

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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To Mend The Walls of Babel: Essays On Identity and Ethnicity.

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In this thesis, I explore experiences with my identity, looking at the identity people have seen me as, who I've thought I was, and the identities my mother's and father's different family backgrounds suggest I should be. I have divided this discussion into three main areas: my complexion, the first time I became aware of racial differences while living on Stats Street in Las Vegas, and my stay at Fort Dix, New Jersey during Army Basic Training. I explore my complexion first because it has been the biggest factor in my own understanding of my identity. Because of my darker complexion, I've been mistaken as Mexican, Cuban, Filipino, and African-American, and judged (misjudged) accordingly. It has often branded me as a "trouble maker" and made me feel ugly and inferior to my white friends. In the thesis' middle section, I look specifically at my stay on Stats Street, in a lower income housing "project." During my stay there, all of my neighbors, except one, were African American. I felt a constant barrier between me and my neighbors because of skin color and the different ideologies and lifestyles I came in contact with there. Finally, I look at a period of my life when I was forced to live among a very diverse group of people. In the Army, I was seen as a kind of anomaly because I didn't fit into the naturally occurring groups that formed. Through my entire discussion, I attempt to present a metaphor for the ever-changing and ever-creating process of identity that I've seen myself go through and continue to go through: mending walls and tearing walls down. I present a notion of identity, and ethnicity, that is in flux for everyone, one that is constantly being constructed and

deconstructed. I do not attempt to enter into the discussions on ethnicity in order to offer a way to approach ethnicity or multiculturalism, but I do offer my discussion here as a process of one Japanese-Hawaiian, Cherokee Indian man who is still searching for his identity yet has begun to understand, at least, his own process of identity.

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To Mend The Walls of Babel: Essays On Identity and Ethnicity

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Asao B. Inoue

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Asao B. Inoue, author

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An Argument: On 1942
For My Mother

*Near Rose's Chop Suey and Jinosuke's grocery,
the temple where incense hovered and inspired
dense evening chants (prayers for Buddha's mercy,
colorless and deep), that day he was fired . . .*

--No, no, no, she tells me. Why bring it back?
The camps are over. (Also overly dramatic.)
Forget *shoyu*-stained *furoshiki*, *mochi* on a stick:
You're like a terrier, David, gnawing a bone, an old, old trick . . .

Mostly we were bored. Women cooked and sewed,
men played blackjack, dug gardens, a *benjo*.
Who noticed barbed wire, guards in towers?
We were children, hunting stones, birds, wild flowers.

Yes, Mother hid tins of *utskemono* and eel
beneath the bed. And when the last was peeled,
clamped tight her lips, growing thinner and thinner.
But cancer not the camps made her throat blacker

. . . And she didn't die then . . . after the war, in St. Paul,
you weren't even born. Oh I know, I know, it's all
part of your job, your way, but why can't you glean
how far we've come, how much I can't recall--

David, it was so long ago--how useless it seems . . .

--David Mura

Why I'm Not "Ethnic": An Introduction to Me

My name is Ty Inoue. I am an American born in Inglewood, California under the Japanese name: Asao B. Inoue. I have often been mistaken and misidentified as Mexican, Chicano, Filipino, or some other ethnicity, but I've never really felt "ethnic." I do not have experiences that place me on some multicultural landscape because, frankly, I was raised like an average, white, male in a single-parent home. And so I've felt greatly misunderstood much of my life.

I am Japanese-Hawaiian from my dad's side of the family. My parents divorced before I was even a year old, and my twin brother and I were placed in my mom's custody. After my twelve year stay in Las Vegas, which is the location of the first two essays in this thesis, "My-Complexion" and "Stats," I moved to Corvallis, Oregon for my last year of high school. During my freshman year at Oregon State University, I tried to become a part of the Hawaiian association, but most members were actually from Hawaii (they were *real* Hawaiians). They ate different food than me, talked different English--using odd inflections, often responding with statements that rose in intonation at the end, like a question. They had different experiences than me, knew Hawaii. They all felt, in some way, ostracized from the rest of the student body because of their black hair and Asian decent (most were Asian as well). But Asians have had a long history of exclusion in America. Ronald Takaki, in his 1980 keynote lecture during a conference entitled, "Ethnicity and Public Policy" at the University of Wisconsin, talks about the Nationalization Law of 1790, which dealt specifically with Asian (especially Chinese) immigrants in America and, as Takaki suggests, helped establish a national bias or sentiment concerning Asian Americans. The law, in effect, made Asian immigrants and their American born children "foreigners forever": "[n]ot 'white,' they were ineligible for naturalized

citizenship” (Takaki 26). This was the first political decision in America that established a “racial and exclusionist pattern” (Takaki 27), a pattern that helped separated the concepts of “race” and “ethnicity.” Takaki says, “[f]or 162 years, the Naturalization Law, while allowing various European or ‘white’ ethnic groups to enter the United States and acquire citizenship, specifically denied citizenship to other groups on a racial basis” (27). It is this distinction between “race” and “ethnicity” which will be a part of my study here. My whole life, I’ve tried to assert myself as “just another average guy,” all the while assuming that what that meant was I was “white.” While at the same time, I exclaimed that I am not “ethnic” but simply “ethnic looking.” Takaki’s distinction between “race” and “ethnicity” seems useful here, giving me a possible impetus to my long-felt resistance to being a different “race” than I felt I was. And even my use of the somewhat xenophobic sounding pronoun “they,” which refers to those students I met who were “Asian-Pacific Islanders,” shows my uneasiness identifying with them because of my own tainted understanding of who Asian-Americans are in relation to other Americans--that they were a different “race,” one that is unattractive, and funny sounding in their speech.

My biological dad has a famous cousin in Hawaii, Daniel Inouye, a U.S. Senator. He played major roles in both the Watergate and the Iran-Contra hearings, held years apart. He has a residence in Hawaii and is a decorated war veteran and hero. I’ve seen him on TV several times, always with a caption at the bottom of the screen: “Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii.” In my senior year Government class, we watched a brief film on Watergate, and there he was. I half rose in the dark and exclaimed: “Hey, that’s my cousin!” Daniel has always been exotic and interesting to me because of the way he’s been able to succeed in America in spite of his Asian ancestry. He is why I’ve half-striven to identify myself as Japanese-Hawaiian, why I mark “Asian-Pacific Islander” on employment applications. Unfortunately, that is all I’ve been able to

do. I do not feel any kind of link or connected-ness with Hawaii or Japan, with my Japanese ancestors who were forced into internment camps. In fact, when I checked that box, "Asian-Pacific Islander," I used to feel guilty, like I was cheating or lying. I felt like I was some kind of fraud, collecting on a tradition that I hadn't contributed to or been a part of--or even knew. I only have my name.

My mother is one-eighth Cherokee Indian--I think that is where I get my naturally darker skin. During my first year at OSU, I also looked into the Native American Longhouse (the Native American association at OSU), but again I felt no real connection to any of its members. I was so different from them. They were all so obviously Native American, many wearing their dark hair long and clothing with beads and patterns. Growing up, mom simply said, "you're Cherokee Indian Ty--the pretty Indian," but it never really meant anything. I mean, I didn't feel Indian, not like those in the Longhouse must have felt. I definitely didn't dress like them--as if I knew what a Native American should dress like. I did learn about the "Trail of Tears" from my grandma, who is from Oklahoma. In fact, she was entitled to some kind of government retribution many years ago but was ashamed or too proud to collect it. She used to tell me before I even began going to school that her grandma walked to Oklahoma, that she was also an epileptic and was raped during an epileptic seizure by a man who wasn't Native American. The funny thing is: when I did learn about "The Trail of Tears" in my history class sometime in junior high, I didn't connect the two as the same event. One was a family history. One was a school lesson. One was full of my grandma's intimate knowledge of her family, my family. The other was a neutered version of history that had no passion, no reason to be told except because it was in the next chapter in our textbook. My grandma never asked me to identify myself with the story she told me or as a Native American. It was simply one story of her grandma, a story that

she was told probably at the age that I was then. It was something to pass the time, to help me fall asleep, something to feel proud of, and, though I didn't know it then (and am only now realizing), something to connect me to my heritage. But it was one isolated story, hardly a thing to base my ethnic identity on.

Yet even in my grandmother's story lies another example of Takaki's notion of institutionalized racism in America, his "racial and exclusionist pattern," and here this pattern works against even the excluded. In "The Metaphysics of Civilization: Indians and the Age of Jackson," Takaki emphasizes the Trail of Tears as the culminating act by President Jackson to remove the Cherokee people so that white settlers could buy their lands. Jackson rationalized his actions as those of a "father" to his "red children," insisting that he wanted to be "just" and "humane" (Takaki 63). President Jackson ended up legalizing prejudice against Native Americans in the minds of America's white populations, creating a precedent, paving ways to court decisions like *McKay v. Cambell* (1871) which denied citizenship to Native Americans on the basis that they "had always been held to be distinct and independent political communities" (Takaki 28). It is this pattern of exclusion, which creates deep-seated assumptions about the Cherokee Indians, just as the Nationalization Law of 1790 did concerning Asian-Americans, that made me initially resist--or not embrace--my Native American and my Japanese-Hawaiian ancestries. I saw them as descriptions of the "other," of non-Americans, of people who weren't anything like me.

The *Dictionary of Race and Ethnic Relations* defines "ethnicity":

The actual term derives from the Greek *ethnikos*, the adjective of *ethnos*. This refers to a people or nation. In its contemporary form, ethnic still retains this basic meaning in the sense that it describes a group possessing some degree of coherence and solidarity composed of people who are, at least latently, aware of having common origins and interests. So an ethnic group is not a mere aggregate of people or a sector of a population, but a self-

conscious collection of people united, or closely related, by shared experiences. (102)

If I take this definition to be true, I must ask myself: do I have any “common origins and interests” or “shared experiences” with any ethnic group? With Japanese-Hawaiians? With Cherokee Indians? Is my grandma’s grandma enough? If I don’t feel, “at least latently,” any “origins,” does that make me not who I’ve said I am? To put it another way: who am I then, if I do not have an *ethnos* with the groups I have been born from? David Mura asks White Americans: “Why can’t I be who I am? Why can’t you think of me as a Japanese-American *and* as an individual?” (138). He says this is his response to people who say “I think of you just as a white person,” or “I think of you as an individual.” Mura holds an assumption that I have never been privileged to hold: he understands himself as a Japanese-American and as an individual. He understands himself as an individual who also fits into a larger context, that of an ethnic group: Japanese-Americans. I must re-phrase Mura’s insightful second question if I am to fit it to me. Why can’t I think of myself as a Japanese-American as well as an individual?

One factor that has been a constant millstone for me is my complexion, which I’ll explore in my first essay here, “My Complex-ion.” It has always placed me, in the eyes of others, into one or another ethnic group. Today, I am a light olive color because of almost seven consecutive years living in Oregon. But in Las Vegas, where I lived for twelve years (from my first year in elementary school until my Junior year in high school), my complexion was very dark. I was always conscious of it, especially when I passed mirrors or windows. I remember getting back from the pool one Saturday afternoon and looking into the mirror after my shower. There were well-defined white bathing suit lines circling my waist and legs. I hadn’t thought about it before, but right there, in the bathroom, I realized that maybe I could be a lighter color, that underneath my bathing suit I was white.

While living in Vegas, my mom, my brother Tad, and I moved five times into five different neighborhoods. I will only be talking about the last three in this thesis because the first two were very quick and only temporary. The first move, the initial one, was to Nellis Air Force Base, to stay with my mom's cousin Maisy, and her husband Larry, and their four daughters. We quickly moved to a small two bedroom apartment that was just too expensive for my mom's small salary. The only thing I remember about it was a large park across the street, and beyond it our school, and an afternoon when my brother picked up a pack of cigarettes lying on the grass, finding inside it a silver dollar. We only stayed in that apartment for a few months. Then we moved to North Las Vegas, to Stats Street, an almost all black neighborhood. It was government subsidized housing, poorly maintained and cockroach infested. Our school was about five blocks away, and halfway between our apartment and the school was a Circle-K. We lived on Stats for about two and half years. We moved into the apartment in the late Fall and moved out during the summer. Those two and a half years felt like five, and the five years we lived in the trailer on Pecos Street, our next move, felt like two. Pecos was a trailer park, completely confined by a six and a half foot brick wall. Our school again, both elementary and junior high schools (we were in the fourth grade when we moved in), were just three or so blocks away. And again, there was a Circle-K just three blocks away. I will concentrate on this neighborhood and my experiences there first. It is where I, for the first time, was continually conscious of my complexion and other people's assumptions about what it meant. It is when I first truly struggled with my own identity.

Our final move was to a house on the edge of East Las Vegas on a street named Ithica. For Las Vegas and its fast growth rate, this neighborhood was considered "old," but the neighborhood itself was only about fifteen years old. Our house was built in the early seventies,

maybe sixty-nine. We were bussed to Basic High School in Henderson, Nevada about ten miles down the highway because it was the closest school to us. And there was a Seven-Eleven just four blocks away across the street from the Vons supermarket on Tropicana. And sometime between our move from Pecos to Ithica, mom met Bill Peterson, a mechanic from New Jersey, and got married. Her name changed, but Tad's and mine stayed the same.

In "How I Learned to Write," Carlos Fuentes remarks about rhetoric's relation to his own identity. He says, "My passage from English to Spanish determined the concrete expression of what, before, in Washington, had been the revelation of an identity. I wanted to write and I wanted to write in order to show myself that my identity and my country were real" (93). But this identity is not simply one distinct and separate from an English or American one, instead it is simply one that is, as Fuentes himself calls it, an "enigma." He ends his essay saying, "don't classify me, read me. I'm a writer, not a genre" (110). Language has been Fuentes' way of identifying himself as a duality, as American and Mexican. However, by saying "don't classify me, read me," Fuentes is asking us not to taxonomize, but understand him on his own terms, to see him as he sees himself. This is, through the course of writing this thesis, the way I have come to understand my own identity, not as Japanese or Hawaiian or Cherokee, but as all of these and yet, unfortunately, (here is where I differ from Fuentes) none of them.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant suggest that the political engines--right, left, and center--of America since the early 1970's have one tendency in common: to "diminish the significance of race, to treat it as a mere manifestation of some other, supposedly more important, social relationship" (viii). They continue, suggesting that the ethnicity-based paradigm, the "mainstream of the modern sociology of race," states that "race was a social category," simply one determinant of an ethnic group's identity "based on [its] culture and

descent” (15). They offer this theory not as one to adopt, but as one that has been adopted in America since the African American movement in the late 1960s. It is this ethnicity-based paradigm that I see Fuentes and myself struggling against. For in this paradigm, the assumption is that “ethnic groups” simply exist, that we all fit somewhere on a landscape of ethnicity, and that everyone can find and know where they belong. Fuentes says he doesn’t belong in any one location--that he has two. I say I don’t know where mine are--do I have two, maybe three locations? But more importantly, this paradigm also offers a flat way of looking at identity and not a dynamic one--the way I am illustrating through the writing of this thesis. The ethnicity-based paradigm suggests that identity can be a fixed point, like a location on a map. Even in my discussion, it often sounds like I’m suggesting a fixed notion of identity. Yet I am using a more dynamic understanding of identity, one that is a process, much like the writing process, in which ideas and elements are in constant revision and flux. However, I’m not suggesting that identity can be a slippery-slope, which jumps from place to place, radically changing when new understandings come into the mix, instead identity is understood here as a process that is continually reaching closer, funneling down, to an ever-more-complex understanding of the individual. Fuentes, by writing his essay, has begun to do this, just as I am here.

