

Y E L L O W A R R O W



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Creative nonfiction by female identifying writers

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Journey

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Dear Readers,

The great allure of a journey is the promise of an end point, a final destination, perhaps an achievement. At the end, all will be well. We will have learned something, solved something, come to an understanding. Turns out the end of most journeys are just the beginning of another. Some begin and end at predictable points, some last a lifetime, others have their travellers circling round and round, never quite reaching the end. Sometimes we don't even know we are on a journey until it's all over.

Not so long ago I embarked on a journey to start a new life in a new place, surrounded by nothing but new faces. Although the physical journey ended a few years back, I realized that this particular pilgrimage would be incomplete unless I was willing to return home, if only in a metaphorical sense. Home is regular life, mundane tasks like sweeping the floors and washing the dishes. Home is paying bills and long winter evenings. Home is stocking the pantry and planting annuals in pots. And after all this time, all this running away, I've finally returned home with the elixir. This magic potion is the good sense to know that life is beautiful and fulfilling exactly as it is in this very moment. To look at what's in my hands, be grateful for it, and then get to work making it into something more.

Welcome to Yellow Arrow Publishing, my something more. A couple years back, huddled around a table made from an antique door in a basement coffee shop, I concocted a plan with some writer friends. We'd start a publishing company in order to exit the game of write-edit-submit-rejection. Why not create a few more opportunities for other writers to share their stories in the process? So here we are, bringing you this first issue of our literary journal, another end and another beginning.

Taking a journey sounds exotic, implying adventure, challenge, and struggle. Odysseus, Columbus, and Lindbergh come to mind because they are the ones we are exposed to the most in school, popular culture, and literature. But we happen to know of some adventurers of another kind, women who stood their ground, quietly moved mountains, or never gave up. We know women who took chances on moving across the country, who persisted in bringing new life into the world despite painful loss. These women reflect on how a childhood journey makes an impact many years after and demonstrate that faith will eventually lead you where you need to go. After reading this journal, you will know them, too.

Our adventurers bring heart, soul, and honesty. The breadth of amazing, strong women writers we are

blessed to share stories with in this journal stretches far and wide, all the way around this world from Mexico to China. You'll hear a story about hitchhiking, an essay about a road trip, a heart-bender on the rawness of motherhood, and notes on the delicate journey of heritage.

Thank you for taking this journey with us.

Gwen Van Velsor
Founder and Editor

Bus, Burros and Broken Beer Bottles

Carol Clupny

Riding in a tin can of a bus I felt like a chicken in a roaster oven. This may have been an accurate thought as there were two caged chickens in the seat with a woman across the aisle.

The back of my shirt was soaked. Sweat ran off my brow as I leaned my head on the seatback in front of me. I was mesmerized by the drips that formed a pool below me on the bus floor.

The bus turned off the paved highway. Not only was hot air coming in the few windows that opened, but volumes of dust now rolled up from the tires. Pasty mud sweat accumulated in streaks across my face.

The bus stopped in a cloud of dust. The door opened and a man climbed aboard and surveyed the seating situation. He remained standing as the door closed and the bus lurched ahead. I looked out the window. *Where had he come from*, I thought to myself. There was nothing but cactus and scrub oak for miles.

The bus stopped again. Only the men got off. My husband commented, "Rest area," and got off also. I was left with the women. After a few minutes, the men started to return. Some held little packets of gum or candy. A few

were sipping from bottles of soda. The women now got off. I spotted my husband near a refreshment stand of sorts and called to him, "Can you get me a cold drink?" He requested, "Seven Up *por favor*." The storekeeper opened the top of a barrel that was half buried in sand and pulled up a bottle. "*Un Seven*," he said and flipped the top with a bottle opener attached to the wall by a raveled shoelace. I looked around for the familiar women's restroom sign. Not seeing any, I asked the bus driver, expecting him to understand my English, "Where's the bathroom?"

The bus driver wiped his face with a dirty bandana and gestured to the area on the left of the store. *Oh, I get it. Find a bush.*

I waited until the last of the women had returned and walked in the direction they had come from. There was no mistaking the women's rest area. I gingerly stepped over used toilet paper and other artifacts until I found an unused spot. Dropping my pants I backed up a little, but just enough to put my bum right into a prickly cactus. I let out a loud scream and heard Charlie's, "Are you ok?"

"I will be," and finished my business. As there was no sink to wash up in I returned to the bus. Charlie handed me the soda. I took a quick swig, expecting ice cold 7 Up. The pop was slightly cooler than the air temperature and that was all. It bubbled up through my nose and I had to spit it out. Handing the bottle to Charlie I climbed back on

the bus and planted my sore behind in my assigned seat.

The bus bounced along through the flatland desert. It stopped to let people off. The lady with the chickens got off and walked through the brush to her unseen destination. The man who had been standing by the driver disembarked where two young children were standing alongside the road, smiling toothless grins.

