

A Dissertation on the Incentives of Superheroics: The Resignation Letter of Dr. Melissa

Montoya

By Ben Tardiff

To Whom It May Concern,

Let me begin with an apology. I do not believe that I have upheld the standards of this institution, nor do I believe that, in any sense, I deserve to continue working here. I am prepared to provide as much assistance as I can in easing the transition from my departure, but I have no intention of staying any longer than I am expressly needed. Broadly, I am grateful for my time at this institution, despite the issues that I have raised with the administration. My resignation is not due to any individual dissatisfaction with my time working here. Instead, it is due to the recent phenomenon of young adult vigilantism, and the resultant death of Ernest Martinez, which I failed to prevent.

I was Ernest's wellness advisor as well as his professor for Introduction to English Poetry, CW-120. Ernest transitioned from his previous wellness advisor early in his sophomore year, citing my reputation for rigorous and effective regimens for submitting work on time and preventing procrastination as his reasoning. When I taught him that same semester, I immediately saw why he needed it.

Ernest was bright and compassionate, and he brought an excitement to his analysis during workshops that was infectious. He was no stranger to writing poetry and had notable skills in the construction of musical language. Yet, at times, one could believe that he was discovering the thrill of reading poetry for the very first time whenever he read a classmate's poem. He did not often provide many avenues of critique or revision, but his praise was nonetheless consistently

insightful. He was otherwise polite and personable, if somewhat quiet, and had no trouble making friends.

I suspect, however, that the seemingly spontaneous wonder he displayed arose from a specific habit. He did not review or annotate his classmates' poems before class, as I had assigned. Instead, he perused them the moment our workshop began. Tardiness to class was also an unfortunate habit of his, as well as unexplained lateness for many of his online assignments. His penchant for procrastination only worsened as the semester went on, and I resolved to question him about it a few weeks in.

It was around that time that Ernest began to come to class with bruises on his face and hands. Big, angry, purple welts that traveled across his knuckles and up into his shirtsleeves; oblong red impressions on his neck where it appeared he had been choked; a myriad of black eyes and busted lips. Putting our incoming discussion of his procrastination on hold, I immediately confronted him about these issues at our next meeting. He laughed and explained to me that he competed in competitive jiu-jitsu tournaments. Even at the time, I detected faint dishonesty in his statement. I'm a kickboxer and have never sustained the level of injury that plagued him. Nonetheless, when he wouldn't budge at any continued prodding, I was forced to accept his excuse. That's when Sucker-Punch began to get local news coverage.

Before that point, the rumors of a masked vigilante in the New Bedford area—one with a habit of stopping muggings—had come to my attention, but I had paid them little mind. The concept seemed ridiculous, straight out of a comic book. But then, video evidence surfaced of the masked menace in a green jumpsuit and stab vest patrolling the alleys of Fall River. More people began to proclaim the bizarre hero's virtues, be they true or made-up. The name "Sucker-Punch" appeared as suddenly as he did, and it stuck. He became a permanent fixture of the evening

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news: Every week there would be at least one segment on the local station speculating about his origins, tacitly condemning his violent methods with the begrudging respect of moral, if not legal, approval. The idea of him enraptured my students, perhaps because it seemed so far-fetched, so perfectly fictional. Sucker-Punch was the hero of New Bedford.

It was amusing and just a little hopeful. I think it gave us all something fantastical to be inspired by. I tried my best to be staid and rational about the situation. Ultimately, what good could come from a single person going out at night and beating up whomever they thought to be criminals? But I would be pretending if I said I was unaffected. It was nice to imagine someone who wanted to help, someone who wasn't a cop or otherwise a member of a corrupt institution.

One girl in Introduction to English Poetry claimed to have been saved by Sucker-Punch. The whole class gathered around her one morning as she told her story, blushing faintly and darting her eyes around her audience. She said that she had made the mistake of going with her ex-boyfriend to a club and could not find anyone to accompany her home. Somewhat inebriated, she figured that she could walk back to campus alone. It was not a long walk, after all.

