

Workshop 2

Engagement and Dialogue: Judith Ortiz Cofer and Nikki Grimes

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Workshop 2 Readings

AN HOUR WITH ABUELO

Just one hour, *una hora*, is all I'm asking of you, son." My grandfather is in a nursing home in Brooklyn, and my mother wants me to spend some time with him, since the doctors say that he doesn't have too long to go now. I don't have much time left of my summer vacation, and there's a stack of books next to my bed I've got to read if I'm going to get into the AP English class I want. I'm going stupid in some of my classes, and Mr. Williams, the principal at Central, said that if I passed some reading tests, he'd let me move up.

Besides, I hate the place, the old people's home, especially the way it smells like industrial-strength ammonia and other stuff I won't mention, since it turns my stomach. And really the abuelo always has a lot of relatives visiting him, so I've gotten out of going out there except at Christmas, when a whole vanload of grandchildren are herded over there to give him gifts and a hug. We all make it quick and spend the rest of the time in the recreation area, where they play checkers and stuff with some of the old people's games, and I catch up on back

~ An Hour with Abuelo ~

issues of *Modern Maturity*. I'm not picky, I'll read almost anything.

Anyway, after my mother nags me for about a week, I let her drive me to Golden Years. She drops me off in front. She wants me to go in alone and have a "good time" talking to Abuelo. I tell her to be back in one hour or I'll take the bus back to Paterson. She squeezes my hand and says, "*Gracias, hijo*," in a choked-up voice like I'm doing her a big favor.

I get depressed the minute I walk into the place. They line up the old people in wheelchairs in the hallway as if they were about to be raced to the finish line by orderlies who don't even look at them when they push them here and there. I walk fast to room 10, Abuelo's "suite." He is sitting up in his bed writing with a pencil in one of those old-fashioned black hardback notebooks. It has the outline of the island of Puerto Rico on it. I slide into the hard vinyl chair by his bed. He sort of smiles and the lines on his face get deeper, but he doesn't say anything. Since I'm supposed to talk to him, I say, "What are you doing, Abuelo, writing the story of your life?"

It's supposed to be a joke, but he answers, "*Sí*, how did you know, Arturo?"

His name is Arturo too. I was named after him. I don't really know my grandfather. His children, including my mother, came to New York and New Jersey (where I was born) and he stayed on the Island until my grandmother died. Then he got sick, and since nobody could leave their jobs to go take care of him, they brought him to this nursing home in Brooklyn. I see him a couple of times a year, but he's always surrounded by his sons and daughters. My mother tells me that Don Arturo had once been a teacher back in Puerto Rico, but had lost his job after the war. Then he became a farmer. She's always

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saying in a sad voice, "Ay, bendito! What a waste of a fine mind." Then she usually shrugs her shoulders and says, "*Así es la vida*." That's the way life is. It sometimes makes me mad that the adults I know just accept whatever crap is thrown at them because "that's the way things are." Not for me. I go after what I want.

Anyway, Abuelo is looking at me like he was trying to see into my head, but he doesn't say anything. Since I like stories, I decide I may as well ask him if he'll read me what he wrote.

I look at my watch: I've already used up twenty minutes of the hour I promised my mother.

Abuelo starts talking in his slow way. He speaks what my mother calls book English. He taught himself from a dictionary, and his words sound stiff, like he's sounding them out in his head before he says them. With his children he speaks Spanish, and that funny book English with us grandchildren. I'm surprised that he's still so sharp, because his body is shrinking like a crumpled-up brown paper sack with some bones in it. But I can see from looking into his eyes that the light is still on in there.

"It is a short story, Arturo. The story of my life. It will not take very much time to read it."

"I have time, Abuelo." I'm a little embarrassed that he saw me looking at my watch.

"Yes, hijo. You have spoken the truth. La verdad. You have much time."

Abuelo reads: "I loved words from the beginning of my life. In the *campo* where I was born one of seven sons, there were few books. My mother read them to us over and over: the Bible, the stories of Spanish conquistadors and of pirates that she had read as a child and brought with her from the city of Mayagüez; that was before she

~ An Hour with Abuelo ~

married my father, a coffee bean farmer; and she taught us words from the newspaper that a boy on a horse brought every week to her. She taught each of us how to write on a slate with chalks that she ordered by mail every year. We used those chalks until they were so small that you lost them between your fingers.

"I always wanted to be a writer and a teacher. With my heart and my soul I knew that I wanted to be around books all of my life. And so against the wishes of my father, who wanted all his sons to help him on the land, she sent me to high school in Mayagüez. For four years I boarded with a couple she knew. I paid my rent in labor, and I ate vegetables I grew myself. I wore my clothes until they were thin as parchment. But I graduated at the top of my class! My whole family came to see me that day. My mother brought me a beautiful *guayabera*, a white shirt made of the finest cotton and embroidered by her own hands. I was a happy young man.

"In those days you could teach in a country school with a high school diploma. So I went back to my mountain village and got a job teaching all grades in a little classroom built by the parents of my students.

"I had books sent to me by the government. I felt like a rich man although the pay was very small. I had books. All the books I wanted! I taught my students how to read poetry and plays, and how to write them. We made up songs and put on shows for the parents. It was a beautiful time for me.

"Then the war came, and the American President said that all Puerto Rican men would be drafted. I wrote to our governor and explained that I was the only teacher in the mountain village. I told him that the children would go back to the fields and grow up ignorant if I could not

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teach them their letters. I said that I thought I was a better teacher than a soldier. The governor did not answer my letter. I went into the U.S. Army.