The road changed. Rocks replaced the hubcap-deep dust. The driver guided the vehicle along what had become a very narrow mountain road. At a switchback, he had to make three tries to get the bus around the corner. I was startled from my zoned-out state by a shout. The bus stopped abruptly and the men piled out and took off down the hillside.

Charlie's eyes were searching through his opened window. "It's a deer. They spotted a deer." The men returned without having captured the deer.

Burros. There were burros walking alongside the road, standing in groups under a tree, nibbling at the brush. I had never seen so many burros in one place. I asked Charlie to find out who they belonged to. With textbook Spanish, Charlie asked the man across the aisle from him. After a brief exchange, Charlie responded. "They don't belong to anyone, so I guess they are wild, but trained. If a person needs a burro to carry something they just catch it and pack it up. They let it go when they are

done.”

The sun had started to set as the bus stopped at the entrance of a small village. “Is this Yecora?” I asked Charlie, expecting it to be our destination.

“No, but this bus doesn’t go any further. We are here for the night.” The packed dirt main drag of this nameless village was lined with cement sidewalks and little adobe houses, a storefront and a bar. A man climbed on top of the bus and handed boxes and suitcases down to the bus driver, who placed them on the sidewalk. Charlie gathered our two overstuffed travel packs and the boxes of supplies destined for the mission in Yecora. “I am going to find us a place to sleep. Watch the stuff.” He then walked away with another bus rider. Other passengers collected their bags and walked off to their homes. The bus rumbled off down the road and turned the corner out of sight. I was alone on the deserted street of this mountain village in the Sierra Madres of Northern Mexico.

I could feel eyes upon me. From curtained windows, around the corners of buildings people were looking at me. My arms prickled in goose bumps, and I felt the hair on the back of my neck start to bristle up. Then they came. Three boys came up my side of the street. A group of women came across from the store. A family with five little ones came down the middle of the main street. A couple of cowboys stepped out of the bar. The children started playing with uniquely carved tops, spinning them

out on the sidewalk. The adults stood quietly, looking at me, my long blonde hair, my pale skin and my city clothes. I wished I had candy to offer the children. Yet, I did have something exciting to play with. I reached into my backpack pocket where some wind-up toys had been riding. Kids and adults were fascinated. As if by some unspoken rule, each child came and gave me their top and then looked and pointed to one of my toys. Before long, the kids were giggling as the wind-up toys jumped, skipped or buzzed around in circles. I laughed at myself as even after demonstrations by the older children I could not get the tops to spin. One by one, the children returned my toy and reclaimed their top. The adults drifted off, their curiosity somehow satisfied. Again, I was alone on the main street until a boy came running around the corner with something in his hand. He screeched to a halt and opened his hand to me. A top. He brought a top for me. Before I could try to give him one of my toys, he turned and ran away.

Now it was almost dark. Charlie returned and we gathered up our belongings. “Did you find a nice hotel?” I asked.

“Not exactly, there are no hotels here. We are staying with Save the Children.” *Save the Children? What is that?* I had questions and possibly complaints to offer. Looking into Charlie’s eyes I could see he was frustrated too. It was best for me to keep quiet at this moment.

We stopped at a little house just up from the river. Out in front I saw two cots. I peeked inside the open door only to feel the stifling heat. Blankets were organized into sleeping nests on the floor. *Oh my, we are sleeping on the floor and it's hotter than hell.* I realized then these people had given us their beds. Charlie and I would sleep outside on the cots. A man heated tortillas and beans on a wood stove.

He handed some coins to the boy I recognized as the one who had given me the top. Just as we sat down to eat the boy returned with two bottles of *Un Seven*, cold.

Charlie had been talking with the cook. "Save the Children is an organization that has come here to vaccinate children and work on clean water projects," he told me. "They have been traveling to small villages in the mountain areas. Lucky they were here tonight."

After dinner I was shown a small closet with a door that shut but no roof. *Was this the bathroom?* A bucket of fresh water, a small towel and a bar of soap sat on a bench. I guessed it was more of a shower area than a toilet. I retrieved some fresh clothes from my pack and washed up. Charlie was asleep in one of the cots and I crawled into the other, pulling the blanket up to my chin. Around me were the sounds of the village: a charismatic prayer group speaking in tongues, a phonograph repeating the same song, dogs barking, a baby crying. The people from the church walked home. Lanterns and candles were put out and stars became ever so brighter as the dark village

quieted. Sleep at last.

Charlie screamed. I sat up and looked over at him. He was punching the air, in a fight for his life. A burro was standing near him, and five or six more burros were walking by. I got up, and in my attempt to shoo off the nearest burro, tripped and fell on Charlie's cot. The familiarity of me stopped his punching and woke him.

“What's the matter babe?”

“I thought someone was mugging me.”

