Editor's Choice

Disney World
By Isis Johana Lara

This last July I saw my past unravel. It was embodied in photographs, video recordings, and a compassionate, yet empathetic voice my brother wore. It was a showcase of all I've suppressed and have simultaneously craved. Two voids which I am still too immature to grip, because together they are an abyss with an area of 43,278 square miles. A hole as deep as fifteen abandoned years, with a width of only seven years remembered. Its air waits to expand.

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During the weekend of the Fourth of July, late in the afternoon, as the sun was setting and the warmth of the day began to cool, as custom, I was greeted with affectionate hugs and kisses on the cheek from my family. This day was unusually joyful because, one day prior to my being in Tacoma, my brother had arrived back from our home country. He was away for about a month, I hadn't visited Tacoma in three. An ongoing joke between us, when I do drag myself to visit, is that I'm the missing child. But, after three months, with classes over and, being unemployed, like a man lost at sea, a foghorn amidst the blur to always guide you back home. So with my duffel strapped over my shoulder, under the shade of my childhood home, I embraced the comfort and open arms of, first, my brother Galelle who, as we touched, teased, "I just got back from the equator, yet you have a much darker tan than I do," my older sister Michelle, her husband Ivan, and finally the rambunctious leaps of two nephews and a niece. The whereabouts of my younger sister Vicky, for the moment, didn't concern me. Instead, across the yard, following the stone pathway, I reached the separate living quarters of my mother's back bedroom. Opening her door, smelling the aroma of a freshly cooked dinner, I walked in to see her waiting for my entrance. Standing up from her seat, in lovingly Spanish words, she said, Aqui viene mi otra hija, "Here comes my other daughter!" Gigling, I hugged her tightly, as she rubbed my back. Since I was so occupied in greeting everyone, I had almost forgotten my boyfriend, Chris, had come to visit with me. Thankfully, a trip to the liquor store distracted him.

After eating a delicious meal and chatting with my mother, I walked out, only to see an array of diluted, yet still flickering, silver stars draped over a black canvas. Roaming from my mother's bedroom to the main house, I searched the sky for the moon, but its presence was nowhere to be found, and its shadow didn't linger, so in lost curiosity I joined the cackling laughter of my two siblings. They were gathered in the living room sharing a mouthful of Spanish, sex-driven, dirty jokes, while Chris and Ivan idly discussed soccer. The TV speakers, at seemingly full volume, pumped a cacophony of commercial ads, and the carpet displayed an assortment of toys, which were trampled upon as the kids ran through them. I couldn't help but smile.

"Ready to see Honduras?" Galelle asked ecstatically, still chuckling.

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An encyclopedic description summarizes that Honduras, situated in Central America, is slightly larger than the state of Tennessee. It is bounded on the north and east by the Caribbean Sea, on the south by Nicaragua and the Gulf of Fonseca, on the southwest by El Salvador, and on the west by Guatemala. It
has three distinct topographical regions: an extensive interior highland area and two narrow coastal lowlands. The interior highlands are the most prominent feature, composing approximately 80 percent of the country’s total area (and is home to the majority of the population).

To date, Honduras is still the only Latin American country that has the majority of its urban population distributed between two large centers, Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. The cities contrast dramatically: Tegucigalpa is the political capital and San Pedro is more industrially and commercially based. As the capital of Honduras, Tegucigalpa was built into the hills of the central highlands. Coincidentally, it was originally a mining town, possibly deriving its name from the Lencan dialect, an indigenous tribe that was a distant cousin to the Mayans, loosely translating into “hill” and “silver.”

Because San Pedro Sula is located in the flat, fertile Sula Valley (Valle de Sula in Spanish) at the foot of the Merendon mountain chain and just an hour away from the Caribbean coast, it is the bustling center of business transactions. It was founded in 1536 as an agricultural town and has been since. The city is surrounded by banana plantations (one of its biggest exports, as well as coffee) and other fruit companies.

