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Imitating Life

by James Noguera

I can hear the other children in the park below, the same as yesterday, as the day before: shouting, playing, having fun. The sounds are always there, always the same. And I am always here, the same, to hear them. I listen every day, trying to understand the sounds. But I know I can't; I don't make them.

I'm alone in a small room in a small apartment, surrounded mostly by off-white walls. Maybe they're actually white. I can never tell. There are other things: a TV, a bed, a Super Nintendo, game cartridges, a VCR, and a small collection of VHS tapes.

In the living room is where Dad's books are. There are a lot of books: encyclopedias, biographies, textbooks, novels. Dad doesn't seem to have any preference. Many of them have pictures, which I really like: Abraham Lincoln, the Earth, a volcano. Most are old, some torn. I wonder where he gets them.

Dad is in the kitchen, as usual, watching the small TV set he has there, probably drinking a beer and smoking a cigarette. Mom is out, probably working. My sister is in the other room, also watching TV.

I don't have any friends. And the other things in my room don't always work. So I go to the living room and pick up one of the books and sit down. I do this every day during the summer, trading one book for another, searching. But I can still hear them; there are no other sounds when I read, nothing except the inevitable turning of a page.

* * *

I've always felt different. It was just physical at first: having a separate body, my own brain, but it developed into something more. I began life speaking the wrong language, Spanish, when everyone else, except Mom and Dad, spoke English. Mom came here to America in a plane in her twenties from half an island called the Dominican Republic. She met Dad, a poor Puerto Rican with four kids by two women, and married him. To Mom's credit, though, she did try to leave Dad once. She went to DR with my sister and me without telling him. He was pretty upset. He wrecked Aunt's house, where we were living, in a drunken rage, we later found out. Good thing Mom had found a new place to live. We left Manhattan for the Bronx, which was a good move because it took a while for Dad to find us. Then one night he came knocking on the door. Mom didn't look through the peephole. I was right next to her when she opened. She spoke with him with the door ajar. He put his foot in the crack. I thought maybe he had a gun or a knife. Maybe he did. Luckily, though, Mom let him in, and we became a family again.

Dad wasn't so good at being a dad. I wouldn't have minded so much if he hadn't made it his mission to make my life worse; he'd never let a day go by without verbally insulting me and he'd beat me whenever he was angry with me. I don't know why he always had it out for me. But one good thing about him was that he had a lot of books.

Mom, on the other hand, raised my sister and me the best she could. Unfortunately, the best she could was the Boogie Down Bronx. I grew up around

poverty and crime, broken concrete and graffiti, blacks and Hispanics, rap and merengue. This made me realize two important things growing up. One, I was Hispanic. Why else did I speak Spanish? Why else was I living in the ghetto? Why else were my parents poor and foreign? And two, I was *not* Hispanic. Why else was I so pale? My nose so long? My hair so straight? Other kids looked at me and knew I was different. I had no choice but to agree.

Mom tried to provide me with a Dominican identity. She failed. Despite the trips to DR in the summer, I never felt very Dominican. I felt more Dominican than Puerto Rican, yes (I'd never been to PR or met any of Dad's family), but I felt more American than Dominican, and I didn't feel very American. Except in DR. There, I couldn't feel like anything other than the English-speaking, afraid-of-insects, afraid-of-the-sun, non-donkey-riding, non-swimming American I was.

In DR or the Bronx, I was always the stand-in for white people. I didn't even know what white people were really like. As far as I knew, white people lived in Manhattan. I only saw them on TV or in school as teachers, but I never knew them to exist outside in the real world. Did they just disappear after they had served their purpose?

Going to public school in the Bronx didn't make things any easier. At PS 26, few kids would talk to me. I couldn't blame them. I was shy, or, as far as anybody else knew, mute. I definitely didn't talk to any girls. I was talked to by girls occasionally, though often by mistake. My bully seemed like the only one that would talk to me. I was, according to him, a rock-and-roll star; he would yank on my long locks as he teased me.

In the third grade, I met Naim, my first friend and best friend. We used to play Super Nintendo at my house every day after school. But at twelve, he left to live with his mom in Africa, since his parents were divorced. This is probably why I later became friends with Xavier, who I had met in the fifth grade. We had sat next to each other and would talk during class. The teacher would get upset and call him my girlfriend. After Naim left, we would talk on the phone for hours after school. He was, much to my luck, fat and tall. His size more than anything else made him cool, which made me sort of cool. I just had to make sure the other kids saw us hanging out together.

