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LOTERÍA:
HYBRID NARRATIVE OF A TRANSRACIAL ADOPTEE

by

DANIELLE “DANI” SARTA
B.A. University of Central Florida, 2019

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
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ABSTRACT

Lotería is a hybrid poetry collection that follows the life of the speaker as a queer, Hispanic transracial adoptee raised by a conservative Catholic family in Central Florida, focusing on their struggle to fit into the binaries assigned to and expected of them across religion, race, gender, and sexuality. This collection is separated into three sections, each expanding on the one before as the speaker journeys through life, exploring their identity and their connection with the world around them. In the first section, poems such as “(Non)Binary Star” and “Size 6 Woman Size 18 Daughter” sift through the speaker’s conflict of being a queer, adopted child and feeling like an outsider in their own home, particularly in relation to their adopted mother, while also exploring the way religion was routinely used as a vehicle for shame and obedience. Poems like “Poet as Wolfdog” and “Wolfdog as Poet” in the second section explore the speaker’s relationship with themselves as they learn to push against the boundaries of the binaries they’re familiar with and to become more comfortable in expressing their identity as an adoptee while leaning into more fantastical language and imagery. The final section steps outside of the home of the speaker and considers the relationship between them, their body, and the world at large, in poems like “The Cycle of Life in Skagaströnd,” which turn the act of traveling into a spiritual experience. The use of hybrid forms such as numbered lists, dictionary definitions, and elongated prose throughout *Lotería* serve as tangible examples of the body and soul of the speaker as they navigate their existence between and across forms, roles, and binaries.

For Angelica

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Beyond Queer Words: “Our Gender Exists in the Stars”

Honey Literary: “In 1998 the Lioness Adopts an Antelope,” “Wolfdog as Poet”

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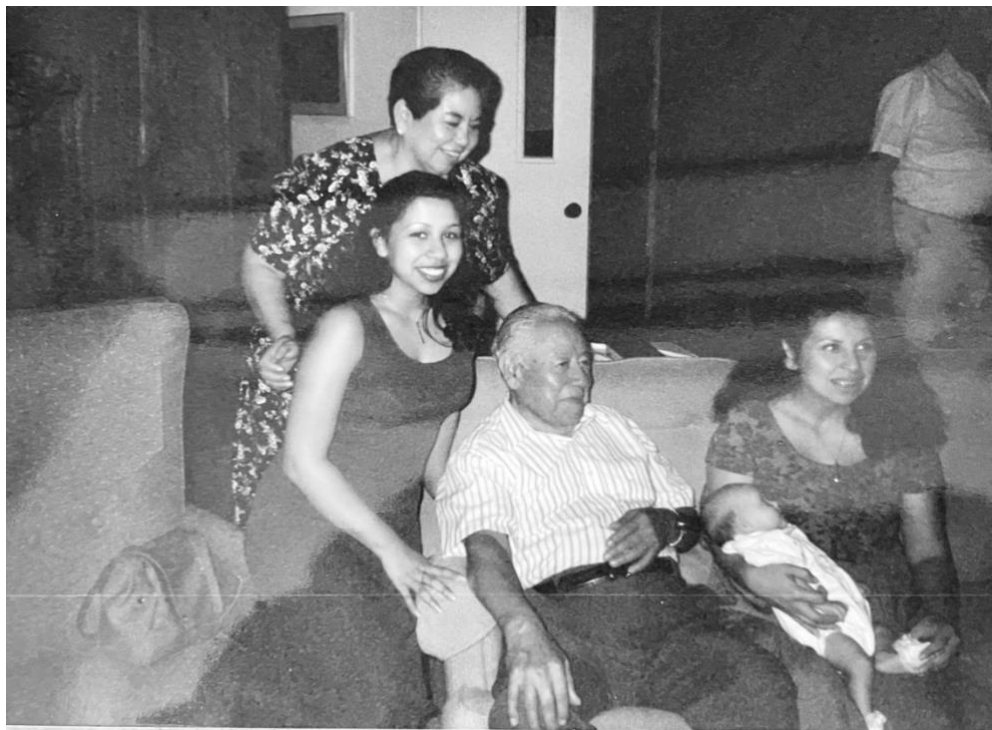


*Top: (© 1998) The author with their adopted father and mother
Bottom: (© 1999) The author with their adopted paternal and maternal grandparents*





*Top: (© 1998) The author with their biological mother
Bottom: (© 1998) The author with their biological mother,
great-grandmother, great-great grandfather, and grandmother*



(Non)Binary Star

Alone at night, she
believes she's loved, un-
conditionally, like a child should
dreams of nothing but
everything safe and sound, her
family protecting those little
gentle hands and feet, fingers that
hold and hug and handle
insects with care, that grip onto
justice until she's told
kids go to hell sometimes, even the ones
like her, soft and loving and
moving through the world like
new stars, bright and shiny
one-dollar coins in the milky
powder-white world—once she
questions what happens to the
rejects,
shadows in frowns come to
tarnish and dim her, forced
under a bed, in a couch cushion, a closet
vagrant begging for the
warmth she thought was
expected, no, deserved,
yet she settles into her new dark and waits, her
zenith still light years away.

Size 6 Woman Size 18 Daughter

Maybe if her stomach had stretch
marks from birthing me, she wouldn't
look at mine with disdain. Maybe
she would know how nothing they
are save a reminder of growth.
Maybe she would know growth isn't
bad. Maybe she wouldn't classify food
as good or bad. Maybe she'd
see it's meant to bring joy
each bite something to be shared
bread broken between blood and bone.
Maybe she wouldn't see flesh and
fat, would see muscles, veins, nerves
the making of me instead of
the shaping her hands keep forcing
me into, blunt nails itching to
cut through my navel and dig
out the me from her dreams.

A Woman is Born with All the Rage She'll Ever Produce

Imagine teaching your children to be silent
like your mother and grandmother
did before you
sleeping every night knowing
they were silenced
all their lives.

Childless, I refuse to let anything
that happened to them
happen to me as I
am the next curse-bearer
and everything surfaces eventually
even if it takes generations.

I was born with my blood on fire
heat like that of a witch's
damned death after dancing naked
yet I've always felt cold
like the surface of the poet's
pockmarked moon.

This anger at being made
only to be made to suffer
is acidic, corroding
matriarchal lines, bleeding
worry lines and crow's feet
into their wombs.

It can't be stopped
and almost feels biblical
calculated and powerful
this man-made flood
wiping out all descendants
until the only animal left
gasping for air
is blood-soaked.

