

**SLIP OF THE TONGUE—  
A Latina Performance Project About  
Personal and Cultural Healing**

Cristina Nava, Sara Guerrero,  
and Elizabeth Isela Szekeresh

*Excerpted work from Rocks in My Salsa by Cristina Nava; Calzones Cagados by Sara Guerrero; and When Song Leaders Go Bad by Elizabeth Isela Szekeresh.*

## SLIPPAGE: An Introduction

Tiffany Ana López

*Slip of the Tongue* is a trilogy of plays comprised of three solo works written and performed by Cristina Nava, Sara Guerrero, and Elizabeth Isela Szekeresh, core members of Breath of Fire Latina Theater Ensemble in Santa Ana, California, one of the largest Latina/o communities in the nation. This collaborative project uses humor to stage a conversation about forms of personal and cultural violence—such as the manifestations of gender oppression—including rape, drug addiction and its impact on family and children, and the emotional and financial struggles that accompany the arduous journey to diagnose and treat bipolar disorder. The project aims to produce theater and film that explores sexuality, speaks out about matters of culture and identity, and frankly engages in other slips of the tongue. This work began to evolve in 2004 after Cristina Nava, Sara Guerrero, and Elizabeth Isela Szekeresh met as part of a film collective whose projects included Szekeresh's *It's a Pleasure*, which celebrates masturbation (what the artist prefers to describe as “self loving”), and *La Puta*, a film written and directed by Iris Almaraz that affirms female sexual agency, for which Nava was lead actress, Guerrero the costumer, and Szekeresh a crew member. In 2006, Nava and Szekeresh joined together again under the direction of Monica Palacios for Nava's show *Rocks in My Salsa*, performed that same year at Breath of Fire Latina Theater Ensemble and Highways Performance Space (Santa Monica, California). *Slip of the Tongue* has since been performed at universities and conferences across the United States, including most recently, in 2011, at the Washington and Lee University in Virginia (Women and Gender Studies 10th Anniversary Program of Events) and the MALCS Summer Institute (California State University, Los Angeles).

All three works that comprise *Slip of the Tongue* are devoted to the act of remembering traumatic events, documenting the struggle to process those events, and spotlighting performance as a vehicle for healing. As a genre, performance is distinguished by three central tenets: a storyteller's full emotional and physical presence; a story's performed enactment of a range of complex emotional responses to trying circumstances; and the gathering of an audience of dedicated and invested witnesses. Significantly, these are all things thwarted by trauma; traumatic events are disruptive precisely because they elide one's sense of presence, restrict the range of emotional response, and leave the survivor feeling without witness. Trauma is characterized by events that appear unspeakable because at the outset they so powerfully defy understanding and resist narration; subsequently they cannot be immediately named or described as traumatic. The healing process journeys to understand an event and the depth of its damage and, in the process, bring clarity about how it cleaved one's life into two distinct parts consisting of a before and an aftermath. Understanding a sequence of events gives them form and allows narration necessary to articulate that one's life is much bigger than the scope of traumatic events, that trauma is not the complete distillation of one's life story but rather just one facet.

*Slip of the Tongue* is a performance project that presents three different narratives about the quest to heal from traumatic events. It begins with Cristina Nava's *Rocks in My Salsa*, in which the narrator journeys from adolescence into womanhood and reflects on culturally proscribed gender norms and their hazards for young girls discovering their bodies and then later for women grappling with their sexuality. The character "Johnnie" represents romanticized heteronormative masculinity and how girls are taught to define their female worth (beauty, sexuality, cultural capital) in relationship to this icon. Nava spotlights the extreme harm of the term La Puta and shows the levels of violence that result from teaching women that masturbation is sinful or that personally initiated sexual curiosity is the gateway to bigger sins. Nava's work portrays the

end spectrum of such thinking: That forms of sexual violation are a woman's responsibility. Her work asks: How then is the Chicana survivor of rape to heal and reclaim her full sense of self, inclusive of sexuality?

Sara Guerrero's *Calzones Cagados* explores the life of a young girl as she weathers her parents' divorce, shuttles between two homes, and gradually comes into awareness about her father's drug addiction. The character "Johnnie" also figures in the guise of a bicycle, an object that represents desire, freedom, and adventure. That a girl so young names her bike after a man illustrates the deep-seeded lessons of heteronormativity. However, here it also represents a mode of transport that offers a respite from dysfunctional family dynamics. The bicycle provides a vehicle of healing whereas the young girl connects her mind and body as she peddles outside the confines of her family and narrates the events of her life.