X introduced me to three things that had a big impact on me growing up: hockey, pro wrestling, and heavy metal. I have X to thank for much of my "manliness."

I don't know what first got me hooked on hockey other than it was different. I would pretend to be Canadian so other people might understand. X and I would play, or try to play, in our roller blades in the park near my house. Nobody ever knew what sport we were playing, and judging by the way we played, neither did we. We even had a fake hockey team, The Bronx Icebergs, and made T-shirts. But nobody ever showed up to practice. I never seriously entertained the idea of becoming a pro hockey player, though; I just wanted to be Steve Yzerman.

The glittering, bleeding world of professional wrestling came next. X was obsessed with pro wrestling, especially with the wrestling group the NWO, the New World Order. So was the whole school. This was during pro wrestling's heyday in the mid-90's, before we all found out that it's fake. In school, you were either in the NWO or you were picked on. I knew X, who was in the NWO, so I guess I was in it, too. But I got picked on, anyway. I wouldn't be deterred, though; I'd later want to become a pro wrestler.

Heavy metal, on the other hand, was an acquired taste. The screams of Sepultura just didn't do it for me at first. I couldn't understand how X enjoyed that

kind of music. Then I heard Metallica, the marijuana of heavy metal, for the first time and got addicted. I knew there was no turning back; as far as most people in the Bronx were concerned this was "Devil music." X only got away at school with liking heavy metal because of his size. I had to hide. This wasn't such a big deal until later in life.

Before I left PS 26, the school became MS 330. That meant three more years in the same school before having to go to high school and, eventually, growing up; three more years of the safety of having X as my friend. But come the sixth grade, X and I had different classes. I suppose it was inevitable. I did the best I could, which is to say that I didn't talk to anyone. I did the same in the seventh grade. But in the eighth, something unexpected happened: I made a friend.

He was a big-headed, big-eared Dominican kid named Uriah with curly black hair. He started talking to me on the first day of class. It felt normal, like what's supposed to happen. I thought I had finally been accepted. Uri would tell me years later, however, that the only reason he started talking to me was because I was the only "white" one in the class, which he thought was cool in a weird way. Uri and I chatted every day like we were going steady, ironic since neither one of us had even touched a girl, except by accident or in ways appropriate in public or with family.

Uri wasn't like me, though. He had friends. That's how I came to know Angel, another Dominican. Uri and Angel had met while taking bilingual ed together. That's how it was with the bilingual ed kids; they all seemed to know each other, like a clique, and they would break out into Spanish for no reason in the middle of a conversation, always sounding really cool when they did. I understood the language but never knew what they were talking about. Unlike Uri, who had uncomfortably light skin, Angel's skin was darker, more sympathetically Hispanic. He was short and heavyset, wore glasses, and had a crew cut. I'd look at him and feel comfort: merengue, bachata, *arroz con leche*, *habichuelas con dulce*. They made me feel more Dominican.

"Shut up, white bitch!" Uri would say.

We'd play video games at Angel's house every day after school. Uri would dominate me at Super Smash Bros for n64. I hated losing, especially when Uri would rub it in. My wrists would be sore, my palms sweaty. Which would actually make the controller easier to handle: the joystick would be less stiff, the buttons more responsive. Still, I'd watch Uri beat my character, poor Pikachu, over and over again, beaming him across the stage round after round.

Video game sessions were always a rough experience, like a kind of sociological experiment. Good players would gloat and claim superiority. Bad ones would complain and argue cheating. Losing meant humiliation, the imposition of someone else's will against your own. I hated Uri when we played Super Smash Bros.

But there was nothing else for guys like us, no other way we could demonstrate some sort of superiority; we all looked like we were eagerly anticipating puberty. The girls our age, fully developed breast-and-ass monsters, a fact that always makes me think about the hormones they put in livestock, were the first to let us know. They'd ignore us with their eyes, avoid all interaction with us like we were pedophiles, and, worst of all, make "eww" sounds.

"James likes Lena!"

"Eww!"

In high school, two important things happened to me for the first time. Besides puberty. I became popular and girls showed an interest in me. What the fuck happened to that?

When it came to which high school I'd be going to, I didn't have a choice. I had forfeited that ability when I only applied to two schools, both art schools - I had yet to learn the adult art of pessimism, or that I wasn't very good at drawing. I was zoned to Theodore Roosevelt, one of the worst high schools in the city, across the street from Fordham University, the best college in the Bronx. I knew that because I'd see the white students coming in and out, the plots green grass and archaic architecture, and the gate that surrounded and separated it from the world I was familiar with. I remember saying to myself, if I could make it there, I'd know I had succeeded.

