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SCREAM IF YOU CAN

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SCREAM IF YOU CAN

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing:
Fiction

by
Heather Leigh Reyes

June 2014

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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

Scream If You Can is an episodic memoir that captures the driving lifestyle of southern California while focusing on significant life events of a twenty-something young woman. The memoir explores themes of family, trauma, and perseverance. Biculturalism and disability are explored alongside the use of education to make a better life for oneself.

To
my grandfather,
Miguel Marujo Reyes
1918-2000

for
believing in me,
being my father figure,
teaching me right and wrong,
and passing on his perseverance.

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Introduction

Although the study of English literature and creative writing is not a high priority in my family, the richness of fiction drew me in at an early age. I remember reading a leather-bound children's book on Lancelot and King Arthur, many times, when I was five. Soon after that, I was hooked on R. L. Stine's *Goosebumps* series and *The Adventures of Wishbone*, which introduced me to classical stories in a format befitting my age. These books provided another world that I could escape into, and that was very helpful when things were tense in my home environment.

Around age ten, I started staying up all night to finish reading good books. That habit continues more than fifteen years later. However, these days I notice gender portrayals, racial prejudices, literary devices, tone, style, characterization and such even when I try to escape into a pulpy bestselling novel. I often take notes on technique and well-crafted sentences. Literature holds my interest because it is an interdisciplinary subject, so by reading a story, I can learn about psychology, philosophy, history, women's studies, ecology, geography, or some other topic through the text. When I write, I like to bring in knowledge to inform my readers, even if that requires research on my part. I also enjoy reading and writing young adult stories because they provide knowledge and awareness to young readers, which assist them in growing up.

In my teenage years, I was hooked by J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. As I matured, I latched onto Charlaine Harris' *Sookie Stackhouse* series. These books were comforting to read, especially during some of the most difficult periods of my life. Someday I would love to create that same kind of comfort for readers of my fiction.

My love for literature grew when I started writing as a teenager. I hid my writing from my family for many years. I started college at the age of 16 thanks to the California High School Proficiency Exam, and was strongly encouraged by my family to become a scientist. I loved the movie *Contact* and I was very interested in the work done by SETI, so I planned to major in astrophysics, to learn rocket science and join the search for intelligent life in the universe. The concept fascinated me, but as I reached the higher levels of calculus and physics, I began to struggle. Spending hours on equations wasn't easy to do at the age of 17, especially when a lot of my time was taken up by the emotional trauma that grew stronger within my family. My mom battled lung cancer while my father spent money on drugs rather than the mortgage, so my mom nearly lost her life and we lost our house.

I decided to change my major to computer science because I was a tech geek and I hoped I would be able to complete that coursework as the chaos within my family continued. For many years, I watched TV shows about building computers from scratch and how to resolve software issues. Computers seemed natural to me because I had been using them since the age of 5. Back then, I

had to enter a DOS command to launch Windows 3.1. The first computer we had at home had a hard drive with less memory than any USB drive you can buy today. I started building and maintaining computers and then I progressed to web design, so I changed my major again and started to approach website creation as an art form.

I ran my own web design company for over three years and I did well, but I found the work unfulfilling. My clients were paying me because they didn't have the time to manage their online presence themselves. I felt insignificant. Anyone could replace me. A desire grew to find something that made me feel significant, something that justified my existence on this planet.

Approaching web design as art was a sort of bridge that allowed me to transition to the English major. The economic downturn hit and my clients could no longer afford my services. I closed up shop just as my home life shattered and required a relocation. As I was packing for the move, I started asking myself what I really wanted in my life. I was rebuilding my life all the way from the foundation. I had ideas for stories but I needed to develop my skills before I could be comfortable, even proud, to share my work with others.

As I applied to Cal State San Bernardino, I wanted to choose the creative writing major, but I allowed my mother to talk me out of it because according to her, almost no one makes a living with their writing. Instead, I took the literature route for undergraduate work. I took so many creative writing classes that until my final quarter, I could have switched to creative writing without needing to take

more classes. My grades in creative writing classes were always higher than my literature classes.

