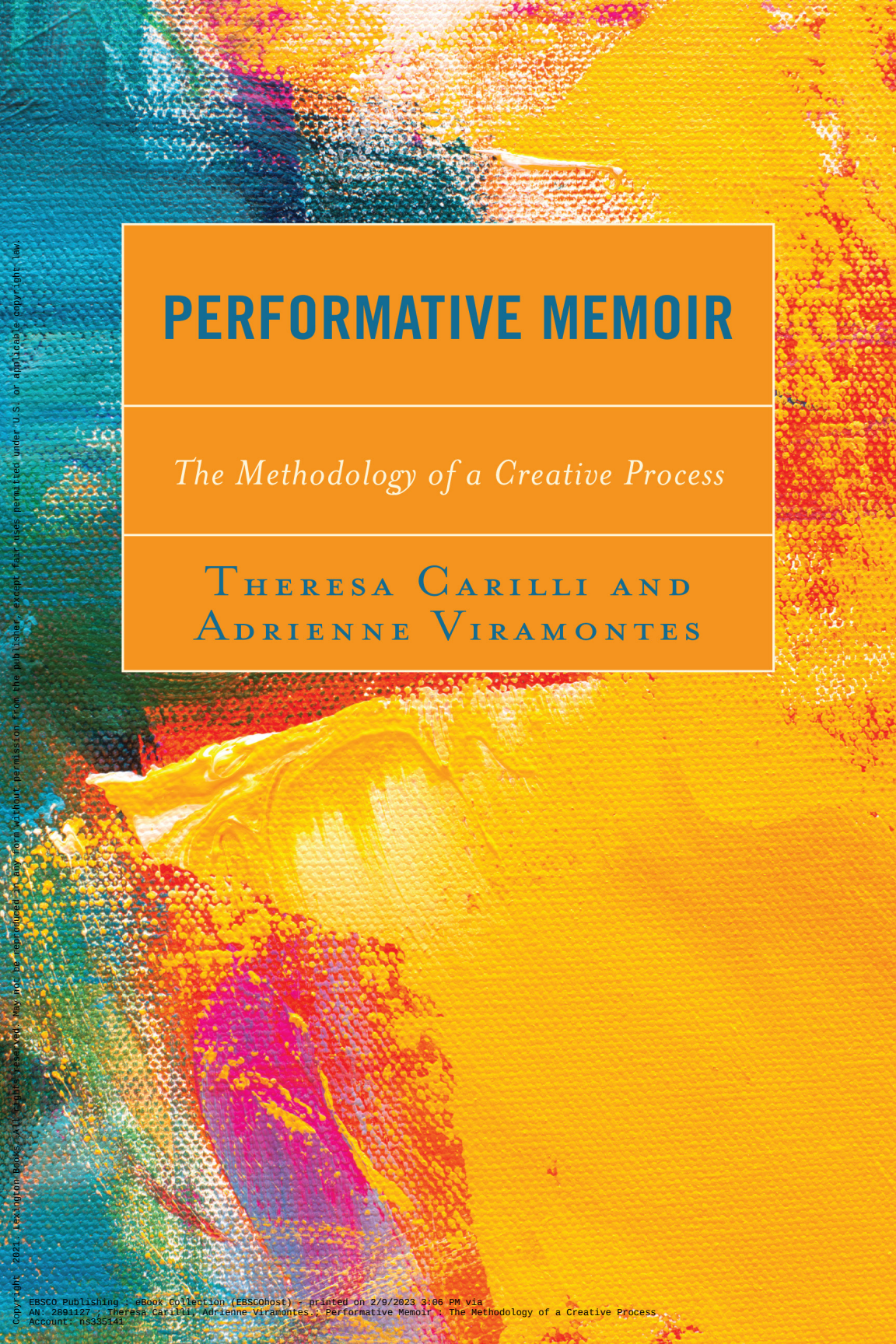




PERFORMATIVE MEMOIR

The Methodology of a Creative Process

THERESA CARILLI AND
ADRIENNE VIRAMONTES

Performative Memoir

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*For Jane
I know the next chapter will be great—
Eternally yours,
—Theresa*

*This work is dedicated to Mercedes Mancilla Viramontes.
I hope to be as smart and capable as you one day.
—Adrienne*

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Preface: Performative Memoir: The Methodology of a Creative Process	xi
1 Performative Memoir: From Nostalgia to Recovery <i>Theresa Carilli</i>	1
2 The Performative Memoir as Spiritual Practice <i>Adrienne Viramontes</i>	15
3 Loving Crazy: A Performative Memoir <i>Theresa Carilli</i>	29
4 Mexican Love: A Performative Memoir <i>Adrienne Viramontes</i>	53
5 Making Sense, Making Peace: An Analysis of “ <i>Loving Crazy</i> ” as a Performative Memoir <i>Theresa Carilli</i>	79
6 The Art of Living through Performative Memoir: Four Phases <i>Adrienne Viramontes</i>	91
7 Performative Memoir: Crossroads of Communication Scholarship <i>Theresa Carilli and Adrienne Viramontes</i>	103
Selected References	109
Index	111
About the Authors	115

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—Theresa Carilli

To Dr. Theresa Carilli. Over twenty years ago, you recognized that I needed help and you showed me what I was capable of achieving. Your guidance

allowed me to find my voice, and you and Jane showed me what genuine love is. I would not have a career in higher education without your influence in my life.

To Mary Viramontes—my grandmother. You taught me exactly what I needed to learn. I know you and my mom are with me always and will never leave me.

—Adrienne Viramontes

Preface

Performative Memoir: The Methodology of a Creative Process

THERESA

San Francisco, 1981. As a working-class kid from an east-coast Italian American enclave, I had no idea what this city would do to me. My partner at that time encouraged me to seek therapy for the avalanche I was about to experience in San Francisco. Ill equipped to communicate, defensive, and angry, I was attempting to manage my feelings without having the language to do so. I learned to communicate in San Francisco. And I learned that talking about substantive feelings matters. My therapist broke identity down for me, explaining privilege in a way that helped me to make sense of my ethnic, working-class lesbian identity. In San Francisco I learned that experience not only makes you who you are but makes you different—particularly if you have lived as a marginalized individual. When I moved to the Midwest, I swore to myself that I would embrace open, honest, and authentic communication as a lifestyle.

In 1989, I became a professor at a regional commuter campus in northwest Indiana. Now equipped with the lessons I had learned in San Francisco and in graduate school, I began teaching courses in performance studies. One of my colleagues introduced me to a student who told fascinating stories about growing up in northwest Indiana as a working-class Mexican American. This was Adrienne Viramontes. I connected with her immediately because she reminded me of my struggles, but I also noted that she had spine and was not afraid to express her feelings. I took to her, and she began working on a performance that she called *Deconstructing the Oreo: Growing Up Latina*. I cannot begin to express the gratitude I feel for meeting Adrienne, since she taught me how to develop performative texts. She became the role model for dozens of students who wrote original performances in my courses.

Years later, Adrienne, now a professor at a midwestern college, with a firm understanding of her identity, continues to performatively write about her lived experiences. When I began to develop an understanding about performative memoir, I thought back to Adrienne's pioneering work as a performative writer. It only made sense to work on this book with her. Together, we have a mutual vision of how stories are the basis of our identities, and the memories we use to construct and tell the stories demonstrate our worldviews and our understanding of the communication discipline.

Once I learned about the value of performative writing—not just writing but performing the tales that make us who we are—I encouraged students to become performative writers. Embodying text is a powerful and fulfilling act. Teaching people to write about their lives through the performance of texts teaches people to feel. Without such expression, I am of the belief that one cannot move past or toward any obstacles. Robert Frost (1915) once said, “The only way out is through” (p. 45). When we move through our experiences and allow others to do so, we are creating a type of communicative healing, most necessary for our times.

We call this book *Performative Memoir: The Methodology of a Creative Process* to explore how this genre we call “performative memoir” serves as a creative methodology wherein we share our reflective lived experiences in a performative manner. By so doing, these experiences become a communication knowledge base and respond to Soyini Madison's call for “a distinction between autoethnography and autobiographical performance” (2006, p. 320). Audience members are encouraged to embrace this knowledge base as empirical evidence and what Soyini Madison has called “ecologies of the self and speak in the multiple tongues of their own worlds” (p. 320). As we move through our experiences, we take inventory on our lives, make future decisions, and savor those memories as unique aesthetic experiences. Bearing this in mind, we offer performative memoir as a specific writing genre whereby we conduct existential fieldwork that assists in our personal healing and recovery.

ADRIENNE

In 1997, I began my master's work at a small midwestern university in an area of northwest Indiana known as the Calumet Region. I knew Theresa already because I had been a student in her Oral Interpretation course when I was an undergraduate. One day I ran into her in the hallway and as we chatted, she said to me, “I would like to talk with you at some point about your Mexican American experience in the Calumet Region.” Without giving it a second thought, I responded, “Oh, well, I'm not a *real* Mexican, so I don't

have any Mexican American experiences to talk about.” She looked at me and nodded and a short time later, I found myself in her office talking about doing an independent study, where I would write stories about my lived experience. I would spend the summer writing about the death of my mother, my relationship with my grandparents and father, and what it meant to me to be Mexican. At first, this seemed perfectly easy.

It had been twenty years since my mother’s death. I began to reflect, write, and cry. As I reflected and wrote about the parts of my life, more memories emerged, more tears would be shed, and the more developed my narratives became. Under her guidance, it would take me a year to compile a twenty-page performative script that would culminate in a one-woman show, *Deconstructing the Oreo*, for a live audience.

Throughout the creative process, I learned how to structure a narrative, what kinds of details and descriptions were useful and instructive to a general audience. I discovered that when one writes a story that will be consumed by others, it needs to have a point—it needs to be about more than me. My particular narrative needed to explain how a third generation, full-blooded Mexican American, who was raised by her old-fashioned Mexican grandparents, could grow up believing she was white. That was a tall order.

A year later, I had performed my show, graduated with my master’s degree, and was on my way toward earning my PhD.

All of the experiences that had emerged from *Deconstructing the Oreo* had changed me. I now understood why I believed I was white, why I thought I was not a *real* Mexican, and how misunderstanding my racial and ethnic identity had prevented me from cultivating an authentic voice. But just writing and performing the script did not solve the problems of my stunted development. I took the lived experience that I had cultivated and made it the focus of my doctoral dissertation: *On Becoming Chicana in the Calumet Region: A Phenomenology of Decolonization* (2006). In short, it took me seven years to consume information about Mexican history, the steel industry, immigration, Mexican representation in the midwestern media, the geopolitical history between Mexico and the United States, and how it all came together in Northwest Indiana, my family in particular, and me. The story of “me” was actually the story of Mexican immigration, the industrial age, and capitalism writ large.

In my article “Toward Transcendence: A Creative Process of Performative Writing”(2008), I discussed how the creative process was a transcendent experience for me and compared it to Martin Heidegger’s (1971) conception of building, dwelling, and thinking. In this article I write, “A performative or creative text is a manifestation of building and dwelling inasmuch as a text is constructed through a process of writing, which involves putting material and experiential parts together to form a cohesive literary structure” (p. 338).

Thus, what started out as my responses to five questions on post-it notes turned into productive material that earned me a master's degree and a doctorate in Philosophy. The creative process was not only transcendent but was the vehicle for my social mobility.

In 2007, I was hired as a tenure-track faculty member at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside where, given the goals of my department and university, I had to figure out how my specialization in phenomenology and autoethnography could contribute to transferable skills that I was responsible for imparting to my students to make them more employable. In my article "Autoethnographic Reflections: Autoethnography as a Signature Pedagogy of Speech Communication" (2012), I wrote about how the creative process involved in writing phenomenological and autoethnographic texts was an inherent part of the disciplinary ways of thinking within the Communication discipline. Using Mikhail Bakhtin's (1994) theory of dialogism, I explained how autoethnographic writing (which is creative/performative writing) fosters a part-to-whole relationship between personal experience and universal reason. As my article explains, "Essentially, Bakhtin believes that language invokes meaning at the personal level as well as the general level. Sue Vice (1997) explains that Bakhtin's dialogism:

refers to particular instances of language, perceptible in novels and popular speech; and also to refer to a defining quality of language itself, and its most fundamental sense-making capacities. In the case of the former, dialogism refers to the presence of two distinct voices in one utterance. (Vice, as cited in Viramontes, p. 5)

Hence, understanding the role of dialogue within the study of communication makes it possible for students to understand themselves, their identities, and situations within a larger cultural context. I argued that this part-to-whole relationship is a key component of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, which according to the American Association of Colleges and Universities' 2010 national survey results is a much-needed skill that employers feel is missing in newly graduated college students.

To recap, engaging in performative writing as a student made it possible for me to transcend the conditions that made possible my misunderstood racial and ethnic identity. I have produced several performative texts that have allowed me to achieve a state of healing from a variety of traumas that I have experienced. The material made it possible for me to earn a master's and a PhD, and now I'm using the creative process with many of my students, just as Theresa did with me, as I encourage them to write about their lived experience and situate them within disciplinary scholarship. For this book, it is safe to conclude that performative writing, in particular performative memoir, is a

form of social justice activism that can promote spans of psychological healing, tranquility, and in some cases social mobility.

Many in the Communication discipline are quick to claim that these practices are not a substitute for therapy. That may technically be true; however, let us be clear: performative and creative writing is therapeutic and produces similar outcomes that one might receive in therapy (depending on the motivation of the patient). But not all of us are “cooperative” patients, just like not all of us are “effective/affective” writers, who are capable of erecting a literary structure within which to study their experience and emerge from the process with a different perspective. The point is this: the practical components involved in the creation of a performative memoir date back to antiquity when Hellenistic philosophers helped their students to understand what it means to be human in order to be able to live peaceful, productive, and enjoyable lives, which they referred to as “the art of living.” In the following chapters, we offer our performative memoirs as evidence not only of lived experience within the context of cultural practices just like the ethnographers of old, but as a manifestation of the art of living.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

With this book, we provide an exploration of the performative memoir as a unique writing genre with guidelines for writing the performative memoir as well as two original performative memoirs. We propose performative memoir as a creative methodology for the study of human communication. Then, we define the criteria for performative memoir, the suggested methods for creating a performative memoir, and the philosophical and spiritual underpinnings of this genre.

With two original performative memoirs, *Loving Crazy* and *Mexican Love*, we demonstrate this writing genre. Returning to the criteria and how we constructed these texts, we conduct an analysis of these texts. Finally, we examine the relationship between the study of communication and performative writing. We offer this book as a tool for performative writers, a distinctively new method for writing memoir, and an opportunity to risk telling those stories that matter to us.

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Chapter 1

Performative Memoir

From Nostalgia to Recovery

Theresa Carilli

Brazil. 1996. I am at a Candomble House. My cowry shells are being read by a godmother who insists I go through a healing. She sees something ominous in my stomach, but she tells me I will live through it. She sees the map of my life—hell and tragedies all rolled into one. While in Brazil, I learn about the Portuguese word, “saudade” which roughly translated into English means nostalgia. I inhale Bossa Nova, Candomble, the ocean, the poverty in Rio just steps away from the beauty of Corcovoda. I go for the healing. Thirteen years later as I am being wheeled into surgery for colon cancer, I don’t remember the godmother’s prophecy. What happened between Brazil and surgery?

Our memories appear to us either verbally, visually, or viscerally. They masquerade through our minds reminding us of how we identify ourselves and how words, thoughts, pictures, and feelings have affected us. When we attempt to story our memories, they can appear as fleeting indescribable images or moments of keen joy or despair. Sometimes, they can be ordinary snippets of life without any profound or interesting substance. As Kenneth Ring mentions in his *Life at Death* (1980), the survivors of near-death experiences often describe the memories that flash through their minds when they are close to death. Some of these experiences are rather plain and dull, not grandiose as we might expect. They are often a reflection of daily life and the moments that constitute daily activities, most of which are not very memorable. Some of those experiences are described as ineffable, such as a story told by one of the survivors:

I took a trip to heaven. I saw the most beautiful lakes. Angels—they were floating around like you see seagulls. Everything was white. The most beautiful flowers. Nobody on earth ever saw the beautiful flowers I saw there . . . I don’t

believe there was a color on this earth that wasn't included in that color situation that I saw. (Ring, 1980, p. 61)

I cite Ring's seminal book here because I was one of his collaborators. It is with this research that I learned about the importance of story to exposing, explaining, and examining our lives.

The stories we tell are at the center of who we are. They contain our truths and trials. They contain the journey of where we've been and where we're going. When, however, we are asked to recall important life stories, images and feelings are evoked as if they were our living soundbites. They often flash through our minds, and we retain only those images and feelings that we believe to be meaningful or important to us. For example, if our deceased mother had told us stories about her life, it is these stories by which we remember her the most. We might remember when she told us the story, how she told us the story, and why she told us the story, but the story emerges like an island floating through the various chambers of our brains.

When we commit those stories to paper or we tell them to friends, we create a fiction from our memory, dwelling on only those instances that capture the story for the reader or listener. Memoirs are a compilation of individuals' lived experiences. They can be focused on a theme or a belief system, but they descriptively explore the individual's understanding of her own life. They are autobiographical and poetic, autoethnographic and explanatory, but they exist as a record of someone's life.

When a memoir is written as an oral narrative, that which was intended to be "told" to an audience, and it contains language that emphasizes the oral or performative nature of the text, it can be considered a "performative memoir." When the focus of the story is on interactions or exchanges rather than description, and it encourages engagement with lived experience, it can be considered a "performative memoir." Performative memoir contains nostalgic language that reflects personal identity. It is an artistic dance through the nuanced contours of moments that make our lives both memorable and tell-able. In the end, performative memoir demonstrates the writer's journey of recovery—an examination of how the writer makes peace with her struggles.

There are many solo performers who have presented performative memoir to us. Among these performers are David Cale, Eve Ensler, and Julia Sweeney. I cite these individuals specifically because they artistically confront an existential crisis in their lives and teach the audience how to feel through their pain in a way that heals. Performative memoir invites individuals to heal and supplies an audience with healing tools for future use. Briefly, I would like to discuss the work of the aforementioned performance artists as a means of defining this unique genre.

In his show *We're Only Alive for a Short Amount of Time*, David Cale describes his boyhood in England, recounting how he built a bird sanctuary in his parents' backyard. Caring for birds became his primary mission as he and his brother seemed different from others. By embodying family members as characters, Cale takes us through the conflicts he experienced while growing up. At the center of this conflict, David's father's family felt that David's father had married beneath his class. As this heart-wrenching performance continues, we learn that David's father kills his mother by hitting her over the head in the family bathroom. David is summoned from school and witnesses how his life changes before him. Left with little money and resources, David eventually makes his way to the United States as a writer and performer.

While Eve Ensler is mostly known for her play *The Vagina Monologues* (2000), her poignant memoir *In the Body of the World* (2013) takes the reader through Ensler's cancer. In this memoir, Ensler takes us into her world of diagnosis and treatment along with all her painful memories of sexual abuse and disconnection. In the following passage, Ensler poetically explains her feelings of disconnection:

I have been exiled from my body. I was ejected at a very young age and I got lost. I did not have a baby. I have been afraid of trees. I have felt the Earth as my enemy. I did not live in the forests. I lived in the concrete city where I could not see the sky or the sunset or stars. (2013, p. 1)

Before her cancer diagnosis, Ensler worked with women in the Congo who had been raped and tortured while a war around minerals and resources ensued. Through this activist work, Ensler described these wars as a cancer, writing that, "Suddenly the cancer in me was the cancer everywhere. The cancer of cruelty, the cancer of greed, the cancer that gets inside people who live downstream from chemical plants, the cancer that lives inside the lungs of coal miners" (2013, p. 7).

Julia Sweeney, best known for her appearances on *Saturday Night Live* as a character who seemed confused about their gender, wrote two performances that would serve as an evolution of her belief system: *God Said, "Ha!"* (1998) and *Letting Go of God* (2008). In *God Said, "Ha!"* Sweeney explains the humorous and heart-breaking experiences of her parents moving into her Los Angeles home with her and her dying brother. In *Letting Go of God*, Sweeney, once a devout Catholic, unravels her belief system as she studies the Bible and realizes that it is a series of folktales created by men.

These three writers exemplify what I call "performative memoir." Their journeys use nostalgic language, a language of memory that evokes moments of strength and joyfulness. They weave their nostalgic tales into stories of survival.

PERFORMATIVE WRITING

The roots of performative writing are contained in the following: a) the post-modern ethnographers and the crisis of representation, b) the development of Performance Studies out of oral interpretation, c) performative ethnography, and d) autoethnography. Personal narratives became recognized as tools for the study of culture and communication when postmodern ethnographers/anthropologists (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1985; Marcus & Fischer, 1988; Myeroff & Kaminsky, 2007) raised the issue of the crisis of representation. During the 1980s and 1990s, social scientists, particularly these ethnographers, questioned traditional quantitative measurement as a means for studying culture and human behavior. The crisis of representation challenged the objective means used by social scientists to render culture and behavior. In brief, the crisis of representation explores whether social scientists have the authority to represent other cultures. This becomes an issue of cultural sensitivity and methodology. Previous ethnographic research was challenged to be cultural critique since ethnographers use their own personal set of values to study culture.

Concurrently, the landmark article written by Ronald J. Pelias and James VanOosting, entitled *A Paradigm for Performance Studies* (1987), carved out new terrain for the discipline of oral interpretation. While oral interpretation focused on how to present literary and rhetorical texts to audiences using movement and voice, performance studies broadened the definitions of performer, text, audience, and event and outlined a methodology for the study of human communication. Through this methodology, the authors construe all acts of communication as performance acts and all acts of performance as communication acts. The major premise of this “magical renaming” is that all texts have an aesthetic quality.

In Performance Studies, lived experience evolves into creative and literary texts. Through the creation of performances which emerge from lived experience, we learn about the complexities of human emotion and how when faced with dilemmas, there are usually no easy answers or shortcuts. Many of us believe that living in the ambiguity of existential angst is perhaps the most authentic manner of being/understanding. When we are asked to perform or embody a literary text, we are asked to confront those issues, thoughts, and feelings faced by the author of the creative or literary text. Through the act of performance, we learn about other ways of communicating or being in the world. As audience members, we are also asked to reflect on feelings and ideas which might be foreign to us. We are asked to “live in those shoes” for the sake of understanding others.

As an alternative methodology to study culture, performance studies scholars and ethnographers (Conquergood, 1985; Turner & Schechner, 1985;

Turner, 1988) developed performative ethnography. Dwight Conquergood's seminal research on Hmong refugees carved out the paradigm for performative ethnography, where the performer engages in participant observation with a cultural group and then embodies that group in a performance. This research produces information on the "other," thus providing insight into cultural experience both through the act of embodiment and through conveying this understanding to an audience. This marriage between ethnography and performance studies introduced several theoretical and methodological challenges which are still being debated today. Some of those challenges include how the term "the other" marginalizes individuals and their culture (Taft-Kaufman, 1998), and if participant observation is cultural critique or authentic cultural interpretation.

Resulting from such questions, performance studies scholars such as Tami Spry, Jackie Taylor, Lynn Miller, Kristen Langellier, and Theresa Carilli examined how personal narratives yield cultural information. Ethnographer Barbara Myeroff, in her study on aging individuals in a Los Angeles Jewish club, allows cultural members to speak for themselves. In the documentary *Number Our Days*, Myeroff gives a poignant insight into how these individuals experienced their identities as members of this community. Myeroff let the participants talk about their lives and feelings, establishing that the cultural member can be the best advocate and teacher of her own culture.

This focus on personal narrative developed into the methodology known as autoethnography. Autoethnography, a subjective research method, combines the terms "autobiography," one's own story, with "ethnography," the study of culture. An autoethnography is a reflective narrative that provides lived cultural experience. Autoethnographies are subjective presentations of cultural experience and as such, they serve as a form of communication data. Qualitative researchers (Ellis & Bochner, 1990; Denzin, 2014; Leavy, 2013) have created a rubric for the assessment of autoethnographies. When cultural members tell their reflective stories, they assert their membership in a cultural group, giving subjective and meaningful insight. Harshly criticized for being self-indulgent and overly subjective, autoethnographies challenge the distancing that occurs in traditional scholarship where the individuals must divorce themselves from the topics they are studying. Performative writing emerges from the debates and discussion about autoethnographies. As a writing genre, performative writing calls for a paradigmatic shift in the way communication researchers conduct and represent their research. Overall, the discipline has not taken too kindly to this up-close examination of cultural and personal experience. Yet, during a session at the 2019 Central States Communication Association conference, participants Brooke Kiran, Miranda Redenbaugh, and Alexia Walls presented their autoethnographies in a panel entitled "The Autoethnography of Being a Survivor." Audience members

were deeply engaged with the topic, exchanging their own stories and feelings. A panel experience like this demonstrates a new era of communication scholarship.

In his article, "Performative Writing as Scholarship: An Apology, an Argument, an Anecdote" (2005), Ronald J. Pelias offers six assertions about performative writing. According to Pelias, performative writing "expands the notions of what constitutes disciplinary knowledge" because it "welcomes the body into the mind's dwellings" (p. 417). Next, performative writing "features lived experience, telling iconic moments that call forth the complexities of human life." Pelias continues, "With lived experience, there is no separation between mind and body, objective and subjective, cognitive and affective" (2005, p. 418). Pelias explores this assertion as the place where "the raw and the genuine find their articulation through form (2005, p. 417). Pelias's third assertion rightfully suggests that performative writing displays multiple realities, dismissing the notion of singularity whereby all individuals have the same experiences. With the fourth assertion, Pelias notes that performative writing "often evokes identification and empathic response" as evidenced by the previously mentioned 2019 CSCA panel. During that panel, audience members responded to the panelists by sharing their own stories of surviving and attempted to connect with the panelists for future dialogue. Pelias' fifth assertion returns to the feminist adage "the personal is political and the political is personal," acknowledging "the recognition that individual bodies provide a potent database for understanding the political and that hegemonic systems write on individual bodies" (2005, p. 420). Pelias' final assertion is that performative writing "participates in relational and scholarly contexts" (2005, p. 420) where current issues allow individuals to reach scholarly communities. For example, the #metoo and #timesup movements demonstrate a need to articulate and explore how individuals have survived through sexual and emotional assault.

Pelias, much like the postmodern ethnographers, calls for a creation of the poetic essay whereby lived experience becomes the raw material for expression. In his book *Writing Performance* (1999), Pelias gives us foundational principles for authoritative voice. Because performative writing is "an instrument of embodied experience" (p. xiii), it can be critiqued using four criteria: coherence, plausibility, imagination, and empathy. Additionally, Della Pollock (1998) reminds us that "performative writing is an important, dangerous, and difficult intervention into routine representation of social/performative life" (p. 75). Performative writing takes us on a foray into "dangerous" terrain where real experience is painfully articulated in a poetic manner so that the listener gains truths that are expressed through the performer's body with effects that are ineffable, indescribable, and transcendent. Poetic performative writing requires an assessment of how traditional hegemonic methods

of research continue to dominate when they are nonthreatening and require a distance on the part of the researcher. Performative writing exists as a methodology for communication study. If we are to explore how individuals communicate, then we must understand how and why they tell the stories they tell. We must examine how they construct narratives that open new worlds.

NOSTALGIA

Much like individuals who have near-death experiences, nostalgia is a momentary feeling that overcomes us. It contains a memory that we wish to experience again but which can only be replayed in our heads. When I was young, I spent time with my family on Long Island Sound. My father would often arrive after his workday in dull green trunks. He would acknowledge my sisters and me, and then he would disappear into the ocean, swimming so far away we couldn't see him. Then like magic, he would return, and I felt so happy to see him. I smell the salt water and I feel the agony in my heart as I remember my father, an unpredictable character who had many personal demons. This is a visit from nostalgia. It is a visit that stays within the confines of our experiences, revealing itself only to us. When we share it, we hope that it explains some part of ourselves. Our lives are constructed of nostalgic moments and experiences. Nostalgia is the cream of our memories. It tastes bitter and beautiful and strange and familiar and faraway.

