

Jonathan Sichka

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English 101

Professor Hall



José Olivarez

## “Maybe I Could Save Myself By Writing”

As a Latinx teen in Chicago, he belonged nowhere—until he found his voice

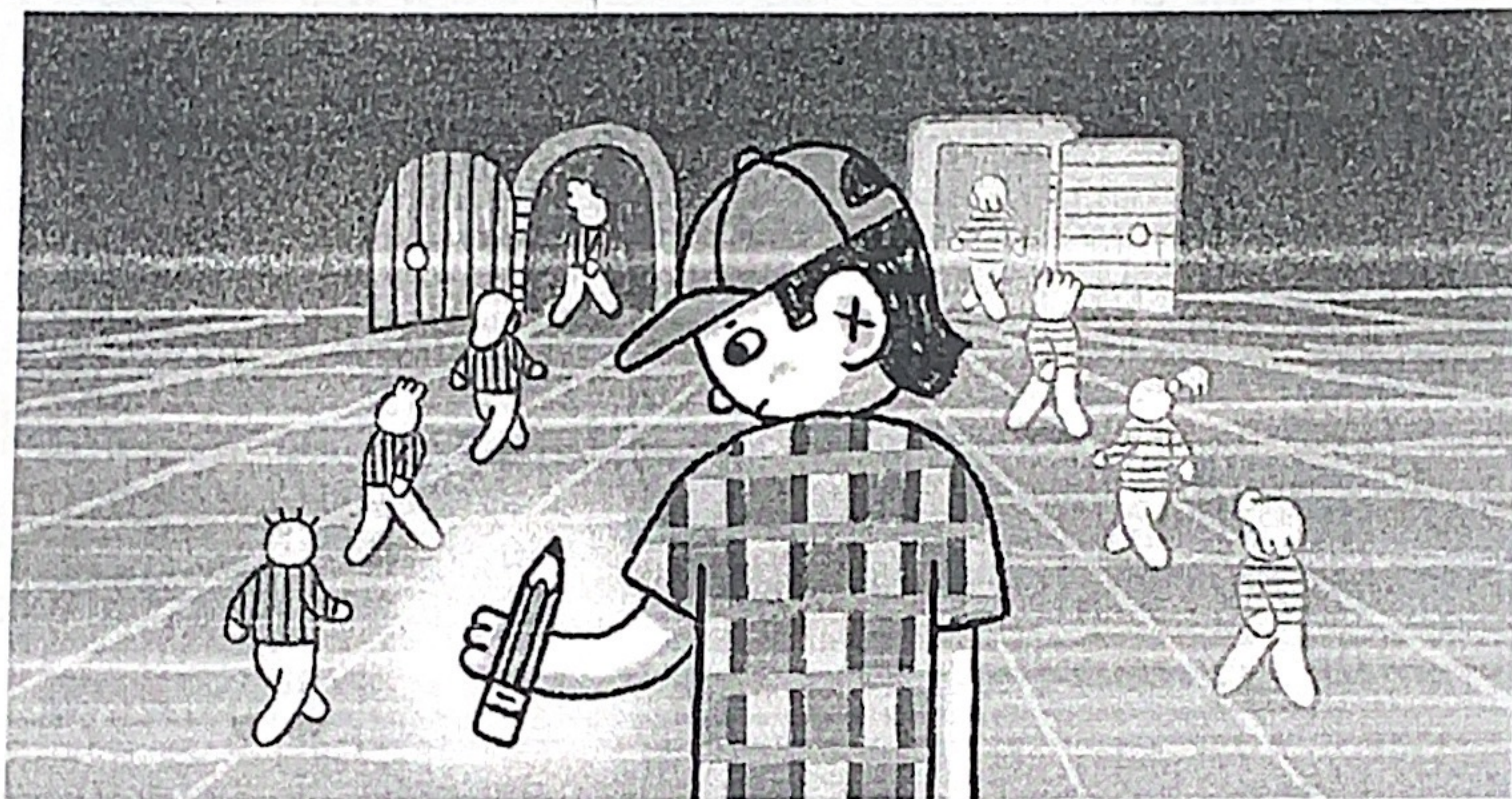


Illustration: Austin MacDonald

When I was a teenager, I felt like I belonged nowhere. I know it's a cliché: Ni de aqui, ni de alla, but damn if I didn't feel that. I walked around with my head to the ground. I was just trying to get through each day.