Elizabeth Isela Szekeresh's *When Song Leaders Go Bad* portrays a woman's experience with bipolar illness, from its undiagnosed emergence during adolescence to the struggle for treatment during adulthood. Szekeresh performs this piece dressed in a cheerleader's costume. The song leader represents the frenetic scale of mania with energy that dramatically slides from the shrill heights of triumph to the dark lows of defeat as Szekeresh tells the story of her trials and tribulations with self-medication and formal treatment. Through her character, Szekeresh works to give audiences a sense of what it is like to be pulled into the grips of mania. Her song leader is extreme in her exuberance, even when facing stark battles with psychological distress and the health care system. Additionally, the work asks complex questions about drug treatment and healthcare: How to achieve full, effective, and ongoing treatment for those with addiction problems or the working poor?

I first saw *Slip of the Tongue* in an encapsulated version at the 2011 MALCS

Summer Institute at California State University, Los Angeles. While I am a board member of Breath of Fire Latina Theater Ensemble and have worked with the company as a dramaturge and community outreach scholar, I had not yet seen Guerrero and Szekeresh perform outside their roles as artistic director, director, and producer, and had never seen them perform their own written plays. The MALCS performance moved me to tears, precisely because of the slippage involved for me as an audience member. For several years, I'd worked closely with these incredible women and saw the hard work and sacrifices they'd made to create—and keep operative—a theater space designed to empower Latinas as artists in all realms of storytelling (dramatic and cinematic) and at all levels of the art making process, from author to producer. I'd seen many of the stories they'd help to realize on stage, including the world premiere of Cherríe Moraga's *Digging Up the Dirt* (see review in *C/LS*, 10:1) and Janine Salinas's *Angel of the Desert* (South Coast Repertory, Studio Series, 2011). However, I'd not yet heard their stories. It was a poignant revelation to learn that part of what characterizes a colleague's gifts as a theater artist is born from a debilitating mental illness. How is her making a difference for so many others also indicative of her own inner turmoil and her own homeopathy? In September 2011 Breath of Fire staged the full performance of *Slip of the Tongue* including Cristina Nava's moving portrait of surviving rape and reclaiming intimacy. It's always an amazing thing to feel a sense of kindred-spiritedness with those whom we already feel such deep professional respect and personal affiliation. It confirms why it is that we find ourselves so powerfully drawn together in our mission to do the challenging work of making art in order to make a difference. Sitting in the Black Box Theatre at California State University, Los Angeles, I knew I had to bring *Slip of the Tongue* into print because it so frankly documents three of our most pressing but unspeakable forms of violence and oppression: rape, addiction, and mental illness.

The title phrase—slip of the tongue—playfully captures that fine line between kidding and truth telling, those moments when humor gets deployed as a means to simultaneously invite and disarm listeners, in the process, resituating them as witnesses to painful realities that threaten to debilitate, often to the point of annihilation. Laughter is remedy, weapon, and pedagogy; shared laughter is shared insight. It is often said that depression is anger turned inward. Depression debilitates because it imprisons one within the realm of the personal, severing mind, spirit, and body from the larger social world. *Slip of the Tongue* deploys humor as a means to channel debilitating emotions outward and, in the process, transform personal anger into outrage, the building block of critical analysis. It refuses to restrict problems to the realm of personal struggle, thereby enacting resistance by identifying and naming toxic forms of violence as rooted in cultural systems. In this way, it affirms slippage over baggage. Better to have a slip of the tongue than a fall into inertia, silence, or death.

## FROM ROCKS IN MY SALSA

Cristina Nava

CONCEIVED AND DIRECTED BY MONICA PALACIOS

*LIGHTS* UP on CRISTINA as Music plays: “Johnnie Angel.”

*(Singing along):* “Johnnie Angel, you know I love you...mmm, mmm, mmm, Johnnie Angel...” Man was that boy fi-i-INE. He had great hair, just like Elvis, drove a cherry red Honda Civic with a kick ass sound system that had a remote control...a remote control in a car? That’s hot! I met him at a winter dance my senior year. I looked good in my MC Hammer multi-colored blazer and black stretchy pants. I had moves just like Hammer, and Johnnie Angel noticed. *(Hammer song plays as CRISTINA does an MC Hammer move.)* Johnnie Angel would pick me up after school, and we’d go over to Pete’s Patio on Firestone Boulevard and have a chocolate chip shake and fried zucchini while we talked of this and that. You see, Johnnie Angel was no high school boy. He was twenty-one, didn’t have a job or aspirations, but he was BEAUTIFUL. All the girls wanted him, but he wanted me.