"I told my sergeant that I could be a teacher in the army. I could teach all the farm boys their letters so that they could read the instructions on the ammunition boxes and not blow themselves up. The sergeant said I was too smart for my own good, and gave me a job cleaning latrines. He said to me there is reading material for you there, scholar. Read the writing on the walls. I spent the war mopping floors and cleaning toilets.

"When I came back to the Island, things had changed. You had to have a college degree to teach school, even the lower grades. My parents were sick, two of my brothers had been killed in the war, the others had stayed in Nueva York. I was the only one left to help the old people. I became a farmer. I married a good woman who gave me many good children. I taught them all how to read and write before they started school.' "

Abuelo then puts the notebook down on his lap and closes his eyes.

"*Así es la vida* is the title of my book," he says in a whisper, almost to himself. Maybe he's forgotten that I'm there.

For a long time he doesn't say anything else. I think that he's sleeping, but then I see that he's watching me through half-closed lids, maybe waiting for my opinion of his writing. I'm trying to think of something nice to say. I liked it and all, but not the title. And I think that he could've been a teacher if he had wanted to bad enough. Nobody is going to stop me from doing what I want with my life. I'm not going to let *la vida* get in my way. I want to discuss this with him, but the words are not coming into my head in Spanish just yet. I'm about to ask him

~ An Hour with Abuelo ~

why he didn't keep fighting to make his dream come true, when an old lady in hot-pink running shoes sort of appears at the door.

She is wearing a pink jogging outfit too. The world's oldest marathoner, I say to myself. She calls out to my grandfather in a flirty voice, "Yoo-hoo, Arturo, remember what day this is? It's poetry-reading day in the rec room! You promised us you'd read your new one today."

I see my abuelo perking up almost immediately. He points to his wheelchair, which is hanging like a huge metal bat in the open closet. He makes it obvious that he wants me to get it. I put it together, and with Mrs. Pink Running Shoes's help, we get him in it. Then he says in a strong deep voice I hardly recognize, "Arturo, get that notebook from the table, please."

I hand him another map-of-the-Island notebook—this one is red. On it in big letters it says, *POEMAS DE ARTURO*.

I start to push him toward the rec room, but he shakes his finger at me.

"Arturo, look at your watch now. I believe your time is over." He gives me a wicked smile.

Then with her pushing the wheelchair—maybe a little too fast—they roll down the hall. He is already reading from his notebook, and she's making bird noises. I look at my watch and the hour *is* up, to the minute. I can't help but think that my abuelo has been timing *me*. It cracks me up. I walk slowly down the hall toward the exit sign. I want my mother to have to wait a little. I don't want her to think that I'm in a hurry or anything.

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ARTURO'S FLIGHT

Sometimes I just have to get out and walk. It's a real need with me. I guess it's one of the things that make me odd in everyone's opinion. Almost everyone's. My parents worry about me, but they think I'm God's gift. All of them are wrong about me. What I am is impatient. Sometimes I feel trapped, trapped in a school that's like an insane asylum, a trapped rat in this city that's a maze—no matter how long and how far you walk, you always end up in the same place, at least it all looks the same: old apartment buildings with too many people squeezed in, bars with sad-looking people staring into their cups, and stores so bright with lights that they hurt my eyes.

The only place that doesn't give me a headache is that old church my mother still goes to, where I made my first communion: St. Joseph's. An old guy that I know cleans it at night, and he lets me in. At that hour there is only the red security light on, and the candles that the people at the evening service have lit. Johann, the old guy, says that they have to be left alone. They can't be

blown out because they're prayers and requests people have made. He acts like he's the keeper of the Olympic torch or something. But I understand what he means. It would be wrong to blow out a candle someone lit for a special reason—like stealing a wish.

I met Johann one night when he found me sitting on the steps outside. I had decided to leave Paterson, and I was making my plans. I think I frightened him with my punk look. That was during my purple hair and leather period. It was a way of making a statement to the people at school. But it backfired and really hurt my mother and the old man. Anyway, that night I was sitting on those steps looking pretty scary, I guess, with my purple spiked hair, black leather jacket, and all. I guess I was looking kind of miserable too because there was this old guy just standing there looking at me with, you know, that good-Samaritan expression on his face. We both stared at each other for a good long time. I was considering taking off when he spoke in a thick accent, in a strange old-fashioned way: "Young man, are you seeking asylum?" It made me smile. That was a line right out of a movie. "No, man, I'm not looking for an asylum, but I know where one is if you need one." I felt like ribbing the old guy a little. But he didn't seem to get my joke.

"Are you hungry?" he asked, lowering his wrinkled old face to look at me. He was wearing glasses so thick that his eyeballs looked like two blue fish swimming in a bowl.

"I'm not hungry, just cold." Then I noticed I really *was* cold. Freezing, in fact. I had been walking the streets for a couple of hours by then. The old man extended his hand to me. I shook it, and it felt like a dry leaf. "My name is Johann. I am the caretaker of the church." He took some heavy-looking keys out of his coat pocket and

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~ Arturo's Flight ~

unlocked the huge wooden front door of the church. "Please follow me," he said, sounding just like a butler in an old black-and-white horror movie. "Walk this way," I said like Igor in the Frankenstein movie, dragging my left foot. I was still trying to be funny. But he didn't seem to get it.

"Are you in pain?" he asked, looking into my eyes again. This time I didn't answer him because the question made me think. Was I?

The church at night is like no other place I've been in. As I followed old Johann, I felt like I was in a dream. It all had a misty quality to it. Like that book we read in English, *Jane Eyre*, or something, where you imagine everything takes place on a foggy night in a spooky old house.

The old man showed me to a pew in the front.