That was a long time ago now, but recently, I decided to write a book of poems, *Citizen Illegal*, about what it was like for me as a teenager. I didn't always love poetry (though I always loved reading). When I was growing up, poetry was taught like it was a historic practice akin to scratching a cave wall with a stick. It was past tense. Poetry happened, but we never met any living poets or even talked about them.

I don't  
like poetry

This wasn't unique to poetry. I attended public schools in a working class south suburb of Chicago called Calumet City, where teachers taught via the banking model of education: We were empty bank accounts, and it was our teachers' responsibility to deposit facts.

Before we go any further, I have to tell you that my memory cannot be trusted. It's been 12 years since I graduated high school and 25 years since I started kindergarten. Am I reconstructing my past to fit what I now know about how the decks were stacked against me and my classmates? Why am I telling you all of this, anyway?



I'm telling you this because I wrote a book of poems with one foot in the past, one hand in the present, and a nose on the future. Because I want to be honest about how much I don't know. Because, maybe, you too want to write your own book, but are worried that you don't remember well enough.

my n  
isnt th  
best e

Here are the facts: My parents were born in Cañadas de Obregón, Jalisco, México. I was born in Chicago, Illinois. The distance between Cañadas de Obregón and Chicago is 1,965 miles. This is one story: When my family moved to Calumet City, I knew I did not belong. How did I know? My parents brought me to the local preschool facility where the preschool promptly rejected my application into the school. The preschool did not have anyone on staff who spoke Spanish well enough to help me attend classes.

this wo  
/ be the  
introduc

This is another story: Around the time I entered high school, I knew with complete certainty that I needed to move to México. I was living in the wrong country. I didn't make sense in the United States, but if I moved to México, I would make sense. All my questions about where I belonged would be answered. I could go and live a good, anxiety-free life. If it weren't for gravity, I might have floated away.

When I was 16, my parents let me spend a month with my grandparents in Cañadas. My plan was to never come back. However, I arrived in México and felt just as out of place as I felt anywhere else. The kids on my grandparents' block pronounced my name like my parents did, but when they asked me where I was from and I tried to tell them I was Mexican, they were quick to correct me. No, no, no. You're from the United States.

you hav  
to be  
proud  
who g  
are

What I wanted and desperately needed in those moments was a book to help me make sense of all my questions. I didn't need answers, but I really wanted to know that my family was not alone. In those moments, I needed to read books by Sandra Cisneros, Laurie Ann Guerrero, Benjamin Alire Saénz, Luis Alberto Urrea, Ana Castillo, Javier O. Huerta, Denise Chávez and other Chicana writers.

I needed to read books by Latinx authors. I needed to read about the Chicano Movement and the Young Lords and anti-gentrification organizers. Those authors and those stories weren't a part of the curriculum.

Luckily, my high school did have a poetry slam club. I didn't know what a poetry slam was, but the first time I saw my classmates perform their poems, I felt something bloom within me. I leaned forward in my chair. I picked up my head and looked at my classmates. If it wasn't for gravity, I might have started floating.

good that  
you found  
something  
your passion  
about

Maybe I could write the stories I was craving to read. Maybe I could save myself by writing.

Writing shifted my relationship to education and power. After I started writing, I stopped being interested in models of education that didn't consider me an active participant. In class, I got in trouble for the first time. Some teachers complained that I talked too much. Other teachers reveled in my growth. It made school harder. When I passively accepted everything I was taught

teachers  
should be  
embracing  
that you are  
not afraid to  
speak



as fact, school was easy for me. I just had to memorize a bunch of information. Now, I asked myself to understand what stories were being left out? From whose perspective were we being taught? How else could we write the story?

There are facts and there are stories. Every fact can be turned into any number of stories.

every story  
has more than  
one side

Here is a fact: The United States went to war with Mexico in 1846.

One story says the U.S. soldiers were heroes. One story says the United States was a winner and México was a loser. One story says Manifest Destiny.

One story says México suffered terrorist aggression from an imperial state. One story says México didn't lose—it was robbed.

One story says both México and the United States have illegitimate claims to govern in North America.