Nostalgia or *saudade* (a word that can be felt but not described) brought me to performative memoir. We have experiences that haunt us and no matter how hard we might try, these are experiences that we can never quite explain. I come to the word *saudade* seeking answers to those experiences. Nostalgia, the closest translation, is often associated with positive or painful and liminal experiences. Remembering is a form of healing. To remember and re-remember an occurrence provides us with the personal information we need to survive future events.

As a performative writer, I tell stories that are infused with a sense of nostalgia, weaving a pattern of experience that leads to my recovery. Before demonstrating how this genre works, I would like to present the criteria that can be used to delineate a performative memoir. These criteria serve as a roadmap for understanding how to write a performative memoir.

CRITERIA FOR PERFORMATIVE MEMOIR

Here is a list of criteria that can be used to create or study the performative memoir. These criteria have been developed as a result of my work as

a performative writer and teacher. In my book, *Scripting Identity: Writing Cultural Experience*, I present narratives, autoethnographies, and stories written by former students. These students have given information about their lives and identities through their scripts. With all the theories in Communication that explore human interaction, I do not believe there is anything more important than the stories that are at the root of individuals' experiences. Anthropologists and ethnographers discovered this to be the case as they collected stories told by cultural members. Zora Neale Hurston, the famous African American ethnographer, collected cultural stories and turned them into fiction. When Communication scholars embrace the power of stories told from lived experiences and find ways to study these stories, I believe the discipline will be revolutionized.

Here are the criteria for performative memoir:

1. *The performative memoir is oral in nature.*

As performative writing, this genre has an oral quality. The writing demonstrates movement and as such should "move an audience." It gives a dramatic sense of something happening and how the events that are happening will reverberate. Its oral nature contains movement and reverberation.

2. *The performative memoir takes us through memorable traumatic experiences that depict an unusual personal and psychological journey.*

At the core of the performative memoir is an experience that changes, transforms, and to some degree, annihilates one's self. In the process of coming to terms with this experience, the writer shares reflective personal information that delves into her psychology, explaining the unique and specialized psychological foundation of her internal, intellectual, and emotional processes. The performative memoir paints an oral picture of an event and then demonstrates how that picture originated.

3. *The performative memoir contains cultural information.*

The elements of one's identity, which includes his cultural background, is illuminated through the performative memoir. His belief and value system, which are often housed in cultural identity, emerge as he works through the memoir. The audience learns about the salient components of identity which have led the writer to this point.

4. *The performative memoir delves into human nature and emotion in a candid and authentic way, placing the audience in a world they must confront if they wish to obtain any significant knowledge about the human condition.*

A performative memoir challenges the master narrative by delving into experiences that are atypical. It requires audience members to engage

new worldviews and ideas. Some of these views and ideas might provide new reflective insights into human experiences.

5. *The performative memoir can contain a combination of narrative and ethnodrama (dramatic scenes).*

While narrative is the primary tool used to create the performative memoir, sometimes dramatic scenes between two or more individuals, called ethnodramas, can be infused into the memoir. By creating scenes, the writer gives an additional perspective of her experiences. She might create voices and individuals to assist her in telling the story. According to Johnny Saldana:

An ethnodramatic play script and its ethnotheatrical production are deliberately chosen as representational and presentational methods of ethnographic fieldwork or autoethnographic reflection because the researcher or artist has determined that these forms are the most appropriate and effective modalities for communicating observations of cultural, social, or personal life. (2011, p. 15)

6. *The performative memoir strives to teach about the contours of an experience from a performative position.*

Because of its oral nature, the writer renders his experience in a present and lively manner. The story he tells happens in the present as the events unfold. This performative position allows the writer to take the audience directly into and through the events which create the memoir.

7. *The performative memoir contains snippets of experience that are lyrical and poetic, and sometimes repetitive and hypnotic.*

Through intertextuality and self-reflexive narrative, the writer explores experience using language that can be poetic and lyrical where mundane, ordinary language becomes layered and meaningful. Simple observations become metaphors. By repeatedly using words, the writer teaches the audience how to read and understand his experiences. When words are repeated, the writer creates a hypnotic quality of the work, teaching the audience how to respond viscerally.

8. *The performative memoir captures the past, even though it is performed in the present, thus evoking a visceral experience from the audience because they experience it in the here and now.*

In addition to language choices made by the writer which create a visceral experience, the sense of the memoir being told in the present contributes to that visceral experience. When audience members experience information viscerally, they reflect on it and take it into their physical, emotional, and spiritual space.

9. *The performative memoir facilitates understanding about cultural and personal experience.*

As individuals take the knowledge from the memoir into their physical, emotional, and spiritual space, they obtain new understandings. These new understandings should assist them in their empathy and communication with other individuals.

PERFORMATIVE MEMOIR AS A CREATIVE METHODOLOGY

As the Communication discipline has grown, so has the need for identifying methods to study communication. From its beginnings, the discipline combined Social Psychology with Rhetoric. Social Psychology introduced the tools of the scientific method to create theories that are objective and generalizable. Many communication theories were developed using quantitative methods that built assertions about the communication process. Some of these theories were limited in scope, having used “subjects” that were readily available. The final result often tested the proposed measurement instead of the behavior. Performance Studies scholars such as Dwight Conquergood noted in the 1980s that the Communication discipline was largely overrun with what he termed “the hegemony of positivism” whereby numbers were translated into an understanding of communication behavior.

Rhetoricians, on the other hand, created models to study argument. Performance Studies can be considered one such model. In their 1987 landmark article, “A Paradigm for Performance Studies,” Ronald J. Pelias and James VanOosting identified a model for studying human communication as performative behavior. Through an expanded definition of text, performer, audience, and spectacle, Pelias and VanOosting created a method for studying performance as communication behavior. This research extended oral interpretation, the study and presentation of aesthetic texts, to performance studies, the study of communication acts as performative behavior. In turn, this opened the door for performative writing. The phenomenological component of performative writing allows both writers and audience members to present knowledge based on lived experience translated into original expression. A performative writer uses a creative process to tell stories that give insight into culture, communication, and the individual self, as that self explores their worldview. Often that worldview has been developed through their relationships with others. These lived experience stories woven together into a unique tale are the basis of performative writing as a creative methodology.

As the communication discipline moves forward, new methods for studying communication will unfold. These methods will be a unique

combination of qualitative and creative methods. In her book, *Fiction as Research Practice: Short Stories, Novellas and Novels*, Patricia Leavy examines the connections between qualitative methods and creative writing. Leavy writes,

The material writers use in fiction comes from real life and genuine human experience. Similarly, qualitative researchers very much shape every aspect of their investigation imbuing it with meaning and marking it with their fingerprint. . . . Characterized as a craft, qualitative research aims at generating deep understanding, unpacking meanings, revealing social processes, and, above all, illuminating human experience. Qualitative research values sensory knowledge and experience, multiple meanings, and subjectivity in the research process. (21)

As a creative methodology, the performative memoir blurs the lines between qualitative research and the creative process. Much like qualitative methods, writing a performative memoir should have general writing guidelines. While the criteria for a performative memoir are listed above, here are some general guidelines for writing a performative memoir:

1. Select a topic that will provide cultural and interpersonal communication knowledge. This can vary from being about specific experiences that occurred because of cultural membership or a particular relationship. For example, the performative memoirist might write about the tremendous influence of an individual or a culture on her worldview.
2. Select stories about the specific experience which contain metaphors or nuances that can be expressed in lively and engaging performative ways. These stories should capture the essence of the overall experience.
3. Performative writing is active and engaging and writers should tell stories that are alive, moving, and transformational in their explanation. A vase sitting on a desk is static. A vase falling off a desk and crashing to the floor is alive. A meaningful vase falling off a desk and crashing to the floor becomes significant, explanatory, and symbolic.
4. Write each story, ridding yourself of self-conscious moments. Who you are and what you own are not relevant. How you process lived experience and express that process is critical to building a performative memoir.
5. After you construct each story, look back at how the stories relate to one another and how they build the larger narrative. If they don't work together, make the necessary edits until the performative memoir takes on a life of its own. Always keep your audience in mind. Does the overall narrative possess an authenticity that resonates for your audience?

CONDUCTING EXISTENTIAL FIELDWORK

Prior to writing a performative memoir, the author should engage in what we call “existential fieldwork,” a self-reflective look back into the individual’s knowledge base.

The primary components of existential fieldwork include risk-taking, self-reflection, and truth telling that results from them. As a risk-taking endeavor, writers must not be afraid to delve deeply into experiences that are unusual and specific to their lives. Through risk-taking, the writer opens up a range of possibilities by showing a world that others might not know about or have never been allowed entry into. The writer might also validate the experiences of audience members who wish to learn about the topic being uncovered. In this manuscript, two performative memoirs, *Loving Crazy* and *Mexican Love*, take risks through their exploration of familial dynamics. These dynamics convey information that is only available through stories—rich, textured information that educates, informs, and transforms the audience.

Once the writer decides to take the risk, she must plunge into her world of stories and experiences, deeply reflecting on what particular stories best explain the topic and what stories will make sense to the audience. During this reflective process, the writer must excavate those instances that convey meaningful information to the audience. Furthermore, these instances must be organized so that the overall narrative is cohesive and the details fit together like puzzle pieces. The writer might engage in a process of taking field notes about the stories she plans on writing. Then, she might return to her notes and decide upon an order of these stories as well as where the story details fit. The worlds of nostalgia and pain that emerge during this process must be noted by the writer so that she might convey those feelings. This engagement with these stories and this process are at the heart of existential fieldwork because the writer shares moments of existential angst revealed through nostalgic memories. Moments of nostalgia challenge and often reify our worldviews. By expressing these moments of nostalgia, we are demonstrating our dialectic, how we move through the world, and how we understand our lives. To some extent, our memories can be very nonverbal so conveying them verbally becomes an arduous process, but a process that invites a visceral audience response.

Truth telling implies that writers are invested in rendering authentic and truthful information that will benefit and transform the views of their audiences. Audiences, by nature, can determine narrative authenticity and truth. When the narrative becomes memorable to audience members, it becomes a part of their consciousness, and in turn, a part of their worldview. Performative memoirs can teach and change the way audience members think and feel about a topic.

Existential fieldwork is a form of qualitative research that relies on the primacy of human experience and the trajectory of thought. Creative writing about the self requires entering a liminal space where uncertainty abounds, thus making the process daunting, exhaustive, and risky. Those thoughts that you've been resisting that never go away are begging to be resolved. And through qualitative research—existential fieldwork, it is possible to transcend them. That is the art of being human. Knowing thyself is a form of healing. Epistemologically, to know thyself by being honest about the dark and light, is the only way to be able to know another.

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Chapter 2

The Performative Memoir as Spiritual Practice

Adrienne Viramontes

When one writes a performative memoir, one engages in a creative process. As Theresa Carilli (1998) described in “Verbal Promiscuity or Healing Art: Writing the Creative/Performative Personal Narrative,” these particular texts offer more than entertainment and reflection. They are more than just theatrical texts that one can block and prepare for staged performance. They actually facilitate a transcendent healing journey for the writer and possibly some of the audience members. Performative memoirs are a purposeful means to an end, and the process that is experienced in their creation is thousands of years old and rooted in ancient philosophy. In this chapter, I will explore how the creative process of building a performative memoir is inclusive of a variety of spiritual practices that are part and parcel of the criteria for a performative memoir discussed in chapter 1. In the end, I discuss how the performative memoir makes manifest the Greco-Roman concept of the “art of living,” through spiritual practices which enhance the self and one’s identity, broaden perspective, and achieve transcendence, which brings about a state of healing.

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES OF ANTIQUITY

In *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1995), Pierre Hadot carefully explains how the Stoics and Epicureans, among other groups of philosophers, viewed the quality of human life and the therapeutic methods that each school of philosophy employed in order to teach people how to achieve and experience a quality life. “In the view of all philosophical schools, mankind’s principal cause of suffering, disorder, and unconsciousness were the passions: that is, unregulated desires and exaggerated fears” (p. 83). Today, we can easily identify with this statement as each of us deals with the pressures and

stresses of daily life, career/job, family and romantic relationships, and of course, health and money. Ancient philosophers believed that these kinds of institutions, systems, and conditions prevent people from truly living. To truly live was to be able to be present in the moment, think clearly, be virtuous, and to connect with nature because philosophers believed that the only thing that depended on humans was the moral or evil choices we make. All other objects, desires, and distractions that easily prevent us from truly living were not aspects of our lives that we could control or influence. Hence, these ancient philosophers conceived of “spiritual practices” in order to combat suffering and liberate the soul.

Documenting the writings of Philo of Alexandria, Hadot explicates the two overlapping lists of spiritual exercises that date back to approximately 40 CE. This list includes: research (*zetesis*), thorough investigation (*skepsis*), reading (*anagnosis*), listening (*akroasis*), attention (*prosoche*), self-mastery (*enkrateia*), and indifference to indifferent things (84). The other list includes meditations and remembrance of good things, which will be included in the discussion (p. 84). These spiritual practices are categorized in four phases: Learning to Live, Learning to Dialogue, Learning to Die, and Learning to Read. I provide a brief discussion of each phase along with the spiritual practices that fall within each category.

LEARNING TO LIVE: ATTENTION

When we think about the broad discipline of philosophy, often what comes to mind is the close examination of an abstract concept that is analyzed and expounded upon. The Stoics and Epicureans did not treat philosophy in this way (Hadot, pp. 82–83). They treated philosophy as a way of life—a form of praxis.

In their view, philosophy did not consist in teaching an abstract theory—much less in the exegesis of texts—but rather in the art of living. It is a concrete attitude and determinate lifestyle, which engages the whole of existence. The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being. (p. 83)

In other words, the concepts and ideas they closely examined were applied to their daily lives through material practice. Philosophy was an embodied process as opposed to an abstract static or fixed concept.

The spiritual practice of attention is to possess and utilize presence of mind. Today we would call this living or being in the moment. This ensures that one has a vigilant presence of mind so that he is fully aware of his actions

and context. Practicing the attitude of attention provides one with the ability to apply “the fundamental rule of life: that is, the distinction between what depends on us and what does not” (Hadot, p. 84). When one has the ability to identify what is essential to the art of living, one is more likely to avoid unhealthy “passions, which are always caused by the past or the future—two areas which do *not* depend on us” (p. 85).

In essence, the practice of attention is what we could consider being a critical thinker—always keeping in mind the structure of our reality, its social construction, and the relationship between one’s authentic identity and how we constitute that through human interaction. Thus, being attentive and present in the moment is a kind of formulaic thinking about one’s reality. The Stoics and Epicureans believed that humans cannot control anything but ourselves and our own behavior. And, more importantly, we need to accept reality as it is and let go of unnecessary distractions. “Such a transformation of vision is not easy, and it is precisely here that spiritual exercises come in. Little by little, they make possible the indispensable metamorphosis of our inner self” (Hadot, p. 83).

Meditation (Reading, Listening, Researching, Investigation)

The spiritual practice of meditation is to be prepared for unexpected circumstances to occur such as death, poverty, and suffering. According to Hadot, the act of meditation:

is an attempt to control inner discourse, in an effort to render it coherent. The goal is to arrange it around a simple, universal principle: the distinction between what does and does not depend on us, or between freedom and nature. Whoever wishes to make progress strives, by means of dialogue with himself or with others, as well as by writing, to “carry on his [*sic*] reflection in due order and finally to arrive at a complete transformation of his representation of the world, his inner climate, and his outer behavior.” (p. 87)

As one meditates on the rule of life, some of the other spiritual practices come into play as applications. Meditation invites the need for reading, listening, research, and investigation. According to Hadot, one could read philosophical texts or lessons from a professor, in order to expand one’s thoughts more thoroughly—more concretely. As any good teacher knows, there’s no better way to understand a theory than to put it into practice. This is where the practices of research and investigation come into play.

The entire process of meditation is a call to reflect upon one’s situation and thoroughly investigate one’s life in the span of certain moments. As someone who has been to therapy a few times, it is similar to the process of

talking with your therapist, who is supposed to ask you important questions that invite you to make sense of your thoughts, feelings, and actions, which help to provide a new framework of understanding yourself. The act of asking questions and providing answers—being accountable for one's actions and behaviors is the practice of dialogue, which brings us to the second phase of spiritual practices.

LEARNING TO DIALOGUE

Of course, Socrates is responsible for introducing the concept of dialogue into Western consciousness. However, it is important to note that one can dialogue with another or with the self especially through the act of writing. If performed correctly, engaging in written or oral dialogue “invites us to establish a relationship of the self to the self, which constitutes the foundation of every spiritual exercise” (Hadot, p. 90). Furthermore, Hadot claims that:

To know oneself means, among other things, to know oneself qua non-sage: that is, not as a Sophos, but as a philo-sophos, someone on the way toward wisdom. Alternatively, it can mean to know oneself in one's essential being; this entails separating that which we are not from that which we are. Finally, it can mean to know oneself in one's true moral state: that is, to examine one's conscience. (p. 90)

In other words, dialogue is a process by which one investigates (reads, listens, researches) the depths of one's consciousness, morality, behavior, attitude, and human being. In the age of antiquity, most people were responsible for their own well-being and felt it was their moral duty to think progressively and positively within the framework of universal reason. Hadot describes the dialogic process as one that is “profoundly significant:”

Only he who is capable of a genuine encounter with the other is capable of an authentic encounter with himself, and the converse is equally true. Dialogue can be genuine only within the framework of presence to others and to oneself. From this perspective every spiritual exercise is a dialogue, insofar as it is an exercise of authentic presence, to oneself and to others. (p. 91)

It may sound quite easy to speak with another person as an “authentic” self, but it is one of the most difficult performances that humans face. Just imagine one day at your job, and with each exchange with your coworkers, you say what you really think (politely or directly, that's up to you). You tell your truth to those who want to hear it and those who don't (and most of us don't

want to hear about it at all). This is why in our daily lives we say things we don't mean just to get a break from the stress of telling others what we really think. Lying is a nice vacation from the self, and it becomes a coping mechanism that we cannot live without in the context of existence within a never-ending social, economic, and political matrix.

Day after day we spend so much time being inauthentic that it becomes easy to disconnect from one's essential identity. These spiritual exercises are a form of human checks and balances in order to maintain the integrity of one's identity and self, centered yet fluid, and separate from influences that prevent us from the art of truly living. Hadot writes:

The point is worth stressing, for the same thing happens in every spiritual exercise: we must *let* ourselves be changed, in our point of view, attitudes, and convictions. This means that we must dialogue with ourselves, and hence we must do battle with ourselves. (p. 91)

The battle we do with ourselves begins with engaging in dialogue, which allows us to meditate, research, investigate, and read and interpret our lived experience. Dialogue provides us with the opportunity to examine the subject. When it comes to discovering truth and contradiction and then dealing with it as it relates to our identity and personhood, that per Hadot, requires dialectic, which can be considered the method for uncovering our subjective truth.

Thanks to these detours, "with a great deal of effort, one rubs names, definitions, visions and sensations against one another"; one "spends a long time in the company of these questions"; one "lives with them" until the light blazes forth. Yet one keeps on practicing, since "for reasonable people, the measure of listening to such discussions is the whole of life." (p. 92)

Thus, engaging in dialogue and dialectic are the means by which one begins to learn just how important spiritual practices are to the health and well-being of the self. It's about the process one engages in to discover truth, not the truth itself. For there will be many difficult truths each of us needs to face and with which to reconcile ourselves throughout our lives.

LEARNING TO DIE (THE DEATH OF INDIVIDUALITY)

To recognize the significance of the death of individuality, one must first look to the concept of universal reason. As stated in previous paragraphs, the fundamental rule of a philosophical life is to be able to identify the unnecessary passions and fears that plague human beings and distract them from the art of

truly living. The separation of the soul from the individual is a goal that presupposes that human beings, as part of the evolutionary process, which because it is generative and productive, is virtuous and good. There is an overarching “cosmic good” under which all humans participate by means of existing. In this cosmic good exists “a world of immutable norms, which are opposed to the perpetual state of becoming and changing appetites characteristic of individual, corporeal life” (Hadot, p. 93). In short, cosmic good—sometimes referred to as universal rationality or the Logos—is a kind of repository for all human experience from time immemorial. When one engages in the spiritual practices of dialogue, investigation, reading, and researching and shares ideas and experience through writing and/or speaking, one (according to Hadot who invokes the work of the monk Antony), can “liberate oneself from one’s individuality, in order to raise oneself up to universality” (p. 377). Moreover, Hadot argues that “Writing, like the other spiritual exercises *changes the level of the self*, and universalizes it” (p. 377). He continues:

Writing, says Antony, takes the place of other people’s eyes. A person writing feels he is being watched; he is no longer alone, but is a part of the silently present human community. When one formulates one’s personal acts in writing, one is taken up by the machinery of reason, logic, and universality. What was confused and subjective becomes thereby objective. (p. 378)

Thus, learning to die is successfully separating the soul from the desires of the individual through the process of spiritual exercises. The end goal is for the human being to be able to purify the self so that the essence of one’s soul can be known. Today, we might call this self-actualization, or, Carl Jung’s concept of integration/individuation, which is the final goal of spiritual exercises.

LEARNING TO READ (SELF-MASTERY AND INDIFFERENCE TO INDIFFERENT THINGS)

Spiritual exercises have been described as a means of identifying the obstructions and compulsions that can impede one’s ability to truly live as an authentic being. As all of us know, the amount of time one experiences the feeling of self-actualization—of feeling and being whole of being one with nature—is fleeting. Time doesn’t stop and we in the United States live in a Capitalist society, which is ruggedly individualistic and pervasive and made manifest in the way we think, speak, value, strive, and perform. It is important to remember that this ancient body of philosophical thought was an ideal goal that needed to be performed over and over because no one could possibly maintain a level of existence that functioned only on pure thought. The point

is this: we benefit from sharing our lived experience with ourselves and others because it provides an opportunity for us to transcend ourselves, our dark and traumatic experiences, our sorrow, our grief, our pain and suffering, which for every human is inescapable. Achieving transcendence is a temporal form of self-mastery, and if only for a short time, allows us to recognize that we don't have to be imprisoned by that which we cannot control.

Through the act of writing about one's lived experience, we engage in ancient spiritual practices that make possible healing and transcendence of self. Additionally, as Hadot notes:

The means employed are the rhetorical and dialectical techniques of the attempts at mastering one's inner dialogue, and mental concentration. In all philosophical schools, the goal pursued in these exercises is self-realization and improvement. [. . .] Their goal is a kind of self-formation or *paideia*, which is to teach us to live, not in conformity with human prejudices and social conventions—for social life itself is a product of the passions—but in conformity with the nature of man, [*sic*] which is none other than reason. (p. 102)

Thus, for thousands of years, philosophical schools believed that in order to live a genuine life it was important to repeatedly engage in deep thought about one's lived experience so as to be able to come to understand our being and its motivations, and to liberate ourselves from the distractions of daily life. It was important to write and speak about our experience using dialogue, dialectic, rhetorical tropes and imagination in order to utilize the full faculty of the mind and fully communicate the nuances of lived experience and subjective truth. "With the help of these exercises, we should be able to attain to wisdom; that is, to a state of complete liberation from the passions, utter lucidity, knowledge of ourselves and of the world" (Hadot, p. 103). Striving to achieve this state is what the Stoics understood as the "art of living." Hadot explains it by using the analogy of sculpture. "For the ancients, sculpture was an art which 'took away,' as opposed to painting, an art which 'added on.' The statue preexisted in the marble block, and it was enough to take away what was superfluous in order to cause it to appear" (p. 102). In other words, sculpture, like spiritual practices, is a pathway of discovery through which we reveal ourselves and strive for artistic performances of ourselves, within our own lives.

THE PERFORMATIVE MEMOIR AS MANIFESTATION OF "THE ART OF LIVING"

As a graduate student in the late 1990s, I had the opportunity to write my first performative memoir, entitled "Deconstructing the Oreo: Growing up

Latina.” By chance, I was having a conversation with my professor, Theresa Carilli, who looked at me and said, “I would like to talk with you about your Mexican American experience in the Calumet Region.” Without giving it a second thought, I responded with, “Oh, well, I’m not a real Mexican, so I don’t have any Mexican American experience to talk about.” She just looked at me, nodding her head. A short while later, she approached me about doing an independent study with her over the summer. She was going to provide me with some questions that she wanted me to answer. I would write my responses over the summer and we would talk about them when they were complete.

The performative memoir is a work of art that represents lived experience that has been reflected upon through meditation and deep thought, through reliving particular experiences (good and bad), by investigating the nuances of experience, thought processes, fears, desires, and with research, remakes sense of them in a different framework. And, all of this work is compiled through the acts of writing and oral interpretation. In the following pages, I narrate how I was guided through this creative process. I focus on the steps and practices I engaged and performed and relate them to the spiritual practices I discussed in the previous section. I do this to show how creating the performative memoir is a pathway toward transcendence that hearkens back to the spiritual practices of ancient times.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE AND THE PERFORMATIVE MEMOIR

Phase I: Establishing Dialogue

When Dr. Carilli and I met to discuss the work for which I was responsible the summer I first worked with her in graduate school, she handed me five yellow post-it notes. On each note was written a question:

- 1) How did your mother die?
- 2) How did you deal with the loss?
- 3) What was it like to live with your grandparents?
- 4) Describe your relationship with your father.
- 5) What does it mean to be Mexican?

I stuck the notes together so not to lose them and went home to begin writing.

I didn’t know it at the time, but when she chose the questions, she was performing what Edmund Husserl (1970) called “bracketing,” which invites

one to analyze situations or circumstances that require “transcendental reduction.” As Richard Schmitt (1959) explains:

The transcendental phenomenological reduction is called “transcendental” because it uncovers the ego for which everything has meaning and existence. It is called “phenomenological” because it transforms the world into mere phenomena. It is called “reduction” because it leads us back to the source of the meaning and existence of the experienced world, insofar as it is experienced, by uncovering intentionality. (p. 240)

Based on what she knew about my lived experience, she was able to recognize that certain events in my life were unresolved; they functioned as psychic open wounds and were hampering my ability to understand my own identity.

The questions on the post-it notes invited me to begin a dialogue with myself.

When I first began to write, I simply recounted the story as I had experienced it. I wrote pages and pages of text and then read them repeatedly, which motivated me to remember new details about my lived experience. This process allowed the narrative to become more fully developed by describing and explaining the nuances of context, situation, actions, attitudes, and behavior.

As I wrote my narrative, I provided the kind of information that Carilli calls for in her criteria:

- The performative memoir takes us through memorable traumatic experiences that depict an unusual personal and psychological journey.
- The performative memoir contains cultural information—in content and style.
- The performative memoir delves into human nature and emotion in a candid and authentic way, placing the audience in a world they must confront if they wish to obtain any significant knowledge about the human condition.
- The performative memoir can contain a combination of narrative and ethnodrama (dramatic scenes).

I wrote about my mother’s death and how I got sent to live with my Mexican grandparents. That experience made possible my rejection of Mexican culture and through my exploration of the conversations I used to have with my grandmother, that situation led me to identify proudly as Caucasian for almost thirty years. It was through the process of dialoguing with myself (and others) that I was able to create a performative text that allowed me to identify the conditions that made possible my racial and cultural misunderstanding. According to Hadot:

Meditation—the practice of dialogue with oneself—seems to have held a place of honor among Socrates’s disciples. When Antisthenes was asked what profit he had derived from philosophy, he replied: “The ability to converse with myself.” The intimate connection between dialogue with others and dialogue with oneself is profoundly significant. Only he [*sic*] who is capable of a genuine encounter with the other is capable of an authentic encounter with himself, and the converse is equally true. Dialogue can be genuine only within the framework of presence to others and to oneself. (p. 91)

Thus, the first step in the creative process of a performative memoir is to establish dialogue with oneself and others by asking a set of questions that invites one to confront a situation from the past. Dialogue invites explanation, description, colorful language, cultural ways of thinking and being and personal accountability. More importantly, it is very important to have someone qualified in the craft of creative/performative writing to guide the author/writer so that a soundly structured narrative can be built.