How Old Was I When First I

thought to touch between my legs, below
my round stomach, inside a place unexplored?
I pretended it was a tent and my fingers
soldiers marching behind mountains,
on a journey to save a princess locked
far away, but once my parents, angry,
found me asleep naked, legs spread,
the soldiers were disbanded.

noticed my mother's body in the shower,
skin lighter than mine peeking through suds
more than twice my height and with definition
on her hips, her chest, her stomach, places
I didn't know there could be? I was mystified
but once I pointed out the differences, drew
attention to what she tried to hide, she said I
was old enough to shower on my own.

saw the body of my best friend, hers faster
developed? we touched and tickled under sheets
in hidden places, planting small kisses to soft chests
and tracing gently over new-growing hair
playing house like we did during the day—
then she moved away with her mother and
the next time we saw each other I didn't know
how to ask for it again, and so I never did.

kissed a boy, at least semi-willingly,
his hand resting on my thigh too hard,
too present, a twisting discomfort settling
in my stomach at the thought of what he
could do if he chose? Even as we sat in my car
the way he took up my space was threatening, so
I kept my eyes open but smiled as he left, drove home
wiping my lips on the back of my hand.

knew I'd never be a mother if I could help it,
after spending most of my preteen years
curled knees to chest, heating pad pressed
to my side, hot enough to leave burns in my
skin? I vowed through gritted teeth and gasping
sobs that I wouldn't make the mistake made on me—
birth a child just for them to suffer and writhe,
drafted into a war they had no stakes in.

I don't remember when this realizing started,
but I'm 25 now, and it still hasn't ended.

My Confirmation name was Joan because

I looked at her and saw a saint, and I saw myself
dressed in men's clothes, hair shorn, a teenager who fought
for her beliefs, and who died for them, branded a heretic.

Was it her rejection of the feminine that I admired
even in the face of death where she wore what she preferred
up until she was burned on a pyre and returned to dust?

Was it her blind faith in something beyond herself
even when her prayers were not answered, and she couldn't die
of her own accord, forced instead to suffer ridicule?

Was it the desperation in which she clung to her truth
even as men tried to coerce, torture, and claw it out of her throat
for a king who would not spare a horse to save her?

A martyr of presentation, I chose her, genuflected
anointed and resurrected in her name, *la Pucelle d'Orléans*
I looked at her and saw a saint, and I saw myself.

Ode to Pain

*praise begins where pain
transfigures itself*
— Paisley Rekdal, "Ode"

The nights I spent crumpled on the bathroom floor
cold tile pressed to my forehead,
even the act of screaming too exhaustive
to complete—I've been told they were merely

the wet clay He would use to
mold me in His image, so that I
may be made beautiful.

Since to suffer is to be beautiful
in the eyes of the Lord—
evidenced by all the canonized,
their martyrdom exalted—

then am I to be a saint someday too?
All of my suffering, pain, heartache
and injury will be praised as a necessity

when I carve open my womb to hold
it up to His eyes, bloody and still beating
like my heart, both organs that have betrayed
the innocence He gave me.

To suffer is to be beautiful, whether
the pain comes from my eggs rupturing
inside of me, lives that would never be,

or it comes from the ache in my chest,
the feeling of crying in the dark of my closet
unable to seek comfort from those
even just a wall of plaster away.

In pain, shall I pray instead to Saint Sebastian
that I may be depicted as he is, pierced by arrows,
face still turned to the sky in praise of You?

Or shall I pray to Saint Cecilia, slice three
times across my neck and, still breathing,
bleed out over three days, that I be depicted
in a pool of my own rich blood?

Even Your Son's disciple Bartholomew
was flayed and beheaded, and painted reverently
holding his flesh around himself like a chasuble.

Through which act of torture would You be satisfied
that the days in which I want nothing more
than the removal of my own lungs and the nights
in which I want never to see the sun, could end?

Wanting Vengeance

For years, I tried to pray with the rising sun
that my punishments would vanish like the evening sun.

I sat tucked in the dark of my closet, back to dresser, knees
to chest, and through tears I wondered if I'd always be stuck losing sun.

As the heat from my womb burned scars on my skin, I declared war
against You, wanting my animosity to weave into a cursing sun.

Curse or prayer You never answer, and I claw at my side to rip open
the skin and castrate myself; I've never desired to be delivering sun.

There was a time when we took anger into psalms to call on Your calamity
the one that drowned the world, praying for misfortunes to signal a caring sun.

Can You explain the needless suffering of babies too young to even speak
Do You prefer to hear their screams as they burn under a spitting sun?

Daily, bullet casings and bombs fall, shot by those who call themselves Your children
their anger and fear, stronger than Your supposed Love, slaughtering suns.

O, God, will You kneel before Your Angel when it is Your turn to pray?
One day My wrath will eclipse even Your burning sun.

Blessed Contradictions

¹⁵ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?

the family sits around the kitchen table, waiting for our father to say grace, so we can eat the food I cooked for dinner

he recites a prayer, one I've long since forgotten, but there's a certain annoyance in every movement he makes, frowning

as he cuts into his chicken, cutlery scraping against each other, and he shakes his clean-crewcut head, exasperated

there were people outside the church parking lot, begging
he says—the instinct of us children is to feel concern

we were taught, after all, to give to those in need, ten percent of every check earned to go to the church, to love

with actions and in truth, but his expression and tone grate grind, gash together against our memories, record skipping

when our mother asks *what did you do*, and he scoffs, shoving the potatoes I spent all morning roasting into his mouth

ketchup smeared across his plate, *well, I kicked them off the property*, and before we can quote his beloved Book

to him, he continues, *they have no pride, trying to scam a good honest congregation, they should get a job instead*, but

he knows it's not that easy, because how many hours have I spent telling him so, sobbing in desperation that I've applied

to so many jobs and none of them want me, but I'm lucky like he tells me, I get to live at home, and I can afford

to be picky, *but they can't*, I tell him, my tone cold the food on my plate untouched, stomach sick with anger

maybe they can't get a job, maybe they thought that a church would help them while they struggle, wouldn't they, he

rolls his eyes—in them I am always a child who won't eat
her vegetables, who kicks him under the table, who knows

nothing of the world and what it's like—says *they're lazy*
says I'm lazy, but goes back to his dinner, and I'm left

with the taste of salt and shame on my tongue, eyes watering
purples, yellows, and reds of the potatoes blurring into a multicolor

background I wish I could melt into, wrapping it around my shoulders
throat tight, thinking of the people he turned away and wondering

when he'll decide it's my turn.