One story says we were poor before the war and we were poor after. Spanish or English. The mouth is still hungry.

Given this history with education, I am always concerned with power.

I didn't want to write poems that moralized the issues of young people. I wanted to write poems that confronted the questions I felt as a teen. I wanted to write poems in a way that might give a young person in similar circumstances some comfort. I hoped my poems would be used to write new poems and to launch a million more stories.

Still, I had my doubts. How could I be sure that my writing could capture the emotional truth of adolescence?

I decided to find out. I would take my poems and ask young people for their feedback and advice. I was already mentoring a trio of a trio of young Latinx writers: Victoria Chávez Peralta, Luis Carranza, and Ken Muñoz. Together, we organized a series of open mics in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood. We designed them to hold space for Latinx people, and we heard over and over that the space felt like home.

That's what I wanted my poems to feel like, so I asked Victoria, Luis, and Ken to read them. That experience taught me about what's possible in poems—and in mentorship relationships. In my mentorship relationships, I hope to dismantle the hierarchies that place me as the expert because I'm the oldest among us. When we sit in workshop together, we are all students. We are all trying to learn and grow. I consider their comments on my work, and I invite them to reject my critiques. They have to write the poems that will save them, just like I had to write the poems that saved me.

everyone has their own safe space



soon as we were comfortably ensconced in our seats, and did not stop until somewhere after Philadelphia. I remember it was Philadelphia because I was disappointed not to have passed by the Liberty Bell.

My mother had roasted two chickens and cut them up into dainty bite-size pieces. She packed slices of brown bread and butter and green pepper and carrot sticks. There were little violently yellow iced cakes with scalloped edges called "marigolds," that came from Cushman's Bakery. There was a spice bun and rock-cakes from Newton's, the West Indian bakery across Lenox Avenue from St. Mark's School, and iced tea in a wrapped mayonnaise jar. There were sweet pickles for us and dill pickles for my father, and peaches with the fuzz still on them, individually wrapped to keep them from bruising. And, for neatness, there were piles of napkins and a little tin box with a washcloth dampened with rose-water and glycerine for wiping sticky mouths.

I wanted to eat in the dining car because I had read all about them, but my mother reminded me for the umpteenth time that dining car food always cost too much money and besides, you never could tell whose hands had been playing all over that food, nor where those same hands had been just before. My mother never mentioned that black people were not allowed into railroad dining cars headed south in 1947. As usual, whatever my mother did not like and could not change, she ignored. Perhaps it would go away, deprived of her attention.

I learned later that Phyllis's high school senior class trip had been to Washington, but the nuns had given her back her deposit in private, explaining to her that the class, all of whom were white, except Phyllis, would be staying in a hotel where Phyllis "would not be happy," meaning, Daddy explained to her, also in private, that they did not rent rooms to Negroes. "We will take you to Washington, ourselves," my father had avowed, "and not just for an overnight in some measly fleabag hotel."

American racism was a new and crushing reality that my parents had to deal with every day of their lives once they came to this country. They handled it as a private woe. My mother and father believed that they could best protect their children from the realities of race in America and the fact of American racism by never giving them name, much less discussing their nature. We were told we must never trust white people, but *w/ty* was never

horrible  
times

AUDRE LORDE

## The Fourth of July

*Audre Lorde (1934-1992) was a poet and nonfiction writer. Born in New York City to Caribbean immigrants, Lorde trained and worked as a librarian and became a widely published poet in the 1960s, when she also became politically active. Her poetry collections include The First Cities (1968), Cables to Rage (1970), and The Black Unicorn (1978); her other books were memoir and political and social theory, including The Cancer Journals (1980) and Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982).*

*"The Fourth of July" is a beautifully spare yet forceful piece of writing. In it, readers can see the anger that spurred much of Lorde's writing, whether about racism, as in this essay, or about sexism or homophobia, but they can also see the control with which Lorde expressed her ideas and the honesty with which she implicated herself and her family in her writing.*

The first time I went to Washington, D.C., was on the edge of the summer when I was supposed to stop being a child. At least that's what they said to us all at graduation from the eighth grade. My sister Phyllis graduated at the same time from high school. I don't know what she was supposed to stop being. But as graduation presents for us both, the whole family took a Fourth of July trip to Washington, D.C., the fabled and famous capital of our country.