"You may rest here," he said, patting my back as I slid in, for God's sake. The guy was a relic. "Do you need anything?" I shook my head. How the hell was I supposed to tell this guy what I needed? So I sat there and decided I was just going to act like this was the movies or a theater and this old guy was going to put on a play or something for me. Hell, I didn't have anything better to do. I wasn't going to go home. I had one hundred and nineteen dollars and eighty-four cents in my wallet, money I made carrying grocery bags for the old women of El Building, my place of residence, choice tenement for the PRs of Paterson, until my outstanding hair and black leather jacket got to them, that is. The worst one, Doña Monina, ambushed Clara, my mother, after Spanish mass right here in St. Joe's, and told her that I looked like *un bum*. Don Manuel asked me to dress better for work, and no purple spiked hair. But I was in no mood to take orders from anybody at the time. That night I told

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my mother about getting fired, and the look she gave me made me want to scream. She looked betrayed, for God's sake. Am I an angel or am I Judas? Somebody ought to tell me. My father's got a bad heart, and that worries me a little. I mean, he's been getting so upset lately that the next thing that's going to happen is that he'll drop dead and then I'll be a murderer. Patricide, that's what my English teacher called it when we read about that old Greek guy who killed his old man and married his mother. Very nice. Some kind of example we get in school.

Right about then I started to worry about being locked up in an empty church with the old guy. He'd been gone a long time. The old midnight madness was taking over my mind. I thought maybe I'd get hacked to death and nobody would know it until the *viejás* from El Building dragged in for the 6:00 A.M. mass and found my corpse in the aisle. You never know these days. An ax murderer can look like a nice batty old guy with an accent. Need asylum? Come into my lair, young man, let me feel your purple spiky hair. I can make anything rhyme in two languages.

I have to admit, I'm good at this poetry biz. Not a talent that'll get you very far in the barrio. I've always done real good in English class. The grammar bores me, but the lit-te-ra-turrr, like Miss Rathbone says it, is easy. I can get into those stories.

But it was a poem that started the mess. It was when Rathbone asked me, no, *ordered* me in her marine-drill-sergeant voice, to recite, not just say, but *recite*, a part of John Donne's poem "The Flea." Jesus, I could feel myself burning up. I sweated right through my jeans and flannel shirt. I tried to fake not knowing it, but she knew I did because I had been stupid enough to tell her, *I had thought*,

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~ Arturo's Flight ~

in confidence, after she had told us to find a poem in our book that we could *relate to*. Man, she's like in a time warp. Relate to. Who says that anymore? So I had flipped through the book and opened it to any page, and there it was, "The Flea." Considering the other titles in the index, like "Intimations of Immortality," and "An Essay on Man," this one sounded like something I could "relate to." And it was so weird. This guy, who was a priest or something, writes to his girlfriend to say that he wishes—this is good—that the same flea that bit him and sucked his blood would bite her! I mean, that's kind of sick. But he rhymes it so it sounds like a poem. Still, as Miss Wrath-Bone would say, "I do not expect that the young lady would relate to this particular declaration of love."

Like I said, I liked the screwy poem. And I stay after class to show off a little: "Mark but this flea," say I in my best imitation English-snob accent, "and mark in this, How little that which thou deniest me is; Me it sucked first, and now sucks thee. And in this flea, our two bloods mingled be." Sick. Old John Donne was a pervert. But if he could make it sound good, maybe he still got the girl. Anyway, I thought that Rathbone liked me. I mean she puts *Good! You have a gift!* and crap like that all over my essay papers. So I thought I'd give her a thrill by memorizing a couple of lines from the poem. And what does the Miss Brutus-You-Too do? She announces it to the whole class the next day. "Arthur, as in King Arthur," she says, for God's sake, "has a surprise for us today." If I didn't wet my pants then, I never will. I mean, I know I had a minor stroke or something. I felt the blood crashing against my eyeballs. Behind me Kenny Matoa said, "King Arthur will now rethite for uth." I knew my life was over then. See, for the guys of the barrio, reading poetry is like an unnatural act. *Liking* poetry makes you

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suspicious as to your sexual preference. Unless you're a girl. It's so stupid I can't even explain it to myself. It's just words. Poetry is like the words of a song, and these guys would kill to write songs and be rock stars.

Two weeks later it was still hell for me on my street. Someone had spray-painted "The Flea" on my locker, and that's what they called me. "Suck my blood," signed "The Flea," was scrawled on my notebook when I came back from the bathroom one day. Kenny, a guy I've known and hated since third grade, was leading the campaign against me. Most of the people in my school are also my neighbors in El Building or the barrio, so there was no escaping it. And I admit I didn't know how to fight it. Then last weekend I went crazy and dyed my hair purple. I just wanted everyone to call me something else. Crazy, maybe. But I wanted to shock them into seeing me a different way.

All that happened was that my mother, Clara, screamed when she saw me. And my father took one of his pills and told me that we had to talk. I got fired at the bodega. They started calling me "the Purple Flea" at school. I finally made my decision to get out of town for good when Clara looked like she was ready to have a serious talk: a fate worse than death. I walked in. She said, "You gotta grow up, *hijo*." And before she could start another sentence, I went into my room and dragged my book where I kept my money out from under my bed. Shakespeare's sonnets. I took the bills out and threw Willy's poems into the Dumpster down on the street. I can hit it from my window. Very convenient, except at 5:00 A.M. when the truck comes, sounding like a herd of stampeding elephants.

Then I started out for the Greyhound bus station. Des-

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~ Arturo's Flight ~

tination unknown. I walked for a while, then sat down to rest on the church steps for *un minuto*.

