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Keep the Doors Open

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

KEEP THE DOORS OPEN [SAMPLE]

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Lauren Rivera

2013

To: Dean Kenneth G. Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Lauren Rivera, and entitled *Keep the Doors Open*, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this dissertation and recommend that it be approved.

Julie Marie Wade

Asher Milbauer

Les Standiford, Major Professor

Date of Defense: November 15, 2013

The dissertation of Lauren Rivera is approved.

Dean Kenneth G. Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2013

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DEDICATION

For Daniel Jesus Fernandez and Ciro Daniel Fernandez.

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Danny, thank you. Thank you for the life we launched and for letting me write about it. Thank you for encouraging me to be a self-reflective woman, and for teaching me all you have helped me understand, through blood, sweat, tears and laughter. Ciro, our son, our dream come true, thank you for asking me to tell you stories.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

KEEP THE DOORS OPEN

by

Lauren Rivera

Florida International University, 2013

Miami, Florida

Les Standiford, Major Professor

My purpose in writing this collection of lyric essays is to examine my evolution during one decade, from age 19 to 29. Essential questions have guided me: What stimulated change? What formed my decisions? What predisposed me to my relationship with my partner? Why did I want to have a child? What kind of relationship do I have with my son? How did my relationship with my partner evolve? Why did we decide to leave Miami? Hopefully, I have given the reader a glimpse into my movement from self-centeredness to motherhood, from aloof adolescent to committed partner, from timid daughter to self-aware individual. The nature of my inquiry led me to confessional conclusions that clarified my reactive behavior or lack of initiative, which my initial memories of the same events often disguised. These confessions are sometimes as satisfying as the more celebratory moments themselves, because they challenge older notions of self and invite the possibility of change.

Specific authors who have provided models of substance and style include, but are not limited to, Annie Dillard, Maxine Hong Kingston, Sharon Olds, Michael Ondaatje, and Richard Rodriguez. I use lyrical techniques to translate my experiences into crafted prose. I incorporate recurring lines to create links between essays that stand

alone, thereby forming a sequence. Some experiences are so personal and specific to me that using an adopted form, such as a repurposed fairy tale, a cento, and the inverted pyramid, has allowed me to create a measure of distance from the subject, which I found necessary for rendering it clearly. I allude to specific songs to help me establish exposition and lend tone and texture to my scenes. I chose to use the second person and direct my words to a specific audience, such as my mother, my partner, or my son, because at times it feels more authentic to let the reader listen to the way I speak to that person than to tell about the relationship. I also chose to capture the voices of certain people speaking directly to me in order to establish the most authentic speaker. My effort to answer essential questions sometimes conjured scenes from the distant past. I use line breaks to let the reader fill in the gaps or make the leap to explore connections across time. Juxtaposition and prolepsis link these tableaux so the reader can see my life and uncover the answers along with me.

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PROLOGUE

THE MANY NAMES OF THIS AUTHOR (AFTER MICHAEL MARTONE)

Lauren Christine Rivera was born at 12:34 a.m. on the Summer Solstice of 1984. Her father, Aurelio Rivera, who goes by Eddie, wanted to name her Odalys, after her mother, who goes by Ody. Ody objected. She wouldn't have her daughter called o-DALLAS, in English, because nobody bothered to pronounce it right: o-DA-lease. She chose Lauren because she liked the actress Lauren Bacall. Growing up, Lauren cared so little for this explanation that she never inquired after her namesake's likeness. To this day Lauren Rivera does not know what Lauren Bacall looks like. Yet, even though she turned out to be the kind of child who would reinterpret the significance of her given name, she started out her life preferring to hide under her mother's skirt at birthday parties. Her father called her Cookie Plum, and later Pichy, or sometimes it was Puchy. He could never decide, and she was too happy to see him come home before her bed time to care. Her grandmother, Etelvina, who goes by Es-TER, and smells of Clorox, called her Lauren Christina, and *registrona*, when she searched through every drawer in the house, looking for the dried up maraca gourds, the letters from Cuba she could not read yet—so she took to believe that it was written in Cuban handwriting—an iron made of pure iron that was warmed on a wood stove and a douche. Her late grandfather, Dagoberto, who went by Dago, and smelled of engine grease, called her Lauren Christi, and *fresca*, when she asked him to tie her shoes even though he taught her how to tie her own shoes when she was two-years-old. He once called her *majadera* when she dropped a black bean in the

