

Selection from

***Your Sun, Manny: A Prose Poem Memoir*, by Marie Harris**

Marie Alexander Poetry Series, No. 2  
published by New Rivers Press, 1999

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**Preface**

Even now, with years of journal entries and boxes of documents to consult, I'm not sure I can really explain or reconstruct all the circumstances that conspired to deliver a teenage Puerto Rican boy to our dooryard. At the time, my husband and I were living a simple, full, and peaceful life. Then—what? The flash of a serious face on TV, the voice, the plea . . .

Many people figure in Manny's story: his adoptive father, step-brothers, blood brother, our relatives and neighbors, his friends and girlfriends, teachers, and employers. Each would tell the tale differently. *Your Sun, Manny* is my version of the story that I have collected from various emblematic episodes into a kind of prose collage—my words, Manny's words, and other people's anecdotes, letters, reports, notes, and conversations. It is at once a personal memoir and a tribute to everyone who had taken part in this adventure, especially Manny himself.

## Driving Lessons

Before our Town Dump became first a landfill then a waste transfer station, I'd back up to the edge of a smoldering mountain of garbage, let down the tailgate, climb into the bed, and fling trash bags, sheetrock scraps, dead appliances, broken rakes, used tar paper, tangled chicken wire, and anything else left over from our week's labor onto the pile. Smoke of a particular, unmistakable scent drifted in the air and beer bottles exploded like muffled firecrackers.'

Neighbors lingered, exchanging gossip, keeping an eye out for anything that had no business being thrown away. Not infrequently, items brought to be discarded never hit the ground. Even I was not immune. I acquired a boy's bike this way—lacking only a pedal—a pair of waders in need of duct tape and a dusty pink bathroom scale.

Ray the dump keeper knew just about everyone in town, by sight if not by name. *Good morning, Mrs. Rockefeller*, he'd shout as I eased our rusting truck to a stop.

It was our only means of transportation in those days, the 1965 International pickup Charter had driven twice across the country and twice rebuilt the engine. I liked driving it despite having to double clutch on the downshift and haul on the steering wheel for all but the gentlest turns.

Charter loved that truck. He kept its oil changed and its innards lubed. He washed it regularly and in winter took care to spray water up under the wheel wells to remove road salt. One Christmas I had the bench seat reupholstered for him.

In the summer of his sixteenth year, Bill took the wheel. Charter sat to the right of the floor-mounted gearshift and they set off down the driveway. Within minutes the truck reappeared with a fresh dent in the left front fender. Bill took a slow turn at the mailboxes and kept on turning. Into the phone pole.

*Anybody hurt?*

*Anybody hurt?* was what my Dad used to say as each of his ten children in turn sent moving vehicles off embankments, into drifts, caroming into other cars and skidding into ditches.

On a snowy Good Friday, Sebastian passed his driving test in my old blue Pinto. The following summer he was rear-ended at a red light by a licenseless, uninsured teenaged girl.

We both tried to teach Manny, but each lesson ended with him slumped over the steering wheel, defeated. Mr. Towle of Towle's Driving School had better success, though he did suggest that Manny take his course a second time. Mr. Towle wore a dark suit with a red tie. He drove a spiffy black Pontiac. Manny drove his spiffy black Pontiac. Down dirt roads and side roads and main roads and highways. For six weeks. (Mr. Towle is uncomfortable with failure. In his quiet way.) And on the roads for another six weeks. Manny passed the driving test. Mr. Towle is authorized to administer the written part of the test orally should he deem that necessary. He did. Manny's license arrived in the mail.

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The wet snow that fell last night is melting in patches. Manny drives slowly down the dirt road in the Chevy longbed we'd bought for him from a guy who owned a flooring business. He accelerates a little on the paved part. No weight in the back. Used tires. The truck begins to plane just as we reach the blind curve. When he swerves and hits the pine tree, my glasses fly off my face and Manny utters the one word he's never said in front of me.

## Family

Charter's father invites family to lunch when he has something serious on his mind. Today, I am his guest. Shortly after the sandwiches arrive, he says, *It is a great burden to me that my family name is about to disappear forever, as my son has no children.* (Manny of the dark skin and slow ways is not his idea of an heir.) At a complete loss, I push back my chair and leave the restaurant.

Charter's mother Louise fancies herself an artist. For a time the notion of Manny as a grandson amuses her because he paints watercolors.

Charter's sister Charity has difficulties of her own. But she is a good Auntie and picks just the right things to give him for birthdays.

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My father likes to give children nicknames, as though he were the secret author of their lives. He named me "China" in the edgy handwriting etched on the back of my baby pictures. When his eighth child impended, he was driving, as he told it, on a highway in upstate New York and saw a road sign that caught his fancy. *Herkimer*. Maureen was "Herkie" for as long as it took for Mom to put an end to it. So when he met Manny—our deliberate boy—Dad dubbed him "The Green Hornet." Manny wears that moniker proudly, like a patch sewn on the sleeve of a ski jacket.

My mother is the author of Manny's style. It is she who chooses the perfect fishing vest from the Orvis catalogue. She who sends him subtly patterned shirts and preppy pants. He loves her taste and tells her so. *I always look great!*

My parents have many grandchildren. Manny is but one more.