I also started working in an afterschool program at a local middle school. I received extensive training and an afterschool teaching certificate. I ran a classroom by myself and assisted my students with their homework. If their homework was done, I found teaching opportunities. I was very proud to see the progress my students made and there was nothing more rewarding than those "light bulb" moments when something just clicked in their brains and they understood what they were learning. This work made me feel significant. I wanted to keep teaching, but at the same time, I knew I wanted to teach older students who didn't require babysitting. I wanted to teach students who could get into deep analysis of a text. I wanted to teach college students, and I knew that required a graduate degree.

I graduated in December 2011 with a BA in English and a concentration in literature. I took some time to consider my options even though I had been eyeing the MFA program for some time. I knew the MFA would qualify me to teach at the college level and it would allow me to continue honing my craft as a writer. It was almost time to apply for programs in the fall, but I didn't know what to do in the mean time. Seeing no better option, I chose to continue taking creative writing classes as a post-baccalaureate. I took a number of poetry classes in my two post-baccalaureate quarters, and they greatly increased my

interest in writing poetry, which left me torn between which creative writing track I wanted to pursue. Luckily, I discovered I could apply for both.

In the first post-baccalaureate quarter, I submitted my MFA application, which is a story in itself. I didn't get a response until the following quarter, another story there. What mattered in the end was that I was accepted on the fiction track and I was slightly ahead of the game because I was able to transfer the units from that second post-baccalaureate quarter.

I decided to write a memoir for my thesis. I also worked on some fictional pieces during the MFA. Because of my classes in poetry, my attention was drawn to word choice and images. Imagistic poetry is very common amongst my fellow students and I saw how valuable it could be. For example, I begin my memoir with the image of Fresno in the side view mirror of a U-haul truck I am driving to my grandmother's duplex in Riverside. At points, I focused more on symbolism, such as the alarm clock that my father smashes to pieces in one chapter. I wanted to replace that exact alarm clock because it represented everything being right in my life. It may have been superficial and provided a false sense that things were back to normal, but it represented a strong desire that I had in childhood for my father to stop having these tantrums where he would break objects out of anger. There were many things he trashed over the years, but the alarm clock was the symbol I chose to use in this memoir.

Poetry has helped me gain a sense of what I want from life. My drive isn't solely to earn money, although I need to maintain a roof over my head and a car

for easy transportation. What I want to accomplish before I die is a sense that I lived my life as much as I could. That I helped people, especially those in my life, every way I could. That I focused on the important things instead of materialistic pursuits that are too common in today's American lifestyle. I get my news from independent sources now and I pay attention to how the deterioration of Earth is simply a result of economic profiteering. These concerns influence my writing.

As I type this, water is leaking out from a nuclear plant in Japan leading to radioactive contamination of the Pacific Ocean, which means this eco-tragedy is hitting close to home for me. I wonder how long it might be safe to still visit the beach and put my feet in the water. California is also in the midst of a severe drought that could be tied to Global Warming. With limited water resources in this state, it is worrisome to think of the possibility that fracking could contaminate what little water the state has. I don't know how long we will be able to maintain our current lifestyle. It has occurred to me that my writing could fall into a regional classification for this period, so I think it is important that I try to capture how life is because our lifestyle might only be accessible to future generations through our writing.

Bicultural Legacy

I grew up in two cultures because I am half-Mexican and half-white. My Mexican half is fourth generation. My grandfather's cooking and our close

extended family provided a sense of culture that was different from my mother's family.

My maternal grandmother's family came from Scotland and were clan McKay. We have a family crest and tartan. The tartan is blue with four black lines and a very thin red line crisscrossing. I don't know how many generations have lived in America, but the McKays followed the Oregon Trail and founded a ranch on the California Oregon border, near the town of Dorris, California. After seeing *Titanic* in the theater with my mother, she told me that we were distantly related to John Astor, whose character was included in the movie and who in real life was the first multimillionaire in America.