The man I had been married to for five years told me this story for the first time. He was sleeping on the beach and was hit in the head with a rock and robbed of everything he owned. Two weeks of planned travel after a semester of school turned into a six-month saga of working his way back to the U.S.

I could not go back to sleep after that. I laid awake watching the stars disappear. Roosters crowing, darks barking, babies crying brought the village back to life.

I saw Charlie was awake. “What time is the next bus, hon?”

“There is no bus.”

“How are we going to get to Yecora?” My anxiety level shot up.

“We hitch hike on the first vehicle that comes

through town.”

Not knowing how soon that first vehicle would be along, I packed up my bag, organized the boxes that had traveled with us and went looking for the real “bathroom.” I saw the “honey buckets” as we called them at home, lined up down by the river. The door slamming behind startled me. I thought about the need for better sanitation as it appeared the waste went directly into the river. Then I heard the engine sound of a truck. Back up the hill at the Save the Children house Charlie talked to the truck driver. It was a logging truck with no room for passengers. Right behind it was a one ton flatbed Ford pickup with racks. The driver gestured for the men to get up on the boxes that filled the flatbed and for me to come in the cab and sit on the bench seat between him and his buddy.

“*Gracias*, but no!” I told him and got a boost up onto the boxes. I settled near the front of the truck. The day was pleasant and the view from up high was good. I was into this adventure!

I smelled beer. Stale beer. I looked at the boxes. This truck was stacked with cases of beer. Bottles were broken somewhere in the truck. Charlie teased, “We won’t be thirsty today.” The smell of the beer was intoxicating enough. No need to break more bottles.

We rode the truck for nine hours, passing over seven mountain passes. Charlie and I were joined by

another hitchhiker, a fisherman who had been working on the coast returning to his mountain home. The driver stopped the truck whenever an oncoming vehicle was met. The opposing driver and any passengers would get out and greetings were exchanged all around, often accompanied by the sharing of some bread, fruit, or cool water. Then the drivers would negotiate the passage of their vehicles on this narrow mountain road. We waved from our perch and returned our gaze on the road ahead, watching for branches that might take our hats.

The name of the town where the mission was located, Yecora, means “rimmed in rock.” Our driver had one last narrow passage to negotiate in this rim before we would arrive in the valley section where the town was located. A slide of tumbling rocks came from the ridge above just as we passed through. Rocks came right at us as we scrunched down close to the boxes of beer and covered our heads with our hands. Quite a large rock hit right next to me, breaking through the box I was on top of, crushing the glass of the beer bottles. At least one bottle blew its top, resulting in an unwelcome spray of warm beer directly in my face.

Luckily no serious injuries were incurred. I wiped the beer off my face, the guys removed the rocks from on top and in front of the truck and we continued into town. The mission had sufficient shower and laundry facilities for me to get thoroughly clean. We were shown our simple

room and would receive an orientation the next day. An open window let in a breath of cool mountain air. The cicadas sang me to sleep.

By morning the word had spread. Everyone in the community of Yecora knew the new missionaries had arrived, but only after being baptized in beer.

Midnight Run to Mexico

Cija Jefferson

LA—the land of sunshine, beaches, and palm trees—was only five hours away but Rachel and I had been driving since sunup. It had been four days since we left Pittsburgh on a one-way cross-country road trip. Tomorrow was the beginning of the rest of our lives, but tonight we would sleep. We pulled up to the motel and parked right outside the door of our room. Rachel and I unloaded our overnight bags and hurried out to the pool, dangling our feet over the edge. I leaned back, palms digging into the concrete, and contemplated my good fortune. Next to us was a luxurious palm tree whose crown scraped the night sky. I'd dreamed about California as this far-away, unattainable place when I was kid and now here I was right within its borders. Rachel and I sat side-by-side in the comfortable silence of our five-year friendship and hours spent traversing the country together. I felt free, unencumbered by the daily minutiae that comprised life as I had known it. I had no idea what tomorrow would bring and I didn't care. That's a feeling I wish I could bottle up and put in a safe. Break in case of emergency.

A week after my arrival Damani, a friend from college, invited us over to his place. It all felt so grown-up. Drinking rum punch at a pool party under palm trees in

LA was so *Melrose Place*. We caught up, played Marco Polo and made plans. Damani mentioned that he and his best friends were going to Mexico that weekend for their annual trip to San Felipe. He asked if we wanted to go. Rachel and I were still tired from our cross-country drive, but were feeling adventurous. The next day we asked Reyna, roommate to one of our LA hosts, if she wanted to join us. She was down for a little adventure, and she spoke Spanish.

Friday we set off on a midnight run to Mexico. Between everybody's schedules and LA traffic we decided driving overnight was ideal. We were a caravan of two, Damani's truck and Rachel's sedan. First stop was Ralph's, a local grocery store chain, where we bought tortillas, limes, cilantro, white onion and snacks, stuffing our coolers with ice and water. We began our two-hour drive to the border. I knew we were close when we began to see yellow triangle signs on the side of the road picturing the fleeing silhouettes of a man, woman and little girl—braids flying, linked hand-in-hand like a string of paper dolls.