Most interestingly, many travel agencies present the city as “flat and uninspiring to look at, and for the most part of the year, uncomfortably hot and humid; it is a city for business rather than sight seeing.” For a native, this quote is a big revelation as to how an outsider sees the country.

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In response to Galelle’s excited nature, I had submissively agreed. Feeling a little apprehensive, but thinking it was the dinner that made me uneasy, I nestled within the warmth of the oversized green couch. With the armrest to my left and a burgundy throw pillow on my lap, I was unknowingly in position to cower. If tears were to well up inside me, they’d surrender themselves to the wool, if my heart stopped for a second, the pillow was there to shadow my vulnerability, and if I were to faint from the powerful theatrical performance that I was still hesitant to experience, the extended arm of the mother form that I sat on would catch my fall. Within seconds, my past was thoughtlessly splashed against a fifty-inch screen. Somehow, I felt like a child at the front row of an opera or ballet, whose young mind doesn’t grasp the emotional waves that dangerously thrust at soft pieces of your spirit. Though bewildered inside, I expressed excitement only to mirror Galelle’s harmony.

Sitting a foot from me, our toes openly wiggled above the landscape of a beige carpet. In khaki shorts and a light cotton button-up displaying summer shades, he held the remote that obeyed his every command. In contrast to the beaded bracelet he brought me from Honduras, he wore a hand crafted wooden chain around his bronzed neck. His short black hair glistened from the sprinkles of gel he probably put on in the morning. Within his clean shaven goatee, he bore his infamous grin to the left, leaving out his small dimple to outwardly tease another smile; he is definitely someone who would fit within the cast of Miami Vice. With delight in his eyes and charisma echoing through his voice, Galelle explained the 300 photos of every beach, park, museum, neighborhood, inanimate object, and relative he encountered during the month he was away. Our night was consumed by an overwhelming vertigo of distant memories. One of which was our eldest brother Marcel.

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July 1994, in Wilcox Field, Miami International Airport, a stampede of travelers and airport personnel with high- and low-pitched voices portrayed a scenic reminder of how well humanity is camouflage among the masses. Among the herds of single minded and hectic people, a mother with five children quietly stood in the center of chaos. The bruises down her face and arms were the most apparent feature. The thick purple blotsches of pain gleamed outwardly as a sign of escape, with every mark indignantly refusing aid. Through the black-eyes, brown irises screamed a small cry of hope. It was her heart that allowed confidence and assurance to flow along the blood stream. Her surrendered spirit pushed her to fly over the Bay Islands of Honduras, the country of Cuba, across the Key West, and into the salvation of American hands, where opportunity and destiny awaited. But in the midst of urgency and spontaneity there was just one loose string that dangled in neglect: a white lie in the mind of her middle son.

At eleven, Galelle had hazel-colored hair and always threw open a wide smile, revealing two buck teeth. He was energetic and very quick-witted. But, there, in the blur of America, he was only a boy who held onto the childish illusion that he had come to see Disney World. His mind was enthralled by the fantasy and fairy tale he would experience. His spirit wanted only to enjoy the festivities of innocence and youth. A magical time of our childhood that should be reminisced about as an incandescent bliss. As Walt Disney so adamantly promises, the park is “the happiest place on Earth,” and like childhood, it should be a kingdom where “dreams really do come true.” For Galelle, they never did. Instead, Disney World and America became two mythical worlds full of disappointment, adversity, and self-pity. More specifically, at eleven, he was ripped away from the man he idolized most, our father. For the next fifteen years, his life became a grave whose casket carried the figurative essence of our father but the physical betrayal of our mother. It would not be until 2009 that he would find solace. Sealed behind manila envelopes and thrown in a metal box, arrived the two documents that almost cost him his American card and a Honduran passport. His Disney World was Honduras. America was a suffocating cell block, rusted iron shackles that scraped the skin, foul air that intoxicated the lungs; a green card was his bail money. For fifteen years, INS was my brother’s master, a man who tallied all his faults as an undocumented, Hispanic male, and spat them out on his face when he asked for freedom. Behind this man, Galelle believed, our mother was the force who, like the domino effect, flicked the first piece. He didn’t gain closure with our mother until he stepped onto the fertile land that is Honduras.

