodotus, one of history's earliest chroniclers, documented this phenomenon as religious syncretism, identifying and fusing deities across different belief systems. Even though the Egyptian Thebes is thousands of years older than the Greek city-state, early Greek-Egyptian intermingling emerged as this rich syncretism thrived during the Hellenistic period following Alexander's conquests, when systematic equivalencies emerged: Amun was equated with Zeus, Horus with Apollo, Ptah with Hephaestus, Isis with Demeter, and Neith with Athena. Even though Egyptian deities possessed multidimensional identities, it fascinated Greek interpreters nonetheless, as Thoth, the god of wisdom and the purported inventor of writing, appeared in various forms, including a baboon, an ibis-headed human, or in complete human form. The Hellenes, namely the Greeks, incorporated this latter manifestation into their religious worldview by merging Thoth with Hermes, creating "Hermes Trismegistus," meaning "Thrice-Greatest." Similarly, Amun-Zeus represented a powerful hybrid deity, blending Greek and Egyptian influences, venerated throughout the Mediterranean, including Egypt, Greece, and neighboring regions such as Libya. Even Alexander the Great was frequently depicted wearing ram's horns—a clear visual testament to Greek cultural indebtedness to Egyptian religious iconography and thought.

Platonic Reverence for Egyptian Wisdom

Even Plato acknowledges the Egyptians for their wealth of wisdom. Plato's dialogues often portray Egypt as an ancient wellspring of knowledge that predates Greek civilization. In his *Timaeus*, he presents the striking account of Solon's visit to Egypt, where an elderly priest famously rebukes Greek intellectual immaturity: "O Solon, Solon, you Hellenes are always children, and there is no such thing as an old Greek."[2] This condescending yet profound argument establishes Egyptian civilization as venerably older than Greece's nascent developing stage. The priest admonishes that the Greeks lack ancient traditions because periodic catastrophes, from earthquakes to volcanoes, have repeatedly destroyed their civilizations, whereas Egypt, protected by the Nile's regulated flooding, has preserved its knowledge over millennia.

This narrative device enables Plato to portray Egyptian priests as custodians of primordial wisdom, a rhetorical strategy that legitimizes his philosophical innovations by claiming they have ancient precedents. The *Critias*[3] continues this Egyptian connection through the celebrated Atlantis narrative, purportedly preserved in Egyptian temple records and transmitted to Solon. Plato simultaneously honors Egyptian historiographical traditions while appropriating their cultural authority by framing his ideal state narrative within the supposed historical records of Egypt.

Phaedrus and Egypt

The *Phaedrus*[4] offers another noteworthy Egyptian reference when Socrates recounts the myth of Theuth (Thoth), presenting his invention of writing to King Thamus. This anecdote acknowledges Egyptian cultural contributions and becomes a heuristic metaphor for Plato's complex critique of writing as a technology. The Egyptian god invents writing as "an elixir of memory and wisdom," but the Egyptian king critiques it as producing "the appearance of wisdom, not true

wisdom." This ambivalence reflects Plato's complicated relationship with textuality versus orality, projected through Egyptian hieroglyphic iconography. Plato's fascination with Egyptian mathematics and astronomy had a profound influence on his cosmological theories. In *Laws*[5], he explicitly praises Egyptian educational methods, integrating mathematical instruction through play and practical application. The highly geometric and proportional aspects of Plato's cosmology in *Timaeus* reflect Egyptian mathematical principles that emphasized harmony and precise measurement, concepts embodied in the architectural achievements of ancient Egypt, such as the pyramids at Giza.

Herodotus and Egypt

Herodotus and Egyptian Cultural [5], he explicitly praises Egyptian educational methods, integrating mathematical instruction through play and practical applications

The ultimate storyteller and father of History, Herodotus, dedicates the entirety of Book II in his *Histories*[6] to Egyptian culture, geography, and religion—a testament to Egypt's significance in Greek intellectual imagination. Even though criticized by Plutarch for being *philobarbaros* (pro-foreigner), Herodotus' detailed ethnography presents Egypt as a land of "wonders more in number than those of any other land" and a civilization whose practices often invert Greek norms, yet whose antiquity demands respect. Herodotus' religious syncretism is most explicitly evident in his systematic equating of Egyptian deities with their Greek counterparts. He declares, "The names of nearly all the gods came to Greece from Egypt," a provocative claim that inverts the expected cultural hierarchy. Beyond simple name equivalencies, Herodotus attributes numerous Greek religious practices to Egyptian origins, including processions, festivals, and divination methods. He credits the Egyptians explicitly with pioneering the concept of divine

epiphanies and being "the first to assign altars, images, and temples to the gods."

His description of Egyptian priests portrays them as meticulous record-keepers with an unbroken historical tradition spanning 341 generations—an astounding claim that dwarfed Greek historical consciousness. Herodotus reports that these priests showed him written records and dynastic lists that reached back approximately 11,340 years, a timeframe that thoroughly destabilized Greek notions of historical time. Whether exaggerated or misunderstood, these accounts positioned Egyptian historical consciousness as vastly more extensive than Greek traditions.

The architectural marvels of Egypt receive particular attention, with Herodotus providing the first detailed Western account of the pyramids. His measurement of the Great Pyramid demonstrates both admiration and an attempt to comprehend its mathematical precision. The Labyrinth near Lake Moeris impressed him so much that he declared it "beyond words" and superior to all Greek architectural achievements combined. These passages reveal genuine awe and a Greek desire to categorize and quantify the monumental achievements of ancient Egypt.

Synthesis: Egypt as Greece's Cultural Ancestor

Despite their different intellectual approaches, Plato and Herodotus equally position Egypt as Greece's cultural predecessor. Their rhetorical arguments serve multiple functions: they provide historical depth to Greek traditions, offer external validation for Greek cultural innovations, and establish a prestigious intellectual lineage. Yet this acknowledgment of Egyptian influence is simultaneously an act of both cultural appropriation and mimetic appreciation—both authors interpret Egyptian wisdom through distinctly Greek conceptual frameworks.

The complexity of this cultural exchange deepened further during the Ptolemaic period when Alexandria became the preeminent center of Hellenistic learning. Why? Because the establishment of the Library of Alexandria represented the preservation and transformation of Egyptian knowledge traditions, which have become filtered through the lens of Greek Ptolemaic deliberation. A good example of this is the formation of Serapis, a Graeco-Egyptian, syncretic deity derived from the ancient worship of Osiris and Apis. This Greco-Egyptian intellectual synthesis gave impetus to unprecedented developments in mathematics, astronomy, geography, and medicine, ultimately laying the foundation for the Western philosophical and intellectual tradition. This historical dynamic provides essential context for understanding how Egyptian religious symbols —from the Sphinx to animal-headed deities—transformed Greek cultural imagination. Additionally, the "misunderstanding" of these symbols wasn't mere ignorance but rather a complex cultural translation and recontextualization process that reflected Greek philosophical priorities and aesthetic sensibilities.

Much can be learned about Bernal's *Black Athena,* particularly when the assault is based on politics, and because it serves as a counternarrative to scholars who have a monopoly on a subject that merits serious reconsideration. The field of knowledge is always open to diverse understandings of text; otherwise, research and evolving knowledge would grind to a halt.

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Rafael C. Castillo, who teaches literature and humanities, is the author of *Dostoevsky on Guadalupe Street: Writings from the Edge* (Peter Lang International) and three collections of fiction. His last research addition was "Chicano literature" for Oxford University's *Oxford Bibliographies*.

Notes

[1] See Martin Bernal's *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilizations*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987. His other two volumes emphasize archeological and linguistic evidence.