However, Fuentes takes for granted the physical differences in hair and complexion between him and his childhood classmates in Washington. He looked like the ethnicity that he was and was never mistaken for another. Fuentes also has experiences with Spanish culture, feeling connected to his Mexican heritage through language and family. It was not strange to him that people saw him as different because he did have different experiences and felt a part of another culture (different than the mainstream American one). I can’t take for granted my skin color because, as Fuentes explains of childhood, so many people I’ve known haven’t. They have

seen the color of my skin and assumed I was Mexican or Cuban or Spanish. And even after I try to explain, it never really helped. My complexion had already shaded their eyes. Fuentes also seems to take for granted his economic position. He was born to a wealthy Mexican diplomat, a Mexican Nationalist. He was well read, and had traveled during his early years to Geneva, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, and Paris. He had to have felt some additional sense of entitlement to identify himself. His sense of who his father was, and thus who he would become, must have allowed him to feel more confident in expressing that his own “identity” and “country” “are real.”

I grew up understanding what my last name was and what my mom’s heritage was, but not what I could then take from those two things. On Stats I identified myself by seeing, very blatantly, what I wasn’t--or what I truly didn’t want to be. It seemed everywhere I turned there were those “other” people. Yet I was there with them, doing the same things they were, going to the same school. In my second essay, “Stats,” I explore the issues and complications that arose when I began seeing my neighbors’ differences, the way they differed from me, not just in skin color but in the way they lived and acted. It was my first remembered encounter with the other, the first time I began to see the boundaries and divisions that separate people. It was also a time when I began to feel different and below-average--my own distinguishing separateness.

There is an image that has been with me since Stats that is about differences--the origin of differences in my life--and is the subject of inquiry of my third essay, “Babel.” It is an image from a book I once had, the first real book I owned besides my New American Standard Bible. The book was a thick Bible storybook that contained Old and New Testament stories written for kids. I never read it. I just looked at all the pictures. They were the typical kind for Bible storybooks. I remember many looking apocalyptic. The artist used lots of dark colors: deep

reds, oranges, and muddy yellows. The men were all bearded and somewhat ugly. One particular picture I remember distinctly--because it had such a profound effect on me even as an eight or nine year old child--was the one attached to the story of the Tower of Babel. It was a full page picture of a crumbling girthy tower that looked more like a stump. It had a ring of dark clouds around its middle section, light flashing in some of its cracks. It was night, or dusk, and fire was falling from the sky. There were hundreds of men all over the tower, disturbed right in the act of construction, many falling off at different spots. Some were running away from the base with their hands in their hair. There were two things that struck me about this picture when I was a kid. The first was its obvious apocalyptic elements (of course, I couldn't have labeled them as such then). It is a dark and ominous picture, which looks suspiciously like images described in Revelation. The second was what it suggested about the nature of the story. The picture's story was that of the destruction of the tower, emphasizing it as the final act, or at least the most important act of the story. That wasn't my impression as a child or mine now.

My mom read the story to me first from the Bible then from that storybook. In Genesis, it can hardly be called a story. It is only a few verses long, maybe ten. It's not even its own chapter (It only begins the eleventh chapter). Structurally, it acts and looks like a prelude or prologue, heading the lineage section that proceeds it, and the Abram (later to become Abraham) and Lot section a bit later. It feels like a segue between two epochs: that of Noah and that of the people after Noah, his descendants--a story showing the transition from an age in which the world was unified to one that became scattered and fragmented, a world of sameness crumbling into one of differences. In the storybook, the story was a whole page long, complete and distinct from the others around it.

The story from Genesis goes something like this (I have adapted it from the NIV version in Genesis, Chapter 11):

The descendants of the great flood (those of Noah and his sons) all spoke the same language. As they moved eastward, they found a plain called Shinar (or Babylonia). They began to build a city and a great ziggurat, or tower, made of mud brick and tar that would reach from the earth to the heavens. All of this was in the hopes to make a name for themselves and be united forever with this one great accomplishment. When God came down to the city, he said, “If as one people speaking the same language, they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.” So God scattered them across the world and confused their language.

I understood the story of the Tower of Babel only as a beginning, not as a story that had an end itself. I am a descendent of those vain Babylonians (either figuratively or literally, it doesn't matter). I am living the end of that story. My brother, who is a Biblical and theology graduate student at Wesley Seminary in Washington D.C., says that one must take the stories written in the Bible as religious mythology, or parables, which are not necessarily intended to be read as historical accounts, but were written instead as accounts that explain or give insight into God's divine power and mystery. The story of Babel explains the world's fragmentation and reason why cultures and ethnicities across the globe have differences, and why those differences are meaningful and important. I understood that what happened at that great ziggurat in Babylon was only the very beginning of our civilization. Yet that picture suggested to me that the tower's destruction and the scattering of its people was the end. I don't remember the account of the story in my storybook, but I do recall my jolt of confusion when I first saw that picture and realized that was not the way I'd seen the Tower of Babel in my mind's eye. And I think the

reason I was so jolted was because throughout my entire life I've felt that fragmentation, but never more keenly than when I was in Basic Training. In my last essay, "Babel," I explore the issues of segregation and misidentification, and the cost of a social identity in that particular army situation.

I am not attempting to find an answer to America's ills regarding cultural diversity, or multiculturalism, or even identity. I am attempting to explore my own identity, the way it has been perceived and the way those perceptions affected my own understanding of myself, not to put myself on a pedestal, but because I seem to be both typical and atypical of the problem of identity in America, because I have experienced things that, on remembrance, have helped me come to terms with my identity, funneling it down and at the same time complicating it.

The nice thing about America is that it is filled with people from all over the world with backgrounds and experiences with cultures that are so divergent that it's hard to even attempt a list. The bad thing about this is that America is filled with people from all over the world with backgrounds and experiences with cultures that are so divergent that it's hard to list them. What I'm saying is that America is not a typical country in which most of its residents feel cultural, religious, and ethnic ties to one another. We live in a country that celebrates the gaps that exist between each of us. We are individuals, lone-wolves--everyone is trying to assert himself, to be her true self, to be unique in the crowd. I think this is why fashion movements like "grunge" get to be so popular so fast, and even become small counter-cultures. We do things to distinguish ourselves. We do things not to fit in but to look out of place, a clichéd diamond in the rough--a rough consisting of other self-proclaimed diamonds. It is the opposite of this quality in Americans that J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur applauded in his epistolary novel, *Letters From An American Farmer*. a quality in Americans his narrator, James, calls "new." At one point,

James says: “*He* is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds . . . Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men” (70). Crèvecoeur is defining a new citizen, an American, one who is radically different from his European counterpart. He establishes here a philosophy that will get well used in future generations of Americans to identify themselves: the “melting pot.” Crèvecoeur also establishes an idea that many Americans today fight against: the idea that all Americans are the same, that we are all on equal footing, and can be considered one unified “kind” of people. Piggy-backed on this idea is the notion of the “American dream,” of the rugged individual pulling himself up by his own bootstraps, making it on his own, doing it his way. However, what isn’t stated in any of this is the fact that this “American dream” has been exclusively accessible to certain kinds of Americans, ones whose differences aren’t racial (as opposed to ethnic, connoting differences in exclusively European ancestry) ones.

And so today, we see multicultural programs trying to accommodate these feelings of inequality and underrepresented racial and ethnic cultures in our public schools. This is not to say there are not true differences--in fact, that is what much of this thesis is about: the differences--but should these differences be at issue, made the issues? If they are, then who has the power to investigate them and what can our assumptions about those differences be? When I think of differences, it is negative. I think of aggression, of barriers, of obstacles, of the gaps that are dwelt upon by opposing sides. The whole debate over multiculturalism in America has recently made me reread Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall.” The poem opens:

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,

That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it.

And spills the upper boulders in the sun;

And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.

It is these “gaps [that] even two can pass abreast” that I end my thesis on. On the one hand, I am celebrating and acknowledging the differences that exist between me and many white Americans. On the other hand, I hope to suggest that gaps in the walls that separate can also be points of entry.

Close to the end of Frost’s poem, the narrator reiterates and extends his opening line by pondering his neighbor’s words, “Good fences make good neighbors” :

“*Why* do they make good neighbors? Isn’t it

Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.

Before I built a wall I’d ask to know

What I was walling in or walling out,

And to whom I was like to give offense.

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,

That wants it down.” I could say “Elves” to him,

I can’t say that the differences in my life, between me and my neighbors, have made us “good neighbors,” that the fences we built made us any more friendly to one another, but then, just as in the poem, it depends on which neighbor you ask. The extension that Frost puts on his initial line is the phrase, “[t]hat wants it down.” This is the difference the poem elicits; this is the dichotomy that the wall forces onto these neighbors. The narrator, after understanding that there are no cows, that one needs something to “wall in” or “wall out,” ponders the effect those walls have on neighbors and which neighbor might want the wall down. The narrator knows that the wall serves only to separate because his (or her) neighbor only sees it serving that function. Yet

Frost suggests much more here. He suggests the power of assumptions and preconceived notions of differences among people. He ironically lets us understand that neighbors, and here we may insert ethnicities, hold up their own walls just as much as they try to tear down others’.

But we cannot simply insert ethnicities into this equation so easily. Orchards and people are different things altogether. While Frost acknowledges the dichotomy that the wall separates and symbolizes here (that there is a debate between building walls among people and tearing them down, that walls don’t necessarily make good neighbors but divided ones), he doesn’t acknowledge the real problem--and maybe he can’t with the analogy he is using here, or the one I’m placing on his poem about simply two neighbors. The real problem is: that among people, especially in America, there are racial and ethnic differences, walls, that cannot be broken because they are differences that must always be in every cultural equation. The walls that create identity are always being mended, not because we are ignorant or prejudice, necessarily, but because those walls are what make us who we are. However, there is still something to Frost’s sentiment that “[t]wo can pass abreast.” Is it possible to mend a wall and leave parts of it down? That is what I’m attempting here in this thesis by revisiting my experiences.

Ironically, in the Babel story, it is also a wall that is destroyed. But in Babylon, the people saw their tower, their great wall, as a unifying structure, one that took everyone to build and symbolized their unity. The destruction of it meant fragmentation and the creation of many smaller walls that signified their differences. Frost hints at the power of smaller walls, showing that walls must have entryways, places where each side can meet and “pass abreast”—I emphasize “pass” for it isn’t “dwell”—yet those gaps aren’t that easily negotiated because, just as Frost’s wall illustrates, the borders between and among differing ideologies and ethnicities are constantly being rebuilt in new ways and from different sources. And this is where I end my thesis, with

walls, barriers, not to propose any agenda for change, not to propose a way to create passages in the walls of difference--I think, as Frost does, that they already exist, that maybe we choose to ignore them. I also realize that proposing an agenda for change is too lofty a goal to set for myself. Instead, I present my life's experiences as one wall that is both being mended and torn down.

Complex-ion

In Spanish she called through the crowd: "Put a towel over your shoulders." In public, she didn't want to say why. I knew.

That incident anticipates the shame and sexual inferiority I was to feel in later years because of my dark complexion. I was to grow up an ugly child.

Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger Of Memory*

One day in the third grade in Mr. Hicks' class, we had an assignment to do at home which asked us to describe the color or colors that we found in our skin. I went home that day, consulted with my mom and studied my skin very carefully. Mr. Hicks had always liked me. He offered me a "tester" of the Halloween party candy before the party, saying to me: "Ty, shhhh, what do you say we test some of this candy?" And on Valentine's day: "Ty, come here, lets try some of this Valentine's candy, just to make sure it's safe for the rest of the class." I liked him too. He seemed kind of fatherly, or big brotherly. When he asked me to share my conclusions, my assessment of the colors of my skin, I said: "My skin is dark red, a little orange, some yellow, and white." I saw dark red from the Cherokee Indian in me, giving my skin a tan which seemed a "dark red" and not a brown. I saw "a little orange" from the mixture of Indian and Hawaiian, the blend of the two genes. I saw "yellow" from the heritage that I identified myself as, Japanese. My skin, especially around my palms and joints, seemed more yellow, or olive color, blending from the darker color of my arms. And I saw white in my finger nails and scalp. I didn't pretend to see these colors. I actually saw them. As I put my arm and hand up just an inch or two from my face, I could see specks, dots on the surface of my skin. Some were dark red, some yellow, some orange, and some white. When I spoke these words, I got to yellow and the entire class erupted into laughter, including Mr. Hicks. He said, "Yellow?" through his

bursting. I could only look at him, his stomach burping up laughs intermittently, the rest of the class, all around me, laughing. I could hear kids repeating my words: "red," "orange," "yellow"?

My first reaction was to cry, to feel ashamed, to run out of that room full of laughter. What was funny about being those colors, I thought, looking around the room at a sea of brown and white children, none of whom were even close to my complexion--all were either African-American or Caucasian. Mr. Hicks said, "don't you mean *light-brown* or something like that?" raising his eyebrows on the words "light-brown" and smiling. I couldn't say anything; the wall of laughter was slamming into my face and I felt suffocated. I just looked at him. And he moved on to the next student.

I can sympathize with Richard Rodriguez' statement that he "was to grow up an ugly child." In Mr. Hicks' class, throughout the rest of the school year, I felt "shame" and "inferiority"--of course, at the time I couldn't call them that. I felt that way because the ridicule I received was, in a way, condoned by Mr. Hicks himself. I remember feeling unworthy and even ashamed to sit next to a girl I thought was the prettiest in the class (I think her name was Stephanie). All I wanted to do was sit in the seat next to her, but when we changed our seats during the second half of the year, David Simms got to sit next to her. I was too hesitant to get close enough to her, too scared that she would not want me to sit next to her. Unlike Rodriguez, the towel was not thrown over my shoulders. It was thrown over my head. I was told to be "light-brown," and when I didn't see or understand the obvious reasons for that distinction, I was laughed at. This would be just one incident of many in my childhood that would make me feel tragically misunderstood.

Throughout adolescence, I felt myself mysteriously marked. Nothing else about my appearance would concern me so much as the fact that my complexion was dark.

Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger Of Memory*

When I was about twelve or thirteen, living in the trailer park, I had this neighbor across the street and down one space who hated me. He was a roundish guy, had long straight hair, talked gruff and loud--sometimes I swear I could hear him and his wife screaming at each other (she was a wiry, raily thing with long brown hair and thin arms). He called us "Beaners" and "wet-backs" a lot. He'd yell those names at us in the street as we walked by his trailer as often as he could.

"Shut your God damn dog up--fuckin Beaners!" he'd say. My mom told me to just brush off comments like that, said he obviously didn't know who I was, so I shouldn't worry about him or his opinion. I tried. Believe me, I tried, but I was never able to. Mom wasn't the one being called a fuckin beaner or a greasy wet-back. She wasn't looked down upon by his face in his front window. Every time I had forgotten about him, he'd say out his window: "keep walking Beaners." His blatant bigotry against me, just because of the color of my skin, has stayed with me, crept back over the years behind other people's words. Yet even in my circle of friends--those who knew I was Japanese-Hawaiian--looked down upon Mexicans. I looked down upon them, jokingly calling them wet-backs and beaners too. It was just what everyone did. So it hurt even more when I was called those names, but I was never able to equate that hurt to the people I was calling names.

All of his anger came to a head one night. He threw a rock at my dog, a black mutt with short hair, making him looked like a Labrador puppy. But he never grew. He just followed me home from school one day right out of the desert (mom never believed that, I think because of

how clichéd it sounds). Bobby barked a bit too much sometimes, especially at night. He was a good dog though, always watched the place, woke mom up one night and saved us and our trailer from almost burning down. That night, Tad and I were watching TV, then BANG! RACK! RACK! We looked out the window and there he was standing on his porch, yelling at us and our dog. I was scared. He stood on his porch, shaking his fist at us, his long hair pulled back in a ponytail, a thin red bandanna across his forehead, stomach bulging through his tee-shirt stretched over it. Then he yelled: "Go back where you belong! I'll shoot that fuckin dog if he barks again!" All the while, Bobby growled and barked at him behind our fenced corral, and I prayed that Bobby would just shut up.

