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## ME WITHOUT YOU

Michelle Bracken

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ME WITHOUT YOU

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

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

---

by  
Michelle Elizabeth Bracken

June 2015

# ME WITHOUT YOU

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A Project

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Faculty of

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Approved by:

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Julie Paegle, Second Reader

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## ABSTRACT

ME WITHOUT YOU is an interlinked collection of short stories set in the blight of an urban housing project in San Bernardino, California. The stories follow the lives of three students in their year of fourth grade at a low performing school. Narrated from these points of view, the collection amplifies the voices of a community wrought with violence, poverty, and crime while also exploring how children brave the consequences of a world they cannot control.

Mesmerizing in its simplicity, and gripping in its detail, ME WITHOUT YOU intertwines themes of identity, family, loss, poverty, and longing for what is just out of reach. It begs the reader to question how one survives a world of violence and disillusionment.

The story behind my stories is this: in my nine years in San Bernardino, I have learned that it isn't just the origin of one's story that matters, but what one does with it. In this way, ME WITHOUT YOU tells the stories of this region, the dreams of its children, and the journeys they navigate in order to survive.

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## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

In her interview with *The Paris Review* the writer Lorrie Moore asserts, “If one loves stories, then one would naturally love the story of the story. It does seem to me to be a kind of animal impulse almost, a mammalian curiosity” (60). Lorrie Moore has elegantly put into words the question that most writers encounter in their careers: *why do you write*, and *where did this story come from?* As humans we have a desire, a “mammalian curiosity” to trace the origins of our families, ancestors, the galaxy; a longing for knowing how things came to be. We yearn to make sense out of the chaos that is our lives.

This is the story behind my stories.

My thesis, *Me Without You*, an interlinked collection of stories set in the blight of a Southern California housing project, takes the reader deep into Little Africa, a secluded and struggling ward of San Bernardino, a place of hard knocks and tough luck. Propelled by compelling narratives from various points of view, the collection uncovers the poignant heartache and economic hardships of a neighborhood, while also shining a light on the spirited voices of its children, and what it means to grow up long before they are grown.

Mesmerizing in its simplicity, and gripping in its detail, *Me Without You* intertwines themes of identity, family, loss, poverty, and longing for what is just out of reach. It begs the reader to question how one survives a world of violence and disillusionment.

San Bernardino, California has been my home for twelve years, and for many of them I have lived on the outskirts of Little Africa, a neighborhood sectioned off by the bustling intersection of Sterling and Baseline, bordered with cement walls, broken shopping carts, and painted-over graffiti. At first glance, not much seemed different from the neighborhoods of my youth, but when I began teaching at the local elementary school, I discovered a world of wonder and despair, where hopelessness drifted like a balloon among moments of clarity and beauty, where humanity is what brought people together.

The story behind my stories is this: in my nine years in San Bernardino, I have learned that it isn't just the origin of one's story that matters, but what one does with it. In this way, *Me Without You* tells the stories of this region, the dreams of its children, and the journeys they navigate in order to survive.

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Observation is the key to any good writer. How one learns to look at the world informs how a person looks at oneself. The act of observing others naturally facilitates introspection, and ultimately requires one to consider his or her place in the world, and how every action has a reaction. The story behind the story of why I write can be gleaned from observing the history of my youth.

As a young girl, the writer found herself in the conversations of adults, in words not spoken, but thought, in the stillness of a moment. A bicycle stolen on her birthday. A birthday cake not made. Forgotten at the flagpole of her

elementary school after everyone had already gone. Snapshots. The mundane of everyday life. But to her, moments of truth.

By the time she was in the fifth grade, she had been to five different schools in five different cities. There would always be another home, another city, another job, another apartment, another room, and another boyfriend for her mother, another beginning.