Phase II: Universal Rationality

As the details of the narrative begin to fully unfold, the subject matter has begun to exist as an object, what Hans-Georg Gadamer (2002) describes as “aesthetic distanciation,” which allows me, the author, to view my own work as something separate,” (Viramontes, 2008, p. 338). What was once purely subjective is transformed through the repetitive, dialogic process of writing, reading, meditation, reflection, and rewriting and develops into a work that can be viewed and interpreted as an object.

After I responded to the five questions, I submitted my work for evaluation. At that point I had created five distinct stories that by themselves were not explicitly connected. What I got back looked like government redacted, top-secret documents. There were blackened-out sentences everywhere. Dr. Carilli explained to me that all of the blackened-out lines were what she called “ego statements.” These were sentences I crafted that focused on things I thought and/or felt that did not progress the narrative. Being able to identify and remove ego statements was an important part of the aesthetic distinction process because eliminating superfluous subjective commentary was what ensured what Walter R. Fisher (1984) referred to as “narrative fidelity.”

The next step for me was to figure out how to combine the five distinct narratives into one flowing performative text. It required much more than conceiving of clever transitions to link them together. Bringing the stories together to create one full narrative begins the process of understanding yourself and your situated lived experience within a larger context. One begins to understand how her lived experience compares to others. It establishes a

part-to-whole relationship between the author, the experience, and its resonance with the collective experience of others. This process invokes Hadot's thoughts on the death of individuality, as he believed that "Training for death is training to die *to one's individuality and passions*, in order to look at things from the perspective of universality and objectivity" (p. 95).

Additionally, once the fully developed narrative is complete, the author reads the text aloud to (at first) a small group of people in order to gather feedback about its construction, its ability to make sense, its significance to a general audience, and its lucidity or lack thereof. A performative memoir, and other forms of performative writing, should be written with the intent to publicly express or perform its content for an audience. The oral nature of a performative memoir shares even more in common with ancient spiritual practices. Referring back to his preface for *L'Enseignement oral de Platon* (1986), Hadot explains that:

Ancient philosophy, at least beginning from the sophists and Socrates, intended, in the first instance, to form people and to transform souls. That is why, in Antiquity, philosophical teaching is given above all in oral form, because only the living word, in dialogues, in conversations pursued for a long time, can accomplish such an action. The written work, considerable as it is, is therefore most of the time only an echo or a complement of this oral teaching. (p. 20)

In very simple terms, the spoken word that has been orally interpreted using inflection, rate, pitch, speed and pausing, and incorporates the body is a more dialogically powerful medium than silent reading when working toward the status of transcendence. This is why "the performative memoir is oral in nature." It demands to be verbally expressed in order to maintain the dialogue with others, which constitutes performance as a spiritual practice as well.

Phase III: Achieving Transcendence: From Written Text to Live Performance (Orality)

For the sake of clarity, the phrase "achieving transcendence" means that you understand your lived experience from a totally different perspective. In essence, the writer is able to move beyond the original starting point as the storyteller. For example, after I completed "Deconstructing the Oreó: Growing Up Latina" and performed it for live audiences in two different venues, I was able to understand how the death of my mother, and the events that unfolded afterward, led me to believe that I was not a *real* Mexican girl/woman because of the ways I differed from traditional Mexican culture (according to my grandmother). Achieving a state of transcendence about my misunderstood cultural identity led to a continued investigation of the

conditions that made that misunderstanding possible. The performative memoir that I crafted as a master's student became the data for my dissertation. It was through live performance and several years of reading about Chicana/o history, Mexican history, philosophy, communication scholarship, and the social, political, and economic history of Northwest Indiana, which was the site of massive immigration during the era of the Industrial Revolution, that I was able to arrive at a macro level understanding of myself and my situation.

It took all of that for me to be able to articulate to myself and others that my mother's death, along with the influence of my grandparents and their interpretation of Mexican culture, created a chasm between my identity and Mexican culture. In other words, because I seemed unable or unwilling to act or behave like Mexican girls that my grandmother approved of, she began to respond to my failed cultural performances by suggesting that I was not a *real* Mexican. After so many years of hearing this response, I adopted it and emerged with the moral understanding that since I was not "authentically" Mexican to begin with, performing as such was an immoral act. I was in an unwinnable situation, which obstructed the development of my identity. Using the phrase "I'm not a real Mexican" became a marker for those moments when I was expected to speak as a Mexican person but felt that doing so was inherently immoral or false. This is transcendence. I no longer use the "real" Mexican phrase because it no longer serves a purpose in my daily life. I speak as a Mexican person because I am one, no matter how I behave or what I think.

Phase IV: Liberating the Soul

Over the years I've been asked to perform "Deconstructing the Oreo" as a presentation or talk. And, now that I understand what happened to me and how it happened, I am almost physically unable to perform the text because I am mentally, physically, and emotionally distanced from it.

Writing and performing that text moved me—emotionally, physically, and psychically. The process allowed me to go beyond the obstruction by means of a new way of understanding the situation in which I found myself. The creative process required me to build my own bridge by which to cross to another shore within my life trajectory. As Martin Heidegger (1971) explained:

The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge designedly causes them to lie across from each other. One side is set off against the other by the bridge. . . . Always and ever differently the bridge escorts the lingering and hastening ways of men [*sic*] to and fro, so that they may get to other banks and in the end, As mortals, to the other side. (p. 150)

This process highlights the human ability to heal by means of thinking, writing, and speaking, through artistic, constructive, and dialogic lenses.

When philosophers discuss the process of “liberating the soul” from the individual, they refer to what we now greatly misunderstand as *Liberal Education*. To say that it is good or bad to be exposed to a liberal education shows great confusion about the word *liberal*. It does not mean “anything goes” kind of thinking or rejecting long-standing thoughts and ideas because you might disagree with family traditions. Being liberally educated means to uncover, cultivate, and make manifest one’s voice, which enables the individual to speak her own truth. And that truth, no matter its content, is the lifeblood of living a quality life.

It is in this way that creating performative memoir, which is an ancient spiritual practice and a creative, meditative, philosophical, endeavor, is paramount to a quality education and self-actualization. I am living proof of this phenomenon. In essence, the study and practice of Communication, specifically through performance studies, is a pathway for humans to fulfill their own potential. For anyone to claim that being liberally educated is an attack on family traditions or is some kind of political conspiracy only shows the level to which they do not understand what they claim.

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Chapter 3

Loving Crazy

A Performative Memoir

Theresa Carilli

Cast of Characters

Narrator
Anne
Father
Mother
Sister 1
Sister 2
Manny
Therapist
Gloria
Giuseppe
Sebastiana
Karen

Notes: Characters can be part of an ensemble group of three to four individuals who take on one or more of the specific voices listed above. The narrator will always take on her own voice. Anne's musical recordings can be used in conjunction with this script.

I.

I learned to love crazy. Loving crazy means that you adopt a willingness to love without boundaries. The individuals you love operate in their own world of madness. That madness becomes your sense of reality. When you are born into this world, understanding madness is akin to learning how to walk

or feed yourself. You become a casualty in a world that makes no sense to others and you give yourself to this world, willingly, because that is all you know. You love them. You hope they love you. And the space in between their world and yours narrows as you begin to understand the effects such relationships have on you. I learned to love crazy. I don't know any other way. To me, madness is the highest form of feeling.

Anne: Creative genius thrives when raised in an environment of neurosis and violence.

Father: I just wish she would die. I wish she would die.

Mother: I never knew what it meant to raise someone so gifted.

Narrator: Creative genius thrives when raised in an environment of neurosis and violence.

May 19, 2013. Sunday morning. My sister Angela calls to tell me that my oldest sister Anne has died. I sit in a chair for twenty minutes and try not to think about it. I am sad and relieved and ecstatic and sick and terrified. This is my grandmother's birthday. I never met my grandmother Angelina. She was my mother's mother. She died at the age of thirty-seven from a stroke. Instead of Anne, all I can think about is her—her life, her struggles, her pain. An immigrant woman, she worked at home as a seamstress while raising her four children during the Depression. My mother was her second daughter and nothing to be proud of, for only sons matter in Italian families. My mother told me countless stories about her mother. She was stately and admired and funny and kind. She was in an arranged marriage, having left her home and her true love in Sicily. When I saw her birthplace, I learned that her father just didn't want to support her and sent her to America. She had no say in this decision. She had no voice. She had to accept the hand she was dealt. My mother was part of that hand. My mother was not her mother's favorite. She was whiny and plump and she adored animals. She wasn't intellectual but was often followed home by schoolboys who would stand outside and attempt to woo her. She told me two stories about her childhood and youth that I loved. When my mother was very young, her aunt took in a couple of sickly birds from the street. Her aunt told her not to go into the basement and to leave the birds alone, but as soon as my aunt left to go to the store, my mother hopped downstairs and crushed one of the birds accidentally. She couldn't breathe and she was overcome with grief. Her aunt, she later claimed, was not angry at her because the sorrow she expressed was lesson enough.

My sister died today, and all I can think about is the grandmother I never knew, the woman I wanted to love, not my sister who I loved, a person I knew, a person who shredded the interior of my spirit—the kind of pain you feel when you realize that life will continue. The person who hurt me the most

in my life. The person who I felt I could never live without and then learned to live without. My sister died today, and I have to go grocery shopping or clean the car or work on an assignment. I cannot face it. I fear that I will never be able to face it.

My mother used to tell me another story about her first job. She took a job as a secretary at a prestigious organization where she worked for the top boss. She was just out of high school and pretended to be more experienced than she was. Of course, she was fired for her lack of experience, which to her was very humiliating. She didn't have a mother to console her and to help her to understand her mistake because her mother had died. She had to learn on her own and by the time she met my father, she was supporting her family. He was attending law school at the time but had to drop out because of his history as a felon bootlegger. During that time, she gave birth to my sister Anna, Sebastiana, after my father's mother, but we called her Anne. When Anne was a small child, she went into daycare with a neighborhood woman. One day as my mother prepared to go to work, she got Anne ready for daycare. "Please Mommy," Anne said, "please, no." In time, my mother learned that the daycare worker had left my sister to sit on a cold stoop all day long. My mother tried to do the best by her family in spite of my father's infidelities and her frustration with his inability to hold down a job. She would tell a story about why she thought Anne had problems. One day at a family function, six-year-old Anne was being obnoxious, so my mother smeared a piece of pizza all over her face in front of friends and relatives.

Were these the experiences that molded my sister, made her into who she had become, a mentally ill musician, an old spirit with a tremendous amount of clairvoyance, an individual on the dole, someone who revels in others' suffering? Was this a result of smeared pizza or cold stoops? What made her that person that you take so easily into your heart and who pulls apart every ventricle, every artery until you feel as though you do not have any ability to love anyone again? What made her that person whom you spend every waking moment thinking about, worrying about, caring about, and feeling like you didn't do enough, like you did too much, like you have a wound that will never heal and that will grow into a gaping hole that you will fall into someday?

When my mother died, Anne appeared at her funeral having had a visible bi-lateral mastectomy. "I'm dying," she told my sisters. Anne had told so many lies throughout her life that we could never separate reality from her fiction. As an attention seeker, she would do anything. So when my sister called me to tell me that Anne was in hospice, I was surprised, shocked, and bewildered.

Narrator: Bullshit you're dying. How did she work that out? Do they just take anyone into hospice these days? Bullshit you're dying. (pause) You've been dying your whole life. What makes you think I would believe you now?

Anne: Because I'm really dying.

Narrator: Like hell you are, you would do anything for attention. You would do anything to get me back into your life so I could take care of you, be your servant, agree with everything you say. Yes, you're a genius. Yes, I don't matter. Yes, you do.

For the next two months, I spoke with my younger sister about visiting Anne in hospice. I wanted to say goodbye if she truly was in hospice, but I didn't want her abuse anymore. I didn't want to hear about my negligence and selfishness. I had spent the last ten years making arrangements for my parents' care, in spite of the very sad and irreconcilable history I had with them. Back and forth, my youngest sister and I talked. It was like all the conversations we had about Anne's reality. Was she or wasn't she crazy?

On May 19, 2013, my grandmother's birthday, my sister called to tell me that Anne had died. I didn't know how to feel. My mother always said that Sinatra's "My Way" was Anne's theme song. She did it her way and suffered for it. She had lot of people throughout her life who cared for her. She had a unique ability to make me laugh. Her wisdom included the beliefs that negative energy appears very strongly when you are just about to transition into something wonderful and that creativity was a gift bestowed upon the truly chosen. I spent my life in fear of being crazy, that it would take hold of me one day and I would be helpless. Instead, I worked. I worked and worked so I would never be called crazy. I cannot stop working. I fear that if I stop working, crazy will take over me and I will become my sister Anne.

II.

There she is as a child. It's Mother's Day and my father has taken her to a record studio where she makes her first recording:

Anne: (child's voice, sung to Happy Birthday) Happy Mother's Day to you, Happy Mother's Day to you.

Father: Say some more, talk some more. We love you very much.

Anne: We love you very much.

My father idolized her. She loved him but there they are in the projects. She's made him very angry, and all he can do is chase her around while she rides her bike, and he hits her with all his might. Disobedient, ornery child. She learned not to listen to him after the age of six.

Narrator: Clap hands, clap hands 'til Daddy comes home, Daddy has money and Mommy has none.

Mother: That's her father. She needs to show some respect to him.

Father: That's her mother. She needs to show some respect to her.

Narrator: You always wanted a daughter that was an original, her very own person.

III.

The first time I remember my sister Anne was in kindergarten. I come to consciousness at about four years old, and I'm wrapped around Anne's leg. It is the first day of kindergarten, and I'm terrified. Anne, ten years my senior, is about to betray me. "You must stay," she tells me as I clutch her furiously. People frighten me. I never speak to anyone except my sister Anne and my mother. She pulls me off her leg and leaves me there to fend for myself. This is my first out-of-body experience. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do without her. She understands me. She gets me. She loves me. By the time I'm six, she teaches me how to play chess, and I learn that people are all a part of the chessboard. No one good, everyone out to get you. That makes sense to me. She teaches me the rules.

Anne: Capture the king. It's all that matters. The king. Learn the rules. Then, break them.

Then she leaves. She has been sent to boarding school. I miss listening to her playing the flute—the soft melodies that communicate her own demons. I hear the sounds as she plays, then stops. Over and over. She wants to be a musician. She rehearses every day, hours and hours. Jazz musician. Because she stole a biology examination from her local Catholic high school right off the teacher's desk, she must leave. She cannot live with us anymore. She is a bad influence on me, especially me. We drive her to Maine, to a boarding school for girls that misbehave, and she sobs, begging my mother not to leave her. I feel the chill of Maine—the damp air, the desolate landscape, the penetrating cold in the eyes of these New Englanders. I miss her and I must begin to talk to people. If I am to survive, I must talk.

In first grade, I sit in the "dummy" reading group because I will not read, so it is assumed that I cannot read. As an act of complete frustration, I read furiously and with expression so that my teacher must move me into my very own group—beyond the "smarties," even. She asks me that night to stay after class. She looks at me and asks me why I won't read or speak, and I sit there in silence, getting very sick to my stomach, and finally she lets me go home. I won't speak but I will read. This is my first act of defiance—reading out loud with expression. It unites me with my sister.

Anne comes home periodically, and she fights with my parents but plays her flute, still. I love listening to her. She tries to teach me, but I don't seem to have the gift of music. I sit with her as she rehearses over and over. She hates boarding school and someday, she tells me, she will be a famous musician. I believe in her. I believe her. When she graduates from boarding school, she joins a band called "The Senorita Brass." They play at fairs and other events. Dressed in riding boots, black pants, and a matador type shirt, Anne plays songs that are modeled after Herb Alpert and The Tijuana Brass, such as "The Lonely Bull." The sounds of brass instruments with my sister's flute accompanying them. A different sound. But as becomes customary for my sister, she doesn't get along with the band leader, Nancy, and must part ways with The Senorita Brass. In an act of revolt, she destroys all posters, flyers, and car bumpers advertising the group by crossing out the "BR" in their name so that it read "Senorita's Ass." My sister was childish and difficult. If things didn't go her way, she would leave.

And that's where we find ourselves a few years later—Anne about to leave. She has been attending Berklee music college in Boston, coming back to my hometown, Hartford, periodically to share her compositions in the middle of the night. She knocks on the living room window.

Anne: I hitched back. I have something great that you will really love. Something I wrote.

She is wearing her black dashiki, emblematic of hippiedom. She smells like incense and mold from her basement apartment. I wake up and listen to her brilliant music. She plays her flute as though it is an electric guitar. She combines this sound with jazz and soul and declares herself a genius. At nine years old, I'm happy to see her. I smile at her and fall asleep on the sofa while she rants well into the night. But then, my parents notice something about her. She is unkempt and seemingly high and yellow and very sick. She argues with my parents. The next day she shows me the source of their anger—the tracks that run up and down her arm from heroin. "Let's take a ride," she says. I will go anywhere with her. I love her. She is my older sister, and she recognizes in me a budding artist—sensitive, difficult, mad like her. We go to the train station and park by the bookie/newsstands section.

Anne: This is what I need you to do. Sit here in the car. In an hour, call the house. Here is ten cents. Tell them you're at the train station. Tell them to come and get you. I'm going back to Boston, but don't tell them. OK. No matter what—don't tell them where I'm going.

She is my sister. I love her. I will do anything for her. I sit quietly in the car, watching men pull up in front of one of the many bookie/newsstands.

They place bets with their favorite bookie, hand him money, and drive off. I know this because my father was a huge gambler. He taught me how to bet on football pools when I was young. My father had been a professional boxer and a football player, and he taught me everything he knew about football. By the time I was twelve years old, I had made over \$500 betting on teams within the point spread. Then his favorite bookie friend would call me from prison every Saturday to get my sure bet. He would bet large and give me a cut. I learned how to bet based on whether or not the team was playing at home, injuries, weather, how much scoring they had done over the last few games, and just a gut sense of who might win. I developed an early understanding of statistics from these bets. I made enough money to purchase my first car from those bets.

As I sit in the car waiting for time to pass, I look at my arms. My skin is smooth. I am not my sister. I am not my sister. Within fifteen minutes, Anne returns and tells me she just couldn't leave me there. She returned for me. And I believed her. The first lie she would tell me. When you love someone, you believe their lies because you must. It is a survival strategy because if you don't believe them, your entire existence means nothing. We drive back home, and my parents greet us coldly and take Anne to the emergency room at the local hospital. She goes into a very deep coma and is transported to Yale New Haven hospital. My parents are told that the heroin has made her very sick, and she will not likely survive. They go to visit her every day after work. They return, fight with one another, and sob in separate rooms.

Mother: The psychiatrist tells us that all our children will be the same—just like her. I knew I should never have married your father. His family was unsavory. His family was like a pack of animals. The first time I ate dinner with them, they left nothing for me. I just smiled at them.

Narrator: But Mom, they were your cousins.

Mother: I never should have married your father. Never marry a cousin! Just think of the great children I could have reproduced—perhaps with someone who was educated.

My mother looks at me as though I have been shooting poison into my veins because I am like her. I have one sister who is two years older, Angela, and another who is four years younger, Gigi. For six months, we spend our evenings alone—fighting or watching television or doing homework—without any parenting at all. They have given up. We take care of each other while my father recklessly displays his temper by breaking every door, window, dish, and wall. I love my father. When he's not angry, he's spontaneous and has a lovely sense of humor, but then he just goes off for what seems like no reason at all. Bam. Dinner splattered all over the walls.

Bam. The door torn off its hinges. Bam. The knife being pulled from the drawer.

Father: I'm going to kill you. I'm going to kill you. I'm going to kill you.

Ensemble Voices: It's alright. It's alright. He won't kill you. He doesn't have it in him. He won't kill you. He won't kill her.

Mother: Don't listen to him. He loves all of us.

After these episodes, my mother would look at me. Everything she experienced was my fault and I'm not sure why—perhaps because my two other sisters would be crying and yelling in fear. “It’s alright,” I’d say to them, calming them down, “it’s alright.” We would huddle in an area of the house while the brutality continued. When my mother believed his threats, she would leave. “It’s alright,” I’d say to them, “it’s alright.” I would rub their heads and comfort them. When I was twenty-four years old in San Francisco, the visions of my father’s tirades returned, and I was finally allowed to feel them.

Therapist: You need to feel some anger towards your parents. When you begin to feel that anger, you will heal.

Narrator: But I love them. I denounced God when I was six years old because a nun told me I had to choose God or them. I chose them.

Therapist: Why you begin to feel that anger, you will heal.

While my sister is in the hospital, my parents fight with one another constantly, blaming each other for creating a heroin addict. My mother tells me she has decided not to care for me and my sisters anymore because we have no future. Our future will be like Anne’s.

Mother: You're all going to be good-for-nothing drug addicts. That's what the psychiatrist says. Why should I even bother with any of you? You're going to amount to nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

Naturally, we would all become drug addicts with no sense of purpose. Nothing. We had no future. And every day we were told this. She had made a dreadful mistake by marrying our father and having children with him. I learned to be sorry for my birth. First, to be born the third female out of four in a macho Italian culture to a former professional athlete, then to have a sister who was an addict.

Anne: Berklee Music School. One of the best programs in the country for up-and-coming jazz musicians. I had what it took. That's what they told me but then I met Rocky, the love of my life. Hippie soul, sensitive, gorgeous, loving. We shot

heroin together and I knew I was in love. He moved in with me. He was the love of my life. Together, we hustled to keep buying heroin. Once I sold someone a dozen donuts and told them they were laced with it. I made sixty bucks—enough for Rocky and me to shoot for a while. But then one day, my parents showed up at my apartment unexpectedly, and they caught Rocky and me. My father walked in and punched Rocky in the face. He flew across the room. Rocky never forgave me. It broke my heart.

When my father learned that his four daughters were destined to be mentally ill drug addicts, he put all his trust into his brother. Together they concocted a plan to make millions of dollars, which involved forging my mother's signature. The plan went awry, and my father lost the house, his wife, and his four "budding drug-addicted, mentally ill children." While the deal was being worked out, Anne was in rehab, contemplating her drug addiction and attempting to get back to Boston to her boyfriend. Her illness cost her a fortunate miscarriage and close monitoring by my parents. Every night, my parents would fight. Sometimes it would escalate—other times it wouldn't. This all depended upon whether my father had to attend some type of church function where he was perceived as a celebrity. My mother, meanwhile, would revisit everything the psychiatrist had told her. According to the psychiatrist, she was no good as a mother and her children would take after her.

Mother: Nothing. They are just going to be my burden, my cross, for the rest of my life. They will do nothing. Be nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

The fighting continued. My father moved out. My father moved back in. My mother called the priest, who offered his prayers and reminded her of the struggles that men face. Then one night the phone rang. When the phone rings in the middle of the night, unless it is a wrong number, it usually isn't positive. I remember hearing my mother's frantic voice. I heard her breathiness, her fear, her deliberation, and then her decision. Anne had stabbed someone in rehab, "some ugly dyke who was coming on to her," she said. My mother had to make a decision: send her to the state mental institution or send her to prison. By the end of that phone call, my mother sent her to the state mental institution.

Anne: It was terrible. Just terrible. First, they'd put you in this cell and they'd tie you up like you were some kind of criminal. And then they would check on you. They would keep the lights on all the time and someone would feed you. Finally, they untied me and let me sit in the corner of the cell for hours. I was so frightened. I was so frightened.

Mother: I made the best decision I could. Really, what would you do if you were in my shoes?

This was the harbinger my father had waited for. The sign to dump my mother and follow his brother's scheme. One night, he came home with a grey complexion. I was about thirteen years old at this point, and he looked at my mother.

Father: I lost everything.

Mother: What do you mean? What are you talking about?

Father: I co-signed bank notes so my brother and I could own the restaurant together.

Mother: You did what?

Father: (sheepishly) I co-signed bank notes for the business.

Mother: But you would have needed my signature as well.

Father: I signed your name.

Mother: What?

Father: I signed your name.

Mother: (pause) You had no right to sign my name.

Father: She's your daughter. This wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for you. She's your daughter. You made her sick.

It took her awhile until she finally understood that he had co-signed her name on documents, turning over anything they had saved or worked for to his brother, who left the state and moved to Florida, setting up a new identity for himself. My parents were responsible for my uncle's restaurant, which was a gambling front. My father cried and begged her forgiveness even though it was "his fault." He left, always for good, he said, but we knew he would return again. He started taking massive pain killers to numb his emotional pain. He called me once and asked to meet me on the top of a local hill where I would go tobogganing with friends. I met him with the toboggan, and he looked at me and hugged me. He was completely drugged up. Thinking that my father being high was amusing, my friends encouraged me to send him down the hill on the toboggan. I sat behind him, and we sailed down the icy hill. I held onto him tightly. The ride was quick and painful. At the end, I looked into his absent eyes. As he stood up, I saw my friends laughing at the top of the hill. They thought it really cool that my drugged-up dad had taken a toboggan ride. I remember how I felt. The shame pulsed through my body like a disease that I would never shake. I loved my father. I missed him. I preferred to see him on fire in a rage than in a drugged-out stupor.

IV.

After Anne moved out of the mental institution, my parents helped her get set up in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn. Having been born and raised in Brooklyn, my mother was its biggest advocate. It made sense for Anne to move to Brooklyn.

Mother: She was born there. So was I. A new start. Maybe she'll meet someone. Maybe she'll make it as a musician. Maybe she'll put this ugly past behind her. Maybe . . .

She moved in a safe apartment next to an older woman named Mrs. M. Mrs. M., greeted her every day with cake and tea. She did her best to nurture my impossible sister who befriended Mrs. M. who continued to feed and mother her until she left Flatbush. In time, she tired of Mrs. M. and moved to a basement apartment in the Flatbush area. Mrs. M. was becoming suspicious of Anne's activities.

While in that apartment, Anne held down several menial jobs, all the while exploring her life as a musician. She met many other musicians and began jamming with them in Washington Square. As an act of diplomacy, my parents decided I should visit Anne in New York. My sister who was two years older was a social isolate, and my younger sister was too young, so I was appointed the family ambassador. I would take a train to Grand Central Station, take the A train to West Fourth Street, and then the F to Flatbush. I was between twelve and fourteen years old, but because I reached the height of five feet seven inches by the time that I was eleven, I passed myself off as being sixteen years old. I would take every penny I was given from Christmas or my birthday or from chores or football pool winnings, and I would buy my sister groceries. It seemed as though she was still on some kind of drug, but I would never tell my parents. She would host some of the most interesting individuals in her small Flatbush apartment—all men—artists, musicians, cab drivers, chess players. At night, she would leave me alone in her apartment, and she would mysteriously disappear. She would return in the morning as I was waking up, and we'd have coffee together.

At one point, a gay male couple moved in next door. Manny and Jose. This was in the late 1960s during Stonewall times. Jose was a quiet masculine sort who passed with ease while Manny was a stereotypical queer—flamboyant and expressive. He wore his hair shoulder length. He was unapologetic about his gayness, explaining that once he had been married to a woman, or as he put it,

Manny: I played the game their way, and then I decided to play it my way. You can only pretend for so long. When you're gay, you know it. And you can't change it.