I was confused by his words, by his actions. Where did I belong? What was he talking about? Was that why he hated me, because I moved in across the street from him? Because I "belonged" somewhere else? Mom called the police. He calmed down and denied everything. Mom made a statement, and that was it. But it was enough for me to be completely scared of him and doubt myself. He was a grown man throwing a rock at a dog, I thought. Could it have been just because Bobby was barking? My dog barked every night. There had to be more.

It wasn't until I was a senior in high school here in Oregon, when mom and I were talking about all the moves we'd made, that I found out that many of our Pecos trailer park neighbors hadn't accepted us, or even wanted us there. The management refused my mother's first petition to live there, telling her that they didn't like the way my brother and I looked--they meant that we looked Mexican. Mom got a lawyer, and they recanted, allowing us to move in. Mom didn't tell us because she didn't want us to feel any tension, the tension I know she felt every time we went to the park's pool and there were other families there, the tension she felt

every time she had to pay our rent in the office and Fred, the manager, or the secretary, watched us askance.

There were only a few of the kids that ever really "liked" Tad and me. There was Chris Nowacki and Heather Adair and Amy Greggory--but they too were the "misfits" of the trailer park, the "trouble makers." The rest played with us sometimes, did stuff with us, but they'd lie about us, blame us for all kinds of things around the park, things we never did, rocks thrown at trailers, chalk graffiti on pavement. Later they'd look at Tad and me like we were "bad boys," like we deserved the blame for all those things we'd never done, socially branding us with a dark, scarlet "M." I never caused any of that trouble, yet I constantly, especially in front of the adults of the park, felt as if I truly was a "bad kid"--under the heat of their accusing eyes, stripping me down to my skin. Many times I wished I was bad, so that I could get those people back for treating me the way they did.

Now, I realize the incredible and subtle prejudice and bigotry that many of my Pecos neighbors felt against me. There was no other reason to hate me except for the color of my skin. The incidents that I had allegedly been involved in were merely excuses to punish me, to substantiate how bad my "kind" was. Every family there was white and many built walls around me, trying to separate me from them and their children. They didn't want me entering their world.

One Saturday morning, Jon Copsey, the trailer park manager's grandson, was over at our trailer talking to us. It was early, about nine o'clock, and we were planning something to do. Our barbecue grill was between the wooden steps that led up to our front door and Bobby's fenced corral. Jon was standing and we were sitting on the steps. Somehow we began drawing on our paved porch with the charcoal briquettes that were left in the barbecue. As Jon was

leaving, he took his briquette and threw it across our lawn right into the neighbor's fiberglass awning. It hit with a very loud BANG. It left a good size black stain on the cream-colored awning. Tad and I quickly scurried inside. Jon ran home. The next week we got a notice that our neighbors, an elderly couple, had filed a complaint against Tad and me for throwing rocks at their trailer. We said we didn't do it, that we couldn't have done anything like that. Of course, they didn't believe us, and when we tried to appeal to Fred Copsey, he didn't want to discuss it. That was our first warning. Mom suggested that Tad and I go next door and apologize, but we argued that we didn't do it. Apologizing would only incriminate us, and we felt stupid apologizing for something we didn't even do. Mom said that it was in the best interest for our relations with our neighbors. We had to live next to them, and it would be better in the long run if we tried to put this experience behind us. No sense in anyone carrying grudges. Our neighbors accepted our apology but never talked to us afterwards. In fact, that year, they erected a chain link fence between their carport and our lawn. And whenever our neighbor got a chance, he'd stand on his side of the fence telling us to be careful and not hit his fence. Sometimes he'd just watch us play in our yard, looking through his kitchen window at us.

The second warning came as a result of the pool incident. The pool was right behind the clubhouse. It was a good size one with a deep end at 12 feet. And when you reached the ripe age of thirteen, you got the privilege of swimming without parental supervision. From the day Tad and I turned thirteen until we left the trailer park, we had our swimsuits on and were running off to the pool every chance we got. No more asking mom to go to the pool. We could go whenever the whim struck us. One August or July afternoon, Tad, Chris, Heather, her brother Pat, Amy, a girl name Chirsty who didn't live in the park long, and I were all swimming in the pool. It was just us, no grown ups around. It was late in the afternoon. The clubhouse office

was closed. Fred and the secretary had gone home. And our playing in the pool began to get a bit out of hand. Everyone was splashing water at each other. People were taking running leaps into the pool, jumping high into the air for big cannon balls. We were all screaming and having fun. And eventually, after about half an hour, we all went home. It seemed harmless, our fun. But a few days later, mom was approached at the office by Fred. He said that Tad and I had been "rough-housing" and "carelessly and unsafe playing" at the pool on such and such a day. A nearby resident had called him personally because of all the noise. This was our second warning. I don't know if any of the other kids had received a warning from Fred, but I do know that none of those kids, except Chris, were "allowed" to play with Tad and me again.

It seems clear now why mom never wanted to do much in the trailer park, why she didn't want to go to the Halloween and Christmas parties at the club house, help out at the annual trailer park car wash. She just didn't want to face that cloaked aggression, that tension that both Tad and I felt every time we went out to play. And now that I think about it, Chris' dad, Heather's parents, and Amy's parents didn't participate in any of the park's functions either. While all the parents cloistered themselves in their trailers, we--the kids--could not. We had to go outside. We were kids. We had to face Fred in his roving golf cart, barking at us: "You kids, stay off the lawns!--glaring at us as he whizzed by. We all knew that he only said those things to us kids when Tad and I were around. Once Fred walked a half block, through the large fenced yard behind the club house, through the olive grove, to gripe at Tad, Chris, and me for some trailer park mishap. I don't remember what he said, only his biting, accusatory tone of voice, and our confusion because none of us had any clue as to what he was referring to. At the time, it was just another reason to see Fred as this weird, old, mean man. But it also shows the extent that Fred would go just to reprimand us. And all of his reprimands had a point: in the second or third year

of our five year stay at Pecos trailer park, Fred sent another letter to my mom, saying that we would be kicked out, forced to leave, if Tad and I made any more trouble. We'd been "warned twice," the third meant eviction. He just wasn't going to stand for any more of our trouble.

Throughout adolescence, I felt myself mysteriously marked. Nothing else about my appearance would concern me so much as the fact that my complexion was dark . . . In three-way mirrors at department stores, I'd see my profile dramatically defined by a long nose, but it was really only the color of my skin that caught my attention.

Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory*

Not very many people in the trailer park were as vocal about their opinion as my neighbor across the way, or even Fred's somewhat passive and semi-diplomatic opposition to us, but most felt, to a lesser degree, what both had expressed to us. I know because it was their kids who told me. Eric, the son of the assistant manager, told me that his mom said that he wasn't really allowed to play with my brother and me--but he would. I never asked him why. He wasn't all that nice to me anyway, so I didn't care much. He was a big kid, a grade behind me, but taller and stronger. He was held back in school a year for being "slow," so actually he was my age. Eric liked to play the bully whenever he could. And when I played with Jon and Ray Copsey, the manager's grandsons, I got the same kind of statement. They weren't allowed to play with me, but they were going to anyway in secret. So I'd hide down the street at the small sand park and wait to play with them, wait for Eric or Jon to leave their houses and come to the park to meet me. But when Heather Adair's parents wouldn't let me play with her or her brother Patrick, it seemed almost too unfair. Heather said it was because her mom had heard about the trouble I'd gotten into, the rocks I liked to throw at trailers, the chalked words I liked to write on the street. She rode the bus with me. She sat next to me, talked to me, knew me. We were friends, and yet she couldn't see me. Her parents both worked afternoons and evenings. She'd sneak out at night,

and we'd walk around the trailer park or talk in her fenced-in backyard in the dark, me always half in the shadows, ready to make a quick get-away if her mom or dad should come home early.

"My mom and dad said I'm not supposed to see you anymore because they said that you are a trouble maker--that you're trouble." I got that all the time, but when Heather told me, it hurt because it sounded like she half believed it. I considered her immune to the slander that Fred, his son Jon Sr., and Eric's parents threw around the park. This happened during our sixth grade year, and I had a hidden crush on Heather. We would meet each other at the bus stop, sometimes sharing a piece of bubble gum or candy bar together. The bus stop was just around the corner off Pecos. We had to walk out of the park and down a block or so, then turn left. We waited in the cul de sac just a half a block down where the sun was in front of us so that we could see clouds of gnats hovering in spots until we wooshed them away. Sometimes we could cut through a couple of yards, jump a fence or two, and get to the bus stop first--the cul de sac was on the eastern edge of the trailer park--but I always felt guilty doing that, going through other people's yards like a thief, as if I'd stolen something. I think that's why my brother and I were always the last ones to the bus stop.

Many times Heather and I would sit together. I'd always try to stand close to her before the bus got there, so that when it came time to get on, I'd naturally follow her on and sit next to her. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it didn't. After school, I'd purposely fool around with my friends in the shade of the roofed sidewalks across from where the busses loaded on the asphalt playground, always keeping an eye out for Heather. When I saw her, I'd say, "well, see ya." When I did get to sit next her, I remember talking about horses, and unicorns, about mythology. She, like most girls her age, loved horses and unicorns. I knew a lot about mythology, the Griffon, Medusa, the Minotaur and the ball of string. I even knew about Norse mythology: Odin.

"the All-Father," Thor, "the god of Thunder," Loki, Seth, Hemidal. She had this blue and pink notebook with a pair of unicorns on the front that she always set in her lap. I remember afternoons riding home, just staring at that notebook, thinking how much it seemed like a notebook Heather would have.

The moment *it* happened was one afternoon on the bus. Heather's leg touched mine. She'd sat closer than usual to me that day, probably by accident. I didn't want to move. Her leg was so warm, so soft, even through her jeans. It happened all of a sudden: her leg touched mine, and I couldn't move even though I felt a slight cramp coming on. I didn't want to risk the release of her leg, and the feeling of warmth I got from it. There was the green seat, the hum and grind of the bus' chassis under us; there was the squeak of the window frames whenever the bus made a turn--a sound made almost all at once, one chorus-like screeeeeeek--and her leg and mine. I decided to call her once I got home, but that was risky since her dad was back from Arizona (he was some kind of traveling salesman, at least, that's what she said her mom and dad told her, but she confided in me, said she thought it was something else, maybe something illegal) and now they didn't want Heather to be associating with me or my brother. I told her to stay by the phone and I'd call her right when I got home. I tried to make it sound like it wasn't anything special or important, just something to do. I tried to walk home slowly, but Tad wanted to get home; Cassy, Heather's little sister, wanted to get home too.

When I got home, I sat holding the receiver of our "slimline" for a few minutes, listening to the dial tone. Once Tad went into the other room to watch "Gilligan's Island," I called, but something must have gone wrong. I must have waited too long. Heather's dad answered the phone.

"Hello," he said. I paused for a moment.

"Ah, is Heather there?"

"Who is this?" I wanted to lie. I wanted to say any other name than my own but couldn't. He was a grown-up, and a man--I'd never been comfortable around men (I think because there'd just never been any around). I could hear Cassy in the background saying something.

"Ah, this is Ty." I tried to sound as nice and courteous as possible, but I think it ended up sounding suspicious and guilty.

"Sorry Ty. Heather's not allowed to talk to you. Please don't call her anymore." I hung up quickly and just sat there, looking at the phone, a goldenrod color. I kept thinking, "I shouldn't have called her. I shouldn't have called her." Her dad seemed so calm, so dispassionate when he said: "Heather's not allowed to talk to you." The words sounded almost nice, almost friendly. I'd only seen her dad once. He was a shorter fellow, a little on the round side. He had on a light blue cotton dress shirt and slacks. His hair was thinning, and he seemed to carry a weird expression on his face, not a smile or a frown, just a flat expression.

When I was about twelve, a friend and I were walking through a nearby desert. "The desert" (my brother and I named it this) was actually just a large piece of land that was undeveloped, with lots of tumble weeds, large tree-like bushes, and dirt. It was a little more than one square mile in area and was situated between Charleston Boulevard and Stuart Avenue on two opposing sides, and Pecos Street (the street my trailer park was on) and some other street I can't recall the name of. "The desert" was always forbidden by mom. She used to say, "there's drunks and winos in there just waiting for some young kid to snatch up." What they were going to do with the young kids was always a mystery--but I never asked. It wasn't unlikely; people were missing all the time, many of them young kids my age. So my brother and I usually never

walked through the desert. We knew mom wouldn't lie to us. Plus, she said if the winos didn't get us the snakes probably would. I didn't like snakes. But this particular time I went, not because I didn't feel scared or unaffected by my mother's warnings, but because my friend, Mace, was with me and because I didn't want him to know that I wasn't afraid to go into the desert. Everyone went into the desert--at least everyone our age.

Mace was a tall kid, about six foot one. He was of medium build and quite athletic, which at the time seemed Herculean to me, a five foot tall, twelve year old who weighed in at a meager 90 pounds (if that). Mace was also a number of years older than me, five to be exact. He was seventeen at the time. So the desert lost its scary dimensions next to him. If anything happened, at least Mace would be there.

I had just gotten back from a vacation in Oregon where I'd bought a wrist-rocket. I loved this thing. It could shoot rocks and marbles blocks away and high into the air. Mace and I decided to go into the desert and hunt around, just look for stuff to shoot with it. Walking through the brambles and weeds over rocks and through dry bushes bigger than me was confusing. I remember thinking: "I have to keep up with him." Because of Mace's height, he could cover a lot more ground than me. Mace wasn't afraid to step on a bush or walk right through a dried up plant. My feet always seemed unsure, a bit shaky and clumsy. I kept trying to dodge all those obstacles.

At this point, my memory runs very fast. Out from the direction we were headed came these two Mexicans, one tall one, maybe almost Mace's height, and one short one, about two or so inches taller than me. The tall one was riding a beat up bike. I don't remember much more about them except that I was very scared. I just stood there while Mace tried to talk our way around them. They wanted my wrist-rocket and demanded it. The tall one asked several times

in a calm but confident manner--that's what scared me. It sounded like no matter what we did, he was going to beat us up. Mace took my wrist-rocket from my hand and gave it to them. Then, right before they left, the smaller one seemed to have some compassion for me.

"Give the kid some money for it."

"No," the big one said. My face and ears tingled and burned. I just wanted them to leave.

"C'mon, we gotta give him something."

I don't remember if it was just the short Mexican that gave me money or both. I got about six bucks for my wrist-rocket. In Oregon it cost me ten. After that incident in the desert, I hated deserts even more, but mostly I hated Mexicans. I hated their accent. I hated the dark color of their skin. I hated their black, coarse hair. I hated what they represented to me: mean, dark, ugly, illiterate, poor people.

I had a dream once, years after I'd lost my wrist-rocket:

I'm delivering newspapers in the morning, throwing them on trailer porches. Mace is on the bike behind me, peddling and steering for me, his arms caging me in. I'm just throwing. One trailer after another. The porches whiz by fast, but I keep throwing. He wants to keep most of the collection money. I say it's mine, and he should get his own job. He takes my collection money and says that he *likes* me. I say, "Oh, okay." He puts his arm around me, squeezing me. I remember what mom and Bill had said about him: "He acts funny. I don't think you should hang around him anymore." I realize at that moment, looking at Mace's smiling eyes, blue in the morning sun, that I don't want him as a friend--I don't like him. I say, "Don't. You're a guy." His eyes gleam down at me in the sun. He tells me we can start our own business with my brother as a third partner, a candy business. We can go door to door selling chocolate turtles. I

tell him to just go away, to leave me. I run, and he runs. I'm running and now a Mexican is chasing me. He yells something in Spanish at me. I run, but can only run in slow motion. He runs faster.

