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Life As I Know It: My Story Told Through Poetry

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Life As I Know It: My Story Told Through Poetry



Life Coaching- Atria Group (www.atriagroup.org)

Leah T. Montoya

Creative Writing and Social Action

Creative Project

Dr. Jennifer Fletcher, Professor

HCOM 475

Spring 2017

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Life as I Know It: My Story Told
Through Poetry

By

Leah T Montoya

Final Draft Proposal

1. Name/Concentration: Leah Montoya/ Creative Writing and Social Action
2. Project Description: *Life As I Know It: My Story Told Through Poetry* is a compilation of poetry and prose pieces that give readers a peek into the chaos that is my life. This project sheds light on love, loss, and everything in between.
3. Alignment with Common Theme: Keeping in line with this semester's theme of storytelling, my project aims to tell the story of my life, as each individual poem tells its own story.
4. Purpose: The purpose of my project is to show that poetry can be used as an effective method of storytelling, while telling my stories as succinctly as possible.
5. Capstone Title: My working title is the title of the series: *Life As I Know It: My Story Told Through Poetry*
6. Expectations: I am altering my expectations and timeline. I have presented this project in my Women's Writing Workshop class, and have received a lot of positive feedback. My ultimate goal is to create a small chapbook of approximately 15-20 poems that talk about topics that my readers will be able to relate to on some level.
7. Specific Skills Required: I will be perfecting the way my voice comes across in this project, through the use of poignant wording and vivid imagery.
8. Next Steps: The plan for now is just to write more intensely. I will get used to carrying a notebook around with me everywhere I go, because a large portion of my day is usually devoted to my kids, so I have to learn to write when and where I can.
9. Timeline: Compose poetry pieces (ongoing from February- April)
Attend mandatory draft meetings (ongoing from March- May)

Construct PowerPoint display for Capstone Festival presentation (first week of May)

Organize and paginate body of work (first week of May)

Of the group of seniors planning to complete a creative project for this semester, I have joined a sub-group of classmates, with whom I have worked with in the past, and am comfortable offering and receiving feedback from. In addition to the advice that James Newkirk offers on storytelling, I am currently reading books of poetry composed by my two favorite authors, Alice Walker and Dr. Maya Angelou.

Silence

Before you inquire about why I am no longer
the babbling, bubbly, boisterous woman

I once was,

you should first understand that
pain changes people.

And the constant burning,

aching,

throbbing sensations

that course throughout various parts of my body
serve as a daily reminder of this.

So, if all you have to contribute to our sporadic conversations is,

“Oh, I broke a toe once, and ended up in a wheelchair for
[insert number of weeks]” here,

If you insist upon lecturing me

about how to pray my illness away,

and accuse me of speaking into existence

a condition which existed long before I ever knew its name,

If you would rather spread rumors about me,

dragging my name through the mud,

when, despite our shared DNA,

you don't even know me,

If every time we interact, you ruin the vibe with

senseless awkwardness,

If you cannot appreciate, or even relate
to the way I handle life in general,

Then you leave me no other choice
than to bless you
with the gift
of my silence.

Shame

It was at least 90 degrees outside on the day I was sexually assaulted. I was sharing an apartment with my mother, and I'd gone out to dump the trash. There were three men sitting on the stairs leading up to the complex, and one of them began to follow me and start a conversation. Almost immediately I noticed how aggressive he was, but there was little I could do to dissuade him. He was massive, and there was nowhere to run. Once back inside the building, he grabbed me and shoved me against a wall. Exposing himself, he growled, "Whad'ya think, can you handle all this?" When he finally released me, and I went back inside the apartment, my mother asked me what had taken so long. After I told her every horrid detail, she replied with, "Well, it's your own fault for the way you're dressed." I was wearing shorts and a t-shirt.

The Question

You won't ever get to witness our family milestones—
the birthdays, the weddings, the anniversaries, nor the commencements.

But, at least you got what you wanted: “your turn” to speak.

To verbally cancel out everything I'd just said,
as though my point of view were some sort of colossal mistake,
in desperate need of
erasing and reconstructing.

And I couldn't help but to wonder,
after our one-sided conversation had come to an end,
as you climbed into your bed, content,
after yet another satisfying twenty-four hours of being
consistently correct,
if you ever look into your mirror and ask your reflection,
“Was it worth it?”

Simple Mathematics

I am living proof
that two negatives
create a positive.

The One

I knew you were the one,
when I discovered
that even the blood in my veins
responded to you.

