

MEMORIES OF A HISTORY

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Kris V Bernard

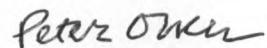
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I certify that I have read *Memories Of A History* by Kris V Bernard, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Creative Writing at San Francisco State University.



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Kris V Bernard
San Francisco, California
2017

"America was the dust in her hair, the wind in her throat, the sun that shouted against her eyelids...America was nothing...but a sliver of interrupted light." – Shanthi Sekaran

"...the wheels keep spinning and I have never learned how to steer." – Jami Attenberg

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis

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Date

PREFACE AND/OR ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dedicated to my beloved mother and my late abuela. Bendicion Mama.

Every day I run from myself without crossing much distance. There's always something to fix, something to wind up for the approval of someone I barely care to know. In my home there are pockets of unfinished business. Quiet moments, I stare them down daring myself to label one more thing as completed. This is what comes from a wandering mind with aspirations of being organized and highly motivated. Living isn't enough in this town, it's breathing when there's this stretch of a tunnel that's narrowing out the longer you walk. Being alone with myself means I have to feign acceptance for who I am without motivation.

An adolescence spent at the foot of the bed my mother and I shared, thin curtains lifting just above my head curled into a book. Solitude wasn't something to fear in those days. The home, even with all its scars forever roughening the walls with age, was all I knew to be safe. You ever talk to yourself as a child? Ok well, what about older? A teenager even, walking down the sidewalk talking to themselves until you pass them and they seem to remember they're outside and shut up until you're passed and go right on to mumbling. I may know a thing or two about that. Papi talked to himself a lot. I remember, not like this was an important moment, but he was washing dishes or we were washing dishes and I was standing next to him and he was so tall. That's it. Things around that memory morph with my many moods, so I know what details I can trust. Doubt is my enemy; the immortal villain to my heart.

Yet, much like the moral to every great survival story, I remain, and likely will continue to exist, to breath and so why not slip into the muck of memory and truth, the difference between them and what it means to be defined by something you simply consider a family matter.

The tips of your canvas sneakers coast the line of entry into your elementary school principal's office. His head is turned down reading the paper. It's lunch time, and everyone is out on break. You hear the culmination of voices overlapping in the yard outside, and aggressively dig your hands into your pockets, sighing.

He looks up and barely blinks an eye finding you standing in his doorway.

He gestures to the seat in front of his desk. "Have a seat."

Your steps are quick and light, your father having taught you how bad manners it is to scrape the floor with your heels. Seated, he returns to his newspaper.

You scan the office walls, Mr. Morrison's diplomas, photos of his family, and a miniature silver globe resting at the edge of his thick oak desk. The wallpaper wraps around you in faded pastel flowers. He used to ask you why you got into trouble so often. He has only met your mother, her beauty a distracting veil from the violence you go home to.

He's tall, his hair white, his suit casual and grey. You exchange glances in the duration of that lunch hour, keeping each other company in a silent acknowledgement. You sit quietly holding your hands in your lap. His fingers are long and thin, palms without the mass to cause much harm.

The minutes continue to pass, and you only know this by the distant whistle outside. Students being called inside by their homeroom teachers.

Mr. Morrison coughs. "So. Do you enjoy missing recess?"
"No, Mr. Morrison."

Here is all I can count on. This being what the little brown girl might say. This bed, a twin mattress on the floor, thinned layers of pilled cotton stuffing scattered in clumps. A blanket parachute flanked on the inside by toy guardians in various states of disrepair, her body a long letter folded tightly.

This is how I always start, with the memory of humid nights; sweat pooling filling the space between beds, between worlds. A monster sighs fists of ash in his sleep and the little brown girl holds still awaiting the dawn. My mother snores facing the wall.

Now, the outcomes are always varied and unknown to the little brown girl, a victim of her own making. A bad dream, she cries. The monster groans an arm open to pull her in, closing the blanket over her head. Please, she asks. The slap's sting alone fades. Again, this time without words, she stands pleading, and for a moment holds her breath. He, her nightmare, rises slumped before a curtain less window. Down below, street corners bloom soft light.

Here is all I've ever wanted. Seeing her asleep beside her mother, the monster shuffles away from them both, silently crumbling into his little brown girl's place in the shadows. Anything can happen in a dream.

In the middle of a city called Guanicá along the west side of the island of Puerto Rico is a plaza with a stone fountain, silver metal cranes frozen in flight by sterling columns and their rusted machinery. During the summer months, a walk to the pier is warned against, a humid breeze carrying the sea's sludge with you as you leave it. A daughter looks on at the water from a distance, standing on the street corner careful not to step on the sandy front lawn of a house someone else, someone not from there, might assume has been abandoned. Wafts of spoiled air hang in wait at her feet until a car rips them from the

ground only to leave them hanging in the air before the entrance of another unlucky resident.

