



THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

Year 2009

Article 2

1-1-2009

Profesera

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Gettysburg College

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Rojas, Marisa (2015) "Profesera," *The Mercury*: Year 2009, Article 2.
Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2009/iss1/2>

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Keywords

creative writing, non-fiction

Author Bio

Marisa Rojas is an English major and Philosophy minor originally from Los Angeles California. She has been writing poetry and nonfiction since the seventh grade, and has been published in other journals across the country. Career-wise she has no idea what will come of her future, but guessing from her major she will probably be poor and living in a box in the streets of LA.

Profesera

"Answer me," she demanded in Spanish. "Are you too stupid?! ¿Es stupida?" A smug smile crept over her face, effectively ripping my heart to shreds. The class erupted into hysterical laughter as I felt my cheeks burn with humiliation and I grew even more tongue-tied. I struggled to hold back my tears, but a single tear slipped forward, causing Ms. Masa to throw up her hands in frustration and proceed to ignore me for the rest of the day. This was my welcome into first grade.

In that one instant all the excitement I culminated in kindergarten for "real school" burst like a dropped tomato. After that one day, school became something to endure, a struggle to remain hidden and not draw any attention to myself. I spent most of my class time huddled down in my seat, silently trying to be invisible. When I was asked a question I usually just nodded or shook my head. If she asked a math question I'd hold up the correct amount with my fingers or just write it out and show Ms. Masa.

I knew that I was assigned to the wrong class, but I felt trapped and too scared to ever question the teachers about my placement. It was only later, in middle school to be exact, that I found out I was put into an ESL class. The administration put me there based on my last name, Rojas, without even testing me to see if I needed to be there. It was either complete ignorance or just blatant disregard for me as an individual. My class was set up into two parts to cater to immigrant students: Ms. Masa as the Spanish-speaking teacher, and Ms. Miller as the English-speaking teacher. I was put into the former group even though I could not speak Spanish at the time. Yes, I did understand it because I grew up with it being spoken around me, but I was not a native speaker like most of the class was.

To make matters worse, Ms. Miller was a sour old woman who delighted in making the children in her class miserable. Her tall frame wrapped in a faded housecoat over black pants and a white shirt; she smelled of mothballs. Her tiny wizened face perpetually held a scowl, puckering her mouth just so, waiting for justification of her displeasure. Sometimes she flew into rages at the smallest thing, terrifying us all with her screams. Once, we were going over a couple of math problems on my side of the class when we heard Ms. Miller nonchalantly ask Ritchie, a boy on her side of the class, "What do you have in your desk?" The poor boy was too afraid to say anything to her so she just squatted down and yelled, "How many times have I told you to keep your desk clean?!" The entirety of the class was frozen, we knew better than to move or bring any attention to ourselves because her anger had a habit of jumping to anyone she saw fit to punish at the time. Ritchie burst into tears as she tipped his desk over spilling everything onto the floor. The harsh sound of a slap followed, so loud in the deafening silence as she demanded that he pick everything up. "Look at the mess you made, aren't you ashamed of yourself?" was her closing remark as she went back to the chalkboard, ignoring the sobbing boy on the floor.

Ms. Masa was not that sadistic, just dismissive. She did not even pretend to like her students or her job. After the first month of school she just assumed I was a difficult child and proceeded to ignore me. I preferred this treatment than being physically abused, so I didn't tell my parents about what was going on because I feared being reassigned to Ms. Miller's tender care. By the time November came around, however, I was forced to explain my failing grades to my parents after my progress report came in the mail. I could tell my mother was worried, so I told her the truth: "My class speaks Spanish and I don't know it," I said. My father immediately called the school and chewed out the principal for making this

big a mistake. Plans were made to meet with the principal the next day to figure out what to do.

"There is no room for you in the other classrooms," my father told me. "So you are just going to move into Ms. Miller's side of the class, OK?" My heart dropped as my father hugged me and told me that everything was going to be fine from now on. I wanted to cry out, "No! Nothing's going to be OK! She's gonna hurt me!" but nothing came out. I went to bed that night scared out of my mind, because I only used to see what she did to her students; now I was going to be one of them. I cried myself to sleep that night and woke up feeling like I was being forced to go to hell.

I had learned by observing not to cry in front of Ms. Miller, because crying would get you a slap, so I was prepared. Since I was new to her and practically half a year behind, being prepared was good because I became her favorite toy. I became the scapegoat for everything that went wrong in the class, causing me to lose out on recess and sometimes lunches on numerous occasions. If the TV didn't turn on for some reason I had to stay in the classroom during break time to clean or to do other sundry duties for Ms. Miller. This made me angry and confused, but it was better than being slapped around like she did to some of the boys. Even as hurt as I was, I was happy to be finally taught in English.