bathroom sink, which visibly sprouted while he was brushing his dentures. In the second grade, Lauren finally learned how to read, but she routinely neglected to take her list of spelling words home, even after her friend, Melissa Plana, fellow Little Mermaid aficionada, who noticed the D branded on her quiz for the third week in a row, called Lauren a stupid girl, and told her that they could not be friends anymore. Lauren's baby sister said Tata, among her first words, and used it to refer to Lauren. To this day, Elisse Rivera calls her older sister Tata. The physical education teacher called her Lauren in Lala Land, the day she was walking in file and began to imagine that she was on a balance beam. She was pretending to prepare for a dismount, when she looked up and realized that the entire class had gathered on the other end of the court for warm up exercises. Derek Santana called Lauren Casper, and told her to cover her legs, they blinded him. This went on until the beginning of middle school, when she finally turned to him and said, "You are not so tan yourself!" She watched his own friends laugh at him and didn't enjoy it, even after all those years. In the Eighth grade Lauren was distraught during basketball practice, by thoughts of her grandfather who was trapped inside his own body. There was no cure or treatment for Lou Gehrig's Disease, so she hoped for speedy relief, even if it meant death. Just as she was feeling guilty for desiring her grandfather's death, Coach Kenna threw a basketball at Lauren's head. He let her on the team because he watched her practice layups during recess. Every recess. The same layups from the right side of the hoop. He called her Bambi, because she never got over her maddening habit of taking an extra skip before bringing up the knee that helps create the right momentum for the elbow that hooks the ball. Mr. Kenna was the first grown up to tell her she was really good at answering reading comprehension questions in class,

much better than she was at playing basketball. When her mother married Wayne Rinehart, turning her into Ody Rinehart, Lauren gained a stepfather, who took her to the Orthodontist, bought her a Basketball hoop, a telescope and a guitar, and enrolled her in a College Preparatory High School, which was in a whole other county. He called her Booger, then Wedgie, then Big Ugly, as her little sister was called Little Ugly. In high school, Lauren's French teacher chopped the air with the syllables of her name, LaU-reN ri-vE-rA. Her eleventh grade AP English Language and Composition teacher, Mrs. Ogenowski, who goes by Ms. O, called Lauren Sweetheart, out of compassion. Lauren was not recommended into that class, but begged the English Department Head, not relenting until she was let in, on the condition that she file a note signed by her mother, acknowledging that she would probably fail the class, and the College Board's exam. She ended up passing both, and once received the rare honor of hearing Ms. O read her own writing to the whole class, swelling with delight at the way Ms. O made pauses and used emphasis, in the precise places Lauren meant them to be. She became hooked. In twelfth grade, Mr. Heffernan, who goes by Heff and who gave her AP English Literature and Composition class rich lectures on the books they studied, quoting passages by heart, simply called her Rivera. Monique Mendez called Lauren Matilda, when she filled her margins with notes, just like Heff, and began to quote passages herself. Her first creative writing teacher just called her Lauren, and advised her to make a career out of what she did in his class, though she would not write another short story or poem until well after graduating college with a degree in Professional Writing. Laurencrivera@gmail.com replaced Blancusita@aol.com when she meet Daniel Fernandez, who used danieljfernandez@aol.com, after he told her that her pale skin was nice because it