One night, Johnnie and our mutual friend, Andre, called me up to tell me they’re picking me up to go to this party. I made myself look cute, spraying a little perfume here, a little perfume there. I was giddy and excited.

He picks me up, and he and Andre tell me the other girls were meeting us at the party, which turns out to be a room with a Jacuzzi at the Best Western.

When we get there, Tamara, Lisa, and two other girls are already in their bathing suits. Johnnie hands me an oversized t-shirt, and I keep my bra and panties on underneath. There were seven of us trying to fit into this two-person Jacuzzi. It was hilarious.

Because Johnnie Angel was twenty-one, he was able to get any amount of alcohol we could afford. Now, I wasn't a drinker, but Night Train tasted like bitter Kool-Aid, so I stuck to that. After laughing and singing, and a few cups of Night Train, it was getting late, so I decided to go into the bathroom to shower so I could go home. As I walked to the bathroom, I could feel the effects of the Night Train.

*LIGHTS create patterns on the floor, giving the effect of drunkenness.*

Before I could close the door, Johnnie Angel follows me and closes the door behind me. Immediately, he kisses me, and my entire body is tingling from his touch. I wanted Johnnie Angel to be my boyfriend so badly. I had such a crush on him. As we continued kissing, his hands began to explore and caress my shoulders, my back, my waist...and when his hands found their way to my ass, I began to tense up. I could feel him aroused as he pressed his hips to mind. I moved his hands up to my back and continued kissing him, but slowly they found their way once again. (*She pulls back from Johnnie.*) "Can we take this slow, Johnnie? Let's go outside with the others."

*The lighting remains distorted with the added sense of moonlight.*

We entered the room. Someone had turned out all the lights, and only the light of the moon shone through the window. Johnnie Angel walked over to Andre to talk. The effects of the Night Train were making me dizzy, so I decided to lie down on the bed and rest for a minute. I opened my eyes when I felt the bed moving. It was Johnnie Angel sitting on the bed caressing my forehead and face. (*As JOHNNIE.*) "You okay, baby?"

He bent over. He kissed me. He lay down next to me. His right hand found its way to my stomach. His hands slid down to my crotch. I wished he would just stick to kissing, but his hands went to my breasts. "Can we just keep



kissing and nothing more?” His body pushed up against mine. He rubbed my legs, the small of my back, my neck. The Night Train seemed to be getting stronger. He kept kissing me, caressing my body. In an instant, he gets on top of me. He’s right between my legs. “Johnnie, let’s slow down, Johnnie.” He’s got my panties off. I’m so embarrassed.

“No, Johnnie, not here, not now.”

I can’t get his weight off me,

“No, Johnnie, no.”

He’s inside me,

there’s no going back.

“Johnnie, no, no, stop.”

But he’s thrusting

in and out of me.

“Johnnie, no, no, no.”

They’re watching....

*CRISTINA begins sobbing and curls up in a fetal position. After a moment, she sits up. CROSS FADE to intimate lighting.*

He dropped me off at my house. I stared in the mirror for a very long time. It wasn’t supposed to be that way. (*She steps into the LIGHT.*) “You’re cheap.” How embarrassing. I’m not a puta.

The next day, Tamara and the girls were sitting at the lunch tables. (*As one of the girls.*) “Cristina, why were you crying? What happened?”

CRISTINA: “I don’t remember. I drank way too much. I was hoping you would let me know what happened.” Tamara looked at me, and I knew she didn’t believe me, but she didn’t disagree. (*Pause.*) She knew.

In the days that followed, I felt anxiety when Johnnie didn't call.

I thought, now THIS man has to love me. Has to be my boyfriend. I wanted him to validate what happened between us. It took me years to realize that he raped me. (*EXIT.*)

*PowerPoint on the definition of RAPE. CRISTINA enters holding a rebozo in the shape of a rope, giving the illusion that it will be used for hanging oneself.*

In the weeks that followed, I made a very important decision. (*She holds up the rebozo.*) There was really only one thing to do.

*Music plays: "Fight For Your Right to Party" by the Beastie Boys.*

CRISTINA (*singing along*): "You've gotta fight, for your right, to party!" And party I did. I wanted nothing to do with boys. High school came and went in the blink of an eye, and I was off to COLLEGE! I went to Europe, acted in plays, and focused on me. I wasn't looking for love, but one day...love...found...me.

