



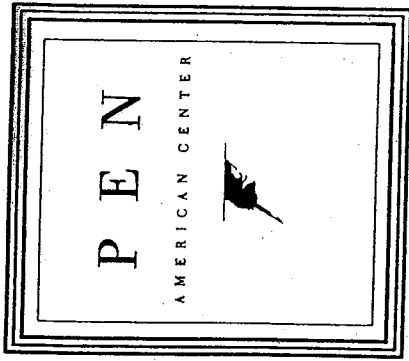
## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO ENCOURAGE CONVICTS TO WRITE?

I never thought of myself as a writer. I wrote primarily to release volatile energy built up by years of confinement. In order for me to adequately express what the PEN Writing Program means to people like me, it's first necessary to give a brief summary of my past. My life was one of perpetual conflict. . . . I held an apocalyptic view. . . . I have spent most of my existence on this earth inside one prison or another, so my mindset toward the world was one of complete antipathy and alienation.

I have been on Death Row for the past thirteen years. During that time I've undergone a profound transformation, in which my writing played a significant role. I was reluctant to submit my story to [the PEN contest]. I at no point thought I had a chance of winning. When I won the award, it gave me an overwhelming sense of acceptance. I now felt that I had something of value to offer humanity.

[Winning the award from] the PEN Writing Program was the most important milestone of my life. It gave me the confidence I need in my writing, without which my stories, poems, and essays would have unceremoniously met their end in the trashcan. There are many potential writers in prisons all across America, and without programs like [PEN's] these writers will never get the opportunity to cultivate their potential or develop confidence in their talent. It is vital that these programs remain alive, because without them voices like mine are sentenced to a silent execution.

Anthony Ross  
Death Row, San Quentin  
First Prize, Fiction, 1995



The PEN Prison Writing Committee  
presents the

# 1998 PEN WRITING AWARDS FOR PRISONERS

Twenty-Fifth Annual Ceremony



Keynote address by  
**Sister Helen Prejean**  
author of *Dead Man Walking*



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 11, 1998, 6:30 P.M.  
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NEW YORK CITY

## A MAN WHO LOVES HIS MOTHER LOVES WOMEN

Benjamin La Guer  
First Prize, Memoir, 1997

**F**or as long as I can remember, my mother has been recounting her childhood. My brothers and I know her story well. She told it each time with an emphasis on one new detail.

As I grew older, the scatter of details slowly began taking shape. I did not understand her, either as a mother or as a woman, until I was mature enough to listen in that way our ears become finer instruments with age.

When she was a few days old, her mother traded her for some spirits. The exact number of bottles is one of those details she has amended since I first began hearing her.

In her story, she worked in the fields and in her adoptive parents' house from dawn to sunset. And while her sisters and brothers were walking off to school in one direction, she'd be on her second trip in the opposite direction, in order to fetch the day's water. The stream is such a place that, in her story, there are more details. On rainless days, she says, she made as many as ten trips there. Those, she says, were days of no electricity. People traded not in money but in goats, chickens, cows, and bags of beans.

When she tells these stories, often I have detected a kind of anger mixed with pain and bitterness. It is a feeling that arises when one feels wronged. But she tells each anecdote with the strength of history, pausing at moments to fill in the gaps with those scents and sounds and sights that jiggle our dreams as well as our nightmares.

**T**he Puerto Rican countryside, deep in those hills far away from pavement in the early 1940s, was wrapped in superstition. The devil was real, as was the son of God. And the devil snatched up unchaste girls, according to legend, to burn in the lake of fire for all eternity. My mother tells the story of a couple who every night had a fight. And her stepfather kept warning that the devil would visit. Then, one night, a white horse in a shroud of chains lay their hovel to waste.

Her stepmother once accused her of carrying on an affair with her husband, my mother tells me in a recent telephone conversation. She says it was untrue. But by her calm, revelatory tone of voice, I suspect there was more than she was divulging. I am not sure why I think she is not telling, or remembering, the whole story. Later she tells me she was actually suspected of being pregnant with her stepfather's child. She was twelve.

It was early one morning; my mother remembers it all in astonishing detail. The old woman, her stepmother's mother, arrived. All three stood in the middle of the kitchen, near the stove, where the sun was raking the dirt floor. *La vieja* ordered my mother to pull up her ragged, patch baste shirt, and then for her to take off her panties. In short, she was pregnant. Both women chanted and howled for the Virgin Mary. *La vieja* then collapsed on a wooden stool. And for awhile, all was quiet.

Later that morning, Mami recollects, the old woman boiled a witches' brew of herbs and wild mushrooms for her to have an abortion. She hallucinated for days. And nearly killed herself, running barefoot like a madwoman across the peaks and valleys of Cruz Mountain.

These new snippets of detail finally resolve for me a puzzling account of hers. Many years ago, when I was no bigger than a minute, Mami told me a tale. And I have grown into manhood disbelieving her. In fact I always wondered how she could have told me such a bizarre tale. In her story, she was standing on the peak of Cruz Mountain. And there, under a rain of stars, she saw a horse turn into a bear, which then turned into other animals. Unable to move, she insisted, she sat under the stars until sunrise.