She began to get nervous when she noticed a tall man slinking through the streetlights behind her. She accelerated her pace, and he followed suit. She crossed the street, but he followed her. When he took his hands out of his pockets, she thought she saw the glint of something sharp and ran.

I was nearly about to shut down this macabre story time when the student got to the "exciting part." She said she was almost overtaken, but just as she heard his heavy breathing behind her, there was a loud *thunk*. She turned and saw her pursuer knocked to the ground, blood spurting out of his nose. A bloody-knuckled, huffing-and-puffing man in a mask and color-coordinated getup crouched over him. The man rammed his knife into Sucker-Punch's abdomen,

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but it got caught on his vest before it could penetrate too deeply. Sucker-Punch kicked him unconscious and turned to her with the knife in his hand, handle-first, and gave her a thumbs up. He told her she could have it.

Several students clamored to see the knife. She said that she didn't have it with her, but she could show people after class if they came back to her dorm. This whole story alarmed me, and I began the class with a reminder to the students to tread carefully, and never be out too long after dark without a friend.

I suspected Ernest's secret identity that day. When the student had mentioned her pursuer's attempt to stab Sucker-Punch, he traced his lower side with two fingers and grimaced. Still, it took several more weeks of suspicious bruises and one particularly egregious case of a persistent limp for me to confront him. His life of vigilantism was taking a toll on his physical health as well as his academic functioning. His perpetual lateness and procrastination only worsened as the end of the semester loomed before us.

It was December when I finally secured a meeting with Ernest in which I intended to bring up his crime-fighting tendencies. I figured I could not have been the only person that suspected his identity—to deduce it or perhaps to be told—so I attempted to raise it casually. I referred to his "late-night vigilantism" as a possible cause for his academic issues.

He tried to deflect, but I stated that it was a habit I disapproved of and one that's legality was debatable. I assured him that I would not divulge it to anyone else. I feared the legal ramifications against poor Ernest if I did. I must admit as well that at that point, Sucker-Punch was still well-loved and seen as a hero. There was something miraculous about his existence, and I feared destroying it. I see now that this was a mistake: I should have acted like an adult, not a starstruck fan.

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Eventually, all the fear drained from Ernest, and he could do nothing but laugh. He told me, to my shock, that I was the first to discover his secret identity. I told him I feared him getting arrested. Additionally, it was no excuse for poor performance in my classes. He had mentioned his reason for switching to me as his advisor was my penchant for curbing procrastination, but he had not once attempted to use me as a resource to do so. At my insistence, we attempted to create a calendar that would allow him to do homework in between his bouts of superheroics.

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As we wrapped up our meeting, I ventured a question that had been eating at me since I had first heard about Sucker-Punch. Why, I asked him, did he want to be a vigilante? Moreover, why was the vigilante life something he seemed to love and do so wholeheartedly, while he couldn't even find the time to read and annotate a couple of poems before each class?

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He considered my words before he answered. To this day, his words stick out in my mind. Ernest said that, usually, whenever he returned to his dorm with the intention of doing homework, he would begin to feel extremely nauseated. When he felt like that, no matter how hard he tried to justify why he should do his homework, he wouldn't be able to do so. He said he never felt nauseous when fighting crime unless he got punched in the gut, and he liked making the costume.

To this day, I'm unsure why his words moved me the way they did. I think we both would have been better off if they didn't. I think I merely had a sense of immediate and palpable understanding. There is not much in this life more exhilarating for the kind-hearted than trying to save the world with our bare hands. That must feel much more palpable than writing poetry and reading literature.

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Still, the boy was clearly suffering from immense anxiety—anxiety that could not be solved by letting him run amok in the streets. I should have put an end to it there, but I could not.

It's inexplicable now, but whenever I considered reporting the boy, I felt such swirling anxiety inside of me. It made my stomach hurt, and I was consumed by ennui. I tried to justify myself as an outside observer, someone with no stake in the matter, but the printed calendar Ernest had stuffed in his binder with little timeslots marked on the weekends with "Vigilantism 10:00 PM–6:00 AM" proved that wrong. Still, I pretended.