“Did you see that?” I asked Rachel.

The image reminded me of that sense of foreboding I felt two years before, driving past cotton fields in the south on a spring break road trip to Atlanta. It felt antebellum. There was history on this barren highway leading to Mexico.

Just before the border, we stopped at McDonald's to

stretch our legs and use the bathroom. I got a coffee to try to perk up since it was my turn to drive. Damani gathered us so we could get our story straight when we crossed the border. Two different stories would definitely arouse unnecessary suspicion although he said we should have nothing to worry about when we got there. His concern was the checkpoints sprinkled along our path to San Felipe. “Be sure to have your IDs ready and tell anyone who stops us that we’re here for vacation. I’ll go first, then I can let them know we’re together.”

When we pulled up to the guard booth at the border, Damani paused several feet in front of us. The poker-faced man in uniform asked me a question in Spanish. Reyna rolled her window down from the back seat and answered him in Spanish. She translated his question to Rachel and I, telling us to get out our IDs. Rachel passed me hers and we thrust them out the window. A few flashlight roves later we were on our way. I fastened my gaze on the taillights of Damani’s truck as we pulled off into the moonlit dark of the early morning in Mexico.

We began our crawl east over pockmarked streets, cratered like the surface of the moon. Navigating was exhausting and tricky. I’d only been driving for two years and I’d never had my own car. The most driving I had done was the week before. Now here I was in Mexico, after midnight, on a road leading into the unknown. I needed my cup of black coffee to keep me awake. It had

long since lost its steam, but I was still sipping it, trying desperately to suck up any caffeine I could get. If I could just drive and not have to worry about blowing out Rachel's tires on the gigantic potholes, it wouldn't be so bad.

We kept pushing through the night, our little caravan forging ahead, now on a cliff with the ocean to my left, the moon reflecting on the inky-looking surface of the water. I rolled down the window; the smell of the ocean sharp and salty in my nostrils. There were few potholes on this strip of road so my speed was steady at about forty miles per hour. Damani was two car lengths in front. No other cars were on the road. I fastened my eyes on the back of his truck and after awhile my vision blurred. It happened so quickly. My forehead dipped toward the wheel like it was magnetized. My neck jerked back against the headrest and as the car swerved to the right, my eyes flew open. I snuck a glance at Rachel; she had witnessed the whole thing.

“Did you mean to do that?”

“Do what? ” I bluffed, reaching for the now cold coffee, “I'm fine.” I rolled down the window some more and apologized for the chilly air.

She just looked at me. I was relieved she didn't ask again. I looked in the rearview mirror; Reyna hadn't said a word so she must have been knocked out during the whole incident. At least we were on the side of the road with the mountains, away from the ocean. The thought of having to

call Rachel's parents to tell them about an accident circled through my brain. I had only known Reyna for a week, I couldn't imagine having to share news of an accident with someone's family who didn't even know me. I silently thanked God for watching over our little caravan as we drove deeper into Mexico.

Potholes and lack of sleep were threatening to ruin what seemed like a good idea hours before. We continued to pick our way toward San Felipe. My scare woke me up; it had the opposite effect of the coffee. As we got further in, we ran across our first checkpoint. I was familiar with sobriety checkpoints in the U.S. by police in neat uniforms, handguns holstered. In Mexico the checkpoints were different, waifish teen soldiers manned them, wearing too-big, olive-green uniforms belted tightly at the waist. They had shoulder-strapped machine guns pointed to the ground, fingers trigger-ready.

Our routine, set at the border, remained the same. Damani led the way, leaning out of the driver's side window of the truck, pointing to our car and then pulling up and waiting while the soldiers asked us for ID.

"Show your IDs," translated Reyna. We dutifully passed them out the window. I mostly avoided eye contact except after they reviewed my ID so they could see my face. In the meantime, I glanced at this kid's boots and at his hand holding the butt of the gun, and hoped he was sure of himself. What would happen if I said the wrong

thing? I imagined a hail of gunfire in the side of the car *Godfather*-style and then pushed the thought out of mind. He let us go and we continued on.

As the road rushed beneath us, the deep dark of early morning surrounded us. I imagined our convoy from a view in space, little toy cars on a track whose end we didn't know. I felt inconsequential in the grand scheme of the universe, but it was oddly comforting. I thought of my mother at the kitchen sink humming a song and washing dishes. She would be asleep right now; under a dew-heavy early morning sky in Maryland, in the world, doing familiar things that I could conjure up at any time.

We finally arrived in the coastal town of San Felipe at sunup. The landscape was the color of sand. Pastel-colored advertisements lined the buildings on the side of the road. Like a drill sergeant, Damani stated the rules: don't drink the water and only eat what comes from the sea. At a small roadside stand, we bought a couple of freshly caught fish and a case of *Tecate*, a Mexican beer. I spied a fresh orange juice stand and bought a jug for two dollars; it would have cost triple that in the States. Drinking that juice I felt plugged into the earth, happy to have the sun beaming on me under a canopy of sky, in a place I had never been.