mislead; she might look Midwestern, what with those blue eyes, he pointed out, and many guys might want to bring her home to mother. But that was only the surface. Her skin could not define her. *Blancusita*, a way to refer to pale skin with a positive connotation, had been a victory over Derek Santana, a sign she that she had gotten over the fact that the sun ignored her and embraced herself for who she was. Danny called her the Buccaneer Bad Ass, when she served as Editor-in-Chief of the college paper, for one semester, though she didn't produce more than a handful of issues. Then, Danny began to call her Baby, and she began to call him Baby. Her stepfather called her Damaged Goods when he found out she had been sneaking around with Danny. He called her Monica Lewinsky, when she was chosen for the Scripps-Howard Semester in Washington program. Up there, she looked like her Midwestern roommates, but did not sound like them. Her Miami dialect softened the English language, the way Cuban Spanish softened Castillian. Con-for-da-bol vo-ca-bo-la-ry. Any time she speaks her full name on the phone, operators respond "Lorna Rivera?" And anyone who reads her name will pronounce it Lo-ren Ri-vi-e-ra, adding a syllable, but not changing the meaning. There is something about her last name that she wants to keep, some pastoral dimension of an ancestor long past, in Spain, near a river which supplied a small farm, invited with a cool drink, a frigid swim, and promised to carry anything you gave it away to the Mediterranean Sea. Lauren knows that the blood line eventually gave itself over to the sea—it would be difficult to argue that ancestors are not much like tributaries that converge—which carried it to the Island of Cuba, for a few generations, until it uprooted, via a Pan Am flight to Miami, FL. How can she know much else about her ancestry, beyond this abstract representation? She barely knew her father, who revealed very little

before going away. After writing in the nation's capital Lauren returned to Miami, to Danny, looking for something that could fulfill her more than the daily grind, and the inverted pyramid, and she ended up becoming a teacher, working in middle and high schools for longer than she intended to. There would be countless lazy tongues, who'd just call her Miss, whom she'd train to read with fluency, to think of writers as people like themselves. Among other authors, she would introduce them to George Orwell, the man who had to change his name from Robert Blair to call it like he saw it, separate himself from his family—something Lauren needed to do, too—and warn the world to choose the truth over lies and never let violence do the talking. She told her students that she was born in 1984, but they weren't impressed. She told her students that she was born on the Summer Solstice, but they weren't impressed. She told her students that she was born at 12:34 a.m. and that impressed them just a little. Lauren knew that none of that mattered and so she went to teach and write about something that did. She tried to write the truest story she could. Danny still calls Lauren Baby most of the time. He will only call her Lauren when she does not answer to Baby, because she cannot hear over the window A/C unit or the hair dryer. He has also called her Lauren when he has been angry at her, and has told her that he wants to break up. Lauren will never call him Danny, because it feels like reverting back to the way things were before they called each other Baby. They had a baby on June 12, and "baby" is one of the first words the baby learned. Lauren Rivera currently lives in Miami, with her partner, Danny, who goes by Papi at home, and their son, Ciro Daniel, or Cyrus the Great, The Emperor of Persia, Ciropolis or Shmongy, who calls Lauren, Mami.

ONE

A REFLECTION ON A REFLECTION

You gazed at me after I was born and saw an image of everything you wanted to be: beautiful, loved, protected. My brain was a mirror, like the surface of the water that Narcissus fell in love with. It reflected you and loved you back. This is the first way you taught me your fear.

In seventh grade social studies, I watched *The Last of the Mohicans*, and subsequently thought, minute after minute, about what it's like to burn alive. There could be nothing worse. The only relief could come after all feeling organs were incinerated or longer still, after the flames penetrated to the baking brain. I thought with dread about waiting to finish burning alive, while tied to a stake, unable to move, watching others fan the fire. I thought about how the feet would burn first as the flame traveled up the body like an upside down match. But wait, there could be something worse: you burning. I ran through the field behind the school to the furthest tree and climbed it, to the sitting limb. From there I watched my classmates chase, saunter and huddle. I balanced on the rough limb, imagining agony.

Once home, I told you that I could not stop imagining you burn, and you nodded peacefully, unaffected. "Maybe that is the way I am going to die," you suggested. Then, I stopped thinking about you burning because I began to ponder why you smiled, so satisfied.

While you were pregnant, some of my cells traveled through my umbilical cord, like backwash, to my placenta and were absorbed by your body. Those rogue capsules of me never left you. Anytime you have had an injury in any organ, even your heart, and your brain, there were my cells helping you to repair. You didn't know about Fetomaternal Microchimerism. *Cells from a fetus pass through the placenta and establish cell lineages that persist and multiply in the mother for several decades.* This is one of the things that I teach you.

