



**Digital Commons@**  
Loyola Marymount University  
LMU Loyola Law School

# First-Gen Voices: Creative and Critical Narratives on the First- Generation College Experience

---

Volume 5  
Issue 1 *New Vistas*

Article 23

---

February 2016

## There is Beauty in Struggle

Brenda Quintanilla  
*Loyola Marymount University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/fgv>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Quintanilla, Brenda (2016) "There is Beauty in Struggle," *First-Gen Voices: Creative and Critical Narratives on the First-Generation College Experience*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 23.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/fgv/vol5/iss1/23>

This Creative Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Academic Resource Center at Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in First-Gen Voices: Creative and Critical Narratives on the First-Generation College Experience by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu).

*I am sitting in my balcony writing in my pink journal, looking out onto 13<sup>th</sup> street in Richmond, California—where I have grown up surrounded by gang violence, drugs, and prostitution. Yet, I feel privileged. Privileged to have a family, when many don't. Privileged to have food and a home, when many have nothing. Privileged to be alive, when many are not.*

**July 1997**

*I was born a bird  
Built in feathers that could fly  
Even on that day*

When my mother gave birth to me, she already had three other kids to raise. She told herself that I was for sure the last one, so she got her ovaries removed and that was that. We lived in a small house—big compared to the houses some of my neighbors lived in—in a neighborhood called Los Angeles Apopa in San Salvador, El Salvador. Our house was the very last one in *el pasaje dicieocho*. There was a giant concrete hill that led from the very top of the *pasaje* to the end of it. My best friend, Karlita, lived in front of me. We often rode our bikes throughout the *pasaje* and pretended we were professional bike riders. One time we raced from the top of the hill and she ended up beating me because I fell half-way through the race. What a great way to scrape my knees, which would show in every picture my mother took of me moving forward; till this day I can still see the scars.

I loved my neighbors. You could find all types of families in each home: from the lady that sold everyone *torillas*, to the woman who owned the grocery store and would give us discounts, to the old lady that would feed me pancakes every damn time I visited her. They were more than neighbors to us though, they were family. We grew to love each one the way we loved our own blood. I was friends with all the little girls that grew up in the *pasaje* with me. We would steal rocks from the front door neighbors and use them as bases to play baseball; we would use unwanted strings to make a rope to play jump rope; and we'd take our toilet paper, wet it, and use it to play hopscotch. What creative minds we had. My childhood felt like a movie I was living in each day, unaware of the struggles that would come with growing up. I was naïve and I wish I had stayed that way. But there is beauty in that. There is beauty in struggle.

**March 1999**

*Poverty took me  
Sent my dad to the U.S.  
Left me without wings*

When I was two years old, my father had to immigrate to the United States to pursue a future for my family. My home was left without a male figure, aside from my brother who was very young at the time. I grew up not truly knowing who my father was, and I was okay with it. My mom did a good job at distracting me from his absence. I had a loving brother, two amazing sisters, several *sobrinitos*, and an inspiring mother. However, in 2001, my brother had to leave to the United States as well. He was about to turn 18, which was the time in which young men were recruited to join gangs and my brother already had several gangs pursuing him. He wanted to avoid that lifestyle so he left with my uncle, and I did not see him for five years. I remember telling my mom that I would buy a gun and kill my *tio* for taking my brother with him. I know, I know. I was a crazy girl. Little did I know that I would be next in line in the journey to the “American Dream.” But there is beauty in that. There is beauty in struggle.

**April 2006**

*I set flight and left*

*Although I did not want to*

*I managed to leave*

The day I found out I was going to immigrate to the United States, I ran to my room and hid under my bed hoping no one would ever be able to find me. I cried and cried to my mother because I did not want to leave everything I knew behind. Leaving meant starting over. Leaving meant never coming back. The last day I sat in on my third grade class, I mentally said bye to all of my classmates and friends. I could not tell them where I was going; all I knew was that the next day they would not see me sitting in my usual seat. Days would pass and I still would not be there. I knew everyone would wonder where I went—if I was sick, or tired, or whatever theory they all had in their heads. I left them all with many unanswered questions. And till this day, I wish I would have been able to have a proper farewell to the country and people I loved so much.