Roosevelt had a bad reputation. It was tough, they said. There were gangs. And Metal detectors. It was filled with blacks and Hispanics. I was scared. I had grown up around blacks and Hispanics, but they hadn't grown up around people that looked like me. I represented to them people who had it better, like the people across the street. And with my long hair, I represented rap's mortal enemy: rock and roll.

Luckily for me, actually this is probably why I'm still alive, there were a lot of students there from MS 330. We had barely talked at 330, but at Roosevelt, we followed a different code. We knew it was better to be friends than to try to go it alone. Most of them were black. I don't understand why that made them cool, but it did. We would hang out. Sort of. When we saw each other. In the hallway. Outside, they would hang out. I would see them occasionally.

"What's up?"

"What up, James?"

I wasn't cool yet.

It was my freshman year. I did well. Academically. I was even taking math a year ahead of the other freshmen. I remember being the only kid in math class without a beard or facial hair, beside most of the ladies.

I still don't get how popularity works and so can't explain how it happened. But it was sort of like osmosis. I was surrounded by these cool, black ghetto guys. I wasn't anything like them at first, despite having grown up in the ghetto. But they grew on me, a lot more than I grew on them. We'd hang out every day after school. Or we'd cut class together. We'd play video games at my house. Or we'd backyard wrestle outside, often not a good idea for me. I started wearing baseball caps, baggy pants, big coats, and talking ghetto. In a sense, I became black.

Yet there were times I felt I stuck out.

"I hate white people, son," someone would say.

Everyone would look at me.

"James ain't white, though."

As for the girls, I understand that part even less. All I know is that as I became more popular, more and more girls started to show an interest in me. Everywhere I went, girls would approach me: at lunch, in the hall, outside the school, on the bus.

"I like your hair," they'd say, sometimes reaching for my head.

"Thanks."

I couldn't figure out why girls suddenly took an interest in me. Or what to do about it. Where the hell were they in middle school, when I knew who they were and could talk to them? Before they got pregnant.

"It's the hair," my black friends would say of my girly locks, attributing all the attention I was getting, and they weren't, to something they naturally didn't have.

You'd think there'd be no way for me to leave Roosevelt without getting laid. But you would be underestimating my powers to fuck up my own life. I'd make up reasons in my head why the girls weren't right for me: *Too ghetto*, or why I couldn't have them: *Her butt's too big*. The girls made a valiant effort. I just had too much control over my own actions.

Uri went to Christopher Columbus. I should transfer, he said. I wasn't so sure. It was a better school, he said. So was almost every other high school in the Bronx. He mentioned white girls. White girls?! Yes, white girls, he said. I transferred. Anyway, I was already doing badly at Roosevelt, the price of my popularity.

I had to wake up at six in the morning and take an hour-long bus ride every Monday through Friday. I would think about nothing and look out the window the whole route, wishing I were asleep at home. But when I stepped off the bus and onto Pelham Parkway, I almost didn't care. Pelham Parkway to me with its islands of green grass and trees and its white people, though mostly Albanians and Russians, was like the suburbs in the Bronx.

After my first few weeks, Uri got mad at me for something, I forget what, and stopped talking to me. I lost the only friend I came into Columbus with. I went from being the most popular I've ever been to being no one. I could bear the classes: the not knowing anyone, the no one talking to me. But I dreaded lunch. The lunchroom was always packed with hormones and crackles and gibberish, and there were long white tables of separation: one for Puerto Ricans, one for Dominicans, one for blacks, one for Albanians, one for Russians, and one for the goth and punk kids. I would get my lunch and eat standing up against a pillar until lunch was over. Once, I wore all black to try to impress the goth and punk kids. It worked. They asked me to sit at their table. Their friendliness took me off guard; I didn't say much. They thought I'd eventually come around. I never saw them again, not in the lunchroom. I had learned to avoid the lunchroom altogether, that the library was open the whole time. I owe much of my knowledge of Greek mythology to my deep-seated, often justified fear of people.

The idea that at Columbus I'd be starting over evaporated away. I stopped doing the homework. I started cutting class. I had already decided I didn't need school anymore; I would drop out. I didn't need a high school diploma: I would become a professional wrestler, all 120 pounds of me. Besides, a GED is like the same

thing and takes less time!