When we moved across town and began attending Basic High School on the eastern edge of Las Vegas, we encountered more Mexicans, a gang. Their name was some Spanish name like Los Lobos (that was our school's mascot, "the wolves"). Basic High was situated right off the highway on the near edge of Henderson, Nevada, an industrial town on the rim of Las Vegas, only about five miles away. The mining factories seen off the highway clunked out uranium and levi jeans. At this time, we lived in a house in East Las Vegas, right near the city limits. Technically, Basic High was closer than any other school, so we were zoned to it. It was a good school, less than ten years old. All the halls were enclosed, so walking from class to class was never a long or bad trek. There was only the one problem, the Mexican gang. Everyone just stayed away from them.

One day at lunch period, I'd been mouthing off to this girl in line--I called her a "bitch." She happened to be the gang leader's girlfriend. Out of all the Mexican girls in the school, I had to sling an insult at her. From across the lunchroom, she said: "That's him right there. He's the one that called me a bitch." The thing is: she was pointing at Tad, not me. Tad and I were twins, and from about the age of seven, there was really only one way to tell us apart. Tad had a mole on his left cheek. But even those who knew the mole was there would forget who had the mole. It seemed to just confuse people more. We dressed the same, had the same haircut, talked alike. But I was the one in line calling that Mexican girl a bitch because she seemed to think she was the most important person there. She called me a "dick," and said I could go "fuck off."

"I don't know what you are talking about. I didn't talk to you and I didn't call you a bitch." That's all Tad said to her. And that's all he told her boyfriend. I didn't say anything. I just sat there and let this Mexican girl and her boyfriend-gang leader accuse my brother.

After lunch, we went to the restroom; that's where they cornered us. Well, actually they cornered Tad. The gang leader had one of his boys keep the hall monitor busy while he and the others were in the bathroom. There was Tad, our friend Andy Deither, me, and about six Mexicans including the leader. I kept running in and out of the bathroom, not really knowing what to do. Should I call for help, should I see if this will just blow over? Andy just stood there looking at them. The gang leader kept saying, "why'd you call my girlfriend a bitch?" Before long, the leader hit Tad in the face, glancing his eye. Tad put his hands over his face, covering his eyes, hoping his contacts wouldn't come out and knelt down on one knee while the Mexican kicked him in the face a couple of times. Tad didn't say or do anything. He didn't fight back--otherwise, the others would have jumped in, I'm sure. They all seemed ready to. He didn't tell them I was the one who'd said it. He just let himself get kicked. And when I think about it, what other option did Tad have? Tad was the only one there who really *knew* what to do.

Two days after the incident happened, Tad and I were talking in passing. Since the scene in the bathroom, we'd tried to avoid mentioning the entire subject. We began to argue about something. Tad said: "You're the one. You called her a bitch." I knew Tad had probably known, but I was hoping he hadn't. I couldn't say a thing. I just left. Those Mexicans had done this. I just knew it. They had put this thing between my brother and me.

I remember one time sitting in front of my mom's full-length closet mirror with my best friend Chris. We were both about fourteen. We'd just gotten back from the trailer park's swimming pool and were only wearing our trunks with towels slung over our shoulders. I don't

remember why we were in front of that mirror, only that I felt inferior because of my much darker color. Chris was a tall, thin, fair-haired boy. When he got an ounce too much sun his cheeks turned a pink-red, like grapefruit. He never tanned all that much. If he did, it would last a week or so and vanish, leaving his skin clean and white. I, on the other hand, tanned under lamp light. And in Las Vegas, where it's sunny over 300 days each year, I was always very dark. Looking at Chris standing next to me in front of my mom's mirror made me realize the plain difference between us. Chris was always too good of a friend to ever mention this difference, but it was there. I felt it at school, in the trailer park, when we met other people, especially girls. I realized then, at that moment, in the mirror, why I had never considered myself attractive, why I couldn't consider myself attractive in Las Vegas. Why I never had a girlfriend until my junior year of high school, and why I had always felt a barrier between Chris and me.

I was dark.

My hair was straight, black, and coarse. I looked Mexican. I looked, at times, even Black. I couldn't do anything about it. All my friends wore clean white skins, while I had to wear this dark one. A few years back, I was taking my little brother, Casey, to McDonalds (he, my mom, and step-dad live in Portland now), and he made this incredible racist remark. I asked him how his school was going (he was about 6 at the time, going to a private Christian day-school). And while waiting in the drive-through line, rain peppering our windshield, we got onto the subject of his classmates, who they were, how many he had.

"Black people aren't appropriate in my class. They belong in another class."

Now I know that my mom never taught him attitudes like this, so I asked him where he learned something like that. His teacher had told him this. I looked at him in the car, his white

little arms folded, hands in his lap, looking up at me, then at the window where his Happy Meal was about to come through.

"Well, what am I?" I asked him. And I think for the first time in his life, he noticed the difference between the colors of our skins. We adopted him the day he was born, and even though mom had always made it a point to tell him that he was adopted because "he was so special and we wanted him," he'd never yet thought about the physical differences between us. In a way, I'm sorry I forced him to see differences between us. He looked at me for a second or two and said: "Oh, well, you're brown." My instinct was to laugh, but I didn't. Casey saw a difference between us, and he'd already, through his teacher's opinion, made value judgments based on race. Did he equate the difference he saw between us into a racial one? Was he going to place a value on me based on our different complexions?

Everyone I see on the street is tall and good-looking. That, first of all, intimidates me, embarrasses me. Sometimes I see an unusually short man, but he is still two inches taller than I am, as I compare his height with mine when we pass each other. Then I see a dwarf coming, a man with an unpleasant complexion--and he happens to be my own reflection in the shop window. I don't know how many times I have laughed at my own ugly appearance right in front of myself. Sometimes, I even watched my reflection that laughed as I laughed. And every time that happened, I was impressed by the appropriateness of the term 'yellow race.'"

from his London diaries, circa 1902,
Natsume Soseki

Stats

We were talking about the parable of the talents, about achievement, working hard, doing the best you can do, blah-blah-blah, when the teacher called on the restive Ken Harvey for an opinion. Ken thought about it . . . "I just want to be average." That woke me up. Average?! Who wants to be average?

Mike Rose, *Lives on The Boundary*

During the second grade in Mrs. Whitmore's class, I was a remedial reader. I had to go to a special smaller room, not a classroom, but a small room divided by a thin partition, which sectioned us off from the other remedial reading group (the one my brother happened to be in). Our section of the room had one bookshelf with a handful of thin books, each packed with lots of illustrations, and a small oval table that was just big enough for the six of us (including the teacher). I went there everyday at reading time while all my classmates stayed in our big classroom and read the second grade reader, being broken up into groups: the red group (the "bright" students), the blue group (the "average" ones), and the green group (the "slower" ones). While the rest of the class got to read from our thick reader, I was sitting in a small room reading the song lyrics to "Mary Poppins"—"Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious."

My reading teacher was younger and thinner than Mrs. Whitmore. She (I can't remember her name) was probably close to my own age now. I remember her light brown hair pulled back in a pony tail, making her seem more approachable—definitely more than Mrs. Whitmore and her large, wispy, salt and pepper colored bun, a few tufts of hair spraying out here and there. My brother's reading teacher gave her students Peppridge Farms fish crackers when they read well or did something in their class. Tad was always coming home with little bags of fish crackers. Everyday I hoped my teacher would pull out a bag of them, but she never did. When I read a passage, she would say: "nicely done. Thank you, Ty." I couldn't get beyond the fact that on the other side of the partition, where my brother was, they were eating fish crackers. And beyond

that, the rest of my class was in our big room reading the book I was supposed to be reading. Our second grade reader was a typical one, a large, square-shaped, green, hard back book. It was the thickest one we had in our desks, thicker even than our math book. I had gotten one the first week of class, used it one day, then went off to the remedial class. It sat in my desk for the remainder of the semester. I can remember holding it in my hands. I've always liked the feel and heft of books. I especially like this one, its thickness, its weight, the smell of the binding glue between its pages (like the smell of brown crayons), how it felt cold in the morning when I first arrived in the room. Sometimes I'd grab it in both hands just to feel it's thickness and weight. By the middle of second grade, I liked the idea of reading, moving my finger across each line of words, speaking them. I liked that feeling of being smart when doing it, but I wasn't very good at it. I didn't know a lot of words, usually mispronounced them, and always felt a little dumb because of how slow I read.

I think that's why I tried so hard in the reading contest that year. At first, I wasn't sure about doing it at all. There were so many smart kids in our class. There was this really tall red-haired girl who seemed to always have all the answers, and she was in the advanced reading group. But I gave it a shot. And after the first week, after seeing my name on the board in the back of the class next to everyone else's, I was determined to go all out. Everyday I went to the library, checked out books, took them home, and read them. I remember sitting until way after dinner in my room, reading slowly line after line, page after page. Today I don't remember any of those books, only that there was nothing else on my mind during that first semester of second grade but to win that reading contest. Everyday I read a book or two, short ones. I would turn in the reading slips to Mrs. Whitmore, signed by mom, proving I'd done the reading. She would update the board each morning. After the first couple of weeks, I was way ahead of everyone (a

third of the class decided not to do it); however, the tall red haired girl had somehow read one or two shy of my total. She could easily pull ahead of me if she tried, and she did for a week or more. But in the end, I won by a small margin. I got trophies, two: I'd won first place in my class and the overall first in the entire second grade. I think the red haired girl got tired of reading so many books after six or so weeks. She knew she was a good reader, a good student.

I, too, got tired of reading after about the fourth week, but I had to win that contest. Mrs. Whitmore kept talking about it, saying how well we were all doing. She kept saying my name, "Ty is leading everyone with twenty-two books read. I hope everyone will keep up the hard work." At the time, I didn't have any conscious reasons to win the contest except that I just wanted to win. I wasn't really happy in my remedial class, with the stuff we were reading--I wanted to read out of the big book, the one the rest of the class read from. I'm not really sure that I even connected the winning of the contest with being placed back into the class during reading time, but it was winning that contest that helped me begin to feel "average" for the first time in my scholastic life. Before the contest, I constantly felt behind everyone else. And to make things worse still, I was shy and very quiet, teased everyday by a boy who sat next to me, a white boy; and, sometime during that first semester, I had to have my mom come to school because Mrs. Whitmore thought I didn't speak much English. I would fall asleep in class everyday because of the allergy medicine I had to take. Once I was shot with a squirt-gun by Mrs. Whitmore--the teacher of all people!--because I had fallen asleep again. I woke up groggy, confused, and humiliated. All I could do was sit there and watch as, around my desk, the entire class, including the teacher, laughed at me. It is no wonder that, years later in college when I read Richard Rodriguez' book, *Hunger for Memory*, I immediately identified with him and his own identification with Caliban of *The Tempest*. George Lamming, an Afro-Caribbean writer,

has made similar identifications with Caliban in his childhood schooling. Laura Rice, in an unpublished conference paper, says that Lamming “is neither eurocentric, nor *other than*, but rather the composite creator who is heir to both.”⁷ Rice identifies the dual identity that Lamming felt, Rodriguez felt, the characters Fola and Caliban felt, and finally I felt. This dual identity is caused by language, more specifically, by English taught through a Eurocentric lens. Most importantly, language (we may also, hesitantly, use the term “literacy”), in all these cases, was a tool to subjugate and make feel inferior the person that had an identity outside the ideology contained in the English language. For me, my subjugation had less to do with learning language (for language has empowered me) than from the schooling process itself, and it is the Caliban figure, one who in the process of being “civilized” is pronounced uncivilizable by his European overseer, that I associate with myself. It is the “other than” quality that I paradoxically both denied existed and tried to eradicate that I find common between Caliban and me.

In Mrs. Whitmore's class, there were also these four black kids who sat in the back of the class, and they didn't seem to care whether they did any work or not. All they wanted to do was goof around and draw race cars and knobby-wheeled trucks. During reading time, they would just sit at their desks and do nothing, books closed, “tough” smirks on their faces, slouched in their chairs off in their corner of the classroom, whispering to each other, chuckling. They weren't dumb or slow. They just didn't care. They worked during the first week or so of class but then stopped. They could read faster than me, and most of them knew their math well. I remember getting beaten by one in a math race. We dashed to the board and worked out an addition problem, 12+4 or something like that. He won. I was shocked and devastated. I

⁷ The term “other than” is used by the character Fola in Lamming's *Season of Adventure* (London: Alison and Busby, 1979 [1960]). The “other than” was a quality in Fola that was “other than” European, colonial.

remember not even getting a chance to place my chalk on the board--he whipped me that fast. I felt like the stupidest kid in class--I couldn't even be superior to a guy who didn't try to learn.

I felt like I was slipping to the back of the class, back to their positions. I didn't want to be associated with them, or be mistaken for them, even though I lived just blocks away from them, knew them. I disliked them, detested them, wanted them out of my class because I felt they were tainting my education with their laziness. And yet they belonged there more than I did. I knew that somehow someone later on would find out that I went to that school, had to attend a remedial reading class (a class that none of those black students were in), lived in that part of town. I didn't want to be illiterate and live in our two-bedroom, government-subsidized, roach-infested apartment for the rest of my life. My mom told me those kind of boys were just "dummies." They didn't understand that if you wanted to get out of North Las Vegas, you had to get A's in school. They didn't want to be average. They didn't want anything. They were refusing their education, ironically refusing the thing that damned Caliban, and the thing which I wanted so desperately.

Again, I turn to Lamming. In a 1970 interview, he says, "I came from a poor home, but education was the only thing that was going to rescue me from total disgrace." Lamming also felt that education would somehow save him from his impoverished beginnings, but soon realized that "the curriculum ha[d] nothing to say to him" (Rice). This was not the case for me. I made my education speak to me. I made it say something to me.

School can be a tremendously disorienting place. No matter how bad the school, you're going to encounter notions that don't fit with the assumptions and beliefs that you grew up with--maybe you'll hear these dissonant notions from teachers, maybe from the other students, and maybe you'll read them. You'll also be thrown in with all kinds of kids from all kinds of backgrounds, and that can be unsettling--this is especially true in places of rich ethnic and linguistic mix, like the L.A. basin.

Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundary*

In Las Vegas, and especially when I was in elementary and junior high, I was prejudiced. I hated blacks, called them "niggers" behind their backs, and thought all of them to be stupid like the four in Mrs. Whitmore's class. Much of my dislike came from living in that apartment on Stats Street, an almost all-black neighborhood. Stats was a very economically poor neighborhood. Just about everyone was on welfare. There were few cars around, and the ones that were usually were owned by several people, a group of neighbors or friends, a couple of families. I don't remember the street looking like a "project" or it being dirty. However, recently I was flipping through the channels on my TV and caught one of those "Cops" shows. This particular one was filmed in North Las Vegas, just blocks from Stats. In fact, I could see apartments that were the same style that mine had been. They had less color than I remembered, fewer trees and less grass. The front of them was just dirt, and there were no cars, period, not even a parking lot. There was a lone, gutted, jalopy parked on the curb, all the windows smashed in. The gutters were cluttered with trash, and no one was out walking around. The whole street was empty, and everything looked dilapidated and worn. The one person who was out was the reason these North Las Vegas policemen were called to the area. He was a "paint-sniffer," silver paint lining his mouth and nose--he looked like a circus clown. He was black, and I could barely understand what he was saying, talking with a slurred speech and a heavy slang. Was that Stats.

I thought. Had I really lived in that squalor? Was he like the neighbors I had? Was my neighborhood that barren?