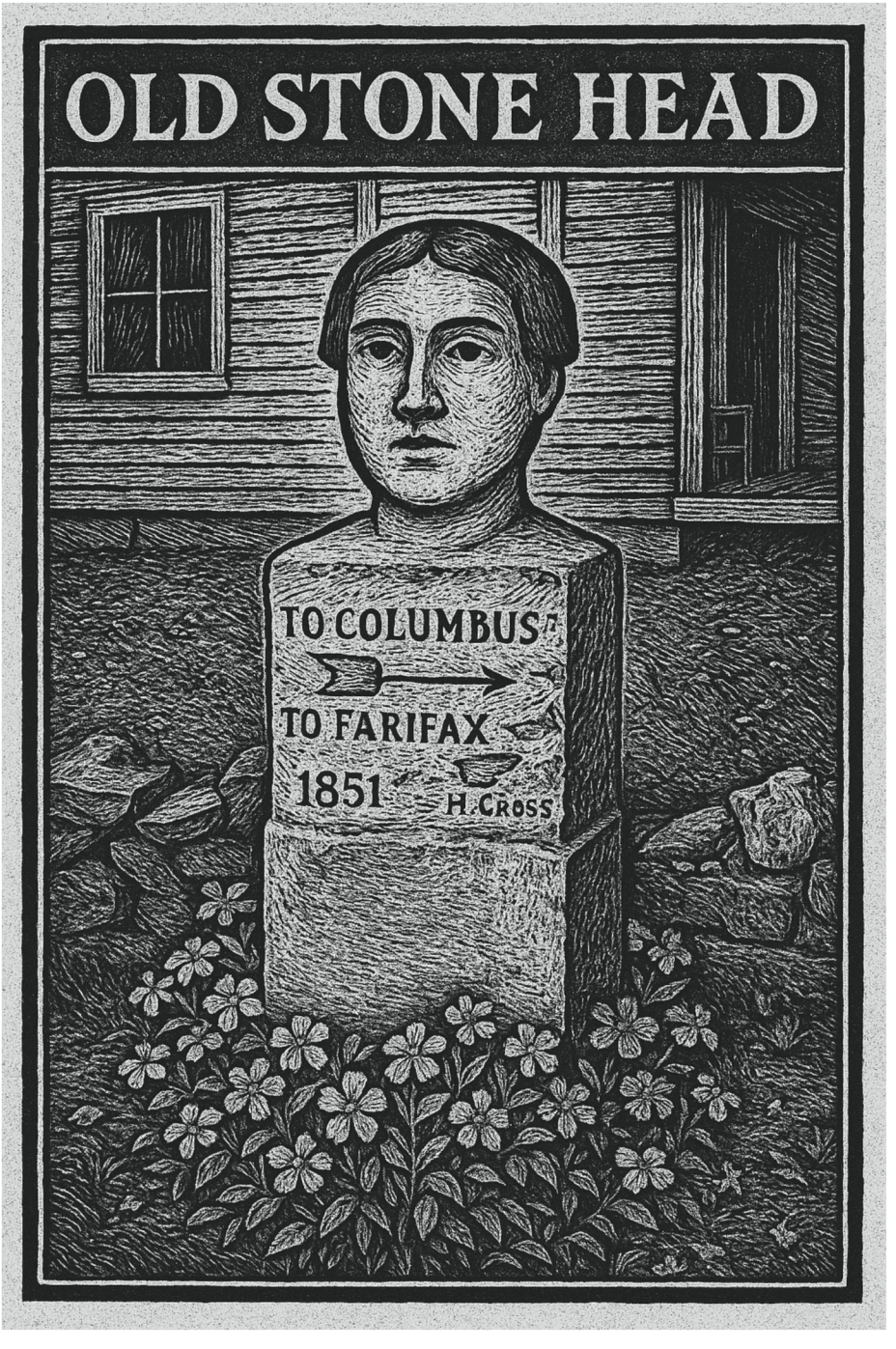
[2] See *Plato: Timaeus. Critias. Cleitophon. Menexenius. Epistles* (Loeb Classical Library Trans. R.G. Bury) Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929.

[3] See *Plato: Timaeus. Critias. Cleitophon. Menexenius. Epistles* (Loeb Classical Library Trans. R.G. Bury) Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929.

[4] See *Plato: Lysis. Symposium. Phaedrus.* (Loeb Classical Library Trans. Chris Emlyn-Jones. William Preddy) Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022.

[5] See *Plato: Laws* (Loeb Classical Library Trans. R.G. Bury), Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926.

[6] Herodotus. *The History Ἱστορίαι* [*The History*]. *Translated by Gren, David. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp. 37–38.*


OLD STONE HEAD
TO COLUMBUS
TO FARIFAX
1851
H. CROSS

Old Stone Head

By Arthur Gonzalez Carvajal, Jr.

In the southern half of Indiana, among mustard-yellow fields of corn, where the towns are too small to have more than a two-lane road to connect them, stands a lonely inn at a fork in the road. In this remote part of rural Indiana, the inn is conveniently located where State Road 135 meets Bellsville Pike in Van Buren Township of Brown County.

The inn is a converted farmhouse that was built in 1891. It's a charming wood-frame building that the owners have converted into an inn. It sometimes draws tourists who visit Brown County for its annual arts fair in the fall.

But most of the time, it stands empty, and the windows are dark and quiet where the roads meet. It has one feature that draws tourists who have no interest in staying at the inn. Standing in front of it, where it has stood since an Indiana settler carved it in 1851, is a two-foot-tall mile marker, a block of limestone with the names of nearby towns etched into it with their respective distances in miles.

Atop this marker is a crude carving of a man's bust. It is a simple form with shoulders and a head. On the face is carved a little protrusion to signify a nose. Long ago, someone used black paint to adorn the face with crude eyes and lips. The unknown painter added black "hair" that is parted at the top and falls to the sides just above the ears, in a style that might have been popular in 1851, when the settler carved the old stone head....

On a Saturday evening in late October, when the trees are just beginning to turn new shades of saturated colors in southern Indiana, Stephanie and Alex were passing through Van Buren township. Alex watched the changing foliage over the steering wheel; Stephanie examined a colorful felt hat she'd bought in an artist's home in Brown County. It seemed like a frivolous purchase, mainly because it resembled a jester's headpiece, but the artist had been persuasive, and Stephanie liked to support small businesses.

"This is my favorite time of year," said Alex. "We got here just in time, too. These colors won't last much longer. In the next couple of weeks, they'll turn brown and fall off."

Stephanie glanced up and looked at the trees. "Then it will really be a *brown* county."

Alex smiled. "We should think about dinner. I got hungry watching you shop all day."

"We also saw the covered bridges. And you took a lot of pictures of your car driving out of them."

"You make a good model when the top is down."

"I was just an accessory. I felt like those girls at auto shows who are hired to stand next to the cars and look pretty."

"You're not like them at all. Those girls can't afford a car like this."

"Thank you for not saying that I'm old enough to be their mother."

They traded a *touché* look and drove in silence for a while.

"See what's around here for dinner," suggested Alex, seeing the sun disappear below the horizon.

Stephanie was scrolling past suggested venues on her smartphone when she felt the car suddenly slow down.

"Stef, look!"

They were approaching a tee intersection, seemingly in the middle of a vast emptiness of pale-yellow harvested fields. At the intersection was an old wooden building with paint faded from countless Indiana summers. Alex was pointing at something in front of the building, and she soon saw what he wanted her to see.

It was the Old Stone Head.

Both had read about this tourist attraction. They had seen photos of it in the brochures inviting Chicago's curious travelers to Brown County. And now that they were seeing it in person, it seemed forlorn, standing way out here in the middle of nowhere with only an old vacant building behind it and the momentary company of transient, wide-eyed passersby in too much of a hurry to get to the artists' shops several miles away.

"Let's stop," Alex said. "I want to get a picture."

They pulled over into a small gravel lot beside the inn. The tires crunched the limestone driveway and stirred little puffs of white dust that floated in front of the headlights. Alex parked at the edge of the lot. They could see the silhouetted marker several yards beyond the penumbra of the beams of light. Its back was to them.

Alex switched off the engine but left the headlights on. The absence of any artificial light at this crossroads made them necessary on this night before moonrise. They approached the marker, smartphones in hand.

Rounding the monolith, they were surprised to find that it was shorter than they expected, perhaps no more than four feet tall. The head was larger than life size. In the half light, it

seemed to smile benevolently at them, a friend to all travelers who paused to gain its limited but helpful counsel.

The eyes gazed stoically toward the crossroads. "Imagine all the things that this stone head had seen over the last 150 years," Alex mused softly.

Stephanie took a couple of photos. "I imagine horse-drawn wagons... horseless carriages... early cars running on electricity and steam, then gasoline. All of them passing this way on what was first a dirt or gravel road that was eventually paved with asphalt."

"Maybe there was even a barnstorming pilot who set up shop in that field across the road," said Alex, almost reverently.