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In its most attractive, Honduras is a vivacious country with a beautiful history. As a midway location from Mexico to South America, Honduras inherited a variety of ancestries, most notably that of Mayan blood. This prestigious civilization built the famous archeological site found in Copan. This city is considered one of the most elaborate and artistically advanced of all Mayan cities. The serene landscape contains 4,509 structures, with 3,450 of the structures found in only 10 square miles surrounding the Principal Group. The Principal Group consists of the Acropolis, an east and west plaza; 1.5 miles of tunnels found directly under the Acropolis; the Ball Court, second largest to be found in Central America; the Great Plaza, and the Hieroglyphic Stairway, which is made up of 63 steps and several thousand glyphs and is the longest known text of Mayan civilization; it tells the history of the Royal House of Copan (unfortunately, fallen stairs annihilate the possibility of deciphering it).

Honduras also inherited many Spanish colonial towns that still embrace their authenticity. Among them are Comoyagua, famous for its churches; Santa Rosa de Copan, a city surrounded by mountains.
and national parks; Suyapa, whose mythological history claims that the Virgin Suyapa was discovered by a peasant; and Trujillo, a city site close to where Columbus first landed on mainland America, which reveals the ruins of a Spanish pirate fort overlooking the bay.

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At the age of 24, Marcel was deported from the United States. His conviction, like many striving immigrants, was drug trafficking. His defensive strategy: our mother needed rent. There is no lie in this. Afterward, to Galelle’s misfortune, Marcel was sent back to Honduras, where he reconnected with my father—a man who didn’t deserve to be forgiven by Marcel.

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As the night dwindled by, I realized how much passion Galelle had behind each word he spoke. It was as though his heart skipped a beat every time Honduras pushed out between his lips. In the calm of the night, but in the midst of reliving, I sat wide-eyed, Galelle at the edge of his seat. Michelle laughed while Ivan and Chris listened, and we verbally reminisced after each photo. With the house well-lit and noise penetrating around us from the kids, the slideshow, and our overlapped commentary, we popped open a few bottles of rum to celebrate.

The alcohol helped induce our appreciation in viewing Galelle’s trip. We were awestruck by the history he learned, inspired as he showed the ruins, enthused when we saw the clear blue water of the Caribbean, felt warmhearted to see random natives, moved by cathedrals, and ultimately in high spirits to have revisited our Honduras. I didn’t cry until I saw our old house, our old neighborhood, my old school. The house that guarded abusive memories; the neighborhood where we were so openly laughed at; my school where I found solitude. They’re the ragged bits of memory, the only puzzle pieces left that I remember.

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In waiting for the presence of an unknown uncle, I remember having stood very close to my mother in that busy Miami airport. I was oblivious to where we were or why, but my hand rested deep within hers as her rings grooved in my palm. In my mint-green dress (which is still in my possession), I gazed out to find the familiar face of my brother. I remember he was wearing a pair of blue jeans and a Thunder Cats T-shirt. He carried two-year-old Vicky, whose face was as pretty as a porcelain doll. Marcel, just short of 23, peered from behind them. Unlike us, his blood comes from another father, but like our mother, he suffered as well—for Christmas one year, my father gave him a flat soccer ball found in the field behind our house; by the age of 13, still weaning off a habit of peeing his pants when nervous, my father kicked him out of the house because he thought he was a maricon, faggot.