On Stats, there was Lester, the boy next door, a skinny kid who always wore multi-colored, striped shirts and pants that seemed to fit short in the legs. I can now barely remember what he looked like, but I still remember what I felt like when we played together, when I touched his skin, when I shook his hand for the first time late one summer evening, and smelling, for the first time, what I thought was an odor coming off his skin but was really coming from his hair. I was a thin boy, only sixty pounds in the second grade, but Lester was even thinner. I could feel the bone in his arm when I grabbed him, could see all of his ribs and his sternum clearly and the triangle shape his solar plexus made through his dark skin. There was a tension between Lester and me. I was one year older, and, to kids around six and seven, that meant the difference between who were the leaders and who were followers. The tension was created as much by our age as by other things that we couldn't quite put our fingers on. Lester never talked to me quite the way he did with his other friends who were black. He never called me "nigga" like he did the others (this was before I even knew what that word meant and connoted). "Nigga" was just a word like "guy" or "dude." Everyone said it. I said it. Tad said it. But it didn't take long for me to figure out what that word meant, and how the meaning changed when it came from the mouth of a white kid. When no one else was around, Lester and I were pretty good friends. Because I was a bit older, Lester seemed to naturally follow me around. He wanted to be included in whatever I was doing, didn't mind being somewhat subordinate. But when his friends were around, he was braver and more confident. We would argue more.

Once we were all hanging out in the grass courtyard, just talking. Another kid and I started to argue, shouting at each other. He called me "Honky." We were all gathered in a circle.

him (I think his name was Lashawn), Lester, Lester's little sister, Tad, me, and maybe one or two others (everyone was black except Tad and me). We were about to play a game, tag or something. Tad happened to have his cowboy cap gun in his hand. Lashawn told me he didn't really care if I liked being called honky or not. That was what he said, and he wasn't going to take it back. I said, "How would you like it if I called you black boy?" He hit me with a slapping motion across the cheek. It didn't really hurt, but I spit a little blood and that scared me and I cried. He just looked at me, and as I turned to go into our apartment, I saw Tad strike Lashawn with his cap gun, making Lashawn cry. Even back then at only seven years old, I can remember thinking about how wrong Lashawn was and how he didn't see or care to see his mistake, but also how happy I was that Tad had "gotten him back" for his injustice and how it fueled a hate in me for Blacks. I hadn't done anything to him. I was willing to be his friend for the afternoon, to play a game of tag with him. I wanted so much to make him understand, to make him see me differently, but Lashawn, and even Lester, wouldn't. I'm sure Lashawn knew that I disliked him. Maybe that's why he called me that name and hit me, and maybe even he felt I was doing him injustice by disliking him for simply being black. Maybe he felt misunderstood.

Lashawn lived in apartment A, the first apartment on our side of the courtyard. His mom and dad never seemed to work that much. He lived with his mom, dad, uncle, and aunt. They all shared this big white Cadillac with furry beige seat covers. I glanced in their apartment once or twice as I was passing by—their door was always open. They were always having people over. I remember only furs and zebra striped furniture, a lava lamp, and the smell of cigar smoke. Lashawn's mom was tall and very skinny. She dressed in light florescent colors, oranges, greens, reds. My only mental picture of her is hanging out their door, her right hand holding on to the door frame, waving her left, calling Lashawn inside. Lashawn's dad was a big man, probably

over six feet and stocky. He wore one of those closely trimmed beards that covered half of his face. He had a deep voice. Once I saw him swat Lashawn on the rump for something, lifting Lashawn up off the ground. It was the sound that scared me most, a "shplock." I heard it from the other end of the courtyard, over fifty feet away.

"Get in there!" Shplock! Mom never hit me like that--not that hard. Mom was always so diplomatic about punishment. Once when we misbehaved at a baby-sitter's house, mom said, "Boys, what do you think your punishment should be?" Of course, we all knew mom had the option of vetoing any and all suggestions. In public, mom might have given me a quick swat on the rear, but only as a warning, meaning: "Now, you've done it. Wait until we get home." Or she might only snap her fingers, but boy could she snap her fingers. I remember mom snapping her fingers in church and feeling the pain--not a literal pain but the pain of anticipation--shoot up the back of my neck right into my ears--"tack, tack!" That "tack, tack!" meant we may or may not be in serious trouble. And mom never snapped more than twice. Lashawn's dad made no attempt at being discreet or temperate with Lashawn, just "Get in there!" shplock! Neither of them ever looked my way. I don't think they even cared if they had an audience.

A few months after Lashawn's swat, I ran into his dad. I mean, I literally ran into him, into his legs as I dashed around the corner of our courtyard's wall. I looked up at him, frozen, thinking he might swat me for being a nuisance. He always carried this straight, serious, almost menacing expression on his face, like he was trying to find a guy that owed him money or scratched his caddy. I think it was the beard that really frightened me. I remember he had the smell of sweat on him, and his jeans had a washed-in dirty look to them. He looked down at me and smiled, said, "hello--be careful." It was the second part that caught me. I can't remember for sure if it was "be careful" or "watch out," but it was something very close to that, just a quick

few words. His voice was deep and warm, like I remember my grandpa's being before he'd died a few years before.

At Stats one of our favorite games was "Roots." Only Tad, Lester's sister, Lester, and I played. She was the queen and my brother and I were the "white slave capturers." I remember mock chases, Lester running, screaming in his high pitched, pre-pubescent voice, trying to imitate terror.

"Tad! Go that way around the left side," me pointing to the left side of the far adjoining court at the first tree, Lester screaming and running ahead of us just a few yards away.

"You can't escape boy!" Tad fires off his cap gun at Lester. Clack! I fire mine too. Clack! Clack!

"No, no, no," Lester yells.

"Oh yeah, boy." We turn over a K-mart grocery cart near the wall that holds all of our mail boxes, the jail, put Lester in it, and slam it shut. Lester again screams in a high pitched voice.

"Ahh! Kunta!"

"Shut up boy!" I sit on the cart and laugh a mock slave trader laugh.

"Kunta! Kunta!" Lester yells. All the while, Lester's sister sits on the top of the wall, smiling, arms folded, her small dark pig-tails bob as she nods.

The scary thing is now when I think about that game we played, I remember that I enjoyed being the "slave capturer," and how easy it was for me to do it, how accepting Lester and his sister were to the game, to their automatic roles in the game and mine--the fact that no one ever questioned who would be who in the game. Lester knew that his being black meant something, just as I knew that me not being black meant something else. In our game, it meant

he was the slave, and I was the slave capturer. Outside our game, it still meant things: that I had more opportunities than him because I had lighter skin, came from a family that was upwardly mobile, which could be used to my advantage. For Lester, it meant that he was trapped, that he had more obstacles than me even though we both started in the same spot on Stats, together. And somewhere in the back of my mind, I see Lester still at Stats today, still living in those apartments, still sitting on the step of apartment B, the same step I shared with him because I lived in C. I see Lester still trapped in our courtyard under that K-mart grocery cart.

I had another neighbor, a college-aged lady who lived across the courtyard from us in apartment F. I didn't see her all that much except on weekends or on an occasional weeknight, coming home from work or school. I remember her only because she let us all play on her "slip and slide" one Saturday. It was hot and she was coming back from somewhere, opening her door. Tad, Lester, his sister Kisha, and I were all just hanging out under the large trees that divided our courtyard. She asked us if we wanted to play on her "slip n' slide." I'm not sure why she had a "slip n' slide" since she was too big to even slide down it--it was only about six feet long. That afternoon she sat in a lawn chair next to her door reading a book, sometimes watching us slide across the green piece of plastic in a patch of sunlight between the eaves of her apartment and the trees. That is one of my best memories from Stats: all of us sliding down that slip n' slide, screaming from all the fun, no grown ups around to tell us to come inside.

The lady across the way in F was about my mom's height (five feet six inches), and she had longer, lighter colored hair than my mom's shoulder-length, dark brown. She was probably the same age as my mom at the time, maybe a year or two younger. Mom was always serious, always asking us to clean the bathroom, take the trash out, dust the coffee table. During our stay at Stats, she had three jobs. She was a bank teller, a janitor, and a "change-girl" at the "Jolly-

Trolley" casino. I remember mom telling us to come straight home from school and lock the door. Keep the drapes closed. Don't answer the door for anyone. Don't talk to anyone on the phone unless it was mom. If someone called for mom, tell them she was asleep and could I take a message. And by all means, keep the TV down on low. I remember afternoons, peering out our living room drapes that looked into the courtyard, watching Lester and Lashawn playing outside, running around. I remember being so glad when mom got home, partly because I missed her and I wanted to go outside, and partly because I could just open the door. And when mom came home, that's what we did. We opened the door.

No one ever really went into anyone else's home. Lester would often knock on my door on Saturday, but never came inside. He would stand at our threshold, waiting for me to join him outside. I never went inside anyone else's homes either. It was something that never happened. What seems obvious now is how that unconscious act of non-entry upheld the divisions that we all felt among us--or at least the divisions I felt. I couldn't enter Lashawn's or Lester's home because I was not them, because it wasn't done; it was theirs. The big, white-painted bricks that formed our apartment complex solidified these separations. At night, I would place my hand on the cold brick wall of my bedroom knowing that Lester was asleep on the other side, and thinking that this side is where I belonged. But I didn't know why.

On the other side of us, in apartment D lived this tall black man who wore bright African clothes, like short sleeved shirts starched red, black, yellow, and green. He would come out every Saturday with his Bongo drums--he had two or three--setting them up in the courtyard. They were polished dark wood, shiny like oil. In their stands, they came up to my chin. He'd play them, sometimes to music that came from inside his apartment. I never knew his name. I talked to him though. He let me hit his drums once. I was very shy, and I remember feeling

embarrassed when such an awkward sound came from the drum after I hit it--a kind of "doonck!" It wasn't but moments before he'd made the drum seem as if it were talking. It all looked so easy. He was just hitting it to the music. The sounds that he made were like a clatter of voices, some loud, some soft, some tinny, others basy, and together they made sense. They were music. He'd do this kind of squatty dance as he played, bending at the knees in a rhythmical pattern that matched each stroke, swaying to the left, then to the right. It wasn't obvious then, but now it seems that he also had an accent, talking in odd flat sentences and weird inflections. He'd say, "Hallo, nice day tooday?" He was very friendly and always willing to chat.

Once I came up to the open door of his apartment, looking inside. It was dark and cluttered. Odd pictures of what seemed like swirls of bright colors--the kinds from his shirts--hung on the walls, other small knickknacks here and there, a small wooden mask with blue feathers, a rope-thing with beads lying on the table. He'd stopped playing, leaving his drum outside. I think I was going to ask him if I could play it, but when I peered inside I forgot about the question. There was a long couch against the closest wall, an odd blanket with a zebra striped pattern lie across the back of it. The only other thing I remember was the smell, a different smell, one like my neighbor Lester carried on his clothes, like the oily stuff he put in his hair. Yet this smell had something mingling with it, something odd, like incense, but different than the kind my mom used. Mom burned "sandalwood Hindu Incense" a couple nights a week, but this smell was muskier. I felt funny standing there in his doorway, looking in his dark apartment, that smell drifting past me, him somewhere inside, hiding. I got scared, so I quickly went back to my door, pretending I'd never been there.

Babel

. . . and we were all good niggers, good gooks and japs, good spics and rice eaters saying mem sab, sahid, bwana, boss-san, senor, father, heartthrob oh honored and most unceasing, oh devisor and provider or our own obsequious, ubiquitous ugliness, which stares at you baboon-like, banana-like, dwarf-like, tortoise-like, dirt-like, slant-eyed, kink-haired, ashen and pansied and brutally unredeemable, we are whirling about you, tartars of the air all the urinating, tarantula grasping, ant multiplying, succubused, hothouse hoards yes, it us, it us, we, we knockee, yes, sir, massa, boss-san, we tearee down your door!

from "Song For Uncle Tom, Tonto and
Mr. Moto," David Mura

During my last year of high school, I lived in Corvallis, Oregon and attended Crescent Valley High. My uncle was a Professor of Microbiology at Oregon State University and it seemed the logical place to go for school. Immediately after that year at Crescent Valley, I enlisted in the Oregon Army National Guard as a technical drafting specialist, designation number: 81-Bravo. I left for about eight months of training and was on active duty and away from home for a good part of my brother's first year in college. I wanted to secure more money for school because I wasn't sure my financial aid was going to cover all my expenses. Plus, the recruiting officer was there at school, my girlfriend had signed up already, and it seemed liked the right move.

On September 15, 1988, I left for Fort Dix, New Jersey. Our bus arrived at the reception station a few minutes after 2300 hours. It was dark. We were tired from flying across the country and the 4 hour bus ride from Newark. Most didn't know what to do except stand there clinging to satchels and bags, our few civilian belongings. The minute we got off the bus there were six drill sergeants and numerous other personnel waiting, screaming at us: "Get in line, you scum bags!" "Are you supposed to be a trainee? You look more like a *pussy* to me! How the

hell did you get in here?" They were pointing at this yellow line painted on the wide front sidewalk parallel to the building and the bus. "You are not on the block any more! Toe the line, meat heads!" I stepped up to it and stood at attention. No one said anything to me. From that day on, I did what I was told to do and how I was told to do it. I asked no questions.

Fortunately, I'd been prepared by the Oregon National Guard Prep Station in Estacada just a few months before. They showed me how to march and cup my hands, letting them only slightly swing evenly as I marched. They showed me how to stand at attention, and execute an "about face" so that my feet came together at a perfect 45 degree angle. They gave me the protocol for repeating instructions, told me what would be on many of the tests. I was prepared.

I was also in good shape from high school wrestling. The second week was the first PT (Physical Training) test. Everyone had to pass the final PT test in order to go on to Advanced Individual Training (AIT) where they would learn the fundamentals for their job in the army. A few people were a bit slow getting back into formation after breakfast, and we paid for it. We were "dogged" the rest of the morning and into the early part of the afternoon. "Dogging" was the physical punishment that drill sergeants administered to their trainees, involving a lot of exercises, usually in full gear (30-pound ruck-sack, M-16, field helmet, and protective mask), and usually until everyone couldn't do anymore. By 1500 hours, no one was able to do much of anything at the PT test. Everyone in our platoon failed except for four people. I was one them.

That was the only time I was ever called to the Drill Sergeant's office. He wanted us to know that all of us would be watched carefully. He said we might be material for platoon leader and squad leader positions. The other three ended up becoming squad leaders and one even became platoon leader for about four weeks until he got caught fighting with another private. All three were black. Most of the platoon was black. Out of the 35 or so privates in my platoon.

about 20 were black, 3 were Hispanic, the rest were White. I never became any kind of leader. I like to think because I didn't want to, because I just didn't care about leading this group of men or any portion of it. At the time, I thought of most of them as "losers," societal rejects, guys that had no other aspirations besides being a private in the army. I was preparing for college. My career was not going to be in the army. I had been more than a private and was to become more than a private. But I'm not really sure why I didn't get to be a squad leader. I'd passed every test and never got in any trouble, which is something very significant in Basic. Everyone got into trouble, not because we were terrible trainees but because they were always looking to get us for something. That was the Drill Sergeants' job.

Part of my resistance to the other trainees was the simple fact that I knew how to march, how to salute, how to make my bunk so that it was "square," how to fold the sleeves of my BDU (Battle Dress Uniform) blouse. Most trainees fumbled around the first week or so, learning how to do the simplest of tasks, like saying, "Yes, Drill Sergeant," instead of "Yes" or "Yeah." I was squared away, and they weren't, and in the army, that made a difference. It also made them look dumb because they were constantly doing things wrong and didn't understand why we all were getting "dogged." I had forgotten that I too had made the same mistakes just months before but had plenty of time to correct myself. I think the biggest problem I had with the majority of my fellow trainees was the fact that I felt I was better than them. Not only did I feel smarter than them, but I felt morally better. They all cursed, swore, fought, and argued with each other. How could I respect any of them when every night, there was, without exception, a fist fight or a yelling match going on. Fighting, of any sort, was not tolerated in the army. If you fought, the MP's would come and take you to jail. It was a crime to fight in the army, which would seem to stop all violence, but it didn't. The nightly arguing and fighting convinced me that they were all

idiots and losers who didn't even have the sense to get along when it was so imperative to do so. These privates gave me little reason to like them or want to understand them.