That's when St. Johann of the Broom invited me into his asylum, where he kept me waiting half the night. I didn't know what I was waiting for. I heard him dragging things around in the sacristy. I considered giving him a hand. I changed my mind, since I was thinking about some things. It was like the place made you want to do that. I remembered something important. The next day Kenny was getting to *recite* from Shakespeare. Turns out everybody had to do it. When Miss R. surprises herself with a new idea, she goes nuts. Anyway, since Kenny couldn't find a poem that he could "relate to," Miss R. had chosen one for him, Shakespeare's sonnet number CXII. She had written it on the chalkboard. Is that a hundred and twelve? I learned those Roman numerals in elementary school and haven't had much use for them since then. I had started to wonder in an obsessive way what the poem was about. But Shakespeare was in the Dumpster, and it was midnight already.

Finally old Johann came in dragging his pail, mop, and broom. I had started walking out, since I figured he had lost his marbles in the back and was trying to find them. I stopped to look around one last time. At that spooky hour, with the candles moving everything around on the walls and the ceiling, the nave looked like the inside of a ship. The names of everything came back to me from catechism class: sacristy, sanctuary, altar, holy of holies, and all that. Clara had walked me here every Saturday afternoon for one year when I was six years old to take first-communion lessons. Then, when I was twelve, I was "confirmed" in the church. That's when the bishop slaps your face (a little tap with his soft hand is all it is) to test

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your faith. Then you're a real Catholic, whatever that means. I stopped coming to mass with my parents when I started high school this year. I was having doubts of all kinds by then, not just about religion, but about everything. Including myself. Like why was I so different from Matoa, Garcia, Correa, and the other guys? I didn't like to hang with them anymore. I was bored by their stupid talk about gangs, girls, drinking, and stuff. And—this really worried me—I was actually enjoying some of my classes at school.

The old guy came toward me with the mop over one shoulder. He was bent at the spine from an old war injury, he later told me. But that night I thought he was daring me to see him as Jesus Christ. I looked down at his shadow and my hair stood on end. I sat down in the hard pew, letting my frozen hands and feet come back to life, and watched him mop the wooden floor so slowly it drove me crazy. I wanted to take that mop from his shaky old hands and just do it myself. But he seemed happy to be doing it. In a sort of trance. I was getting dizzy myself watching him move down the middle aisle, genuflect at the altar, pull himself up with the mop handle like it was one of those shepherd's staffs you see in Nativity scenes, then go up the sides of the church, moving his lips at every station of the cross, praying maybe. I considered the fact that I might be sitting in an empty church with a crazy man who might hit me over the head with his mop and leave me there to bleed to death in the very clean house of God.

But what happened was that when I sat back down, I started to relax in that church like I hadn't anywhere since I was a little kid. I breathed better. The way the air smelled like incense and candles cleared my head, and

Workshop 2 Readings, continued

~ Arturo's Flight ~

the old wood and leather all around made me feel kind of safe, like in a library. And the shape of the place gave me a weightless sensation; it was a cave with plenty of room to move around and breathe. Or maybe I was just spacing out.

After a while I fell into a sort of dream where I could make myself float up to the ceiling and say hello to God up there. His face changed as I stared at it. It looked like old Johann at first, then like my father, then like Miss Rathbone (that surprised me a lot), and even like Kenny Matoa. I shook myself out of it and tried to get back to earth.

I was dozing off when I heard the old guy sort of creak and crack into the pew next to me. Everything smelled good, like lemon or pine or something. It was really late, but I could tell old Johann had things on his mind. I waited awhile, trying to stay awake. I mean, by that time I was wiped out. I asked him why he worked these late hours, being old and all; he should be in bed. Besides, the streets of Paterson aren't safe even at noon! He said he liked being alone, and that's why he cleaned the church late at night.

I started to feel funny after a while because he just sat there with a patient, sort of saintly look on his face, waiting for me to say something, I guessed.

"Johann, when did you come to Paterson?" I said, trying to sound like Johnny Carson interviewing a guest. I mean, we had to get this over with, right?

He folded his hands on his lap and stared at the candles still burning in front of the cross where Jesus hung, then he started talking. In the empty, quiet church, his low voice with its thick accent sounded like it came from far away. I stared at the candles too, making them be a sort

~ An Island Like You ~

of movie screen where I tried to picture what Johann was saying. It was like he had been waiting for me to show up at St. Joe's so he could tell me this story.

He said that he had once lived on a farm in Germany with his wife and his son. Then Hitler took over. For several years they suffered many hardships (he used these words like he had looked them up in a dictionary). But the real problems had begun when troops had come through the village, forcing—conscripting he called it— young men to fight. His son had been made to go with them at gunpoint. When he and his wife had protested, Johann had been beaten with the butt of a gun. That—he smiled in a weird way when he said this—was the "war injury" that had left him minus a couple of ribs and permanently in pain. Though he and his wife survived the war, they had never heard how their son had died, only that he was dead. In the last days of the war, nobody had bothered to keep records. He and his wife had applied for visas in the early fifties and had finally been allowed to come to America during President Kennedy's time in the sixties. His wife's heart had failed during bypass surgery three years ago. He had been alone since then.

"Why Paterson?" I was really curious about how Johann had come to be in this city, of all places in the United States.

"The Church. The Catholic Church sometimes sponsors people. This parish of St. Joseph's used to be mainly Polish, Irish, and German immigrants. Now it has many Puerto Ricans too. I was given a job here."