She was a quiet child. She could not find herself in a world of books. If you were to ask her about her favorite one, she would have shrugged, struggled to name a title. She loved libraries, the act of being alone, the smell of books, the smell of dust. She was often left alone. She was often left to look over little children, sometimes infants, mostly toddlers. They were hers to look after, her seven siblings, and when she found herself about to lose it, about to scream at the top of her lungs, she told them a story. The writer as a young girl gathered them together, sometimes rocking one to sleep, while the others sat at her feet. There was a glimmer in her eyes, a pulse in her veins. Little stories, little what-ifs and whys. These were the moments where the girl found herself able to navigate a world so cold, so large, so broken: a world where she was not a child, not herself.

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Based on the story of my life, it seems natural that I would gravitate to children. It seems natural, even, that I would become a teacher. However, what feels most natural to me, as both a writer and a teacher, is that I am most

motivated by discovering a moment of clarity, what the writer Anton Chekhov describes as an illuminated moment of consciousness. A story is more than just words on the page, the twists and turns of a plot. It is ultimately about a character and his or her realization(s), a brilliant pause where all is revealed. Like a break in the clouds, it can be unpredictable, and hard to pinpoint, but when it occurs, that revelation is truly magical.

Throughout my teaching career, I thought the culmination of my experiences would be a memoir on teaching, a nonfiction account of that time and the children I taught. While this collection of work is loosely inspired by those experiences, the art of fiction allows me to speak about a greater truth, something that might not break through an account of actual events. I am not interested in recounting facts. I am interested in exploring the nuances of those facts, the ripples they have in the lives of others, and how in a moment, everything can change.

“No Angels,” one of the stories in *Me Without You*, narrates the death of a character at the hands of her father. The story is loosely based on a 2010 murder-suicide. The event was considered one of the worst crimes in San Bernardino’s history, and devastated the elementary school in which I taught. One of our kindergarten students and his father had been murdered, and his surviving younger brother would one day be a student of mine. For years, I wondered about this family, and how in one pivotal moment on a sunny Saturday afternoon, everything about their lives had changed. Through fictionalizing this

event, and the people affected, I was able to honor the beauty of the lives lost, and pay tribute to their memory. The story is now about a young girl, her relationship with her younger brother, and how her spirit lives on after death. Fiction allows the writer to explore the possibilities of a moment, and to approach the people affected with empathy, something that is often missing in the tragedies of the real world. As Lorrie Moore notes, “a story is a kind of biopsy of human life.” I want to look deeper into that biopsy, to investigate the intricacies of human reactions and responses, to seek out the meaning of a particular moment for a particular character, and how that resonates in the world in which we live.

\*

“That’s not how it was,” the young writer’s mother told her. “You remember things wrong. You remember it the way you want.” The way it was. The truth of the matter. The writer as a young woman crafted stories of her life, little snapshots of what was, of how it felt. These were the moments her mother preferred to forget. These were the moments that her mother claimed did not happen. *That’s not how it was.*

To the writer as a young woman, this is how it was to *her*. It was not another’s version, her mother’s version, the best version, but the truest one. The writer as a young woman wrote about loneliness, about navigating a world untethered to others, about the absence of — all kinds of things. She threw herself into reading, and had stacks of books at her beside, reading several at a

time. Charles Bukowski, Anne Sexton, Joan Didion, Stephen King, Jamaica Kincaid. Biographies of the dead and famous. Self-help books.

She lived in a city where she had no roots, named after Bernardino of Siena, a saint known for miracles and bringing people together. She taught at a school that felt more like a prison, and found it difficult to show up everyday. The building was often tagged in graffiti, and as classes of students walked in single lines by the repainted brick walls, teachers could be heard shouting for them to keep their hands behind their backs. Always behind their backs.

She lived in a city so broken that streetlights went unrepaired, and where children walked alone after dark. A city overwrought with crime and foreclosed homes, where helicopters lit up the night with their spotlights, a megaphone blaring for everyone to lock their doors. San Bernardino, California.

No one had told the stories of the people lost in the night: the 47 murders of 2012, the 120 rapes of 2003, or the 15 homicides in September of 1995. The missing persons. The cold cases. Why it was not safe to play in the yard, to mourn for a friend at a memorial, to walk home from school, to eat at a fast-food restaurant. To be home. Why it was not safe to do anything, to go anywhere, to say anything, to look any way. Guns were fired, people argued, and terrible things happened.