During the last week of Basic, I was stopped by my head Drill Sergeant. He said, "Private Eee-no," reading my name tag, "You in my platoon?" I was shocked. Was I in his platoon? He practically called my name every day at mail call for the past seven weeks. I looked up to this guy. He was a tall, Black man, very lean, in great shape. He had one of those very authoritarian kinds of voices, like a preacher that swears. Everything he said was a statement, a commandment. He had natural charisma. "What kind of name is Eee-no?" he said. I told him Japanese. He stood there for a second, I think, not really knowing what to say. Then he said, "I never dropped you have I?" He meant, had he ever made me do push-ups. He hadn't, so I said no. Then he asked me why hadn't he noticed me before (I think it sounded like why hadn't I ever been caught getting into trouble). I think he was just as shocked as I was. "I don't know, Drill Sergeant," I said. Laughingly, he told me that I wouldn't be leaving his platoon without him dropping me at least once, so I did twenty or so easy push-ups, right there in his office, both of us smiling, and I left. I was a little disheartened to leave Basic knowing that my own Drill Sergeant hadn't remembered me at all, and I didn't know what to make of his asking me about my name. Now, I can see that he just didn't know what to make of me, didn't know where I belonged. It was partly due to not remembering me in the platoon. At the time, I felt I had accomplished my goal. I had disassociated myself so much from my platoon that even the Drill Sergeant didn't know me. Now, I think I may have just alienated myself, but what else could I have done in those circumstances?

Our barracks was a long, four-floored, brick building, gray and squatty looking with lots of windows, exactly like the ones in "Full Metal Jacket." The first floor held the Sergeants'

offices, the mail room, four laundry rooms, the rec. room, and the main reception office for all four platoons that stayed in the building. All of the other floors held the rooms each platoon stayed in. Our barracks happened to not have the big bay-rooms that many people associate with army "barracks." Each room held only about six or so guys, three or four bunked-beds. There were two massive stairwells, one on each end of the building, North and South. We were on the third floor, exactly in the middle of all the other platoons. Bravo platoon got one end of the third floor, Alpha platoon the other end. We were forbidden to cross the imaginary line that divided our side from theirs, which ran between the two large bathrooms in the middle of the floor. We got one; they got the other. Between them was no-man's land. If you got caught on the other side, there were consequences. It was perfectly segregated.

Our barracks were always cold. The floor was cold; the walls were cold; your pants were cold when you put them on in the morning; the toilets were cold when you sat on them at night; the faucet water was cold when you brushed your teeth; and sometimes if you didn't get an early enough shower, your shower was cold too. And the one thing that seemed strangely familiar were the walls. They reminded me of the walls in the apartment on Stats, made from the same kind of big square bricks. I hadn't really thought of Stats for a long time, but suddenly, looking at those walls as I lie in my bunk at night, the wall almost seemed like the wall next to my bed in my bedroom at Stats. My stomach sicken because I realized I hated being forced to live in this place just as much as I ever hated living at Stats.

There was a private that was very much like me: Private Alvarez. Both of us kept to ourselves most of the time, doing our chores at night and quickly getting into bed and reading or listening to headphones. We didn't make friends or sneak out to the PX—like many of the others who did (and usually got caught). But Private Alvarez was a pariah of sorts. Then I didn't know

why. He was just always by himself. He was a tall kid, probably only eighteen, just out of high school. He was usually pretty quiet, but he did occasionally talk to the others in our room and thumb through car and truck magazines, bragging about his own, how it was better or had similar rims and tires. He said his family was rich and owned a large three-story house in California. He constantly talked about his Nissan truck, how he'd had it professionally lowered ("slammed" is what he called it). He was just there "because." He had no real goals, and he didn't care whether he graduated Basic Training. He didn't care about much of anything, except for his car magazines. I wasn't sure what to make of him. He'd failed every PT test he'd taken, failed most of the weapon ranges (another thing one had to pass in order to graduate).

One night he was reading his truck magazine, and I was sweeping under his bunk. He asked me, "what are you?" I just looked at him. At first, I didn't know what he meant, or if he was even talking to me. Then he said, "Are you Mexican, Puerto Rican, Mulatto? Where do you belong?" I had never been confronted like this before. I wasn't sure how to act, what to say. I had been asked frequently what my "nationality" was, and if I was from another country. I'd been considered "ethnic" and a "minority," but it didn't feel like Alvarez was asking that.

"Why?" I asked him.

"I just want to know where you fit in. Who do you hang out with? I mean, I'm half-Black and half-White." We both paused for second or two, looking at each other.

"Oh, I'm Japanese-Hawaiian." He squinted at me. I could tell I'd caught him off guard.

"You look Black, maybe even like me."

I couldn't see it then, but Alvarez was simply being honest and straight-forward about the groups that our platoon seemed to naturally fall into. He could see clearly the way the social networks worked in the barracks, the way everyone naturally divided when chores were done.

and he couldn't tell what nationality I was. My hair was shaved off. My skin was a dark olive color. I didn't talk much, and since everyone wore the same clothes, there was no way for him to tell where I came from, or who I was. He saw me talk to Angel, my bunkmate and "Ranger Buddy," the one I had to depend on out in the field. But we didn't talk all that much during our free time. I think he probably saw me the way I saw him: estranged and usually alone either reading or listening to headphones. I thought it kind of funny that he had mistaken me for black. I'd never been mistaken for black before, but it was logical. Skin color was the only physically distinguishable feature anyone could use as a marker of separation among people in Basic Training, and that is what he was trying to do: separate me into a group and label me.

On my Christmas break between Basic and Advanced training, I told my Grandma about Alvarez' misidentification of me. She was appalled. We were sitting on the foot of her bed, Kimberly standing in the doorway across from me. Grandma said, "Don't they know that Negroes have an odor. It comes off their skin." It hurt to hear my grandma say such a racist remark. She was dying of cancer, bed-ridden, constantly feeling the pain from her bones separating. She had taken me to church, the same one my grandfather had built. When I was three or four, before going to Vegas, she had rocked me to sleep in her green rocker, singing "Amazing Grace." She had encouraged and helped me study the Bible and was there when I was baptized at seventeen, just a year before. And to top it off, I felt a little guilty for leaving her to go off in the army. I think I replied with something like "oh, Nana." But she was really upset over the whole thing. Her face was a bit flushed and she was crossing her arms the way she always did when she was disturbed or upset. Grandma knew who I was, and she could see plainly the color of my skin, could smell the scent that it gave off. It was the scent of one who was part Japanese-Hawaiian and part Cherokee Indian (grandma was a quarter Oklahoma

Cherokee). It was the scent of her grandson, a young man who would go to college, get an education, and be a leader in our church and community just like his grandfather. But I couldn't exactly refute her because I half-believed in what she was saying, not that African-Americans had an inherent odor but that they were different than me, and that difference was to be looked down upon and shunned. I have never been innocent of the kinds of racist stereotyping that Alvarez and others at Pecos and Stats had done to me. I could not escape the knee-jerk reaction that I hated in others all my life. And maybe the army's impossible assumption that we could escape all those ethnic assumptions and stereotypes attracted me, that I could be in an environment where the color of my skin didn't matter anymore, but all it seemed to do was highlight and emphasize the differences we all felt and saw.

But misidentification was the army's goal. My Grandma didn't realize that the army has taken great pains to construct an environment where everyone is to look and act very similar, in effect, erasing the individual. And once personal identity cannot be determined by a group's members on a one-to-one basis, those members begin identifying everyone within that group as simply a part of that group, promoting social identity (i.e. Private Inoue of Bravo platoon, second squad). It is an attempt to force equality on everyone--that is, an attempt to erase ethnic and economic factors in the army's personnel--but an erasure of those elements is not that easy because they are elements that help each of us identify ourselves as individuals. I was only to be known by the group that I found myself in (the largest group, of course, being the army, while the smallest being second squad).

The first week at Fort Dix, we were marched single file to the barber shop. I was about the tenth person in line, and the drill sergeant was standing at the door. We were all "at ease." The drill sergeant was yelling at us to get out our "smart books" and study them, walking up and

down the line. A private's "smart book" was his guide to basic training. Before we left, we would be tested on everything in it. If a private had time to wait in line, he had time to pull out his smart book and study. As I stood reading it--"the Sergeant Major of the army is Gates . . . enlisted ranks go: private, private E-2, private first class, spec four, sergeant, staff sergeant, sergeant first class, sergeant major"--I could hear the first couple of privates inside the small shop. "High and tight please." "Leave a little bit of bangs sir." After a while, I notice that all of them came out with the same haircut: crew cuts. There were no "high and tight" or "a bit of bangs" left on anyone. When I stepped up to the door, the drill sergeant told me to put my smart book away and take out my seven dollars for the haircut. There were multi-colored piles of black and brown and blond hair near each of the three chairs in the room. A tall, balding man with a mustache and big belly motioned me to his chair. He looked unusually clean in his starched, white apron. I sat, gave him my money, and he took the clippers to my scalp.

I left and stood in line with the others that had finished with their haircuts. At that moment, I felt more like a soldier than any other time during Basic. Our de-individualization was complete. We were all wearing the same clothes, stood "at ease" the same way, were studying the same smart books, and now had the same haircuts. If you were far enough away, you probably would not have been able to notice any difference between each private, a line of clones at ease, reading. Through the corner of my eye, I could see the other line leading into the barber shop. There was something ugly about them. They all looked different, unorganized, each having different hair cuts. They just didn't quite look like soldiers yet. Once everyone had finished, the drill sergeant came up to us.

"You are now no longer individuals. You are no longer back on the block with your loser friends, smoking dope and doing whatever the hell else you did. You are all privates. There is no 'I' in army. From now on, you work as a team, a platoon."

When we were marching out in the field or taking classes, everyone acted as a platoon, but shaving heads and dressing everyone in BDU's did not make people the same. Deep down in our bellies, we all feel like individuals, knew we were not exactly like our neighbor or ever could be. The cosmetic changes that the army made didn't erase the neighborhoods and backgrounds that each private brought with him. It didn't take Las Vegas and Corvallis out of me. It didn't take Charlotte, North Carolina out of Roland, or California out of Alvarez. In a way, this is what private Alvarez saw. After hours on our floor of the barracks during our social time, everyone automatically formed smaller social groups. I didn't know everyone in my platoon. No one did. In fact, half of them I never said a word to, even though we were all out in the field together, ate together, stood outside in formation together in freezing rain while the drill sergeant finished his morning cup of coffee. And each private in these groups struggled, behind the army's back, to identify himself as someone more significant than just a private in Bravo Platoon. I struggled against this social identity by huddling around my book or my walkman--"I am not one of you guys; I'm apart from you." I remember constantly thinking to myself: "I am not like these guys."

The most stratified of our platoon's smaller groups was the Blacks. The ones with the darkest pigment usually hung out together while the others, the lighter ones, usually hung out separately. The Mexicans, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans hung out in their group, which happened to be our room, probably because it contained two of the three members. And then there was everyone else. This left people like Private Alvarez and me out of luck, unless we could absorb ourselves into another group. Alvarez couldn't because he kept talking about how rich his family

was, keeping people away. It sounded too much like bragging and nose lifting. People simply didn't want to be around him because he only wanted to talk about himself. That's why he noticed the social arrangements so quickly. He was an outsider. I was able to blend into the Hispanic group, almost unknowingly.

There was one black private who didn't quite fit into any group. He was originally from Africa, Kenya I think. He was an American citizen, but talked with a very thick accent. I don't remember his name, except that everyone had trouble pronouncing it. In fact, one of our drill sergeants had such a hard time, he changed the private's name. The drill sergeant knew where he was from; it was common platoon knowledge. And so one afternoon while we were practicing our marching, the drill sergeant yelled out, "Private Bushman, what the hell are you doing fucking up my lines!" Apparently, he'd made a wrong step. I hadn't seen what happened, and just barely caught what the drill sergeant had said. A few people laughed in line, and the Kenyan private looked confused. I don't know if the drill sergeant was just mad or decided to play off his previous joke, but he continued: "I know you're used to hiding in the bush, but now you're in America."

The next day, that particular drill sergeant was asked to apologize to the private in front of the entire platoon. I don't think it was a coincidence that the drill sergeant who had called the private from Kenya a "Bushman" was white, and that the one who made him apologize was our head drill sergeant, an African American. That's not to say that what he said was okay to say, but I think if he'd called me a "Jap" or Private Alvarez an "Oreo," I don't think there would have been any public apologies. The army enlisted personnel, and especially my platoon, were mostly black--a majority--and there was always a sensitivity toward African Americans and their conditions in the army. This was one of the first contradictions I saw in the way the army did

things. They told us that ethnic and racial elements didn't count anymore, that we were all just privates, yet the army still considered these factors, still noted them. The drill sergeant that called the Kenyan private a "Bushman" was taking into account that private's ethnicity, was implicitly and profoundly saying that there was a difference that he understood and could not ignore.

In the Hispanic group, there were only three, four if you counted me. There was, of course, Angel and these two other privates whose names I've forgotten. I didn't like them because both were mean-spirited and one, who was from Lubbock, Texas, was in the army because the judge gave him a choice: jail or army. They constantly got into trouble and were always trying to find short cuts to everything. They were short tempered and couldn't help but talk about past crimes they'd committed. At one point, five minutes before a "dress-inspection," all of us in our dress greens, one of them began fighting with another private. Our brass and gear displayed on our bunks, we were all ready at the foot of our beds, and these guys decided to fight. They were punching each other, kicking, ripping, tearing, shouting, rolling around on the floor. We all just stood there in disbelief. These two guys weren't really doing this were they? No one is that stupid. Fighting itself was a major offense but during a dress inspection? That was unheard of. The drill sergeant could practically be heard stomping up the stairs at that very moment, but no one wanted to stop the fight, fearing they too might get all messed up and dirty. Finally, someone yelled "at ease." The drill sergeant had come onto the floor. It was dead quiet. The two fighters jumped off each other and stood at ease next to their bunks, their dress greens torn beyond repair, brass on the floor, shoes scuffed. The drill sergeant got to our room. We all were just hoping he wouldn't punish all of us.

"What the hell is this?" Our drill sergeant bent over and down right at the Mexican private's forehead (he was only about five foot tall). "What the fuck happened to you private shit-for-brains?" Our weekend pass to the PX was canceled while the two fighters were taken outside in their shredded dress greens, and were placed in "the pit" (a large sanded area, which looked like a big sandbox). The drill sergeant told them that since they weren't going to respect their clothes that he might as well finish the job. On command the two were ordered to "run" in place and to "drop" into the "front leaning rest" position (push-up position), all the while another sergeant was spraying them with a hose. Our drill sergeant worked them over for about two hours, got tired and left them out there for another hour in the front leaning rest. They came in looking like two muddy dogs after an alley fight.

In my mind, these guys were the Mexicans from Pecos and Basic High. They reminded me of the wet-back and beaner images that I grew up with--the people I was mistaken for all the time. They were mean, and lacked discipline, manners, respect, and most of all, brains. I wanted nothing to do with them.

Angel, on the other hand, was smart, strong, friendly, and willing to help me. He was a hard worker and smiled a lot. He was 27 and married. I don't know exactly where he was from, but his wife came one weekend in a car, and he was allowed the weekend with her. Angel was my height, about 5 foot 8 inches. But he was also muscular and, in a way, reminded me of my brother. On the long road marches, he'd helped me through a bout of very painful shinsplints by singing "Victory in Jesus," keeping my mind off the pain, but most importantly, keeping my legs moving ahead on the rocky trail, getting us where we had to go. We worked well together out in the field because I was willing to follow his lead. He was older and more experienced, and during Bivouacs, we were the first to have our tent up and our trench dug. We worked together

to find a good spot early on before dark, spot checked each other's uniforms, urged each other to do ten sit-ups and twenty push ups more at PT tests. I was standing next to him in the gas chamber when our protective masks were pulled from our faces. He was in front of me as we ran around the two poles in the sloped field next to the chamber, flapping our arms, snot, tears, and spit flowing from our faces. We watched on the higher end of that same slope as others came out of the chamber vomiting into buckets near the exit of the small brick building. We did all this together because luck had placed us in the same bunk. Looking back on our relationship now, I know he treated me like a younger brother--up until the last week of training.