My family's branch didn't have money or pedigree. My grandmother grew up on the farm eating meat and potatoes. During the Great Depression, they didn't have a shortage of food, only money. The rule of the house was they would feed anyone that came through in exchange for work. My grandmother was also raised by a very progressive father. His farming techniques mirrored those of organic farmers today. He was also determined that my grandmother would go to college. She attended Chico State in north California in the late 1940s. She wanted to become a teacher but wasn't a good enough speller. Eventually, she dropped out, but it was impressive that she attended college in the first place.

My grandmother met my grandfather in grade school. His family had fled the dust bowl in Oklahoma and his mother, who had her first child at the age of 13, got cancer when she was 29. My grandfather had to help raise his younger

brothers. We are still researching the genealogy of his parents' families; his father was of English descent and his mother had some French heritage.

My maternal grandparents got divorced in the sixties when there was a stigma against divorced women. My mom was already out of the house and had a significantly different childhood from Aunt Barbara who lost friends because their parents didn't want their children associating with the child of divorced parents. My grandmother found work to keep the house and pay it off. She managed lighting stores and then became an interior designer. She worked until the day of her stroke in 1996.

My father was a drug addict, which led my family to rely on welfare many times with a few excursions into the upper middle-class when he was able to hold down a job. During these interludes, my mother and I traveled with him through the western half of the United States and Mexico with five-star accommodations. Because my father was frequently stoned, my paternal grandfather assisted in raising me until he died when I was 13. He provided my connection to my Hispanic heritage.

My paternal grandfather served in the Navy, on DD-540, during WWII and then became a bus driver. During the Great Depression, he had to pick fruit in the San Joaquin Valley. He was a hard worker who made a good life for himself. My grandfather had four sons from his first wife. Those sons, my uncles, were mostly grown and had their own lives by the time my grandfather married my grandmother and adopted my father.

A chapter of the memoir focuses on the positive impact my grandfather had on me. He explained what was right and wrong to me and used the example of a kid we saw steal a candy bar from Super A Foods to tell me that was something I should never do, but I didn't have to report the kid either. Being on the border of East LA meant we didn't want to make trouble for ourselves. My grandfather made an effort to know our garbage men and street sweeper. I learned to respect men who did jobs that kept our city running, no matter how dirty their work.

My grandfather would dance with me in the kitchen while we cooked dinner. He also taught me to garden and be handy around the house. From him, I learned to work hard and it didn't matter that I was female. I could accomplish anything I wanted, even when it came to home improvement projects and power tools. It is because of my grandfather's positive influence in my life that I try to keep his legacy alive not only in my life, but in my writing.

One of my writer idols, Sandra Cisneros, best known for *A House on Mango Street*, read on campus and talked about her writing struggles. Her short essay "An Offering to the Power of Language" brought me to tears as I read it. The written word can convey emotion and allow us to find elements in our own lives that correspond in some way with what's written on the page. She writes about her father in that piece, but I linked her story with my grandfather because he called me Mi'ja. He was my father figure and his death deeply affected me. As Cisneros relives the last days of her father's life, I am mentally transported to the

nursing facility and hospital where my grandfather spent his last days. When she writes of her father's cologne, I recall the reassurance I still feel when the clothes I store in my dresser that used to belong to my grandfather come out smelling like his aftershave more than thirteen years after his death.

Cisneros later says in "An Offering to the Power of Language", "When I wish to address a child, lover or one of my many small pets, I use Spanish." I wish I had enough knowledge of Spanish to do the same. I find myself at a loss for a substitute name for some people in my life, especially anyone whose name doesn't exactly roll off the Anglophone tongue. Cisneros' example inspired me because she captured the feeling I continue to experience being alienated from half of my culture and its language. This is my motivation to study Spanish. I've taken many classes and even tried Rosetta Stone, but I'm still far from fluent. I want the language of my grandfather's legacy because it is part of my cultural inheritance. At times, my writing highlights that lack of connection with my Mexican heritage. Other times I incorporate a Spanish word because I code switch at times to use my limited Spanish vocabulary. Some words or concepts are easier for me to express verbally in Spanish.

