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Ensenada

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Ensenada

by

Julia DeArriba-Montgomery

A non-thesis project submitted as partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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ensenada

a sheltered inlet or bay, allowing passage from one body of water to another

MFA Research Project
Julia DeArriba-Montgomery
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she slept near me at night. her statue serene, with her child in her arms. I used to have a statue of her son there as well, until his hand broke and i felt sad when i looked at him. but she was right next to me, even when the blaring numbers of the alarm clock offered only a rude awakening, she looked upon me with quiet contentment. years would go by, years in which i could not understand nor defend the catholic church, years in which doctrine seemed driven more by social hierarchies than spirituality. but she always found a place on my night table, next to my bed, beside my alarm clock. a relic of a religion i can no longer believe in, yet cannot fully separate myself from. a reminder of where i came from. a token from my mother.

but mary is a face, a voice, an idea. she is a mother and only a mother: and i am many things at different times. the world wraps around me and i am left to redefine the roles i have chosen. each time i learn a bit, either through mistakes or successes. but the roles change, as everything changes. and i would like to think that, although at certain times i feel as if i'm moving in circles, i'm really moving within a sphere, touching on things in the the past, but not repeating them.

and it is this change that i draw from right now. the change that happens when you move from one place to another, whether that place be literal or metaphorical. the change that happens when you allow a part of you to die, in hopes that another part may be born. while this is happening, worlds intertwine in strange and somewhat contorted patterns. one world grows weak while the other gains strength. this is seen in big ways, as in migrations and assimilations of cultures, and in small ones, as in a woman's change from a daughter to a mother: it is a place of much uncertainty, but also a place of great strength.

when i was young i'd sit for hours in my back yard, mixing a strange concoction of plants and liquids, household items and dirt. i was convinced this potion would, no doubt, contain magical properties. through years of experimentation, i had never actually seen the magic i knew the recipes could create. of course, i continued to believe that i just hadn't gotten the recipe right, and thus my search for magic continued.

the search for alchemy, (turning common objects into precious materials) is in many ways more important than the outcome. it is the process behind one's search, the days and nights of creating and recreating ideas and forms, that offers us a chance to believe. a belief in ourselves, and perhaps the world around us.

and so everyday objects such as wood or twine, moss or wax...become something else when placed in just the right way. and it is a dance, a strange and exhausting dance, to create such a place.

but these are words and ideas, they can not be caught and understood for more than a moment. they are thoughts and thoughts are more important to the person having them, generally speaking. stories are different. they are ours when we are listening to them. we gather our own ideas and our own interpretations. metaphor takes the place of obvious conclusions. we are left in a world of symbols and characters and the cord that ties them together.

and although i am an art maker; i will try my hand as a storyteller. the tales I will tell are in no way original, as little is these days. they are a collection of my own experiences, my imagination, and the world around me. i will also share memories, fragments of my past, clues as to what brought me to this point and why. what led me to believe the things i believe and what parts of that system are contrived and what parts are true, if any.

and i suppose, regardless of tone, they shouldn't be taken all too seriously. they are only stories, after all.

ants in spain

sometimes a story is more than it means to be, while more times it is less than it ought to be. and every once in a while a story is just what it should be. and this is one of those stories, i think.

the day was short and the night came early. the moon was a crescent where the old man slept. the stars were small and quiet, and the crickets had gone on vacation for a while. and all around her was a quiet type of place, with no words and no interruptions. just the sky and the land, the horizon marked over by the night.

she surveyed this place, and was content with her findings. a broken swing, an old oak tree, some discarded bottles and gum wrappers, and a tree trunk. she decided to sit upon the tree trunk, for it seemed the most suitable place to sit. and she waited. she knew she could wait it out this time. she knew the sun would rise in a few hours and she would be there to greet it.

and sounds would filter in and out, and creatures would visit from places hidden and distant. but she sat upon the stump, convinced of her task. and the darkness grew around her deeper still, until she was a small little speck, hardly recognizable even to herself.