This is something the writer thought often about.

So much was out of reach for the writer as a young woman, and she found herself haunted by people down on their luck, in having had the hardest of times, and still coming up with nothing.

\*

My work is driven by character. When a story first appears on the page, it opens because of a particular character at the cusp of a particular moment. There are three main characters in *Me Without You*: Isis, a quick-witted and feisty fourth-grader who finds herself a new transplant in San Bernardino; JoJo, her new best friend who lives in the apartment directly above hers; and Manny, the class clown and bully of her apartment complex, the one person on the block who seems to know everyone and everything. Each character has a distinct voice and sensibility, yet all three search for a basic human need: connection. How they relate to one another, and to the outside world, reveals the nuances of humanity, and the many facets of what it means to have an illuminated moment of consciousness.

Character development drives the stories. Through a character's description of the world around her, and her attention to detail, the world of the story becomes sharply defined. Intimate moments between characters bring immediacy to the page and build a world in which the reader knows the intricacies of the individuals, their desires and motivations. This development sets up a reader's expectations, and makes one eager to see how the story will continually unfold.

One of my favorite coming-of-age novels, *The Catcher in the Rye* by JD Salinger, speaks to the necessity of character development, and how a distinct voice makes a story move. Salinger masterfully uses voice to drive his work, and the many dimensions of his characters. Like peeling an onion, the reader continues to learn about the protagonist Holden Caulfield as his voice reveals the many layers underneath his adolescent angst. From the first layer, he appears to be an unhappy teenager, but when we look deeper we see that he's an insecure individual constantly searching for ways to connect with those around him, whether family, friends, or strangers on the street. In this way, his layered voice builds an instant connection for the reader, one that draws us in, employs empathy, and takes us along Holden's journey to see how he positions himself in the world.

As in *The Catcher in the Rye*, the larger narrative arc of *Me Without You* is that of a coming-of-age narrative. However, I hope my stories track the bildungsroman of today's Generation Z, those born after the millennium. Though the heart of both works addresses a yearning for human connection, *Me Without You* employs the voices of many while *The Catcher in the Rye* solely follows Holden. In my work, the three main characters become a chorus: their desires, tendencies, aspirations, regrets, and heartaches sing quietly, yet powerfully, throughout the collection. Their voices conjure the diversity of their world, the nuances of their experiences, and follows them as they question and search for bonds of genuine connection.

\*

For the writer as a teacher, the children became urgent. Each year a new class of students, and a greater sense of urgency. For years she wrote nothing but lesson plans. Her lesson plans became weekend writing sessions, hours and hours of planning, creating posters and presentations. She thought of ways to get her students *more* engaged, all of the things young teachers attempt in their first years on the job. The heart of the matter. What mattered to her most were the students.

Every single one.

Every laugh, every question, every tantrum, tardy slip and absent note, every phone call home, every birthday card attached to a teddy bear, every tear, scream, every *aha!*, every rough draft that never became a finished one, every notebook that fell out of a backpack, every *let me tell you what I did last night*, every *can we help you after school*, every laugh-so-hard-you-can't-stop-and-you-know-you-should, every party where everyone wanted a bag of hot chips, every messy desk that she wanted to knock over, every time someone said they gave up, every time she wanted to pull her hair out, every lesson that worked and did not work, every time she had to stop and say *we'll try again another day*, every time she cried in the classroom after her students had gone.

These were the moments she tried to hold onto, to freeze into her memory, an album of all the boys and girls that came in and out of her classroom over the years. In every one of them, she saw herself.

\*

Inevitably the writing process is something the writer thinks a lot about. Her bags and purses are filled with varying sizes of notebooks, some which can fit in her back pocket. In these notebooks, she stores nuggets of information: a line of dialogue she heard on the playground; a phrase someone laughed about in a private conversation; a fact she read in a newspaper; a statistic of crime in her neighborhood; the number of homeless children in her city (the second poorest city in America). In these notebooks are pieces of ideas, and she thinks about a few at a time, for hours at a time, for days and weeks at a time. Inevitably, a story begins to hum, and plot its way through the pages of her mind. In her mind she is writing, thinking. The characters are what she is drawn to first, a voice, a sense of urgency, something worth telling.