We liked one another, and he would talk openly about his love for Jose. One night both Anne and Jose disappeared, leaving Manny and me alone in the separate apartments. At 1 a.m., Manny knocked on the door to inquire if I had seen Jose. He was very rattled and asked to come in. We had some coffee, and he told me he was a poet. Immediately, he ran back to his apartment to get some of his poetry. I told him that I was also a poet but was reluctant to share my work. We sat together for many hours as he read his poetry. We didn't discuss our fears about Anne or Jose's whereabouts though that feeling hung in the air. Manny decided to read his poems about earthworms to me.

Manny: We are all earthworms, wanting what each other has, drinking the dry, desolate ground as if it would offer us comfort. We love like earthworms. We want what others have. We want moist and fertile ground. We want to live in homes where we crawl with dignity.

I applauded his work, and he began to cry. He shared his fear that he was not enough of a man for Jose—something which I couldn't grasp at the time, but I listened with as much empathy as I could. Anne and Jose returned in the morning, and I told her that Manny had kept me company. Six months later she called me in Hartford to tell me that Manny had died, drowning in a bathtub. From him, I learned that it was a liability to be gay, sensitive, and to care for others.

V.

When I was about four years old, I developed a severe staph infection in my lungs. I was in Brooklyn at my aunt's house with my mother and sister, around Easter time, when suddenly my mother became alarmed and demanded that my Uncle Bill drive me to a nearby hospital. My mother yelled the entire way, "Faster, faster." My uncle was becoming increasingly agitated. I was rushed into the hospital, swarmed by doctors and nurses, and an oxygen tent was placed over my bed. When the tent didn't work, the doctor consoled my mother, telling her that it was unlikely I would survive the night and if I did, I would have severe brain damage. My mother sobbed and called my father, who drove to New York from our home in Connecticut. He arrived by dawn with my favorite doll, Hedda Get Better, a unique baby doll who looked like she was born in Paul Bunyan's family. She had an enormous head under her plastic bib that could be turned to reflect a sleeping, happy, or measles face. I was happy to see them both.

During that time, a doctor would enter the room every half hour and give me an injection. I took the first twenty-nine injections like a trooper. After

my father left, Anne came to visit me. She must have gotten a ride from my father or taken a train to see me. She arrived with a four-foot orange bear with rubber bands on her feet so that you could slide your feet under hers and dance with her.

Anne: What should we call her?

Narrator: Mr. Orange.

I guess I couldn't imagine dancing with a girl bear so I assigned maleness to her, even though she was unmistakably female. I fell in love with her though I admit we never danced together. That seemed too personal. Anne sat there with me all day and told me stories. We noticed that the wallpaper in the room had designs of many animals. Together we looked at each animal and described what it might be doing there on the wall. Chasing a butterfly. No, collecting water in a bucket. Making a new friend. Anne played my favorite game with me, jungle walking, where we would pretend that we were walking through thick grass and mud while searching for lions and tigers. Just after dinner, the doctor came to give me my last shot, the thirtieth shot. For some reason, I began to cry, and then I began to kick and scream. The doctor scolded me and then asked for assistance. Four members of the medical profession held me down as one of them gave me the final shot. I was furious. Later that year when I started kindergarten, all I could remember was that shot and the betrayal I felt by the doctors and my sister who could not stop it from happening. Now, when I feel overwhelmed by something in my life and I express far too many feelings, I call it the thirtieth shot. I'll take the heat until the thirtieth shot comes around. Then, watch it.

VI.

After Flatbush, Anne moved to the city, to the East Village. When I would visit, we would spend time hanging out and visiting her friends. She would always have a slew of colorful friends like Gabriel, the gentle soul guitar player, and his mother Elaina, who encouraged his music talent. I smoked pot for the first time with them and sang a Billie Holiday musical classic. Being high, they encouraged me to continue singing. Anne always praised any artistic talent I expressed, whether or not I had any. Because my mother never praised me, I was so appreciative of the attention. After visiting one of Anne's friends, we would walk around, barely having enough money for subway fare and a coffee. All of my money would go to her, and she would spend it on food, which she would consume all at once. She had an eating disorder, but no one had a name for it back then. Before Anne was admitted

back into society, after her time in the mental institution, she had to undergo a series of shock treatments.

Anne: Twelve of them. Do you know how it works? I'll tell you. They wire you up to a machine and then you have a convulsion. After the convulsion, you don't remember anything. You don't feel any more pain. Life doesn't hurt anymore. I walked around in a daze for days trying to remember who I was.

Narrator: Sort of like Dad in his boxing days. He'd get hit in the head and forget where he was. Boxing. Shock treatment. Boxing. Shock treatment. Same thing.

Anne: Not really. I didn't have a choice.

Narrator: Neither did he.

Anne: I'm an artist and every time I had shock treatment, I would forget how to play my flute. It would take months to come back to me.

Narrator: So was he.

Anne: No one really understands what it means to be an artist. You are born with a marked soul that tells you that you must do what you were meant to do.

Narrator: And what were you meant to do?

My family legacy—someone will try to locate a way to rid you of your sense of feeling. Punch you. Shock you. Remove that worthless brain from you. Anne's shock treatments allowed her to live in the world as a normal person. She was little more than twenty years old when these treatments were administered to her. I remember seeing her after each treatment. She barely knew anyone and she was very subdued and quiet, a departure from her flamboyant and animated personality.

Anne: What I love about New York is that you see so many colorful people. Superman on roller skates. Hare Krishna members dancing in the street. People celebrating their lives. I was walking down the street and saw a woman dancing with the Hare Krishnas. I immediately gravitate towards her, and it turns out that she's a musician who knows the same producer that is trying to get me a record deal.

As she came back to consciousness, she grieved over the losses she experienced as a musician. She would temporarily forget a composition she had been working on, and she would be distraught about her loss of memory. While working at the New York post office, she would meet and fall in love with two different men, Steve and Neil. She became pregnant with both and had abortions. This would end her relationship with each man. She would put herself back through shock therapy as a way of dealing with her pain. She was out of control and had been diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. This diagnosis would allow her to move into a rent-controlled apartment in SoHo for the rest of her life.

Flatbush was tough. I witnessed someone trying to break in during the early morning hours. Anne was home at the time, and we saw the individuals as they attempted to break the window of her basement apartment. I screamed, and they ran off. Another time, her dog located and consumed a vile of pills. Anne left me behind to clean up and nurture the dog as she vomited repeatedly. Every experience in that Flatbush apartment was peppered with a tragic event that I would accept as a matter of course. My mother was just thrilled that Anne behaved like such a supportive older sister, even though I would tell her about the occurrences in that apartment. She never expressed any concerns about my safety.

As Anne's musical career was beginning to come together in spite of the shock treatments, the psychosis, the bulimia, the suicide threats, the irregular and confusing day-to-day existence, I would make frequent trips during my teen years to visit her in New York. Sometimes, I would stay at my Aunt's house in Brooklyn and venture into the city to be with Anne. My Aunt Gloria's house was a safe haven. She was one of the first women to separate from her alcoholic husband during the mid-sixties.

Gloria: I just couldn't stand to hear him call me a Guinea Bastard one more time. I should have known better. As an Italian woman, never marry someone Irish.

She raised two sons with my grandfather Francesco's assistance. I loved my grandfather Francesco. He was a very small man who read *Il Progresso* every day and studied his lentil soup every night. During the last months of his life, I remember sitting with him and how he looked at me with his sparkling green eyes and told me that he loved me and that he would love me all the days of my life. This was a first for me. His daughter, my mother, despised him because he favored his only son over his three daughters. My mother was void of feeling when her father died, but I sobbed my fourteen-year-old heart out. The times I spent with him are permanently etched in my psyche, and when I find myself in a desperate place, I hear him whispering that he loves me while wearing paisley pajamas and a sweater that hung over his arms. When my grandfather died, his room in my aunt's home was available so I took the opportunity to visit New York with my sisters or my friends. It was a chance to escape the painful fighting between my parents and the inevitable disaster that would befall them: they would stay together.

New York was like a promising friend that had so much to offer. New York was where my mother was born and where she met my father. Connecticut was a suburban nowhere full of people attempting to escape their ethnicities. I had two dear friends with whom I would drive up to New York. We would smoke endless amounts of pot on our way to visit my sister. Anne lived near Chinatown and on one very high visit, we went out for dinner. This was my

first anxiety attack. Suddenly, I insisted we were experiencing an alien invasion. I asked to be removed from the restaurant before we were taken away. My friends thought it was just some bad pot, but I believe it was a combination of seeing my sister, knowing the hopelessness of her situation, and the destruction it had wreaked on my parents' marriage and consequently the lives of my sisters and me. I stood up and ran out of the restaurant. Of course, I would laugh about this with my friends. I had no one to confide in except my sister Anne, who began a litany that would haunt me until my early 30s. She explained that one day, just like her, I would be taken away and forced to live in a mental institution because, like her, I was mentally ill. It would just happen. I needed to accept this. I would have no future. This indoctrination began in her apartment:

Anne: Have you ever heard of Nina Simone? Let me put on Nina Simone first before I tell you what I have to tell you. Just listen to the arrangement in this song. Slow. Makes you feel. The slowness makes you feel. She takes every word and tears your heart out. I'm writing arrangements like this and they're good. They're genius in fact. Slow. Listen carefully. My new producer thinks I'll sell more records than The Temptations. I hope so. I don't want to sell out. There are so few real musicians and I'm one of them. (pause) I met Charlie Parker's wife by accident the other day. We were standing at a bus stop, and she saw that I had my flute, so she began talking to me. Next thing I know she tells me about her husband. I felt really sorry for her when she told me how he died. Real music genius suffers and then just dies. Look at Hendrix. He would have helped me if he didn't die. But I'm gonna make it and when I do, I'll give you anything you want. I'll buy you a zoo, take you around the world. I'll dedicate all my music to you, my sister, the only person who really believed in me. Really, without you, I would have died in the institution. I never would have survived if it hadn't been for you. No matter how bad it got, I always thought of you and I knew that you cared about me. I thought many times that I should kill myself but then, what would happen to you? I thought that you would need me because you understand. You're creative. You're the only other person in the family who's really creative. Creativity is not the blessing people think it is. Creativity is a combination of deep suffering and psychic ability. People who are creative have a direct line to God, but God punishes them. God teaches you to handle it by making you struggle first. That's why we were born into the family we were born into. I mean, Dad's crazy. One of my friends saw his name on a Mafia hit list. People don't realize quite how heavy that is. Your own father could kill you anytime he wants. He tried to kill me once, but I said to him, "you bastard, if you try to kill me, I'll tell everyone you raped me when I was five years old." So, he left me alone for a while. But everywhere I go, I see this guy following me around. I think he's a friend of Dad's. He follows me everywhere I go. I see him from the corner of my eyes. (pause) And then there's

Mom. She's crazy too. She doesn't believe anything anyone tells her except for Dad. She told me when I was a child, she cursed the day I was born because it ruined her relationship with him. She kept telling me that having children was a big mistake and something she wishes she never did. She never wanted any of us. She hates all of us. She does. And that's why it happens. All of a sudden, you're 19 years old and you're in a mental institution because you realize that your mother doesn't love you and your father's trying to kill you. You'll see. It'll happen to you cause you're like me—sensitive, creative, psychic. Just remember what I said. When they're about to give you shock treatment, remember that it happens because you're creative. You're really creative.

Beginning when I was young until I had the sense to leave my sister, I waited for that day when I would, like her, be declared mentally ill, taken off to shock treatment, left to fend for myself without the love or support of anyone.

VII.

About once a month, my sister would surprise us with a phone call declaring her imminent fame. This was often accompanied by her realization that the great artists of all times were speaking through her—Mozart, DaVinci, Rembrandt—they all had a direct line to my sister and they would help her compose music, music that no one would comprehend. And while she would wax endlessly about her brilliant gift and the variety of artists' souls who lived in her small Thompson street apartment, she made friends easily. She would promise them the world, tell them they had gifts that no one but she could see, and take whatever money or gifts they would offer. My mother would often comment on how she was much like my Grandfather Giuseppe, my father's father.

Ensemble Voices: Son of a bitch. Son of a bitch. Son of a bitch.

Giuseppe was sent to America because his well-to-do Sicilian parents could not manage him. Before sending him, they located a woman that was perhaps not marriage material and purchased her for a bargain. Her name was Sebastiana, or Anna, the woman for whom Anne was named. Sebastiana was a sad individual, somehow mentally challenged, which made her a real bargain for my grandfather's family. She was quiet and obedient, moving to America to a flat in Hartford, where she experienced the cold chill of a country that would not protect her. She made pasta fazoli every day since it was cheap, mended the clothes of the nine children she bore, and every night Giuseppe beat her.

Giuseppe: You son of a bitch!!

Giuseppe refused to learn English, couldn't hold down a job, and took to begging individuals for whatever extras they might give him. Two of Sebastiana's children died—one from consumption and the other in a car accident. Her nightly beating by Giuseppe insured that she would never develop the strength to become an American. On her thirtieth wedding anniversary, she had had enough, going in and out of the sanatorium, resulting from her diabetes, so they said. She woke up that morning, told her children that this was the last day of her life, and died that evening. For years we thought it was her great psychic ability, and now we think it must have been suicide. When someone would rather die than get beaten, her suffering has surpassed the point of hellish. My father, as an up-and-coming celebrity boxer, came into his own that night by breaking down his first wall after his mother had passed. His manhood was now complete.

When Giuseppe displayed his unsavory ways to my sister and me, seeing Anne was a welcome relief. She was a Pied Piper, playing games and teaching us to be creative. She spoke to that small child who couldn't escape Giuseppe's miserable hands. I believed in her because she took me out of a world where I had no future and into her world, full of ideas and imagination. She wove a world full of color and asked us to step inside, far away from the sounds and smells of the household fury. My father's temper would burst unexpectedly, leaving me shivering and frightened without any hope that I might have a future. Anne made us all believe that she did have a future. Beginning in my teen years, Anne was always meeting someone who would help her "make it" as a musician. There were stories of record producers and famous celebrities, all of whom understood her musical genius.

Anne: You won't believe it, but guess who I jammed with in Washington Square Park? Dr. John. We had a blast. He's got so much talent. (pause) Guess who I met at the record studio? Jimi Hendrix. He tells me that I do with my flute what he does with his guitar. I work with an electric flute. The first person. If he didn't die, he would have helped me. We really dug each other. (pause) Guess who I met at a concert? Frank Zappa. Cool guy. Really liked him. We jammed awhile, but we really didn't have sound that jived together. (pause) Guess who I met? Charlie Parker's wife. She was sitting on a park bench by herself, and I just had a vibe that she was someone important, so I began talking to her. She tells me that she's going to help me out, connect me with her husband's record producer.

Jimi Hendrix, Frank Zappa, Charlie Parker's wife. I could never tell if these were stories she made up, individuals who looked like celebrities, or

real events. In her version of her life, she was always so close to “making it.” To becoming famous. She would get close or so she’d say, but then, things just wouldn’t turn out her way. The producer didn’t agree with her arrangement of a song, or she didn’t get along with one of the band members. Always something. I did actually accompany her to a record studio where one of her songs called “Hey Boy” was being produced for mass market consumption. She fought with the singer and the contract ended. Anne had no source of income but her SSI, which was based on being declared a paranoid schizophrenic, and what little money my parents could muster up to give her. Every time she would come to Hartford for a visit, she would fight with my parents. After she would leave, my father would say a prayer that she would die and he would no longer be responsible for her.

Father: She’s crazy. She’s crazy like my father.

Voices: What are we going to do with her? She’s crazy. What are we going to do with her? She’s crazy.

Like him, she almost became famous, almost. He knocked out the most famous heavyweight American fighter of all time, and because of World War II, never had the opportunity to make his name. Instead he was the sparring partner, an also ran type of celebrityhood. His siblings thought this was amazing, but they would never know the demons he faced, or that he passed them onto his children. Anne made her way into the office of big record studios but never had that big break. My father wanted that fame for his daughter, and Anne had some type of musical gift but not the belief, nor the confidence, nor the resources, to bring it to fruition. They both courted fame, but in the end, they did not have the ability to stand up and knock out their personal demons. Instead of working with their talents, their demons destroyed them.

VIII.

After her shock treatments, Anne became a very large woman. Size runs in my family. My father used to brag that his mother’s sister was the largest woman in Sicily. For a man, being the biggest is an honor; I think for a woman, it’s a heartache.

Anne would come to visit and, in her desperation, she would eat the contents of my parents’ refrigerator and beg for money. She would sob uncontrollably, and I felt my heart hurting because I didn’t know how I could help her. Once, she fell into a catatonic sobbing while my parents were gone. Our next-door neighbor, a mean follower of Jesus Christ, heard the commotion, came over, and slapped Anne repeatedly across the face until she came out of

this spell. I would feel so helpless and in so much pain for my sister. I listened to her. I gave her everything I had, and I began to understand that I would have a life separate from my family.

I had my first really significant relationships when I was about nineteen years old. Anne would eventually destroy them both and teach me that love was out of my reach. My first relationship was with Karen. Karen and I bonded over Hermann Hesse. We were born one year and one day apart and were drawn to one another through some type of magical/familial force because Karen was also mentally ill—something I wouldn't learn until years later. And then, there was Mark. Mark and I worked at a university library. We bonded over playing chess and became good friends. He and I began to date. It took time for Mark to tell me that he was gay, but he loved me and wanted to continue being "in a relationship." It was very confusing. I was gay. He was gay. And at that time, gay people had some way of finding each other. No rainbow pins or t-shirts, or symbols—just old fashioned eye contact.

By the time I was twenty-two, which was in 1979, I had had enough secrecy with Karen and Mark. Having finished my first year of graduate school, I spent my summer with my Aunt Gloria, who willingly took me in. While in New York, I had a conversation with Karen one evening on the phone. During this conversation, she told me she never wanted to see me again. After hanging up with Karen, I called my sister Anne for her comfort and support.

Anne: You're gay. You're crying because you're gay. You need to accept this. You were probably born like that. It's okay. I'm here to accept you. I love you. I always will.

I hung up the phone and sobbed for hours. Anne was right. I was gay and I had to accept it. Anne, who had lost a considerable amount of weight by then, taught me about becoming a vegetarian and learning how to love and take care of myself. That summer I spent a great deal of time with her. She encouraged me to pursue my love of theatre and to write plays. Also, during summer I wrote my first full length plays—one a musical and the other a play about a baseball player. My sharp focus was still centered around men's lives, though that was soon to change. I opened my heart and wrote effortlessly. That summer, I was unleashed to be exactly who I was and who I was becoming.

I spent most of the summer going to New York museums and digesting my gayness. Anne introduced me to women in her recovery groups, but I was still quite new to my identity and hadn't quite gotten all the rules yet. My parents vacationed in Italy that year, and my father left me with a savings account in the event something might happen to him. When I told Anne

about this, she encouraged me to cash in the money because of my father's reckless behavior.

Anne: He gave you the money because he wanted you to have it. Cash it in and give it to me. OK. Look, there's something I need to tell you. You remember when I told you that story about how I couldn't meet up with you because I felt sick? Well, really what happened is I was coming home from the studio when I saw this guy following me. He yelled my name. So I began to walk faster. Then another guy started walking up the street following me. I hurried to get home. As soon as I got into my apartment, they both shot at my window. I've seen these guys before. They're friends of Dad. He's been trying to kill me for years. The truth is that once he said something to me about you. He hates you. He knows you're gay. He's trying to kill you. If you cash that money, perhaps we can get away, go someplace safe.

Anne began telling me stories about my father and the Mafia. He was, according to her, a hit man who had killed many people. Her stories were compelling and sounded authentic. I was under her influence, not yet consciously aware of her madness. She continued to claim that our father was attempting to murder her. I began to believe her.

That glorious summer, Anne and I would bond deeply as she taught me how to cook with tofu, how to drink Turkish coffee, and how to believe that everything she said was the absolute truth. When you love someone who is crazy and you seek validation from a critical mother who never thought you had any special gifts of your own, you tend to believe the crazy individual is really OK, and her sense of reality becomes your sense of reality. You blame yourself because the reality of the crazy person is always the correct reality. There is no other reality until the day you end up in therapy or with someone level-headed who explains to you that your sense of reality has been skewed by the individuals around you. And when those individuals happen to be family members, your life is tainted like damaged goods that you are trying to salvage to make a pie or build a house. And you might succeed, but you know with all your heart that whatever you have created is tainted and can crash down on your head at any moment.

The stories about my father's attempt to murder my sister increased as the summer grew closer to the end, and my parents returned from their vacation. Anne kept pressuring me to cash in the money, and so I did it for her, for those death threats, to keep her safe. When my father returned and asked for his bank book, I explained that I had given it to Anne for her safekeeping. My father began to cry because he understood Anne's persuasive nature, and while he did nothing to protect me, his rage toward my ignorance was unbearable. I was caught between Anne and my parents, not understanding

that the dynamics between them were part of a puzzle that they all enjoyed. Opportunities for drama and anger were opportunities to be engaged in the life they all hated. Many years later, I was speaking to my youngest sister who lived in New York on the telephone when suddenly she told me that there was a lot of commotion outdoors. She ran to the window to look at the commotion.

Sister 2: I'll call you back. Dad's in the street strangling Anne.

I responded in a matter-of-fact tone. By that time in my life, I had accepted these public outbursts as though they were dishes to be washed.

It was 1979. I never saw Karen that summer. Anne never wrote the music for my musical. Everyone was angry with me. Anne had to give whatever was left of the money back to my father. My parents learned that I was easily persuaded, and worst of all, I was left with the stark hard fact that I was gay, and there was no going back.

IX.

Being gay meant two things: first, I would learn to become my own person and create my own life. Second, I would begin to understand the hold Anne had on me and how she would do anything to make me look like the failure she had been. When I returned to school, I unabashedly identified as gay and became involved with a woman named Jesse.

Jesse began to break down my history and put a mirror up to my face. For a change, I didn't hate what I saw. Jesse would catch Anne in repeated lies, which only fueled Anne's hatred for her. Jesse was a visual artist who saw art as something one dedicates herself to, not as something one uses to explain bad or crazy behavior. She saw my sister for who she was and helped me to see what normal looked like. Normal was talking and listening and expressing feelings and being honest and sharing fears. Normal was seeing yourself through the loving eyes that others saw, not the distorted mirrors of an amusement park. Normal was keeping some semblance of order in your life and treating others with the respect they deserved. Crazy was a series of random acts. Crazy was never knowing what would happen next, ducking around every corner in case a shot was fired. Crazy was being laughed at or poked fun at around others. Crazy was directionless and frightening. Crazy was a cloud of angst and an invisible presence.

As I moved closer to Jesse and further away from Anne, Anne became enraged and sought ways to destroy anything that could possibly evolve into goodness for me. That happened one weekend while I was at my parents'

home, looking for a job while waiting for my lover to finish school. Anne also came for a visit, and when I made Jesse the clear priority, she took aim in front of my mother:

Anne: She's a homosexual. She's a dyke. You think I've caused problems. She's gay. Look at her. Just look at her. You can tell. That's not her friend. It's her lover. She's a dyke.

It was the thirtieth shot. The only time I have ever experienced a moment of blind rage was then. I picked up a small empty dresser and threw it at my sister, knowing full well that she had just severed my ties with the mother who despised me already. My mother's eyes seared through mine. If at that moment she could have killed me, she would have.

Mother: I don't care if you are a murderer or a nun, but not a queer.

A year later, I moved with Jesse to San Francisco. My heart hurt, and leaving my family was excruciating, even though they had cut me out of their lives with ease. Anne became queen of their jungle while I remained the despicable outcast that brought them great shame. Her own heroin addiction, shock treatments, violence, and diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia meant nothing to either of my parents. Only the label of queer mattered.

I vowed never to speak to or see my sister again. She had cast me into exile, which would help me to get on my feet and become a competent and productive member of society, while she would continue to construct herself as the misunderstood artist. She married a man, divorced him, got involved with a woman though she would never admit her own sexual ambiguity. She called me once while I was finishing my doctoral work and reamed me out for being a cold and insensitive individual without any creative impulses.

Twenty-five years after my blind rage, I saw Anne at my father's funeral. We tried to make amends, but the bridge between us had grown too wide as I had become healthier. She had published several music books and recordings which she gave me at the funeral. As she and my mother walked out of the church after the funeral, my mother introduced her to a former work friend as her very talented, creative artist. She introduced me as the daughter that lived far away.

X.

May 19, 2013. My sister Angela calls to tell me that my oldest sister Anne has died.

Me: What happened?

Sister 1: It seems she had a heart attack while in hospice.

Me: Was it related to cancer?

Sister 1: I don't know. It could have been anything.

Me: She's dead?

Sister 1: She's dead. Her girlfriend thinks we suck for not going to see her.

Me: Why? So she could have abused us one more time, and we would be left with only those memories of final abuse. It was a no-win situation. It was always a no-win situation. I loved her.

Sister 1: Me too.

Whenever I think about my sister Anne, I think about how we would laugh at the song, "We Are Family." I think about how she would caress the notes on her flute. I think about how deeply sensitive she was, how she wanted me to love her, and how I did. In the end, I had to leave her because she would not let me become a separate entity. Anne was one of the great loves of my life. Most of all, she taught me that artistry is about searching the contents of your heart and mind until you collect the pieces that are painfully beautiful and unabashedly display them. A couple of years after her death, I looked at a book she gave me after my father's funeral. She had signed it for me. It said, "For Theresa, may you always keep your light. You have greatness. Love, Anna."

XI.

The body is a roadmap of the spirit. Every curve on one's body, every pain, every imperfection, every sculpted moment. It's all there—a roadmap of the spirit. If someone wants to find you, they need to follow the signs on your body which tell them where to go, where the danger lies, where beauty emanates from, how to get inside without destroying themselves. Our bodies tell us the story of our own lives—how we managed, how we triumphed, how we lost, how we learned to survive in a world that hates us. Our bodies say everything. My body tells the story of what it means to love crazy. It holds an enormous amount of grief and happiness, a large amount of danger and destruction, a small amount of resolution. In my childhood, I was captured by a consciousness of mental illness. I learned to live in an unsettling world with a sick, dank feeling. Every day of my life was torturous and hard. I would listen to music and feel the tug of sorrow. My sister was a musician. I would watch performers and think to myself that my father had been a performer. My father and my sister were artists and I, their biographer. What happens to a person who loves crazy?

ENSEMBLE VOICES: She must learn to forgive herself.

Chapter 4

Mexican Love

A Performative Memoir

Adrienne Viramontes

Anytime there is a discussion about what it means to be Mexican, I often hear people proudly talk about how close Mexican families are. People assume that many, if not all Mexicans, come from large, close-knit families, and Mexican family members love each other deeply. It's like the only positive thing the dominant culture affords us, and they act like we prioritize it like no other culture. To me, all of this Mexican family stuff is a myth. I come from a Mexican family that I believe has been disbanding since the moment my grandparents got married. I don't think our disbanding is a bad thing. In fact, it has always felt to me that we were *supposed* to break apart.

It's important to note that my family stories are situated within the context of Mexican culture. It's more than just tacos, tequila, and parties for Cinco de Mayo, which my family has never done and would never do. Mexican culture comes with certain pervasive assumptions. Males are preferred over females, gender *is* morality, and though none of us talk about it, we are all still affected by the Spanish Conquest of 1525. That sounds crazy, but any time you hear members of a culture talk about blood, purity, and marrying your own kind, it's a cry for help. It's a desire to create and maintain the idea that before we were raped and pillaged and religiously oppressed by the Spaniards and Catholicism—that before we were forced to speak Spanish and became Mestiza/Mesitzo (Spanish/European/Indigenous mix), we were a “pure” race or species.

That was never true, and no matter how rigid and demanding we are about with whom we reproduce, it will never be true. But, try telling that to my extremely old-fashioned Mexican grandparents, or anyone else's Mexican grandparents for that matter.