On the other side of my mother, Michelle stood, like an advisor to a noble. At 17, she was as tall as our mother but very lanky. Her jet-black, curly hair was her most prominent feature, along with big brown eyes. She held her hands in a knot, closely tied together, almost in prayer. Her bony wrists and thin hands have not changed to this day. They remain the hands I saw at the airport: feminine, smooth, and caramel in color.
I remember having felt glad, because I hadn't seen either my mother or Michelle in awhile. They had both moved away from our Honduran home to flee from my father's violent antics. Before Florida, the last time I had seen my mother was in one corner of the house. Her body lay limp on the floor as my father walked up to shut my door. Through the plaster, I could hear Michelle sobbing in the room next door. The following day, they were both gone.

Michelle's anguish toward my father derives from a hazy night in her childhood that she chooses no longer to express. It was during her teenage years that she unleashed a purposely forgotten secret. I was in diapers when my father was accused. I've heard enough repulsive stories to know she wasn't lying. But Galelle refuses to respect what she has again hidden. His father was not the sick bastard that raised Michelle.

But, that day in Miami International Airport, among the thousands who walked around her, each individual foreseeing only their own circumstances, Michelle erased a father. A man only destined to burn in Hell. A figure whose name she no longer attributes to herself. A character depicted in a life she never read. Her America was limitless, exponentially greater in every aspect of life. For the following 15 years she was to become like the pedestrians around her, independent and self-sufficient. Unlike the struggle Galelle and I have suffered to claim residency in the United States, Michelle's future was paved when our parents married and gave birth to a daughter in New York. In no time at all, was she able to surrender Honduras for the Disney World that was America.

When photos of our father rolled by, across the room, Michelle would ominously sip on her rum. Thick loose curls dropped on her shoulders, and every now and again they'd carelessly be pulled back. As habit, she'd lick her pink bottom lip, rubbing a layer of shimmer off each time. She would glance about the room only to distract herself from the man on the screen. Affectionately, Ivan would caress her forearm, but she'd only wave it off with a wry smile. Like me, she was tucked behind a pillow and held it firmly like a knight would grasp a shield in battle. She sat in an upright position, round eyes glossy from the alcohol, pupils dilated, but transfixed, lost in memory or maybe nothing at all. She was a paper doll with no emotion. That man on the screen was a stranger to her, as he was to me.

As the night drifted away, and so did the liquor. I found myself exhausted with emotion. Galelle repeatedly explained how fortunate we were to have been born in a country so rich in culture. He raved about how the smell of the open sea, combined with the surroundings of good natured souls, was unbelievably rejuvenating. He went on an hour-long rant about our relatives there. A drowning list of successful cousins, superstitious aunts and new in-laws, recently born children, never-been-married uncles, uncles in mid-life crises, but most importantly the one man who connects us all to them.

"You need to come back with me, Johana. Trust me. Go there and see it for yourself. It's our homeland. Daddy is there. He needs to see you..."
Like an heirloom Honduras holds closely its Vicky, unlike all of us, has never known a father—a good or bad one. Instead, she has cut all ties to looking for one. She has told me, “Who cares?”

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Nearing dusk, with the kids in bed, Michelle and Ivan having gone home, at the end of the fourth bottle of rum, puffing cigarettes outside at the hour most brisk, stumbling over our words, unraveling the family’s innermost secrets; as Galelle declares that Michelle has lied all her life, and our father is a great man, as I constantly and shamefully apologized to Chris about our skeletons, I finally recognize that I am that child at an opera concert. I’m dizzy, not from the rum, but the linguistics in which the adults sing. How their voices intimidate and scare me. The same fear I’ve felt when witnessing my father’s fury. Every alto is a scream which I’ve heard my mother scream, every deep-pitched tone is the anger my father has audibly displayed. The libretto is a showcase illustrating the pain and sorrow of every bruise and mark, threat and strangulation, that occurred behind closed doors. Inhaling the sweet nicotine, somehow clearheaded, I decided I wasn’t ready to revisit Honduras.