and slowly the world blurred, and quietly her eyes shut. and suddenly she was no longer where she had been just a moment before. she was in the mountains in spain, high in a cabin. the ground was dry. allowing only small shrubs and trees to grow. she was serving dinner, although she didn't know what it was. she held the pot in her hands when all of the sudden she was surprised by an uninvited guest, and she accidentally dropped the dinner on the ground. ants began to feast on the meal.

and the ants started to crawl on her legs until she couldn't stand the feeling anymore and swatted them off. and the mountains disappeared and were replaced by a green patch of forest, an old oak tree and a broken swing. as she gained a sense of where she was, she noticed some discarded bottles and gum wrappers, and a tree stump that she was currently using as a head rest.

and the sun made its debut, lying low just over the horizon line, which was quite clear and distinct. and morning sounds did their morning things. and she missed her beginning, yet again.

an older tale in which i am convinced i take myself far too seriously...

i was walking along the shore of empty wishes, made by children who had long since grown out of the habit of wishing. i was walking at sunset, with my grandmother beside me. we were waiting for the stars to show their faces, and for the sun to give up it's conceit and let the less-bright children shine. i think, perhaps, my grandmother was dying then, she had the look of one who knew time was more than numbers on the face of a clock. she had to sit for a moment, the stars were taking too long to come out, and she was afraid she would not be able to stay long enough to see if they did.

we sat on the sand, which was just moist enough to make into balls on the palm of my hand. it was cool sand, with only a few bits of broken shells, and felt good on the soles of my feet and the back of my legs. she coughed a bit, and looked out into the ocean. the sky was ablaze in red and pink and orange...the world could be on fire. she looked away from the ocean and placed her hand on mine, and together we sat in silence. my mind was cluttered from the wishes i could hear spilling over the waves. my grandmother could hear them as well, but she had grown accustomed to the noise. she had been on this beach nearly all her life.

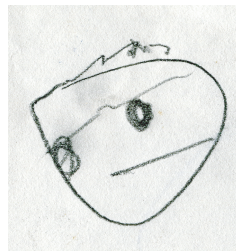
later, my grandmother would leave this place forever. but for now, she was breathing the same air i did, and still laughed at the same things i found amusing. we were close, and she was closer to light than i could dream.

we looked on at the waves, until the sound of empty wishes filled my head and my heart and my soul, and i could no longer bare it. i jumped from my place and looked hard into my grandmother's eyes. "Why won't they stop?", I asked. "Why won't the noise just go away? The sound of their wishes, over and over, how can you find peace in this place?"

she said little to me then, and pushed herself upon her feet, and walked to the very tip of the shore. the water touched her skin, washing against her with both rhythm and grace. she knelt down, and dipped her hands into the breaking waves. For whatever reason i do not know, or did not know then, she cupped her hands and filled them with the deep blue sea. she let the water flow in and out of her hands, again and again, until soon she was no longer my grandmother. soon she was the land and the sky, bathed in water, creating something no fool would count on, no king could recognize, and no god can undo...my grandmother created hope.

a perpetual look of happiness

at three i clearly remember my need for my mother, and my fear of clowns and bunny rabbits. two very terrible and alarming things. but i also remember yellow lined note-book paper that my father would bring home from work. on these pages my mother would draw with her ballpoint pens faces of women and men, flowers and houses. i would have my turn, making strange faces that were somewhat round with eyes and noses. i was always amazed at my mothers drawings, her people had a perpetual look of happiness. my father drew a little man with a big nose stuck on a fence. i thought he was a funny little man. i always begged him to draw more but he hadn't the time. these moments were like magic for me. i still feel the lift of excitement in my belly even now.



shoreline

the water flowed in azure waves above her head, as she looked up towards the sun, its beams dancing on the surface. she slowly made way for air, she knew she would break this moment into a million pieces. the sun could no longer be above her in a watery glow, but would instead be all around her, hot and bright and strong.