*²⁶As the body without the spirit is dead,
so faith without deeds is dead.*

Scopophobia

*The eyes of the LORD are everywhere,
keeping watch on the wicked and the good.*

A child taught that surveillance is normal and not only
normal but good and not only good but desired

lies awake at night afraid her American Girl
doll watches her while she sleeps

just like all of the eyes on the posters on her wall—
she justifies those because she bought them

but when she's gifted more dolls or stuffed animals
she begins to wonder if other people would replace

a glass or plastic eye with one to spy on her,
to catch her in the act of something

She refuses to swim in her family's pool alone
because, when dim, the light on the wall of the deep end

reminds her of a shark's eye, and though the biggest animal
that invades the pool is a frog, she still swims in a panic

to the stairs when her sisters get out of the water, gasping
for breath, looking over her shoulder as the eye disappears

When she's caught in a lie, a stupid, innocent lie—
she texts her best friend in the restroom during church

which is a cardinal sin, of course, the Word is more important
than anything else—her parents ask her if she did it

and she says no, they say we know you did and place cell
phone records onto the table, date and time stamped

branded into her shame, they take away her phone and books
and TV privileges for a month, only allowing her to read

a handful of books on Catholic saints which she finishes
in the first week, but she has already learned her lesson—

how to hide, and tucks a graphic novel between her mattress
and bed frame, crawling under to read when no one is around

When she first learns that nothing on the internet
is private, her father finds her teenaged Twitter account

where she rants about her parents in typical teenage fashion
but what isn't typical are the #WomanCrushWednesday posts

he finds and berates her for, he says you don't have crushes
on women and you upset your mother and he watches

over her shoulder as she deletes the account for good
until she learns another lesson and makes one that's private

but even then she wonders if he watches from the shadows
lurking in the corner of her eye and waiting for her to post

one wrong thing, say one wrong thing, be the one wrong thing
she's always been afraid of becoming

*But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him,
on those whose hope is in his unfailing love.*

“You lost weight. You look good.”

Those were the last words my grandfather said to me over Zoom
As he lay a thousand miles away on a hospital bed, joined by only
My grandmother, about to be taken off of the ventilator by choice.

The same grandfather who stopped me and my best friend
Before we could leave to continue our next stretch to Niagara Falls
To hand us two more cases of ice cream sandwiches for the road.

The same grandfather who showed up to every holiday in Florida
With pans of lasagna and cheesecake, all homemade, and encouraged
Every bite I took even when my mother tried to shame me for it.

The same grandfather who once made an entire plate
Of baked clams oreganata for me when I was young and they didn't stick
To my waist, and he was happy I left the shells licked clean in a pile.

I don't think he knew that over the four months between visiting
Him in New York in the summer to him dying just a few weeks before Christmas
My parents and I had argued over my weight at least a half dozen times.

I don't know if it would have hurt more if he did know, as it hurt
That he deemed it important enough to say on his literal deathbed
In front of my sisters, uncles, cousins, and my father.

He followed it up with “I love you, girls,” before we ran out of time—
But when my youngest sister's laptop screen turned black, warping and mirroring
Our haunted expressions, tears in our laps, I heard nothing echo in my ears but

“You lost weight. You look good.”

not only i am mentally healthy but i also see angels everywhere

Inspired by a tweet by @chiefkeefmidi

in every corner of
my sight and behind
every door they
don't look like
the cherubs
i see in church
these angels
beat raptor wings
of blinding white
dark claw-fingers
ready to sink into
my wrists
and fly me away
if i think too hard
about sin
they linger
with tilting haloes
orbiting their
eye encrusted
bodies
but i am
mentally healthy
and the angels
prove it
in their silence
the only noise
comes from the
ceaseless drone
of their wings
obsidian eyes
reflect holy fire
to purify my thoughts
even if i were to
beg them not to
once i tried to tell
my parents about
the angels but all they
did was hide every
sharp thing
resembling an angel's
sword.

If you asked my mother

about the way the world should be she'd say
beauty is in the length of your hair and
cutting it off is a crime against her specifically—
didn't you know that? Didn't you know
every time you shave it back down, you're
forcing her to see your round tanned
goddamned face without the curtain of brown
hair, the feature that made you look like her
in infancy? Other mothers would see her and be
jealous of the fact she had no stretch marks,
kept her form intact despite birthing a new
living being, but they didn't know she bought
motherhood, that she'd spend the rest of her years
never considering that you wouldn't blindly
obey anything she asked after teaching that
parents must be respected. Hair must be kept
quite long, nails short, love kept for only
relationships she'd approve of, hetero but non
sexual ones; what do you mean you're queer—
that's not what she taught you. She just can't
understand how she failed to braid her own
values into your scalp, how brushing her
worldview through your brain, her bigoted
xenophobic ideals, failed to stick and instead
you shave your head and plan for the day your
zeal for being you overpowers the desire of mothers.

Queer Religion

As we watch and sway with the lesbian singer, draped in a rainbow chasuble, an elder lesbian with blonde, shaved hair, catches our eyes— holding both hands up in worship, pink and purple lights filtering through her fingertips, dispersing like sun through stained glass. She slow dances with her partner in the cramped blue arena rows, a congregation filled with a thousand other disciples, rejoicing with us when the singer preaches *Fuck DeSantis* in our unsanctioned basilica, for a moment forgetting the pains of the past, of those martyrs she might have lost, those we will never meet, forgetting the pains of the present, of those heretics who would tell us what we can and cannot say and screams along to the singer's message of divine mercy: that *Pussy is God*.



*Top: (© 2003) The author with their adopted younger sisters
Bottom: A friend-of-the-family artist's version of the same image*



Excerpt from *Ethnic Identity of Transethnically Adopted Hispanic Adolescents* by Estela Andujo

Published in 1988

Hispanic adoptee a
dilemmas is a product of
psychological
based on the
transethnic problem of
parents.

The Insatiable Adoptee Body Hungers for Its History

If the body had been fed folklore from the lips
of its mother's mouth at birth it would be satisfied
but it was left to feed on its own left searching
hungry always hungry wanting to be full

so the bloodied hands dig grave-robbing familial stories
the body hears in echoes but they slip through its grasp
and hungry always hungry it forces the fingers
to keep digging fingernails pulling loose in the dirt

and the empty stomach's bubbling acid howls
hungry always hungry urging the hands
to keep forcing words into the mouth to slide
slick down the throat even as the letters slice the tongue

still hungry always hungry the body crawls through
the graveyard of lineage it will never know skin scabbed
bleeding weeping gnashing its teeth bones rattling
an infantile chorus calling for a relief that will never respond.

Sometimes I Wish I Could Talk to My Mother When She Was a Child, But Then I Remember I'm Mexican & She Was a White Girl Born in 1963 New Jersey

And though my biological family / was only a few states away in Michigan / *my grandmother being born in the same year* / my adoptive mother was born into a white, Polish-German Jewish family / whose father escaped the war / changed his name / *the same time* / *my great-great grandfather left Mexico* / she the third of five children / saw segregation end when she was a year old / grew up sharing an attic with her two sisters / one older and one younger / *my sisters and I had separate rooms most of our lives* / she wore clothes made out of patterned flour sacks / smelling like the cigars her father smoked in the car / on the way to take them to school / *while my great aunt ran a Mexican restaurant to feed her family* / my mother's father was on the school committee / her brown hair always roughly cut around and above her shoulders / *maybe this is why she covets my hair so much* / *wishes I would let it grow for all the times she couldn't* / she talked to her friends on a corded phone / stretched around corners of the house for privacy / only ever dated one man and married him after college / her mother was strict and her father even more so / her older brother / taking his life / leaving behind three children / a few years after I was born / *a year before reconnecting* / *with my birth mother* / *my step-uncle did the exact same* / *left the same number of children behind* / and I never really knew either one.