**S**ometime around 1946, her adoptive parents migrated to New York City. The narrative of her story now straightens. In no time, her stepfather found work for her, placing her with a white middle-class couple in the Bronx as a housemaid who day-cared their child. She was happiest in the huge apartment, in those rooms larger than most country houses in Puerto Rico. The kitchen with gas stove. The toilet and bathtub. The closet full of colorful gowns. Not once, though, did she see a single rusty nickel of her wages. Her stepfather demanded that she bring him her wage envelope intact, sealed, just as it had been handed to her. But never mind that, she says, she was happiest then. She was well treated at her job. She was even given a set of beautiful dresses and nylons.

My mother has always been silent on the question of her first husband, with whom she bore her first son, Danny. For some reason, she has chosen not to utter his name, referring to him only as Danny's father. It must be, still, a secret she carries that weighs on her spirit. She does, from time to time, bring up her disastrous second husband. If my brother Frank resembles anything close to his father, I can imagine my mother madly in love with this man. His first name was Sinatra; Sinatra Rodriguez. And he had the DNA of an immortal, a man who made Desi Arnaz stand in shadow. But he was a drunkard.

Sinatra battered and humiliated her on street corners and in the studio apartment they shared. Those were the days when men battered

and not a single soul raised a voice in protest. My mother probably withstood longer in the marriage than she should have, but no one can sit in judgment on affairs of the heart.

After divorcing her Latin lover, she worked in a sweatshop in the Bronx, first stitching gloves for fancy Fifth Avenue stores, then stitching dresses for Barbie and Ken dolls. With overtime pay, she was able to support herself along with Danny and Frank comfortably. And weekend outings with her boys were a regular. She packed sandwiches, and spent the whole of Sunday either at the Bronx Zoo or the Museum of Natural History in Manhattan.

She told me of the day she met Dad. It was a Saturday, while both attended services at the Seventh Day Adventist Church on Prospect Avenue. Dad was not very suave, having learned the artistry of courtship from his peasant father, whose idea of wooing a woman was to bring her a bag of groceries.

*Senora, le llevo una comprita esta noche?*

For mother, at least, the marriage was a social contract. Before she agreed to marry him, she made him pledge that she no longer had to work, that he would support the family. As for his part, during the summer Dad did highway construction for a company in Yonkers, and in winter served four-month stints in the Merchant Marine.

In public my mother carried a Christian Bible by day, but in her solitude, when night fell, she lit candles for African voodoo deities. She wore no makeup. And yet her skin retains its golden, olive tone. She sews her own garments on her ancient Singer machine. What she is not is gifted in the culinary arts. Her repertoire of dishes is limited, and she never hesitated in reheating rice and beans for breakfast.

But no other woman has what she has. And I say this in truth, in that way no one claims a mother greater than his or her own. She kept all our secrets, all the while making us saints.

When Frank had his genius-child-prodigy nervous breakdown and disappeared into the psychiatric ward at Bellevue, she told a neighbor he was on a religious retreat. When Danny became addicted to heroin, she claimed his constant vomiting was an allergic reaction. One time she told a neighbor, in a self-deprecating way, that her cooking was making Danny sick.

The only time I remember her breaking silence was when my father contracted a venereal disease. She summoned the pastor of our church. It was a weekday. Dad was working. I had just come in from school. And she was showing her evidence against him, yellowish stains around the groin area of a pair of pants. After closer examination under the bedroom nightstand lamp, Dad was found guilty. They prayed aloud.

Later that night the pastor returned. The image I remember is one of the pastor, stern-faced, pointing his finger in Dad's face. And if that were not enough, he soon underwent circumcision surgery, and in nearly no time got himself almost fatally assaulted, in a holdup one morning en route to work. He lost the sight in his left eye and became overweight and diabetic; his *cuerpo* went south from then on.

Members of the church were always in our house, visiting during weekdays and on weekends. They came alone, in couples and groups, to pray and read the Bible. A few wore garments stitched together from fifty-pound potato sacks. The itchy, skin-irritating material supposedly signified a willingness to endure a Christ-on-the-cross-like suffering. I played games with their sons and daughters. But I often wondered if any of these people, familiar and at once strangers, had jobs. Dad did. And that is why, I then supposed, he was never around.

About this same time, I remember opening the door for a giant of a man. He looked as if he had just stepped out of the television—the four-thirty movie—impeccably dressed in a three-piece suit, complete with a gold watch and the shiniest wingtip shoes I had ever seen. He wrapped his whole hand around my fist, in a handshake of man to boy. I can still hear him speaking in that clear, projecting voice.

Don Carlos, to give him a name—because I do not actually remember his real name—made his visits more regular. He came during the week, usually at the noon hour.