Tell it fast. Tell it true.

A character, a voice, is what she follows. Her instinct. She writes to get the voice on the page, to get the story on its own track, a narrative that she thinks and thinks and thinks about. What is the conflict? What's at stake? For her, the conflict is precisely what's at stake. Her character must have a journey, a crisis, however grand, however small, something that propels him or her forward, something that pushes him or her further out into the world. For the writer, the stories have a purpose. They are not something read just for pleasure. Most importantly, the writer hopes her stories invite the reader's own introspection.

Her sense of a story, of its purpose, keeps her keenly focused. She writes trying to capture what is only essential, what is significant and characteristic of a person, time or place. She writes only what is absolutely needed for the reader to feel what she sees and hears: men in the street; people at bus stops; the music of a neighborhood; the turn of a moment — how, in an instant, everything can change.

She often writes about those who are neglected, abandoned, people not finding themselves at the end. There is no end as an *end*, but more of an investigation into others, and the world; into the paths traveled, into brief moments, a fork in the road, a moment that changes everything that follows.

\*

Writing is how I make sense of the world, how I put the pieces together even when the pieces do not go together. I look for trends and patterns in the reactions of others because each one carries the weight of something unsaid. For me, writing is about communicating the unsaid; what is felt, but not expressed. This is where imagery is a powerful tool of the craft. After character development and voice, imagery is what makes a story stir. Not only does it add intriguing layers to prose, but a distinct image also gives shades of meaning throughout a text.

A recurring image in *Me Without You* is a cluster of lights. After death, JoJo exists as this collection of energy, and watches over Little Africa and the fate of her friends and family. The lights range in color from a fiery red to a

somber blue. As these lights, JoJo roams the apartment complex of Sunset Row, and observes how the world continues in her absence. In the beginning of JoJo's afterlife, she sees herself bright, like orange balls of fire. There is an intensity to her energy, an urgency to be seen and felt, to be recognized by those she left behind. Years later, as she follows her younger brother through grade school, her energy has cooled. No longer fiery, but calm, like ocean blue, as if she has finally accepted her place in the afterlife.

The description is nuanced for the particular moment in which she appears, and represents more than just a "haunting," but provides a subtext for the hope that exists just outside of the world of this neighborhood, and speaks to the notion that even in the darkest of times, we are illuminated by brief moments of strength, endurance, and beauty.

\*

Little Africa is what the neighborhood called itself. It sat on the east side of the city, and the rows of apartments and duplexes housed families and children, single mothers and grandmothers. Decent people with decent children. The slumlords of Little Africa didn't fix the broken pipes or the leaky faucets, did not take care of the cockroaches and rats, and collected rent from decent people while looking the other way.

The apartments of Little Africa were demolished in 2009. San Bernardino City Council voted to evict the decent people from their apartments and duplexes, to destroy the blight of a city, and to hire an outside redevelopment

agency to rebuild low-income housing. City council members considered this community to be the home of pimps and prostitutes, home to the dead, appearing overnight on Sunrise Lane and in the back alleys of Guthrie, near a garbage bin. They believed it necessary to tear down a community.

This was the community where the writer as a teacher worked. From her classroom window she could see the alleyways of these apartments, and hear the police sirens cruising the neighborhood. These were moments when the school bell rang in long and short pauses: a lockdown. The writer locked herself and her students inside the classroom and gathered them away from the windows. Turned off the lights. Told a story.

A lockdown in Little Africa meant that someone was outside with a gun. These occurred even after the bulldozers came and knocked the tenements down. They happened even after the construction workers removed all of the stucco and fixtures, and smoothed the dirt over. Little Africa was gone but still there. Though the original apartments had been demolished, and new housing had been built and surrounded with metal fencing, shootings were still something of the night. Because of the displacement, even more homeless people congregated in the foreclosed shopping center off of Guthrie, their shopping carts and bundles of clothing molded together like tents.