During that week Angel had been a bit different. We pulled fire guard, marched together, practiced for the graduation ceremonies side by side, but no words were spoken afterward. During chow, he was quiet, ate quickly and headed out to formation early. At night Angel would just curl up into his bed, saying nothing. One of our last nights before heading off to AIT, Angel stunned me speechless.

"This is just a job. I like you. I hope you do okay, but I'll forget you. You'll forget me." I just looked at him, oddly scared of what he was saying. "All I want to do is finish Basic and leave this place--get on with my life." He could now see the end coming, and no one was going to stop him from finishing Basic Training. I was shocked by his bluntness and sharp demeanor, one he'd never used on me before--he seemed mad at me--that I almost didn't catch what he was saying. It's only now I realize the reasons Angel's words smacked me so hard across the face, and why he had to believe them. We had quickly learned, more out of necessity than out of kindness, to be friends, Ranger buddies, but when that last week came and all the classes and marches and bivouacs and doggings were over, our friendship was not needed anymore. If we had become friends--which Angel was emphatically saying we had not done--then our parting

would have been painful. It would have risked the suggestion that we didn't have a significant life outside the walls of the barracks, and, by association, we would have been only that narrow identity that the army had assigned each of us, only privates in Bravo Platoon--two facts everyone resisted constantly. But more significantly, Angel had jolted my senses, made me remember why I'd disassociated myself from everyone there: I did not belong in any of those groups, the blacks, whites, Hispanics, Bravo Platoon, the army. I had almost forgotten that once the context of the army was taken out of our relationship, there was no commonality felt, or none that either one of us wanted to feel. I had forgotten that I was living under the army's illusion that we were all the same, that there were no social, economic, or ethnic differences between Angel and me. We had been forced to suspend those factors for eight weeks because we constantly were being told that we were one generic thing, a soldier, but always felt that we were something much more complicated, individuals. Angel was not basing his decision on any racial or economic factors though. He was simply doing what he felt he had to do. He was trying to live with the contraries that the army was both presenting and denying existed.

One night in the barracks during our private time right before lights out, I remember walking down the hall in my socks, slipping a little on the freshly waxed floor, looking into the various rooms, and seeing privates huddled around opened lockers, sitting on bunks, polishing boots, shining brass, bragging. And sooner or later, each conversation would turn to the pictures taped on the inside of the locker doors: Private Roland standing next to his Volkswagen Jetta; Private Gutteriez and his finance smiling in their winter formal tux and gown, a cardboard backdrop leaning on the wall behind them with the words, "Winter Wonderland" on it; a girlfriend's senior picture, or maybe a Polaroid snapped in a cluttered bedroom, or by a car. One private even had a girlfriend send him a Polaroid of her in lingerie, a black lace one, somewhat

modest. She was sitting on a bed, looking straight at the camera, her head down a bit. He showed that one off frequently. He was making a statement, like everyone else: "You see, someone cares about me. I, too, have a life outside the army, one better than the one I'm living right now."

Angel had very few pictures. He was very secretive. He was also a bit older than most of the others, and he wasn't too concerned about what others thought of him. The few pictures he had were in his wallet, and I saw them twice, I think. Angel knew the life he had with his wife and wasn't all that interested in proving it to anyone, not even me. What he wanted was to get back to it, yet in Angel's own way, by letting me know exactly where our friendship ended, he told me that he also had a life outside the army. I could not be a part of it. Bravo Platoon was a life he was about, just like the rest of us, to excise. At the time, I could hardly blame him. Angel was not simply a private either.

“Turning Japanese”: An Afterward

My complexion has changed in the Oregon climate over the last eight or nine years. I'm looking out the window above my desk in my bedroom and snow is falling. It is the third time snow has fallen here in Oregon in the last four of five years. My wife says she'd miss the snow and the green color of the hills around our home in Monmouth if we had to move to Arizona or some place like that. The hills are green because it seems like nine months out of every year some kind of moisture is falling from the sky. In the last month, we've had two windstorms that were preceded and proceeded by heavy rain. The lack of sun here has changed my skin's color to an olive, and less of a tanned brown. In Vegas, it snowed a total of two times the entire twelve years I was there. By the time I was seventeen, I'd experienced maybe two weeks of snow, and I'd never bob-sledded.

When I first got here, I didn't notice any change in my complexion right off. After I'd already returned from the army, I remember once walking down grandma's hall toward her room. She had one of those picture frames that held a montage of different pictures in it, all different shapes, hanging on the wall near her door. In the frame, there was a picture of Mom, Tad, and me at the Circus Circus in Las Vegas. It had been taken during our Freshman year. Tad and I had matching blue sweaters on, and mom wore a white blouse. All three of us were very dark. Around that picture were numerous other pictures of my cousins Kim and Renae and Aunt Sue and Uncle Bill, their white faces smiling in Florida by a sign: "Gators." I can't think of a time when I felt any more ashamed of who I was than right there in that hall. Was I the only one that noticed it? I remember standing in the hall, looking carefully at those pictures, wondering if my Aunt and Uncle ever felt as embarrassed when they took me places in the homogenous town of

Corvallis as I did at that moment. I wonder now if we should have been surprised that my membership at the Corvallis Country Club was constantly questioned that first year, that the President's son, who also went to CV and was my age, hated me, called me "spic" and "beaner" and "wet-back," and that, of course, I'd be reprimanded for not wearing a shirt with a collar when I golfed.

In my grandma's picture, I could barely distinguish my straight, black hair from my face and neck. I saw the whites of my eyes but no cheekbones, no eyebrows. At the time, I wanted to take that picture out of its frame. I went into the bathroom to see if I was really *that* dark. I could see my eyebrows, my cheeks, but in the mirror, it looked as if I had traces of dirt around my eyes, under my jaw, around my mouth. I washed and washed, scrubbing harder every time, hoping and praying for clean skin. When I finished and looked up into the mirror, nothing had changed. I was still that boy in the picture. My skin had been so dark in Vegas, and for a brief moment, my feelings betrayed me: I thought I understood why my Pecos neighbor hated me so much, why Private Alvarez had mistaken me for a Mulatto, why dark skin seemed so ugly to me. And it was that fleeting sensation of self-revulsion that crystallized my determination to put Vegas behind me, to leave that dark skinned boy at Stats and Pecos and Ithica.

It was near the end of that first summer when I remember first feeling a difference in my identity, a rift in the timeline of my life separating Vegas from Corvallis. I remember sitting in Mazzi's Italian restaurant one evening with everyone. It was lit by candles placed in cut tins. A waitress poured water. I ordered something with an Italian name: Chicken Marsala. My cousin Kim was sitting next to me, and we were all dressed nice. I had on a new pair of Reeboks that my Aunt paid for. No one told me to watch what I ordered because we were on a budget. I didn't feel that different from the people sitting at the other tables. In fact, I felt affluent. We all

looked it--my Aunt and Uncle were it. At that moment, I thought: I've crossed over. I've finally crossed over. In retrospect, I see that "crossing" may not have been exactly what I was feeling, "passing" might be a better word for it. I wasn't really affluent. I was still Ty from Stats and Pecos. Was it possible to do what I was doing? My Aunt and Uncle had no problems with it. In fact, they seemed to encourage it, buying me clothes and things, so that I'd "fit in at school." My Aunt would say, "we need to buy you some nice jeans for school. All the boys have nice jeans." I had sixty dollar pairs of "Guess" jeans, ones I'd never in the past even thought of wearing because I knew they were way too expensive and were only worn by a certain kind of kid in school. But now, was I that kid? Or did I just look like that kid?--was *that* all it took to be that kid?

My Aunt had nothing but altruistic motives for attempting to "fit me in" at Crescent Valley, but I now wonder if those intentions were for the best. On the one hand, she was right. Most of the kids there did wear "nice" jeans. By wearing those kinds of jeans, I looked like I fit in--and maybe to most of them, I did fit in. But none of them thought anything of matters that, in Vegas, kept me from doing everything they took for granted, like the price of a movie ticket, gas for the car, or spending money to eat at McDonald's instead of the cafeteria during lunch. All of these things hovered in the back of my mind as I passed for one of them. Guess jeans never made me feel a part of most of Crescent Valley's student body. My mom used to say to me that nothing is free when she saw me in new clothes, that things like money and clothes come with strings attached. I've never been quite sure what mom was afraid of, why she resisted Aunt Sue and Uncle Bill buying me clothes and things; they had the money to spare. They were doing it of their own accord. Now, I can see that there were other strings attached. There wasn't just an ethnic line to pass over, there was an economic one too. In Las Vegas, I'd never even gotten

an allowance. Things like Pepsi in the fridge were luxuries, treats, not the norm. My mom and I had lived in an entirely different economic strata. Mom and Bill probably only made half as much as Uncle Bill alone took in, and so everything that first year felt false, temporary, like I was on vacation and soon would be going back home. I think mom understood this better than I did at the time because she wasn't the one passing. She saw the differences in me because she was an outsider like Alvarez, looking over the wall that separated my Aunt and Uncle's economic strata--looking at me--and her own.

I didn't want to hear or remember Stats or Pecos then because it meant that I was someone else. But as much as I tried, I never fully felt a part of Crescent Valley's social and economic student body. The funny thing is: I can't remember one racial incident at CV, not one stands out in my mind (if there were any). I can't remember any time I was faced with prejudice as I had been in Vegas. I don't know how to account for it, and I don't really know what to think about it, if it was a good thing or simply my own near-sightedness and unwillingness to see any fault in the new community I found myself in, the one I desperately wanted to be a part of, the one that was inevitably altering my perception of me.

Furthermore, while in every neighborhood I've ever moved to in my life, I've never felt a part of any--in fact, I felt *apart* from all of the groups of people that made up every one of them, including Crescent Valley and my aunt and uncle, the Hawaiian club at OSU and the Longhouse. I never truly felt a connection to any group of people, never felt that feeling of "shared experiences" that the *Dictionary of Ethnic Relations* says is a key element when defining ethnicity. I didn't feel connected to my neighbors at Stats, at Pecos, or in Corvallis. I have always felt like the outsider, the stranger, who was constantly being mistaken for someone else. But at CV I simply didn't know what to think. I was trying not to think. My appearance was

changing, but how was my identity changing? I'd look at my cousin, Kim, who was only a year younger than me and wonder why she never felt this same ambivalence in the fabric of her life. Didn't she feel oddly disconnected with the groups of people in her neighborhood, her school?

Of course, Kim never jumped economic tracks like I did so quickly, so abruptly. I'm sure that caused part of my disorientation, but jumping tracks also allowed me a radically new perspective on my life. It made a distinction between who I *was* and who I *was becoming*. It allowed me to see my identity as a changing process, and not a fixed entity, one I would have to find somewhere. I would quickly forget this insight, but the seed of it would be planted.

I'm not saying "feel pity for me; I've had a tough and lonely life filled with confusion and uncertainty." No, I haven't been lonely or altogether confused. I'm not even saying that I've never felt a connection with other people. I am saying that I've never felt a connection or intimate association with the ethnicity that people want so much to associate me with and with the one my name and birth place me in. I have never felt "ethnic" even though I have often felt misidentified, misunderstood, foreign, and alien.

And this is the predicament that I have been in: I was never offered options for my identity. I was never really asked who or what I was. I was told, but I was not told that Japanese-Hawaiians or Cherokee Indians were ever important in American history. I was never asked to wonder about who I was or how my experiences and economic background produced the person I am. My identity has constantly wavered among those socially constructed because of other people's preconceived notions of the "kind" of person I looked like, the ones I wanted to be, the ones my name said I was supposed to be, and the identities that I felt in the marrow of my bones. And yet, my identity has changed over time, been revised--is still being revised--by this thesis, by new insights that slowly connect me with others who share similar ancestry.

Mr. Hicks, as kind as he was to me, taxonimized me as well, purely by my appearance, into some generic category that he'd already constructed. I was simply "light brown," not a complex mix of genes and cultures, peoples, and histories--that was not possible. How could any third grader be *that* complicated? And similarly, my little brother's (Casey) teacher also placed this same taxonimizing seed in Casey's head. But I am not totally innocent in all this. I too have placed certain people in generic groups, "mended walls" between those Mexicans in the desert at Pecos and me, between the members of that Mexican gang that beat up my brother, a group of Mexicans that today I can't for the life of me forgive (or maybe it's me I can't forgive), and me. Angel too mended a wall, a wall mutually constructed by both of us but forgotten by me, because that was the easiest and most expedient way to do things. Angel and I did not want--and still today I sometimes resist--to walk two abreast between the gaps that existed between him and me because it was, and is, easier to turn away than to confront the enormous complexities that comprise us, because I think we still find some kind of misguided comfort in the belief that "good fences [*do*] make good neighbors."

Our multi-cultural agendas and affirmative action policies, meant to enfranchise and acknowledge the value of ethnicities and minorities like myself, have only served to confuse, and many times worked against, any kind of feelings of ethnic understanding, pride, or even belonging. I'm not necessarily advocating policies of assimilation--for those create, and have created in the past, many problems and social stratifications--but I do question the effects of haphazard usage of policies that do nothing but encourage cultural diversity just for the sake of cultural diversity. Yet our country's sordid history when dealing with "other" "racial" groups, as Takaki has pointed out, like the Asian immigrants of the 1700's and the Cherokee Indians during the 1800's, tells us that we must act to right the inequalities that have already occurred, or risk

further injustice and exclusion of racial groups by our social and political mechanisms. How is this done? How do we tear those walls down and still retain the rich cultures that those walls define and make possible?

Furthermore, what can a white teacher teach me about my own Japanese-American heritage or culture? Or more importantly, how can any teacher teach me who I am, what my heritage should or shouldn't be? Mr. Hicks sure didn't, as much as I strived to do so on my own. How can any teacher teach me about my "ethnicity," my "racial" backgrounds, tell me what I should do, learn, understand, as a Japanese-Hawaiian student that doesn't live in a Japanese-Hawaiian household and knows nothing of that culture, a Japanese-Hawaiian who has looked in the mirror every morning to find a face that looks nothing like his mother's, a face he can't find similarity with in any of his known relatives?

While at Pecos, I was bussed to Madison Sixth Grade Center because of laws that mandated non-segregated schools. Madison was a school in the heart of North Las Vegas that was surrounded by a barbed-wire fence, said to keep out the gangs and the fighting that went on in the neighborhoods around the school--a wall that didn't seem to make "good neighbors." I hated being driven back there every day, the feeling of unfairness, of being forced to pay a toll that some of my neighbors just over the trailer park wall weren't forced to pay. Hadn't I paid my dues at Stats? I had lived near Madison, why did I have to go back there? Wasn't the whole point of moving to *this* side of town, to get out of that side of town? That year, I got into fights almost everyday, was frustrated, almost flunked my Reading class. And I'm not sure if it ever got any better, even at Crescent Valley, maybe only more subtle. Every school, up until CV, that I attended had a good mix of White, African-American, Hispanic, and Asian students attending--all the schools had bussing like the kind I experienced at Madison to keep the mix right.

