

Manuel Solano

*Artissima*

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My life in the last seven or eight years has been a continuous process of adapting to new life-altering, often limiting circumstances and traumatic events through harnessing my sense of self and putting it into my work. When life, health, people and resources fail, my sense of who I am and who I want to become has often been the one force holding me together. Arriving in Berlin and finding relative stability for the first time in many years has almost felt like a shock, which has both allowed some dust to settle and also stirred up old demons. Ever since I started Antiretroviral treatment for HIV, I have had very vivid, recurring dreams; the characters of which have changed throughout the years. Now in Berlin, after so much recent personal turmoil; moving countries, death, grief, heartbreak, and constantly learning who I have to become in order to be myself, my dreams have started to become overwhelmingly about my early childhood, and more specifically about my friendship with my best friend, Karla. While living in relative stability where I am now, these dreams have begun recurring obsessively two or three times a week, and it has dawned on me and made real the separation from my childhood friend as the original trauma that has shaped the person I am today.

The shower scene depicts Karla and myself doing a little dance that we did in the shower when we were very little. It was an innocent children's game, although it was also sexually charged. We felt completely safe and connected and we loved each other intensely. I was an introvert, she was an extrovert and always drew me out. She was my link to the human race. I molded my image of girlhood from her.

The iguanas depict a moment from when I was six or seven years old. At the time, I was obsessed with iguanas and other reptiles, and found them both extremely cool and beautiful. The first time I saw iguanas in real life, my family and I were on vacation to a beach hotel in Manzanillo, Colima, Mex, and I remember a feeling that was almost like being starstruck. I was also very frustrated because I wanted to see them up close, I wanted to touch and hold them, I wanted to hang out with them all the time. But the iguanas would bask in the sun on the lawns and run away and disappear as soon as any human approached. My dad told me to try to approach them like catching a pigeon, that I had to let them become accustomed to my presence and closeness. So I spent countless hours standing in front of them, inching each foot forward once every long while, all the while the iguanas tracked me closely with their eyes, until I managed to get up close to a group of them – to the point where my little sneaker was nudging the side of one of them. The iguanas looked up at me, I remember being struck by the fact that they look at you right in the eye. I just stood there with them, we stared at each other. I didn't try to pick one up, as I felt that we had a kind of mutual agreement, an unspoken mutual respect that had been earned by slowly allowing each other closeness, which might have been broken if I had tried to hold one of them.

The painting of my grandparents and my young mother and aunt depicts my aunt Lola's birthday. It depicts my mother's family as a young and aspirational working-class family with hopes of becoming more independent. Eventually, after that photo was taken, my grandparents decided to work together and open their own little food business. They had married without much; my grandmother was a girl from the country who moved to the big city, while my grandfather was a poor street child from the city who became a driven young man with dreams of giving his family much more than he ever had growing up. They conquered all odds with their years of tireless and endless hard work.

The last painting depicts me and Karla also around age 7, sneaking into her parents' bedroom and under their bed, to check out a book they had there about sex.

I am in an odd place because on the one hand, I can see how many positive traits within my personality have been honed through my memories of Karla's character, which I so admired. I am now the most like myself I have ever been in my life, in part because I am able to recognize what aspects of my identity I want to bring forth – this is a feeling as close to happiness as I have experienced in my entire adult life. I am also able to acknowledge the huge positive changes that my work has brought to me. On the other hand, I know full well the irrational and inescapable nature of trauma and can see how my life is going to be a constant process of adaptation and transition – strategies for surviving trauma.

– Manuel Solano