Once at the campsite we drove across the sand as far as we could and then parked. On one side stood a rocky expanse of mountains and on the other the majestic sweep of the Gulf of California. We picked our way across the

burning sand, stripped down to our underwear and hit the water. I walked into the calm water up to my shoulders wishing I could swim. Everyone else frolicked, slicing into waves emerging on top, drops of water hanging like crystals in their hair. Afterwards, we sunned on our towels, inviting the bronzy glow of summer skin. It was so hot the air clogged my nostrils but it was a dry heat not the swampy heat of summers in Maryland. I sat at the edge of the water to keep cool, my legs stretched in front of me as the surf rolled up my thighs.

That night we all pitched in to cook dinner. The guys grilled the fish and warmed the tortillas. We women chopped the cilantro and white onion and sliced the limes. We ate with our fingers and chased each bite with a lukewarm swallow of Tecate. The flavors were foreign to me. Growing up, tacos were hard corn shells filled with ground beef, cheese, tomatoes and iceberg lettuce. They were good but this was different; the ingredients simple.

After dinner we sat around the campfire and chatted. I shared how good it felt to have said *yes* to this trip. As I gazed into the flare of wavering light in our fire pit, I marveled that this was my life. I was out of the U.S. for the first time. In college almost everyone I knew had taken a trip to Europe. The farthest I'd ever been was Utah and that was back when I was a little kid. Now I was in Mexico, and while there were more tourists than locals on the beach that day, it felt good not to be in an insulated hotel

somewhere.

When it was time for bed, we carved sleep pits into the sand with our bodies, laid a sheet in the hollow and formed a slumber circle. Under a midnight-blue, star-studded sky, I slept in the cool embrace of sand lulled by the crash of waves.

The next morning the sun woke me at first light, blooming blood-orange behind my eyelids. Eyes shut, I lifted my chin to the sky and let the sun warm my face. The rhythmic lull of the gulf, rolling up the sand then receding back into the watery depths, made me want to lay there forever. I stretched the heels of my feet maneuvering the sheets to my ankles and then gripped the still-cool sand with my toes. As a little girl I preferred bare feet and the soft scratch of grass on my soles. Now I realized I had always been rooted to Mother Earth. On that short trip, I lived off her and in return she took care of me. Gulf waters massaged away my fatigue. Fish nourished me. Sand was my bed. Rays of sunlight were my morning alarm clock. Mexico was the beginning of my new life, one whose path was just beginning to unfurl.

Letters from an Unqualified Mother

Jannica Cuaresma Breslin

Dear Son,

I am overjoyed, like flora satisfied from a light rain shower and now bathing in mild, golden sunlight. You and your dad are the greatest blessings God has ever given to me. Sometimes I wonder if I deserve either of you, but I am always happy that I have both of you, and I try my best everyday to be worthy of the two of you.

Love,
Mom

Dear Son,

I'm afraid.

I'm afraid of leaving the hospital.

I'm afraid of failing as your mother. What if I fail in a way that irreversibly compromises your health and well-being for the rest of your life? What if I fail repeatedly? What if I fail at everything?

I've always been afraid. I have never initiated anything

where the possibility of failing outweighed the possibility of succeeding, or where I couldn't tip the scale towards the latter. Each time I make a decision, I believe it's a strategic move. Each time I reflect on it, in hindsight, it's a cowardly move. The unknown is quite a bully, one that can turn this lioness of a woman into a helpless little mouse.

Love,
Mom

Dear Son,

Your lolo, lola, uncle, and I came into this country in 1997. That was twenty years ago, but I still remember the very first time that we went to a beach. Which beach, I can't recall. But I do remember how it called me like a friend at the window asking me to come out and play.

To my left and right, above me, and straight ahead of me, there was nothing but beauty at its best and most perfect form. It was beauty I've never beheld. The sky was clear, the breeze gentle and cool, and the water a meadow of melted diamonds. The sun flirted with the ocean with an endless heated kiss, and the ocean, bright blue cheeks blushing, flirted right back with winks of light.

I ran to the ocean alongside all of my cousins, our laughter blending into the sound of the crashing waves. Sand crept into the crevices between my toes. The foamy white wash

high-fived my legs. Warmth and cold were in a perfect marriage. I fell in love with mother nature.

Then I lost my footing. The world was blurry. Little needles of sunlight penetrated between colors that were smeared together. I had no idea which way was which. The ground seemed to have run away from me, and I was stuck floating in some punishing limbo. Pressure caged my lungs in and I couldn't breathe, try as I might. My eyes were stung by liquid salt and were forced open by the desperation to survive. I was drowning.

One of my cousins helped me up, thankfully.