For the first time in the first twelve years of life, my father would be staying at a hotel. It seemed like any other night that he stayed out late, except that now I was laying on his old side of your bed, wondering if he could make it on his own. Who would find his round brush in the morning, tickle his feet on the couch after work or peel the dead scales of sunburnt skin off his shoulders after a fishing trip? My younger sister, who still didn't know he was gone, had fallen asleep, leaving you and me to finish watching A Walk in the Clouds, a saccharine Keanu Reeves flic, about a traveling chocolate salesman who chooses to stay with his wife, her family and a vineyard you could mistake for a universe. You had just asked my father to leave our house—my universe—because you were tired of his late night meetings at the car dealership, missed birthdays and cigarette breath. “I am already the mother and the father around here,” you claimed. “I don't deserve to be begging someone to come around.”

“Just divorce him already,” I responded. “You can do it. You are a strong woman.”

When the credits rolled and the violins swelled, you sobbed. “I’m so scared,” you moaned. I sat upright with a start. You leaned your torso into my lap, curled your body into a fetal position. You wore your threadbare sleep shirt with the decorative bows, fraying at the edges, unraveling just like you. I shushed you, softly, and moved my fingers through your hair. “It will be alright,” I said. You sobbed. “Shush, shush. It’s okay.” You still sobbed and I would have given anything for you to stop. For months I lied to my little sister, grandparents and friends at school about the divorce. I was the only one who knew, and that gave me an immense amount of power; I was the girl for the job.

Your father left you in a grocery store, looking at crayons that he told you he could not afford, so that he could go next door and eat a plate of oysters on their half shells. You will tell me this detail, nostalgically, how he prioritized a delicacy over delighting his daughter with coveted art supplies. He left you behind in that grocery store, just went home and forgot you were there, with the taste of the sea on his lips. And on another occasion, the time you slipped into a ditch and wailed for help, he kept on walking, all the way home.

You tell these stories. But never say a word against him, as if you are still that little girl, the last time you dared to tight-rope across a bedrail suspended between two twin beds, caught there, unable to control your bowels, because he raised his eyebrows just so. You fail to realize that your fear of men is *a priori*: your father betrayed you, before my father did.

“But when can I have a boyfriend?” I appealed, as you snipped away at my brown hair.

“What do you want one for? You are only fourteen! You should not be concerned with that yet.” I clenched my teeth. “If you begin now, you will not know how to find the right kind of man. You have to love the man less than he loves you. He has to love you more, do things for you and put you on a pedestal. A pedestal!” you looked at me in the mirror as you stood behind me, measuring my hair, snipping the left side ever so slightly.

Your hair salon was empty except for us, and I felt calm here, while the front and back doors were locked, and I had you all to myself. It was the only constant after the only home I had ever known had been sold, the profits split. The lights on the Palmetto expressway were visible from the front windows, which you had framed with gender-neutral, micro-leopard print curtains. Traffic was at a standstill, as usual. And because I was twelve, and you had just finished filing for the divorce, my life had also come to a standstill.

“Your father doesn’t know what he is missing,” you said. “To see you two girls, waiting for him by the window, it breaks my heart.”

“It’s his loss,” I said. “Was he ever better?”

“He was always a little distracted. But we were so happy and in love. It wasn’t until I caught him cheating that I even knew we were having problems.”

“How did you catch him?” I asked.

You sighed.

“I wore sunglasses and a scarf. I went to the restaurant where he said he had a meeting. And he was with her.” You slid the comb deftly through my hair, balanced it over the scissor, and snipped.

“This was when I was three, right?” I asked. You nodded. “How did you stay together so long after that?”

“He swore to me that it was all a mistake. And we wanted to have another baby. And we went to counseling, and things got better. I thought he had changed.”

“But he was still missing my birthdays. Remember the video where I am saying, *Mi papa se lo perdio por bobo.*” My father missed it since he’s dumb. “I am a strong girl. I don’t need a father.”

“I am your mother and your father,” you told my reflection in the mirror.

Emilio is your first boyfriend’s name. You are thirteen years old when he suddenly breaks up with you without a reason. You vomit from grief in the morning, holding back your waist-length brown hair, which you dried in the sun the afternoon before, brushing and brushing until it shone brighter.