as she came up for air, she let out a gasp. the salt water stung her eyes and it took some time before she could see the world around her. she had traveled far from her starting point. the under toe was working hard today. she did not recognize the shoreline, and thus began to panic.

how long had she been under water? a few seconds, no more. and yet it seemed much longer to her now. she could see no one, and she could feel the sea and all its uncertainties wrap around her, as if it could sense her fear.

she remembered going night swimming with friends. she remembered how they pulled their cloths off as they jumped into the ocean. their shyness of one another's bodies forced them to run quickly into the water, without thinking of what may lie beneath. the moon was bright but not too bright, and one of the group decided to swim far from shore and was soon lost to them. she came back some time later, everyone sensing how she had been drawn to the nothingness of the ocean.

but this wasn't the beach at night. this was during the day, and she was alone. and the nothingness that was the ocean was not inviting, it was confusing and immense. and so she did the only thing she could do, she dove underneath the waves. all she could hear was the churning of the water, deep and low and soothing. she slowly looked up, and saw the sun dancing on the water's surface. its rays forming a million small speckles, each more beautiful than the last. she did not want to break this moment, for it was everything.

and so she floated, for a while, in between the surface and the ocean floor, until she could no longer fight her urge for breath. as her body broke the surface, she gulped the air hard and strong, opened her eyes, and swam to shore.

dance hall days

my grandparents spoke with thick spanish accents. my mother's mother cursed in spanish, and the first words in spanish i learned, outside of duermas con los angelitos, were curse words. she had a mouth like a sailor and no patience for children with minds of their own. at certain points i hated her, but more because i was confused as to why she so hated me. she had grown up poor, with eight brothers, and had to quit school at the age of thirteen because her mother needed her to stay at home. i rarely saw her happy, she was usually grimacing at someone or something. but on a rare occasion she would dance, moving her arms back and forth, one raised above her head while the other drifting to her pronounced belly. for those moments she was content with life, and even though we could not always communicate in the same language, we would both laugh at ourselves. even towards the end of her life, when she was living in a nursing home and rarely able to absorb the world around her, i would raise my arm and begin to dance. she would mimic me, slowly, and we would laugh. i hope she is dancing now.



childish notions

it was a lazy saturday afternoon, and she decided to go to a park and take a stroll. as she found herself immersed in the woods, she felt a strange sense of security, as if all these trees and bushes were protecting her from something. the leaves crunched beneath her feet, as she tripped occasionally on a root or a plant. and soon she was not on a path at all, but somewhere deep within.

and it was in that place that she saw it. two tree branches intersecting to form an archway. she was brought back to her childhood, when she believed with all her heart that if she walked through such a place, she would be transported into another world. she would try time and time again to go to these other places, but each time she walked under the natural arch, she would find herself in the very same reality she ventured from. she never gave up, excusing the failure simply because it was not the right time of day, or she wasn't the right age, or perhaps it was the wrong month...or maybe she was just wearing the wrong color. each excuse gave way to the continuation of her hope.

but today she was not a child, and she began to laugh at her childish notions (although somewhere deep inside she still held her childish hope). she surveyed the archway, making sure the branches really touched and that it was a true archway, and not an almost-archway...which can sometimes occur. she was pleased to see that the branches did touch, and that it passed the test.

and the air was chilled and she knew she must be going soon. and so she took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and (little to her surprise) walked through the archway. as she came through the other side, she slowly opened her eyes to see the world around her.

and it was the same world, with the same trees and the same sky. and she let out a small sigh and laughed at herself again. these were such silly notions.

but as she found her path, she remembered how she got to this place. after all, it was probably just the wrong time of day, or perhaps the wrong time of year, and she had plenty of time to get it just right. and she walked out of the woods, with all intentions of coming back one day.

a memory

i used to try anything to get out of church. there was an amazing oak tree towards the side of the building, and if i could convince my dad (a task which was never too difficult) to take me outside, he would set me upon its branches and i would, quite diligently, work on dirtying my sunday best.