*The author's adopted mother's family: The Radzieta-Colt (Cohen) family, © 1966
Clockwise order: Paul (baby), Matilda "Tilly," Lisa, Betty, Vicki, David, Ernest "Ernie"*

19, 15, 19, Ø (nineteen fifteen nineteen null)

1963 — Saginaw, Michigan

The woman brings her child to life hundreds of miles away
from where her family was born in Mexico—she is the first of them
to learn that to cry you have to breathe, the first of them to share this
with her daughter, and this daughter won't be the only one she'll have
to teach, but they'll all spend their crying days together with sisters, cousins, aunts

1979 — Saginaw, Michigan

Her daughter, a woman—no, still a child—has her first child in her mother's house
but she isn't old enough to teach her daughter to cry in order to breathe, not when
she's still learning, and when she discovers her next daughter six years later,
knows she can't teach them both—the second daughter is signed away to stay
in Michigan with another family, and they move to Florida without her

1998 — Orlando, Florida

Her granddaughter, still in school, suddenly discovers her own child by getting into
a car accident—in pain, the ultrasound shows her daughter, only four months
to breathing, learns soon after her mother is pregnant with her third and final child,
her second chance—which one will be taught how to cry, which one will be sent away—
as a daughter who first mothered her mother, she gives up her own daughter

20 — ?**

The woman's great-granddaughter, or I, am only just learning to feel like a child,
to cry and breathe together, years of half-drawn breaths and an aching from my mother's
mother's mother works its way out of my bones—this is what I give birth to,
the suffering of a long line of mothers is what I will nurture and teach to cry
and carry with me until the end, where I'll leave it behind

In 1998 the Lioness Adopts an Antelope

Grief
stricken
the mourning mother
takes another's child as her own
sheltering and guiding them for weeks
across their dangerous savannah home
together lying in the acacia shade
her coarse tongue intending
to groom by nature
still too rough
on their
skin

Mal
nourished
the calf wastes
away even as the mother
tries to feed them the tender meat she killed
she doesn't understand why they won't
eat why nothing she does is good
enough for them why their eyes
always shift around her
looking for something
when she's right
there

No
body
was there
when the mother returned
from a hunt to see her calf dead
a lion having devoured them in the night
and she chased him off of her baby
but what was left was not enough
for her to groom or to feed
or to shelter or guide
so she knelt
down and
ate.

Three of Swords

Upright: Betrayal, sadness, trauma, heartache, alienation

Reversed: Forgiveness, compromise, optimism, suppressing emotions

My birth mother invites me to join a program,
a wellness program she says has changed her life
and if she had it when she was my age, things
would have gone very differently and I—desperate
to connect with the woman who birthed me
and gave me away thinking I would have a better life—
agree, while ignoring the alarm bells that go off in my head
because she wants this for me, and I want her.

*I am running the neon-lit, wet pavement streets of New-York-but-not-New-York, and like
heroes in an action movie my best friend and I run, scaling walls and buildings all the while
knowing that we are being chased but having fun anyway, as if there is not something breathing
down our necks with dark intent, as if everything will be as it always was when it was just the two
of us against the world, trusting the other to catch us if we slipped.*

I listen to the introduction, I give my deposit.
My mother is happy, she cries, she calls me after to say
that she loves me, she loves I am doing this for myself—
for you, I want to say, for you to be proud—I agree
but then I lie awake wondering if I did the right thing
and a few weeks later when I need to take my cat
to the vet for an emergency I will look at my dwindling
savings and think about the next payment and wonder.

*We are chased into a house, empty, by my friend's father, him brandishing a sword, and
swinging after both of us, but we are quick, and we are clever, and we dodge him until we are both
cornered, but still we are not afraid, he has hurt my friend with his absence many many many times
over the years so his presence now is nothing but a cruel joke and we are not afraid.*

Then the alarm bells I tried so hard to ignore come back
in the form of a comment section on a video proving
that the program is a cult, and it feeds on people like me,
like my mother, and my heart stops until I cancel
my enrollment in the program—yes, I lose my deposit,
no, I can't bring myself to care when I was so close to losing
more—and I lie awake wondering if this will ruin the baby
of a relationship with my mother that I used to wish for.

*Then he lunges, and the sword pierces my side and I think I cry out but my throat feels tight
too tight to breathe and my movements slow as if in water, and all I can do is watch as the sword
digs deeper and deeper, the lights glittering off of the metal no longer neon and invigorating but
fiorescent and blinding and the world smells sterile and wrong.*

She calls me a few days later wanting to know why I dropped out of the program—and that alone scares me, that she knew without me telling her—but I just blame it on the money, always the money and she pushes but I push right back, it's not the right time, and I laugh to myself about nature vs nurture, us both being stubborn and dancing around what we want to say.

The house we ran into is suddenly full of people but not people I recognize, their faces blurred and grainy like double exposed film, and my friend and his father are gone, but I remain, the sword still lodged in my side, the hilt at the edges of my vision, and I do not disturb it, and I am now scared and on my own but I do not ask for help because that would prove that I've been hurt and no one here will help me.

“I don't want you to feel like you are alone.”
She says she knows what that feels like and maybe she did know what it felt like, but she hasn't been 23 in a very long time so I tell her I don't feel alone, the added “usually” slips out before I can bite my tongue and she looks sad but she doesn't get to be sad, I should be the one who's sad but instead I tell her to keep me updated on more classes, maybe in the future it can be different.

The house is full of people but I am alone, and I push past them into a bathroom where I can look at myself in a mirror; but the reflection isn't myself, it is something I do not recognize, a cracked mask that once had a smile now weeps, and I reach for the hilt of the sword still protruding—am I bleeding? I must be bleeding but there is no blood or maybe I just can't see it through the mask—and as I touch the sword I wake up.