An engraved boulder marks the time in history when Guanicá was the Capital. Daughter remembers this place differently, when the water was less salty, the air thick with the smell of boiled milk in a pot on the stove cooling for those who want their café con leche. What else? She's trying to remember the plaza of her Mother's childhood covered in less dust and clearer waters. Trying to picture this place full of the sound of plastic wheels staining the sidewalks with sand and dirt churned into four neat rows of brown. She thinks this color reminds her of the stains under her eyes, on her forehead and nose. In the window of a parked car, she nods at her reflection having learned long ago of the scars that come within a life shaped by man's ideals. She cringes at the memory of a feeling, in this case proud, revealing itself in deeply embedded lines around her mouth implying she's laughed her way through even the harshest moments.

Victor –

Every part of my name goes back to you. Mom always wanted to name me Sara. When I first found out who I could've been, it was a relief to know you had taken charge of it all. The name I was given was well used, but not altogether ordinary. The first letter –K- made it somewhat different, though not so unique in today's world of misspelled and inanimate baby names. I first met a girl named Princess in elementary school. On any number of my playground recess periods, I don't recall feeling one way or another about it. What I do wonder is why a man would name his offspring after him if he doesn't expect to stick around. A middle name is rarely regarded as representative for a person. Often times, we who wish to become someone or something else adopt it as our first. Then the night casts shadows over two girls while one of them says she has something to confess. And it doesn't matter why she chose a name few know over the one everyone recognizes. A minute after she told me why, I'd forgotten it entirely. Your name soon became impossible to forget.

At 12yrs old I wrote a series of love letters to a boy I was crushing on; I signed the letters with the name you gave me, your name made femme. Then in high school I proposed changing my name altogether. Mom disagreed, of course. She still bears your name; proof of a lifetime of holding onto a ghost.

Your vasectomy proves guilt came in first at some point. You should know, I've decided to keep it. Your first name, my middle, my last, your last and around and around we go. You made me, but I'm not yours. But there's more to it than that.

Arms connect to wrists to thumbs sunken into the pocket of soft vein threaded skin beneath my chin. Hands overlap, a silent prayer or wish neither of us is able to listen to, and yet my uncovered mouth pretends to be a closed door. *Why won't you obey?* I was taught to speak up when justice is misplaced. *You will show me some respect.* I'm choking. Mom. You can't hold on forever. Toe tips stroke the kitchen tiles in sync with the breeze carrying dust from surrounding high rises in one long breath through the windows shaky frame. Motion in every corner of this place, and all I see is falling, my eyes within hers a reflection too familiar to turn away from. The phone might be ringing - is it? - neither of us notice. Then - a warm brush, light and invisible as a whisper. *You have to let her go.*

Up there, everything seems the same save the clustered mountains. Even the rushing waves remind me of home, metaphorically speaking. Down here, the traffic's predictable, the air sharp and wet, passive. A cafe moonlighting as a laundromat is where I sit waiting. An invitation, I indulge in a dress months from expiration. Eager tongues slicken teeth - they're disappointed I don't bleed like I used to. So much quiet. Standing now wishing the ground were a tarmac I know now home is in that moment, my throat cradled in her grip, neither of us saying a word.

“Hola?”

“Ma Maaah”

“HOLA MI AMOR! Como estas?” Mom says my grandmother’s losing her hearing. She says it’s why she yells. Personally, I can’t remember a time when she didn’t.

“Bien bien. Y tu, mi niña? Come te siente?”

“AY luchando como siempre, mija. Gracias a Dios.” Fighting. She tells me she’s fighting. As if a fatherless family would be doing anything but. I learned what bitch meant from a button my mother wore stuck to her purse when I was a child. Saying it aloud got me a grin instead of her slap. But then, I’ve been known to remember the past differently than others. My memories are based on what I choose to believe about my past.

Of all my childhood possessions I believe I miss my brother’s hand-me-down cassette tape recorder the most. That was the possession I improvised radio shows on with my neighbor’s son across the hall. Some of the tapes were thrown in boxes packed with canned fruit and baby wipes for my brother stationed in the desert. When he returned, he gifted me a bootleg copy of Madonna’s Greatest Hits that I played side after side on my shoulder like a makeshift boombox.

Mom got a wooden jewelry box, it’s tiny drawers lined in silk. I coveted that box at first sight. Days later he found me strutting awkwardly towards it in a pair of mom’s heels and told on me. Our mother gave it up with little more than a wave, adding one more thing to his list of resentments.

The best years were before all that. Mornings were mom walking me to preschool, and Mama in the afternoon waiting in the hallway to take me home. I was never good at nap time especially knowing she was out there. The stories she told were what became the lessons on how to be brave. Today I know she's the reason I'm alive.

Lucha: It's early where I am and late where she is when I ask her about her health. "AY luchando como siempre, mija. Gracia a Dios." Fighting. She tells me she's fighting. As if a fatherless family would be doing anything but. Truth is I'm not sure what we'd do without the ache in our overworked muscles reminding us the thing to fear the most is becoming numb. We learn early on that crying is a sign of weakness. Fogs the memory, mystifying our reality. The most important lesson is no one cares about your problems. *Amen*, I say agreeing.