"You live around here?" Suddenly I wanted to know everything about Johann. His story was sort of like the tragedies we read in class. No happy ending like the ones in grammar school. No good fairy godmothers bringing

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~ Arturo's Flight ~

the lost boy back to his parents. This was more like the ones where somebody pulls their eyes out of their heads because things are so bad they might as well get even worse so they can get better. Old Johann told me he had a room in a private house on Market Street. He also said that Father Capanella had already told him that the Church was making plans to retire him. That meant that he would be going to a Catholic retirement home away from Paterson.

"Do you want to do that?" I couldn't believe how he seemed to just accept the Church's "retiring him." Putting him out to pasture was more like it.

"It does not matter where I go, Arturo. I can always find peace in myself."

"You mean God? Religion?" I was listening very carefully to Johann, but I didn't intend to sit through a sermon. I had made my own decision about religion.

"No, my boy. Not religion in the way most people speak of it. I am religious. I go to mass, I say my prayers. But peace does not come from doing these things. For me, it meant finding my place in this world. My God is in my thoughts, and when I am alone and thinking, I am conversing with Him."

We sat there together for a while longer. Then I left him to watch his candles and went home. I was in no mood anymore to run away. Old Johann's story had made me feel like a crybaby for thinking my troubles were that bad. I don't ever want to be as alone as he is, with only his thoughts for company. That doesn't mean I won't get on that bus another time. But I had something to do first. It was almost three. I still had time to rescue Willy's poems from the jaws of the dump truck. I just had to know what Kenny Matoa was going to have to *recite* in front of our class that day.

~ An Island Like You ~

So I did what I had to do.

I climbed up on the green monster that smelled of the garbage of humanity, of vomit, rotting meat, the urine of bums who slept in the alley, of everything that people use and abuse and then throw out. I balanced my foot on one of the handles the truck hooks onto and I reached for the top. I pulled myself halfway into the pit of hell and nearly ralphed. Man, ten thousand outhouses could not compete with that stink. But I saw the book right away. It was on top of a ton of trash; nobody had thrown a dead cat on it, or last night's *arroz con pollo*. It took me a couple of minutes to fish it out, but I got it, right before I started to sort of pass out from the stench and all.

I may never tell anyone except old Johann, who can listen to a weird tale if he can tell one, what I felt like leaning on a Dumpster like a strung-out junkie or worse, holding a book of Shakespeare's sonnets to my chest. For God's sake, I must be "The Flea." I must be old Donne's bloodsucking Purple Flea to be climbing a Dumpster at three o'clock in the morning for a stupid book. I could have started bawling like a baby right then, except I remembered why I had gone through all that trouble. The book was a little on the tacky side, so I had to kind of peel the pages apart. Under the lamppost I finally got to CXII. I had to sound out the words, since William wrote in very weird English. "Your love and pity doth the impression fill . . ." I didn't get that, but with Shakespeare you gotta give it a little time before it starts making sense. "Which vulgar scandal stamp'd upon my brow; For what care I who calls me well or ill, So you o'er-green my bad, my good allow?" I decided to give him two more lines to get his message across, or back into the mouth of hell it would doth be tossed. I said the lines out loud; sometimes that helps. "You are my all-the-world, and I

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~ Arturo's Flight ~

must strive," I yelled in the direction of my window two floors up. I saw a light come on. "To know my shames and praises from your tongue . . ."

Right then I saw in my mind Kenny saying these lines and the whole class staring at him. *He* wouldn't have a clue what the poem meant, but I knew what the message was for me: whose opinion did I really care about anyway? And I'd get to hear Kenny recite a poem *for me*, even if he didn't know it. Mrs. R. had done it. Revenge, Shakespearian-style. Anon, anon, and all that.

Clara had come to the window and saw me down there orating Shakespeare by the Dumpster.

"Arturo, hijo. Is that you?" There is no better tragic hero than a Puerto Rican mother, I swear. She put so much pain into those few words. Ay, bendito! I was in a sorry state by then, and almost anything would have made me cry. That's what staying up all night listening to sad stories does to you.

"Do you know what time it is?" It was the witch Doña Monina sticking her scrawny neck out of her apartment window on four.

"*¿Sabes qué hora es?*" was what she really said.

I yelled back, "*Son las tres, son las tres.*" Because it rhymed with what she had said. Even when I'm not trying, I'm good at this, I can't help myself.

"Arturo, please come in. It's cold." Clara opened her arms out to me as if I could spread my *angelito* wings and fly up to her, for God's sake.

But she was right. I needed to go in. I had never been so cold in all my life. I heard the rumble of the dump truck going down another street, crunching up the garbage of humanity and swallowing it. Soon it would come down my street. Before going home to take the longest shower of my life, I wiped a greasy stain off the cover of my book

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and put it in the inside pocket of my leather jacket. I thought maybe old Johann might like to borrow it. But first I was going to read along with Kenny Matoesa, moving my lips silently right along when he *recited* CXII that day. "For what care I who calls me well or ill." Really. This was going to be good.

Workshop 2 Readings, continued

~ Matoa's Mirror ~

MATOA'S MIRROR

1.

Harry came personally to Kenny Matoa's apartment to invite him to that night's bash at his place. Kenny's mother was furious at her son for even letting Harry into her house. *Basura*, she called his friend, "trash." Kenny left Harry waiting in the living room, with his little sisters pestering him, while he changed into his party clothes: blue jeans, Tiburones T-shirt, and black leather jacket. His mother followed him into his room.

"Kenny." She spoke his name in a tone he knew meant a sermon was coming, so he stepped inside his tiny closet and dressed in the dark while her voice droned on.

"This Harry is trouble. Trouble, hijo, of the serious kind. Do you want to end up in jail, or maybe dead?"