I don't remember anything else from that day.

We've been home for almost a week now. Your dad, thank God for him, keeps me afloat when he's home, but when he's working, I can't find my way up to the surface. I drown over and over again.

Love,
Mom

Dear Son,

Since it still takes me such a long time to comfort you when you cry or put you to sleep, I often forget to eat a meal or snack, drink water, and use the bathroom - I often

forget to take care of myself. So, I'm sorry, I failed again. My inexperience, lack of maternal intuition, and physical weakness from labor has led me to neglect myself, which ultimately makes me less effective at taking care of you.

The Sunday after you were born, a pressure nagged my lower back, my right hip, and lower belly for hours. Eventually, the nagging evolved into a ravenous bear clawing at the flesh at my insides. I whimpered on the couch, twisted in agony like a slug sprinkled with salt. Your dad immediately took me to the ER, a dreary place where the air is so sterile, it even disintegrates sense of urgency.

With little pricks, the IV in my arm reminded me of my idiocy whenever I moved. I should be at home, being a mother, being your mother. Instead, I was in the hospital, sabotaging your feeding schedule. After a few hours of waiting for a doctor, your dad asked the nurses if we could breastfeed in the ER - quite a dangerous place to feed a newborn, but what else were we to do? They checked for patients with respiratory ailments, and when they found none, they allowed us to. So your lola brought you in and turned you over like a pancake onto my breast.

It was awful. Everyone was laughing - a baby groping around for something to suck is adorable, of course. I laughed along - classic bandwagon move. But, I secretly wished to wake up from the nightmare. To be there naked and helpless, ill in front of your dad, lola, uncle, and the nurses who are in and out of the room? My raw self just out for all to see? I felt like the circus act that everyone

laughed at with condescending amusement instead of wonder.

I felt humiliated. I felt degraded. I was less than a person. Dignity lost. Body unsacred. I hated it. Not only that, I proved yet again to be a detriment to your health.

In the end, I was prescribed antibiotics for an infection that could've been prevented had I taken care of myself better. I'm sorry I put you in a situation where you were even more vulnerable than you already were.

Love,
Mom

Dear Son,

You peed all over the doctor's office today, and cried the whole time I was cleaning. It was like I was in a torture chamber. In mere seconds, your cry turned from a tiny kitten's little whimper to the wail of a sorcerer trying to summon the dead. And it bounced against the concrete walls to stab my ears over and over again.

Love,
Mom

Dear Son,

About a week before you were born, I was at Higashihara Park with some friends. On my way out, an elderly lady walked up to me and complimented me that I looked great. Then, she said that I shouldn't take that for granted because once you are born, I won't be able to sleep and will look like shit. She was right. I look like shit. I feel like shit.

Love,
Mom

Dear Son,

It is one of the worst in the world - knowing that you are incapable of feeding your own child, that you're incapable of caring for your child.

Love,
Mom

Dear Son,

Everyone says your maternal instincts come out when you have a baby. "Trust your instincts," they say. "Go with your gut feeling," they say.

No can do.

I don't have any.

At the end of every day, I feel like I did plenty of things wrong. Everytime you cry, I think I didn't feed you fast enough because I didn't recognize your hunger signs, or I don't know how to soothe you. Every time your butt is red, I think I didn't change your diaper in time. You're tired because I don't know how to put you to sleep. You cry at bath time because I don't know how to do it gracefully.

I'm sorry, but I want you to know that I'm trying my best.

Love,
Mom

Dear Son,

Love is a decision, something you show in words but more so in action. This is often hard to do, especially when trying circumstances flirt with your less-than-best self. But, when in doubt, choose love. Also, avoid putting in 50/50 - dedicating only 50% effort and expecting others to give you 50% in return. This is a misunderstanding of the "meet me halfway" concept. Instead, put in 100/100 - dedicate 100% effort to encourage others to give you

100% as well. This will ensure everyone's happiness. This will make even compromises seem like win-wins.

These are just some of the things your dad and I wholeheartedly believe and try to do every single day for each other, as husband and wife. And now, for you, too.

So, even though I'm going through what may just be the hardest time of my life, I'm going to swallow all the trials and wrenches like vitamins that will help me grow stronger as a person. I'm going to steer myself towards the better parts of myself and face the challenge of motherhood with gumption and a smile. I'm 100% in.

Love,
Mom

Dear Son,

When you are old enough to reflect on your life intimately, with the deepest parts of your soul, I hope that you will feel that despite my long list of flaws, I was a good mother to you. Or, at least, that I never gave up trying.

Love,
Mom

Being Chinese (Canadian)

Sherry Li

I had never felt more out of place than I did when I went back to China.

Having lived in Canada since I was four, raised primarily in English and under the influence of Canadian culture, I considered myself Chinese but not *Chinese*.