When I finally had a serious boyfriend in my twenties, I desperately wanted to capture the romance, but things didn't always go the way I planned them. One day, I decided to make a romantic dinner for my then boyfriend, Chavo, and chose to make a delicious salsa from scratch and show off my molcajete. Per my mother's instructions, I boiled chiles Nuevo Mexico, and took garlic, onion, some lemon—must have lemon in everything—and began to grind them all together in my brand new molcajete. It smelled awesome. The pungent scent diffused throughout the house, but not in the usual way that my mother's does where one has to evacuate because the harsh chile attacks your throat. (*CRISTINA begins to choke.*) More of a seductive manner that beckons your taste buds, the secret's in the lemon. So when my Chavo walked

in, he immediately took in a big whiff of the salsa and moaned with pleasure. I was still preparing the rest of the meal when I offered him a tiny taste of my salsa. (*She coquettishly reenacts offering Chavo a bite.*) He moaned once more as his taste buds exploded with delight, and he reached over to further show his approval, and grabbed the biggest Trader Joe's nacho chip he could find, and dug deep into the molcajete. He put the entire chip into his mouth and dramatically crunched hard...the next sounds that followed were louder moans. He grabbed his right cheek, and his face crumpled up. "My (*really exaggerated*) tooF," he managed to say. He proceeded to spit out most of the salsa onto a napkin, but more importantly, half of a molar, which lay next to a tiny...ROCK? (*CRISTINA walks over to the molcajete.*) You see, no one told me this, (*She places the rock in the molcajete and begins to grind*) but you're supposed to "break in" your molcajete by messing with it and the rock and make a few inedible dishes so that the loose rocks are released. My romantic interlude was ruined 'cuz I had rocks in my salsa. Needless to say, we spent the entire evening trying to locate a dentist, which ain't easy at 9:30 at night.

The mishap that night was exactly like my relationship with Chavo: very spicy but extremely rocky. We spent five years together, but one day, just like that, it was over. He broke it off. I had been supportive of his career and devoted to him, and just like that, it was over.

At first, I refused to believe that what I had worked so hard to build was gone. I talked and talked and talked to my friends until one day they stopped listening. One day I looked in the mirror, and I didn't recognize myself. I had changed and not for the better. And then I realized that I had gone without something for five years. An orgasm.

In speaking with women of all walks of life, I realized that this IS AN EPIDEMIC!

Which is ridiculous because for Latinas, Adam and Eve are our first parents, that's what the Catholic Church tells us, right? And they were living in paradise, they were doing it all the time. Nothing was evil or dirty—imagine it...the first orgasms on earth.

*“2001 Space Odyssey” music begins as a single spotlight turns on and CRISTINA looks into the light and proceeds to have two orgasms.*

I came...I came...twice! (*CRISTINA rejoices and swings a bat as if hitting a ball out of the park. She runs around and gets on top of a rock to proclaim:*

Men across America—no the world: Get a book...Barnes and Noble, Amazon.com, Costco. Ask your ladies what makes them feel good! Mujeres, DON'T FAKE IT!!! Stop listening to your mothers. Seriously, find out how you can best be pleased. Get a book: Barnes and Noble, Amazon.com, Costco. Let's stop lying to our daughters.

I wish my mother had explained the realities of men and women. After the incident with Johnnie, I had a lot of reclaiming of myself to do. I had so much taken away and had given so much that I had to work on loving myself before I could love another person.

I began to analyze my past relationships.

In my twenties, I would fall for a guy who: had a fast car; played a guitar; smelled good; didn't want me. In my thirties, I now look for: Does he have a job? Is he happy with what he does? 'Cuz if he doesn't love his life, he can't love me. Is he spiritual? Are we sexually compatible? And after six months, does he want to marry me? I read tons of self-help books: *The Power of Now*, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, *Dating for Dummies*, and when I finally let go of looking for Mr. Right, Mr. Right found me.

*She steps into the spotlight.*

After eight months he asked me to marry him. We have two beautiful little boys and an adorable little girl, and now I'm left with the responsibility of sharing with them the realities of men and women, and that life doesn't always turn out how you planned it, and that sometimes, on your journey in finding yourself and your partner, you might find a few rocks in your salsa.

Sabanos *My Parents Sleep On*, 54x75 on bed sheet, Chicanas Only at Mexi-Arte in Austin, TX, April 2011.



## EXCERPTED FROM CALZONES CAGADO

Sara Guerrero

*Music* can be heard as LIGHTS RISE on ESTRELLITA. Music slowly FADES OUT as she speaks.

I never heard my parents fight, until my mother had an affair. This of course was a result of my father daring her to have one. He only wanted to even the playing field. You see, he was a man who had an appetite for sexual liberation, an affinity for hookers, bit of a virgin-whore complex, and a number of things.