Emilio is my first boyfriend’s name. I was thirteen when you caught me telling him that I loved him through an internet chat. That flutter that shook my inner core with joy, anticipating his response, was suddenly cut off by your circumspect presence behind my seat. “You are never talking to him again,” you said into my ear. I believed you, as I ran away to my bedroom, letting you break up with him for me.

Out of despair, I threw all my stuffed animals, plastic eyeballs snapping against the wall. I threw them so hard, I resented that they continued to smile at me the next day,

making me feel guilty for mistreating them, while I moped around the house, wanting to call Emilio but resisting, and hoping you would start talking to me again. Less angry than ashamed, I pictured the back of my head as you saw it, how I leaned toward the computer, smiling and giggling.

How long did you stand silently? How slowly did you walk so that I would not hear your footsteps?

I would also let you break up with my second boyfriend for me, when I was fifteen, and soon forgot my anger. Then, when I was seventeen, eighteen, and nineteen, you would coach me on what to say. I hated that you made me do this, but I will never say a word against you, as if you are my father catching me on a pretend tightrope, and I go right in my pants.

PORTRAIT OF A MOMMA'S GIRL

Picture a black box that seems infinite, and it's you in the middle, as if you are your own thoughts suspended in time. Your thoughts have definite locations in the gray matter of your brain, but they don't seem to be tethered down or located in any concrete capacity. Likewise, this black box is really a high school classroom, but the matte black walls and ceiling completely vanish when you are standing in front of the stage lights. Anyone sitting in the theater seats can see you, but all you see is the role you play, reflected on a mirror for checking posture, facial expressions. When the lights bounce off your shiny skin with nothing, no background, foreground, floor or ceiling to ground you, you appear to float, and this is the only place you can forget who you really are, because that brilliant figure could be anyone. You can be a crack addict shaking uncontrollably, or a teen mother searching for resolve. You can be fearless because it's not you that you are showing off.

But be careful that you don't share the stage with someone who will mount you during an improv exercise and yell "Submit!" Suddenly the audience you once could ignore erupts in laughter. You will have no role or script. You will only have yourself to go by. And if who you are is based on what your mother told you then you will not have her to consult. It will get worse. The weight of his crotch will plant itself over your waist and he will begin to grind into you. He will smell of layers of sweat dried on his uniform shirt, and unwashed hair. The carpet will smell of a rat that gave birth under the floorboards. Your mother's admonitions will not save you here. They will laugh. And your only comfort will be in knowing that if she were there she wouldn't mock you. *You*

are a virgin and that is so rare. But your mother isn't there to make rarity feel beautiful.

It is only you. They see who you are and it is laughable.

DYING EMBERS

You were driving along the left-hand lane of the high way when I noticed a closed off ramp. At first, I thought, “What would I have done if I was driving and that happened to be my exit?” Then, I noticed the construction truck and the driver. He drove in reverse directly toward a colossal lamppost. He faced forward. I saw him inch closer and closer. The truck’s rear made contact with the lamp.

Timber.

It tipped over slowly and then gained speed, its head growing larger as it got closer. The sodium vapor embers which were still struggling to make an impact in the sunrise, suddenly extinguished—and something else began to extinguish that day—as the power supply severed. You swerved.

If a lamp post falls in the middle of the highway, does it make a sound?

It does. But I can’t describe it. I don’t remember it, because it’s your voice that crashed through my ears that day, as it crashes through most of my childhood memories.

“Ay! Ay! Ay! That was directly in our lane! If there had been traffic, we would have been crushed!”

We reached our destination, and before you reluctantly let me go meet my classmates, gathering for a tour through Downtown, you warned me, “Stay with the group, Lauren. Look at what just happened to us!”

I nodded emphatically, but as I walked away I saw the lamppost again, falling on our car, crushing the hood of your white Mercedes sedan.

What if we never saw it coming? But, Ay! Ay! Ay! Ay! Ay! We did.

Would I have swerved?