We moved to Canada because of my dad – who held a Master’s degree in mechanical engineering and the foresight to learn English when he was younger. This led to a lucrative job within an American company, which allowed us to move to Canada.

When we first arrived, we lived in a community with a large Chinese population in Toronto, which helped us adjust to Canadian society.

Then in sixth grade, my family moved to Brampton - city whose population was largely visible minorities, though with an almost nonexistent Chinese community. We were the only Chinese family on the entire street, and in my entire school it was hard to spot any Asians, let alone anyone Chinese. But at my school, being a minority was the majority, and even though I was still a minority in a school of minorities, nobody batted an eye.

This caused me to predominantly drop Chinese culture because my friends and I accepted and connected to Canadian culture instead of our parents' many cultural backgrounds. This meant that I never felt the urge to learn to read Chinese, nor did I ever learn to speak it with a native fluency. I used my English name, spoke English to most people I knew, and at the time, I didn't even have any Chinese friends.

As a result, even though I looked Chinese and was Chinese, I had no real connection to the country since I didn't grow up there, and I left too early for me to really remember it.

So when I spent the summer after sixth grade with my grandparents in Dalian, I experienced culture shock – I was stuck in a place far away from everything I knew, with people I hardly knew, who spoke a language I hardly understood.

I was homesick - I had no one to talk to but my grandparents and my uncle on most days. I didn't fit in with kids my age, and I felt desperately out of place because I was chubby, and everyone else was thin. I found it hard to make friends when there was a language barrier between me and everyone around me.

I couldn't speak to any of my friends in Canada as there was no internet at my grandparents' place. We were cramped in a tiny apartment. I couldn't read anything since

I couldn't read *hanzi*. I was lonely and I missed my parents. I cried almost every night.

That trip was the last time I was in China.

And every year the conversation comes up. *When are you going to go back?* My parents ask me. My grandparents ask me. I wonder myself.

But I don't know.

I almost went last year, but all I could remember was how I didn't fit in. The differences mounted again — my hair, my piercings, my weight. I couldn't bring myself to go back. I didn't want to be isolated in a country where I didn't have friends, could barely speak the language, and had no access to the internet. I just didn't want to feel that alone again.

But on Chinese New Year, I came home to visit my parents, and celebrate together one of the biggest holidays in Chinese culture. My dad lit incense and left food out as an offering for our relatives. We hung up a new year's sign upside down. We had dinner, and my dad gave me a red envelope stuffed with twenties. My dad quizzed me on the animals of the Zodiac, asking me to name them all, in English and in Mandarin.

And I got to speak to my grandparents again. But this time, I remembered the last time I went back completely differently.

I remember how I took walks with my *Laoyi*, and I held his hand while we went down the hill that led into town. We'd occasionally buy a roast duck from a street vendor where they hung, rotating in the window of a machine. We'd buy groceries from the stands that lined the roads, buying tofu, fish, vegetables, and fresh, delicious peaches.

I remember how my grandmother, or *Laolao*, would meditate every morning and every evening, her legs crossed and her eyes closed. How she'd hike up a mountain to tend to her garden almost every day. How tiny and thin and fragile she was but so fierce and strong at the same time. And how much I had admired her and loved her.

I remembered how they'd both get up so ridiculously early, whenever the sun rose - and how during the day when I finally woke, there were always sounds of merchants yelling what they were looking to buy, or trying to sell, that crept in through our window.

And hearing my *Laoyi's* voice, it brought it all back.

He had asked me when I was coming to see them - another reminder of how long it had been - and said, "You

should learn more Chinese. People all over the world are learning Chinese. You *are* Chinese.”

And in just that phone call, there were so many times where I couldn't figure out what to say or how to say it. There were so many times my grandparents asked me questions that I needed them to ask twice, just so I'd understand. I realized that I had lost something that I never realised was valuable in the first place.

I used to feel like I couldn't connect to Chinese things because I was Canadian, too westernized, but I realized, that the truth was I couldn't understand because I just wasn't Chinese enough.

So this time, instead of rolling my eyes and going, “yeah, yeah, yeah,” I felt tears stream down my face when he spoke to me. I felt the distance between us. I felt the language barrier between us. I felt my detachment from my family's culture - *my* culture. And not just from my culture, but from *them*.

I spent so much of my life being just Canadian that I pushed away my own past, my own language, my own culture. When I pushed away those things, I pushed away my family who needed me to be Chinese.

I forgot what it meant to be Chinese Canadian.

When I forgot about being Chinese, I forgot about who raised me — my *Laoyi*, who moved to Canada, and took care of me before moving back.

My *Laoyi*, who not only walked me to and from school, but who also came in at noon, my lunch bag clutched in his hands - just so I'd get a hot lunch everyday.

My *Laoyi*, who slept on the couch, so that I didn't have to when I came to visit.

My *Laoyi*, who called me by my Chinese name, *Li Xin Yu*, and never by my English name because he couldn't pronounce it.