Soulmate

If you were to ask someone how they knew they had fallen in love with their significant other, you'd probably be met with responses alluding to one defining moment—similar to moments seen on television, or in movies. A moment where two people meet, lock eyes, and in that instant, the heavens open up, and celestial beams of light rain down upon the person, as if God himself is saying, “There they are.” It's usually an intense moment, that has sometimes been known to follow traumatic, or life-changing events. As the cliché says—a real “eye opener,” that makes you suddenly realize that this person is the missing link from your life. For me, that moment didn't come when he would carry my books for me, or walk at my pace to the galley, or even sit with me so I wouldn't be lonely. Nope. That moment happened for me during one of the seemingly insignificant times when he brought me food.

He called me while I was studying in the female barracks for an upcoming exam. He'd just been relieved of his watch, and wanted to study with me, since we were in the same class. When I agreed, he offered to buy me lunch. I tried to decline, but the gentleman in him wouldn't let him take no for an answer. So, I gathered my belongings and strolled down the hallway to the lounge, to await his call, which came about 20 minutes later. And that's when it happened. I opened the door to the barracks, and there he was, sitting in his crisp, polished white uniform, with my bag of food next to him. And in that instant, my vision tunneled, my heart somersaulted inside my chest, and I became blissfully dizzy. For the first time in my life, I knew what it felt like to be in love—*really* in love. And suddenly all those goofy clichés about meeting “the one,” and falling in love, began to sound more like an inside joke between myself, and every other person on this earth, who'd been blessed enough to find their soulmate.

Vulnerable

Never have I felt a more compelling sense of simultaneous terror and elation,
than when I am wrapped in the cocoon of your loving embrace.

It both petrifies and soothes me to my core.

I sink into your arms timidly.

I rise from them renewed and exhilarated.

I am brave

for even taking the chance,

for letting down the concrete walls

I have built up for so long.

I am cautious.

for no one else in this lifetime has ever been allowed to see me—the *real* me,
that I believed to be buried under so much pain and fear.

Until there was you.

Carefully, gently peeling away layer after layer, leaving me raw,

and exposed,

and vulnerable,

and unequivocally yours.

Life with Boys

When you live with boys—whether you’re a mother or a sister—it’s important to remember this sage piece of advice: Headphones are your friends.

In fact, if it weren’t for headphones, I’d probably be faced with only two choices: Banish my boys to the backyard, from Friday afternoon, when they’re released from school, till Sunday evening, when they’re tasked with preparing themselves for school; or, be subjected to every single Pokemon fact known to man, for two days straight (three, on holiday weekends).

And it’s not that I have anything against the Pokemon franchise, specifically, it’s just that there are So. Many. Facts. To Know!

For example, did you know that each character has a “type”? Or, that some even have two—those are called “dual types”.

Or that some characters evolve into stronger—but *not* different—versions of themselves? My 11-year old felt it important for me to emphasize this point. Because while they may grow in size, under no circumstances do they *ever* change type—unless, of course, they go by the name of “Eevee”, the seemingly appropriately named “evolution Pokemon”.

At times, I’ve come to appreciate the moments of silence they allow me to have—which are few and far between. Like, when they’ve finally crashed, in a heap of testosterone, onto their beds for the night, after an entire day of barging into my room while I’m trying to write, but instead, end up being interrupted at Every. Fourth. Word.

But mostly, I have learned to become suspicious of their silence. Like when they would mistake the corner of my freshly-steamed bedroom carpet for their apparently less conspicuous, albeit, brightly colored, plastic SpongeBob SquarePants potty...repeatedly!

And let’s briefly discuss the warm climate in which we live—for which I am extremely grateful. Especially since the number of windows I have to roll down every day, during after school pick-ups, is somehow in direct correlation to the number of boys who enter into my car—that number is “three”, in case anyone wants to know.

But when they’re not busy tormenting me with various sights, sounds, and smells, my boys can actually be sweet. Like when my oldest pumps my gas for me, or darts clear across his high school campus, much like Quicksilver, to defend his sister’s honor from some random knucklehead, who unfortunately, didn’t see him coming.

Or when my younger boys—for whom tree conservation is clearly not an immediate concern—shower me with Mother’s Day cards to match every color in their Dollar Store construction book rainbow.

Yes, when you're a mother—or sister—to boys, you learn some very valuable lessons—such as how you should *never* attempt to do their laundry without a set of rubber gloves, or that it would definitely behoove you to have the number to your local urgent care facility on speed dial.

But despite the continuous onslaught of bumps, bruises, and belching, having boys in your life can actually be rewarding. Because in exchange for the way we tenderly care for them when they're sick, they supply us with an endless amount of hugs and kisses. And in exchange for our encouragement, they strive to become ten times the men they were meant to be.

So, the next time I'm elbow-deep in what I can only hope to be a load of mud-stained laundry, or perhaps, putting them to bed at the end of a long day, I'll be sure to utter a prayer of thanks—both for my boys, as well as the often too little amount of quiet time they give me.