He had been in the house for some hours when my mother and he left the kitchen. She had her Bible in hand. And he his. They went into the bedroom, where they always chanted in prayer and sang their hymns. At times there were five or six, surrounding the bed on their knees. With eyes closed and hands raised above their shoulders, some prayed in plain language while others spoke in tongues. It was said that only the person speaking in tongues could decipher whatever secret message God was delivering.

I remember standing between the curtains of the bedroom door. There are picture frames on the wall. Her shoes are aligned. The bed is neatly dressed, with its pillows folded under her flowery bedspread. An open Bible rests in front of her on a piece of white knitted cloth. In the mirror, right-angled opposite the bedboard, Don Carlos is on his knees behind my mother. His pants are falling, unzipped wide below his thighs. Her garment is rolled up almost to her neck. He presses against her, and she against him. Sweat drips down her forehead.

I never saw Don Carlos again.

**D**ad's health gradually deteriorated after his near fatal holdup. He retired, and after his application for social security benefits was approved, we moved to Puerto Rico. In the town of Patillas, which can be found on the map by drawing a straight line down from San Juan, my mother and I—along with two younger brothers—lived for some months in the house of her childhood stories. Her adoptive mother was still alive. Trees of breadfruit and mango and aguacate surrounded the cement-and-tin roof house in one huge shadow. My mother's stories, in every detail, sprang to life.

One morning, I watched her in the distance. Alone, she was kneeling, her back against the mango tree. As I approached, she lifted her face and tears dripped from her eyes. Not saying a word, she extended her arms for me to come closer and hugged me tight as we both sat on the grass.

"*Yo sufrí mucho en este lugar,*" she said. "I suffered plenty in this place."

After a few weeks in the Puerto Rican countryside, I felt different. I could hear and feel myself, unlike in New York City, where the scale of modernity is one great black cloud over the human spirit. *El campo*, the countryside, had magic in the air and in between the trees, as in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novels, where even grass has sensuousness. The leaves are like notes of music for the night winds.

**T**en times Mami made plans to meet her real mother, the one who had traded her for a few bottles of liquor, and that many times, in a week, she changed her mind. Her mother lived in El Pueblo Del Cerro, a remote mountainous region. When we eventually made the trip, she was nervous. I had heard her during the night.

I have this image of us walking along the town's avenue of stores. Shoe and jewelry stores. An ice cream parlor, the theater and pharmacy. A man was selling lotto tickets on the street in front of the *cuchifrito*.

She entered one of the stores while I stayed on the sidewalk, eating a cone of ice and fruit syrup. She exited with a bag of gifts, a box of chocolates and a bottle of rum. We passed *la marqueta*, street stands trading in all sorts of exotic fruits, vegetables and herbs. Chickens, goats, and piglets in rope nooses everywhere.

At the edge of town, where the tarmac vanished into the forest leaving the avenue of stores behind, a crowded station wagon taxi awaited. It was a hot day. And humid.

The old road from Guayama to Cayey is coiled, one steep curve after the next, and every turn more precipitous than the last. On the right, one can see the valley below becoming smaller, more miniature with

every curve. With altitude, one notices, the air cools, and the purity of the foliage has no sister equal in scent. There were kids alongside the road waving signs, in English, twelve mangoes for a dollar.

My mother's sisters are named Titi and Tita, which I did not know until the moment she screamed their names from the side of the road. Suddenly, out of the forest came voices, all echoing each other: "*Maria ilegal!*" "*Maria has arrived!*" Next there was an orgy of hugging, kissing, hands clapping and bodies defying gravity. All mirrors of one another. I was kissed and squeezed until I felt dizzy.

Of the three houses, Tita's was the largest. It stood first, slightly elevated, on a deck off the road. A slantwise clay trail led up to it. Mami takes off her pumps to make the climb. The walls and floor are naked, bare as sheets of plywood in a lumber mill. There is no electricity, nor running water. Behind the house, the toilet is a shanty tin hut with a terrrain well. When one squats, every phobia springs to life.

Titi's house is much smaller, no differently built. She has two daughters and a son in their teens. A newborn, weeks old, is crying. Her husband, Fernando, is a master builder of eight-string guitars. The kitchen is outside, under a sheet of tin held with four wooden pickets.

I played with the girls and hunted for pigeons with my cousin until darkness fell.

Mami was happiest that day, amongst these people who lived and ate on what the mountain gave. Their blood ran through her; their tales ran in her memory. Cured, it seemed, was her malice of a different epoch. She picked breadfruit, machete-pierced the soil in search of white yam vines, fetched water and helped to slaughter a goat. It did not seem to matter, either, that she had been gone for nearly three decades. She and her sisters picked up their conversation right where they had left it, decades in waiting to complete, just as unsentimental as their lives.

In the end, when all is summed, what we have left of our mother is her story. Her tales play a more significant role in our lives than her chromosomes.

But perhaps my earliest memory of Mami is of us sitting at a counter in a diner near Lincoln Hospital in the South Bronx. She had no money for anything fancy. She ordered a hamburger, along with a glass of water. Then, searching her pocketbook again, she found a few more coins and ordered additional bread. She made me eat the hamburger. She had two slices of bread. The glass of water we shared.