Cisneros' "An Offering to the Power of Language" is only two pages, but it evokes so much empathy in readers. I want to do the same in my own writing. I identified with Cisneros' spirituality. She finds a positive aspect in the death of a loved one, "you suddenly have a spirit ally, and energy on the other side that is with you always... it's old age, so ancient and wonderful and filled with such

wisdom that we have had to relearn it because our miseducation has taught us to name it 'superstition.'" I truly believe I experienced the spiritual presence of my grandfather when he died. The morning of his death, we were expecting him to be discharged from the hospital, but I had a dream that he came to me to say goodbye and to tell me he understood why I didn't visit him more often in the nursing home and hospital. My mom woke me from that dream to tell me that he had passed away, but I spoke first and told her that I knew he was dead.

For years after his death, every time I held a knife in the kitchen, I could hear his voice saying, "Cuidado, Mi'ja." I've felt as though he continued to guide me for many years after his death. Maybe it is only his legacy living on through me, but it shows how important his life was in shaping my life.

After reading Cisneros, I hope that my writing is affecting readers even if grief is the emotion I evoke at times. My aim by the end of my writing is to shift the reader's emotions to optimism, or at least understanding. I want to help others get through their lives or even escape, as literature has helped me to cope during difficult periods of my life.

I also draw experiences from my own life when reading Amy Tan's "Mother Tongue." Amy Tan is best known for writing *The Joy Luck Club*, but in "Mother Tongue," she writes about her bi-cultural experience. Being bi-cultural gives me a tie-in to what she is writing. I also think many Americans can still relate to her bi-cultural story because they may identify with two cultures even if they don't come from two ethnicities or if the individual appropriates a culture or

subculture for their own use. There are many ways that cultures and subcultures appropriate the English language for their own use. Thus, speakers of the English language can code switch between their different dialects. I say this because my white mother can switch to Spanglish in conversations with me and her sister. Growing up in a Hispanic community and being married to a Mexican-American man for 24 years made her knowledgeable about a culture different from her own. This is the hybridity that is common across our country and thus makes any writing of biculturalism relevant to the majority of readers. So, I hope that my story speaks to my readers in some way.

Disability Influences

My voice is also influenced by my continual struggle to overcome a physical disability. At the age of ten, I had a bone disease that required hospitalization. I was treated in an experimental program that allowed me to live a life that's almost normal. It taught me to work hard for the things I want and to appreciate what I accomplish. I was in a wheelchair before I received treatment in the hospital and I didn't require a wheelchair after the treatment. There have been a few setbacks in the years since and I have required a wheelchair at times, but I always fought to regain my mobility.

I've balanced my physical limitations with the care of other family members. I started caring for my mother during her battle with lung cancer when I was 17. I've been caring for her since the lung removal surgery left her severely

disabled. Four years later, I took on the care of my mother's paraplegic mother when we moved into her duplex because she required live in assistance.

I have my own life outside of the house that includes school, but when I'm at home, I keep house, continually fix things that are breaking down, and keep myself at the ready for when my grandmother falls or starts a fire in the kitchen. The events around my house often inspire my writing. Other times, writing allows me to escape the chaos of my living arrangement and maintain a grasp on sanity.

When I taught English to my grandmother after her stroke and brain tumor, I was 9. My grandmother had lost the ability to write, but after a few months, she could write and spell correctly. That was the beginning of my teaching/tutoring experience. Before taking on the afterschool job, I had tutored friends and classmates for many years. My best friend, Ashlee, received the most tutoring because of her dyslexia and required a lot of assistance to get through high school. Her disability wasn't physical, but I was still able to help her. Teaching and tutoring allows me to help people just as I help family members by being a caregiver. Being of service to others is a big motivation in my life.