But silently, though—wouldn't wanna jinx it!

Secret

I promised

I would take your secret with me
to the grave.

But it seems that your issues
are competing with mine,
for the right to escort me.

The Journey

She hesitates putting pen to paper,
because that simple act
forces her to acknowledge the pain.

She has asked God, “Why?” repeatedly,
sometimes demanding an answer,
other times, her voice barely above a whisper.

And while she understands the reason for this test,
and wouldn't dare undo the growth process
she has endured for what has seemed an eternity,
she has grown weary,
and unsure of how much fight
she has left within her.

Truth

If speaking my truth makes me a bad person,
then what does it make you
for shaping it?

Torture

I torture myself with love songs.

The ones we fell in love to
often play through my mind in heavy rotation,
similar to a mainstream playlist.

I play Russian Roulette with each song,
spinning the track while daring myself not to cry.
The potential splatter of my emotions
is the risk I take when flirting with
such a dangerously sentimental melody;
lyrics eviscerating my soul like bullets.

I fill my soul to the brim
with tunes by Luther, Kindred, and Legend,
suffocating myself with the memories
we made together.

Like a child picking his scab,
I allow the music to pick my heart's wounds
until warm, bittersweet feelings of nostalgia
flow down my cheeks; eager for the next opportunity
to commit emotional suicide.

For these opportunities
allow me to remember what it feels like
to be close to you,
even if it means
feeling your pain.

If You Were Still Here

If you were still here, perhaps,

The very act of getting out of bed
and placing my feet on the floor
wouldn't be so goddamned hard.

The sun would make its appearance known more often--
or at the very least, I'd take notice
whenever it graced the world
with its presence.

I'd have much more to rely on
than my crippling anxiety
to break the monotony
of my seemingly endless days,

And the thrill and anticipation of holidays to come
wouldn't be reduced to the dread of
yet
 another
 lonely
 day.

Maybe food would still have its taste;
flowers, their fragrance;
colors, their brightness;
music, its meaning,
and I wouldn't feel so dead inside.

But, since you're not,

I guess I'll never know.

Irony

Irony happens

when you allow your demons

to put me through the same hell

I would travel to,

in order to rescue you.

Home

How peculiar it is
to be born in a place
where everyone looks like you,
and yet, only be able
to identify with
a select few.

How unsettling it is
to carry the torch
of nostalgia
for a place that only exists
in your mind.

How liberating it is
to finally connect with a kindred spirit,
and build a world
filled with new traditions
and open displays of affection.

How comforting it is
to peer into the hearts
of friends-turned-family,
and know
that I am home.

Senior Capstone Reflective Essay

For my creative project, I chose to create a compilation of poems and prose pieces that are rich in imagery, and also that portray my unique voice from beginning to end. While many of my poems were specifically directed toward a person or group of people, my word choice has been considered amongst my peers to be versatile enough to apply to many different readers, who may be going through similar or different circumstances. Other pieces that may not have been specifically directed toward one person or group of people, have still managed to resonate with my readers, thereby making my project especially relatable to a diverse audience.

Although I consider my work to be diverse, my preferred target audience will be readers who, like me, have experienced real-life changes, resulted by significant events involving love and loss. My target audience may include parents, couples involved in what may be thought of by some as unconventional relationships, and those who have suffered abuse at the hands of those once considered to be close relatives and friends. In addition to providing entertainment, many of my pieces could also be considered thought-provoking, as some of my content deals with taboo topics, such as rape culture. Currently I am also in search of a small publishing company that will publish this work as my first chapbook, via contest, or perhaps a more direct method.

As far as process goes, in all honesty, I owe my creative process to the chaos that is my life. For example, my inspiration for the prose piece entitled “Life with Boys”, came about as I was attempting to compose a poem about a more serious matter; yet despite my best efforts, I found myself literally being interrupted at every fourth word.

I am also incredibly inspired by, and fascinated with, the idea of telling a rather in-depth story as succinctly as humanly possible—in fact, it’s my favorite poetry-associated challenge. There’s something deeply satisfying about witnessing someone’s face light up, as they often proclaim, “Me, too!” after reading one of my pieces.

Regarding thematic and social/historical context, often when one hears the word “storytelling”, images of ghost stories being shared around a bonfire, or young children sitting at the feet of their beloved predecessors while eagerly hanging on to every word the narrator utters, immediately comes to mind. However, few realize that stories can also come to life through poetry. My primary intent for this project is to be able to grab my readers’ attention in such a way that makes them feel as though I’m speaking directly to them (minus the bonfire).