GIRL

(AFTER JAMAICA KINCAID)

This is how you fold a towel; this is how you scrub your scalp; this is how you wave to someone you don't know that well—without showing so much teeth; your teeth make you look just like your aunt Marlene; this is how you pray to God; this is how you pray for healing; this is how you use your hands to strip a cold off your body, close your eyes and I will show you; Take this cold away! We don't want this sickness! This is how you tell your father that if he doesn't come to see you, it is his loss; this is how you say no to a boy who wants to have sex with you; never love a man more than he loves you, or he will not respect you; don't bring shells into the house because they will bring bad luck; this is how you dust a table top with a moist rag; this is how you sweep a floor; this is how you pick up the dirt with a wet napkin; never have sex with a boy, not until you are married, or you will completely ruin your life; this is how you decorate; this is how you hide clutter; this is how you clean a shower while you are in it; this is how you buy clothes at a discount; if you let him have his way with you, he will leave you and just turn a page; this is how you pick out kitchen mats—they must all match; this is how you wear a sanitary napkin; this is how you wash your underwear in the sink; this is how you clean a stain on a bed; this is how you fold your clothes so they are not wrinkled when you need to wear them; this is how you fry potatoes; this is how you bake a cake; this is how you remove the scales off fish; if you have sex with someone before you are married and he leaves you—and he will—then no one will want to marry you; this is how you write a check; this is how you balance a check book; this is how you get a divorce; this is how you remarry, without having sex before the wedding, even though you are not a virgin,

because this will guarantee that your second husband will respect you, though the first one did not; this is how you forgive but don't forget; you can bend over for someone, but don't bend down so far that they can see the crack of your ass; this is how you vacuum a rug while combing it to look nice; this is how you make your bed; this is how you dress for Sunday mass; this is how you dress for dinner at a restaurant; don't wear so much black eyeliner—it makes you look so Cuban! Be a virgin until you get married, because that will make you unique, that is the diamond in the rough that a man is looking for; don't go to college away from Miami; don't come home after 10:30 p.m.; don't forget to eat when you are at school; don't study so much that you don't get a good night's sleep; don't forget your rosary or you will have bad dreams; this is how you make a man work hard to please you; when you get married, you can have sex, but not every night; if you have sex every time he asks you then he won't respect you. *But what if I want to have sex?* You are a woman, and a woman never wants to have sex so much as a man does; if you do, what kind of woman will your husband think you are?

BOY

This is how he cries all night in his crib until dawn breaks through his window and his mother sees the blood trickling out of his ear onto his pillow; this is how a doctor operates on his inner ear; this is how his mother must avoid wetting his ear, or he will lose his hearing forever; this is how his mother gives him antibiotics for the first five years of his life until his immune system becomes so defensive that it begins to attack his vital organs; this is how he ties his shoes; this is how he brushes his teeth; this is how he bathes the dog; this is how he doesn't cry when he goes to the hospital; this is how he holds out his arm so that a nurse can inject him with insulin, because his body stopped making it when his immune system killed his Beta cells; this is how he sleeps on a couch; this is how he shares a bed with his mother; this is how he doesn't cry when his stepfather drinks beer and punches him in the gut; this is how he injects insulin into his gut; this is how he shovels snow; this is how he goes up to the boy who stole his ball even though he is taller and older, and demands it back; this is how he steals a bike; this is how he steals a gun; this is how he rides his bike from New Jersey into New York City; this is how he sells a gun; this is how he keeps a condom in his wallet; this is how he doesn't tell girls he has diabetes; this is how he doesn't look like he has diabetes; this is how he hits a home run, once; this is how he plays basketball—the ball is easier to see; this is how he makes MVP; this is how he gets a girl that is three years older than him to take his virginity in the back seat of a car when it is snowing outside; this is how he makes it with a girl with his ass in the snow; this is how he sees someone coming to mug him from around the corner and prepares; this is how he makes friends with the toughest gangster in the neighborhood so that when he steals the girlfriend of one of his enemies he will have