One early morning in April, I got my backpack ready, grabbed my *teletubi* bear, said bye to my family, and hopped in a white pick-up truck with my oldest sister. Hours passed and we were still driving. I kept wondering where we would spend the night, what we would eat, if we were in safe hands, etc. We ended up spending the night at a *coyote's* house. They gave us a thin blanket and a shitty pillow. It felt like a brothel in there: pregnant women, little children, old men, anyone and everyone willing to sacrifice their life in order to get a glimpse of the Statue of Liberty. We spent nights in similar locations for a couple of weeks. However, my strength was tested for the first time when we had to swim across a river. It was shallow and dirty, and I did not know how to swim. No one offered to carry me, or help me across. No one but my sister. She placed me on her

shoulders, and together, we walked through the water that felt colder than Antarctica. We made it across and everyone was soaked, except me. I got lucky. You see, if you were little or pregnant, you would get a bit more sympathy from the *coyotes* than everyone else did.

When we got to the border between El Salvador and Guatemala, a male cop stopped us. I did not really know what this meant, but my sister seemed petrified. If this cop found out that we were trying to immigrate to the U.S., he would not let us through. So we gave him money, and my sister even had to lower her shirt from her breasts in order for him to let us go. And he did—after all, he got what he wanted. We spent about a week and a half traveling by feet, bus, and car throughout Guatemala. We would sleep in houses that hosted immigrants and barely ate any food. I had nothing, except for my sister and my *teletubi* bear. One night, as we were on a bus that would take us across Guatemala, a cop pulled up and began searching for documents. By this point, my sister and the other immigrants on the bus had gotten fake identities. They had to memorize all the details of that person and pretend to be them. However, I did not get one of those life-savers because there were no little girls that looked like me willing to give me their identity for that night. So I had to hide. I hid under the engine location until the officers got out of the bus.

In order to get across the Guatemalan border into Mexico, we had to be placed inside a pick-up truck. We were all laying down in the back; it was about 15 of us in that small perimeter. We had a shield covering the entire back section of the pick-up truck, and although this prevented us from being seen, it also prevented us from being able to breathe well. The hours inside that pick-up truck felt endless. Some mothers had babies with them in there, others were asthmatic and constantly kept having asthma attacks. At one point, even I began to feel trapped as I was squished between bodies and had to smell the fumes of gas coming from the engine that was right below us. After several hours that felt like eternity, we finally made it to Mexico. We spent the night at a very nice home and ate a delicious meal—the first time in many weeks. But I guess they were just preparing us for what came next.

On the last days of our travels, we had to cross over several mountains to get across the U.S. border. After walking through several miles of rough land, we would get picked up by a van that would take us to a house in Los Angeles, California. So that is what we did, but it was not as easy as it sounds. We walked through broad daylight on a beautiful sunny afternoon. It was hot out, and we kept walking up and down hills that felt like an insanity workout. A woman who had been traveling with us was very asthmatic. She kept pausing throughout our walk because she would get tired and had to use her inhaler. Our *coyote* kept yelling at her and saying that she was slowing us down. After several attempts to keep her up to speed, she gave up. She was turning purple and could not keep walking. So

she stopped and said “you go on without me, *ay los alcanso*.” So we left her, but she never caught up. I was scared; I could not help but think that could have been my sister or me.

The rest of us kept walking and it quickly got dark. I still felt like I was in a movie, but unlike my childhood movie, this was a horror film. We had to hop over barbed wire, which ripped a part of my shirt and scratched me on my legs. Then we reached a steep hill, which was impossible to walk through. So we had to sit on our butts and slide down the hill. While kids my age in the U.S. were sliding down playground slides in McDonald’s, I slid down the American border. That night, we slept in the forest near the street. At sunrise, the van would pick us up and we’d be free. I slept coldly. No blanket, no pillow, and no *teletubi* bear because I had to leave him behind along with my other belongings before entering Mexico. Half way through our sleep, our *coyote* yelled at us to wake up and told us that the van was waiting for us. We all ran to the van, and quickly but orderly got in. They took us to a house, we took a shower, put on the last outfit we owned, and they took us to a McDonald’s in LA. There, my father along with my brother picked me up in a brown truck. I rode in the back seat for six hours with people who felt like strangers until we reached my new home in Richmond, California. But there was beauty in that. There is beauty in struggle.