She went on and on about Harry. Horror stories she had heard in the barrio, featuring drug dealers and drive-by shootings. In her version Harry played the part of the devil, tempting innocent barrio girls and boys with free drugs and easy living until they were "hooked." Then they paid the price.

Kenny groaned loudly in the closet, hoping she'd get the message and leave him alone. He came out with his hair sticking out in all directions from having to maneuver among clothes and shoes. She was still talking nonstop as he sat next to her on the bed to put on his combat boots. He shook his head in disbelief. His mother lived in another world. She went to her job as a housekeeper for a businesswoman out in the suburbs, saw how the other half lived, and then came home at night to tell him and his sisters that if only they shared meals as a family, watched educational shows on public TV, and got regular checkups at the dentist, they too could be a *normal* American family. *Right*. Actually she just fantasized about it, since she herself had gotten regular doses of reality in the barrio, like getting rolled for her watch at the bus stop in daylight just last month, and other incidents she blamed on good barrio kids being corrupted by bad influences, *like Harry*, from the outside. She had an attitude about Harry, who's twenty-five and throws parties at his place once a week, by invitation only. She was under the impression that he wanted to lure her son into his criminal world, then make him his slave. Too many bad movies on the Spanish channel, Kenny figured.

She was pleading with him now. "*Por favor*, hijo. Kenny, think about what you're getting into," she said, trying to put her arms around him. Since she's five inches shorter than he, all he had to do was stand up to avoid her grasp. He jumped off the bed without looking at her. She got on his nerves with her continuing melodrama about the dangerous streets. And he didn't want to hear her suspicions about Harry anymore.

"Mami, I'm just going to a party. Give me a break, willya?" Kenny said, turning his back on her to comb his hair at the cracked mirror. He moved his head until he

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Workshop 2 Readings, continued

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found an angle from which it wasn't split by the crooked line that ran across the mirror like a winding road on a map. It had been his father's shaving stand, an old-fashioned piece of furniture with a hanging mirror his father had brought home one day because he couldn't get a turn in the bathroom when he needed to. The crush of three kids and a wife in a two-bedroom, one-bath apartment had finally been too much for him. Add to that the constant nagging about a "better life" and a man can go a little crazy, Kenny thought. One day he just didn't come home from "the office," as he called the kitchen at the Caribbean Moon, where he cooked greasy snacks for the customers.

"Drunks get hungry after midnight," Kenny had heard him say. "They like to eat late at night so they can have something to throw up in the morning."

Kenny finished slicking his thick hair into a black slash dividing the razor-shaved sides of his skull like an exclamation point. Then he placed his comb in the porcelain bowl on top of his father's old rusting razor and blades that were stuck to the bottom. His old man hadn't taken anything when he left—probably couldn't stand the thought of seeing his wife looking like the widow at a funeral, like she did right now. Kenny glanced at her in the mirror. She was crying quietly. Sitting on his bed, a chubby woman with a pretty face and thick curly hair like his own. Her hands, folded on her lap like she was praying, were red and peeling from the chemicals she had to use to clean the rich woman's house. Even rubber gloves couldn't protect her skin from the hard work of killing other people's germs. That's not what he wanted for himself, Kenny had decided long ago. He didn't want to come home at three in the morning, smelling of old cooking grease and stale garlic, and he didn't want to

~ Matoa's Mirror ~

spend his day polishing somebody else's silver and gold. He pretended to take a last look at himself in the mirror as he watched her slip off his bed. He saw her looking tragic, like he was breaking her heart or something. Their eyes met for a second, and he could tell she was scared. It made him angry that she wanted to keep him at home like she did his sisters, like he couldn't take care of himself out in the world or defend himself against "bad influences." He ignored her until she padded slowly out of his room. In her terry-cloth slippers and baggy house-dress, she looked like a woman who'd given up on almost everything, including her looks. Kenny sometimes thought that she could've done something to keep her man home. Fixed herself up a little maybe, or tried to be more cheerful. But that was old news.

"Matoa! I ain't got all night. You comin'?" Harry called out from the living room over his sisters' giggles. He could tell Harry had worked his charm on them.

2.

Harry's place is a mess after the party. Paper cups like party hats on everything. The TV, still on the music channel, is blaring out one rap song, the disc player, another. Matoa laughs as the words get all tangled up in his head. The coffee table is laid out like a buffet of party trash; Harry himself has passed out on the sofa. Matoa feels disconnected from the scene like he has just finished watching a good action movie and the lights have come on in the theater. Time to leave. He takes a last look at the place—what you'd call a well-stocked situation, he thinks. A real apartment, in an apartment building, not a decrepit tenement like El Building. Harry has the latest in electronic equipment, and the furniture is all glossy

Workshop 2 Readings, continued

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black and white leather. He had shown Matoi his closet too. It's almost as big as Matoi's bedroom and crammed with the kind of clothes Matoi's only seen in magazine ads. He'd whistled in amazement when Harry pulled out a pair of Italian shoes he said cost him two hundred bucks.

It'd been a small party, only ten or fifteen people, all older than Matoi. He'd felt out of place at first, especially with the women, who looked like high-fashion models in their tight dresses and high heels. But they'd all been real friendly, and after a few drinks and some of Harry's samples, it'd changed. Matoi began to feel at home. The women no longer seemed so tall and intimidating, and the men treated him like his brothers in the Tiburones did.

Matoi steps out into the hallway. There's a winding flight of stairs in front of him—for a minute it looks like a giant slide, but it's just that the dark carpet makes the steps seem to disappear in the dim light. He puts one hand on the banister on the way down, still feeling pretty good.

