

2019

Break

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Recommended Citation

Lopez, Mari (2019) "Break," *CouRaGeouS Cuentos: A Journal of Counternarratives*: Vol. 3 , Article 42.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/courageouscuentos/vol3/iss1/42>



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Break

Mari Lopez

Existence shaped by one another,
interconnected
as the branches they fall from.

Discussing my childhood is something that invokes fear for me. It's a fear of unraveling the truths of myself, my family, our memories; then seeing the impact our dysfunction had on us all. There was so much love growing up, yet so much anger, sadness... and violence.

No llores.

My earliest memory is my parents arguing. My mother was throwing things around and screaming at my father; I walked down the hallway at around age Four attempting to come between my parents with a stuffed animal peace offering but my eldest brother snatched me away and took me to the room I shared with my sister. We cried and cried as we heard our parents arguing and my brother attempted to console us with the stuffed animal I intended to quell my parents with. Being the youngest of four, I felt like I needed to help everyone feel better- create joy where there was an air of melancholy. Between me and my three other siblings, we all have different experiences of childhood and for now, have yet to openly discuss our collective past. The bits and pieces I remember from childhood are shrouded in questions, assumptions, and puzzle-piece truths I've scavenged for through pain.

As I began kindergarten, my family was informed by the bank that our landlord had not been paying the mortgage and that he had skipped town. We were forced to move and went on our way a few blocks down to my mother's parent's house- the place where I grew up in and where we still live today. Both my parents by this time were working late into the evening so my grandparents were our caretakers for most of the day. It was capitalism having them exhaust themselves and depression that enveloped them.

Encased in the struggle,

we turn to darkness...

Life at this point for me was beginning to get real. At school I was being bullied for my weight, skin color/complexion which led me to stay in the

classroom with my teachers during lunch, leading to further bullying. While at home, my parents would argue viciously, then the weekend came and they would be *weird* which only lasted so long- as the high wore off, they'd be angry and it would get ugly.

"Your survival is in your hands."

I always had really strong tantrums where I'm sure intergenerational trauma had a part in that but to my family it was seen as senseless and was reprimanded. I was taught that when angry, one must be silent and accept life for what it is. My father would see my anger as normal because he has this skewed impression that us being Apache means that we are naturally violent and angry people. There would be times where it wasn't just fun and games, it was scary.

We always had to stay out of his way and allow for his patriarchal bullshit to fly because my mother said so. My mother always nurtured the idea of family, reminding us on a constant that we will always be bonded through our blood- "no matter what happens". This has always been an idea that didn't sit well with me; it would be a motivator towards realizing the passion I have for social justice.

Breaking me down,
piece by piece.
His words tear into me

as

vicious

as

barbed

wire.

It's Fall semester of my freshman year of high school and I'm in full blown teenagehood; I am also realizing my sexuality with homophobia running rampant in my home. My father constantly berates me with the words like *dyke*, *pig*, and *joto*. On the weekends my parents are still smoking crack and drinking their lives away as us kids play games in our rooms or do whatever it is we did back then.

Trying to hold my untamed tongue,

the horse won't break.

I jokingly call him a crack-head (even though I had no way to know what they were into) and he flips out on me. I'm an angsty teen so I naturally push it and proceed to keep saying it to him throughout the night. Eventually, I am summoned into my parent's room where he asks me to say it again to him and as I test the boundaries of space and his time he springs up and grabs me by the throat.

Knife held to me,

I won't break.

A force that

scares him.

I feel a sting on my neck as he threatens to kill me, I know he isn't lying.

My strength triumphs over his words,

dripping out of the wounds he inflicts.

Unsafe territory,

a heightened sense of my surroundings.

Toxic and healing,

uncomfortable dichotomy.

His protection,

encased in barb wire...

Her protection,

encased in soft screams of "no",

"stop, that".

As she lays beneath his shadow,

worried the sun will burn her.

Freedom will burn-

sting.

I hold this memory as a pivotal moment in my life. It was a moment when I realized that if someone is attempting to harm you, they want you heed to their will and will do so at any cost. We must not give into their attempts at silencing us or stifling our spirits. From then on, I never stayed silent when my father was terrorizing us. I had to learn from these experiences, providing me with ancestral knowledge for survival that is in constant tension with the academic knowledge I was being nurtured with. The complicated relationship will never be fixed unless I pull the veil from its false dimension and stand up against oppression. He inadvertently taught me this while attempting to extinguish my spirit. The strength of our ancestors are why I still stand today and will always empower others to free themselves.