when we moved back to florida, our new church didn't have such nice oak trees to climb. they only had pine trees, which were a huge waste of time, as their branches grew far above one's reach. sitting in church became necessary, even though my father stopped attending all together. i would sit dutifully, as my brother would climb on the floor and lower the kneeling bench with a thud. the priest would continue his sermon, until finally i was relieved of the monotony by communion. then i could walk from my seat and stand in line for the small wafer, minus the blood of christ since we were only children, to be placed in my mouth.

we would then shake each other's hands, sing a hymn terribly out of tune (aided by the off-key soprano's in the choir), and leave the church.

once home to our house on veronica street, i would tear off my dress, stockings and fancy shoes and replace them with my jeans and t-shirt. then i would run into the backyard, and up our oak tree, which was huge and green and filled with the most amazing branches. although it took some time to climb the first branch, it was then quite easy to reach the others.

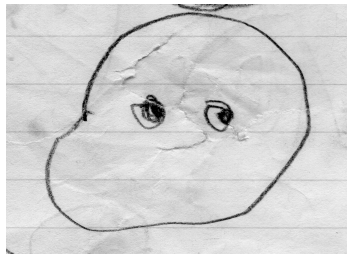
and my mind would forget all the noise and commotion of the church, and would focus on the sky and the earth, and the sun would beat down upon my neck and my face.

in years to come, when we moved from the house on veronica, my memory would always take me back to the huge oak tree in our back yard. i can still see the way the sunlight twinkled in the leaves, as the wind blew soft and steady.

i am afraid i have little memory of the church, aside from its blue gray carpet, the sad crucifix of jesus, and a complete lack of oak trees.

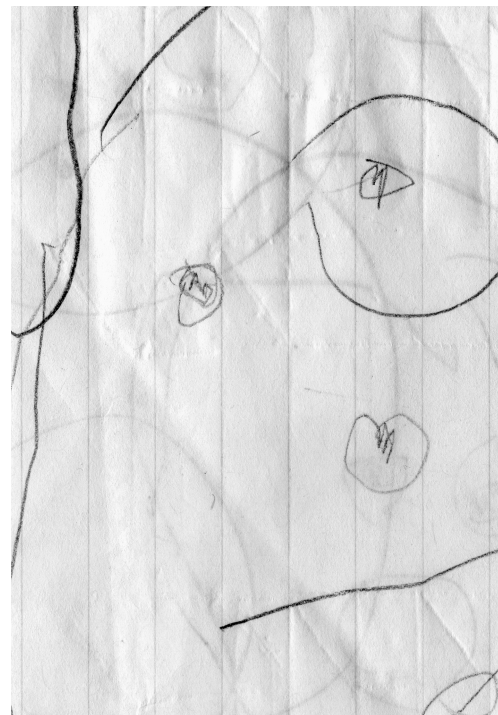
palm sunday

st. peter hung above my bed, and every time we moved, which was quite often as a child, he would always find a place there. after each move, i would delicately nail the plaque to the wall, next to two angels my aunt had brought back from spain. and on palm sunday, i would lovingly create a cross out of the blessed palms handed out in church, and hang it next to st. peter. making the crosses seemed so much more interesting than listening to the priest, who usually spoke of things that did not seem true to my little self. the palm leaf would dry over the next few months, changing from a pale green to a pale yellow. sometimes it would fall apart, but usually it would stay intact until the following spring. eventually, my mother would go to church alone, without any of us. on palm sunday, she would bring back the palm leaves and i would diligently make multiple crosses, a pang of guilt going into each one for not accompanying her. at sixteen i could no longer bring myself to go to church. the ritual no longer made sense to me and i envied my mother for her belief. but i could make sense out of making little palm crosses. that was a pure and honest endeavor, and something i could understand.