### **July 2009**

*My home was shattered  
He was ripped out and taken  
I still cry for him*

Three years after my family was reunited on the other side of the border, my father was imprisoned. Three days before my 12<sup>th</sup> birthday, my dad, mom, and I went to Wal-Mart to get decorations for my party celebration. We were searching the aisles when my dad got a phone call. I did not know who it was or what the conversation consisted of, but I do know that my father’s face expression gave a whole 360. Four days later, a day after my birthday, as my mother and I returned from church, my father was arrested. I was a confused little girl; I did not know what was going on. I was sent to my aunt's house to “play with my cousin” but I knew deep inside that something was wrong. On the ride there, a song came on that stated “you don’t know what you have until it’s gone,” and a strong feeling ran through my body and I began to cry. I could tell that things would never be the same.

On the day of my birthday my father told me, “no matter what happens, I will always love you and I will always be here for you.” I asked him why he said that, but he did not want to tell me the truth in fear that I would reject him. My father has been in jail for seven years now, and will not get out until I am in my

30's, but I have never, and will never, reject him. I grew up without my dad in El Salvador, and I am growing up without him here in the U.S., and as much as it hurts to say this, I think I have grown to accept his absence.

**August 2012**

*Started from the ground  
Now I soar above the sky  
I am a dreamer*

Throughout middle school, I always thought that I would never be able to attend college because of my undocumented status. However, in 2012, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) was introduced. With DACA, I was able to get a work permit, a social security number, a driver's license, and permission to travel within the U.S. Most importantly, DACA protects me from being deported. When DACA became official, it felt like many doors opened up for me, and I no longer needed to live in fear. I was therefore able to succeed in high school—got high grades and had a tremendous amount of participation in sports and clubs. I always wanted to make my family proud.

My siblings barely graduated from high school in El Salvador, but a high school diploma from El Salvador is not equivalent to a high school diploma from the U.S., so their opportunities here are not as strong as they would be in my home country. My father was able to finish high school in El Salvador, but college was never an expectation. My mother had to drop out in the third grade in order to work with her mother because they were extremely poor and needed all the hands they could get. She did not get the greatest education, but my mom is one of the smartest, most independent women I know. Her lack in knowledge of cells, or the Pythagorean Theorem or World War II has not prevented her from making a life of herself. She may not have a high school diploma or a college degree to offer, but she does have wisdom, love and compassion, and that is all I could ever ask for.

On June 10, 2015, I walked across a stage in Craneway Pavilion, in front of all my friends, teachers, and family, and received the one thing no one else in my family had ever received: an American high school diploma. Not only that, but I cannot express the gratitude I felt when my principal, Mr. Nelson, called my name and declared me as my class' Salutatorian. I knew I was one of the top students, but never did it cross my mind that I was one of the top two. I could see the pride in my family and friends, and if it wasn't for them—for both their love and struggles—I don't think I would have been able to push myself to be the best me I could be. But there is beauty in that. There is beauty in struggle.

**Today**

*I have known the lows  
I have thrived high in the sky  
I got more to go*

This same girl who did not speak English in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, this same girl who thought she would never be successful because her dad is in prison, this same girl who did not expect to graduate from high school as Salutatorian because no one in her family had ever gotten that far, this same girl who was not expecting to go to college because she would never be able to afford it, is the same girl who is sitting in her bed in a nice room in her freshman dorm at Loyola Marymount University on a full ride scholarship.

I have not let my struggles define me. Instead, I used these pivotal moments to guide and shape me into the young woman that I am today. I am proud to be a first-generation college student who comes from a low-income immigrant family that eats Salvadorean *pupusas* every Sunday morning before going to church in the “deep hood” of Richmond, California.

I am not telling you these stories to make you sympathize me. Nor am I trying to make you have pity on me. I am telling you this because I believe that there is beauty in struggle. All it takes to see that beauty is some understanding, some compassion, and some resilience. So, open your eyes wide enough and you will see the light at the end of the tunnel. This world is a beautiful place, and we are blessed to be a part of it. After all, there is beauty in all of it. There is beauty in struggle.

***R.I.P. to my dear friend Byron Morales who passed away on June 29, 2015.***

***R.I.P. to all my family members who now only exist in our memories.***

***R.I.P. to all the lost hopes and dreams.***

***These memories are for them.***