



*ALEXANDRA ROWAN FOUNDATION VOICES OF TOMORROW SCHOLARSHIP WINNER: JORDAN MONTERO, NONFICTION*

Twenty-odd summers ago, I was born in the Salinas Valley, a sunken piece of land off of California's Central Coast. My grandparents settled there after years in the Bracero program, after the countless trips across borderlands, into that hollow cool where work was available year round. For decades they labored upon the land, picking crops 'till their backs broke, tending to a community that could not be as easily uprooted as they were. My dad was born into this valley, my mother — who is a product of California's Inland Empire — says that he'll die there, that the land inevitably reaps what it sows.

I was born into this legacy: laborers, amateur musicians, and a history that would only be as long as memory could serve. I was born into corridos, tall tales, and old-world superstitions — the only imports my grandparents could bring with them. A century before my family settled in the valley, in an East side low-income apartment with ceilings that snowed when the upstairs neighbors got home — John Steinbeck was born into that same valley, prophesying a curse in the clouds that settle upon the land. I grew up "East of Eden," in the American-epic backdrop "Of Mice and Men," where the valley's beauty remained just as cruel. The Salinas Valley is known as "the salad bowl of the world," producing the nation's largest amount of iceberg and romaine. But Steinbeck's prophecy lives on: with underfunded public schools, a homicide rate double the national average, and a population where only 15.5% have a Bachelor's degree (and only 3.6% have an advanced degree) — despite its agricultural fertility, the land kills anything that tries to survive.

I made it to UC Berkeley because the "luxury" of a quality education was not just a desire, but a necessity. I am pursuing a B.A. in English Literature with an emphasis in Poetry and minored in Journalism, specifically focusing on the crux of culture, pedagogy and the politics of storytelling. Throughout my undergraduate career I've polished my writing, editing, and critical thinking skills; conducted independent months-long research projects; and taken two graduate-level courses at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism. Coming from a lineage where most cannot read or write (and entering a world where more becomes auto-generated), I studied literature and creative writing because I believe in the profound power of language.

I may still die deep in the Salinas Valley, in a plot among my ancestors who dreamed of doing more than they could afford. But if I do, I will die there knowing they gave me the opportunity to do it all, to tell the stories they never could. I will come back to the land of the rundown beige, suburban houses fixed between those crescent mooned mountains, knowing I had the privilege to choose my story's end.

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