Come the end of winter break and the beginning of the new semester, the strangest thing happened. Several students in my new Introduction to English Poetry module, entirely independent of one another, began to submit assignments with chronic lateness and put off reading their peers' poems until just before or during class. These were students from whom I had not expected this behavior, given their previous records and my familiarity with several of them. When one student, who will remain anonymous, came in with a black eye and a broken nose, I knew exactly what had begun to occur.

The evening news became a circus. I'm sure you all remember those bizarre identities flashing across news headlines: the bright yellow Bumblebeast, tough leather-clad Biker Boy, the enigmatic Mysterimo, Monster Hands, Gun Man, Wonderfist, Punch-Sucker, the Flaming Flamo, and several others that I don't care to list. Some were trying to make money off it. Many attempted to start social media careers by posting as their heroic personas. Several were beaten up so badly that they quit forever. A few were arrested. Luckily, improbably, and impossibly, there were no deaths.

I no longer had Ernest as a student, but I was still his wellness advisor. We were discussing his schedule for the new semester and the topic of the news arose. He laughed and called them copycats.

With more and more students becoming members of this bizarre trend, faculty awareness also increased. I'm ashamed to admit that many were more proactive in stamping out this trend than myself. You'll remember the actions of Danielle Niscone, who spearheaded the "Stop Superheroics" campaign across campus and was personally responsible for reporting several students. At one point, she approached me to give out the names of any students I suspected to be engaged in the movement. I played dumb, but she suspected my dishonesty. She told me not to harbor these students' delusions of grandeur.

This movement is worthy of consideration. The heroes that arose were almost always male, with most women having been raised with the good sense not to go out at night and put themselves in danger for the prospect of possibly getting the chance to kick the shit out of a mugger. The heroes were predominantly white, as well, for obvious reasons: The police were far less likely to shoot them.

It was a masculine fantasy, too, I suspect. I think that everyone wanted to be Sucker-Punch after saving that poor girl in my poetry class: cool, perfectly fictional, and violent. They could be heroes and remain anonymous; that shirking of glory was so tastefully martyrish that I believe they would do anything to preserve it. The masked face is male, too: It has no holes through which to express itself.

I will not pretend that this movement, this trend, was wholly violent. It is evident that most crimes that an individual can stop in the act are quite rare. Because of that, individuals wanting to do good in the middle of the night were often relegated to patrolling and cleaning, which was undeniably beneficial. Nonetheless, for some, this was a more appealing option than turning in their work on time.

And can't you feel it? Haven't you thought about it? Entertained the fantasy? Not to say that you would do it or that anyone should do it, but if you did, you would have to ask: What would it be like? Who would you say you were? You could be someone entirely different for a night, escape yourself and your responsibilities, and save people all the while. Isn't that a wonderful thought?

And here I admit my shame: I had thought about it. I had a tough leather jacket and tall, walkable combat boots. I kept mace and a taser in my purse already. I had slacks and knee pads; I had even taken kickboxing lessons since I was a little girl. One night, I went home and gazed through my computer screen at the mountain of poems I had set myself to grade. I felt unbearably nauseated—the word “poem” itself had lost all meaning. I donned my garb, mismatched as it was, and stuffed all my hair into a ski mask, headed for the street.

A thrumming electricity pulsed through my every step, even as the night wore on. A small part of me was perpetually screaming—I had no business doing any of this. If anyone found out about me or even saw me, I could be arrested. I relished torturing that part of myself. The night was boring. I never hurt anyone. I never got the chance. I picked up a lot of trash.

I saw other heroes out, too. Not Sucker-Punch, but all sorts of colors emerging from the darkness and into the pools of the streetlight before fading back onto the sidewalk behind me. Mostly adolescents. A couple of adults. I wondered what work they were shirking to be out like this. Some waved at me; others scrutinized me. I tried to smile as I passed, but realized they couldn't see through my mask. It was exhilarating when one first spoke to me—another woman, if her voice was anything to go by. She called herself “Violence Gal.” She asked me who I was, and I nearly said my own name before tripping into my secret identity. “Boots LaKick” is what I called myself. Imagine that: a little forty-year-old Puerto Rican woman, curly hair poking out of

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her balaclava, trying to call herself “Boots LaKick.” It was embarrassing and silly and utterly childish, and yet it felt exciting and sacred. I went home and fell onto my bed, dreaming of empty night streets for what felt like sixteen hours.