back up when he shows up to jump him; this is how he defends himself with a chain; this is how his rubs his opponent's face on the concrete; this is how he plays chicken with a knife; this is how he plays Russian roulette with a loaded gun; this is how he drinks a whole bottle of whiskey; this is how he drinks two whole bottles of whiskey; this is how he drinks two cases of beer; this is how he becomes prom king; this is how he becomes student body president; this is how he gets his girlfriend to throw a suitcase out her second story window and follow it with her own body into his arms, and then into his car; this is how he drives to Miami; this is how he starts college; this is how he searches for his Cubanity; this is how he becomes a writer; this is how he becomes a historian; this is how he loses his sight; this is how he loses his scholarship; this is how he loses his girlfriend; this is how he regains his sight; this is how he goes back to school; this is how he doesn't tell women he has diabetes; this is how he keeps insulin in a small refrigerator when he goes to work at a film company; this is how a small cockroach on a wall becomes amplified by acid that goes to his brain; this is how he takes a Florida History class; this is how he meets a girl and tell her his stories. This is how she believes them.

WHEN THE BOY FROM NEW JERSEY MEETS THE GIRL FROM MIAMI,

THIS IS WHAT THEY DO NOT SAY

Every morning, in late July, heavy rain clouds accumulate over the Everglades, and then slowly and steadily make their way southeast toward the concrete jungle of downtown Miami. The rains close a white curtain in front of drivers, and soak pedestrians through. The swamp tries to reclaim itself every afternoon and the vultures perched on the top of the neoclassical courthouse, looking down at the cultural center, seem to be in on the plan. They watch this confluence of library and museum, built to resemble a Spanish fortress, with terracotta instead of coquina, a place casual enough for the kind of people who read in the morning what they will use as their blankets at night, and elegant enough for the kind of people who wish to take walking lectures led by their history professors. In this unpredictable place, only the rain can be forecasted.

A boy from New Jersey will meet a girl from Miami, but this is what he will not say. “We have been in this history class together for a few weeks, how come we haven’t studied together?” Or “I can tell just by looking at you that you are what my mother wants me to bring to her house next Thanksgiving.” Or “What is your favorite kind of music?” Or “Do you like watching movies?” Or “I am a documentary film producer, and someday, my goal is to get a doctoral degree in History at an Ivy League University.”

The girl from Miami will meet the boy from New Jersey, but she will not say, “Orange you glad Mary Brickell sent Henry Flagler some fruit?” Or “According to my mother, I must play hard to get.” Or “Gee, it looks like it will rain.” Or “How do you like

our school?” Or “How do you like our city?” Or “I write for the school paper, and someday my goal is to become a professional writer.”

Instead, he will notice her looking at an enlarged photograph of an early pioneer, an ordinary farmer, leaning against a haystack, shirtless under his soiled denim overalls, deciding to finger-comb his hair right before the photograph was taken. *Was that underarm hair or shadow?*

What he will say is “Er, e’scuse me, ma’am? I sure would like to lick your armpit.”

She will turn around to meet a pair of deep brown eyes, a goatee that frames a set of full lips, turned up ironically at the corners. She will see a fearless face. She will look away.

What she will say is “It’s already Thursday,” remembering what she will about Southerners before running water, from reading *Charlotte’s Web* in middle school. “I haven’t washed my armpits since Sunday.”

The group of history students will exit the Museum, towards Government Center, board the electric, elevated, people mover, exit at the Hyatt Hotel, venture into a pedestrian walkway, a dark, above-ground tunnel. From the opening at the bay-facing side of the tunnel, the professor will show them the original shore line of the Biscayne Bay, before the land fill, and he will say that the river was polluted and that it was dredged, angering environmentalists. He will show them the Tequesta Indian Circle, a ceremonial burial ground, which builders had almost bulldozed through. The class will turn around to go back the way they came, and the girl will kick a soda can at the boy.

“Careful!” the boy will warn. “This is where I like to bring my dates.”

“What? Here?” she will laugh, eyes filled with delight.

“I set up a nice bistro table and we sit down for dinner. The bums don’t mind at all. You can be my next guest,” he will say, “but there is one stipulation.”

“What is it?”

“You have to wear a wedding dress.”

She will not say, “How will I ever get permission for *that*?” or “How will I ever get permission for *you*?” It might be easier to change the geography, or even stop the afternoon rain.

What she will say is “Strapless? Or lace up to the neck?”