And when she did do it.... (Pause.) ALL HELL broke loose. There is something very cautionary about getting exactly what you want. They eventually divorced. And after witnessing the gutting of the underbelly, my sister got a new Atari, and I got my first bike. (In a loud whisper.) I think they felt guilty.

*The song "Johnny, Be Good" FADES UP.*

My bike, Johnnie, I secretly named after a crush. Johnnie was cherry-apple red with a coordinating retro flowered banana seat, matching tasseled handles, and crowned by a white plastic wicker basket. Originally, with training wheels but soon lost with a wrench.

*Music slowly FADES OUT.*

Johnnie was kept at Dad's, which was once our family home, and where I was ultimately to spend weekends. Guilt or no guilt, Mom wasn't exactly kosher about the whole bicycle thing. While wrapping up an Avon sale, she witnessed

a young neighbor kid on a bike get hit by a truck. *(In MOM's voice.)* "Fijate, that chavalito is a vegetable, and that will happen to you."

Despite the possibilities of becoming a fleshy tortilla, I would count the days, the hours, the minutes, the seconds until I could take Johnnie out for a spin.

*Sound of musical interlude: "Into the Mystic."*

Nothing else mattered. We left everything behind, feeling only the space and the air between us. And as we would cruise, our souls curiously flew into the mystic. At the end of our trailblazing weekends, we would reluctantly part ways in the darkness of the garage.

*ESTRELLITA becomes coquettish with the bike. She goes to leave, but turns for one last good-bye. Music slowly FADES OUT.*

Before things can get any better, they get worse. Weekend visits became shorter. Dad started arriving late, and then later, and then sometimes never. Broken promises were made. Threats, name calling, and quarreling parents escalated. There were no filters. Only age and naiveté kept most things over my head. My sister, who was older, wasn't so lucky. The visits stopped. I was devastated. *(Pause.)* I was mourning the time lost with Johnnie. I asked my mom, "Why can't we just go to Dad's?"

*(In MOM's voice.)* "Your father is a worthless deadbeat who is cheating you out of child support because he's a selfish addict."

"Oh."

Again, most of it went over my head, at least at that moment. I began to wonder how they could have ever been in love.



Finally, I was allowed to visit again, and I could be with Johnnie! Dad's mom, my abuela, moved in with him to keep a watchful eye. It put mom at ease. And to commemorate the reunion, we celebrated by eating ice cream for dinner followed by Disney fireworks. Our backyard faced the amusement park. I loved watching Tinkerbell descend down off the top of the Matterhorn. IT WAS MAGICAL!

*Sounds of fireworks. Lights reflect the explosions.*

And as the explosions of the fireworks smashed the last of their brilliance into the night sky, Dad disappeared into the dark, leaving me in the care of Abuela.

*Sounds of fireworks FADE OUT; light of the fireworks also FADES OUT.*

I would drift to dreams of riding Johnnie in mid air, soaring over colorful rainbows. Johnnie would transform into a magical unicorn and I, into a pretty-pretty princess. (*She mimics royalty waving to her subjects.*) As the night became her quietest, I found myself waking. It was that instant feeling of emptiness that stirred me. Dad was still gone.

While building the courage to leave the security of Abuela's bed, high beams from an oncoming car shot through the bedroom window, rolling alongside the wall. I froze in anticipation. And then they rolled away, and my heart sank. Our home was at the end of a slow turn; a dozen or so more vehicles would pass. And at last, one pulls into the driveway, engine cuts off, door opens, shuts, and out stumbles my father. He's home; for now.

Breathing more calmly, I pull up the covers and force my eyes closed to dream again. "Johnnie, Johnnie, Johnnie." Before first light, I go straight to the garage. But Johnnie's gone. I look all over the house inside and out. My

bike was: a) missing; b) lost; or c) stolen. *(Pause.)* I blamed my dad. He often kept his garage door open at lengths of time when unloading his work truck. But being an optimist and a great problem solver, I got every scratch piece of paper to make reward signs. My dad even offered blueprint paper. Then we went door-to-door passing out flyers and posting them throughout the neighborhood.

That week was T-O-U-G-H. Missing bike on the brain. I feared and agonized that Johnnie would never be found. I called Dad's every night leaving messages with Abuela. He never returned them. I could tell she was upset con mí papa because of things happening there; he kept taking off and so forth. *(Speaking on the phone.)* "But, Abuela, did you see my bike?"