They took turns photographing the head, by itself, and posing beside it.

"It's almost Halloween," said Alex. "I think we should do something special for Old Stone Head."

Stephanie considered this for a moment. "I know what we can do."

She walked back to the car and returned carrying the jester's hat. "I think this will make him look cheerful and festive."

Alex placed the felt hat on top of his head. The hat was too small to cover the entire head, but by stretching the narrow elastic chin strap beneath the massive head, he managed to secure it well enough so that the wind wouldn't blow the hat off.

"Well, that seems to work," he said, standing back to admire the adornment. "Old Stone Head seems to like his new chapeau."

Indeed, the floppy hat lent a modest whimsy to the benevolent expression on the rigid visage. They took a few more photos. Then Alex began to pull the chin strap off the head.

"No, let's leave it," said Stephanie.

"Are you sure? It's a nice hat."

"Yes, it looks good on him. And I don't really want it, anyway. I'll never wear it. Would you wear it?"

Alex chuckled. "No, I suppose not." Facing the head, he touched his forefinger to his temple. "Well, old man, it looks like you've got a Halloween costume now."

They walked back to the car. Alex took Stephanie's hand and kissed her before opening the door for her.

"That's for being kind, even to something that can't appreciate it," he said.

They dined in a nearby town, amid the many Chicago tourists visiting southern Indiana for the weekend, and considered themselves fortunate to have a reservation. The trip was Stephanie's idea, and Alex appreciated her initiative; like many men, he lacked his partner's imagination. But once given to the idea, he was all in.

Their little roadster swallowed the miles under the headlights as they drove on Bellsville Pike after dinner. The harvest moon had finally risen. The wan light cast a milky glow across the rolling, barren fields on the sides of the road. Alex drove carefully because the narrow road had no shoulder, and he switched on the fog lamps to see the edge of the asphalt. Tall blades of grass rushed at them on each side of the narrow highway as the headlights shone on them. The couple sat contentedly beside each other, listening to the throaty tone of the engine.

They crested a slight rise. The intersection of State Highway 135 came into view in the distance.

"Let's check on our friend," said Alex.

Stephanie peered toward the inn. Some low clouds scurried across the moon's face and cast shadows on the ground. "Okay, if you really want to...."

"We won't be long."

Alex slowed the car, and they rolled to a stop a short distance from the inn's front door. At the edge of the headlight beams, the face stared back at them.

Alex turned off the engine. He peered intently at the marker. "It looks different."

Stephanie squinted at the stone head for a few seconds. Then she gasped.

"Oh, no!"

Alex got out. Stephanie quickly followed behind him. They reached the marker at the same time and stood on both sides of it to view it in the headlights' glare, free of their shadows.

"No—How could somebody do this?" Stephanie exclaimed. Her eyes were wide, her hand over her mouth.

Alex ran his fingers tenderly over the pockmarked surface of the face. They entered the divots where someone had shot a small-caliber firearm at the face. One eye was gone; the face had a crater where a nose had once been. The other features were partially obliterated, just enough so that the head was left disfigured and grotesque. Adding insult to injury, the vandals had even spray-painted meaningless symbols on the base, rendering the marker completely useless. The paint had not dried completely, and some of it trailed down toward the grass like tears. Gone was the cheerful visage that greeted countless passersby for generations. Now, a deformed countenance stared toward the road with a single eye.

"Poor fella," Alex said softly. "They even took his hat."

In the headlight's glare, they could see little tufts from its felt decorations lying in the dry grass, where they rose in the wind like tiny pennants. Stephanie wrapped her shawl tighter around her shoulders. Alex put his arm around her. For a moment, they gazed upon the poor stone head, feeling helpless.

"Wait here," Alex said suddenly. He hurried to the car and opened the trunk. Returning with an old towel damp with gaso-

line, he knelt before the marker and began dabbing it on the paint.

Stephanie looked around, as if she might somehow spot the culprits or find evidence of what had become of them. In the moon's dim light, there was little to see, and the few trees surrounding the property offered poor hiding places. Only the inn might harbor anyone, but it was dark and still vacant.

The wind picked up. Some low clouds passed across the moon. Their wispy tendrils reached for it, then released it from their grasp.

The smell of gasoline floated past Stephanie as Alex increased his effort. She looked at the stone head. Above Alex's straining shoulders, the crude eye seemed to return her gaze. She told herself that the light and shadows were making her imagine it.

With a sudden shudder, she drew the shawl closer around her narrow shoulders. "Let's go. We need to leave."

"I'm not finished. Those bastards really did a number on the old head."

"Alex, we need to go... *now*."

"If you're cold, just sit in the car. We won't be here long."

"You don't understand. It's not that. It's just... I don't know. But I think we should go now."

There was a sincere urgency in the plea that startled Alex. He paused and looked up into her eyes. In the glare of the headlights, her slender figure seemed even paler than it should have been.

"All right," he said, standing up. "I guess we can't do much good anyway."

He put his arm around Stephanie, unsure whether she appreciated it more for its warmth or assurance. At the moment, she seemed to need both.

Their shadows momentarily darkened the marker as they

turned their backs to it and passed in front of the headlights. Back at the car, Alex opened the passenger door for Stephanie. When he took his place behind the wheel, he looked once more at the marker. It stood facing them, pale and lonely.

"We must have been one of the last who saw him intact," he muttered.

Stephanie nodded. She watched the marker as Alex backed the car out of the small lot and the headlights withdrew, leaving the marker in the shadows.

That night was their last at the bed-and-breakfast inn in the nearby town. Alex slept soundly; Stephanie was awakened in the middle of the night by a sudden gust of wind that shook the windows.

The next morning, they went downstairs to the dining room and joined their fellow residents for breakfast. They ordered their food and sipped from the hefty white mugs of steaming coffee while scanning their daily news feeds.

Stephanie gasped. Her phone fell to the table as her hands clapped over her mouth. The couple at the nearest table looked up from their food.

"What's wrong?" asked Alex.

Stephanie's eyes widened. She grabbed Alex's forearm with both hands. "Do you know what time it was when we stopped at the marker?" she whispered urgently. "When we stopped and saw that it was vandalized."

"About 9, I guess. Why?"

"Somebody else was there after us."

"Sure, a lot of people stop to see it. But what's got you like this?

"The marker is *gone*."

"Someone stole it?"

"Someone dragged it away last night. Look!"

She shoved her phone in front of him. A wire story from

The Indianapolis Star reported that early that morning, a passerby called the police to report the missing marker. A photo taken by a passerby accompanied the story. Indeed, the stretch of torn-up grass and overturned dirt that connected the marker's familiar post to the gravel parking lot seemed to confirm that someone had dragged the heavy monolith away.

But what truly startled Alex was what he read next.

"Steph, what do you make of this?" He put the phone in front of her and pointed to it.

Another item described the early morning discovery of two bodies in a motel in the town nearby. The victims' identities were not mentioned pending the notification of their next-of-kin, but the article described them as males in their late 20s. The bodies were found in their beds, and they had died in their sleep. Several cans of black spray paint and a small-caliber handgun registered to one of the men were found with the bodies.

An autopsy was pending, but observers noted the odd manner in which the bodies were found. Their beds were collapsed, and the men's torsos were flattened. Their room reeked of gasoline.

"Oh, my God," whispered Stephanie.

Their appetite vanished, and they soon checked out of the inn and began their drive back to Chicago. For a long time, neither mentioned the news articles. But after a few miles, they approached the old inn at the intersection of Bellsville Pike and State Highway 135.

"Alex—Look!" Stephanie exclaimed as she pointed excitedly toward the front of the inn. Alex pulled into the small gravel lot.

There at its old post, standing watch over the intersection, stood the Old Stone Head. The morning sun cast shadows across its pockmarked surface. Alex saw the smeared, black-

ened surface that he'd labored over with the towel. And in front of the marker, the uprooted grass and overturned dirt that they'd seen in the news photo led from the marker to the parking lot... *and back.*

Alex and Stephanie looked at each other. She took hold of his hand. It was cold. They sat like that, mute and listening to the motor's low, deep tone. Finally, Alex put the car in gear and backed out of the gravel lot.

"I guess we have no way of knowing what was in that old stone head," he said.

It appeared momentarily in the rear-view mirror. But before it vanished from sight, Alex thought he saw something on the weathered face.