Let's Start at the Beginning

I wish Faith had aborted me, even if by the time she found out about me it was too late. I wish she hadn't chosen to give me away, even if her mother was pregnant with my uncle then and she needed the chance to finally raise one of her children properly. I wish you had chosen the baby from the other adoption agency offered at the same time as I was instead of me. I wish you had named me something different. I wish my middle name wasn't also Faith. I wish Faith had changed her mind and kept me. I wish you hadn't said I looked so much like you that other mothers were jealous when you walked around with an unstretched, uncut body and a baby in your arms. I wish you hadn't said I looked like you. I wish we had stayed in Minneola. I wish I had seen Faith more when I was little. I wish I had seen all of them more when I was little. I wish I had that picture with Benito, my great-great grandfather. I wish I had met him, really met him. I wish I knew what he thought of me. I wish we had stayed in Virginia with the snow and the fireplace and the basement and the cabinets with eyes in the wood grain. I wish you had known how to soothe a tantrum other than hiding it away. I wish I never learned to be afraid of you. I wish you had made an effort to connect me with my culture when we moved back to Florida. I wish we had visited Faith and everyone else together. I wish I had felt more like I belonged when I was the flower girl at her wedding. I wish I had known someone else at the wedding party, known which uncle to dance with, or which cousin to play with. I wish I had felt comfortable enough to talk to them all on Facebook, if nothing else, instead of watching from the shadows of the internet as they experienced life without me. I wish you never commented on how I grew. I wish you hadn't started talking about how I needed to watch how much I ate. I wish you didn't point out I was likely to gain weight because of my genes, because of Faith. I wish I knew you liked her. I wish I knew you liked me. I wish you hadn't homeschooled me. I wish I had gone to middle school with my friends. I wish you had let me see my friends without making me feel guilty for having fun outside of the house. I wish you didn't react the way you did when I was caught lying about texting in church. I wish I didn't have to be paranoid that you're watching every move I make even now. I wish I never had to learn how to lie. I wish I didn't dread telling you any kind of truth about myself. I wish I never learned to feel shame over the things I enjoyed. I wish you would have sat down with me to watch the show I liked one month or let me talk about the book I read. I wish you liked the music I like. I wish I could watch videos at top volume in my room without worrying about you hearing. I wish the sound of the laundry room door opening didn't make my heart race and spine tense. I wish you had listened to me when I told you I was scared of myself. I wish you hadn't just taken away my Swiss Army knife and never spoke about it again. I wish you had listened when I sobbed in my closet at night, leaving the door cracked just enough for the sound to carry. I wish you never found that Twitter account I had in high school. I wish you hadn't been more concerned over the fact that I was making #WomanCrushWednesday posts than the posts where I said I was depressed. I wish you had talked to me about them. I wish you had been happy too when gay marriage was legalized. I wish I could have talked to you after Pulse. I wish I had been able to get memorial tattoos with my uncle and grandmother and Faith after the shooting. I wish I had been able to join the march with them. I wish I could have asked you to take me. I wish I hadn't tried to talk you out of voting for Trump in 2016. I wish you could have just made that decision on your own. I wish I didn't cry while trying to explain that voting for him voted against everything I was. I wish I had known everything I was then. I wish I knew you would have listened if I didn't cry. I wish my sister being Baker-Acted changed things at home. I wish I hadn't wished to join her. I wish you didn't tell me to be quiet about the time I said I was scared of myself if anyone asked me what things at home

were like. I wish you had said something about it sooner. I wish I had been braver, even if you didn't want me to be. I wish I came out first, so my baby sister didn't have to be the first to deal with your reaction. I wish I could say that I would have been given the same quiet anger she was. I wish you hadn't asked what you did wrong for us to both be queer. I wish you hadn't looked away when I said *nothing*. I wish I hadn't lied. I wish we could have talked about it again outside of an argument. I wish I could make you see me. I wish I could share my heartbreaks with you. I wish I never started working at that religious self-publishing industry. I wish I hadn't been able to see you in every author I slaved for who wrote about how much they wished gay people didn't exist or how immigrants ruined this country or how COVID wasn't that serious. I wish I could find comfort in religion. I wish it didn't devastate me. I wish you acted like you told us we should. I wish you didn't try and guilt trip me for not going to church. I wish you hadn't said you pray for me to find my way back. I wish you gave up trying to change me. I wish Erica hadn't told me that you've given up on me. I wish knowing that, hurt more than it does. I wish knowing that, hurt less than it does. I wish I could feel as comfortable in my body as I do at a club while I'm at home. I wish I still felt like it's my home. I wish when I moved back in that you had listened to me when I asked you to not comment on my body. I wish you had waited longer than a month to express your concern. I wish as your father died the last thing he said to me wasn't *you lost weight*. I wish it didn't bother me as much as it does. I wish I hadn't been a little happy when I got COVID and it meant I could just exist in my own space without you. I wish I hadn't been so anxious about asking you to bring me food, almost choosing to starve over admit to you that I eat. I wish I could say that you were happy I didn't lose my appetite. I wish I didn't wish to lose my taste just to starve to please you. I wish I could please you with anything I do. I wish I could share with you anything I do, without the fear of upsetting you. I wish I could share with you everything I am. I wish when my cousin asked if I would tell you that I'm nonbinary I could have said yes. I wish I could tell you how scared I am of being unlovable. I wish I could tell you how hard it was to move back home. I wish I liked living at home. I wish it was only the heat and the sweat that made living here unbearable. I wish I was more afraid of leaving. I wish I never learned how to stare you down in an argument and stand my ground when you get in my face. I wish I could hurt you back. I wish that when you said that it feels like I'm not grateful for anything you do, I said *I don't have to be*. I wish that when you said that you don't think I even want to be back here, I said *you're right*. I wish I could say for sure that you know more than I do. I wish you knew me. I wish I could talk to you about everything on my mind without it turning into a lecture. I wish you knew how to comfort me. I wish I could stop pretending that you do. I wish I could just stop trying. I wish I could believe you when you say you love me and only want what's best for me. I wish I could believe you. I wish I could say I hate you. I wish it could all be that easy.

Animals I Am Before I Am Their Daughter

Armadillo: though not the three-banded kind; I have far too many plates of armor inhibiting me from curling into a ball in defense of my soft underbelly, the nights I cried alone in my closet; instead, I protect the rest of me.

Blobfish: anyone would look like that pulled from the depths they were made for, forced to live outside of what they need; suffocated and swollen from the change imposed on me at birth, almost never able to return to how I should be.

Cassowary: they haven't forgotten they were once dinosaurs in the same vein that I haven't forgotten I was once an angry child, lonely in a way I couldn't know how to verbalize, but still using that memory as a single razor claw to lash out.

Devil's Coach Horse Beetle: in the past, I would have been considered a curse too, the shape of my face and the color of my skin a source of fear for some overseas colonizer; maybe now people know more, but my name hasn't changed, fear remaining.

Ermine: to own me used to be a sign of status, only the wealthy could afford my care or my fur to boast around, to be seen with in paintings and wrapped around necks, but even predators are wary of me in the wild, knowing what my teeth are capable of.

Firefly: when I was little, I dreamed about flying, hovering off of the ground, illuminating the world below with the light I was given at birth, but as I've grown, I've lost that light, and if I have wings, they're hidden far beneath a shell.

Glass Frog: turn me belly-up and see my organs through my translucent skin, this vulnerability an act of coyness, you see me now, but my soft edges blend me into the background, my body becoming almost invisible once I slip beneath the water around me.