Mom was not happy. I told her my dream. She thought I was dumb. But I convinced her of my passion and that pro wrestling was a viable career, or at least one that made a lot of money. I promised to at least get a GED. Mom paid for wrestling school. I love her.

There were no wrestling schools in the Bronx. The closest one was in New Jersey: The Monster Factory, a promising name. Only, Dad would have to drive me. I was not excited by this, but I wanted to wrestle.

I had never seen white people in their natural habitat before, except for briefly on the streets of Manhattan or the Albanians and Russians of Pelham Parkway. I wondered what white people were really like: what clothes they usually wore, how they spoke among themselves, what they did. I wondered what they would think of me: if they would see me as one of them or if they would know that I was different.

The drive there was always an hour and forty-five minutes: an hour and forty-five minutes alone in a car with Dad, an hour and forty-five minutes of awkward silence set to the sounds of the road, an hour and forty-five minutes of nauseating car fumes and butterflies in my stomach and me wanting to use the bathroom but not saying anything, an hour and forty-five minutes of being driven further and further away from the Bronx and everything I grew up around and into the unknown whiteness of New Jersey.

Then Dad's car would pull up to the large Plexiglas window of The Monster Factory, my first glance at the white wrestling bodies, clad in bright colors. I'd step out and my legs would feel like spaghetti. I'd wonder if I smelled. I'd look down at myself: a white T-shirt, baggy gray sweatpants, shiny black sneakers. And go in. Dad would wait outside.

The first time Mom came with. We went in and asked for Larry, the owner. He was in his office. Larry and Mom spoke for awhile. Larry asked me a few questions and concluded that I was a "dreamer." I lowered my head in shame. Still, he agreed to take Mom's money and teach me pro wrestling.

The guys were nice if a little distant; wrestling is an interesting way of interacting with someone, I learned, where, despite the physical contact, you barely speak to each other. I would find out later in life that sex is the same way.

At the moment, though, I wasn't getting any sex. I knew that well because I was always paired up with a white girl my age, sixteen, named Monica. She wore different color streaks in her hair every other week, was attractive, and, even worse, big-hipped. I was nervous enough wrestling with the guys. I remember bumping heads with her three separate times. And she would say "Hi, James" and "Bye, James" every week. That in itself was a kind of torture.

Whenever the other wrestlers heard where I was from, they'd ask me to tell them about the Bronx. I never knew what to say. Despite having grown up in the Bronx, I didn't know much about it. And when they'd find out I was part Dominican, they'd ask me to tell them about DR. I knew even less about DR. I think they thought I was being antisocial.

I never got to know any of them very well. I only came on the weekends and only for about three months. A couple of weeks before my first match in front of

an audience, Dad's car broke down somewhere in still-white New Jersey. He had to pay to get it towed, stored, and fixed. He was pissed. He refused to ever drive me back. I asked if he would lend me the car if I got my license. "Fine," he said. I studied and took driving lessons, and a few weeks after turning sixteen, I got my license. But when I asked Dad for the car, he refused. He said I'd wreck it or get lost or that it would break down again. I argued at first. Then I said nothing. I would, also, say nothing when he'd tell Mom in an argument that she "wasted" \$3,500 on me. On my dream.

I learned a valuable skill in not saying much. In staying home. I sought relief in music, music many would probably label as "disturbing" or "really weird." I started wearing a lot of black, painting my nails black, dying my hair black. I watched a lot of MTV. Somewhere I got the idea that I wanted to be a goth rocker. This despite the fact that I couldn't play any instruments or sing. My biggest hurdle, though, was that I didn't have any friends, only acquaintances now, like X, Uri, and Angel.

There were times in the long stretches of silence, however, when Uri would call, and, reluctantly, I would hang out with him and Angel. One summer, we realized that we all wanted to be in a band, a kick-ass metal band like Korn or Slipknot, but we didn't have any instruments. So we'd dream. Uri would play guitar, Angel for some reason wanted to play the steel drums, and I, having the least talent, would sing. We would call ourselves *The Crazy Pavos*.

Actually making music didn't come for a few years. Uri had gotten a guitar and made some new friends. He had met Niles, an Indian-looking goth from Tobago. Raphael, a black/Hispanic rap-metal head. And Phil, a Chinese/Puerto Rican grunger. We formed a band, or, at least, a weird-looking gang that carried around instruments. Phil and Uri played guitar. Raphael drums. And Niles, though he never said it, wanted to sing. Niles and I said nothing to each other about this until our first jam session when we both grabbed for the mic. We ended up both singing for the band, if you call screaming bloody murder to thrashing electric guitars and machine gun-like drumming, singing.