In conclusion, when it comes to artistic tradition and history, like many writers, I tend to draw inspiration from other written works. However, if anyone were to ever ask me which specific poets and authors I draw my inspiration from, I would, without hesitation, answer with Alice Walker and the late great Dr. Maya Angelou. What particularly draws me to their work is the rawness with which they write. Not only has Walker been in an unconventional relationship in her younger past, but both women have experienced significant traumatic events throughout their lives. The poetry that comes from these two women is as poignant as it is carefree, and to me, their talent for simultaneously conveying tones of mystery and vulnerability, far exceeds the works of countless other writers.

Senior Capstone Synthesis Essay

This semester's theme, which was "Storytelling," was quite thoroughly and brilliantly explained by author Thomas Newkirk, in his textbook entitled, *Minds Made for Stories*. What made this book particularly interesting was the manner in which each principle or topic was approached, which I can only best describe as a delightful combination of education and entertainment.

For example, during the week that my group was scheduled to facilitate, we discussed the many ways in which various calls to political action can often be conveyed through the art of storytelling. One such incident came up that involved a library fundraiser being brought back to life by none other than a community-wide Facebook invitation to a book burning party. Suffice it to say, the lesson found in that discussion pretty much proved that it often takes more than statistics to make individuals take an active interest in certain issues—even when the issues at hand are of great benefit.

Newkirk also brought up an interesting, if not debatable point about creating projects strictly out of love vs. creating out of necessity—be it necessity to meet a deadline, or to acquire a favorable grade. Like quite a few of my classmates, I felt that while "love", or motivation, are definitely required in order to begin a project, it is still healthy to finish the projects that we start, even long after the initial novelty of a fresh, new project has worn off. I can't personally speak for all my classmates, but I can absolutely say that the enthusiasm for my own capstone project has come and gone in waves, so to speak, for various reasons—perhaps rehashing old painful memories for the sake of my art had, at times, become too much to bear; or maybe, the idea of a quickly approaching deadline was often perceived as overwhelming. However, because my

motivation to graduate far exceeds my feelings about making necessary, albeit sometimes tedious changes to my work, I am willing to see my project through till the end.

Another perhaps brilliant point about working in the art world was made this semester, by respected author and professor Peter Elbow, regarding several differences between speech and writing, in his aptly-titled essay, *The Shifting Relationships Between Speech and Writing*. As he so eloquently reasoned:

Writing forces us not only to form the letters, spell the words, and follow stricter rules of correctness (than speech); we must also get into the text itself all those cues that readers might need who are not present to us as we write, who don't know the context for our words, and who don't know us or how we speak. (285)

As I went through the semester-long process of writing and re-writing my poetry in such a way that many, if not all my readers to understand the context in which it was written, I found this quote to be particularly accurate—especially since the idea of poetry is to be as succinct as possible, thereby relying on punctuation and line breaks to relay a message.

Professor Elbow also painted very vivid mental pictures, regarding three different types of writers, and the respective methods they use to portray their art. While the first writer is envisioned laboring, or, “pondering” over his or her work, and the second writer portrayed as one who works “in a fine frenzy: scribbling fast, caught up in her words” (Elbow, 284), I see more of myself mirrored in the third writer—the one “conjuring up her audience before her in her mind's eye as she writes” (Elbow, 284).

My project may not tell a story in the conventional sense of the word, but through a collection of poems, I have allowed readers to glance into the chaos that is my life, from love to loss, and everything in between. Not only does the entire collection of poems tell a story, but each individual poem or prose piece tells its own relatable story.

I believe the mechanics of my project have proven themselves exemplary. My format has been developed and approved, after extensive and careful consultation, and I am on schedule for having all my deliverables completed. I believe the substance of my work to be exemplary, as well. My work has demonstrated a clear and deep understanding of this semester's theme, and I think this project echoes my unique voice rather well. And although I have yet to complete it, I am confident that my reflective essay will produce solid evidence of both my creative and critical thinking processes.

In conclusion, one of the many benefits of an HCOM degree is that many of the various concentrations include courses that tend to overlap, which significantly increases the chances of running into, and taking classes with, familiar faces. Such has been the case with me, which explains why it was so easy to collaborate with my group members. Not only do they offer constructive criticism in a non-confrontational manner, but they always make themselves available, either through e-mail or text. And while working on my own for this project was also enjoyable, considering the levels of sentimentality involved, I couldn't have asked for a better group of classmates to work alongside.

Works Cited

Elbow, Peter. "The Shifting Relationships Between Speech and Writing." *College Composition and Communication*. 1985. 283-303. Print.

Newkirk, Thomas. *Minds Made for Stories*. New Hampshire: Heinemann, 2014. Print.