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Essentially, Honduras is a country with an audacious culture, citizens who are proud in being *catrachos*, native born. We move to the rhythm of our national dance, *punta*, heavily influenced by the swift movement of the waist and hips; every morning, we honorably sing the national anthem to the five stars drawn boldly on our flag; we indulge ourselves with seafood and *tahadas*; and we hold closely to how friendly and open we are as a nation. Honduras offers luscious beaches, strikingly gorgeous-blue mountains, and a genuine mix of *Mestizo* and *Garifuna* culture. Like any proud patriot, the spirit of Honduras lives strongly within the soul of the resident. No tourist can ever be fully aware of a nation’s prestige, the fundamental nature that is only realized when you live within those borders. Travel agencies may call San Pedro Sula flat and uninspiring. I call it smooth as my sister’s hands and a because it has flourished since we left (it is now industrially bigger than Tegucigalpa). It is the city in which I was born. Its ground sprouted the seeds of my existence. Its terrain is watered by the innocent memories of my early childhood. I learned to laugh, crawl, and walk on its ground.

Like an heirloom jewel, Honduras holds closely its Mayan ruins. It is a wondrous and serene site of beauty and historical impact. A traveler may climb the steps of the temple but cannot acknowledge a connection. Galelle touched the surfaces, and our ancestry dawned on him. The stone texture percolated the Mayan blood that runs through our veins. Standing at the center of ancient remains was a reminder of a culture we were given at birth through the genealogic branch of our mother.

Explorers and vacationers alike can visit Honduras, but, because it is a poverty-ridden nation, they will never cross the border from luxury to simplicity or subtlety. Where a native will roam neighborhoods filled with barefoot children playing soccer on dirt fields, a vacationer will only walk sandal-less on the crystal-clear beaches we invite them to dip into. While tourists will devour steaks from a fancy restaurant, a Honduran will eat a plateful of fried fish, beans, rice, and fried plantains with a glass of rum or beer. A traveler may never learn the myths and rumors of our land: why the mountains are blue, where it rains fish, or where you can meet a Honduran-African who speaks *Garifuna*. While resorts include other world-class travelers, outside the elegant gates are citizens with open hands and even more open hearts. I believe
a person travels to experience a wave of difference, to redefine oneself, to gain knowledge about one's own personality, while existing in an unfamiliar place; I invite these individuals to see Honduras with an unlocked eye.

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I stand torn between wanting to be a tourist and reconsidering my nationality. For 15 years I have ignored and suppressed my relationship to the country. Honduras, in itself, is a majestic place I'd love to see again. But it's what it stands for that I cannot bear. I have a whole blood line of relatives who are connected to a man I no longer know. His voice is that of another; his apologies are those of the pathetic; his very existence is an illusion to me. Even his physical appearance isn't what I remember. His hair is thinning with gray in places; the bags under his eyes are deep-purple and almost reach the tops of his cheeks. He slouches dramatically for a man his height; he's thin at the arms and legs, but has an overgrown gut. I don't recognize him. He's my blood, but I don't feel an ounce of relation—something Vicky and I have in common.

I can't imagine what he felt when he arrived to an empty home, wife and children gone. He thought she was stupid, just a poor passive female, but, to his surprise, the day she left she sought out six American visas. Unlike Galelle, I idolize my mother for regaining her self-esteem and having the power to travel to America without a clue as to what the future would hold. Yet, even knowing Michelle's torment, I still don't have the heart to completely destroy the illusion that is my father. He'll remain a picture in my mind. But my fear is that, when I meet him, that when we embrace each other, there will be a concealed motive in his mind: an image so negative and nauseating that I'd be forced to give up all hope on male figures. I want to believe that Galelle has a good sense in character, and any harmful quality Michelle attributes to my father does not exist. Yet, to this very day I cower; I am not willing to find out. Marcel may have given him mercy, but I'd rather choose not to face him.

Two days ago, I learned my father is dying: liver cancer, from all the alcohol he's ingested in self-loathing. I've been crying since, but have begun to realize that, when I revisit Honduras, it will be for his funeral.

I won't ever feel what it is to experience Disney World.