We'd rent out music studios an hour at a time with the little money we had. We did this for months but never got anywhere. It was partially due to our eclectic tastes but mostly because, except for Phil and Raphael, we had no talent. Making music for us was always a confusing, endless process. And being in a band, I had learned early on, forces you to realize your true dislike of other people. Band members came and went. Bands formed and broke up. Eventually, I found myself stuck with Niles and one of his friends, Louis, in a crappy goth band. Niles had picked up guitar, or tried to, and Louis played drums. I played guitar and sang, and wondered what the hell I was doing with them.

We got along at first. We'd hang out late at night at shitty goth clubs, get drunk, not talk to girls, and go home. It wasn't so bad because I didn't know better times. This is, also, the point in my life when I probably came the closest to being killed. I was goth, but I hadn't thought about the fact that I lived in the Bronx and would have to go outside. Walking in the ghetto in goth gear and not immediately crossing the street after seeing a group of ghetto guys on the corner was a declaration of war. At day. Late at night, you were asking to be raped. This is, also, when I learned the importance of walking fast and looking down, and always to carry Mace.

Niles and Louis shared a singular vision for the band. They wanted to be creepy, and they were. Though probably not in the way they wanted. I wasn't, and I didn't want to be. I'd show up to Niles' crammed, unlit apartment and listen

to horrifying music being made. I wore a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* T-shirt to piss off Niles. Louis bitched at me about my lack of contributions. My musical aspirations died.

I stayed home a lot after that. Mom was not happy. She wanted me to enroll in community college. To get an education, to have something to fall back on. I never got the reasoning of that. She nagged. I enrolled. But I was resentful. I didn't want to do the work. I didn't like attending the classes. I gave Mom three weeks. Then dropped out.

I had dropped out of high school. Now community college. I wasn't a pro wrestler. I wasn't a rock star. I had no friends. Again. No life. Dad made sure I knew that. So I went back to books. They hadn't gone anywhere; they hadn't changed. Like they were waiting for me to come back.

I learned more during this time than in all my previous years of education. I read Poe. I read Shakespeare. Mom bought a computer and I started listening to science podcasts and studying French. I had discovered the reward of learning. Something I had never been taught in school.

Still, Mom wanted me to go back to school. That or get a job. I couldn't decide which was worse. I resisted with everything I had. For three years. Then reason hit me in the ass. Part of growing up, perhaps. I realized that at some point I'd have to get a job, and that an education would make that a bit easier. I realized that I could study French, science, and Shakespeare; that I could get a degree for doing what I was already doing. Mom nagged. And if she hadn't, maybe I never would've gone back. Maybe I never would've realized that I want to teach.

Mom was happy.

I went back to Bronx Community College, the college three blocks away. I had ditched the black hair dye, the black nail polish, the all black clothes. I wore khakis and dress shirts to class, my hair in a ponytail, split down the middle. I was a star in my remedial classes. In French. But there was a part of me that felt unfulfilled. I told myself I didn't care about making friends, convenient since I didn't make any.

Classes, like my previous public school experiences, were filled with Hispanics and blacks. I was almost always the only "white" one in the class. Sometimes, there was an actual white person, but he or she would be Hungarian or something and nothing like me. I kept to myself; I didn't speak to anyone. If I needed to eat, I'd usually walk home. Sometimes, though, I wouldn't have time and would have to go to the lunchroom. It was always crowded and noisy. Sometimes, there'd be rap playing from a boom box. I considered myself lucky if I found an empty table. But the smallest ones, the only ones I sat in, were made for four people. I'd eat quickly so no one would ask to sit down.

Most of the time, I'd go to the library between classes. Where it's OK to be alone and quiet. Where being social is considered rude. I remember discovering an old book with all of Poe's short stories and poems. It was a few semesters in, and I was upset I hadn't discovered it sooner. Each break seemed to last the length of a Poe story.

I remember while at BCC moving to Pelham Parkway. I'd never seen the place. But it was in Pelham Parkway, Mom said. I had wanted to move for a long time. I was tired of the ghetto, I had told Mom. It seemed as though she had finally

listened. We moved to the projects.

After two years, I was done. I had done well. Academically. I hadn't made any friends. But I didn't care about that. I hadn't graduated either. I had a class or two to go. But I would transfer.