The school week finally ended with a "Just say NO to Drugs" assembly held in our cafeteria with crime fighting dog, McGruff, accompanied by Officer Smith. They would speak to us about the dangers and horrible affects of illicit drugs. As it progressed, I could feel myself becoming uneasy at the sight of a shadow box display case. Most of the contents looked all too familiar. *(She pulls out a box.)* In my head, I could hear a checklist: "Baggies?" Check. "Bong?" Check. "Spoon?" Check. "Tin foil?" Check. "Syringe?" Check. "Things that you find at your father's." CHECK!

Feeling alone, I nervously scanned the faces of my classmates trying to find my match. *(Singing as she searches among her peers.)* "One of these things is not like the others. One of these things just doesn't belong. Can you tell which thing is not like the others. By the time I finish my song?" At the end of the presentation, I did not rise from my seat nor did I join my class as they exited for recess. My teacher recognized the change in me. *(In TEACHER's voice.)* "Is everything all right?"

I couldn't speak. I've never been one to be speechless. Struggling, attempting the words, only sounds left my mouth and tears gushed from eyes. I began shaking. My mother was called in. We never spoke of it again. But my eyes were open, and I began to see my father in a new light.

Despite all that had happened, that evening I was sent to Dad's.

The next morning, I rose before dawn and posted more reward signs. The day felt new, promising, and brimming with hope. And I shook off whatever happened at school. "Today, I'm going to find you, Johnnie, I just know it!"

But first, we were going to the beach. Dad's an excellent surfer, and today was the day he was going to finally teach me. I felt brave enough to eat sand. Hearing my dad... (*She makes the sound of a honking trunk.*) I grabbed my bag. "I'm coming!" I jumped into his truck, and we were on our way to catch some waves!

As we drove, Dad made a quick stop. He parked down the block from a "friend's" familiar place of business. (*IMAGE of a pawn shop.*) The store appeared to be closed. (*In FATHER's voice.*) "M'ija, I'll be right back." I didn't understand why he would park so far. (*Long pause.*) We weren't there for too long when my dad came out. (*She becomes her FATHER.*) "Fuck you, motherfucker! No, fuck you! N' FUCK YOU! Go fuck yourself, then!" It went back and forth for a bit. Then, Dad got back in the truck. Angrily he lit a cigarette. (*Blows cigarette smoke as FATHER.*) My brimming hope began to slip. And, as we pulled away, the lights in the pawn shop came up.

And there, sitting front and center in the window and on display, was my Johnnie.

Sabanos *My Parents Sleep On*, 54x75 on bed sheet, Chicanas Only at Mexi-Arte in Austin, TX, April 2011.



## FROM WHEN SONG LEADERS GO BAD

Elizabeth Isela Szekeresh

*On stage sits an easel with a chart paper that reads “GO TEAM!” outlined in many colors. On the other side of the stage sits a cheer bag on a chair. Throughout the play, SONG LEADER reads off and points to each chart.*

*Enter SONG LEADER in a song leader uniform dancing to high energy pop music.*

If I were a superhero, pompoms would be my magical weapon!

Ready? OK! (*Cheers.*) “B-I-P-O-L-A-R! Bipolar, polar, polar, yeah!” Go Team!

*(Revealing new chart paper)* Bipolar Disorder: A major affective mood disorder marked by severe mood swings (manic or depressive episodes).

Recently, I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Not Bipolar Type I, but Bipolar Type II—kinda like the lighter side of crazy. But I prefer the term manic depressive—it’s much more dramatic. It has taken ten years to get this diagnosis. First it was depression. Then depression with ADHD, and finally bipolar disorder; either way, undiagnosed mental illness doesn’t exactly make you the most popular kid in the class. I’m not sure if it’s because I’m brown or have a mental illness, or that I’m obsessed with sexuality or that I’m weird, but being different in the way that I was different was not good in Huntington Beach, California. (*Cheers.*) Surf City!

*(Revealing new chart paper)* Mania: grandiose thinking, racing thoughts, distractibility, taking big or unusual risks.

For some reason, the mania was the hardest to see: the uncontrollable

spending sprees, (*very fast*) the episodes of rapid speech that would overtake me. And the burns. (*Points to various body parts.*) Motorcycle burn. Curling iron burn. Placing my hand on an almost red-hot burner burn. Tea kettle on the stove for twelve hours burn.

And then there are the short lived hobbies: (*Pulls representational items from a cheer bag.*) playing bass, growing roses, soap making, mosaics, ballet.... (*Holds up coin belly dancing scarf and dances around.*) The usual. And then there is the stimulus seeking behavior.

(*New chart paper.*) Symptoms of depression include, loss of energy, oversleeping, recurrent thoughts of death and suicide, and self-destructive behavior.