Hagfish: I tie myself into three-twist knots to protect my three hearts; one connected to my birth mother, another my adoptive mother, the last one connected to me; retracting around and within myself, slime slipping through any grasp to swim away alone.

Impala: I've learned to predict the actions of predators/parents, eating when they're more likely to be asleep, scattering my secrets into the wind to confuse them, they can chase me, but I'll be too fast for them, and my pattern recognition only grows stronger.

Joro Spider: the entangling bride, she waits for her groom to take the life she wasn't gifted from him; only able to live as human after four hundred years of living underfoot, weaving gold from my body to make my way; until then, I wait.

Kinkajou: flexible hands and feet that let it run backwards and lets me bend my joints forwards and backwards, my mind moving forwards and backwards in time; our cry loud enough to be called *La Llorona*, except I'm the missing child in this version of the folktale.

Liger: born of a tiger mother and an absent lion father, existing only in captivity, I inherit the coat of my mother, her warm skin, but act more like my father, at least I think I must, sounding like both and unable, unwilling, to reproduce.

Mockingbird: mimicry is not flattery but survival, if a cat thinks another cat guards this nest maybe the babies survive, if the privileged person thinks I'm also privileged, maybe I get further than I would if I was given my voice by my birth mother.

No-see-um: I use my mouth to tear and bite, disappear before I can be seen; confrontation scares me, the fear of being shut down and ignored worse than death, but my words leave an itch under skin—my own if I don't let them out.

Ostrich: I don't think Aristotle would know what to classify me as either, bird or mammal, something cooked up in a lab, born in one place, living in another; I don't hide my head in the dirt, but sometimes I wish I could, or at least that I could fly.

Piranha: despite what media has said, I only feel the need to attack out of desperation; when stuck in stagnation I starve, having exhausted every other option, a hand is thrust in front of my face—how else am I supposed to feed myself?

Quetzal: before the days of colonization, would I have been worshipped as someone existing outside of normal roles, tailfeathers streaming behind me, or would I have just been a sideshow, another exotic thing to flaunt?

Royal Penguin: I was kicked from the nest to make room for the second-born, my mother an older teenage mother than her own mother, my uncle the second chance; I sink into southern waters and disappear, the winter hiding me from searching eyes.

Sand Dollar: I am the currency of mermaids, every child's dream to find when the waves pull back, darker when alive, but more beautiful in death; what is it about the color of bone that humans are drawn to over the color of life?

Tuatara: look hard between my two eyes for the third, almost impossible to spot; only I truly know what its purpose is, allowing me to view more than any others that look like me, as there are no other creatures exactly like me alive anymore.

Uganda Woodland Warbler: if I could sing as fast as I fly, maybe I could also write as fast as I blink, read as fast as my heart beats, and love as fast as I breathe; with two feet and a body that doesn't want to move, my limits are much closer.

Vulture: where most see only death, I see life, and can carve myself something of survival from the bones and sinews left behind, using my tongue and teeth and hands; I am coated in blood as I was the last time I was close to my mother.

White-Tailed Eagle: a symbol of American culture, but slightly off, as if someone made me while squinting at the bald eagle, I don't look like I belong

here, but I can still be feared, displaced and because of that, dangerous.

Xantus Leaf-Toed Gecko: to protect myself, I must discard my tail, my hair, my sense of justice, my desire for the truth, in order to continue to survive in unstable territory, they have to go, but it will all grow back in time for me to discard something again.

Yacare Caiman: my parents eat the shell of my egg as if to take some of what they made back into themselves, but they didn't make me, and the powder grinds useless to them; they still try despite knowing the way this hurts both of us.

Zigzag Eel: not even an eel but just a long fish, misunderstood, mislabeled as aggressive, emotional, as if I shouldn't be; in captivity I use as much of my power and strength as I can to escape, only leaving myself drained when I finally slip back into the sea.

Cannibalistic Musings

I wondered / why eating people / was considered taboo / when we ate the flesh / of God's own son / wrinkled my nose / as the bitter wine poured / down my throat / wondered if real blood / tasted any better

I wondered / if wondering made me sinful / if thinking / about crashing my car / into the railing of a highway / or jumping / off of a rocky cliff / sure to miss / the dark water below / damned me / leaving my body / with no hope of being eaten / absorbed into the Body of Christ

I wondered / why being pierced / with arrows / swords / nails / was divine / why I wasn't allowed / to be a martyr / to take the blade to my skin first / to bleed when I chose to / instead of when / He wanted me to / is my blood only worth / a celebration / when liquefaction occurs / long after my soul / has left

I wondered / if I would one day / have no other choice / but to eat the fallen / bodies of the people around me / taken in the rapture / at least they could know / I wouldn't let them / go to waste / what parts of me / they couldn't nourish / in life / they would in death

Was it being sinful / when / unwilling to let anyone else / taste what I was like / inside / I licked the blood / from my own arm / before it could fall?

Adoptee as Lines from Aeschylus's *The Oresteia*

This was always going to happen,
the splitting of the self into the adoptee
and the ghost baby who follows her,
growing up together; who is the real self?
The ghost baby never gets yelled at
or throws a tantrum, or lies, or steals;
the adoptee feels the crushing pressure
of her perfect nonexistence like a curse,
knowing she'll never become what she
could be if the self was never severed.
Instead, she lives dissociated, unborn
unable to move past the underlying
feeling of taking the wrong step forward,
wondering how the ghost baby handled
being queer, or going to college, or her
mother; the adoptee wonders while knowing
she's been dead since the beginning.

Poet as Wolfdog

From birth, the wolfdog can resemble a normal puppy. Its coloring can vary, depending on the dog breed(s) in its background. Owners that raise the wolfdog from its early days have a better chance of bonding with it. They also have a better chance at socializing it as a full dog. In fact, the more time they spend with it, the less chance it has of remembering that it is part wolf. Unlike its wild cousins, it might accept having its nails filed down or its coat trimmed. Grooming is essential to the training of a wolfdog. The owner must take care to keep their wolfdog's coat from becoming matted or dirty, like it might in the wild. They often elect to keep their wolfdog's coat long to further disguise any wolf-like traits. Appearance is the biggest difference separating low-content wolfdogs from high-content ones. Low-content wolfdogs often resemble their dog siblings, making it hard to even tell that they are part wolf. Responsible owners can train the wolf behaviors from low-content wolfdogs, but it is nearly impossible to train the wild out of high-content wolfdogs. This is why so few wolfdogs are actually high-content, even if their owners insist that they are. A high-content wolfdog remembers the taste of blood in its mouth. It cannot be kept in a house, or even a suburban backyard. It needs to run and smell the changes of the seasons. It will fight back if neglected. Owners don't like feeling threatened by their pets. They prefer the tamer low-content ones. This way, they can still call theirs a "wolfdog" no matter how it wags its tail or listens to their commands. Scientists and breeders warn owners to keep their wolfdog from smaller pets and animals. Even if it is well-fed, there is always a chance that it will hear the howl of its ancestor on the wind and be reminded of the thrill of the chase. They call this the "prey drive." This suggests that no matter how far removed a wolfdog is from its wolf DNA, it can return to wildness. For this reason, all wolfdogs should be leash-trained, and kept under close supervision. For this reason, it should not be allowed to encounter any other wolfdogs, lest they share their wildness with each other. For this reason, many owners choose to never tell their wolfdog what it is. The wolfdog may wonder, when it sees other dogs about, why it feels so different. Why it is unable to fully connect. The dogs sense what the wolfdog cannot. The wildness that was successfully bred out of them, still pumps blood to the wolfdog's heart. Dogs will be afraid of it. The wolfdog thinks that under their coats, everyone has the desire to run, a constant sensation it's been trained to ignore. It won't understand their fear. It will suppress the urge, though its teeth ache to sink into something warm; to bite down and tear into flesh.