I applied to a lot of schools. I got rejected by almost all. The first acceptance letter I got was from Lehman College. They congratulated me. I was going to let the semester pass. It was the default school. The minority school. Then I got an email from Fordham University. They wanted to talk with me.

Walking through the Bronx campus would often make me feel like I was in a small suburban community, a gated one. Actual grass and flowers and trees in the middle of Fordham Rd, and they weren't part of the Bronx Zoo or Botanical Gardens. Even the bathrooms were clean. And smelled good. I had never been in a good-smelling college bathroom before, or yet since. Looking out at the concrete and asphalt, after years of looking in, I would think of the past. And the present. And the gulf there seemed to be in between.

Despite being in the ghetto, Fordham was white. Really white. Every now and then I'd see an Asian. But to see a black person or a Hispanic, I'd have to be pretty lucky. Or at Keating Hall. Keating was where minorities went. Where evening classes were held. One building. Away from the whites. The day students. They had the whole college. I went to Keating.

Still, Keating is the most beautiful building on campus. Like a medieval church with a clock tower. Especially pretty at night when lit by its lanterns. Even more so in the rain. Coming in to and leaving class were often the best parts of my day.

The classes were not very different from what I had already known. Mostly minorities. Relatively easy coursework. I felt almost comfortable at Keating. That doesn't mean I made any friends, however. People did try to talk to me. And sometimes I'd talk back. But only as much as I was comfortable with. Which wasn't very much.

I didn't spend all my time at Keating, though. As an evening student, I was allowed to take a couple of day classes per semester. I felt I had to. If for no other reason than to prove that I could.

Day classes were white. Really white. I was almost always the only Hispanic. Though I don't know if anyone ever knew. The whites would come from comfortable socioeconomic backgrounds, interspersed their speech with "like," and were happy and confident all the time for no apparent reason. They had accomplished things. They had worked in the theater; they had travelled Europe; they had published. I hadn't worked anywhere, except as a tutor at BCC. I hadn't traveled at all, except to DR, the last time when I was twelve. I hadn't published anything. I didn't even have a finished story. I felt ashamed. I hardly spoke in class, if at all. I didn't have smart things to say, not like them. I hadn't read as much either, not things that counted, anyway.

Getting to know the day students was out of the question. Class would begin, and often I'd be late. The lecture would have already started. Questions would be asked. And they would answer. And I would listen. Then class would end. And we'd file out of the room. And as we'd exit the building, we'd scatter.

Most of the voids between classes were spent in the Walsh Library. A large

library with a museum and various rooms and lots of windows. And books. A lot of books. I had never been in a library with a lot of books before. The best place to sit in the library is in the Reserves and Periodicals room: any of those seats by the large windows that look up as if looking down on Fordham Rd. On a sunny day, they'd shine like gold. But people always took those damn seats.

I wish I would've slowed down, enjoyed the moment more. But I was distracted, harassed by a problem out of my hands. This is when the police started making my life much worse. I hadn't done anything illegal, but that didn't seem to matter. It's too personal and out of the way to detail here. But it's part of the reason I felt uncomfortable talking to people, why I was often late, definitely why I didn't meet a girl. It's why I have come to largely regret my time at Fordham.

What I don't regret is The American Voice, my first creative writing course. I don't regret sitting in a circle every week, or the friendly atmosphere, or reading and listening to other students' creative works. And, most of all, I don't regret rediscovering my passion. What I had neglected for years. Writing.

I served two years at Fordham. I made no friends. But I didn't care about that. I cared about getting my degree. And I did. In the mail. I hadn't attended graduation. I couldn't. Or wouldn't. I had come to regret Fordham. I just wanted to move on. To forget it. Like a dream.

I applied to MFA programs in New York. I got rejected by all. Except City College.

I'll be a writer. And to have something to fall back on, I'll teach. I don't need friends to be a writer. It's actually a benefit not to have any.

* * *

The books fill me with ideas. It isn't long before I need a place to put them.

I start to keep notebooks with me all the time. They are black and white with the word "COMPOSITION" on the front. I'm afraid that if I don't have them with me, I'll forget something important or miss inspiration. I draw in them: fighters and robots and characters from video games I've invented. But they aren't enough; I seek words, those things in books that make them work. I write. And everything else is noise.

James Noguera, a Bronx native, has a BA in English from Fordham University and an MFA from City College of New York. He has published online in *The WiFiles* and *The World of Myth*. He has recently published a poetry chapbook called *Remember Me like This*, which is available on Amazon in Kindle edition.

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