Was it... *grinning?*

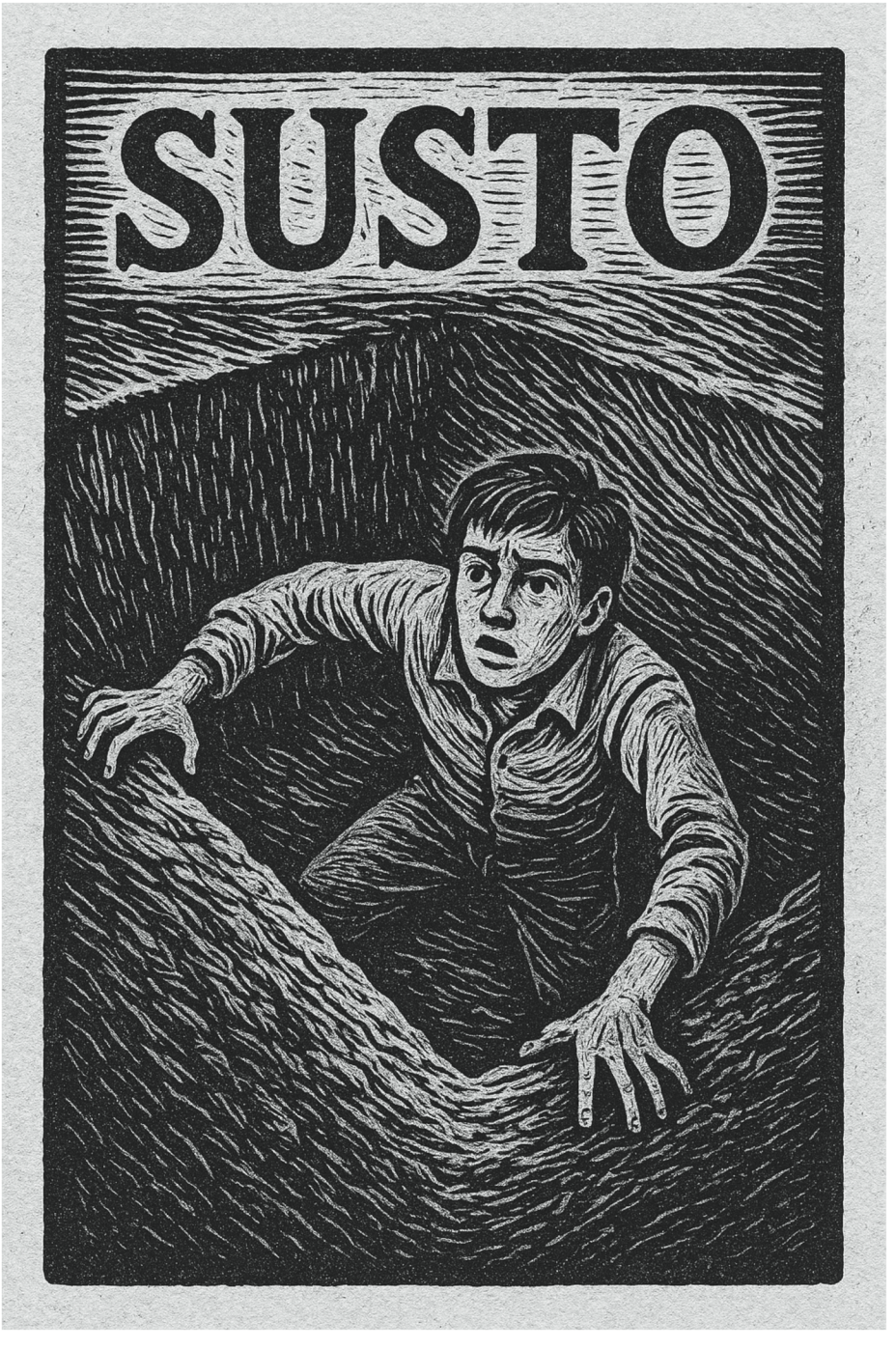
"What in the..." he whispered.

"What did you say?"

Alex blinked a few times. "Nothing. I guess the sunlight's playing tricks on my eyes."

He gripped the steering wheel, turned toward the highway, and smiled.

Arthur Gonzalez Carvajal is a lawyer and legal editor who serves as General Counsel for WebCE, having previously worked for Dearborn Financial Services and Kaplan Professional Services after earning degrees from St. Mary's University and the University of Notre Dame Law School. His creative writing has appeared in literary journals and won first prize in *Chicago Lawyer* magazine's 1996 fiction competition. He continues to pursue his first novel alongside his legal career and musical performances with the Chicago Bar Association ensembles.


SUSTO

Susto

By Julian S. Garcia

When I woke up, it wasn't to reality—it was to a dream. And normally, I don't have dreams of any kind. It wasn't a narrative dream; it was something like pieces of blurred experiences of something I had to do or had to be done. Perhaps it was because of the odd friends who challenged the sanctity of places like Campo Santos that I was experiencing this *Susto*. In English, it is called Fright. What else could it be?

Then again, perhaps books, such as Mariano Azuela's *Los De Abajo* and Juan Rulfo's *The Burning Plain and Other Stories,* had produced a dream in my youth. Had I read them in English, I wouldn't be having this terrifying nightmare because reading them in Spanish has a more deadly appeal. But I told myself it was just a bad dream. If I had never gone to that cemetery with my friend, I wouldn't be having this awful dream. Which is weird, because I've never heard of anyone speaking to themselves in a dream. And to get myself out of this state of mind, I had to go back at least a week to examine what had happened while still in this nightmare. I didn't want a recur-

rence ever again. Ghastly, I remembered after school that I told *La Muerte* I wanted my three dollars for doing his homework. We called him *La Muerte* because of his white sheet complexion—the color of Ivory soap.

Walking on gravel sidewalks up to the Alazan Courts, I could barely see them. The sun was at its last gasp of brightness, setting to the west. I didn't want any trouble; I just wanted my three dollars. They were all huddling and smoking marijuana. I could tell by the faint glow of the joint being passed around. I stopped, resting against a telephone pole, thinking that maybe it was a mistake approaching him in front of his friends.

And the next thing I knew, I was remembering that incident the night before with one of my friends searching at midnight for his cousin's grave. I don't know why. *The San Fernando* Cemetery was pitch black. We were far into the cemetery, stepping over graves; his flashlight batteries had run out. I stumbled into a fresh, empty tomb. It seemed like an eternity, till finally my friend used a rope and pulled me out—that's what it felt like. But while I was in there, the fright embraced me, and then the panic of death took hold of me. *El Susto* was really terrifying me because my T-shirt and boxer shorts felt soaking wet. *Susto* is a stage of fright that has an eerie and paralyzing force akin to a supernatural phenomenon.

I do remember a powerful, gushing, swirling wind yanking me from the telephone pole, and I was hanging on, too. *La Muerte* and the guys, all dressed in black and smoking marijuan*a*, weren't there anymore. They all seemed to vanish. I must've missed their departure as the gusty, dusty wind blinded me.

Maybe I hadn't crawled out of the fresh-dug grave hole that night alive. But something strange struck me, the tomb pit didn't smell moist or freshly dug for a corpse. It didn't smell like

the one I had fallen into while looking for my friend's cousin's grave. I wasn't sure of anything now. I felt every hair on my damp body stand on end. My eyes were open. There was nothing. Blackness. No crickets were chirping in the darkness. I could feel sweat running down my spine. And then, the coldness and emptiness of the dark hole paralyzed my limbs. And this, too, didn't add up.

I tried to move but couldn't. In the darkness, a strange sensation overwhelmed me again. I wasn't alone. Then, it hit me as I tried to breathe with much effort. I tried to move my arms, fingers, and legs, but I couldn't. They felt heavy as leg irons. Suddenly, I began to panic because the grave smelled rancid, like old, moth-eaten, ragged clothes, and its pungent odor filled my nostrils. The dark hole reeked of long-dead bones. Dogs my grandfather buried years ago reminded me of that smell—old, decaying bones.

