

Personal Essay

My parents used to tell me stories of when I was little, sitting in front of the TV, eyes glued to Dora the Explorer. Over and over I'd watch the same episodes, my five year old self completely captivated. I'd imitate Dora, with my notepad and colored pencils, running around our backyard. I'd "explore" our family garden and rose bushes, crawling through the leaves. I'd create my own drawings, careful to note down every leaf vein and worm-bite. Colored pencils would be strewn across our porch as I mixed yellows and greens, furiously coloring.

On weekends, my Lolo would accompany me on my expeditions. Every Sunday after church, my family would drive up to my grandparent's house in San Francisco, a yellow house lush with lemon trees. We'd take walks to the park across the street, laying together on the turf and staring up at the sky. On especially foggy days we'd stay indoors, and my sister and I would dig through my uncle and aunt's childhood rooms, reading through old comic books as the scent of my Lola's sinigang drifted through the house.

Once I had grown out of my exploration phase, I graduated to a more refined form of research: biology. In particular, honors biology was my first glimpse at how expansive science can be. Step by step, we hopped from atoms to molecules to monomers, each concept a product of the previous, and a building block for the next. More than that, I loved how vast the subject could be. Physics was formulas and chemistry was equations, but biology was an explanation.

But there seemed to be no explanation when my Lola passed away. I was with my friends when I got a simple text from my Tatay: "Lola passed away. We're coming to pick you up". The drive to San Francisco was quiet, the usual chatter of the car was replaced with silence.

The first few weeks afterwards, I didn't know what to do with myself. We visited the yellow house sometime afterwards, once it was all cleaned out and ready to be sold, but I refused to look inside. I couldn't bear to see the empty rooms, the bare walls that used to be decorated with photos of cousins, wedding photos, and holiday cards.

As time passed, I felt more and more disconnected. I didn't know any Tagalog and I had never visited the Philippines: my grandparents were my connection to my culture. I could no longer remember the doilies my Lola knitted, or the way the lemon tree in their backyard smelled.

I'd stay awake at night, long after everyone was asleep. I'd turn on a comfort cartoon, grab a piece of paper, and just draw. There was no aim to my drawings, some would just be scribbles on a page. The fine detail I was accustomed to was thrown out the window, quick and loose sketches decorating page after page.

Drawing quickly became my way of understanding, just like biology once was. I would paint portraits and scenery - the Converse shoes my Lolo used to wear, the colors of the sizzle of my Lola's adobo chicken. As the pencil hit the page, the nostalgia would wash over me. I found my memories comforting, a reminder of my grandparents.

Through graphic design, I hope to bridge this connection between structure and emotion. Dora taught me to think out of the box and explore, not settling for the mundane. My grandparents showed me the importance of culture and family, elements that directly influence my artwork. Although not obvious at first, design is very similar to biology—detail and structure being crucial. Graphic design is my way of grasping the vastness of the world, all of my emotions and feelings organized into a way I can understand. And when others see my designs, I hope they'll be able to understand a little bit better too.