My *Laoyi*, who I spent years with, yet I barely know anything about, because even if he told me, I wouldn't be able to understand.

I spent all my life figuring out who I was in Canada, who I was when I spoke English. But I didn't know who I was, or how to be myself, in Mandarin. I never figured out the Chinese part of me - which I had always assumed was the same as, and part of, my Canadian identity.

But by pretending that it was the same, by assuming that I could be me by only speaking English, I forgot about the people who will never know me the way people who speak English can.

I needed to figure out this other part of me, which I pretended didn't matter, before it was too late. I knew that it was necessary to try, or I'd lose the only connection I have to my family, to my *Laoyi*.

I needed to relearn the language that I should've already been speaking. I needed to go back to China.

I didn't feel any connection to China as a country when I was younger, but I knew better now. My parents spent half of their lives in China, where they both grew up poor – my mom in a city, my dad in the outskirts of one. I was born there, my family was there, and I am Chinese - *Chinese Canadian*.

For us, Canada was a new start, a chance to have a better life. My dad learned a foreign language in order to fit into a new culture, and I lost my childhood one.

When we finally became Canadian citizens, we had to renounce our Chinese citizenship. We gave up our Chinese identity for a Canadian one. Now I need to figure out how to return to it – to return to being Chinese, to being *Chinese Canadian*.

On the Cover

If you look long enough and close enough at the image, you can see the female form behind the black and red paint that streaks across your view. Her head is down, her right hand is pressed against her forehead, while her left hand covers the space between her thighs. What you are looking at is actually a large photograph of a woman covered in paint, and which, the photograph itself, is painted on. This image is the first of four panels that make up *Red Grace*, by Jenna Boyles, in its entirety. In each panel, the female figure poses in a way which reveals some parts and carefully conceals other parts of her body.

The title comes from the flower Red Grace. It is a kind of peony, with a double bloom so full it forms a complete ball or globe shape. About the title and its real life namesake, the artist writes

[the peony is] known to represent female beauty but also shame...The figure poses like a venus or martyred saint. Her face is obscured by her own hands or scribbled out. She exposes and hides herself, is guilty but defiant.

Guilty but defiant. Guilty of what and defiant of whom? Defiant of the viewer, perhaps. Or, defiant of the world in which she exists, maybe. She exists in a world which, for the past several centuries, has explicitly set expectations

upon the female. It has expected the female body to be simultaneously modest and sexy. Coy and confident. Pleasing to the eye, or more specifically, to the eye of a man.

In recent decades, an obvious shift has occurred. More and more we witness the female stand up and say out loud, *No*.

No, I will not conform to your mold.

No, I will not take less than what I deserve.

No, I will not apologize for being who I am.

But, even as progress is made, there continues to be a struggle. The female in *Red Grace* is defiant, but she feels guilty--as if she is doing something wrong--for being so. She cannot completely shed the guilt of that defiance, and what it means to expose, figuratively, her true self, and so she cannot do it literally. She twists and turns, and with each pose a new part of her is bravely revealed, but another part is turned away.

One day, exposing one's true self will not be spoken of with a critical tongue or seen with a judgemental eye. Until then, we continue to support each female's defiance. We recognize it, accept it, and we do not expect apologies.

Leila Warshaw
Editor

Contributors

Carol Clupny grew up riding horses, climbing trees, and tubing down the creek. There wasn't a fish that would stay off her line or a tale that would stay off her lips. At age 50 she was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease. She worked a few more years in her career as a speech-language pathologist then hit the road, literally. She toured Europe by car, train, bus and plane, then walked 1,000 miles on the *Camino de Santiago* in France and Spain. Carol and her husband of 34 years, Charlie, live in Hermiston, Oregon.

Cija (pronounced Kia) **Jefferson** is the author of *Sonic Memories*, a collection of personal essays. Her work has been featured in HelloGiggles, The Conversation with Amanda de Cadenet, Baltimore Fishbowl, and The Flywire. When she is not watching copious amounts of Bravo and HBO, she is reading and of course, writing.

Jannica Cuaresma Breslin is originally from the Philippines, but grew up in O'ahu [Hawaii]. Her entire childhood, she thought she wanted to be a doctor. Just before she graduated, she realized how much she really loved to read and write. So, she took a chance, followed her passion, and eventually got a degree in English. In 2009, she moved to the Big Island to teach and a little while after met her now-husband, John. About four months ago their son was born.

Sherry Li is a fourth-year journalism student at Ryerson University in Toronto. She loves photography, movies, books, and has a pet snake named George Michael. She hopes to spend her life constantly exploring and going on new adventures. You can follow her on instagram @sherrys.world.

Jenna Boyles is currently a graduate student in the Art & Technology Studies department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She has exhibited work in Baltimore, Washington D.C., and Pittsburgh, as well as local and regional arts festivals. All four panels of *Red Grace*, as well as past and current works, can be seen on her website jennaboyles.com.

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