It was the first time I'd ever been on a railroad train during the day. When I was little, and we used to go to the Connecticut shore, we always went at night on the milk train, because it was cheaper.

Preparations were in the air around our house before school was even over. We packed for a week. There were two very large suitcases that my father carried, and a box filled with food. In fact, my first trip to Washington was a mobile feast; I started eating as

I just started  
feeling like an  
adult. I have  
real errands  
to run, a job,  
family to attend  
to, etc.



explained, nor the nature of their ill will. Like so many other vital pieces of information in my childhood, I was supposed to know without being told. It always seemed like a very strange injunction coming from my mother, who looked so much like one of those people we were never supposed to trust. But something always warned me not to ask my mother why she wasn't white, and why Auntie Lillah and Auntie Etta weren't, even though they were all that same problematic color so different from my father and me, even from my sisters, who were somewhere in-between.

In Washington, D.C., we had one large room with two double beds and an extra cot for me. It was a back-street hotel that belonged to a friend of my father's who was in real estate, and I spent the whole next day after Mass squinting up at the Lincoln Memorial where Marian Anderson had sung after the D.A.R. refused to allow her to sing in their auditorium because she was black. Or because she was "Colored," my father said as he told us the story. Except that what he probably said was "Negro," because for his times, my father was quite progressive.

I was squinting because I was in that silent agony that characterized all of my childhood summers, from the time school let out in June to the end of July, brought about by my dilated and vulnerable eyes exposed to the summer brightness.

I viewed Julys through an agonizing corolla of dazzling whiteness and I always hated the Fourth of July, even before I came to realize the travesty such a celebration was for black people in this country.

My parents did not approve of sunglasses, nor of their expense. I spent the afternoon squinting up at monuments to freedom and past presidencies and democracy, and wondering why the light and heat were both so much stronger in Washington, D.C., than back home in New York City. Even the pavement on the streets was a shade lighter in color than back home.

Late that Washington afternoon my family and I walked back down Pennsylvania Avenue. We were a proper caravan, mother bright and father brown, the three of us girls step-standards in-between. Moved by our historical surroundings and the heat of early evening, my father decreed yet another treat. He had a great sense of history, a flair for the quietly dramatic and the sense of specialness of an occasion and a trip.

"Shall we stop and have a little something to cool off, Lin?"

Two blocks away from our hotel, the family stopped for a dish of vanilla ice cream at a Breyer's ice cream and soda fountain. Indoors, the soda fountain was dim and fan-cooled, deliciously relieving to my scorched eyes.

Corded and crisp and pinafores, the five of us seated ourselves one by one at the counter. There was I between my mother and father, and my two sisters on the other side of my mother. We settled ourselves along the white mottled marble counter, and when the waitress spoke at first no one understood what she was saying, and so the five of us just sat there.

The waitress moved along the line of us closer to my father and spoke again. "I said I kin give you to take out, but you can't eat here. Sorry." Then she dropped her eyes looking very embarrassed, and suddenly we heard what it was she was saying all at the same time, loud and clear.

Straight-backed and indignant, one by one, my family and I got down from the counter stools and turned around and marched out of the store, quiet and outraged, as if we had never been black before. No one would answer my emphatic questions with anything other than a guilty silence. "But we hadn't done anything!" This wasn't right or fair! Hadn't I written poems about Bataan and freedom and democracy for all?

My parents wouldn't speak of this injustice, not because they had contributed to it, but because they felt they should have anticipated it and avoided it. This made me even angrier. My fury was not going to be acknowledged by a like fury. Even my two sisters copied my parents' pretense that nothing unusual and anti-American had occurred. I was left to write my angry letter to the president of the United States all by myself, although my father did promise I could type it out on the office typewriter next week, after I showed it to him in my copybook diary.

The waitress was white, and the counter was white, and the ice cream I never ate in Washington, D.C., that summer I left childhood was white, and the white heat and the white pavement and the white stone monuments of my first Washington summer made me sick to my stomach for the whole rest of that trip and it wasn't much of a graduation present after all.

The author talked about his childhood experiences. His experiences with racism. It shows that his parents wanted to keep him away from all the bad in the world and spoil him as much as possible.