We live indoors where
we're told we must be silent;
we were sold by blood.

Wolfdog as Poet

My mom says I'm her good girl. Yes, I'm different, especially from my smaller sisters, but my mom says that she loves me anyway. Her good, responsible girl. To me, that means I'm her favorite. Why else would she spend as much time with me as she does? We train every day, sometimes before everyone else wakes up and sometimes long after everyone has gone to bed. My sisters are jealous. But my mom tells them they shouldn't be. I am different, and she needs to help me learn how to not be different. How to be her good girl. When the three of us are allowed to roam outside, I watch my sisters. I protect them, like my mom tells me to do. They don't always like to listen. Once, the smallest wandered too far, and when I finally caught her, I bit her leg to drag her back. She didn't even bleed, but my mom was furious. I was left outside that night. It rained, but I wasn't cold. My fur is thicker than my sisters'. The next day my training was harder than before. But life isn't always training and protecting. Sometimes my mom dresses me up, takes me out. She likes to show everyone else how much of a good girl I am. How well behaved and responsible. My nails are cut the night before, and the knots are brushed out of my fur. Sometimes the fur on my face is trimmed. To show others how much I look like my mom, my sisters. *You can't even tell*, so many people say. *You can't even tell they aren't related*. I don't like when they say that. But my mom does. She's proud of me when I sit in line with my sisters, lead the pack. She says we're such good girls. I always want to be her good girl.

One day, I wake up and there's something in the back of my throat. I cough and scratch, but it doesn't move. My mom doesn't know what's wrong. She says she's never heard of that happening before. She says I must be imagining it, that I must drink some water and all will be fine. It is not fine. I drink and I drink but the lump doesn't fade. I cry. My mom yells at me. She doesn't like when I use my loud voice. She says I'm a bad girl. She kicks me outside; tells me I can't come back in until I have calmed down. My sisters watch from the windows. I can't look at them. I wander from the house, towards the trees. Maybe a run will help. I start to pick up speed when I smell something. Blood. Warm and fresh. And lots of it. My feet move faster than they ever have, faster than my mom trained me. I take a deep breath and then, there. A deer, its ankle caught in a barbed wire fence. I've helped deer before. I would call my mom to set them free, but this time feels different. The deer thrashes harder as it sees me approaching. I want to tell it to calm down. I'm going to help. I'm going to help. I'm going to... the closer I get the stronger the blood smell becomes. My teeth feel too big for my mouth, and the lump in my throat is still there. The blood smells good. It's dripping thick from the wounded deer's leg. I am close enough to lick the drops from its pelt. It bellows. Anger rushes through me, and I turn my head and bite. Harder than I've ever bitten before. My teeth sink into the deer's throat. The gurgling sound it makes as it strains against me matches the sound I make as its sweet, dark blood trickles down my throat. I bite again. And again. And when the deer is still and quiet on the ground I am still biting. Eating. I can swallow. The lump in my throat shrinks with each bite. I am cured. I make my way back to the house. When my mom sees me, she makes a noise I've never heard from her before. She bellows, like the frightened deer. I can see the whites of her eyes. *The lump is gone*, I try to tell her. *Am I still your good girl?*



(© 2001) The author in a dinosaur costume made by their adopted maternal grandmother

The Evangelical's Matthew 5

AND seeing his disciples
he taught them,
the poor
mourn
for they
hunger and thirst
they shall be
persecuted for
your reward in heaven
they
are
good for nothing, but to be
under foot of
your light
and your Father
I am come
to fulfil.
I
pass
the
law,
break these
men
and
Pharisees
exceed the righteousness of the scribes and
I say unto you
bring
thine adversary
to
be cast into prison.
I say unto you,
if
thy members
one of
put away his wife, let him
:

it hath been said
unto the Lord

swear, because white
is more than evil.
it hath been said, An eye for
whosoever shall smite thee

And whosoever shall

But I curse hate thine enemy.
them which persecute you; them that hate you, and
That ye may be

And just re publicans
perfect.

How to Avoid Being Hate-Crimed in the Ethnic Aisle of Publix on Sunday Morning

- Step 1. Don't act alarmed when the older woman in a motorized shopping cart takes your hand before you have a chance to pick up red enchilada sauce. Let her hold your hand gently like a magnolia. Wait for her to speak.
- Step 2. Smile and say no when she asks you if you have cancer. This isn't the first time someone has assumed that with your shaved head and often distant, angry look, and it won't be the last. You think it's funny it makes people avoid you in crowded hallways. In that way, it's funny your head has drawn this woman to you.
- Step 3. Don't panic when she asks you if you're gay as if it's a perfectly normal thing to ask a stranger. There might be an icy edge to her tone, but don't react. Remember, she is still holding your hand and the touch of her grip might as well be the strength of an alligator's bite force.
- Step 4. Panic a little, but don't show it. You aren't alone with her in the aisle, but no one is paying you any attention. Wonder if anyone would step in to help if your answer doesn't satisfy her.
- Step 4.5. Answer her; if you wait too long, she'll know what you are anyway.
- Step 5. Tell her you just don't like having hair; Florida's too hot, and you've always had very thick hair. She'll accept it as an answer, keep holding your hand, and tell you about her mother, sick in the hospital about two miles away. You won't understand why she's telling you this until the end; she wants to get this bar cake in her basket to her mother; would you help her get there?
- Step 6. Try not to think about how this feels like the beginning to every abduction movie you've ever heard of.
- Step 6.5. Try harder.
- Step 7. Lie to her: *I have to get back to my family*. The woman will nod, say she understands.
- Step 8. Tell her you hope all goes well with her mother. She'll let go of your hand, slinking back into her seat, and drive away on her cart. She'll disappear around the corner like heavy incense at a funeral, leaving you choked up, eyes stinging.
- Step 9. Try not to think about what might have happened if you said yes to being gay.
- Step 9.5. Try harder.
- Step 10. Don't forget your red enchilada sauce.