I felt it again—there was something inside with me. I wanted to do as my grandmother had told me to do when demons approach and say the holy rosary backwards—but that, too, I couldn't do because the words couldn't come out of my tongue. At first, I tried to speak out to whatever was in there with me. I tried to move to no avail. My body joints were completely paralyzed. In the hollowness and depth of that hole, the realness of what death must be like shocked me more to the point. I was thinking about all the promises I have made to God, Jesus, and *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. I was helpless. Nothing.

After what seemed like hours of trying to move, a strange sensation overpowered me, and I stopped the arduous efforts of trying to get out of the grave and the bad dream, focusing instead on something odd, ancient, and cold nearby inside the pit. It had to be ancient and cold, because the temperature dropped like a butcher's freezer. I was exhaling vapors as one

does during the winter season. No words would come out. Something across from me somehow understood what was happening as I gasped desperately for fresh air. The dead thing across from me was drenched with ammonia that morticians use on cadavers. It wasn't a good sign because that meant the corpse across from me was returning to life.

I felt I was being punished for not believing in my grandparents' stories of *La Llorona*, *La Lechuza*, or local tales of *The Devil at Camaroncito Nightclub*. I was critical of their stories and told them that these abuelo and abuela stories were used to control children, to warn them not to stay out late at night. At that minute, I wished I could have taken all of it back. I shouldn't have disrespected their tales when I was ten. However, that memory was somehow connected to what was happening in the present moment. One of the few regretful things I've done. Maybe it was a punishing dream, because a pious friend told me it was a sin to stare at a girl's *nalgas*, much less her private parts. But that happened only during gym period.

The silence.

The emptiness.

The guilt—felt real—as the weighty element of nature.

Whatever ancient body was coming across me spread out like a glowing mist inside the pitch-black pit-hole. All logic was defied. I couldn't see it. But I sensed it. Something was coming from his mouth, struggling to say a few words, but he was paralyzed at the moment. Then, I thought, maybe it wants to tell me how to get out of this ghastly dream.

I was trying to understand what was inside the hole with me. I listened carefully, like a jungle cat, my ears searching and calculating how close it was across from me. Then, after a while, maybe seconds, as fog surrounded us, the smell of dingy, tattered clothes, mixed with the odor of rotten, decaying bones,

wafted upon me. I'm not sure, but I thought I saw the appearance of a skeleton. I smelled the stench of cow carcasses from across the nearby slaughterhouse on Tampico Street, where I lived with my grandmother.

But that smell was stark, decades old.

Whatever was across from me settled my fears, because in a flash, it occurred to me that the only thing opposite me in a graveyard had to be a corpse. Someone is already dead. Then I remembered *La Muerte* telling me La India gang members were after him because, after beating up their drug runner, he had stolen their drugs, worth lots of money. But that thought went away. But not completely, because the apparition there in the blackness started whimpering, uttering in Spanish: "*Diles que no me maten*."

I couldn't see him; his voice was hoarse and heavy with mucus. The tired old voice was saying, "Tell them not to kill me." But it couldn't be real—I'm thinking all this is a bad dream. The eerie voice repeated, "*Díles que no me máten*?" And then, a triumphant feeling overpowered me, because I knew right then that those words came from Juan Rulfo's short story. The Spanish words, as creepy as they sound, were ten times more powerful than the English ones. And then I knew for sure I was in a bad dream.

Suddenly, I was back against the telephone pole and saw three black, old Fifties Fords rumble by slowly. They parked by the curb near the playground where *La Muerte* and the Los Courts gang were smoking the stolen marijuana. I then saw three other cars parked by the side with about fifteen vatos with shotguns and Uzis pulled next to them. The driver used the spotlight on *La Muerte* and friends. I wasn't going to stay and be a spectator, and so I ran quickly until I got to my grandmother's house. I went straight to the spigot and filled my empty,

frightened stomach, thinking I could have been an innocent, dead victim.

And then, right there, I remembered the voice and what I heard before, in my dream state, as "*Díles que no me máten, Pancracio.*" That was the voice of a character in the book.

"Who is going to kill you, amigo?" I asked.

There was no response. Only heavy sobbing and sighs. Then came the voice again in a desperate, sharper whisper, "*No hables inglés porque ta maten come a los crean en Dios.*" He was talking about Catholic priests and religious followers, I thought. And then I remembered my grandmother saying that in 1926, *Cristíanos* in Mexico were being murdered for believing in God, and for speaking English taught by Irish-American priests. Then I thought, "Oh no! I'm still in the dream."

Díles les Pancracio. Díles que no me máten."

"But you are already dead, amigo," I said.

I was waiting for a reply. But nothing. Silence. Only shotgun blasts were drifting in the wind, coming from the playground. I waited and waited until I fell into a deeper sleep. When I awoke, it was to our rooster's full-throated *qui-qui-ríqui*. I threw off the covers and showered quickly, not thinking about the bad dream that had woken me. My grandmother had breakfast ready and said, "You'd better splash yourself with holy water."

I gave her a quizzical frown. And she said, "You had a horrible nightmare." I looked at the clock and saw I had plenty of time to re-create the dream for her. When I finished telling her, she said, "The bad dream was an omen. You will understand it better when a certain word comes your way today."

She was a wise grandmother, because it was only a dream.

That morning in the cafeteria, while students ate breakfast, a guy who loved spreading horrible, terrifying news and killings

told us what happened the night before, just like my stupefying dream. Several of the words caught my ear: *"Diles que no me maten."* He claimed to have witnessed the shooting and saw *La Muerte* hanging over the Brazos Street overpass.

I said nothing. But in my mind, I thought life was full of mysteries as omens, signs, and visions of *La Muerte's* death. I wondered if he felt the same silence, emptiness, and blackness that I did in my short but vivid *Susto.*

And for the voice that spoke to me in the grave from beyond, I wrote a few paragraphs during study hall. I went to the *San Fernando Cemetery* and read over all the graves because I couldn't remember exactly which one I had stumbled upon. And I read from my notebook paper, "Listen to my voice —you're not alive. I am thankful you woke me up from what could have been a severe heart attack. Seriously, thank you, dead voice."

Almost as an afterthought, I said, "*Amigo! Ya estas muerto!*"

Then I stopped. There was no reply. No begging. No voice from the beyond. Out of sympathy and respect for the dead, I said my final words: "Your creator, Juan Rulfo, had you killed on page one of his story. You have been dead for decades. You are only alive because I'm listening to you beg me to ask your creator not to kill you, but I can't because he, too, is already dead."

And then again, emptiness and silence surrounded the cemetery as I walked back to the front gate. A caretaker had been watching me from a distance and stopped me as I was passing him by and said, "You're a good young man because you care for the dead as I do."

I nodded and continued walking out the front gate, wondering if this was the sign to watch and care for those loved ones, as my grandmother had before *her time came.*

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Julian S. Garcia is an independent scholar and writer who has published in the *Texas State Historical Association* website, *Caracol*, the *San Antonio Express-News*, *Saguaro*, *ViAztlan, Puentes,* with stories anthologized in *Southwest Tales* (Colorado). He is the author of *La Fantasica Curandera* and *Voices from the River*.

Poetry in Peril

By Fernando Esteban Flores

In a recent review of the award-winning poet Tracy K. Smith's Fear Less: Poetry in Perilous Times, the writer, Meagan Masterman, poses the question, *Does poetry matter?* You may think the answer is evident in view of how poetry has exploded across the country. Yet, in terms of book sales, according to Christopher F.'s report 2024 in Medium (https://medium.com/technical-excellence/poetry-book-sales-in-the-united-states-85d3f526af3b), Poetry doesn't even rank as its own *category*.

However, compared to other genres, poetry remains microscopic in terms of sales, regardless of its growth rate, Christopher points out. However, Masterman notes, *poetry's power to help us work through the vexing and perplexing makes it more critical, not less. Smith excels at explaining topics like ghazels and iambic pentameter simply..."*

Perilous times may lie ahead—economically, politically, socially, environmentally, as well as spiritually—poetry has always been a means of resistance. Poetry may be written and

read for purpose and meaning, but also for the sheer pleasure words give—poetry that offers multiple layers of possibility.

I am reminded of what one of the greatest Welsh poets, Dylan Thomas, said, Images are what they say—not what they stand for when discussing one of his most complex poems, "Altarwise by Owl light," that I have analyzed and marked up in my copy of his collected poems.