Since I was a kid, I have often felt like I was born into the wrong family. I know it *seems* like that is not possible. Maybe biologically, it isn't. But,

spiritually, I think it's very possible and I think the story of my family is a good example of why sometimes it's better to disband, as opposed to stay together, just because we are expected to. Sometimes there's no other choice but to be absorbed by another group for a greater purpose: survival—or the chance for a new life.

After I began to reflect on my family's history I have come to believe that it is my responsibility to tell the truth about how inadequate the members of my family are and were and give voice to all of the pain and suffering we created and shared with each other. I believe it's time to set the record straight—it's time to tell the truth about what it means to be a part of a Mexican family.

As you read about each of us, the events that have occurred, and how we have dealt with them and each other, maybe you will come to agree with me? At the very least, maybe you will be open to the idea that the concept of *family* is not always an unquestionably good thing. Maybe it's just a coping mechanism that we as humans create and strive to maintain regardless of its negativity, just so that we aren't so afraid of the unknown—so we are not alone.

**LOUIS GONZALEZ [HIS LAST NAME
IS NOT VIRAMONTES, BUT YOU'LL
SEE HOW HE IS ONE OF US]**

I had lived with my grandparents for about a year. One morning during breakfast, my grandmother said to me, "Your Uncle Louie is coming to visit this weekend." I looked at her with some confusion, because before that morning, I didn't have an uncle named Louie, which prompted my response, "What Uncle Louie?"

As a nine-year-old kid, I didn't know much about my grandmother or grandfather. They were the only stable part of my life now that my mother was gone. They took me into their home and were excruciatingly overprotective of me—so much so that I often felt suffocated. But I knew they loved me even though the way they showed it was rigid and challenging. Other than that, all I knew was that my grandmother worked at Caterpillar and enjoyed the second shift, and my grandfather was retired from the steel mills and enjoyed his time at home gardening, landscaping, building cute lawn benches around trees, and trying to teach me various skills, so that when I grew up, I could be independent. They were always harping on me about the importance of being self-sufficient.

But with this mysterious visit from Uncle Louie approaching, I would learn that my grandmother was married to another man before my grandfather. At sixteen years old, her life at home with her mother was so unhappy that she

accepted the offer of marriage from the first man who expressed interest. His name was Frank. They had a son—Louis, whom we now called *Louie* and that's who was coming to visit. He and his dog Sargent would arrive in Chillicothe, Illinois in a couple of days.

I wasn't sure how to feel about this. I had come from a relatively small family. My mom had two sisters and three brothers, and I had cousins, but since her death they were not really in my life anymore. Until that day, I thought that my dad had one brother, Armando, whom we called Army, and whom I had seen maybe twice in my life, but now there was Louie as well.

Louie arrived and exchanged pleasantries with my grandparents. He looked just like my dad, but with a completely different disposition. The Viramontes clan had interestingly shaped heads. My grandfather had a long and rectangular-shaped head, which was distinctly flat on top—the result of being kicked in the head by a horse when he was young. My grandmother had a very round face/head. When a Viramontes offspring was young and thin, our heads looked like my grandfather's. After we had put on a few extra pounds, our faces were as round and as large as beach balls. Uncle Louie had a very round face and kind of an angry look to him.

He only stayed a couple of days, but it was long enough for Sargent, the beautiful Shepherd, to mangle the ironwork on the garage door and for Louie to ask for some much-needed money. After they left, I would hear my grandparents talk about how they knew he had called because he needed money, and that hopefully they wouldn't hear from him again anytime soon.

That visit occurred in 1979. I would not see Louie again until the 1990s. Over the years I would hear bizarre stories about him. Early in his life he was married to a woman named Loudelle. She was large. Louie had a thing for large women, and as I grew older and more educated, I would come to understand why.

According to my grandmother and father, from whom I've heard this story Louie attempted to cut the brake line to Loudelle's car. Mechanics and police had agreed that something fishy had occurred underneath the hood, which had caused an accident. I can still remember all of us sitting at the kitchen table and laughing as my dad recounted the story. It is not a good sign when your own mother and half-brother are willing to believe that you are capable of premeditated murder, and the rest of us think it's so funny that we can't stop laughing about it.

Louie was one of those people who had a hard time maintaining a job. He had deep insecurities and a pervasive chip on his shoulder. The world was always against him even though he was convinced he was always more accurate, more intelligent, more deserving than everyone else. He was difficult to be around. When my grandfather offered to marry my grandmother, he also offered to adopt Louie as his own son. But because of the psychological

remnants of the Conquest, my grandmother's mother, named Mary, decided that she wanted to raise Louie as her own. That's how special males are in the culture. They're treated like oceanfront property for which people are willing to pay dearly.

So, like any good Mexican woman, my grandmother was forced to submit to her mother and gave up her first son to be raised by his grandmother, whom I will call a Mexican fanatic. By *fanatic*, I mean that if you are a Mexican girl, the fanatics teach you how to care for Mexican men—because it's your moral purpose—your honor—your prison sentence for being a girl. And, if you are a Mexican boy, the fanatics believe that you are so special that you get treated like a king, although that usually includes the idea that you need care because you can't possibly do anything for yourself except be macho and work hard, but other than labor, you are incapable of much else. It's a weird gender dynamic.

To be blunt, Louie was abandoned, not by choice, but by force. But, none of the context matters, because when you are abandoned, you don't give a shit why. You are overwhelmed by loss and that loss shapes your entire worldview. You spend your life trying to communicate your worth—mostly trying to convince yourself that you are worth anything. Which is why I suspect that when I saw him again in the 1990s, he sat at my grandmother's kitchen table and easily made conversation about how much he admired Adolph Hitler and how much he hated Black people. As I sat listening to him ramble on about a bunch of nonsense, I realized that he was trying to tell my grandmother how much he hated her for giving him to her mother, so she could marry my grandfather and then have two more sons that seemed to matter much more than he.

My grandmother was not easily baited though, and when Louie realized that he was not agitating her in the way he had hoped, he continued to push the emotionally uncomfortable envelope. In front of my father and me, Louie began to ask my grandmother about her sexual practices with my grandfather. It was weird, uncomfortable, and sort of like watching someone assault her. She was mortified. Luckily, my dad stepped in and ended this avenue of conversation.

A few months later, we received the news from an old family friend that Louie was dead. He was a type 2 diabetic and didn't take very good care of himself. At the time, my dad was identified as his only living relative and became responsible for clearing out his Chicago apartment, where he discovered a large collection of pornography featuring women of size. Every once in a while, my dad and his wife would talk about how weird Louie was because of the kinds of things they found in his belongings. They would laugh because they knew someone who owned porn and wasn't that weird and funny?

But I truly believe that as a five or six year old, Louie woke up one day and was informed by his mother or his grandmother the fanatic, that as of that day he was going to live with his grandmother while his mother started a new life without him. Because I know my family, there was no reason given, no justification, and no discussion about the emotional baggage that this change of address could have on such a young boy. I believe he lived within eye-view of his mother and the family she built with her new husband.

God, that's gotta hurt.

Deep.

Maybe that's why he enjoyed torturing people and tried to take as much as he could from practically everyone. Maybe that's why he seemed to fetishize large women—they probably gave him physical and emotional comfort that he had yearned for his entire life. I sometimes wonder if he knew he had been traumatized. Was he even aware of the intense loss he had suffered? Did verbally abusing his family members make him feel better at all? Was there ever a day in his life where he felt unconditionally loved and accepted by his mother? Or, by anyone?

Louie was raised by my great grandmother, the fanatic. From all of the stories I've heard, they did not get along so well. She always wanted him to behave differently, to do better. Nothing was every quite good enough for her. My grandmother used to tell me that when she and my grandfather decided to get married, her mother became very excited about the idea of adopting Louie. The fanatic only had a daughter (my grandmother). If she could take Louie and raise him as her own, she would finally have a son. And, as all good Mexican girls know, having a son would be a dream come true.

ARMANDO VIRAMONTES (1951–1987)

Armando's story is difficult for me to tell. I've only interacted with him twice and by *interact*, I mean that I stood around a bunch of adults and watched them interact with him. I might have been nine or ten years old. Uncle Army was weird. He was a loner, or so we thought. The first time I remember seeing him—actually meeting him—was shortly after my mom died.

After I had moved into my grandparents' house, Uncle Army came to visit. He didn't stay long. No Viramontes offspring ever visits for very long, especially when spending time with my grandparents. The two of them were a force—sometimes for good and sometimes pure destruction. My grandparents as distinct individuals had a host of devastating life events. My grandfather was orphaned by the age of five during the Mexican Revolution and had been taking care of himself and surviving in Mexico and then the United States ever since. He was completely uneducated and yet taught himself how

to speak and write in English, how to compute basic mathematics, how to invest in real estate and turn a profit and use the banking system to grow his money. To say he was a hard worker was and is a complete understatement. He worked in the coke plant at Inland Steel for thirty-seven years. The only time he took a sick day was the day he retired. If you calculate that, it means that he worked 13,505 days (many double shifts) without ever calling in sick. Those kinds of people don't exist anymore.

My grandmother was born in Mexico as well but was brought to the United States as a baby. She was raised in California and found her way to the Midwest by the time she was a teenager. She achieved an eighth grade education and like a lot of women in the 1930s, she got married young and was disappointed by men at almost every level of development. Her father had abandoned her and her mother simply because he could. Her first husband was physically and emotionally abusive. My grandfather had been no angel and had quite a colorful history that unfolded throughout their sixty-year marriage.

These two survived the Great Depression. They survived great social prejudice against Mexicans, originating from local and national newspapers, local citizens, and practically every kind of social institution you can imagine. Somehow, they managed to save enough money so that they could afford to buy houses and cars with cash and find ways to make more money to place them securely within a middle-class tax bracket. As my grandfather would regularly remind me, "Hijita, it's not what you make; it's what you save." They were the kinds of people whom, when you complained that something wasn't going your way, they would look at you and laugh because based on their experience in the world, you had absolutely nothing to complain about. My grandparents ALWAYS got the job done. They ALWAYS accomplished their goals with no complaints and no excuses. The two of them as a team could be a no-win nightmare.

My Uncle Army was born with a hole in his heart. At the age of five, he underwent heart surgery to repair the defect. This medical condition required him to always be careful with his health and it made my grandmother treat him like he was made of glass. In her eyes, he could shatter at any moment. One false move and he could be gone. When he showed up to visit us in the late 1970s, he arrived weighing at least 350 lbs. Like the shape of our heads, the Viramontes clan was *meaty*. We were not thin, small-boned people, and we were not very fat. We were strong and looked like we could carry very heavy things. But my uncle was clearly not in control of his eating.

When Army entered our house, my grandmother immediately began to cry. He was huge and did not look very healthy. Instead of crying, my grandfather took one look at him and just shook his head in utter disappointment. I just watched. You could cut the tension with a knife.

I never had a conversation with Uncle Army. He was not a person you talked with. His energy warned you not to approach him. He was like an open wound that you repeatedly tried to clean and heal but to no avail. In old war movies, they sometimes show a man who needs a limb amputated. These movies always portray how difficult it was on the front lines of war to avoid gangrene. Uncle Army had a gangrenous energy. You knew that parts of him were dying. You did your best to make light conversation with him because deep down you knew there was nothing that could be done. It seemed like he wanted to die and none of us would ever know why.

But my grandparents didn't believe in that. They didn't understand the concept of giving up. If you had the opportunity to give up, you had choices—options.

My grandparents never had the privilege of having choices. It was do or die—and they were doers. If losing weight would ensure better health and longevity, then you bit the bullet and lost weight. Or you changed your diet. Or, you exercised more, ate less, or both. Or you made a decision and then committed to it. It was a simple as $1 + 2 = 3$. That's how easy things could be.

My grandfather was the kind of man who had smoked since he was a child. When my grandmother suffered a stroke and complained that the smell of cigarette smoke nauseated her, my grandfather quit. One day he was a smoker for over sixty years, and the next day he was no longer a smoker. He never complained. Didn't need a patch. Didn't need to chew gum or eat carrot sticks or use any of the tricks that people need to employ in order to quit. He just didn't do that anymore. That's how infuriating it was to live with them sometimes.

The last thing I remember about my uncle's visit was right before he left. We were sitting at the kitchen table eating a meal. My grandmother would not stop talking about how my uncle needed to lose weight. So she turned to the only motivator my grandparents understood: money. She offered him \$1,000 if he lost 100 pounds.

He kindly thanked her for the offer. Avoided talking about it any further and left.

I would not see him again for a few years.

My uncle had saved some money and had asked my grandfather to keep it in the bank for him and take care of it. Giving money to my grandfather for safekeeping was one of the reasons for his original visit to Chillicothe. My grandfather was good at growing money and had helped his son accumulate over \$30,000 in just a few years. The amount was growing, and my grandfather wanted to give his son his money back because he did not want to be responsible for it in case Army needed it. After all, Army was a Chicago cab driver with no health insurance. He could not have made much money, and 30K was a good-sized nest egg for a cab driver—for anyone in the 1980s.

Army was the first person in my family to attend college. He went to Purdue University in Lafayette, Indiana, after high school. He lasted there one year and did not return for his sophomore year. No one knows why. Sometimes I wonder if anyone ever asked him about dropping out of college. Did my grandparents ever ask him what he wanted to do with his life? Did he have a dream job? Did he have any aspirations at all?

My grandparents decided they would contact him so they could give him his money back. But his phone number was disconnected. They tried over and over to contact him through phone and mail, through any contacts possible. Even as a child, it was obvious to me that he did not want my grandparents to find him. He tried to disappear. He made every effort to escape us.

A short while later my grandmother was able to locate him through some old family friends. My grandparents seemed hell-bent on seeing him. So we ambushed him.

We drove from Chillicothe to the city of Chicago. We arrived at a man's house that I did not recognize, though my grandparents seemed to know him. I can't remember his name. He was large and interacted with us while he lay in a recliner. He explained to my grandparents that he had called Army and told him his parents were waiting for him. About thirty minutes later, Army arrived. When he walked in it was quite a sight.

He was dressed all in black and wore a long, leather coat that extended to his knees. He was huge. He had to weigh close to 400 pounds. His hair was so long it produced tight, shiny, banana curls. It was like Shirley Temple had become a monster. He was surprised to see that his parents had found him. It was obvious in his speech and manner that he was nervous. I watched the entire exchange thankful to be a kid that no one was paying any attention to. They talked for a few minutes and then Army left in a hurry.

None of us would ever see him alive again. He would never reclaim his money.

He would never lose weight. And he would never give my grandmother the satisfaction of paying him to behave the way she wanted.

One day in 1987, my dad received a phone call from the Chicago Coroner's office. My Uncle Army was dead. They found my dad's contact information in Army's wallet. It was the only evidence that Army had any family. He would have to identify his body and clean out his Chicago apartment and cab. When my dad returned, he gave a full report of the situation. To this day, this is all we know about the life of Armando Viramontes.

Armando died in bed in his apartment. It took five Chicago firefighters to carry his body down the flights of stairs to his building. He weighed well over 500 pounds.

His body had become so big, his penis had inverted. My dad specifically mentioned this detail. It's been thirty-two years since his death, and I wonder

if that detail is more significant than we originally thought? Armando's cab was a mess. It was filled with old, empty cans of Chef Boyardee Ravioli, Beefaroni, and SpaghettiOs. There were old pizza boxes too. Everything in that car was evidence of something he had consumed.

His apartment was the same. His bed sheets were blood stained. My dad believed that for some reason his legs seemed to regularly bleed. My dad threw away most everything he found in that apartment except one interesting item. He found an art-exhibition book that was autographed by one of the artists. It's a book of pictures of various places within the city of Chicago. Within each picture of a famous place or statue, there is a naked or practically naked woman in the scene.

It's not pornographic. It's more like performance art. You know that it's performance art when there's a naked body either on stage, or in the photo, with no explanation for the relevance of nakedness. The naked woman is one of the artists. Her name is Michelle Fitzsimmons, and she likes fur coats, and yes, there is a pun intended. The other artist, Diane Schmidt, is the one who took the photos. The book is autographed to my uncle. Somehow, though he seemed to hoard food and live in squalor, he had established a relationship with this woman, who wrote in this book:

Dear Armando,

I Love You!

Diane Schmidt [By her name she drew a picture of a dog with a lot of sharp teeth]

Michelle Fitzsimmons, the naked model, also wrote to him, "Any friend of Diane's is a friend of mine. Thanks for coming." The book that Armando received was #62 out of 5,000 and was dated 11/25/85. It was two years before he would die alone and bloody in his apartment.

Did he meet her in his cab? Was she a regular fare? Did he drive them around Chicago as they were taking naked pictures? Or, does Diane Schmidt write that she loves everyone who buys her postmodern art books?

I have so many unanswered questions. Before I wrote this narrative, I looked her up and wrote to her. She never responded. Why did Armando desperately want to separate himself from his parents and his brother? Did he feel somehow abandoned by his parents for their inability to accept him for who he was?

In our family pictures, as a kid and a young man, he smiled sometimes. I have photos of him with his arm around my mother, smiling. But in many other photos I've seen of him, he is not smiling. The scenes I've witnessed of him, he never smiled.

Given his weight issues and what is commonly known these days about the relationship between obesity and sexual assault, was he victimized by

someone in or close to our family? They say there is a molester in every family. I know this is true because I've experienced it.

Was he gay? Was he transgender? I'm running out of questions and have no answers—not even any hints. As I write this narrative, I don't remember my uncle at my mom's funeral. If I'm correct, and he was not there, then why? Was he so busy driving a cab in a city only thirty miles away that he could not take a few hours to attend my mother's wake and funeral? They had a good relationship from what I can discern from old stories and pictures. But old stories and pictures are not always truthful, just as appearance is not reality.

MY FATHER [NAME OMITTED TO PROTECT ME FROM LEGAL PROBLEMS] (1940–)

My dad was born shortly before the beginning of World War II. When he was a young, impressionable kid, he was completely surrounded by war and political propaganda response to our battles overseas with just about everyone. One of my dad's first jobs was working for a funeral parlor. The Rendina family owned a funeral home in Gary, Indiana. My dad worked there for several years when he was young. He helped them to do everything related to death and dying. He collected bodies, assisted in wakes, funerals, and cremations. Everyone in my family who has died has been buried at the Rendina Funeral Home. It is a place we have often gathered to laugh, cry, and commune as a family.

This is where my dad learned to transport the dead, just like Charon, the ferryman in Greek mythology, who is responsible for transporting the newly dead across the river Styx to the underworld. Just like Charon, my dad is a dependable worker, who never causes trouble and is mostly silent.

My mom and dad met at the Rendina Funeral Home. My mother's mother (Mary) died, and during her wake and funeral, somehow between her and my father, sparks flew. How does that even happen? How, while your dead mother lies in her casket for public viewing, do you have the ability to feel a romantic attraction for anyone?

All I know is that my mom, Mercedes, was nine years his senior and they began to date, which wasn't normal in the 1960s. I know none of the details of their courtship. When my mom and dad and I were a family, I don't remember them ever telling me stories about anything related to their relationship.

They got married on July 15, 1965, and I was born three years later. Based on the pictures, and the stories my grandmother used to tell me, there were over 400 guests at their wedding. Most of them came because of my mom. She used to work in Gary, politics. She worked for the comptroller and the

mayor. She knew practically everyone in the city of Gary. If you needed a job, you called my mom. If you needed help with your taxes, you called my mom. If you needed something done, my mom either did it, or knew whom to call to get it done. She was resourceful, connected, and smart as a whip. If she could have afforded to go to college, I think she would have ended up in law school. She could accomplish anything.

To this day, I wonder why she married my dad. My dad was and is the epitome of Mexican Male Privilege (capital letters used on purpose). He was the golden child, or so I thought. Spoiled—whatever he wanted they gave him. My great-grandmother, the fanatic, adored him. He seemed to move through life without a care in the world—and why would he? Mexican women did everything for him as a child. My mom would do everything for him as an adult.

When my dad tried working at the steel mill for a few years, he decided he couldn't stand that kind of work because it was so depressing. So, my mom had him fill out an application to be a Gary firefighter. When he signed the application, she took the document and placed it right on the top of the pile of everyone else's so he would be chosen next. And chosen he was.

He got a job that paid well, had a great schedule and a great pension. Because he worked 24 hours on and 48 hours off, he had the time to get a second job. My parents each had two jobs, it seemed. My dad drove the fire engine and worked at the public library. I used to go with him when I was a kid. I loved going to the library and riding in the truck. We would drive around to other public libraries and collect books. I got to be around books of all kinds, and I loved them.

My mom worked in politics and did taxes on the side. There were always Mexican people knocking on our front door and dropping off stacks of papers so that my mom could make sense of them. Early on when we were a normal family, my dad and I would go golfing. He also taught me how to shoot bow and arrow. These are the most normal things he and I have ever done together. I think about those times every once in a while, when I wonder what my life would have been like had my mother survived cancer.

One of my most significant memories of my dad was the time when I was lying on the couch. He came and sat next to me. I was four or five years old. I was a dumb kid, and I playfully placed one of my feet at the side of his cheek and smiled at him. He looked at me sideways and told me to stop doing that. The look on his face gave me a feeling in my stomach. I silently said to myself, "He doesn't like me." I still get that feeling in my stomach as an adult. It's intuition and it's never wrong. I believe that was the day our relationship began to die.

One night my mom accompanied me on a trip to the Museum of Science and Industry. I was a Brownie, and our troop took a field trip to Chicago that

night. We were riding on the coal car exhibit, and as we began to descend into the mine, she began to sweat profusely. As I sat across from her, I could not take my eyes off of her wet skin. Something was wrong, but I would not know the cause for some time.

Days or weeks later, I awoke in the middle of the night to hear my mom in great distress. When I walked out of my bedroom and into our living room, she was bent over holding on to her legs and my dad was rubbing her back trying to comfort her.

The next day she went to the doctor. When they came home, I was informed that she had to go to a special place called Mayo Clinic in Minnesota.

When my mom went to Minnesota to begin chemotherapy, I stayed with my grandparents. After the first round, she was in remission. My grandparents drove me home, and when we pulled into the driveway, I ran into the house to see her. She was fine. Everything was good and life went back to normal.

Two years later, cancer came back. She went for chemotherapy and again, I stayed with my grandparents. When her treatment ended, they drove me home again. It was the day before Christmas. We pulled into the driveway and I ran into the house to see my mom. Just like last time, I was expecting her to be in remission. I ran into the house and into the living room. She was lying on our couch, sweating like she was that night in the coalmine exhibit at the museum. When I reached her on the couch, I stood in front of her and I *saw* her. Somehow, I knew she was dying. I screamed. I began to wail.

I think my grandmother took me into another room. That was the last interaction I would ever have with my mother. I have felt guilty about it ever since. As they wheeled her out of our house on a stretcher Christmas night, I just watched, feeling helpless.

My dad went to the hospital with her while my grandparents and I stayed home. A few hours later, the phone rang and when my grandmother answered it, I knew my mom was dead. After her funeral, my bags were packed and I was going to Chillicothe to live with my grandparents because my dad, according to my grandmother, could not take care of me because of his work schedule and my medical needs.

When we got to their house, I walked in, sat on the couch, and asked my grandmother, "Am I yours now?" In some ways, I've asked that question to anyone and everyone with whom I thought I might belong. My dad would visit me every other weekend.

Since his parents were sort of acting like my parents now, in my mind, he seemed more like a brother than a dad. I called him "Dad." But I'm not really sure what he actually was to me anymore. The whole concept of family was destroyed.

My grandmother seemed to love telling me that I was now an orphan. As soon as she would say it aloud, she would begin to cry. She seemed much

more upset about it than I was. I felt like she would say really sad stuff to me to get me to cry. She was always asking me if I missed my mom—as if she died decades before and it was just a memory now. But it had only been days and weeks. I could feel her trying to make me have a breakdown. But I would not submit.

“Do you miss your mother?”

I hated the sound of her voice as she asked that question. Her tone indicated that I was not performing correctly as a motherless child. I wasn’t grieving enough to satisfy her. I would look at her and silently scream:

She is the only normal one out of all of you. I have no siblings, no one to talk to, nowhere to hide, no knowledge about what to do, and a part of me is dead too!

(angrily) “What do you mean, ‘Do I miss my mother?’”

Can’t you see? Why are you asking me questions when you should be holding me in your arms and comforting me? Is it because you already know how doomed my future is?

- That I will be alone for the rest of my life?
- That I will sleep with just about anybody because I don’t know my own worth?
- That it will be hard for me to trust anyone?
- That I will hide from everyone because the uncertainty is overwhelming?
- That it’s safer for me to live in my own thoughts than in reality?

Or is it because you suffer from undiagnosed depression and you know of no other way to try to relieve your own suffering? That feeling in my stomach told me: “She wants you to cry with her. She wants to feel sad with you.” But for some reason, I always believed that my grandmother was not sad about the same things I was and if I allowed myself to cry, to show what I was really feeling, that I would allow her to use me like a rag to wipe her own tears away at her discretion.

I *was* sad, but I wasn’t going to let her persuade me that these interactions were about me. They were about her and her own suffering. In my mind, I would comfort myself by thinking that I would wait for someone to care for me. I would wait for someone to see how much pain I was in. I would wait for someone to see me, to find me. When you’re eight, it doesn’t occur to you that it is possible to wait for something your whole life that might not occur.

I hid my feelings of sorrow and despair so that it would stop my grandmother from asking me leading questions that would allow her to express her own pain.

That's when I learned that everyone, to some degree or another, is in a state of suffering.

Suffering is unique in some ways. We all do it differently, for different reasons, but there's only one way for it to be expressed.

"You can't do it through me, Grandma. You can't do it *through* others. You have to find your own way. If you don't, you will always suffer."

"Like you did."

I like how this story about my dad has almost nothing to do with my dad. He was born and had a job or two. That's all he has accomplished in this story, which is based on actual experience. This is all that the culture expects him to do: work, exist, and be taken care of by women. He and my grandfather are the kind of men who somehow exist as characters with no lines in the weekly melodrama of your choice.

Welcome to Mexican Male Privilege. When your life is valued more than the rest of us because you happen to be born with a penis (of likely insignificant size).

THE SECOND MRS. VIRAMONTES [THE BITCH MY DAD MARRIED AFTER MY MOM DIED]

In my head, I've been writing this story for thirty-eight years. It's not a secret that I don't like this character, but I promise you that I will be as fair as I can with her, even though she would not afford me the same kindness or ethical consideration.

In some ways, M has a difficult and complicated story with the Viramontes family. My mom, dad, and I lived in a neighborhood of Gary, called Aetna. M and her children lived in that community as well. So we all knew each other. I've been told that my mom never liked her, which is odd because my mom liked just about everyone.

I was five years old the first time I met her. It was in the movie theatre parking lot. She was with her twin daughters, who would, some years later, become my stepsisters. I was with my dad. He had taken me to see *Pinocchio*. We had to leave early because when the whale swallowed Pinocchio, I lost it. I've never seen the end and will never see it. I've hated Disney ever since.

M was the nurse on duty the night my mom died. She had been her nurse in the past, and my aunts, Mary and Theresa, would tell my grandmother that when M would check in on my mom and then leave the room, my mom would look at them and say, "She's waiting for me to die because that woman wants my husband."

It only took five years for M to "land" my dad. "Way to commit, M. Gotta give you credit for a job well done."

As earlier stated, my dad would drive to Chillicothe, to visit me every other weekend. One weekend, he brought her. As a child, the appearance of a new person who comes to visit you is a game changer. You know it deep down. You're gonna have to start thinking about what you say, how you say it, and who's the boss. Learning about the chain of command sucks because it confirms there's a new regime.