Bendiciòn: Some children, I hear, learn to give respect before understanding what it means. Some children, I've seen, hunger for the same respect they were taught to dispense given back to them. Some adults still don't know the meaning behind the words, which define cultures and faith. Our picture moves, gazing from the top of piles of books, her smile fixed, eyes reflecting mine back at me from lense to lense. *Bendiciòn Mama*. *Que Dios te bendiga, mi niña*.

Malcrea: Men haven't lived here for several lifetimes. One morning as we entered the building elevator moments before our paths divided, I read a button clipped to her purse aloud. *Bitch is not a bad word, Mom said. Own it*. Lately, I find myself looking down at my reflection in a murky street puddle, shutting my eyes before flipping a coin in. If there were a fountain, I know she'd take it all back, teach me to understand the fault in a single word.

Pendeja: *This isn't a hotel, she'd say*. A girl raised by women finding it hard to believe that men are more than easy targets. *Who's the new victim?* They'd ask. I told them,

everything that's going wrong will be fixed if I could just make it work. *Por favor*, they'd say, one voice echoing four. *No sea pendeja*. A rug to scrape your heels on, flecks of dirt still sinking as the door shuts. No, I nod, that's something I'll never be.

Forteza: *Por favor contestame*. I know you're awake. *Yo se que te amo desperta*. Call me. *Llama me*. She doesn't know I'm awake, maybe watching the light blink on my nightstand choosing not to pick up.

Fe: It never felt like the right time. I know now there likely never would've been one. Until the moment I sat with her in the hospital holding my breath, afraid of having been forgotten. Then the exhale of a smile as her eyes thinned pleasantly into mine. My coming was too great a sacrifice, she said. You are beautiful, my love. Take care of yourself, so you don't end up like me. Laying my head down at her feet, dangling my own over the side of her bed, I knew in that moment I'd been forgiven. But I wasn't going to let myself off that easy.

Familia: Regardless of distance, we Candelarios co-exist, together but apart. Memories shape the experiences of a youth spent packed in tiny suitcases, shoeboxes filled with photo fragments, the men and the boys they left us to raise erased with a slice. Sound bites are all that remain of a family shaped like undercooked dough, raw in random places with just the right amount of crunch on the *culo*.

Suerte: Don't believe in it. We Daughters and Daughters of Daughters weave together our history out of very old thread. We do this in spite of divides both physical and spiritual in

the effort to renew our love with material no amount of time can diminish. This way our greatest fear is disappearing is abated. Through this willful haunting we redefine the value of our existence immortalizing ourselves in story.

7am: birdsongs drift through the open window, illuminating the bed in a slice of orange. The alarm clock stabs my gut without restraint. I sit up, stand tiptoed reaching for the right button, hitting all the wrong ones along the way. Everything' quiet, even the animals haven't stirred yet. Skate the path of wood flooring to the kitchen, open the freezer with one hand, pop a waffle into the toaster with the other. White spots, deep breathes; swallow, again.

I used to be brilliant at fasting. The will of a tyrant, I traded curiosity for obsession. Mom never seemed to know whether to beat me down or turn up the volume. That was before we made my father leave, we, my mother folded into my tiny embrace hiding from confrontation. My brother, however young, wore the role of father like an unwanted hand-me-down. But our trips to the zoo were always nice. Years before he shrugged into actual fatherhood, puffed up his chest and walked out *orgulloso*; as if pride had anything to do with it.

Citalopram (brand name: Celexa) 20mg per day, best taken following breakfast or dinner. Definitely causes drowsiness, difficulty with exhibiting emotions, and increased loner tendencies. The waffle didn't go down well. Two bites in acid bubbled up through my stomach, three crumpled sprints to the bathroom, an attempt at peeing falling head first onto the cool tile mattress. It's been a week. No food, no meds; no telling what will trigger the outbursts. Body twitches, waking up. Underwear, its just dead weight.

Make it into bed, hold the covers up high like a parachute and release.

Let it fall over us all in welcomed darkness.

Connecting...

“Hi mom.” Sigh.

“*Hi honey,*” smiles “*What’s up?*”

“I’m crying.” Swallow.

“*What? Why?*” *Concerned.*

“It won’t stop, mom. I can’t make it stop.” Afraid.

“*Honey, where are you? Are you at work?*” *Suspicious.*

“Yes, I’m on my break.”

“*Mmmmm what are you eating?*” *Sing-Song.*

“I stopped taking my meds.” Stop.

“...*When? Did you tell your doctor?*” *Head shaking.*

“They make me too drowsy. All I want to do is sleep. Mom, what do I do?” Throat heavy.

“*Baby, listen to me. You have to stop crying. You’re at work.*”

“...”

“*Everything’s going to work out. You know I’ve got your back. I love you.*” *Retreat.*

“I love you.” Keep swallowing.