Thesis Taking Shape

In my first year of the MFA program, Professor Diana Wagman, a noir Los Angeles novelist, said memoir was about self-discovery. That by reliving past events, we can discover something about ourselves and our choices. This is a

process of confronting ourselves and having to accept who we were and what we did. We know the results of those actions and can now explore how they affected others. We can also try to get into the motivations of others to try to understand how and why they acted the way they did. Socrates said, "an unexamined life is not worth living." Writing memoir allows us to examine our lives. I ran with Diana Wagman's words as I continued to work on my memoir. It made a lot of sense, but something was still lacking. I had a number of memoir pieces, but they didn't seem to connect and I started to doubt my ability to put together any of my pieces in a way that would make sense. I tried using tarot cards because I keep a log of my readings and I could find cards that correlated with each story. Many pieces had a metaphysical theme, but others just didn't fit. It was frustrating to write something and not know how it could come together in a coherent manner. I needed an arc that told a story and starting chronologically from the beginning made everything too heavy.

In my second year of the MFA, Professor May-lee Chai showed a movie on the first night of class, *Patience (After Sebald)*, which is an adaptation of W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*. Sebald's book was classified as fiction, memoir, and travel writing. His journey across England touches on a European belief that a journey heals a person and the movie contrasted that belief with the American belief that a journey is for discovery. I tied that in to my memoir writing. Memoir is both a self-discovery and a way to heal. By examining various aspects of past events in my life, I can begin to accept them as lessons that I've learned and

pivotal experiences that shaped me into the person I am today. Memoir forces me to consider what caused people to do harmful things. Just as villains with compelling back-stories receive sympathy from an audience no matter what actions they may do, memoir allows me to take these events a step further. I can go beyond my knowledge into the realm of imagination in order to understand the motivations of various people in my life.

The Thesis

What I didn't realize when we watched *Patience* and learned about Sebald's writing was that my memoir also took on the category of travel writing. Living in Southern California typically means spending a lot of time driving in a car. It is possible to reach the point that it feels like life happens inside the car. The car also provides a sense of freedom and control. As long as the car is in motion, everything is good, but when the car hits traffic or you are stuck somewhere, bad things can happen.

I considered fictionalizing my memoir, but in the end decided to stick with the truth for the most part; I still had to use some techniques to shape a story out of the chaos of life. In order to cut out boring and mundane parts of life, the timeline of memoir sometimes needs to be compressed. There were many classroom discussions throughout my numerous creative writing classes about keeping the truth in memoir. Some think that emotional truth is better than factual truth, but deep down, I'm a stickler for factual truth. My mom's family has a

saying about their ideology that bothers me, "Don't let the truth get in the way of a good story." So, I rely on my memory, but I also use my journals and even online posts to fact check my stories. I may have to fudge the dialogue at times, but I make sure I incorporate the important parts and I capture the voice of those around me. My mother's voice is so close to mine due to our close relationship. Often we will say the exact same thing at exactly the same time. I do keep a file on my phone where I accurately take down things my Aunt Barbara has said in our living room, which often include innuendos, such as "Don't worry, I got boned 24 times... by my corset." Aunt Barbara knows I do this although she has yet to read anything I wrote about her; she seems to like the fact that I write about her even though I've cautioned her that there are some things she might not like to read. She gave me permission to use her real name, just as my best friend, Ashlee, and former lover, Darren, gave me permission to use their names. Ashlee is proud of our 16-year friendship and Darren is a bit smug about the significant role he played in my past even though we only talk a few times a year now through social networking. Both Ashlee and Darren have read the stories that include even the slightest mention of either of them. I want to make sure I don't upset them. I've also shared some of the stories with my mother because I want her to be okay with what I write. Barbara would get over it or possibly taunt me for years with specific quotes if she read what I wrote about her.

What I found to be most interesting was the number of people I never mentioned in my writing. Those who lingered through my life for a year or more

and were in the periphery of these stories. Now that time has passed, they don't feel significant and too many characters would cause a story to feel cluttered and hard to follow. The creative aspect of writing memoir is streamlining actual events into something coherent, something that carries a message.

My thesis is memoir with a little paranormal and metaphysical influence at times. It didn't start to come together until May-lee Chai, my first reader, saw the reoccurrence of freeways and driving. She saw that when I was driving in my stories, I was taking charge, which tied into the metaphysical. By focusing on the freeways and driving, the theme changed and the arc became more positive. Some of the pieces fit better without a chronological order. The memoir now starts at age twenty-one, dips down to my teenage years and childhood years before climbing back towards my mid-twenties. The non-chronological order allows for a proper introduction into my life and then allows you to see early influences that led me to become the person I am in my twenties.