Ready? OK! (*Cheers.*) "When you're feeling down and blue, cut your arms, you'll feel like new!" Go Cutting!

I started cutting around nineteen. I didn't cut that deep. Cat scratches really. But it was the ritual: Closing the blinds, playing loud classical music. (*Tchaikovsky's "Sleeping Beauty Ballet" is heard.*) Turning my room into a cave. Sitting up in my bed, my arm resting on my knee, palm up. (*Takes a Spyderco knife out of bra.*) And in my other hand, my knife, so heavy, so reassuring, so simple. The click. (*Opens blade up.*) The cut. (*Cuts inside of forearm.*) Taking action against the depression, doing to myself what others did to me. In control of my pain. (*Closes knife and licks wounds.*) But I had to stop.

*The theme song of Beverly Hills 90210 is heard.*

(*New chart paper.*) Tori Spelling, episode on cutting, *Beverly Hills 90210*.

It wasn't even a main cast member who was cutting! It was like Donna's best friend. How could I be doing something that was on *90210*? Where was (*hits*

*her chest with fists*) my pride? (*Hits her chest with fists.*) My self-respect? So I stopped. (*Pause.*) Well, except for the two times I cut drunk to end arguments. An affective tool but a little passive aggressive. The urge still comes now and again, but all I think about is Donna's friend. Fucking Donna's friend.

(*New chart paper.*) It is estimated that 48%–62% of people on the bipolar spectrum have a co-occurring substance abuse/alcoholism issue.

Ready? OK! (*Cheers.*) "Have a feeling you must numb? Try some vodka and some rum!" Yay lush!

Genetically I am fucked. Choose a side of the family, white or brown, and you'll find a little bit of mental illness here, a little bit of alcoholism there, and it has all channeled down to me. Not that I'm complaining; it makes for great stories (*Winks at audience.*). An alcoholic/bipolar combo is a morning after like no other. They exploded together my freshman year of college in a marriage of pure "oh fuck!" The thing is, if I'm already on the impulsive side of an episode, there is nothing like pouring a little vodka/rum/tequila over the situation to really stir things up. I start saying yes to all sorts of things. Like at a piercing party. Shot. "Sure, I'll get a piercing." Shot. Observation: "That girl is getting her labia pierced. . . . Well, of course I know where a labia is!" But really, I don't. I just know it's "down there." Shot. "Pshhh, that's not such a big deal, I could do that." Shot. "I will do that!" Next thing you know, I'm in a back bedroom with a piercer from a shop in Sacramento with my brand new labia ring. And I only had to walk one mile back home to the dorms.

Honestly, I did some crazy shit! I'm not saying that all alcoholics are bipolar or all bipolar people are alcoholics. Just this one. For me, I really can't separate the two. They blossomed together and left their petals of destruction all over my life.

There are the silly stories. And then there are the real stories. The decade

of three a.m. Of rooms spinning. Of making a little home for myself on the bathroom floor next to the toilet. Of making myself puke to feel better, smelling my bile and whatever alcohol that was left in my stomach. Kinda cute in college, but sad and pathetic when everyone else is moving on with careers and families but you.

No DUI. No jail time. Not fulltime job functional, but functional. Eventually living the binge drinker daily grind: Thursday, try and go out; Friday and Saturday, go out for sure; Sunday, hangover and useless; Monday and Tuesday, somewhat productive but lots of shame/alcoholic tears; Wednesday, perk up and prep for the weekend; and back at Thursday again. Repeat. For a few years.

The real feelings, my drunken tube-top ramblings at three a.m.: Looking at the mirror through a fuzzy focus with mascara blackened eyes after a night of drinking away my dreams and my heart. The white dove beating inside my chest, behind my sternum, trapped inside my ribcage, begging me to crack myself open and free her from the confinement of my soul/body.

Getting sober led to my diagnosis. In early sobriety I was still diagnosed with ADHD and depression and taking meds for it. If you're drinking and acting crazy, it kinda makes sense. But if you're not drinking and still acting crazy, while under psychiatric care, then there is something else going on.

Okay, to be fair, before I got sober I didn't actually tell my psychiatrist that maybe I had a little drinking problem. All right, I straight up lied. So when I finally got sober, I was too ashamed to tell him. Note to self: withdrawing from alcohol and neglecting to inform the doctor prescribing you brain chemicals—NEVER a good idea.

But whatever, it took about another year of sobriety, another dark, dark



depression, a new psychiatrist, one I didn't lie to, to receive the correct diagnosis: Bipolar Disorder and a new round of meds.

*(New chart paper.)* Medication can: 1) Control and help resolve an episode; 2) Delay future episodes; 3) Reduce the severity of symptoms.