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That was the first and last time I ever went out on the street as Boots LaKick. I never did feel that nausea again. I had to send out an email apologizing to my students, telling them that they would get their poems back a day late. From the chuckles that followed me into class the next day and my haggard appearance, I think some of the students might have even suspected the reason of my tardiness or at least joked about it. I felt embarrassed, and yet connected to them.

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It’s worth noting that this new movement of small-town vigilantism did minorly lower the crime rate of New Bedford. It’s also worth noting that several hundred “would-be” thieves were brutalized by this gaggle of heroes. Many of them were homeless. Most were unspeakably poor. It turns out that when you give fortunate college kids license to go outside and beat up people they think are disreputable, they end up hurting a lot of people who don’t deserve it. The movement began to change. The more students joined, the more bored and desperate to make a change they became; in that desperation, they found they would rather perform senseless violence than no violence at all. In my worst moments, I understand this. I think that everybody wants to feel like they’re saving the world, no matter who has to suffer for it.

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The only people that bled more than Ernest in his six-month stint as a hero were the people he attacked. The public cheered for Sucker-Punch, but only because they couldn’t conceive of his victims as human—that is, until Sucker-Punch began to attack police officers.

I don’t need to relay to you the immense backlash that immediately followed his first attack on Officer Macintosh. For the first time, I viscerally understood why a superhero would have a secret identity. But I can say why I think he did it. Not long before Sucker-Punch began to

assault police officers, Ernest approached me about altering his schedule to accommodate his membership in a new on-campus organization: a small group dedicated to advocating for the rights of students. They will remain unnamed so as to not implicate them. Ernest told me he joined this organization to improve his work and to give something other than his fists back to the community. That's what separates Ernest from the rest of the heroes, I think: He started to actually think about what he was fighting for. I would have loved to see the sort of work he could have done.

Not long after he assaulted Macintosh, the heroes went after him. Overnight, Sucker-Punch turned from the Hero of New Bedford into its most maligned supervillain. There was a sweeping social media campaign to find and arrest Sucker-Punch. At this point, I told him to stop. I had no excuse not to, but he only brushed me off, saying he would be fine. I wanted to report him myself, as I figured he might be safer in a jail cell than on the streets. Then I thought: What would Macintosh do to him if he took him in? Surely worse than just throwing him in jail. I felt nauseated.

Then he died—and not by the hand of a hero. As far as I'm aware, no individual hero was involved at all with his death. Nobody called the police on him, or leaked his location, or discovered his identity. He was shot in the face by a cop. His head was turned into ribbons by buckshot. Even now, I do not know why.

I was aware that Ernest's relationship to his family was strained. He lived with foster parents, though his mother was alive. There was a small funeral and several of his peers attended. I did not. I knew I should have, but I spent the whole day curled in on myself and hurling in the toilet. It was vibrantly clear to me that I could have saved Ernest's life a thousand times over.

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Now you won't see any people on the street roleplaying as superheroes. Ernest's death made it clear that the game was over. I think it's for the best that nobody will get hurt again. I had an epiphany the other day: Most of this tragedy of errors was caused by Ernest's stubborn insistence to not do his homework. It's silly, almost, if you imagine it like that. But it's also dishonest. There was something very deeply scared inside of Ernest that realized there was something absurd in the work he was doing and wanted desperately to do something more. He wanted to save the world, and it's a world that needs saving. But, in all my time as his so-called "wellness advisor," I was unable to advise him of any route by which he could find a better way to help. I was a fool to think anything could ever be this simple. To think that any of this could have worked out.

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I have failed as an educator, faculty member, and superhero. I hope that my departure can be made as smooth as possible. I wish you all the best, and I hope for the continued prosperity of this institution.

Sincerely,

Dr. Melissa Montoya