

On the Verge Writing Contest 2021, First-Place Poetry Winner
By Valentina Ibarra García

Ode to Angélica

1999

it is early in the morning when the doctor exclaims 'she has pink shoes!' to my mother. my parents are overjoyed at my arrival. my mother's hair falls pretty at her shoulders, she pushes her bangs away from her eyes and whispers valentina - *valiant*, her voice is so soft she can paint skies with it. before i even take the world in, i am given the gift of bravery.

2001

before i learn to walk, i roll. rather than crawling, i roll from one side to another as if the living room is the countryside i am eager to explore. it is from this moment that my parents know there is no stopping me when i set my mind to something.

2006

this is the year when my family moves to the united states. maybe i am too young to know nervousness, or maybe bravery is already steeped deep within me, either way i face the first day of second grade with enthusiasm. nothing takes it away, not even the two boys making fun of me for not knowing the english word for 'nostrils'.

2007

it is my eight birthday. rain has closed down the philadelphia zoo and we find ourselves heading to the museum of natural history instead. this is the first time i learn that even in the greyest days, one can find warmth and colour.

2010

when we move back to mexico, it is difficult for me to recognise it as i once did. spanish rolls off my lips like a difficult tongue twister. my old friends play different games now and have different friends too. i think a part of me has stayed behind in the woods of pennsylvania. i yearn to find her. this is the year where my longing to explore the great world out there begins.

2013

secondary school brings with it hope for a fresh start. it isn't long before it also brings new challenges, as life does, and i find myself spending most of my time at the hospital room where my mom is. although the chemo makes her tired, not a saturday goes by when we miss the harry potter marathon playing on the tv.

2014

it is my mother's birthday. the garden reeks of joy, the sounds of laughter and clumsy feet dancing come together to form the soundtrack to a grand party. today the sun has come up just for us. it tricks us into thinking the previous grim days have just been a dream, and we have finally woken up.

2014

six months have passed and the same people find themselves in a dimly lit room, though the guest of honour's laugh is nowhere to be heard. the room is coloured in a way that puts the Black Sea to shame; there is a silence in the air that would make one think it is being submerged in it. the only sound breaking through it is of tears being wiped away on cloth.

2015

before i tell you about being resilient i must tell you about the times i was not. about the pain and grief that moved into my chest during my freshman year of high school. unpacked their many bags and refused to leave for years. about the young girl desperate to uncover the magician's secret so she could make herself disappear. so she could go someplace else; to another universe where your bones cannot have cancer.

2017

i have a friend with honey-coloured eyes who writes about me and my happiness as if it is something beautiful. as if i hold magic in my laughter just like my mom did. he believes in me and maybe that's all i need until i can believe in myself as well. this is the year where i lay in my father's arms and realize maybe love is not out to destroy but to keep me safe. after years of pushing it away, for a fleeting moment i think to myself, *how brave i am to let it in*.

2018

december arrives bringing a layer of cold with it. but for the first time in years i look in the mirror and realize my eyes hold spring inside them again. i am no longer the ivory morning mist. though it is december, i could swear april has taken over the room. it is the first winter where i have hope for spring. it is the first winter where my throat does not burn when saying my mother's name, but rather welcomes it like sweet tea. and just like that i feel the flowers in my heart begin to bloom again.

2019

this is the summer where her absence no longer makes my chest feel heavy. it is the summer where i feel her everywhere around me; in the way my brother laughs and the full moon shows her reflection by the river. for the first time in ages i feel my heart lifted by the sun, my name called by the winds as a reminder that i am allowed to feel afraid, but there is bravery in getting up, in continuing. this is the summer where i forgive myself for taking so long to get here. and i realize that i used to want to get better for her and now i want to do it for myself too.

2020

this is the year where i follow my spirit as it answers to the mountains' call, arriving to a new country that accepts me as i am. this is the year where i find home in the waves of the ocean and the thick forests of canada. this is when i fully begin to love myself and trust my path. this is when i can finally love in a way that does not hurt. it is now more clear to me than ever that no matter the adversity, nothing can take away my life's purpose; my bravery takes me on.

2021

another february arrives knocking at my door. i almost forget my mother's birthday, but i am reminded of its fast approach by the hummingbirds that float out in the garden. seven years have passed since her last birthday here, but the air feels just as light now. for so long loss and grief made my heart heavy. for so long i felt as if i would never see the sun again. but now, as the eleventh day of february approaches. i am reminded of my mother's words: of course there is pain, but if you complain it hurts more, if you laugh it hurts, but it goes away more quickly.