Here's where I felt kind of bad for M. My aunts had told my grandparents the stories about how my mom felt about her. That was a devastating blow. When my grandma didn't like you, or was mad at you, she had this method of erasing you from reality by the way she looked at you. I think it's a Mexican woman thing because I've heard other similar stories about "old Mexican" power. To say she was cold to M was an understatement. But M had a strong constitution. Over the many years I've spent time with her, she was the kind of woman who was going to have a husband and a life if it was the last thing she did. And, if she had to put up with an old Mexican woman who happened to be her meal ticket's mother, then so be it.

M had grown up really poor. She was one of ten children. She likely had to struggle for everything. And then she hooked up with my dad and had to be nice to me. I was an only child whose grandparents and former parents gave me everything I ever wanted. When my mom, dad, and I would go somewhere in the car, I rode in the backseat sitting atop the armrest so that I could have every possible view for the ride. My other grandfather (Jesus) nicknamed me "La Princesa," because that's either how I was treated, or that's how I believed I *should* be treated.

"I seem like a bit of an asshole, don't I?"

I was, I think. From what I remember about myself, I was one of those kids who said what she thought without any filter. One of the weird conditions that surround only children, at least this is my experience, is that you exist with adults from the time you can talk and observe things. By the time you are five, you expect to be a part of every conversation and be aware of all of the details. It was common for me to be a part of the major decisions that affected my family. They were always asking me what I thought about this or that, and I appreciated being included. You get used to it, fast. You're like the Doogie Houser of your home; people are always asking your brilliant opinion of any and everything.

M put up a good effort to like me. Though honestly, I'm sure it was extremely difficult. After what I just wrote about myself, I would totally hate me too. Then, of course, they got married. One day when my dad came to visit me alone, we were in the car, and he informed me that he was going to marry her. I told him I was happy for him, which was a lie, but what could I have really said? It felt like my family situation was going to drastically change again unless my dad would let me live with my grandparents.

I'm not sure why, but my dad insisted that I move in with him and M, and go back to Northwest Indiana. In protest, I wrote a letter to everyone in the family and made the argument that even though I did not agree with my grandparents' worldview, I was better off with them. I was also a type 1 diabetic, and the insurance and medical costs I incurred were potentially burdensome. I thought it was a brilliant argument for a thirteen-year-old.

As it happened, the days of being an only child who had a voice in the family decisions was over. I would pack my bags and move to Merrillville, Indiana. At that point, I didn't hate M. I wanted to believe that she could love me as one of her own. I wanted to call her "Mom" and feel like it was real. I had all the hope in the world and looked forward to having siblings.

When my grandmother heard that my dad would remarry, she immediately began to tell me those old Mexican stories about stepmothers and how she would feed her children meat and vegetables but give the stepchild only broth. The big payoff of the story was that the stepmother was dumb and didn't know that most, if not all, of the nutrients were in the broth. At the end of the story, the-step child was the strongest, fittest, and in the end, luckiest of them all.

I hated that story. I hated that my grandmother told it to me before I moved, over and over again. I used to tell her that M wasn't going to be like that—she was nice and that she would love me as if she were my mother. Without fail, my grandmother would begin to perform her sarcastic laugh that indicated that I was a fool—a simpleton who was incapable of understanding anything. She would walk away saying, "Sure she will."

From what I remember, my grandma did fight to try to keep me. But maybe in the end she thought that since I had a father, I should follow the chain of command and be with him.

Suffice it to say, my parents were stricter than my grandparents. There were different rules for M's daughters who were older and still in high school than the rules by which I had to abide. That was the general environment of my home life: rigid unfairness. But M was quite a character. Here are some highlights of my best and most memorable interactions with her.

She would brag about being able to tell when her daughters lost their virginity. I think she really believed it, too. So, in the eighth grade I went over to a boy's house and had sex. It wasn't bad for the first time. Now I didn't specifically go to his house to do this. He and I seemed to like each other a lot and one day it just happened. I was so excited when it was over that I jumped on my bike and rode home as quickly as I could. I walked into the house, looked right at her, and smiled. She didn't have a clue.

Sometimes my stepsisters would take my clothing without asking. I did the same to them, but every once in a while, my grandmother and I would go shopping, and she would buy me all kinds of new things to wear, which M

resented. If my stepsisters borrowed something before I had gotten to wear it first, it made me mad. One day, when I discovered something new was missing, I complained to M. In my mind, I wasn't complaining to her about her daughters, I was complaining as someone who was an equal part of the whole family. I was secretly hoping that she would take my side, understand why I was irritated, and finally show me that she cared for me like she cared for her own. Instead, she was so determined to make sure her daughters were protected, that she went in their room to find the missing item, then snuck it into one of my drawers (which I had already looked in at least three times). She called me to my room, opened up the drawer and grabbed the missing item. She explained that Randy the Dog must have grabbed it and playfully placed it into my drawer somehow; pushing it to the bottom so I couldn't find it.

"Randy the Dog? Really?"

That day, I felt bad for her, that she felt the need to stoop to that level to "win" the argument. She and my grandmother had a lot more in common than they knew. Each one of them would never tell anyone in their lives: "You were right. I was wrong. I'm sorry."

If you are a person who loves and needs to be right—righter than everyone else—just know that each time you don't admit when you are wrong, you break the hearts of all who love you. Letting people in is so much more valuable than accuracy, correctness, or being right about something that probably won't matter in five to ten years.

By the way, Randy the Dog hated M too. As a nurse she would get up early to work the first shift at the hospital. She would dress in whites and then come downstairs to put her shoes on. Sometimes Randy the Dog would do his business right at the bottom of the stairs. Each time he did, M would step right on top of it, which would seep through her pristine white stockings. (pregnant pause) Even after all of these years, I still enjoy the memories. Randy bit everyone in the family except me. He was the kind of dog you'd find hanging around the train tracks with hoboes. Randy kicked ass and took names, and I loved him.

But the best M story I have to tell is also the hardest for me. I still don't want to believe it's true, but the voice in my stomach is never wrong. After I graduated high school, I was a hairdresser for four years. A guidance counselor told me I wasn't "college material," and I believed him, so I spent four years cutting and coloring hair, and waxing women's vaginas.

One day, it felt like I was coming down with the flu, so I left work early and went home to bed. A few days later I would end up in my third diabetic coma. I spent a week in the hospital recovering. While I lay in bed, I began to realize that I was going to need to get a job that offered me health insurance. I didn't want to have to marry a man to get it, so the only option I could see was going to college.

Ten years after my coma, I was having a mundane conversation with M. Somehow the topic of diabetic comas came up and we began to reflect on my last hospital experience. She was unguarded and enjoying herself in the nostalgia when she said, "I remember when you came home from work that day. You took a big shot of insulin, and I knew something was wrong because you took a huge dose."

I have no recollection of this big shot because I was slipping into the coma. I would not go to the hospital for two to three more days. All I remember is that I woke up one night and could barely breathe. My lungs hurt because I believe I was at the stage of organ-shut down. That's when M and my dad finally took me to the emergency room.

When I think about this event, I always wonder why they didn't take me the day of the big shot? When it was so obvious to M, the nurse, that I was sick.

"You brag all of the time about the doctors that you know on a first-name basis. Why didn't you call one?"

"Why did you wait? Did you think I was going to get better naturally? Why does my father believe that you actually care about me? Why is he letting you do this to me?"

"Were you hoping I would die? Is that how much you hate me?"

I used to watch M use a Q-Tip to clean her daughters' ears. Ear cleaning is a soothing, comforting experience, especially when someone else holds the Q-Tip. Her daughters used to practically coo. I really believed that one day she would ask if I wanted my ears cleaned. I truly believed that one day I would get to lie on the couch with my head on her lap, while she showed me that she loved me like her own daughters.

But some things are just not meant to be: like a stepmother's love and dying from a coma at age twenty-one.

The one positive thing about M is that I believe she and my dad make a good couple. She cares for him the way that all the other Latin women did, but they seem to get along nicely, and I believe they love each other. Even though I kind of hate her, I'm happy that my dad found someone he can share his life with. And, he loves her children too (except for M's son who tried to sexually assault me when I was a teenager. But they still go golfing together sometimes). My dad seems to belong with her family more than he ever wanted to belong to his own.

That's the one thing he and I have in common. In fact, being abandoned, wanting to belong to a different family, or just *not wanting to belong to our family at all*, is the common denominator of all of us: Louis, Army, my dad, and me.

And instead of being honest about it, or walking away from family, which is what all of us truly wanted, Louis became a monster, whom none of us

wanted to associate with; Army became a hermit, who tried to escape us. My dad stuck it out as long as he could but would not speak with my grandparents sometimes for years at a time because of the disgruntled attitude they had about M and how I was treated by her and her family. And me, who during therapy, was advised by my counselor that it would be best for my mental health to *leave my family*, which I would not do until after the death of my grandmother. When the signs are so obvious, why is it easier to ignore them than be honest about them?

When I think about how much my dad loves his current wife and her family, it makes sense. M has three daughters who all have children, which makes my dad a grandfather, which is something I will never give him. I'm too afraid that I will die young and my child will be affected, like I was, by some other woman. Or, that because I was raised by my grandmother, I will treat my daughter (or god forbid, my son) with only conditional love.

A few years ago, I called my dad on Christmas to say, "Hello and happy holidays." M thought I should have called earlier, and she was pissed off at me, about which she informed me over the phone. I was in my forties and this woman thought she could still yell at me and tell me what to do. She's mean sometimes and has an unending thirst for power. I told my dad that night that I was done with her and have never spoken to her again. I barely speak with my dad now. What's there to say?

"Why do you seem to like everyone else more than me?"

"Why don't you ever ask me about my life?"

"Why do we seem to never have anything in common?"

"Why do I feel like I was born into this family accidentally or by mistake?"

I'm still not married. I still don't want kids. I still don't believe in marriage, and I still feel like a burden to you and your precious family. What's there to say?

For the last five years or more, he has sent me birthday and Christmas cards. For a while, I don't think he even signed his own name. At the end of each card it said, "Love, Dad." After so many of these meaningless cards, I began to hope he would stop sending me anything at all.

I hope that if my dad gets sick or is at the end of his life, M will let me know. A few months ago, I wondered if he was still alive, and so I Googled his obituary, just in case. I hope that she finds it in her brittle heart to inform me if my father dies. With some people you never know. I guess my grandmother was right about her.

I ended up sipping the broth and became a strong, independent woman who went on to earn a PhD, have a good career, and lead an unconventional life. The only goal I've ever had was to have health insurance. I now have that and so much more, that it's an embarrassment of riches.

I have multiple families in multiple locations throughout the United States. Throughout my life there have been families and people who've taken me in and cared for me better than my own family ever could. Some of them made it possible for me to go to graduate school and are the reason I have the career that I do.

Some of them have taken me in after twenty-seven years of being absent and cared for me after I escaped from an abusive relationship. They've been the families of boyfriends they always wanted me to marry; they've been college professors who thought I actually had potential. They've been coworkers and friends. They have loved and cared for me and shown me what good, functional families look and feel like—that genuine love is possible.

Let's face it; my grandparents didn't know how to show love, or create a healthy, loving family relationship, probably because they had no idea what that was, or why it might be important. My grandfather was an orphan, and my grandmother was just plain old abused.

They didn't know how to love themselves, so why should I be surprised at the limited ways in which they tried to show me love? It occurs to me now that they might not have had the capacity or vulnerability to love. They taught me what they knew: how to survive. I'm grateful for everything they helped me to get through. It's not their fault. They did the best job they could. I have to say that if it weren't for the way they raised me, to be fiercely independent and self-sufficient, I would not be as successful or resilient as I am today.

This kind of family dynamic is what I know to be Mexican love—the belief that if you can harden or callous your children (especially girls) the inescapable suffering they will experience will be manageable. We learn to be hopeless early on so not to be disappointed as we realize the darkness of our lives to come.

My grandmother kind of beat me down by telling me ugly hard truths about myself and my life for years and years until I got so fed up with it, I asked her why.

“Why do you tell me these things?”

And she explained, “Because if I can prepare you first, before the real enemies attack you, then you will be strong enough to fight back, to defend yourself. You will be strong enough to laugh in the face of adversity.”

“Because *hijita*, you can't trust anyone. People will hurt you and stab you in the back, and the only one you can count on is yourself.”

And in my case, she was right about everything.

ADRIENNE MARIE VIRAMONTES (1968–)

Shortly after I began to write this performative memoir, I received a Christmas card from my dad. This time the writing in the card was

unmistakably his. He wanted to see me. He wanted to straighten things out. Since I'm at the age where it is time to make peace because death could be around the corner for any of us, I decided that it was time to see and talk with him because as he wrote in the Christmas card, "We're gonna straighten things out."

I spoke with him on the phone a few days later and we agreed that I would drive to Indiana from Wisconsin to see the family for Christmas Eve. My dad said that everyone was really excited to see me. And as usual, I believed him. (So far, every time I have re-read this sentence, I laugh out loud.)

When I arrived at his house, we hugged (and yes, I hugged M. too. I'm not unreasonable—most of the time). I learned that my dad's health was not good. He has a bone disease (Paget's) that has affected his right arm and will spread to other parts of his body, as it gets worse. I hoped it would explain why, for all of those years, he did not sign the Christmas and birthday cards that he sent me, but then I remembered he is left-handed. He had open-heart surgery and a few other issues. Because of his condition, he recently had to have a brain scan, where he learned for the first time that half of his brain was irreversibly damaged at a very young age.

When he told me this, he began to reflect on a story his grandmother told him a long time ago. When he was a year old, he fell down a flight of stairs, bouncing all the way down, bruising every part of his body, including his head. If it weren't for my great grandmother (the fanatic) who caught him in her arms, before he crashed onto the concrete, he would have likely been brain damaged to the point of decreasing average function and limited mobility.

He said he wished his mother (my grandmother) was alive so she could know the real reason why he flunked third and fourth grade. It wasn't because he was dumb. It was because he suffered from brain damage that limited his capacity to accomplish elementary school tasks. I think he was relieved to know that it was not his fault. I think this knowledge released him from the family narrative that framed him as a "disappointment." I think he has hated himself for that long because he thought he was stupid and worthless even though he was a successful business owner for many years. I also think my grandfather is the one who threw him down the stairs that fateful day. I know we might call that abuse. But in my Mexican family, anything that men do is tolerated and unchallenged, and this is often how Mexican women and children experience love.

I know, not all Mexican families are like mine, right?

My dad is not a great communicator. For most of my life, I have avoided trying to talk with him seriously about anything because he just won't engage. He just shuts down. It used to infuriate me because if I had a problem with

something he thought or did, and I wanted to have a serious discussion with him about it, he would just bow his head and say, “I don’t know.”

I used to blame my grandmother for his inability to deal with conflict. She was a force to be reckoned with. She could corner you in an argument where you would wish and pray just to be a little wrong. I thought she had told him “the truth” a few too many times and it had permanently emasculated him. That was her specialty: Psychic castration. She could render you lifeless with her words and used the truth as her weapon.

Like all bad communicators, my dad failed to mention that although they had invited me to the family’s Christmas Eve gathering, the Sunday I arrived at his house was NOT THAT DAY. I would re-visit the Tuesday that followed (because I had to since I agreed to attend to “work things out”). This kind of unnecessary confusion drives me crazy because it reflects a lack of clear thought about how to arrange a simple meeting, especially when I’m driving two hours each way. But why would anyone think that asking me about my needs mattered? But that’s brain damage. It trumps any anger and frustration. It smiles at me when I remember all of the times that my dad neglected me. I’m sure he didn’t purposefully mean to neglect me, right? It’s the brain damage—the thing that makes him innocent and faultless. It’s the thing that makes it “impolite” to demand accountability.

I returned Tuesday, which was actually Christmas Eve. I was nervous because I had not seen them in a decade or so. My stepsisters, their husbands, and their mostly adult children, who barely know me, were there. I was polite, pleasant, and even amiable. I made sure not to talk about my job or my life, which no one asked about anyway.

While I sat and watched my family exist in the basement of my dad’s house, I was able to see clearly what the situation was, and had always been, since I moved in with them as a thirteen-year-old. They’re breeders. I’m not trying to insult them, only to describe the cultural practices and attitudes of my family and why I felt that I have never belonged with them—any of them. When they gather together, they discuss things that relate to buying items, usually expensive ones, like homes, cars, trucks, and recreational vehicles both large and small. These items reflect their success at maintaining a job. Once they land a partner and can begin to reproduce not because creating a child with someone you love is a magical and hopeful act, at least in the beginning, but because that’s what one does in this United States, Capitalistic, working-class life in “the Region” of Northwest Indiana.

We work,
we drink,
we fuck,
and we buy or consume more things.

As I sat at the table making polite conversation with my dad and stepfamily, it became clear to me just how differently I view the world than my family does. The moment I stepped back into my father's and stepmother's house, I ceased to exist as my genuine self. They informed me all about their health issues and what everyone in the family was doing with their lives, and I listened like a good little soldier. No one asked me how my health was even though I've been a type 1 diabetic for forty-seven years. No one asked me if I still identified as a lesbian, even though I ended my decade-long, abusive, same-sex relationship two years before. After that relationship, I wrote a three-page, single-spaced letter to my father, explaining that a former boyfriend and his family took care of me after I found the courage to leave her. To this day, he has yet to ask me if I am okay.

No one ever asked me about any one of the details I included in the three-page, single-spaced letter that I shared with him. My dad apparently was not even a bit interested whether I was seeing anyone or involved with anyone currently.

And, even though I wrote him a Christmas letter just a few weeks before this encounter, sharing that I had bought a house and was very happy. He did not ask about it, or ask to see if I had any pictures. I felt bad because I practically forced them to view some of the pictures of the rooms I was most proud of. To be fair, he did ask what kind of car I drove. "Toyota Rav4, blue, 2014."

When you're not married and you don't have kids, and you are willing to live life outside of the conventions that crush the souls of most humans, a lot of people don't know what to ask you. They don't know how to make conversation about a life they do not understand. Call me an unapologetic spinster, but I'm trying to be generous and fair. I'm trying to make sense of why they don't want to know me—why they have never wanted to know me.

This is my actual family. Aren't they supposed to be somewhat interested in my life? Is this how my dad thought we were going to "work things out?" That I would come back into their realm and be ignored just like old times? A funny thing happened after I ceased contact with my father and his family many years before. I got over it. I moved beyond their limited view of me.

While celebrating Christmas with these people, I realized that my job as a daughter was finished. I had made peace with my father—made him feel better by being there so he could put his arm around me and tell me that he loved me.

Right before the family began to open their presents, I announced politely that I should leave because it was a two-hour drive home. I escaped in the nick of time.

When I got home that night my dad called me to make sure I got home okay. Silently, I thought about all of the times in the last ten years that I had

driven home at a late hour, and no one had given a damn whether I was dead or alive.

Before I said goodnight to him, I said, "Dad, you never have to worry about me because I have a great life. I'm okay." That was my way of saying that I made something out of my life in spite of him and his lovely wife, in spite of my mother's death, in spite of my grandmother convincing me that I was not a *real* Mexican because I could not perform the way Mexican girls are supposed to. He still calls to remind me that he loves me. I respond in kind because it's the right thing to do.

Now that he has to consider his mortality, he has decided to show me that he cares. Death is not a final end. It is a continuum that forces us to face new beginnings.

The night my mother died was my shot at an un-prescribed Mexican life. Her death meant that I didn't have to marry some Mexican guy in order to keep the bloodline pure. Her death meant that I didn't have to cook, clean, have babies, and serve others' needs before my own, because that was what we believed that Mexican girls are for. Her death meant that I needed to see the world with very different lenses so that I would learn to question everything that has ever been forced upon me as a Mexican girl.

As long as I can remember, when the topic of Mexican culture would come up in my house, my grandmother would look me directly in the eyes, hold out her right arm, and say, in a threatening-sounding voice, "If I knew which veins the Spanish blood coursed through, I would cut them with a knife and let the blood drip to the ground."

That's how much she hated herself. That's how much her mother, the fanatic, taught her to hate herself—to hate the Spanish parts of her blood because 500 years before, when we were Indians, they penetrated us, they violated us, they conquered us, and then oppressed us. They changed us forever and we've been trying to clean and purify ourselves ever since.

That's probably why my grandmother thought it was her duty to teach me how to be a good Mexican girl. That's probably why men are so valued in our culture—because when your tribe is being slaughtered and most of the men are lying dead, their wives and the rest of the women will be used to create a new race. That catastrophic, violent, pervasive event was our birth. We were never a pure race like all of my grandmothers used to claim. So, no matter whom we've had sex with, it will not make our children better, purer, or more authentic than any other Mexican. Spanish was not our original language and I yearn for the day when I meet another Mexican person who doesn't snub me after learning I don't speak Spanish and I'm not sorry about it.

We have hated ourselves for 500 years because we are no longer the Indians we used to be. When will enough be enough? When will we finally

realize that the mixed heritage that constitutes us is what is most valuable? That we are made to be different in order to express different views of the world, different ways to live—to express hope for new directions and carve out new horizons.

Go ahead. Call me a traitor. That is how we've all been trained to respond because we are convinced that if we embrace anything new, we will lose the little bit of fictitious purity that we have been trying to retain for 500 years. If we become too educated and make our parents or grandparents feel inadequate, we are accused of cultural treason. If we don't get married and don't have kids, we are not acknowledged as authentic adults. If we identify as gay or lesbian, we bring shame to our family and the culture as a whole—even though men can sleep with any and everything—and they do so without apology. If we don't speak Spanish, we are treated as second-class citizens among other second-class citizens even though Spanish is not our original language. And if we leave our family—no matter how much they don't know how to love us, respect us, treat us like we matter even a little bit, we are called *malinchistas*—the worst of the worst. We are just like her: La Malinche, the fourteen-year old girl, who aided Hernan Cortes in the Conquest. We blame a teenage girl for our impure existence. Mexican people were born because of the conquest. Through violence and death, we emerged. We are a product of Spanish, Indian, and North American ancestry. This is not our fault—it is our birthright.

I believe that death is the impetus for change and new beginnings. Death has given me more to be grateful for than I can recount in this memoir. Everything I have accomplished in my life is because my mother died. Everything I was motivated to learn about myself, my culture, my light and my dark is because I was a motherless child. At first, her death was a destructive force that hindered my growth in every way, which, in turn, evolved into the need to educate myself in order to survive. It's the cycle of life and death, and how one responds to it and copes with it, that determines your character and integrity.

I believe my Mexican family is an example of how so many of us are still reacting and coping with the destructive, oppressive remnants of the Spanish Conquest. My Mexican family was like a military unit that went AWOL. The expectation to just do what you're told because the authority said so is absurd. My family is a microcosm of Mexican culture—full of rigid, nonnegotiable rules that make it impossible for people to feel vulnerable without guilt and shame. It makes it impossible to love ourselves and others because we inherently believe that the “other” is the enemy.

The war is over. It's been over for a long time. We've wasted so much time and energy responding to an invisible enemy that lives within our psyche. We were so committed to annihilating the enemy that we destroyed everyone and

almost everything in its paranoid wake. My family taught me what it means to be Mexican—to be resilient, resourceful, determined, and capable. Born from the ashes of death and destruction, each day I rise like the Phoenix in a new world, transformed with the desire to live as I please, seek joy and happiness, and be honest about how I feel, which for some reason is the most difficult thing for many of us to do.

My grandma used to tell me that I should always tell the truth—no matter how bad or how ugly it was. I told the truth about my Mexican family because they could not. They did not have the strength to do so. In order to be able to speak truth to the people you love, you have to love yourself first. And, no one in my family knew how to do that.

It's taken fifty years for me to learn why I'm valuable; that it's okay to be the way that I am—to believe the things that I sense and interpret. How I unfolded through time was meant to be. There are no mistakes, no coincidences. The Mexican that I am is the Mexican that I was meant to be, and I contribute to our diverse and deeply misunderstood culture whether you approve or not.

Chapter 5

Making Sense, Making Peace

An Analysis of “Loving Crazy” as a Performative Memoir

Theresa Carilli

Performance Studies, unlike most factions of the Communication discipline, allows scholars to examine daily performances as a study of communication. Furthermore, it has taken the lead in accepting creative and performative renderings of human interactions. In this book, we offer the performative memoir as a tool for creating and analyzing human interactions, all for the sake of achieving an authentic lens through which each of us describes our specific lived experiences and how those experiences shape our relationships with others. Through a performative study of interactions, we are developing a new methodology of inquiry—one that acknowledges the personal and unabashedly allows writers and performers not to distance themselves from their study. To abide by the methodological paradigms presented to us in the Communication discipline, we have often been asked to remove ourselves from our understanding of human interactions. The introduction of auto-ethnography into the discipline has promoted and encouraged new ways to examine our lived experience, and thus build and create new methodologies for the study of human communication.

With “Loving Crazy,” I authored a performative text that delves into the relationship with my mentally ill sister. This relationship with my sister has been the guiding force in all my relationships and is core to my understanding of other individuals. Growing up with a mentally ill, creatively inclined sister is that point of contact which influences my perceptions of others. I see my life through her life. I see my body through her body. “Loving Crazy” is an attempt to understand who I’ve become and how I identify myself. It is as much a story about my sister as it is about my own identity.

While I have written and published many narratives, I have waited my entire life to write this performative memoir. It is not only deeply personal. It contains the secrets of my life that I have carried with me, like surgical scars which never leave me. First, I must acknowledge that while it is becoming less taboo to discuss mental illness, there is still fear about the subject. Some believe that mental illness is contagious while many others are attempting to give mental illness a face. In the course of writing this piece, my primary objective was to provide insight into a relationship where one of the individuals is mentally ill, and the other individual tries to make sense out of the world of the mentally ill individual. Making sense of another's world requires a special ability to translate all actions and words. When applying the rules and norms we use for everyday interactions, the deviations we experience with someone who has mental illness destroys and undermines our sense of reality. Those individuals live in a special world and might give us glimpses of that world—their imaginings, their struggles, their sensitive interpretations of perception, but ultimately they live in a world that makes them outsiders and unlikely to participate, except momentarily, in our world.

I loved my sister, and I tried to communicate with her for many years, but after constant failure, I no longer even attempted to communicate with her. Since she died, I have had to find ways to make peace with this failure to communicate. That is why I call this chapter, “Making Sense, Making Peace” because these two phrases appropriately capture my relationship with her. This performative memoir contains selected experiences that I believe demonstrate the relationship I had with my sister. Now, I would like to apply the criteria for performative memoir to show how I created a “live” embodied memoir to best explore this relationship. I find this genre most compatible as a way to explain the relationship I had with my sister. There are a number of reasons for this:

1. *The performative memoir is oral in nature.*

Unlike memoir, performative memoir was written to be performed and read out loud in front of an audience—whether that audience is assembled in a theatrical venue or in one's living room. When the performer takes on the words of a performative memoir and performs them out loud, the performer creates a living entity because those words not only tell a story, they convey feeling. One method of conveying feelings is to write short, manageable sentences for the audience to absorb. Borrowing from the work of performative ethnographers (Conquergood, Schechner, Turner), embodiment passes from the performer to the audience. In this way, the lived self can share a vision that invites an engagement of all the senses. “Loving Crazy” is written

in short sentences, so that audience members can ingest the words to create a meaning and understanding of, in this case, a relationship between two individuals.

I learned to love crazy. Loving crazy means that you adopt a willingness to love without boundaries. The individuals you love operate in their own world of madness . . . You love them. You hope they love you.

Sentence brevity creates an opportunity to build to a crescendo in a rhythmic pattern. Throughout this piece, I use short sentences to create a rhythm and a feeling of fast-paced breathing:

My sister Angela calls to tell me that my oldest sister Anne has died. I sit in a chair for twenty minutes and try not to think about it. I am sad and relieved and ecstatic and sick and terrified. This is my grandmother's birthday.