blurred vision

as a child my eyes didn't work so good, and once a year we would travel to tampa, and i would visit dr. weiss, my ophthalmologist. my eyes would be dilated and stretched and scraped and all sorts of things. glasses would be prescribed, surgery would be postponed, and i would get a lollipop. hours after the visit my eyesight was blurred due to the dilation. my mother would take me to my uncle elio's home, he was a funeral home director at a.p. boza. my uncle julio, aunt katherine, uncle joe and aunt edna (whom we still call wachie) would join us and we would eat black beans and rice and cuban bread. my mother and i could eat a whole loaf, just the two of us, in under an hour. as my eyes healed, my uncle would joke about things that i probably should not have heard, cousins whose names i have forgotten would stop by and visit and the evening would give way to night. my brother and i would be forced to go to bed early while the adults had their adult time. we would usually visit my other aunts and uncles the following day, and sometimes would visit the grave site where my grandfather was buried. these trips were bittersweet, filled with family and death, and just a tad bit blurry.



abbey road

it was a bright sunny day and i had ran everyone out of the house. i wanted to clean and nothing was getting in the way of that. but cleaning could never take place without good music. so out came abbey road in honor of my mother. and things began and the bed was made and the bureau was dusted and the windows were windex'ed. and all of this was in a whirlwind of energy and dancing and singing and a clear resolve to end dirt's short residency in this house.

and soon i began to sweep. and the dust flew up into the air, caught by the sunlight. it sparkled and floated in all directions. and in that very ordinary moment life stopped. everything was clear. i realized how very beautiful and wonderful life was, how precious that moment was, and how i would remember that image for as long as i lived.

and i think to that moment and wonder why, why something so simple and ordinary could be so powerful. why a moment of everyday actions with everyday objects all of sudden became a time of reverence. and why it was that moment and not another, more important moment that remains in my mind. because there are big moments. weddings. funerals. births. these moments are powerful and they impact our lives. we remember them for that reason. but this was a simple moment, with no one special and nothing extraordinary. just a little, overstuffed apartment in midtown atlanta, a broom, and a large bit of dust.

and if i were to see life clearly, which i cannot, i would gander to say that i simply saw life in a different way that day. i was able to capture a view into the world that i would have otherwise overlooked. perhaps the dust wasn't dust at all, but a million sparkling lights all around me. perhaps these molecules were there all the time, skimming the surface and dancing between other, larger objects. and maybe, just maybe, they were the magic glue that held life together.

but i imagine i've thought this moment out far too much. and that what i saw that day was simply dust. and abbey road does always leave me in a sentimental mood. and it was a bright, sunny day.

myrtle street

i was in atlanta, in our cramped apartment on myrtle street. we had just finished eating a meal together, and i had decided to take a few moments to myself on the front balcony. all the apartments shared this balcony, it served as a walkway. as i sat and smoked a cigarette, i decided to pray to my grandfather, it seemed like the appropriate thing to do. and so i prayed and things were fine until all of a sudden he was talking back to me. and this seemed very strange because he was screaming in my head. and he was yelling to me, "get inside now", and i decided since i didn't usually have such a reaction from praying, i would do as he requested. and i put out my cigarette and walked into the house and plopped down on the couch as some friends were just starting a movie. within moments gun shots were fired, kevin yelled to get down, and i dove behind the couch. there must have been five or six shots, and then nothing. slowly, after calling 911, we went to the door. and there, exactly where i had been sitting just moments before, was a gun. a few feet from our door our neighbor lay dying. and from that moment on, i felt it was pretty safe to follow my dead grandfather's instructions, regardless of how silly that may sound.



snooze button

and when she was no longer in her comfortable bed with her comfortable pillow, she knew she had returned to that place. it was neither new nor old, but somewhere in between. a place she had ventured to in the past, but one that she had never stayed long enough to call her own. regardless, she was there and it was time to explore her surroundings.

the place was a house, with many rooms. and the rooms changed from time to time without her knowing. she would enter a door to a bedroom but suddenly she would be in the kitchen, and the smell of eggs and bacon would overwhelm her, and she would quickly walk towards the hallway in hopes of finding another place to explore.

and for what must have been, at the very least, an eternity, she continued along her path. each room would offer a symbol or clue, whether it be written on paper or hung on the wall. there would be some remnant out of place, or just slightly askew, that she knew was a message to her.