Matoi walks home to El Building on instinct. He doesn't know what's finally kicked in, but he's begun to feel that he's in the middle of a whirling cloud of colors and lights: headlights leave a trail as they speed by, and streetlights connect one to the other in gold tracks. Matoi leans against a wall, trying to steady himself. The building sways. He covers his head, thinking the building will fall on him. He laughs, and the sound of his laughter rolls down the sidewalk, bouncing like a can pushed by the wind. It's like someone's turned up the volume in his head to the max.

As he waits for his brain to tell him where his feet are, Matoi glues his eyes to the front door of El Building, but

~ Matoi's Mirror ~

it keeps slipping away. He's standing still and everything else is going around and around.

It's late. The only thing on the streets is the trash to be collected in a few hours. It looks like a landscape of mountains and valleys to Matoi—all the bags and boxes and beat-up, rusted cans. The one he is now leaning on smells pretty ripe. He concentrates on getting to the door. But when he focuses on a pile of trash bags closer to where he wants to go, Matoi sees what looks like a mirror. By squinting hard, he can see that it's fancy, framed in white wood. He takes a few steps toward it but retreats to the wall when he sees something in motion reflected in it.

Matoi feels like he is being dragged underwater by a strong undertow. He's having to fight the heaviness of his body to move, but he has enough sense to know that if something or someone is around at this hour, he'd better lie low. He's in no shape to mess around. He decides to take a little break. He sinks to the ground and props his back on the wall. He tries to focus on the white mirror, but he's dizzy. He closes his eyes for a minute. When he opens them, he sees that the face of the mirror has become a sort of TV screen. He rubs his eyes, thinking he's either dreaming or tripping. Either way he's still feeling all right. He decides to take in the show.

He thinks he sees human figures moving in the mirror. It seems to be the reflection of something taking place in the alley. He squints, trying to get a clearer picture, wishing he could concentrate now. As it is, it's like watching the late movie and waking up at different times, so things sort of make sense and sort of don't. Anyway, it looks like a little guy is getting rolled, but good. The one doing it has him down on the ground and is finishing up the job with his feet. Matoi feels a wave of nausea pass over

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him, but he doesn't move. There is a kind of thrill in watching the action from the sidelines. He's trying to stay awake for it. But his eyes keep rolling back in his head and he has to force them to focus on the mirror. Funny thing, though, there's no sound. You'd expect some cursing, or at least a little grunting from the one on the ground. But, Matoa thinks, it could be that he's just too screwed up to hear it. He pushes the MUTE button on his imaginary remote control and laughs aloud. Startled at the sound of his own laughter, he scrunches back up against the wall, into the shadows. He doesn't want them to hear him. This is one time he'd rather just watch.

The little guy raises an arm as if begging for mercy. He's wearing a black leather jacket; Matoa can see it's just like his own, down to the patch of the Puerto Rican flag that he's sewn on his. This is getting too weird, Matoa thinks. "Hey, get up!" He thinks he's said this out loud, but he might have just thought it. He tries to get a look at the guy's face but can't make out the blood-smeared features. Then the little guy falls down and lies real still. The other one kicks him a couple of more times, crushing his face with his combat boot. "Hey!" Matoa yells out before he can stop himself. Although he doesn't hear any sounds, he can almost feel the bones crunching under the boot, which is army issue, the kind you can buy at the surplus store, just like he and his friends wear. You can do a lot of damage with a steel-toed boot like that. He tries to get up to do something to help the little guy. He can't just let him get murdered. And besides, this may be a home boy. There's something definitely familiar about him, about both of them. But suddenly everything goes black for Matoa.

He must've passed out, because when he opens his eyes it's almost light. He sees Tito, the building's super,

~ Matoa's Mirror ~

moving around in the basement. The lights are on; Tito is probably checking out the boilers. Matoa doesn't want his mother to find him sprawled out like a bum on the sidewalk when she leaves for work. She'll make a scene right there on the street. So he pulls himself up by sliding his back up the wall. Then he spots the mirror leaning on a trash can. What he had seen in the alley comes back to him in a rush. A dream, he decides. Matoa scans himself in the mirror—top to bottom. Wow, hombre, he says to himself. Man, does he look rough! His jacket is stained with something oily. He hopes it's not grease. He comes closer to the mirror and inspects himself, noticing his scraped knuckles—had he fallen down on the concrete? He had obviously wiped them on his jacket. His boots are leaving a trail of dark tracks on the sidewalk. Matoa flicks a piece of wilted lettuce from his shoulder. He looks around in the alley, but there's no trace of any action. Then the dizziness hits him again. His head feels like it's been run over by a Mack truck.

Matoa decides to sneak into his apartment and try to sleep it off before his mother and sisters get up. He's taking the mirror with him, though. It's a find—if he doesn't get it, someone else will. Matoa tries lifting the mirror, but it's heavy, heavier than he'd expected. So, looking around to make sure nobody's watching him, he hauls it up on his back and starts dragging the load, which bends him double. He catches a glimpse of himself in it over his shoulder—not a pretty sight.

Good thing he has only one flight of stairs to climb. The mirror weighs as much as he does. Shaky and out of breath, Matoa struggles with the lock, hoping he won't wake his mother and have to explain about last night. It's gotten to the point where Matoa can't come in the house without getting interrogated, so now he just tries

Workshop 2 Readings, continued

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to avoid talking to her and his silly sisters, who're always pointing at him and giggling. He can't wait until he has a place of his own and doesn't have to explain anything to anyone.

3.