I spent the rest of the year slowly catching up to my peers, being treated like I was dumb by Ms. Miller because I was behind, and learning how to make myself even more invisible on her rage radar. Some of my peers weren't so lucky and had to bear the brunt of her dissatisfaction. Looking back on it now, I am horrified that as a class we were molded into being perfect victims. I remember my friend Mario being hit in the head with a yardstick because he didn't complete his homework, and how red the blood was on the yellow paint. I remember Yesenia being forced to drink liquid soap because she said a cuss word, making her vomit, and how she sobbed as if her heart was breaking while cleaning the mess up. We would never offer comfort to the person being hurt at the time, because to do so would mean that you would be hurt too. While reading about child abuse cases in my psychology classes, there were times I broke down sobbing because the way we acted around Ms. Miller was so similar to how an abused child acts around his or her abusive parent. We never tried to defend ourselves because she shamed us into thinking we deserved it. We never told anyone because she said no one would have believed us over her. We were taught to freeze like scared rabbits, eyes forward, when someone was being punished. We never even talked about it amongst ourselves on the playground. We just played with such an intensity, feeling joy in the normalcy of playing tag and swinging.

Since most of my friends were immigrants, coming home with bruises from school didn't alert their parents that something was wrong. Instead, the parents themselves believed it was right because they were treated that way during their school years. So they didn't ask questions; it was all too familiar and right to them. My mother asked questions though, about how withdrawn I'd become since school started, but I usually responded by telling her I was struggling to catch up to the rest of my classmates. That put her mind at ease, even though I felt terrible lying to her.

It took me five years to tell my mother all about my time in first grade and by that time Ms. Miller was thankfully dead. In sixth grade she sat me down and said, "Remember Ms. Miller?" I nodded and she went on. "She died last night." I sat very still for some time, letting my mind comprehend this. I felt relief and happiness and I savored that feeling just before the guilt came in. I knew I shouldn't wish death on someone, but she had deserved it; yet it didn't stop me from feeling terrible guilt. I looked at my mother and let five years of pain come tumbling from my lips. She looked shocked, surprised, hurt and angry all at the same time. The look was so familiar to the ones etched in my memory from Ms. Miller that I froze and waited for the pain to come, but she hugged me instead as I cried. I cried for the first time unburdened by her memory, as my mind whispered that I was free.

My mother asked me why I hadn't told her while it was happening, and I couldn't give her answer then. I just shrugged and said I was scared, but that wasn't really it. I now think I was just so scared that telling anyone might make it worse, that she would have gone after my family in the same way she did her students. I feel like Ms. Miller would have done something even more terrible to all of us if she was found out. Talking to some of my friends who were classmates during that time confirmed that thought. Every single one I asked told me the exact same thing; we were all afraid she would have beaten someone to death.

Thinking back to my first year of "real school" fills me with such rage, at both myself and Ms. Miller. She was a twisted thing who had no right to do what she did to us, but I, we, had the power to stop this if only we just told someone. Of course we were so young and terrified that her grip was felt even when she left her classroom to join second grade. We stayed silent as the next years were treated with the same cruelty out of our fear to survive. I remember that we could tell them apart from the rest of the masses during recess; they were the ones with dead eyes, playing as if they would never set foot on a playground again. I've longed to reach out to them, to tell them I'm sorry, knowing I could have stopped their pain from happening. The regret, like the lessons of victimization, still lash out bitterly at me and will never fade even though they are never talked about anymore. All I can do is hope I can be better. That I can keep an eye out for the signs of abuse, the huddled stature and faded eyes. I feel drawn to being a teacher because I naively think that becoming a friendly, trustworthy teacher, making class fun for my future students will help erase the lingering pain that Ms. Miller left. Maybe that isn't the best motivator for a career, but as long as the students benefit from what I have to offer them I will give it freely. I know that my pain and humiliation cannot magically disappear, but I can make sure it doesn't happen to others. I am ESL-certified now, and hoping to teach in the elementary level since I know first-hand how it feels to be stuck in a foreign class, being expected to learn and speak in a language not my own. I don't want anymore children to fall through the cracks.

I can never forget that year; I still freeze when I hear an argument and flinch when someone next to me moves too fast. I cannot erase this, but I can strive to make my own meaning out of it however it may come. I know that if I truly mean to help others I must first learn how to heal myself and I hope that this lesson begins soon.