Ready? OK! *(Cheers.)* “Lamictal, Abilify, Seroquel. Oh me! Oh my!”  
Gooooo meds!

Medication and I are frenemies. It started with Zoloft at nineteen. I must admit, I wasn't quite ready to make a lifestyle change because I had the “I'm going on Zoloft tomorrow so let's get drunk tonight” party. Also, one night drinking, I took too many pills; it wasn't a suicide attempt, it was me just drama queening it up. My friends called poison control, and poison control laughed at them because it was like three low dose Zoloft pills. But just to be on the safe side, I decided to lose the pills in the mess I called my room, and I didn't touch medication for the next five years.

But once I started up again, there was no going back. In order: Lexapro, Concerta, Wellbutrin, Cymbalta, Lamictal, Abilify, Seroquel, Abilify again, Topomax, Prozac, noncompliance, Lamictal.

Each one has its own lovely array of side effects. With Lexapro, I had to look up to see a curb. Cymbalta just spaced me the fuck out. I did weird twitchy neck things on Zoloft. Abilify just made me fat and tired, and Seroquel put me to sleep. Topamax, otherwise known as dope-a-max, did curb my appetite. Cognitive dulling didn't seem like such a bad trade off while shedding my Abilify weight. And if you ever wanna be celibate, get yourself some Prozac—you'll never want sex again. Ever. I did go without medication for about six months and tried the whole “mind freedom experience,” but it was disastrous. Bottom line, I need meds.

The sick thing about needing medication is that it is fucked up shit! The side effects I just mentioned are nothing. The scary ones require red labels on the side of bottles. Such as: “Consult with your doctor if you plan to become pregnant while using this medication.” Jesus Christ! If it is going to fuck up a fetus, what the hell is it doing to me?! But it’s like I need them. I need them.

*(New chart paper.)* Mayo Clinic researchers have found that Bipolar Disorder is a more costly chronic condition than diabetes, depression, asthma, and coronary artery disease.

Ready? OK! *(Cheers.)* “Need a psych? But you can’t pay. Your ass is broke! Get outta the way!” FUCK YOU, health insurance!

Getting your diagnosis is half the battle. Actually, it’s a third; the other two thirds are access to a doctor and medication. Finding adequate healthcare is just as or more frustrating than the disorder itself; especially if you don’t have health insurance. It’s like “Yay! I have the right diagnosis, and I know what the tools are!” But fuck me if I can get them. I really can’t say who I hate more, the asshole psychiatrist who thinks he is a god with a prescription pad or the pharmaceutical companies who make medication so fucking expensive.

By far the lowest moment of all my depressions was that last phone call when I knew I was priced out. I hung up the phone and started to cry. Not the tears softly welling up in my eyes or the gentle weeping with tears trickling down my cheeks. Oh no. It was the *(sob)* guttural sobbing with snot coming out of my nose crying. I was like, “Hello! I’m trying to get help here! What the fuck else do you want me to do?!”

Thank god I didn’t have my “solution” at that moment because all my previous thoughts of writing “The Note.” Goodwilling my stuff, cleaning out my files—which really means getting rid of the shit I didn’t want my mom to

find—or thoughts of who would find me, wouldn't have mattered. The only question I would have had was: to the temple, to the forehead, or under the chin. I think I would have chosen to the temple. (*Points to forehead.*) Okay, so like, to the forehead; I've heard of people surviving it with like, a missing eye. (*Points to under the chin.*) Under the chin, the bullet could go right through my face and leave me alive but maimed. Nawh, how hopeless I felt at that moment, I would choose (*points to temple and pulls trigger*) fatal and final. To do what I couldn't do: Shut my head the fuck up.

(*Long Pause.*) Okay, so that was depressing!

Ready? OK! (*Cheers.*) Want to die but changed your mind—hope is really hard to find!" (*Softly.*) Yay hope.

I can't tell you what got me out of it or pinpoint the moment in time. However, a crippling lethargic depression coupled with an empty bank account does sorta kill your energy to find the means to your end.

But going through all of this puts life into perspective. Now when I have a super shitty, beat-me-down kind of day I think, "Well, I didn't drink or kill myself today, so it can't be that bad." You gotta set the bar of success really low on those days. Like low, low.

I hold my sobriety closer than my sanity. If I'm sober, I have a chance at staying sane. But if I drink, it will all go to shit really, really, quick. If I had to choose between the two, I'd rather go out quick and fast my way than endure the excruciating slow and painful decline of alcoholism losing everything I've built and created.

This is why I rage.