2. *The performative memoir takes us through memorable traumatic experiences that depict an unusual personal and psychological journey.*

There are few experiences we have throughout our lives that are unique and traumatic. Identifying those experiences is key prior to reflecting and writing about it. These unique and traumatic experiences affect perception. They deeply affect the way we interact in the world. Often, individuals will locate some way to purge those experiences. Reflecting upon and writing about these experiences assists in the ability to come to terms or make peace with the experiences. When writing about traumatic experiences, there are several identifiable pieces—often chapters to understanding those experiences. In the case of “Loving Crazy,” it was a lifetime of experiences that allowed me to explore the pieces and how they affected my worldview. For example, when Anne returns home while attending music college, I share one of the first pieces of my overall understanding of her:

She has been attending Berklee Music college in Boston, coming back to my hometown, Hartford, periodically to share her compositions in the middle of the night. She knocks on the living room window.

ANNE: I hitched back. I have something great that you will really love. Something I wrote.

She is wearing her black dashiki, emblematic of hippiedom. She smells like incense and mold from her basement apartment. I wake up and listen to her brilliant music. She plays her flute as though it is an electric guitar. She combines

this sound with jazz and soul and declares herself a genius. At nine years old, I'm happy to see her. I smile at her and fall asleep on the sofa while she rants well into the night. But then, my parents notice something about her. She is unkempt and seemingly high and yellow and very sick. She argues with my parents. The next day she shows me the source of their anger—the tracks that run up and down her arm from heroin. “Let’s take a ride,” she says. I will go anywhere with her. I love her. She is my older sister, and she recognizes in me a budding artist—sensitive, difficult, mad like her. We go to the train station and park by the bookie/newsstands section.

ANNE: This is what I need you to do. Sit here in the car. In an hour, call the house. Here is ten cents. Tell them you're at the train station. Tell them to come and get you. I'm going back to Boston, but don't tell them. OK. No matter what—don't tell them where I'm going.

She is my sister. I love her. I will do anything for her. I sit quietly in the car, watching men pull up in front of one of the many bookie/newsstands. They place bets with their favorite bookie, hand him money, and drive off. I know this because my father was a huge gambler. He taught me how to bet on football pools when I was young. My father had been a professional boxer and a football player, and he taught me everything he knew about football. By the time I was 12 years old, I had made over \$500 betting on teams within the point spread. Then his favorite bookie friend would call me from prison every Saturday to get my sure bet. He would bet large and give me a cut. I learned how to bet based on whether or not the team was playing at home, injuries, weather, how much scoring they had done over the last few games, and just a gut sense of who might win. I developed an early understanding of statistics from these bets. I made enough money to purchase my first car from those bets.

This experience is pivotal for me as I begin to understand my sister's mental illness. I am very young and willing to suspend any judgement of her as Anne leaves me in the car alone. Much like the earlier passage in this memoir where I discuss the moment I learn of Anne's death, the narrative takes a tangential turn. These tangential turns are a method of emotionally dealing with the trauma of the experience. When I learn of Anne's death, I meander into a story about my grandmother's death. When I am abandoned by my sister, I meander into musings about gambling. Tangential turns are coping mechanisms that assist us in accepting a situation.

3. The performative memoir contains cultural information.

All texts are written from one's identity location. To understand the perspective of the memoir, the audience member must understand the identity of the narrator. In "Loving Crazy," I integrate my lived knowledge as a working-class Italian/American lesbian to contextualize the memoir. At the very beginning, I discuss my Sicilian grandmother whom I had never met. Throughout the memoir, I demonstrate my loyalty and connection to my sister as part of the collectivist Italian/American value system. When I describe my father's gambling habits, along with his allegiance to his brother, I am demonstrating an Italian/American working-class value system:

This was the harbinger my father had waited for. The sign to dump my mother and follow his brother's scheme. One night, he came home with a grey complexion. I was about 13 years old at this point, and he looked at my mother.

Father: I lost everything.

Mother: What do you mean? What are you talking about?

Father: I co-signed bank notes so my brother and I could own the restaurant together.

Mother: You did what?

Father: (sheepishly) I co-signed bank notes for the business.

Mother: But you would have needed my signature as well.

Father: I signed your name.

Mother: What?

Father: I signed your name.

Mother: (pause) You had no right to sign my name.

Father: She's your daughter. This wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for you. She's your daughter. You made her sick.

It took her awhile until she finally understood that he had co-signed her name on documents, turning over anything they had saved or worked for to his brother, who left the state and moved to Florida, setting up a new identity for himself. My parents were responsible for my uncle's restaurant, which was a gambling front. My father cried and begged her forgiveness even though it was "her fault." He left, always for good, he said, but we knew he would return again. He started taking massive pain killers to numb his emotional pain. He called me once and asked to meet me on the top of a local hill where I would go tobogganing with friends. I met him with the toboggan, and he looked at me and hugged me. He was completely drugged up. Thinking that my father being high was amusing, my friends encouraged me to send him down the hill on the toboggan. I sat behind him, and we sailed down the icy hill. I held onto him tightly. The ride was quick and painful. At the end, I looked into his absent eyes. As he stood up, I saw my friends laughing at the top of the hill. They thought

it really cool that my drugged-up dad had taken a toboggan ride. I remember how I felt. The shame pulsed through my body like a disease that I would never shake. I loved my father. I missed him. I preferred to see him on fire in a rage than in a drugged-out stupor.

I introduce my lesbian awakening in this memoir through an experience I have with Anne's New York neighbors, Manny and Jose:

At one point, a gay male couple moved in next door. Manny and Jose. This was in the late 1960s during Stonewall times. Jose was a quiet masculine sort who passed with ease while Manny was a stereotypical queer—flamboyant and expressive. He wore his hair shoulder length. He was unapologetic about his gayness, explaining that once he had been married to a woman or as he puts it.

Manny: I played the game their way, and then I decided to play it my way. You can only pretend for so long. When you're gay, you know it. And you can't change it.

We liked one another, and he would talk openly about his love for Jose. One night both Anne and Jose disappeared, leaving Manny and me alone in the separate apartments. At 1am, Manny knocked on the door to inquire if I had seen Jose. He was very rattled and asked to come in. We had some coffee, and he told me he was a poet. Immediately, he ran back to his apartment to get some of his poetry. I told him that I was also a poet but was reluctant to share my work. We sat together for many hours as he read his poetry. We didn't discuss our fears about Anne or Jose's whereabouts though that feeling hung in the air. Manny decided to read his poems about earthworms to me.

Manny: We are all earthworms, wanting what each other has, drinking the dry, desolate ground as if it would offer us comfort. We love like earthworms. We want what others have. We want moist and fertile ground. We want to live in homes where we crawl with dignity.

I applauded his work, and he began to cry. He shared his fear that he was not enough of a man for Jose—something which I couldn't grasp at the time, but I listened with as much empathy as I could. Anne and Jose returned in the morning, and I told her that Manny had kept me company. Six months later she called me in Hartford to tell me that Manny had died, drowning in a bathtub. From him, I learned that it was a liability to be gay, sensitive, and to care for others.

Culture is in all of our ideas and the ways in which we represent those ideas. In every performative memoir, audience members learn about cultural

identity. Often that cultural identity is implicit so that it becomes challenging to see markers of culture.

4. *The performative memoir delves into human nature and emotion in a candid and authentic way, placing the audience in a world they must confront if they wish to obtain any significant knowledge about the human condition.*

When I juxtapose my father's and sister's experiences with brain alterations, "Loving Crazy" becomes the vehicle through which I tell about one of the most painful realizations of my life. As a champion boxer, my father was brain damaged. As a mentally ill individual, my sister was brain altered through shock treatments. My intimate connection with my father and sister gives me a privileged place where I embody their mental struggles:

Before Anne was admitted back into society, after her time in the mental institution, she had to undergo a series of shock treatments.

Anne: Twelve of them. Do you know how it works? I'll tell you. They wire you up to a machine and then you have a convulsion. After the convulsion, you don't remember anything. You don't feel any more pain. Life doesn't hurt anymore. I walked around in a daze for days trying to remember who I was.

Narrator: Sort of like Dad in his boxing days. He'd get hit in the head and forget where he was. Boxing. Shock treatment. Boxing. Shock treatment. Same thing.

Anne: Not really. I didn't have a choice.

Narrator: Neither did he.

Anne: I'm an artist and every time I had shock treatment, I would forget how to play my flute. It would take months to come back to me.

Narrator: So was he.

Anne: No one really understands what it means to be an artist. You are born with a marked soul that tells you that you must do what you were meant to do.

Narrator: And what were you meant to do?

My family legacy—someone will try to locate a way to rid you of your sense of feeling. Punch you. Shock you. Remove that worthless brain from you. Anne's shock treatments allowed her to live in the world as a normal person. She was little more than 20 years old when these treatments were administered to her. I remember seeing her after each treatment. She barely knew anyone and she was very subdued and quiet, a departure from her flamboyant and animated personality.

Anne: What I love about New York is that you see so many colorful people. Superman on roller skates. Hare Krishna members dancing in the street. People

celebrating their lives. I was walking down the street and saw a woman dancing with the Hare Krishnas. I immediately gravitate towards her, and it turns out that she's a musician who knows the same producer that is trying to get me a record deal.

As she came back to consciousness, she grieved over the losses she experienced as a musician. She would temporarily forget a composition she had been working on, and she would be distraught about her loss of memory. While working at the New York post office, she would meet and fall in love with two different men, Steve and Neil. She became pregnant with both and had abortions. This would end her relationship with each man. She would put herself back through shock therapy as a way of dealing with her pain. She was out of control and had been diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. This diagnosis would allow her to move into a rent-controlled apartment in SoHo for the rest of her life.

In this passage, I am expressing how it feels to love individuals whose minds have been permanently altered. I am asking the audience to imagine what it would be like to love individuals who are brain damaged, and how such a realization affects perception. To understand "crazy" in this context implies that the audience member lives in the worlds of individuals whose minds have been modified. By so doing, I am asking the audience to take a dangerous foray into the imagination so they might understand what it means to be "crazy."

5. The performative memoir can contain a combination of narrative and ethnodrama.

While performative memoir shares narrative experiences, some of these narrative experiences can be emphasized or explored through dialogue. Dialogue gives a new dimension to the narrative. I integrate scenes between the individuals when the narrative does not suffice and cannot adequately express my intentions. In the beginning of "Loving Crazy," I create a brief scene which demonstrates a range of viewpoints about my sister told from her perspective, my parents' perspective and my perspective:

Anne: Creative genius thrives when raised in an environment of neurosis and violence.

Father: I just wish she would die. I wish she would die.

Mother: I never knew what it meant to raise someone so gifted.

Narrator: Creative genius thrives when raised in an environment of neurosis and violence.

Scenes give texture to narrative. Narrative tells while dialogue shows. There are feelings embedded in dialogue that are nuanced. Nuanced information allows audience members to interpret the lines so that they become personally meaningful. While narrative contains the story line and the structure, dialogue captures the feeling of the performative memoir.

6. *The performative memoir strives to teach about the contours of an experience from a performative position.*

Performance is a live activity. While the performer might be recounting past events, she is telling them in the present. That sense of presence or the living embodiment of the text creates an interactive component with audience members. Through the performer, audience members experience the memoir. When Anne tells me that my history will resemble hers and that I am destined to be mentally ill because of our creative natures, the audience is invited into a world where they are asked to experience someone telling them what their future holds.

Anne: Have you ever heard of Nina Simone? Let me put on Nina Simone first before I tell you what I have to tell you. Just listen to the arrangement in this song. Slow. Makes you feel. The slowness makes you feel. She takes every word and tears your heart out. I'm writing arrangements like this and they're good. They're genius in fact. Slow. Listen carefully. My new producer thinks I'll sell more records than The Temptations. I hope so. I don't want to sell out. There are so few real musicians and I'm one of them. (pause) I met Charlie Parker's wife by accident the other day. We were standing at a bus stop, and she saw that I had my flute, so she began talking to me. Next thing I know she tells me about her husband. I felt really sorry for her when she told me how he died. Real music genius suffers and then just dies. Look at Hendrix. He would have helped me if he didn't die. But I'm gonna make it and when I do, I'll give you anything you want. I'll buy you a zoo, take you around the world. I'll dedicate all my music to you, my sister, the only person who really believed in me. Really, without you, I would have died in the institution. I never would have survived if it hadn't been for you. No matter how bad it got, I always thought of you and I knew that you cared about me. I thought many times that I should kill myself but then, what would happen to you? I thought that you would need me because you understand. You're creative. You're the only other person in the family who's really creative. Creativity is not the blessing people think it is. Creativity is a combination of deep suffering and psychic ability. People who are creative have a direct line to God, but God punishes them. God teaches you to handle it by making you struggle first. That's why we were born into the family we were born into. I mean, Dad's crazy. One of

my friends saw his name on a Mafia hit list. People don't realize quite how heavy that is. Your own father could kill you anytime he wants. He tried to kill me once, but I said to him, "you bastard, if you try to kill me, I'll tell everyone you raped me when I was five years old." So, he left me alone for a while. But everywhere I go, I see this guy following me around. I think he's a friend of Dad's. He follows me everywhere I go. I see him from the corner of my eyes. (pause) And then there's Mom. She's crazy too. She doesn't believe anything anyone tells her except for Dad. She told me when I was a child, she cursed the day I born because it ruined her relationship with him. She kept telling me that having children was a big mistake and something she wishes she never did. She never wanted any of us. She hates all of us. She does. And that's why it happens. All of a sudden, you're 19 years old and you're in a mental institution because you realize that your mother doesn't love you and your father's trying to kill you. You'll see. It'll happen to you cause you're like me—sensitive, creative, psychic. Just remember what I said. When they're about to give you shock treatment, remember that it happens because you're creative. You're really creative.

Beginning when I was young until I had the sense to leave my sister, I waited for that day when I would, like her, be declared mentally ill, taken off to shock treatment, left to fend for myself without the love or support of anyone.

7. The performative memoir contains snippets of experience that are lyrical and poetic, and sometimes repetitive and hypnotic.

Throughout this memoir, I use repetition as an incantation, a prayer for understanding. Repetition has a poetic and hypnotic quality. Repetition allows the writer to employ different statements using a sentence that is structured similarly. When discussing my lesbian relationship with Jesse, I describe my experiences of understanding normal versus crazy:

Jesse began to break down my history and put a mirror up to my face. For a change, I didn't hate what I saw. Jesse would catch Anne in repeated lies, which only fueled Anne's hatred for her. Jesse was a visual artist who saw art as something one dedicates herself to, not as something one uses to explain bad or crazy behavior. She saw my sister for who she was and helped me to see what normal looked like. Normal was talking and listening and expressing feelings and being honest and sharing fears. Normal was seeing yourself through the loving eyes that others saw, not the distorted mirrors of an amusement park. Normal was keeping some semblance of order in your life and treating others with the respect they deserved. Crazy was a series of random acts. Crazy was never knowing what would happen next, ducking around every corner in case a

shot was fired. Crazy was being laughed at or poked fun at around others. Crazy was directionless and frightening. Crazy was a cloud of angst and an invisible presence.

8. *The performative memoir captures the past, even though it is performed in the present, thus evoking a visceral experience from the audience because they experience it in the here and now.*

When audience members experience events viscerally, they commit to embodying the memoir. Embodiment can lead to a transformation of viewpoints. Embodiment can change an individual's preconceived notions and ideas. If the transfer of embodiment successfully occurs between the performer and the audience, the audience will obtain information and insight they might have never had or thought about. For me, "Loving Crazy" has been about healing while purging the experiences that built the core of my identity. My goals have been to speak to others who have had similar experiences and can identify with having a mentally ill relative, and to explore the experiences which explain and describe mental illness.

9. *The performative memoir facilitates understanding about cultural and personal experience.*

Performative memoir invites individuals to change their beliefs and attitudes about mental illness, as well as inviting audience members to cultivate empathy. If we think of our identities as the sum total of our experiences and stories, the performative memoir becomes a methodology for studying human interaction and human communication.

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Chapter 6

**The Art of Living through
Performative Memoir**

Four Phases

Adrienne Viramontes

As Theresa Carilli explained in chapter 6, the performative memoir allows us to examine our lived experience as foundational lenses through which to see other relationships we establish and maintain, as well as how we interact with others. In other words, what she offers is a new methodology that invites an inquiry into the ramifications that a particular experience has or can have on our ongoing interactional performances with others. This inquiry, which involves creative writing inclusive of criteria that constitutes an autoethnographic and performative context, allows us to make manifest lived experience as art, in addition to a subject for analysis and meaning-making.

In this chapter, I wish to add to her methodology by discussing how this process is a collection of spiritual acts that can be adopted as an ontological cycle. In other words, we can build upon our human skills of attention, reflection, meditation, expression, dialogue, orality, and more, to understand ourselves more deeply, develop critical awareness of our reality, and make more informed decisions as individuals keenly aware of our connection to the human collective. Here, I analyze “Mexican Love” through the four phases of spiritual exercises that I wrote about in chapter 3. Those phases are:

- 1) Learning to Live
- 2) Learning to Dialogue
- 3) Learning to Die
- 4) Learning to Read

PHASE I: LEARNING TO LIVE: ATTENTION, MEDITATION, AND MEMORIZATION

Although “Learning to Live” is identified as the first phase, it is not actually the starting point. Acquiring lived experience begins and/or identifying an experience initiates this first phase. This cycle of spiritual exercises is a developmental process that takes time and practice, writing about lived experience in order to bring a critical awareness of one’s reality. With physical exercise, it takes a while to condition our bodies for regular intervals of physical activity. For example, after two weeks of using a treadmill or an elliptical machine, one notices changes to body and bodily functions. We notice differences in our appearance and demeanor and can relate those changes to our activity. Similarly, when one begins to engage the world, she begins to collect experience, and through spiritual exercises she begins to interpret reality differently than before.

The first spiritual practice to examine is attention, which Pierre Hadot (1995) explains, “is a continuous vigilance and presence of mind, self-consciousness which never sleeps, and a constant tension of the spirit” (p. 84). It takes collections of, or an intense, overwhelming experience, to become able to be aware of one’s consciousness and what marks the beginning of becoming aware of the consequences of human behavior on our life’s trajectory. Even intense experience does not guarantee that one becomes aware of him/herself as a conscious being. We have a complete reversal of our usual way of looking at things. We are to switch from our ‘human’ vision of things, which replaces each event within the perspective of universal nature. “Little by little, they [spiritual exercises] make possible the indispensable metamorphosis of our inner self” (p. 83).

It is through the spiritual exercise of attention that I begin my analysis. Hadot explains that the Stoic attitude of attention kept the fundamental rule of life at hand, “that is, the distinction between what depends on us and what does not” (p. 84). As a communication scholar being attentive in this philosophically interpretive way I am not only critically vigilant about my perceptions of reality; I am also hyper aware of the ways in which people communicate, but especially discerning of words and phrases that are used in specific and repeated contexts. For example, when I first began to write “Mexican Love,” I didn’t know what the purpose of my story was. I had no idea that I would come to understand it as a response to the Spanish Conquest hundreds of years before. It was the spiritual exercise of meditation that brought me to make that assertion. As a matter of fact, when Theresa Carilli suggested that I contribute to this project and write a performative memoir, it took me a few days to come up with an idea.

As a phenomenologist and autoethnographer, I specialize in the study of lived experience and have taught undergraduate research methods classes for

years. I invite my students to research anything they want, even their own lived experience, which some of them would truly benefit from, such as a better, deeper understanding of themselves in relation to painful divorce proceedings, identity struggles, mental and physical illness, and even adoption and drug addiction. One day I was explaining why it was important to study my lived experience as a Mexican American who grew up thinking she was white. As I talked about how I was raised in my Mexican American family, I jokingly described to the class my experience being raised by my grandparents, with what I called, “Mexican Love.” Since that day in class, I have used that phrase to indicate that the way I have experienced love from other Mexicans as rigid, rule-based, callous and defensive. This love performs a façade of imperviousness or invulnerability. That day I shared these feelings with my class marked the first time my body gave voice to the term “Mexican Love.”

“Mexican Love” is an indexical expression in that its use is only understandable to an audience who is familiar with my lived experience as the context for the phrase (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 4). I draw attention to this indexicality to indicate that the ways in which we speak about our everyday lives offers clues to understanding our experience in relation to larger contexts. Indexical expressions are not “just the things people say.” They are no accident and not a meaningless happenstance. They mark a time and contextual space that our interpretive bodies signify with a coined phrase or expression. In other words, when we repeatedly say things that become assigned to our performance of self, we are indicating that there is something to be understood beyond the appearance of things. The spiritual practice of attention and meditation, in addition to research, is what helps to bring awareness to the multiple layers of reality that replace our usual indifferent perceptions. Bringing these practices together becomes a part of the process of learning to live.

This phase begins and builds upon the process of interpreting one’s reality differently, or as Hadot describes it, “a complete reversal of our usual way of looking at things” (p. 84). What he explains is that through the spiritual exercise of attention we develop a “concentration on the present moment,” which “allows us to respond immediately to events, as if they were questions asked of us all of a sudden” (p. 85). After years of writing performative memoirs and experiencing multiple periods of transcendence, I experience interaction with others as a complete reversal. It is as if words, phrases, bodies and objects call my attention immediately. It is as if they wave red flags to make sure I notice them.

Hadot would characterize my ability to be present in the moment as a “transformation of [my] personality” (p. 85). He further clarifies this by explaining:

We must also associate our imagination and affectivity with the training of our thought. Here, we must bring into play all the psychagogic techniques and rhetorical methods of amplification. We must formulate the rule of life to ourselves in the most striking and concrete way. We must keep life's events "before our eyes," and see them in the light of the fundamental rule. This is known as the exercise of memorization and meditation on the rule of life. (p. 85)

The exercises of meditation and memorization are "fed" or enhanced by other spiritual practices such as "reading, listening, research, and investigation" (Hadot, p. 86). This enhancement comes in the form of what we would recognize today as a college education, where reading and other materials invite new kinds of thought and exploration through the guidance of a teacher, instructor, or professor. This brings me to an important note to remind readers that it is important to develop performative writing skills under the guidance of a professional educator.

PHASE II: LEARNING TO DIALOGUE

The role of dialogue within spiritual exercises is paramount to achieving transcendence through the creative writing process and to be able to "examine one's conscience" (Hadot, p. 90). As discussed in chapter 3, the concept of dialogue that appears here is rooted in the work of Socrates and Plato. The dialogues they appear in are written texts that show that the goal of dialogue is not actually to learn about or create any new knowledge. "Socrates harassed his interlocutors with questions, which put *themselves* into question, forcing them to pay attention to and take care of themselves" (370/1972, p. 91). This is to say that Socrates asked questions that required his interlocutors to be accountable for their morality, which describes how one decides about beliefs, actions, and attitudes: what is good or bad, right or wrong (p. 89). When one's morality is questioned, or when one is asked to be accountable for the decisions made or beliefs one holds, an investigation into one's underlying motivations ensues. If one is strong and courageous enough to be honest about her/his values, or why someone wants to acquire an object or achieve a particular goal, then truth and sincerity can be revealed.

Classic examples of dialogue usually involve two distinct individuals. However, one can engage a dialogue with the self, which is the spiritual exercise at the root of successful performative memoir writing. To dialogue with the self is to develop the skills and genuine desire to know oneself—to achieve human authenticity:

The point is worth stressing, for the same thing happens in every spiritual exercise: we must *let* ourselves be changed, in our point of view, attitudes, and

convictions. This means that we dialogue with ourselves, and hence we must do battle with ourselves. (Hadot, p. 91)

When one's morality is questioned, or when one is asked to be accountable for the decisions made or beliefs one holds, an investigation into one's underlying motivations ensues. If one is strong and courageous enough to be honest about his values, or why someone wants to acquire an object or achieve a particular goal, then truth and sincerity can be revealed.

When I first began to write "Mexican Love," I was reading a book about how different cultures understand the concept of Karma. In one of the introductory paragraphs, my tentative mental state was in flux as I wrote the introduction. Often, when we are trying to figure out why we are writing about something, ego statements appear. Here is an example of a collection of ego statements that would ultimately signal to me that my conscience was hiding something, or was just not yet ready to acknowledge the truth:

I come from a Mexican family that I believe has been disbanding since the moment my grandparents got married. I don't think our disbanding is a bad thing. In fact, it has always felt to me that we were *supposed* to break apart.

When I die, it will end the narrative of my particular branch of Viramontes' as I have no children and will cease the reproduction of my particular family tree. How do I feel about that? Honestly, I feel that I will have accomplished a very important act of Karma. I believe it is important to pay attention to the situation or context in which we exist. Sometimes, acknowledging and listening to the signs that appear in your life is one of the most difficult things to believe in. It makes it difficult to like ourselves and it takes courage and faith to believe in things that our socially constructed reality does not perpetuate.

In the above example, I ask myself how I feel about that. My answer is a tedious and unnecessary justification of why I am writing this story. When I began to re-read that portion, the voice inside my head kept asking me: who cares what you think about Karma? It not only sounded clichéd, but when one writes about what one thinks over and over without any actual progress of the narrative, that's how you know it's an ego statement and it needs to be deleted (as this portion of the narrative ultimately was). This is how dialoguing with the self works.

Sometimes the battle is tedious, but in order to craft a well-structured, instructive memoir, you must write then read, write then read, write and then read aloud. The back-and-forth is very much like a dialogic question-and-answer. Reading aloud will produce a kind of checks and balances related to the narrative. As you read aloud the words you wrote, your voice and body will stop you when something is not able to flow—when there are unknown gaps that need to be worked through, identified, or moved to a part of the

narrative that might not even exist yet. Your body does this because it is an interpretive tool that is constantly in use.

All of the highlighted portions of the paragraph example above were edited out. When I kept reading aloud the question of how I felt about that, the answer finally came to me a few months later when I realized that I wanted no relationship with my father, his wife, or their family. “Mexican Love” is an explanation. Each narrative document evidence that I believe shows how none of my family members wanted to be a part of my family. And, since I am the last one, the line in the introduction that addresses this truth makes my goal clear: “It’s time to tell the truth about what it means to be a part of a Mexican family.”

It took several months to write about each member’s dark experience within the generations of my family and when a good portion of the narrative was completed, I had an opportunity to share it with Theresa Carilli’s graduate class, as an invited speaker. I read aloud to the class the stories of Louis and Armando. Afterward, students were invited to ask me questions about any aspect of the narrative they wished. We ended up having an interesting discussion with some students who could relate common themes in my narrative to their family experience. As the discussion continued, I began to speak about how I believed the ways in which my Mexican family showed love was an unconscious response to the Spanish Conquest, which had been incubating within me since graduate school. The spiritual exercises of meditation, memorization, investigation, and research occurred while I was a graduate student writing my dissertation. It took almost fifteen years for me to make the connection, which was made possible through the act of writing a performative memoir.

This is the point about the crucial role of dialogue. Engaging in dialogue with the self and others, in conjunction with being educated, invites one to make important realizations about her lived experience, and that constitutes a perspective on life. I think it is important to note that these exercises are “spiritual” because they can affect the human spirit—the life force that makes possible how you make decisions about the quality of your life as opposed to concern about physical or material things. Authentic dialogue leads one to understand the value of one’s own thoughts, the fact that they matter, and instills the urgent understanding that humans need to express those thoughts/ideas in order to identify and fulfill their human potential, which is located in cosmic good as opposed to being for the sake of being.

PHASE III: LEARNING TO DIE

Learning to die represents the demise of individualistic thinking—the difference between the ego and the genuine self. Yes, we are all, technically,

individuals. However, thinking only as an individual as opposed to thinking as an individual within a community of other individuals is a completely different application with different end goals.