The title itself paints a stark and brutal image of what's to come. The poem, though complex, is nevertheless a thing of beauty. I'm grateful for Dylan's comment. It took the burden off me trying to figure out what it was about, which, arguably, Smith contends, is the peril poetry faces from readers who give up trying to figure out what it's about.

Whether you prefer *instapoetry, spoken word, contemporary poetry, or formal/traditional poetry, poetry will continue to grow, breed,* and develop at its own speed. Perhaps in the near future, it will outpace other genres and capture a larger share of sales and profits. In the meantime, enjoy our issue and continue to support your local poets. Buy a book of poems. Attend a poetry reading in your area. Poetry, indeed, matters. Make it so.

———

Fernando Esteban Flores

CTN poetry editor

Welcome to El Snack Bar

Jacinto Jesús Cardona

Alone with my borrones
I write with my voice on off
voice over contrapunto irónico
excuse me while I put on my esmokín jacket
silencio ranas que va cantar el sapo
Valerio did you know my escritorio es mi velorio
huyuyuy
por supuesto you know I was baptized Jacinto
huitz huitz fell from my melancholy lips
fate is fickle ¿qué no? that's why I carry
my own sickle for lack of un instinto divinatorio
I kiss the sod eat a sweet mezquite pod
la tilma on my tongue
¿qué dice? ¿pos quien sabe¿
de músico poeta y loco todos tenemos un poco
the black bone of a telephone rings
¿bueno? ¿bueno? let's cruise the produce

and squeeze a pair of melancholy mangos
Ángela maría who is this ¡aló! ¡aló!
ja ja ja el monasterio is scary ¿qué no?
no señor I have no vocabulary word
for the eyeballs in the keyholes

©2025 Jacinto Jesús Cardona

Fideo Loco, PhD.

Jacinto Jesús Cardona

FIDEO LOCO, PHD.

I'm back
riding my bicycle blue
through the neighborhood
wearing a tweed jacket
frayed patches on my elbows
looking no lesser
than a visiting professor
of philosophy and if
someone asks why
in my lapel I keep
a purple pink clavel
I'll tell them
I'm Fideo Loco, PhD.
the hoi polloi does not know
one day I'll pack my bags

and go to Halifax
for now I ride my blue bicicleta
looking like la pura neta
I'm Fideo Loco, PhD.

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EL BATO LADRÓN

Jacinto Jesús Cardona

Munching on a chicharrón
el bato ladrón rides el Metro
in Mexico City
he would rather be in Londres
shopping for scones
after pilfering tomes
and antique metronomes.

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EL BATO WITH A RED BANDANA

Jacinto Jesús Cardona

Cada fin de semana el bato with a red bandana
spends his hard earned lana as if there is no mañana
he has no need for a financial advisor
not having much success with the opposite sex
el bato with a red bandana likes movies
with a beauty and the beast motif
he could relate to Quasimodo's unrequited love
for the beautiful dancer La Esmeralda
when the movie ended el bato with a red bandana
muttered to himself pos ni modo Quasimodo
el bato with a red bandana tiene sangre liviana
dancing all night with anyone at el market square
el bato with a red bandana is no billionaire
but he is so so debonaire
c/s

@2025 Jacinto Jesús Cardona

XIXIPINI

Jacinto Jesus Cardona

Plopping my typewriter on the table
father made with his handsaw
hence the uneven legs
I sit on an old library chair
under the sparse shade of a mezquite
ripe yellow bean pods like crescent moons
dangling from slender twigs
one falls at my feet
as I plod on with my tiquitiqui
cumulus clouds break out in laughter
but that's okay because clouds
know a thing or two about el xixipini
the drop drop the clack clack
the drizzle of drudgery

--©2025 Jacinto Jesús Cardona

Jacinto Jesús Cardona is a San Antonio poet whose two poetry books, *PAN DULCE and AMAPOLASONG* celebrate his growing up Tex Mex in Alice, the Hub of South Texas. His poem "Bato Con Khakis" was selected by New York Symphony Space for performance as part of ALL WRITE, an adult literacy program. His poetry is documented in *Voices from Texas* by San Antonio filmmaker Ray Santiesteban. Cardona teaches English at Incarnate Word High School.

Don Q. on "Dysme"

Fernando Esteban Flores

The 4th Century Gospel of Nicodemus records his name as *Dysme*
Meaning dying or sunset in Greek
Thereafter the church fathers called him *Dismas*
Better known to us as the Good Thief
Who chastised the other one hanging on the cross
To the left of our Lord
He knew who he was & accepted his
Punishment for a lifetime of crimes
But the unfortunate one mocked the son of God
Challenging him to prove his divinity by
Coming down from the cross to save them & himself
Dismas by his confession & acknowledgement of Christ
Gained his salvation
He realized his number was up
No time for reparations restitutions resolutions
He assigned no blame for his wrong choices

The unnamed cat—hardcore & unrepentant—
Went down screaming & swinging
Railing against anyone & everyone who
Had ever crossed his path
Unable to see beyond his damaged ego
& wounded pride as he slipped into that outer darkness
Where there's weeping & gnashing of teeth
Surely there must have been tears thó we're not told
According to the gospels or tradition
Christ's head hangs to the right in acceptance of Dismas
Today churches & cities have been named after
The Good Thief whose feast day devout Christians celebrate on March 25
He ruled as sinner now reigns as saint
An ending he couldn't have ever foreseen
A better denouement at his demise
Even the worst of us is called
Each must answer accordingly

©2025 Fernando Esteban Flores

If Mary were here

Fernando Esteban Flores

At The Pearl fountain with Mary Oliver
Might make a poem in the dog days of early August
All my life I've been able to feel happiness
Except whatever was not happiness
She tells me in a poem
Each of us wears a shadow she says
I agree with her completely
Sitting in summer's intense embrace
For which there is no escape
Among countless shadows
I've been under
For as long as I remember
As a pair of grackles carry on
Their momentary gripes
Gripped by a vicious vise
A sense of loss of place & purpose
Feeling disconnected like I never belonged

& never will
Punishing myself for a life's worth of troubles
Well worth the mask
My own blues I writ well
If Mary were here
She would understand
©2025 Fernando Esteban Flores

Robert Plant or Jesus?

Fernando Esteban Flores

Might've been a young Robert Plant
On his way to California
Or a young Jesus making his way
Down the street having walked miles
Through the harsh Texas scrub
Or ridden *La Bestia* across Mexico
Long auburn hair flowing back
As he stepped briskly in the early morning
Heat canvas backpack squared
Securely on his shoulders
One never knew who you'd come across
On any day at any time
Fate having fun at our expense
Interjecting its bizarre sense of humor
On our heedless heads
The countless people that cross our path
Shouldering their own broken dreams

Sheltering from their own storms
As they go about the days & nights
Facing the faceless future

©2025 Fernando Esteban Flores

Fernando Esteban Flores is a native son of Texas, a graduate of the University of Texas at Austin, published three books of poetry: *Ragged Borders, Red Accordion Blues, & Blood-Songs* available through Hijo del Sol Publishing. His poems have appeared in multiple journals, reviews, newspapers, online sites and have been nominated twice for a Pushcart Prize. Fernando received an ELLA award and an Arts & Letters award from the San Antonio Public Library System for his outstanding contributions to the artistic and literary community of San Antonio. He is currently the poetry editor of the CTN Journal of Pedagogy & Creativity (catchthenext.org) Gnashingteeth publishing is set to release his forthcoming book of poems titled *Song for America* January 2026.