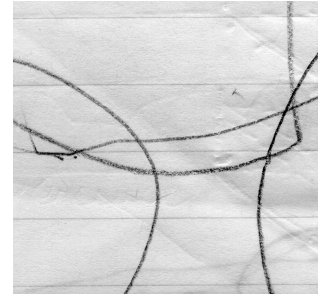
but the last door she entered was a strange door, for it was hardly a door at all. it was more like a space between two worlds, a space just big enough for her to pass through. and when she had walked through this small space, she happened to look behind her. but, little to her surprise, the pass-through had disappeared. instead she saw only the trees and the earth and the sky.

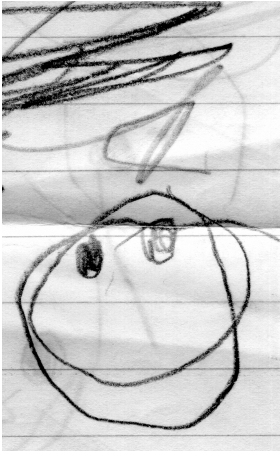
she reached into her pockets for the clues she had taken, but found only scraps of paper, with words smeared and illegible. and so quite sadly, she knew her search was not over this night. she knew she had to leave this place for now, in hopes that one day she would find it in the right time.

and slowly she opened her eye lids, breathed in the morning air, and welcomed the day.

changes

florida is a strange place. i hated it growing up, the heat and the sand and the cockroaches were sometimes unbearable. but then i moved away, and all the things i disliked became somewhat nostalgic, and the heat wasn't nearly as bad compared to the harsh winters up north, and other states had their interesting pests and annoyances. when we moved back i felt a bit like i was moving backwards, but with better shoes on. and school lasted a bit longer than i had anticipated, and i couldn't get away from making art. and tampa resonated with familial bonds and a touch of sadness for a past i could never live. and time moved by me at a relatively quick rate. i was married, making art that finally spoke to me, lost family members and gained some new ones, and then i was pregnant. and all of these things happened in a type of pattern that i'm sure, from a distance, makes sense. but from my perspective it all interwove and tied together in a kind of insane way, with me somewhere in the middle trying to make ends meet. and life is like that, i am told...and things will only continue in this way. and florida is a crazy kind of place, a transient kind of place. and i suppose things will change again very soon, as they always do.





a toast

two funerals in tampa in under 3 months, and both ending at my uncle elio's home. in august my grandmother died. in october my uncle. neither came unexpectedly, but they were sad all the same. after loosing another uncle in miami and a good friend in germany within the same six month period, i was tired of hearing bad news. the cemetery was becoming an all too familiar place. and although my father and i would search and find cemeteries in my youth, in order to retrace the history of cities and towns, this was not an unfamiliar history, it was my own. and therefore, it stung just a bit deeper. after my uncle elio's funeral, my husband, cousin and myself decided it was time to disappear for a moment or two. we went downtown to the hub, before it was cleaner and bigger, and sat amidst drunkards and homeless people. there was no college crowd at three o'clock in the afternoon. there the bartender gave us a few drinks on the house, and we all toasted my uncle. we were happy for a while, and realized that we were needed back at the house. so we quietly drove to his home on the river, and visited family members and sat in his garden, and remembered.

basement treasures

mr. cuesta would quietly go down to the basement of his old cigar factory, years after he had sold it to the company my aunt was employed by. in the sale of his factory, he had made a provision that he could keep some of his things in the basement. for hours he would sit with his treasures, relics from a time long past. his wife would call trying to find him, and my aunt would diligently go down the dark and narrow steps in hopes that he was still there. she would convince him to come up from the basement and rejoin the living. for a time he did. when he had passed, mrs. cuesta asked that my aunt look through his many things, and choose something she liked, since my aunt had always helped in finding her husband. my aunt chose a chair, most of the rest went to the ybor museum. the building was sold and sold again a few more times. but i wonder if mr. cuesta still comes to visit.