The death in question here is the spiritual separation of the soul and the body, [and] that the goal of this philosophical separation is for the soul to liberate itself, shedding the passions linked to the corporeal senses, so as to attain the autonomy of thought. (Hadot, p. 94)

Achieving autonomy of thought requires the ability to discern that which is socially constructed versus what is important to you. These two realms are opposite sides of the same coin. As humans, we help to build, maintain, and perpetuate social norms. We can also defy them. One side sees all that one's social, political, and economic matrix has to offer. The moment we are born we begin to be trained how to want things—how to strive to acquire things because success has been socially constructed to represent possession of such things. The other side of the coin is the genuine self, who has often been muted by negative influence of many components that invites us to feel worthless and incompetent.

I spent many years believing that I didn't matter. I believed that everyone else's thoughts were more valuable than my own because I was a girl, because I was Mexican, because I was from Gary, Indiana. When this kind of darkness rents space in your body, it will lead you to being unable to communicate your own needs, which is a dangerous situation. This kind of muteness can lead to disastrous decisions, such as trying to acquire materialistic things when you don't actually need them, behaving in ways to achieve popularity, living beyond one's monetary means in order to establish a façade of superiority and success, and believing that social norms are more valuable than the voices in your head indicating something different. This other side of the coin is the entity that is brought to engage in authentic dialogue through the writing of performative memoir in order to learn how to discern "that which we *are not* from that which we are" (Hadot, p. 90).

In the conclusion of "Mexican Love," I describe how I went back to my father's house for Christmas Eve. I learned about his ailing health and how everyone's life had progressed since the last time I saw them. I had been separated from all of them for years. Attending this reunion placed me in a situation where identifying what I am from what I am not became crystal clear:

I returned Tuesday, which was actually Christmas Eve. I was nervous because I had not seen them in a decade or so. My stepsisters, their husbands, and their mostly adult children, who barely know me, were there. I was polite, pleasant,

and even amiable. I made sure not to talk about my job or my life, which no one asked about anyway.

While I sat and watched my family exist in the basement of my dad's house, I was able to see clearly what the situation was, and had always been, since I moved in with them as a 13-year-old. They're breeders. I'm not trying to insult them, only to describe the cultural practices and attitudes of my family and why I felt that I have never belonged with them—any of them. When they gather together, they discuss things that relate to buying items, usually expensive ones, like homes, cars, trucks, and recreational vehicles both large and small. These items reflect their success at maintaining a job. Once they land a partner and can begin to reproduce not because creating a child with someone you love is a magical and hopeful act, at least in the beginning, but because that's what one does in this U.S., Capitalistic, working-class life in "the Region" of Northwest Indiana.

We work,
we drink,
we fuck,
and we buy or consume more things.

As I sat at the table making polite conversation with my dad and stepfamily, it became clear to me just how differently I view the world than my family does. The moment I stepped back into my father's and stepmother's house, I ceased to exist as my genuine self. They informed me all about their health issues and what everyone in the family was doing with their lives, and I listened like a good little soldier.

Although I have studied lived experience for many years, I would not have been able to realize this important context of my existence if I had not begun to write a performative memoir, which invited the bringing together of experience, education, and the separation of my soul from my corporeal, capitalistic body.

This excerpt is an example of how one achieves universal thought. Because no one in my family engaged me in conversation that evening, I observed and listened to the content and interactions of my family members as a detached observer. Some part of me felt/knew that these interactions were not about me, which allowed me to grasp a different kind of perspective on my relationship with these people as a whole. Arriving at this heightened perspective is similar to the way in which Plotinus (270/2018) discussed learning about the nature of a thing:

Remove everything that is superfluous, straighten that which is crooked, and purify all that is dark until you make it brilliant. Never stop sculpting your own statue until the divine splendor of virtue shines in you. (p. 102)

When I left my father's house and returned to my home, I felt like I had completed a journey. I felt at ease. The moment I walked into my own home, which is my sanctuary, I knew that walking away from my family several years earlier was the right decision for me. I had no regrets. I did not desire a relationship with them then, and I did not want a relationship now or in the future. I happily speak to my dad on the phone sporadically, but he will never ask me any questions about my real life and because of that, there will never be a reason for me to share anything meaningful with him.

And I am more than okay with that because I can see my own beauty now.

Only [s]he who liberates himself and purifies himself from the passions, which conceal the true reality of the soul, can understand that the soul is immaterial and immortal. Here, knowledge *is* a spiritual exercise. We must first undergo moral purification, in order to become capable of understanding. (Hadot, p. 101)

Thus, in order to know, one must transform oneself.

PHASE IV: LEARNING TO READ

During 2005 and 2006, I was finishing up my dissertation. I happened to be using a book by Paul Du Gay called *Identity: A Reader* (2000), an anthology of extremely interesting and challenging essays about the nature of identity. One of the chapters in that book was Pierre Hadot's "Spiritual Exercises." The information that I've based most of my work on in this book is from a chapter that I read fourteen years before.

This is to say that *what* we read matters. Thus far, based on the work of understanding Hadot's interpretation of classical philosophy, I have discussed how writing a performative memoir is a way of exploring the significance of certain events or situations in one's life. I have shown how the process of doing so is actually a compilation of ancient spiritual exercises that can produce transcendence, transformation, and healing.

Moreover, *how* we read things (situations, texts, people, ourselves) matters. Here, the classic dialogic question emerges: So what? And, who cares? One of the most important things about Hadot's work—about what ancient philosophy has to offer us in 2020—during a global pandemic—during a time when truth seems to be lost—during a time when we would rather show loyalty to politics than to understanding each other, is that life should be enjoyed and celebrated.

Why is the idea of enjoying life so easy to forget? The Epicureans and Stoics and many other ancient philosophers believed that enjoying life for

all its offerings of beauty and pleasure was the privilege of humanity. They believed in having a good time with friends, spirits, laughter, and general enjoyment. Their goal with these spiritual exercises was to maintain the body's equilibrium in order for us to manage stress, hardship, illness, death, broken hearts, unemployment and so much more. I hear the voices now: What about those who are too poor? What about those who are oppressed in some horrible way?

The spiritual exercises discussed in this chapter address the general dissatisfaction that many of us experience in our daily lives. The exercises, in the context of writing a performative memoir about one's lived experience, invite us to hone the skills that we already possess, in order for us to look at life from a different perspective. I realize that not everyone will want to do this, but I also think that everyone is likely to benefit from it even in the smallest way.

Spiritual exercises invite us to investigate our own thoughts. Writing the performative memoir creates the canvas upon which to do so. This is a form of art, which as Martin Heidegger (1971) explains, "lets truth originate [. . .] because art is by nature an origin: a distinctive way in which truth comes into being, that is, becomes historical" (p. 75).

It is not enough for truth to emerge through forms of art and simply appear or exist. Our truths must be expressed, shared, communicated with ourselves and others for them to be able to be made manifest through human performance. Why else were we born and "thrown" (Heidegger, 1971) into this world? I suspect our existence was not specifically designed so that we could drive others to soccer practice.

Learning to read refers to the need to read ourselves and others. It refers to us being able to interpret the nature of things such as our environment, our language, the significant events in our lives, the challenges in our daily lives that each of us face. We are the texts of our lives. Our language reflects what we are interpreting in our own realities. The better you are at reading the signs that appear in your life, the better chance you will have to fulfill your potential and live as a fulfilled human being.

Realistically speaking, it is impossible for people to live with only pure thought. I'm not suggesting that the purpose here is to highlight the need for us to know ourselves through tools that we already possess: writing, reading, reflecting, thinking, and being willing to be changed by and through our own truths. Creating performative memoirs is a way to access ourselves in our quest to understand our natures. This is the point of being liberally educated. It matters not what your truth is. The only thing that matters is the journey by which you were able to arrive at understanding.

The performative memoir is a multifaceted phenomenon. It is a research method that requires creative, expressive, communicative acts that allow the

body (inclusive of the mind) to give voice to situations, experiences, and moments that deeply affect a person, cause great change in theirs and others' lives, and alter life trajectories that often go unexamined. These unexamined moments can shape us in definitive ways that often limit our ability to make truly informed, productive decisions about the simplest aspects of our lives. These unexamined moments lead us to suppress our own identities in vital and important ways.

The creative process of performative memoir is an intellectual act. It provides the impetus for original thought, which leads to original forms of research grounded in human experience that contributes to universal rationality. It is an intellectual act that informs, contextualizes, situates, and explains. These are fundamental components to developing perspective, abstraction, distance, and understanding.

Writing a performative memoir is a philosophical act. It invites one to engage in dialogue with self and others and prepares one to be capable of being honest with oneself, which is a lot more difficult to do than it sounds. Engaging in writing a performative memoir under the guidance of a trained professional can lead to rediscovering one's value, one's purpose in life, and the vital role that expressing subjective truth plays in humans' ability to respect ourselves and others, to value what we think, and not to fear contributing our ideas to benefit others as well as ourselves.

Finally, writing a performative memoir is a spiritual act. It leads to the process of retroactive sense-making and establishes a connection between an individual and a world of others. Once this connection is established, it is difficult to forget how useful, meaningful, and productive it can be in the process of living a better-quality life. Writing, embodying, and giving voice to performative memoirs is a literal and figurative means of engendering the art of living. In other words, it's a way of reminding us that life itself should be enjoyed, valued, appreciated, even celebrated. And, in order to accomplish this, it is an instructive method that makes possible being and feeling whole or complete, even if for but a few minutes of the day.

Many of us have lost our ability to feel whole or complete. It is not something that another can do for us. We have to do it for ourselves. This idea of being a whole and complete person is an old truth. I have spent more than twenty years writing about and re-living my lived experience. I have engaged these spiritual exercises even when I had no idea what they were or what I was doing. I have transformed my life numerous times now. I have overcome many challenges, limitations of my own understanding, through the creation of performative memoirs. The most important lesson that I can share is that it is vitally important to acknowledge and communicate the light and the darkness of human beings.

And yet we have forgotten *how* to read: how to pause, liberate ourselves from our worries, return into ourselves, and leave aside our search for subtlety and originality, in order to meditate calmly, ruminate, and let the texts speak to us. (Hadot, p. 109)

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Chapter 7

Performative Memoir

Crossroads of Communication Scholarship

Theresa Carilli and Adrienne Viramontes

THERESA

I have always believed that one day stories would be at the center of Communication scholarship. The stories we choose to tell and the way we choose to tell them speak volumes about our personal identities, worldviews, reflective abilities, and unique perceptions. When combined, these attributes will determine how we effectively communicate with others. In this book, we have introduced a writing genre that is pivotal to an exploration of how to create useful and meaningful stories for audiences. These performative memoirs are intended to create dialogue among audience members as well as Communication scholars. The popularity of TED Talks and performances such as those presented in *The Moth* indicate a tremendous need to tell and a voracious desire to hear how individuals experience and represent their worlds.

I offer a general framework or guidance to performative memoirists—a way to express stories that deeply affected and changed their lives. These memoirs are seated in our consciousness to share with others and to explain how we understand the world around us. I return to my earlier claim that performative memoir contains nostalgic language that reflects personal identity, and I encourage authors to study how nostalgic episodes take shape in their imaginings. Prior to the writing process, I encourage the memoirist to examine nostalgic episodes as a reflective activity. Within nostalgia, there are moments of strength, joy, and melancholy. Of these three characteristics, I believe that melancholy drives the memoir. Those moments and episodes of longing reflect our past, and through this reflection, we evoke reverie and a desire to return to these episodes. Memories consist of the stories of our lived experiences though we cannot return to those experiences. We develop a sense of melancholy where we miss and long for an episode because it was

critical to shaping our lives. In the following poetic performative poem, I share how my viewpoints about the relationship between Italian/American women and men were shaped:

A Hot Summer Day in Brooklyn, 1967

Auntie dances in the kitchen
Swirling to the beach music on WABC.
She grabs my hand as we twirl around.
Her father looks at her with disgust.
Italian women should never display such joy.
Italian women should never teach such joy.

Her sons look on with fascination.
They are the real people.
Slightly younger than me,
They watch their mother's eyes sway to the music.

One day she will be gone—
Grandpa will be gone.
The music will stop.

But for now, and the rest of her life,
Auntie dances in the kitchen.

It is a hot summer day in Brooklyn.

Joy is present.

In this poem, I long for my aunt and her sense of fun. I long for a time in my past when every experience was fresh, and I was being taught about playfulness and spontaneity. When Italian male presence enters the poem, I learn that exhibiting playfulness and spontaneity are not encouraged, especially for Italian and Italian/American women. The nostalgic episode created in this poem—that of being young and learning how to act as an Italian/American woman, fills me with both a sense of pleasure and a sense of melancholy.

Re-iterating the guidelines outlined in chapter 1, here is a three-step process for building a performative memoir.

1. *Select a topic that has been a central theme in your life.*

Every one of us has at least one story that represents the foundation of who we are. Within that story are several episodes or components that describe our experiences. Sometimes there are simple moments which could range from an encounter with an individual or a reflection based on a simple observation. Referring to *A Hot Summer Day in Brooklyn, 1967*, the encounter with my aunt, grandfather, and cousins become a nostalgic episode. Observing my grandfather as he watches my aunt dancing develops into a reflection. As I develop this poetic memoir, I return to nostalgic episodes which allow me to provide an overview of this formative time in my life. The performative memoirists must discover what they know and the components that comprise what they know.

2. *Write down every meaningful episode or interaction you related to this theme.*

I encourage writers to keep a journal of episodes and observations that are related to the theme of their performative memoir. Episodes and observations build a performative memoir of showing (through dialogue) and telling (through narrative) the dimensions of the experience. In "Loving Crazy," my focus is on demonstrating how loving my mentally ill sister deeply affected my life. I build this performative memoir by recounting stories about her which explore how I learned about mental illness and how our interactions are sewn into my consciousness.

3. *Arrange these episodes in a manner that will make sense to your audience.*

When writing a performative memoir, the arrangement of episodes along with language choices creates a performance event. The selection of episodes must be relatable in an oral context, and the language must evoke a feeling in audience members. Descriptive language, while critical to memoir, sometimes cannot capture the feeling behind the observation or reflection. The performative memoirist must share how she feels about every event or how that event affected her so that the audience knows and understands the events.

I offer these guidelines for performative writers who wish to give an understanding of a topic that disrupts the master narrative. By allowing the audience to enter into an internal dialogue with the performative memoirist, this genre invites personal transformation and promotes empathy and transcendence of fixed viewpoints. As we tell more stories with abandon, we learn that being human is a challenging and daunting notion which has the power to encourage authentic communication. Living as authentic beings encourages a

sharing of stories, reflections, and ideas, but mostly it helps us to make sense, and make peace with ourselves and others.

ADRIENNE

It is through the act of performative memoir writing that we erect a sacred space. We build this space through language, story, reflection, and contention—through the act of self-dialogue. In *Toward Transcendence: A Creative Process of Performative Writing*, (2008), I used Martin Heidegger's (1971) discussion in *Poetry, Language, Thought* about what it means to dwell, in particular, what in fact is the nature of human dwelling:

The way in which you are and I am. The manner in which we humans *are* on the earth, is *Buan*, dwelling. To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell. The old word *bauen*, which says that man *is* so far as he *dwells*, this word *bauen* *however also* means at the same time to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine. Such building only takes care—it tends the growth that ripens into its fruit of its own accord . . . Mortals dwell in that they save the earth [. . .] Saving does not only snatch something from a danger. To save really means to set something free into its own presencing. (Heidegger, p. 148)

Performative memoir writing is the space we create through re-experiencing moments and periods of time in our lives from which our consciousness wants or needs to derive meaning. Through erection of this space, which cares for and cultivates expanded thought and understanding, we can produce things like transcendence, healing, acceptance, and finally, letting go.

Through the act of writing, we can care for ourselves. When we investigate and examine our experience through the act of writing, it is done in that safe, sacred space where details, plot lines, characters, and dialogue are strategically worked through, rearranged, held frozen in our memory's time in order for us to arrive at understanding. As Hans-Georg Gadamer (2002) suggests "Rather, a person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something. That is why a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, [. . .] sensitive to the text's alterity" (p. 269). Writing about our lived experience and the deliberate act of deriving meaning from it bring us understanding—of the event, the context, human motivations, our identities, limitations, hopes, fears, and consequences. When we understand ourselves, we care for ourselves by cultivating our human spirit.

This self-care was the original goal of philosophy. The Stoics believed in philosophy as a lifestyle, a way to live "which engages the whole of existence"

(Hadot, p. 83). “The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being. It is a progress which causes us to be more fully and makes us better” 83). Today, we might understand self-care through performative memoir as a method that seeks to accomplish “Self-actualization,” which Abraham Maslow (1971) explained is “the intrinsic growth of what is already in the organism, or more accurately, of what the organism is” (p. 1). In Maslow’s list of basic principles, he describes what ancient philosophers believed about spiritual exercises:

The salvation of the human being is not to be found in either behaviorism or psychoanalysis (which deals with only the darker, meaner half of the individual). We must deal with the questions of value, individuality, consciousness, purpose, ethics, and the higher reaches of human nature. (p. 1)

Additionally, what Maslow suggested is the need to bring together or integrate one’s darker half, or shadow, with the self—what Carl Jung described as the process of individuation and what I also proposed was one of the goals of writing a performative memoir from the vantage point of ancient philosophy (since, after all, they came up with the idea first). All of the sources mentioned here explain the human need to understand the self in order to be able to fulfill one’s potential.

What we have offered in this book are examples of the kinds of texts one can create through the guidance of Theresa Carilli’s current criteria inclusive of the ideas in her former work in “Verbal Promiscuity or Healing Art” (2008) and my experience with writing performative memoirs as a form of spiritual exercises, or as a way of “doing philosophy” through the creation of art.

In the end, we believe that the discipline of communication, specifically, performance studies, is integral to people being able to take care for and understand themselves and others. We do this through language, the act of writing, the performance of speaking and reciting our own meaningful texts that we must continuously interpret throughout our lives and collected experience. We have the ability and responsibility to teach others how to care for themselves through communicative and philosophical acts that make possible the art of living.

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Index

- aesthetic distanciation, 24
- ancient philosophy: Epicureans, 16–17, 99–100; importance of oral teaching in, 25; Philo of Alexandria, 16; Plato, 94; Plotinus, 98; Socrates, 18, 94; Stoics, 15–17, 21, 92, 99–100, 106–7. *See also* “art of living”; spiritual practice
- anthropologists, 8
- Antony (monk), 20
- “art of living,” 15, 17, 21–22, 107. *See also* spiritual practice
- attention, practice of, 16–18, 92–94
- audience experience: authenticity and, 85–86; embodiment and transformation, 87–89. *See also* universality
- authenticity: challenges of, 18–19; of dialogue, 18–19, 94–96, 105–6; of narrative, 11; providing audience with knowledge, 85–86; truth telling, 12, 100
- autoethnography, 5, 79
- autonomy of thought, 97
- “bracketing” concept, 22–23
- brain alterations, 85–86. *See also* *Loving Crazy* (Carilli)
- bridge, creative process as, 26–27
- Cale, David, 2–3
- Carilli, Theresa, 15, 104, 105, 107. *See also* *Loving Crazy* (Carilli)
- communication disciplines, 10–11
- Conquergood, Dwight, 5, 10
- creative process: as bridge, 26–27; establishing dialogue, 22–24; methodology, 10–11; universal rationality, 24–25. *See also* spiritual practice
- creativity and mental illness. *See* *Loving Crazy* (Carilli)
- crisis of representation, 4
- cultural identity, 8, 9–10, 53–54, 77–78, 82–85. *See also* *Loving Crazy* (Carilli); *Mexican Love* (Viramontes)
- death of individuality, 19–21, 25
- “Deconstructing the Oreo” (Viramontes), 21–22, 25–26
- dialogue: authenticity of, 18–19, 94–96, 105–6; establishing, 22–24; giving new dimension to narrative, 86–87; with self, 101. *See also* meditation
- Du Gay, Paul, 99
- dwelling, nature of, 106
- ego statements, 24, 95
- embodiment and transformation, 89

- empathy, 9–10, 89, 105–6
 Ensler, Eve, 2, 3
 Epicureans, 15–17, 99–100
 ethnodramas, 9, 86–87
 ethnography, 4, 5, 8
 existential fieldwork, 12–13
- Fiction as Research Practice* (Leavy), 11
 Fisher, Walter R., 24
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg, 24, 106
God Said, "Ha!" (Sweeney), 3
- Hadot, Pierre: on ancient philosophy, 15–17, 25, 99; on attention, 92–93; on dialogue, 18–19; *L'Enseignement oral de Platon*, 25; on meditation, 17, 23–24; on self-formation, 21
 healing tools, 2, 15. *See also* spiritual practice
 Heidegger, Martin, 26, 100, 106
 Hmong refugees research, 5
"A Hot Summer Day in Brooklyn, 1967" (Carilli), 104, 105
 human condition, 8–9
 Hurston, Zora Neale, 8
 Husserl, Edmund, 22–23
- identity: cultural, 8, 9–10, 53–54, 77–78, 82–85; exploration of, 79–80, 82–85, 89. *See also* *Loving Crazy* (Carilli); *Mexican Love* (Viramontes)
Identity (Du Gay), 99
 individualistic thinking, death of. *See* "Learning to Die" phase
 integration/individualism of Jung, 20
In the Body of the World (Ensler), 3
 Italian/American culture, 82–85. *See also* *Loving Crazy* (Carilli)
- journal writing, 105
 Jung, Carl, 20, 107
- Kiran, Brooke, 5–6
- "Learning to Dialogue" phase, 18–19, 22–24, 94–96
 "Learning to Die" phase, 19–21, 25, 96–99
 "Learning to Live" phase, 16–18, 92–94
 "Learning to Read" phase, 20–21, 99–102
- Leavy, Patricia, 11
L'Enseignement oral de Platon (Hadot), 25
- lesbian awakening/relationships, 75, 77, 83, 84, 88–89
Letting Go of God (Sweeney), 3
 liberal education, 27, 94, 100
 liberation of the soul, 26–27
Life at Death (Ring), 1–2
 listening, 19
 lived experiences, study of, 24–25, 92–93, 96
- Loving Crazy* (Carilli), 29–52; Anne's death, 30–32, 51–52; author's realization that she is gay, 48, 50–51; childhood memories of Anne, 32–35; creative genius, 29–30, 46–47, 52; forgiveness, 52; Grandfather Giuseppe as similar to Anne, 45–46; normal vs. crazy realization, 50; parental reactions and influences, 35–38, 47, 49–51; thirtieth shot, 40–41, 51; visits to Anne in New York, 39–45, 48–49
- Loving Crazy* analysis: authenticity of memoir form, 85–86; depiction of trauma, 81–82; embodiment of an experience, 89; exploration of identity, 79–80, 82–85, 89; importance of oral performance, 80–81; lyricism of, 88–89; narrative and ethnodrama combination, 86–87; risk-taking of, 12; sense of presence in, 87–88
- Maslow, Abraham, 107
 meditation, 17–18, 24, 92–94
 melancholy, 103–4

- memoir. *See* performative memoir
 memories and nostalgia, 103–4
 memorization, exercise of, 94
 mental illness, 80. *See also* *Loving Crazy* (Carilli)
 metaphors, 9, 11
 MeToo movement, 6
Mexican Love (Viramontes): childhood
 with mother and father, 62–66;
 Christmas Eve reunion, 72–76;
 hatred and the Spanish Conquest,
 76–78; myth of Mexican families,
 53–54; stepmother and dad, 66–72;
 survival, 72; Uncle Army, 57–62;
 Uncle Louie, 54–57
Mexican Love analysis: as indexical
 expression, 93; “Learning to
 Dialogue” phase, 94–96; “Learning
 to Die” phase, 96–99; “Learning to
 Live” phase, 92–94; “Learning to
 Read” phase, 99–102; reunion theme,
 97–99; risk-taking, 12
 morality, 94–95
 Myeroff, Barbara, 5

 narrative: authenticity of, 11;
 ethnodrama and, 9, 86–87;
 understanding lived experience with,
 24–25
 narrative fidelity, 24
 near-death experiences, 1–2
 normal vs. crazy, understanding of, 88–
 89. *See also* *Loving Crazy* (Carilli)
 nostalgia, 7, 12, 103–4
Number Our Days (documentary), 5

 oral interpretation, 4, 8, 25, 80–81

paideia (self-formation), 21
 “A Paradigm for Performance Studies”
 (Pelias and VanOosting), 4, 10
 Pelias, Ronald J., 4, 6, 10
 performance studies, 79
 performative ethnography, 5

 performative memoir: about, 22, 91,
 106; audience’s interaction with,
 87–88; as creative methodology,
 10–11; criteria for, 7–10; defined, 2;
 examples of, 2–3; guidelines for, 11;
 as intellectual act, 101; multifaceted
 nature of, 100–101; as philosophical
 act, 101; roots of, 4–7; as spiritual
 act, 101
Performative Writing as Scholarship
 (Pelias), 6
 personal experiences, 9–10
 personal narrative, 5. *See also*
 autoethnography
 Philo of Alexandria, 16
 philosophy: self-care as goal of, 106–7;
 as way of life, 16. *See also* ancient
 philosophy
Philosophy as a Way of Life (Hadot),
 15–16
 Plato, 94
 Plotinus, 98
 poetic performative writing, 6–7
Poetry, Language, Thought (Heidegger),
 106
 Pollock, Della, 6
 presence, 87–88, 93–94. *See also*
 attention, practice of
 present experience, 9

 qualitative research, 11, 12

 Redenbaugh, Miranda, 5–6
 repetitive language, 9, 88
 Rhetoric discipline, 10
 Ring, Kenneth, 1–2
 risk-taking endeavors, 12

 Saldana, Johnny, 9
 Schmitt, Richard, 23
Scripting Identity (Carilli), 8
 sculpture analogy, 21
 self, understanding of, 101, 107. *See also*
 identity; meditation; spiritual practice

- self-actualization, 20–21, 107
 self-formation (*paideia*), 21
 sentence brevity, 80–81
 Social Psychology discipline, 10
 Socrates, 18, 94
 “Spiritual Exercises” (Hadot), 99
 spiritual practice: from antiquity, 15–16, 25; of attention, 16–18, 92–94; “Learning to Dialogue” phase, 18–19, 22–24, 94–96; “Learning to Die” phase, 19–21, 25, 96–99; “Learning to Live” phase, 16–18, 92–94; “Learning to Read” phase, 20–21, 99–102; liberating the soul, 26–27; meditation, 17–18, 24, 92–94; writing as a spiritual act, 101. *See also* creative process; transcendence; transformation
 Stoics, 15–17, 21, 92, 99–100, 106–7
 story: importance of, 2, 103; themes, 104–5; three-step process for building, 104–6. *See also* writing
 Sweeney, Julia, 2, 3

 tangential turns for coping, 82
 themes, identifying, 104–5
 therapy, 17–18
 Times Up movement, 6
Toward Transcendence (Viramontes), 106
 transcendence, 21, 25–26, 105–6
 transcendental reduction, 23
 transformation, 89, 93–94, 101–2, 105–6
 traumatic experiences, 8, 81–82
 truth telling, 12, 100. *See also* authenticity

 universality: in spirituality of performance memoir, 24–25; of thought, 98–99; writing as tool for, 20

 VanOosting, James, 4, 10
 “Verbal Promiscuity or Healing Art” (Carilli), 15, 107
 Viramontes, Adrienne, 21–22, 25–26, 106. *See also* *Mexican Love* (Viramontes)

 Walls, Alexia, 5–6
We’re Only Alive for a Short Amount of Time (Cale), 3
 writing: as dialogue with self, 101; metaphors, 9, 11; repetitive language, 9, 88; sentence brevity, 80–81; as spiritual act, 101; universality of, 20. *See also* story
Writing Performance (Pelias), 6

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