Ahora soy de acá

Alicia Zavala Galván

Después de tantos años duele
recordar el principio del exilio
hacia otro modo de vida,
aprender a pensar y hablar
en otra idioma
desde entonces ya no fui de allí
sino ahora soy de acá

Los segundos
Los minutos
Las horas
Los días
Las semanas,
Los meses
Los años
Las décadas

El transcurro del tiempo
es interminable

Recuerdos empalmados
pasando en caravana
en mis sueños
en mi inconsciente

Al despertar
se me hunde el alma
y el corazón de nuevo

©2025 Alicia Zavala Galván

Now I am from Here

Alicia Zavala Galván

After so many years it hurts
To remember the beginning of exile
to another way of life
other days and nights in another country
learn to think and speak
in another language

Since then I am not from there
but now I am from here

the seconds
the minutes
the hours
the days
the weeks
the months
the years

the decades

The passing of time
is endless

Spliced memories
passing in single file
in my dreams
in my subconscious

Upon awakening
my heart and soul
sink once more

©2025 Alicia Zavala Galván

Imagined Presence

Alicia Zavala Galván

Despite myself
the unconscious walks the sidewalks
the hallways
the rooms
of a house already collapsed
or occupied by strange bodies

Despite myself
I cling to my hopes
My smell follows the fragrances
of rich dishes served
in an imagined kitchen

Despite myself
my eyes search for
the newspapers printed
in secret

soaked with the sweat of fear
of being discovered

Despite myself
I seek out friends
knowing in my heart
that some
are corpses

They and I are an imagined presence

© 2025 Alicia Zavala Galván

Alicia Zavala Galván, bilingual writer, translator, and artist, has published six collections of poetry. She translated the work of South American and Central American poets. Her work as an independent scholar has focused on the Colonial Mexican Nun of the seventeenth century, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and has been presented in both English and Spanish to popular and academic audiences in the United States and internationally.

My middle name

Carlos Loera

What does it say about me?
No se
I always said I don't know
Why do you ask?
Por que
Do you question my
Identity
What does a middle name mean?
Por que
Who wants to know?
El nombre that our parents give us
I was ashamed
Por que
I did not have a middle name
All the kids had one
Juan Carlos
José Luis

John Robert
Come se dice
I say
El nombre de mama y papa
I struggle to say it
In front of the class
Finally I say
I am
Carlos Gonzalez Loera

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Friday Night Dreams

Carlos Loera

En la calle Guadalupe, entre
Zarzamora y Brazos
That was my playground.
Or I thought.
Desperate dreams and
Sunsets en la Calle Guadalupe
Were different.
I remember my dad
Not coming home
On Friday nights.
I remember those Friday night rituals.
Mom would choose me to bring him home
On Friday nights.
Fridays were my dreams come true.
Paletas, money, lots of kisses
would always slow me down.
I was always chasing him,

He was always one cantina ahead of me.
I knew that Friday night rage
If I caught up to him,
He never wanted me to bust his Friday night dreams.

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It was you and I

Carlos Loera

It was you and I
As I look back on that November night
After the shock has worn off,
After the tears have dried
After the anger has subsided.
After that last drink of despair
I find no end to enduring the pain that is to come.
The hapless of racist America,
The misogyny
The ignorance
We must blame one another,
For being conned
Into buying snake oil
That promises to fix all our ills,
It was you,
It was I,
That has failed.

No more
Will I listen
To the cries of pain
We had our chance.
When democracy fades
It was us.

©2025 Carlos Loera

Carlos Loera graduated from the University of Wisconsin at Madison with an MFA in Art. He is an Adjunct Faculty member at San Antonio College and is an Adult Educator at Bazan Library. His poetry has been published in the *San Antonio Express*, *Gnashing Teeth Publishing*, *Texas Poetry Assignment*. He paints, draws, writes poetry, and produces *Voces Cósmicas*, a group of established & emerging poets.

Pyre

Rita Ortiz

What kind of fire makes the particular pitch
of your eyes in my memory?
Pray take my limbs for bark,
an early fire will surely bring rain
Wait until flames stammer into ash
to look up at first light and see
I lie in the palm of a swallow's nest
newly made by your door
and you'll know
I've left this world, but never your side

©2025 Rita Ortiz

Hymn 21

Rita Ortiz

For the 21 killed at Robb Elementary School
in Uvalde, Texas on May 24, 2022

My tears are memories
My life a wish
welling rain for tomorrows
that never rise

Oh summer, sing
Of my life, a hymn

It feels like sleep
how days drift
I saw a butterfly wilt
at the sound of weeping
for a May that will never end
Oh summer, sing

Of my life, a hymn

The sun a psalm
to welcome me home
Where I can still hear you
Where you can't hear me
I can still see you
keep wishing to see me
in your dreams

Oh summer, sing
Of the 21, a hymn
Oh summer, sing
Of the 21, a hymn

©2025 Rita Ortiz

"About me" list you can read at my funeral

Rita Ortiz

After Lena Hechtman Ayers

At my birth, I forgot the thousand pasts I've lived.
I conducted my first symphony when I was five.
No one came.

I was nine years old when I wrote my first book
titled, Deer in the Forest Book, made of copier paper and cardboard.

My mother featured it on her vitrine.
I dreamt my son 18 years before he was born.
The same son I fathered before we shared armor to raise an army.

I'm short and quiet, but my voice chimes
the blessed and cursed blood of my lineage.

Nightmares hunted my sleep since I was a child.
I couldn't run from them, so I wet the bed.

The moon hums static that trembles my cranium.
Sometimes I can understand what she says—most people call that a stroke.

The wounds I nurse are penance for having
wielded death on my sword 600 years ago.

This life has made of me a wounded animal,
dripping the blood with which earth adorns the sacred.

I dreamed Death in a yellow field, reaping the flesh of my ancestors.
I didn't think he would be so literal.

I am the granddaughter of a horse tamer, who saddled a black horse for me in one of my dreams.
I'm waiting for the dream where he teaches me to ride it.

Blame my tired aim, but I can't hit the target because it's never my turn.
I'm no quitter, but mirrors hate failure.
I can barely recognize myself.

I couldn't remember joy until my son drew it for me in trains.
They're all he remembers from his thousand pasts.

On January 25th, 2023, at 4:30 p.m., I saw a man get shot seven times on 410 East in San
Antonio. He crashed into a telephone pole. Four hours later, I read he survived. I wish I could tell

him I'm sorry I didn't catch the license plates.
I rarely leave Texas, but I've seen a tiger from the inside.
©2025 Rita Ortiz

_____

Rita Ortiz is a singer-songwriter and from Eagle Pass, Texas. Known as "La Golondrina" on stage, she recently released a Mariachi EP titled *Paloma.* Her poetry is featured in the *Pecan Grove Review* and *Asina is How We Talk,* among others. Her short film, *Aldebaran,* was selected in the San Antonio Underground Film Festival in 2024. Ortiz teaches English in Palo Alto College.

Artificial intelligence

Alex Z.Salinas

My friend is
    as of now
    incapable of sitting in a plane
    and relinquishing control—

The mind's capacity for
    self-deception
    is endless
    and must be like freefalling

Except the ground
    is real
    and cold
    hard as any rock forged

Frankly
    it feels warm to use our voicebox

or body
to form the words that God shall free us

From endless
brainwash
already relinquished
to someone's game in a field of flowers

Withered
per their design
from frolicking radiance
we dreamt we were feverishly seduced by—

Then scorched.

©2025 Alex Z.Salinas

Self-portrait as dominant hand

Alex Z. Salinas

The journey here was treacherous.
Their complexion the color of my Juanito's
Head. They do not receive us kindly
But there is no flaw in their
Design. Our gods—
Incompatible. /

Terrible night sorrows
Being stretched to
Oblivion
Bottom
Of sea.

Rise with the golden
Daydreams of the sun
Who never sets in our
Kingdom. Smashed

Mosquitoes. Spillages licked clean.

There is, on their skin, more water than
Blood of Christ. Flowers for irises. The poet
Catullus said our people cleanse our teeth with
Piss. You do not conquer the Pacific without
A dry sense of humor. Irony. Iron. Honest quills.
Duty, my child, arrives much later.

©2025 Alex Z.Salinas

Vertigo

Alex Z. Salinas

Years ago, I watched *Vertigo* for the first time and
afterwards spooked from standing eerie
still scrutinizing the
speckled stranger in my bathroom mirror
stepped outside threw the trash, breathed in & told
our polluted night I swelled with infinite
tales,
please keep me alive—
Punjabi music blasting the sketch carwash
across the furious road, I could've died
right there midstride in my right century
Lord— floating in Hitchcock's
roving dream ... things to remember to
forget stowed in that soaring antihero's
shadow-
boxing fears of sharp dark edges slipped inside light pores—

take me back to that window- less pad, I'll die
right
here, Lord send love to whom is
missed most when I close my ...
where it's said
this soul awaits sunkisses in
concealed pianos guiding
to trap-
door
out the nightmare, red giants
inhaling snuffing us
fragrant flowers out
w/ flagrant puppydog express-
ions
colonies of white
flags
behind
our
ears.

