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Hunger: Essays

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

HUNGER: ESSAYS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Monica Isabel Restrepo

2016

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Monica Isabel Restrepo, and entitled Hunger: Essays, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

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

Denise Duhamel

Donna Weir-Soley

Julie Marie Wade, Major Professor

Date of Defense: October 26, 2016

The thesis of Monica Isabel Restrepo is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2016

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DEDICATION

To Carlos, for making self-discovery possible.

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I would like to thank my colleagues and professors at FIU, particularly Aza for being a voice for difference, Denise for her guidance in poetry, and Julie for her relentless optimism, compassion, and encouragement in helping me find unconventional ways to tell stories.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

HUNGER: ESSAYS

by

Monica Isabel Restrepo

Florida International University, 2016

Miami, Florida

Professor Julie Marie Wade, Major Professor

HUNGER: ESSAYS is a collection of lyric essays that present the coming-of-age story of a young woman growing up in a Panamanian family where identity is defined by patriarchal notions of femininity (e.g., physical appearances) and economically-oriented career aspirations. In an attempt to fit into this family rather than explore her difference, the narrator undergoes psychological trauma that results in anorexia during her young adulthood. As she works towards healing, the narrator grapples with Western dichotomies of body and mind in an effort to become a more integrated self.

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“No straight line between here and there, between past and future; instead, many small rifts open between where you stand now and where you are trying to go.”

–Brenda Miller

Invasion

December 22, 1989. Two days into their mission and with Port Amador secured, United States forces zero in on the hunt and capture of ex-CIA agent, drug lord, and Panamanian dictator, General Manuel Noriega.

It is 4 AM, and I can't stop crying. I try to think of something I love the way my mother tells me to when I'm homesick, but this time, vanilla ice cream won't do the trick. I think of the day before yesterday, when my friend Ali and I were playing hopscotch by the front of her house, the late afternoon sky streaked magenta. In this memory, I am winning, and my mother is about to pull into the driveway—any minute now. Ali picks up the pebble on number six and jumps to number five, her sneakered foot bouncing on the pavement. For a moment, I think I hear my grandfather's car. It turns out to be something else. *Swoooooosh!* a plane blares, *ra-ta-ta-ta-ta!* It's a sound I've only heard on TV, in movies my parents watch without concern, not knowing we are also watching.

Ali and I run inside, into her mother's arms. That's when I begin to cry. Seven is too young to understand politics but old enough to recognize the sound of danger, old enough to realize that something is terribly wrong, old enough to know that my mother is not coming, not today. "*Hay toque de queda,*" my mother says over the phone later, but her soft voice only makes things worse. "Me quiero ir," I tell Ali's mom between sobs, and she looks back at me with her hands on her head, like she's found a wounded puppy by the side of the road and has no idea what to do with it.

Over the course of two days, my mother plans her escape. She studies the keys to my grandfather's old Toyota Camry sitting beside his record player. She waits patiently for a distraction: news of a supermarket raid crackling on the radio or another outburst of fire. My grandfather is still yelling at her, "Esta peligroso afuera!" when she pulls out of the driveway, unwavering, into the dark of night.

It is not safe outside.

When my mother arrives at Ali's house, I make a run for it, rushing into the passenger's side. "Agachate!" she says, gently pushing my head down so that I'm hidden from view. I follow her instructions, curl up into a ball underneath the glove compartment, metal Hello Kitty lunch box against my knees and face pressed onto the seat. The cloth seat smells both familiar and toxic, like the mothballs in my grandmother's closet.

"Cierra los ojos," my mother says, "y ponte a rezar!" She wants me to close my eyes and pray, but all I can do is look at her. Her body seems to be melting into the seat, her head barely at wheel level, just enough so she can drive. Even when she hides, her golden hair is a halo.

I am safe inside.

My head hits the glove compartment each time we traverse a *policia muerto*. I sway back and forth, counting the bumps on the road; *one... two...three... four...*and then I know we are passing in front of Noriega's house, a mass of mangroves surrounded by a white concrete fence. Noriega's Dobermans howl. I can hear their paws shuffling among scattered leaves, protruding roots of dead trees, and bleeding mangoes, flies picking at the silky flesh of fruit like fingernails on a scab. Later, I will dream these Dobermans into my home, a house that looks strikingly like Ali's. I always wake up at the same point in the dream – the part where the Dobermans' teeth tear through my skin.

It is not safe outside.

When we are only a block from my grandfather's house, we hear a *tap-tap-tap* on the hood of the car, and my mother forcefully jams the brake, my head slamming into the seat. She rolls down the window, moving the lever counter-clockwise until there is nothing between her and the man with his cheeks painted black and the whites of his eyes popping out of their sockets. He lifts a dirty finger to his mouth. "You can't be outside," he whispers in a tongue from another land; "it's not safe out here."

My mother nods. She doesn't need to speak his language to know that she has violated the laws of foreign invasion. She slumps a little further into her seat, rolls the window back up, more frantic this time, the muscles in her forearm bulging as we leave the American soldier behind. The car turns right and then inches up an incline, my grandparents' house just ahead on the right.

My mother carries me on her hip as we enter the house, our flushed cheeks sticking together like two-sided tape. The trees on the terrace susurrate, cloaking our steps. My mother sets me down and motions me beneath the dining table, where my brother and sister are sleeping. I lie down next to them, welcoming the cool marble on my face. I close my eyes because I know that's what she wants. I pray an *Ave Maria*, peering occasionally at my own Maria, her luminous head surrendered into her palms.

We are safe inside.