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From me he accrues aunts and uncles and cousins by the score. But it's Annie who lends her husband and their children to Manny, understanding what we have done and who he might need . . . my next sister who well knows that family is a structure without a blueprint.

Manny's two older brothers fold him into their world as if he'd always been there. When Bill visits there are long hours of watercoloring and so many

jokes that Manny learns how to make one. Sebastian takes him away to beaches and ice cream parlors where they talk about personal things. And hoop. Endless hoop in our driveway where the basket is nailed to the phone pole four inches too low.

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Then there's José, his blood, younger brother, reluctant champion. The brother a foster family kept when they gave Manny back.

*Come on out, José. This  
is where Manny lives.*

Maria's passenger opens the car door and places his city shoes on the gravel one foot at a time. His eyes dart nervously from us to our house to the forest.

He is a small, skinny figure next to this blood brother. Not similar at all. He wears his straight black hair combed back and long; Manny's is short and curly. Manny's features are bold, his skin deep brown; José's face is delicate, chiseled, pale tan.

*Would you guys like a sandwich?*

*Please.* That's Manny.

*I don't care.* That's José. He means yes.

He asks quick questions. He doesn't smile. As evening approaches, he keeps glancing at our big curtainless windows.

*What kind of animals you got up here?*

We all walk him to the car, everyone relieved but Manny.

*Come up and stay here again.* That's Manny.

His brother turns, hands shoved into the pockets of his black leather jacket, thin shoulders shrugged against a cold wind.

*You know, you don't have to get adopted if you don't want to. They can't make you.* That's José.

José keeps visiting. His only option if he wants to see Manny. He calls on the phone. *It's me, José.* He learns how to ride the bus from Springfield and how to change in Boston.



We've dropped the two of them at the mall for a couple of hours. When we return, they're standing outside. José has a stricken look on his face.

*There ain't no Puerto Ricans in there!*

*had a great time with my  
brouther. He came to my house  
at 11:00. I had a great  
Thanksgiving over the  
weekend. I made brifoes for my  
brouther.*

Visit by visit, José widens his world to include these woods, these people, our lives.

## Jobs and Money

By the time Manny graduates high school, he will have passed a dozen training courses that could have him gardener's assistant carpenter's assistant plumber's assistant veterinary assistant daycare assistant cook's assistant cleaner's assistant factory worker. He will have been taught how to read the want ads, fill out a simple application, what to say at the interview. He will know exactly what to wear and be able to explain all about good work habits.

But his crossed-out forms and mumbled interviews will never be enough. We will prevail on boss after boss to give him a try. We'll drive him to summer jobs and, after he gets his license, make sure he's on time. When he's fired for working too slowly or talking back, we'll find a different kind of a job, a new boss who might understand. When he no longer lives with us, Manny will learn about social workers and soup kitchens.

Manny likes money. He doesn't mind working for it and he's pleased when people give it to him for his birthday. If money exists in some neutral place—change jar bureau top washing machine car—it could be his. Paper money is confusing because when he pays with it he's never sure how much he gets back. Manny understands quarters.

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Manny opens a bank account because we are teaching him to save.

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The fair comes to Rochester's shabby north end while the days are still warm and the last of summer's breezes tease the night air.

(By day, quilts hooked rugs jams and jellies baked goods perfect ruby beets prize roosters and ducks 4-H'ers napping on hay bales beside their lambs and heavy-uddered cows. At night, harness racing rides games of chance knots of boys and skeins of girls.)

*I was thinking*, Manny says as he rinses his dinner plate. *Josh and them are probably going tomorrow night*. Edging toward his point. *I was thinking about*

going. And Charter tells him, *Fine. Go up to the bank after school and take \$10 out of your account.*

Manny puts his green savings passbook and a yellow withdrawal slip into his back pocket. *See you shortly*, he says, just the way Charter always does when he leaves the house. When Josh and them arrive, Manny comes down dressed in jeans, a short-sleeved red shirt, and a bandanna tied around his head. Charter tucks a five in his pocket. *Have a sausage-and-pepper sub for me.*

All week, each evening before supper and homework, Manny goes to the bank. Each evening, after supper and homework, Manny goes to the fair. Night after night he returns with stuffed bears and Snoopys, posters, keychains, mugs. *I won. I won again.* He gives away his loot. To us, to the neighborhood children.

And then I happen upon his bank book, the gray numbers—\$10. \$60. \$25. \$90. In total: more than \$400—

*Manny, how could you possibly have spent this much money?*

Head bowed, shoulders collapsed, on trial . . . he can't say. So we send him to his room to think and tell the truth. And he comes back down in a while. He says: *I bought marijuana.*

This explains it.

*From whom?*

*From Josh and them.*

So we confront Josh and it isn't true and really Manny has spent his entire summer's earnings at the fair—balls and darts and hoops, rides and rides for friends, twenties handed out, change stuffed in his pocket, uncounted.

Charter looks at me and says, *He must have felt like a king.*

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*Date 10/11/89*

*When I get out of high school I want to be a ski instuarter I like to ski a lout and I think skiing is fun to do.*



10/24/89

*I will be a Dad when I get out of high school. and I have to find a good job so I can pay rent, heat, phone, for the house. I have to have a nouf money to buy gas for my truck.*