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Esképtico

Alex Z. Salinas

Like any good American in the Americas
I took the advice of my expat friends seriously
And scoured the used-book shops' inventory
With the focus of a trained (or self-taught)
Sniper.

On day two, in the shop of a man wearing
Circular lenses like Francisco de Quevedo and
Sipping maté- like any character in a Cortázar
Novel, I found, in the heart of his inventory,
Twin clothbound volumes in dusty red with
Swastika imprints for hearts.

I found the Third Reich across from Sor
Juana's poems—I found Nazi literature in
The Americas, brutally silent.

It rained on and off that day under a gray
    Veil of clouds that put me in mind of El
    Greco's painting of old Toledo. Everything was
    Metaphor in my life, then and now.

Well-mannered was I, then, but now
    It might be comforting to call it what it was:
    A displaced American wandering
    With broken Spanish and a desire to see

History in order to believe it
    To believe it
            And go from there.

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Alex Z. Salinas is the author of four volumes of poetry: **WARBLES; DREAMT, or The Lingering Phantoms of Equinox; Hispanic Sonnets; and Trash Poems**. His collection of stories, City Lights From the Upside Down, was included in the National Book Critics Circle's Critical Notes. His poetry and fiction have been nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize. His debut novel, **The Dream Life of Larry Rios**, will be published on October 7, 2025, through FlowerSong Press. Salinas lives in South Texas.

Mind and Body

Christina Tata

I love as an immortal
my soulmate cursed with mortality.
Short-lived fleeting beauty.
Wits and laughter.
I shower her with gifts-
flowers,
stones,
silks and velvets of other lands.
She, my most loved,
who holds every ounce of my devotion,
will still,
age.
She will feel heartache,
and pain.
My attempts to alleviate the symptoms of mortality in vain.
Spells and pills alike hold no sway over the forces of time.
My love often overshadowed by frustration-

that the Gods will not grant her immortality.
And so,
I sit with my arms wrapped around her.
My hands intertwined with hers.
Her skin ice.
We watch the sun set and count the stars.
She is unable to do much else.
No longer can we swim the depths of the ocean,
hike the highest mountains,
crawl through caverns,
and drink the marrow from the bones of life.
She,
my flame,
bright as ever,
has run out of wick.
I wipe the tears from her eyes.
Kiss her forehead.
And watch the light fade
from *my* mortal tired face and aching body.

© 2025 Christina Tata

Hope

Christina Tata

Let the sweat run into my eyes,
for I have spent so long inside.
Let the salt sour my lips,
and wash away the taste of bitter lies.
May I be crucified with light,
and branded with my sins.
Might my body ache and ash,
but hold firm with regrettable and unwavering devotion.
(For I have come too far to abandon myself)

© 2025 Christina Tata

Mixed Metal

Chrisina Tata

I feel-
anger behind my eyes.
Regret in my lungs.
Happiness on my lips
and lust on my tongue.

Mania tastes of copper
and Depression tastes of lead.
My Lover and Jailer
all in my head.
They'll say it is the chemicals-
that I'm not insane.
Though often when I get like this
others look at me with disdain.
My Love, energy so high,
no sleep even needed.
But my view of myself

often becomes conceded.
God complexes and delusions,
New inspirations running late at night.
The hallucinations will join the high
when my world looks so bright.
Oh, but the Jailer will come to take my Lover away,
I beg him to let her stay another day.
Her intoxication forgotten as soon as she leaves-
Replaced by my mouth tasting of lead,
and my brain filled with the desire to be dead.

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Ayisha Silverson is located in her own reality of magic and chaos, but can often be found in South Texas. Ayisha has two poems published by the *San Antonio Review*. A creative writer by day and academic by night, don't ask her to pick just one interest. /Christina Tata is her preferred alias.

Book Review

El Dia Mas Delicioso De Mi Vida: Una Mezcla de Poetry + Prose: Dictated in persistent Geistgespracht by Emetrio "El Chango" Landeros To Arturo Mantecon

Prickly Pear Publishing
$18
ISBN: 978-1-889568-11-9.

Reviewed by Rafael C. Castillo

Even as repressive regimes suppress literature and poetry, a renaissance of poetry and literary books is cropping up from independent presses this year. I ran across a book that quickly caught my attention. It was a bilingual book, with Spanish and English, two languages dancing a wild German polka of ideas. Just out from Prickly Pear Publishing is *El Día Más Delicioso De Mi Vida* ("The Most Delightful Day in My Life"), a hybrid prose-poetry collection from Arturo Mantecón.

After a brief sojourn in San Antonio, hailing from Sacramento, Calif., Mantecón's shtick is dictated by persistent Geist-

gespraech, a phrase that translates to "spirit speaking." Common during the 1900s, the phase was associated with spiritualism and Ouija gameboards, where seances were held and relatives sought assurances from their mediums that their dearly departed relatives had entered the pearly gates of heaven. A worst-case scenario involved screaming and chasing rainbows of empty piss pots.

Like Dante Alighieri's meditation on spirituality, found in "Purgatorio Canto XV," the hallmarks of these experiences involve the soul's withdrawal from the body. The opposite is true in the prose poems found in *El Día Más Delicioso De Mi Vida*. Ethereal ancestral voices (three of them) take over and inhabit the poet. He claims that these voices enter his body. Even Dante warns his readers, "Abandon all Hope ye who enter here."

I interviewed him some time ago at a downtown coffee shop. I was curious about the book and the person who inhabited that world.

Is Mantecón a medium? I sat down with him and asked.

With a broad smile, the gentle septuagenarian hedged a bit, saying they are visions, muses, alter egos, all with polyphonic narratives, anxious to tell their stories through poetry and prose. A former arts director, Mantecón is also an accomplished translator, with three books to his name. This is his first phantasmagorical trip into poetry.

Mantecón historicizes his family circus background between Mexico and the United States. Interspersed between the prose and poetry are madcap interludes of his cousins smashing cascarones with painted faces of Virginia Woolf, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and French existentialist Jean Paul Sartre — add a Croatian female circus performer for comic relief. The overarching spirit who communicates all this is Emeterio Landeros, known as "El Chango" (Monkey), a

Caliban figure resurrected from *El Gran Circo* Mantecón. He says the spirit, his father's first cousin, is also a playwright, a circus performer, and a poet.

"Why Landeros?" I ask.

Mantecón arches his eyebrow, saying, "Landeros is basically one of my heteronyms. One of the voices I hear at night just as I am falling asleep, when I am in what some people call the 'limbic state.'"

This edition has an introduction by Iván Argüelles, one of this century's foremost surrealist poets. A polyglot and classicist, Argüelles provides a critical background of Mantecón's literary antecedents, echoing the Mexican Infrarealistas poets as depicted in Roberto Bolaño's novel The Savage Detectives, and the anti-poetry of Mario Santiago Papasquiaro, the latter of whom was translated into English by Mantecón. Argüelles cites Mantecón's referential use of carnivalesque polyphonic voices as described by Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin. Of course, Bakhtin became the darling of the literary movement in Russia during the Dostoevsky period.

Mantecón is one of the few voices discovering a new version of Caló. The term refers to code-switching, the musicality of biculturalism that seamlessly transitions between Spanish and English. Like James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, the entire event unfolds over the course of one day, presented as a stream of consciousness.

Reading Mantecón's poetry requires a rudimentary knowledge of Spanglish, Caló, or competent bilingualism. Some may find the reading experience like the Gaelic lexicon in the opening pages of Joyce's "Finnegan's Wake." And with the weight of Chicano legacy, he follows the literary traditions of Alurista, Juan Felipe Herrera, and Ricardo Sanchez — all word sorcerers — who have used code-switching. Mantecón has been

busy attending readings at the Poetic Republic Café and has joined *Voces Cosmicas* of San Antonio as its newest member.

Imbibe the spirits! Poetry that is.

_____

Rafael Castillo, Ph.D., teaches humanities and literature at Palo Alto College and is a member of PEN International, the National Book Critics Circle, and a CTN Research Fellow and Editor. He is the author of **Distant Journey**s, **Aurora**, **Dostoevsky on Guadalupe Street,** and **The Language of Sparrows and Other Stories.**



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Address:
18756 Stone Oak Pkwy, Ste. 200
San Antonio, TX 78258

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