Matoa balances the mirror on the floor in his room, flopping down on his bed with all his stinking clothes on, too wiped out to care how he looks or smells. His heart is pounding in his chest like a fist. He squeezes his head with his palms, trying to drown out the crashing waves of his blood. Too much fun, he says to himself. Finally he falls into a fitful sleep that lasts minutes or hours—he doesn't know for sure—until he sits up in bed and sees that the sun is bursting through his window. "Man, this night already lasted two or three days," he says aloud, just to make sure he's really awake. He struggles to sit up, feeling an urgent need to throw up. "Ay, ay," he cries out involuntarily from the pain in his head and in his churning stomach. He's learned his lesson: next time he won't experiment so much. Mixing gives you bad dreams and a rocking hangover. He moans involuntarily and curses himself. The last thing he wants is to talk to anyone right now. But it's too late. He hears voices and footsteps heading toward his room. "Whaddaya think's wrong with him?" he hears one of his sisters say out in the hall. "Whaddaya *think*?" another answers sarcastically. "Glub, glub, pop, pop," she adds. Laughter. Matoa hears his mother's concerned voice admonishing them. He wants to get up and lock the door, but can't seem to feel his legs under him.

Matoa tries to push himself off the bed but falls back, unable to gain his balance. Then he happens to glance

~ Matoa's Mirror ~

into the mirror facing his bed. His head reels as he watches it dissolve into colors, then resolve into a familiar scene. "No, no!" he howls, as the bloody spectacle from last night starts to play itself out again. He can't take it right now. But his eyes involuntarily follow as the two guys tear into each other. It's all happening just as it did before, except this time he sees them clearly. He knows who it is in the mirror. The two faces are the same. Sucked into the scene by some invisible whirlpool he's too weak to fight, he hears himself scream.

When his mother and sisters burst into his room, Matoa is flat against the wall, on the far side of his bed, his eyes bugging out of his head. He yells at them, "Look! Look!" But when they turn their eyes to where he is wildly pointing, all they see is their Kenny reflected in a mirror they've never seen before. But he's somehow transformed; instead of the tough guy they know, he looks more like someone who's out of his head, or maybe seen a ghost. One of them says they have to call 911. His mother leans over him, calling out his name, reaching for his face. But Kenny Matoa crawls away from her roughened fingers, turns away from her sad, frightened eyes. "Leave me alone!" he yells at her. "Get out!"

He shuts his eyes tight against the intense light ricocheting off the white mirror like a laser beam aimed straight at him. It feels like it's burning a hole through his skull—and his mother's voice keeps calling him back, worming its way into his head, tracking him down to the dark corner where he hides.

Workshop 2 Readings, continued

OPEN MIKE

Attendance

BY TYRONE BITTINGS

*We are all here,
Leslie and Bad Boy, Lupe and Raul,
Here, here and here.
Dear Mr. Ward
with his wards and wardettes.
Let's have a show of hands today.
Is Porscha here? Is Diondra here?
Where oh where is Sheila?
It's me, Tyrone,
up here all alone
rapping into a microphone
'cause I've got something to say:
MTV is here, Mir and
morning space-walks are here,
terrorism is here
lurking at the bus stop.
Can't hop on the subway
without thinkin' of Tokyo—
we all know poison gas
does not discriminate.*

*It's too late to worry
about my innocence
since fear is here.
Why is it a weekend visit
to your local Mickey D's
may be deadly?
Why hasn't somebody
censored death?
Don't hold your breath waiting.
Still you can chill and celebrate
all that's great about life, like music
and the tick-tick-tick of time
which is equal parts yours and mine
to make of the world what we will.
But first, say no to coke, and smoke.
Say no to police brutality
and causing fatality.
Say no to race hate.
Don't underestimate
the power of love.
But most of all
take two poems
and call me
in the morning.*

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Workshop 2 Readings, continued

OPEN MIKE

Black Box

BY DEVON HOPE

*In case I forgot to tell you,
I'm allergic to boxes:
Black boxes, shoe boxes
New boxes, You boxes—
Even cereal boxes
Boasting champions.
(It's all a lie.
I've peeked inside
And what I found
Were flakes.)
Make no mistake,
I make no exceptions
For Cracker Jack
Or Christmas glitter.
Haven't you noticed?
I'm made of skeleton,
Muscle and skin.
My body is the only box
I belong in.
But you like your boxes
So keep them.*

*Mark them geek, wimp, bully.
Mark them china doll, brainiac,
Or plain dumb jock.
Choose whatever
Box you like, Mike.
Just don't put me
In one, son.
Believe me,
I won't fit.*

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Workshop 2 Readings, continued

OPEN MIKE

The Door

BY JANELLE BATTLE

*I've been busy lately
carving a door of words
without a lock in sight.
Your ear is the key
that lets you into me.*

*(I am a secret
I want to share.
I swing my door open
and say a prayer.)*

*Look around.
Take the tour.
Fear hangs on the wall
and shame, sometimes.
Emotional dislocation too.
But I am brave
in my admission.
Are you?*

*When no one is looking
I check to see
if anyone else seems
as scared as me,
or lonely, or shy,
or insecure.
Is it just me?
I'm not so sure.*

*Is your heart
like an onion too?
Show me yours,
I'll show you mine
we used to say.
Your turn.
Peel away.*

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Workshop 2 Readings, continued

OPEN MIKE
Mirror, Mirror

BY JANELLE BATTLE

*Sisters under the skin,
we meet in the mirror,
our images superimposed
for one split second.
Ready or not,
I peer into your soul
and dive deep,
splash-landing
in a pool of pain
as salty and familiar
as the tears on my cheek.
Your eyes don't like
what I see.
You don't want to be me.
So you curse
and smash the mirror,
which gets you what?
A bit of blood,
a handful of glass splinters,
another source of pain.*

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