I was 21 when my parent's marriage ended, which led my mother and me to move from Fresno to Riverside. The first paragraph of the memoir attempts to capture a pivotal moment where I was starting anew:

Atreyu's "Becoming the Bull" played on the radio as I maneuvered the U-haul truck onto the freeway overpass. Cyan numbers on the radio said it was 3 in the morning. The lights of Fresno began to fade away in the side view mirrors. I wished I could kiss the city goodbye, but I knew I'd have to return eventually to get what I'd left

in a storage unit. It didn't matter. In this moment, I felt empowered.

How many twenty-one-year-old women could say they drove a rental truck hundreds of miles? (Leaving Fresno on the 99S)

I was a young woman on a journey into a new life. I felt empowered and in control. I was finally able to put things in perspective as I saw the city of Fresno getting smaller in that rearview mirror. Every negative thing that happened in those 8 years we lived up there was being reduced. I could make anything I wanted of my life. The song also seemed significant to me because my astrological sign is Taurus, the bull. It served as a reminder that I could embody the positive characteristics assigned to my zodiac sign, such as the determination to persevere.

At the end of the collection of stories, "99 North to Fresno " provides a glimpse into my life near my 25th birthday. My mom and I thought we'd never have to return to Fresno yet here we were driving together doing just that. Much had changed in 4 years; I'd found a positive direction that my life was heading towards as I was applying to the MFA program and my mother was much happier as a divorcee. Then the day before the MFA application deadline, I discovered the transcripts I had ordered twice were never delivered and the unofficial ones I had provided were unacceptable. My mom and I rushed up to Fresno to get my transcripts so that I could hand carry them to Graduate Studies in time. After getting the transcripts:

I got on the freeway heading towards SLO and I knew I need never return to Fresno unless my Mom needed to return to court, but her divorce had long been settled. This had been our goodbye tour. I didn't need to see the houses and apartment we'd lived in there because they were in the past and I was driving towards a future in grad school. (99 North to Fresno)

Everything was coming together and the trip was becoming more enjoyable. The whole collection of stories shows a number of the things that I had to survive and the challenges I overcame. It felt like the odds were against me many times but I was overcoming them, persevering, and working towards a better life.

In my memoir writing, I draw from my experiences and the influence my family has on me. The lives of my closest family members are significant in telling my own story, which follows the arc of learning to follow my own instincts and intuition. The instances when I stray away or go against my intuition are when I get into trouble. Tarot cards and clairvoyant dreams also provide me with guidance. Other family members have similar talents that I explore as I try to understand the full extent of their abilities, how it affects me, and whether I truly believe in anything paranormal.

This memoir features stories of some highs and lows in my life so far. I hope to take the reader along with me as I am unable to keep my mouth shut about some of the secrets in my life and those of my family members. This is a story that I need to tell because I can't keep all of the details to myself and I want

to record them for future generations. Some stories might make the reader laugh, cry, or do both within the space of a few pages. My hope is the reader takes away more from these pages than a play on emotions. I hope my stories provide some insight into one person's life.

My initial motivation to embark on this journey of memoir stems from a wish that I had come across a book when I was 16 that could have helped me to make better choices or even to accept traumatic events so that I could heal and move past them. Many years later, I mentored and tutored the middle school students in the afterschool program for a year and a half. It helped me to realize a passion I have for helping adolescents develop life skills. The satisfaction it brought me when one of the students maneuvered through a tricky experience was very rewarding. I observed disagreements between students and home influences that caused problems. Even though I wanted to teach at a college level, one night after work, I found myself in an existential conversation with my mother that led to a declaration of a reason I write. Whether it is memoir or fiction, I want young readers to find guidance through my words and comfort if they have experienced similar traumas.

I seek a sense of social justice in my writing as I try to get beneath the surface of events even though that requires vulnerability on my part. This is a lot to accomplish in writing but I am driven to do so. It is challenging to balance everything I want to incorporate in my writing, but the effort has proven rewarding.

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