People had been driven out, and though crime was not what it was before, despair still drifted like early morning fog. This was the playground of her

students, the reality of so many children, so many decent people. A place so many called home, and that others chose to ignore, to look down upon.

A place haunted by those who had come and gone, by those who had simply died on a walk home, no killer brought to justice, no funeral held. Just another tally mark for the city. But, for the writer, something deeper, a yearning. A story needing to be told.

\*

Joan Didion, novelist, essayist, journalist, and playwright, is known for her style of prose, her voice on the page, and her insights into the human condition. Her reflections on what makes one a writer accurately capture what drives me to tell the stories that I tell.

The impulse to write things down is a peculiarly compulsive one, inexplicable to those who do not share it, useful only accidentally, only secondarily, in the way that any compulsion tries to justify itself . . . Keepers of private notebooks are a different breed altogether, lonely and resistant re-arrangers of things, anxious malcontents, children afflicted apparently at birth with some presentiment of loss.

(Didion,132)

Writers are often asked which writers they admire, and my answer is always the same. I admire Joan Didion. I admire her work because of the language and cadence of her prose, for the beauty of her sentences, for her

exposure of the truth. For how it was. In all the years I have read her work, I have learned the importance of observation, how in the smallest nugget of information lies a story, and how my notation of the world informs how it is told.

I remember the first moment I ever read Didion (twenty-one years old, the paperback copy of *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* in my bed, the book cover the boldest of golds, a giant USED sticker slanted at the bottom corner), and how I had to really sit up and pay attention. I remember how my pulse quickened as I turned the pages, how I could not believe how so much could be said in a paragraph, a scene, in a sentence, in a word, a punctuation mark.

I remember the moment I bought a first edition hardcover of *Play It As It Lays*, (online, from New York). The book jacket was torn at the corner and yellowed around the edges. Didion smoldered in her author photo, a cigarette in her hand, her eyes piercing and unsmiling. I remember how she looked directly into the camera, no averted gaze, but the most serious stance, a confrontation to tell the truth, and her invitation for me to tell my own.

The heart of the matter.

Her work has become my model. A lighthouse in the dark, a guide to follow, something to tether myself to in my journey for the truth. Words are tools of the heart, and if I can learn anything from Didion it is that I should write for myself. I should write about things that speak to me when the lights are out, when the world is cold, when a story stirs my soul. I should write about what haunts me, and I should do it with abandon.

\*

The writer seeks out the truth in all forms. The heart of the matter. These are the stories of the children she has known. In their eyes, all kinds of hurt, and yet all kinds of hope. The children of her community are all the truth she is after.

These are the stories of her city, her community, the place she rests her head at night. These are the stories of the children sectioned off by freeways and government housing, the potholes and police cars giving fair warning to stay away. In this way, the writer writes what she sees, hears, and feels in the center of a moment, a state of revelation. She looks out into the world around her, looks out to help others look in. See that brilliance underneath the broken glass? The beauty in a world of hurt? She does, and so she writes about that.

\*

I write about children.

I write about children of color.

I write about neglect.

I write about the disconnect. About trying to connect. About the wires not meeting up.

I write about being broken.

I write about my mother, and all the ways she left me. All the ways she continues to leave me.

I write about never being had.

I write to tell the stories you've not yet heard. The stories no one cares to hear.

I write to dig deeper, to peel back the surface. Look harder. Look! Look! Look!

It is what it is.

It is what it isn't.

I write because I listen. To every beat, every breath, every sigh.

I write because I seek to connect. Immediately.

I write because the page is tight, urgent. Now is now. Tell it fast. Tell it true.

I write because stories need to be told. A story is a story is a story.

Start over.

I write because someone should write about them, the kids alone, the kids grown.

I write to tell their stories, their voices, their truths, heartaches, their ignored dreams.

I write to tell my own.

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APPENDIX  
ME WITHOUT YOU