Creating an ethnic soup only seemed to make the boundaries even clearer in similar ways that the army's misidentification worked to foster a strident need for individuality. It forced us into groups, economic ones, ethnic ones. At school, these differences were glaringly obvious. It was obvious I had darker skin than the other white kids, yet I was not African American. It was obvious that, in Mr. Hick's third grade class, the boy behind me with the torn up sneakers and faded shirt with holes in the arm pits was poor, and that Stacy, who sat in front of me, who wore new dresses to class and always had neat ribbons in her hair, was not poor. Kids notice these differences, and they aren't afraid to ostracize anyone because of them.

There is a scene from my Fourth grade year at Oran K. Gregson elementary school that seems indicative of why I feel ambivalent about the identity presented to me in my public schooling and why these uninformed notions of cultural diversity, which seem so prevalent, may be connected:

Mr. Loftsgarden is teaching us science, his specialty, pointing to posters of dinosaurs that are pinned above the blackboard. He tells us that the Earth is over four billion years old, that life began in the sea, starting with the ameba and ending in the cosmos's greatest achievement: "man." We see charts that show "Peking Man," "Lucy," and the Neanderthal. The next week we move on. We watch a series of half hour shows entitled, "Mulligan's Stew." It's about an ethnically diverse group of school aged musicians that sing about getting along and differences, that everyone's background and nationality should be respected and honored. There is an African American boy, a Chinese girl, a Native American boy, and Mulligan, a white boy, the leader of the group. There is little if any instruction on the videos. We just watch. The next week it is Christmas and we are told on our return to school we will be bringing one Christmas present for show-and-tell. Mr. Loftsgarden will video-tape us with the school's video equipment

as we present our show-and-tell item. We will spend time writing out what we are going to say, then practice it, and finally present it to the camera. Mine was a new Casio watch. One boy had a pocket football game. An Indian girl had a new dress. One other girl didn't have to do the assignment.

While I think that Mr. Loftsgarden was doing his best and did take his teaching very seriously, I can't help but see every one of his week-long lessons doing things that I know he didn't want them doing. Looking at his lessons superficially, looking just at the length of time spent on each activity, it seems clear each was perceived as equally important, worth exactly one week of time. We were not asked to question the science lesson, or our own previous beliefs concerning the obvious conflict with Creationism--with the story in the Bible I'd been brought up to believe in. We were simply to take in that information without questions. No one helped me understand that two ideologies were knocking heads right in front of me. I was simply to live with this ambivalence, not to figure it out but simply to contradictorily believe in both, which I did. The army asked me also to play this same unquestioning believing game: to believe that I was simply a private, no better or worse than anyone else, but realizing that life and people are much more complicated, strive to be complex individuals, even in the face of an authoritarian voice.

Now that I'm a teacher, I wonder how any teacher can only spend a week on those "Mulligan Stew" episodes and not say anything about them, then follow that with a week long segment on show-and-tell? I also wonder how useful those TV shows could even be without instruction or ways to interrogate them? As I watched the show, I remember thinking, "why the heck is this show called 'Mulligan's *stew*'?" What did *stew* mean? I thought they were shows on food and nutrition at first. I thought they were being shown as a "rest" time during the day.

Students were sleeping, had their heads on their desks, the teacher busy at his desk not watching us. And, oddly enough, I felt more associated, and more in common, with Mulligan than any of the other kids on the program even though I'm sure I was supposed to identify with the Chinese girl--why would I? Why would any Asian student identify with her? She simply looked *Asian*. That's all there was to know about her. Even then, I knew I wasn't a typical Japanese-American, which makes me ask: can there be a typical Japanese-American? David Mura would say that that is a sad commentary on my childhood and education. Maybe, but he also says that "it is difficult to strike an appropriate balance" between cultures in America. In his diary, Mura writes:

. . . what I am now trying to do in both my writing and my life is to replace self-hatred and self-negation with anger and grief over my lost selves, over the ways my cultural heritage has been denied to me, over the ways that people in America would assume either that I am not American or, conversely, that I am just like them . . . I know more about Europe at the time when my grandfather came to America than I know about Meiji Japan. I know Shakespeare and Donne, Sophocles and Homer better than I know Zeami, Basho or Lady Murasaki. This is not to say I regret what I know, but I do regret what I don't know. And the argument that the culture of America is derived from Europe will not wipe away this regret. (143)

"[S]elf-hatred," "self-negation," "anger," and "grief over my lost selves." Those are the words that stick out to me. Those are the words I bite my lip on when I read them. And the worst part about it is that I don't even know who those "lost selves" may be, why I should even feel self-hatred or negation, or grief. I have never heard of Zeami or Basho or Lady Muraski. Are they a part of me? Would they unlock something in me that would be meaningful and empowering? What insight could they offer into *my* life? What could they have meant to me, a Japanese-Hawaiian American growing up in non-segregated schools in Las Vegas?

In a way here, I am arguing for my experience and the experience that I was not given. In his essay "Of Experience," Montaigne says, "I would rather be an authority on myself than on

Cicero,” and he finishes this passage with, “[l]et us only listen: we tell ourselves all we most need” (115). My experience shows me that placing kids with varying backgrounds and ethnicities into one classroom can be rewarding, but it can also be harmful, promote the boundaries that, I think, notions of multiculturalism and of America as an ethnic “melting pot”—which sounds too much like “stew pot”—attempt to blur. My experience shows me that simply trying to kick down the walls that we have so religiously mended for so many generations is not easily done, nor may it ever be fully accomplished since it de-emphasizes that need everyone feels, the need to be who we are whether it is Ty Inoue, Japanese-Hawaiian, Oklahoma Cherokee from Las Vegas who can’t feel these things inside him because he has no experiences to let him, or Angel, a Chicano who has Chicano experiences, speaks Spanish, has a Chicano wife. Is it then a good idea to blur ethnic boundaries—if we can ever be successful—or is it a good idea to mend the walls between ethnicities and economic strata.

Kathleen McCormick promotes a multicultural approach to teaching in her book, *The Culture of Reading and The Teaching of English*. She says that students come to the classroom with “differing interests and cultural backgrounds” (69). She says “[a] text is always a site of struggle,” a struggle between the ideologies presented and assumed by the author of that text and its readers (69), and that this is how we see historically constructed “truths” and notions of “right and wrong,” how we can see assumptions and cultural biases in others (72, 74). But it is also a way of reading, not just a text, but reading ideologies, reading people. Yet it is a reading of aggression, and as much as it sounds like it is meant to emphasize marginalized identities, like minorities, validating them, it does not because it asks us to shorn them against our own ideologies and assumptions. This kind of reading doesn’t ask us to first identify with the other, instead it symptomatically reduces every ideology and every ethnicity to the same level. never

acknowledging any “truths” but always suggesting places of untruthfulness and bias. It highlights the gaps and assumes they are what is most important in any discussion of ideologies or ethnicities--I argue that the differences are only one thing that is important. And this is not, and I would say *cannot ever be*, the way anyone understands his or her own identity, whether in an ethnic context or not. We all understand ourselves as holders of some truth, following some path that leads to truth, or exploring the world for what is right (for who can say they purposely attempt to do what they understand as wrong each day?), and because of this, it is impossible to acknowledge differing ideologies as also right unless one sees the universe as one big chaotic ball of randomness where anything goes. We do what we do, say and think the things we say and think because we understand them to be right. If we don't, then we feel guilt. If we don't know for sure, we strive to find out, hence we see religion, science, the Liberal Arts. The same can be said about the life-long process of self-identification. Who I am is most important in my world. Everyone and everything else is secondary. This means, I must subordinate the understanding of all other ethnicities to mine. Don't mistake me; acknowledging differing ideologies as right and understanding and respecting them are different things. The latter should always be observed first. The former is simply chaos. In this respect, McCormick illustrates our world nicely: each person is like a text that is a “site of ideological struggle” because each day we meet and conflict, to a greater or lesser degree, with those that differ from us, with those who are not us, do not share the same heritage, economic background, or ideology.

My argument against multiculturalism is this: no one can feel any other ethnicity, whether European, Asian, Native American, African, any more potently, any more emphatically urgent than their own and on their own unique terms. To put it another way, I can only *feel* Japanese-Hawaiian (and Cherokee Indian) culture(s) as truly important to me, to my identity.

knowing that those are the cultures I have been born from, while at the same time I can *know* and appreciate other ethnicities and their cultures as inherently significant but just not to me. Yet I cannot simply adopt my Japanese-Hawaiian and Cherokee heritages because they have not yet helped create who I am today. And so the dilemma that this then puts me in is: that I can't say that I now feel a part of the Japanese-American culture in America (as if I could put my finger on a location on a map of the U.S.--there, Japanese-America), and that I can't easily rectify, or even just come to terms with, my strong feelings of "Anglo-ness" because of the lack of any Japanese influence in my life. I still feel white from the thoroughly Anglo-cized education that I've received. However, that doesn't mean there isn't room for me to find a Japanese-Hawaiian identity, in fact, I'm doing that right now.

Over this last summer, I helped move my twin brother, Tad, and his wife to Baltimore, Maryland. We drove a twenty-five foot Rider truck with a full-size car hitch in tow from the West coast to the East coast. When we got to Maryland, I stayed with my long-time friend, Chris Nowacki, who lived in North Bethesda. The night Cal Ripkin broke Lou Gehrig's incredible record for the most consecutive games played in a career, I was sitting on Chris's couch. We were watching the game. There I was sipping a local microbrewed beer with Chris in his apartment in a high-rise building somewhere in a strange Eastern city with someone I hadn't seen since we were seventeen. Just outside the living room window behind me, I could see the metro racing toward D.C. We both watched as Cal Ripkin made that long jog around his home ball park, among screaming fans and flashing lights--that same picture being played in literally millions of other homes all around us, homes that contained a plethora of ethnicities and nationalities (I found out while I was there in Washington that it is just about the most diverse city one can go to in America). I was but one Japanese-Hawaiian among literally thousands, one

Cherokee in hundreds. And somewhere, maybe just blocks away, my cousin may have had a residence there and was watching that game too (it was a historic game). In all the Washington and Baltimore newspapers that month, everyone was calling Cal Ripkin the American “Iron man,” the true “American Hero,” representing the product of hard work and perseverance (good American values!). How was I connected to him? Was I supposed to be like him, to act like him? Was he supposed to be *my* role-model? He doesn’t look like me and yet I remember feeling choked up and proud of him--I could actually identify with him. Does he have to look like me to be my role model, for me to feel an honest connection and pride in the things he was accomplishing?

I have always considered my cultural heritage to be simply that of the mainstream American culture, the generic European culture (blond hair, blue eyes, baseball, apple pie, suburbia), but if I’ve been denied another heritage that I’m entitled to, then have I been simply misunderstanding my own identity this whole time? Is that possible? Why can I only feel connected to a part of American culture that seems to resist me, a part that I am now beginning to slowly resist myself because of writers like David Mura, Carlos Fuentes, and Ronald Takaki? I feel regret, regret because I’m ignorant about my heritage, ignorant about what many Japanese-Americans feel, that sense of importance in certain people and things that create notions of connected-ness, a sense of common struggle and pride. But for the life of me, as much as I struggle, I only hesitantly become interested in these things. Growing up in a single parent home, and the fact that that single parent is not a part of the heritage that my name suggests about me has had much influence on me, on why I feel more white than Japanese-Hawaiian despite my cravings to be Japanese-Hawaiian.

There is one story in my life, a story about me and the first time I came to my identity face-to-face, that seems to be indicative of my whole life's struggle with this issue.

There is a boy, four years old, living in Dallas, Oregon. His name is Ty Inoue. He and his mom, Dixie Garrett (after the divorce, she has chosen to keep her maiden name) are sitting on their couch, a long golden couch. The boy practices writing his name on a piece of paper as Dixie reads.

"Mom, how do you spell it again? Is it 'YT' or 'TY'?"

"'TY' son. And what does that spell?"

"Ty [pronounced like bow-tie]."

Three years pass. Ty is seven now and living in Las Vegas. He attends Fay Heron Elementary school. It is report card time. He accidentally leaves his card in the school cafeteria during breakfast and comes back in a rush after school to see if its still there. He finds a report card there with a strange name on it, one he's never seen before: ASAO B. INOUE. He thinks it may be the girl's that was sitting across from him during breakfast that morning, but takes it home because he has to give some report card to his mother. She might get suspicious. That night he gives the card to his mother, but she acts as if nothing is wrong.

"Mom, it's not mine."

"What do you mean? This is your report card."

"No mom, it's the girl's that I sat with at breakfast. I forgot mine and she left hers. I picked it up instead. See," pointing to the foreign and feminine, vowel-laden name on the front cover, "see, it's a the girl's."

"No Ty, this is yours. That is your real birth name. Ty is your nick-name. That's what we call you."

The boy is confused. If he isn't Ty, then who is he? Why does he need two names? What does that second name mean? For the rest of his life, the boy will grow up with two names: one he will have to put on applications, school documents, his driver's license; the other he'll use and know himself by, his friends and family will call him it, he may write it on a note or a letter to a friend but never sign it on a document because it doesn't belong there. It will often sound clumsy or awkward when he tells it to others. In high school, he will laugh at a Korean boy whose family changed his name to "Huey," after the Walt Disney duck, so that his name "will sound more like an American's name," but he won't realize that his name has also been mouthed-over, almost completely erasing his birth one. Very late, the boy, now a man, will realize that underneath the first name is a whole culture, a whole nationality, a group of Americans that have built walls and have had walls built around them, some with barbed wire. He will realize that he has never lived, never understood, this identity that is supposedly his, yet many tell him is significant to him and his life's story. He is unsure.

Grandfather-In-Law

It's nothing really, and really, it could have been worse, and of course, he's now several years
 dead,
 and his widow, well, if oftentimes she's somewhat distracted, overly cautious when we visit--
 after all, Boston isn't New York--she seems, for some reason, enormously proud that there's now
 a writer in the family,
 and periodically, sends me clippings about the poet laureate, Thoreau, Anne Sexton's daughter,
 Lowell, New England literary lore--
 in which I fit, if I fit at all, simply because I write in English--as if color of skin didn't matter
 anymore.
 Still, years ago, during my visit to Boston, when we were all asleep,
 he, who used to require that my wife memorize lines of Longfellow or Poe and recite them on the
 phone,
 so that, every time he called, she ran outdoors and had to be coaxed back, sometimes with
 threats, to talk to Pops
 (though she remembers too his sly imitations of Lincoln, ice cream at Brighams, burgers and
 fries, all the usual grandfatherly treats),
 he, who for some reason was prejudiced against Albanians--where on earth did he find them I
 wondered--
 who, in the thirties, would vanish to New York, catch a show, buy a suit, while up North,
 the gas and water bill pounded the front door (his spendthrift ways startled me with my
 grandfather's resemblance),
 who of over forty years came down each morning, "How's the old goat?" with a tie only his wife
 could knot circling his neck,
 he slipped into my wife's room--we were unmarried at the time--and whispered so softly she
 thought
 he almost believed she was really asleep, and was saying this like a wish or spell, some bohunk
 miscalculated Boston sense of duty:
 "Don't make a mistake with your life, Susie. Don't make a mistake . . . "
 Well. The thing that gets me now, despite the dangling rantings I've let go, is that, at least at that
 time,
 he was right: There was, inside me, some pressing, raw unpeeled persistence, some libidinous
 desire for dominance
 that, in the scribbled first drafts of my life, seemed to mark me as wastrel and rageful, bound to
 be unfaithful,
 to destroy, in some powerful, nuclear need, fissioned both by childhood and racism, whatever
 came near--
 And I can't help but feel, forgiving him now, that if she had listened, if she had been awake,
 if this flourishing solace, this muscled-for-happiness, shared by us now, had never awakened,
 he would have become for me a symbol of my rage and self-destruction, another raw, never
 healing wound,
 and not this silenced grandfatherly presence, a crank and scoundrel, red-necked Yankee who
 created the delicate seed of my wife, my child.

--David Mura

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