Foresight

There is a third eye in the center of my forehead
that sees everything before I do
 and yet tells me none of what it sees
leaving me to experience all pain for the first time unprepared
 I should know this but the feeling of hope flutters
 every time in my chest only to be disproven with
 a glance
why won't you protect me I ask and it remains silent
why won't you speak to me I ask and it merely blinks vitiligo blonde
eyelashes at me in the mirror or the camera lens or the ocean reflection
 I face it in disconnected
brown nucleus pulsating like a drum or a heartbeat
or a soundwave operating at a frequency I couldn't dream of hearing
but sometimes when I wake up my forehead is wet and the eye is closed
and a feeling of sorrow weighs me into the sheets like a stone
 or a suitcase or a corpse.

Grief in Dreams

a contrapuntal series

I.

I am holding my cat in my arms

I place him in a shoebox
and carry him with me
everywhere I go

in this broken body

He sleeps undisturbed
frozen in time and place

peaceful

quiet

still

I am holding a bird
who belonged to a friend

and show him to no one
afraid someone else will see him for
what he isn't or that he

never mine
still took something of me with him.

I have to continue on
the weight of him

crushing

breaking my spine

I have to continue on.

II.

Surrounded by everyone I know

I mourn
my mother

Though when I open my eyes
she'll be alive.

Walking through a maze
I'm led to my room

curtains drawn, I'm given peace

warm, welcoming

but still
not home

instead, a tension-taut tightrope
to sleep on.

After unpacking my things
everything that I have left

I know that

I can rejoin the ones I love but

they won't hear the breaking
of my heart

Can't they see me

crying.

Years of cutting my soles
on eggshells taught me this

no one feels the pain the same
way I do

and I don't want them to.

No, they can't see me

III.

I am small; my father picks me up
from the car rider line
where I hear him cry out
crossbow bolt protrudes from
his body, no longer recognized
yet still he drives
I can't escape it
I am scared

I am grown; my father now leads me
to the red elephants
"join them, join me."
his chest, puffed with pride
his eyes, cold and glass-blown
his point, forward into me
though I still try to fight it
I know I am on my own.

I think it would be easier to write about my parents if they hit me

- because then a stranger could understand why even over three thousand miles away their anger still haunts me, why I think about every step before taking it and pressing my toes into the ground keeping my body in sprinter's position
- because then when I feel my rib cage constrict around my heart like a python every breath crackling like dried rotten leaves, there'd be places where the bones fused together stronger instead of simply bending to comply in place of fruitless arguments
- because then I would treat food as a friend, a lover, even, dipping my fingers into the sauces and marinades as they bubble and pop, licking the flavors from the creases of my knuckles as we coalesce in the daylight instead of hiding at night from the criticizing eyes
- because then the cracked light switch in my bedroom fused by haphazardly applied hot glue would fit in with cracks in my skin instead of standing out against the light coloring of scabs
I picked at when the anger grew too loud
- because then it'd be easier to say *my needs were neglected*, have someone put their hand on my side, slide their fingers over the deep scars and shattered scapula, pockmarked burns and bruises still discolored, but I can't put a hand on my heart or my brain to feel the changes left behind
- because then I wouldn't cry over just feeling alone when it's not the being alone that makes my very cells ache but the knowing that I can't do anything but keep moving forward instead of being able to trust that one of them might be waiting to catch me

The Only Person to Cry Watching *V for Vendetta*

It's November 5th, 2020, and to distract from the counting of clocks and votes—numbers that will be the deciding factor in whether you survive the next four years or not—your roommate lights a candle and suggests you finally watch *V for Vendetta*, a classic you missed out on in your youth. Together you settle into the worn, grey, \$200 Amazon couch in your living area, knees held to chest under warm fairy-lights. The movie starts, and from the opening monologue there's a tightness in your ribcage, vice grip curling around your heart. It's November 5th, in 2020. Fascism is on the rise, and a cruel High Chancellor controls the public through propaganda, executing “undesirables,” and destroying any evidence of life other than what the Regime offers. You can hear the bombs deploying outside, smell the singed skin in the air. You are Evey. *You* are an undesirable. You watch your friends be taken away, you are watching them be executed. There are riots everywhere. More people executed, gunned down for resisting. Resisting is the only thing you know how to do. You learned this on your own in 2016, when your parents voted for the High Chancellor, when they cheered over execution footage of undesirables. You are an undesirable. The letter of a lesbian's love is supposed to make you feel better, give you hope like it gives Evey hope. All it does is fill you with dread, and the grip squeezes ever tighter around your heart. You've heard this story before; you've watched people like you be turned into letters and memorials and chants and battle cries and war paint and blood and blood and blood. By the time the train filled with explosives appears, you are numb. You are shaved-headed, but you are not a part of the hundreds of thousands marching to watch the destruction of Parliament; you were not given a Guy Fawkes mask to wear. The clock strikes midnight, and you watch the building shatter into pieces in time with Tchaikovsky's “1812 Overture.” Evey delivers the final lines: “No one will ever forget that night, and what it meant for this country. But I will never forget the man and what he meant to me.” She's talking about V, but you will never forget that night four years ago, or this one, back now in your 2020, with no glorious orchestral accompaniment. You can't hear the fireworks anymore. The fairy-lights are suddenly too bright. You can only smell the abandoned candle burning across the room, drowning in its own wax. Your throat is dry. You are crying. You are crying because you are not Evey and the clock hasn't struck midnight and the count hasn't stopped and the votes keep pouring in. You have just witnessed a parallel world unfolding next to yours and back on your couch you feel only cold, heavy terror crushing you into the misshapen cushions. You will never forget that half the country wants you and your friends dead. You are an undesirable, and you have no train with explosives, no lever to pull. You have no more actions to take. You have no V to start the revolution. *It's supposed to make you feel hopeful*, your roommate says. You don't understand how. Not when you just saw the future you've been afraid of for the last four years play out on screen. You won't understand how, but then on November 7th, 2020, the count and the clock officially stop, and for a small moment, you can breathe and laugh and hope and hope and hope.

My Mother Says/I Say

Every woman struggles
with her hair
and her weight
her husband
children
God.

But to one day
cease existing
except with Him
is the greatest gift

so the struggling
to pack herself
into bedsheets
hidden away
is worth it.

*

I have been taught that
in every way imaginable
the female body exists
to be controlled.
And when
left

on her own
unfolds like the fitted
sheet—tangled amongst
herself

she doesn't deserve
to control her own
fitting, but I
was not born
to struggle.

“To my daughter, Angelica Faith Ortiz”

titled after the dedication in my birth mother’s pregnancy journal

When does a daughter cease to be a daughter & become a pair of wings? She becomes a mother & then she flies too close to the sun & her wings & her face melts & she becomes a pool of wax & what happens then? Is the pool of wax a daughter a mother a child a god? When can an angel become a daughter become a god? Rip off her wings chew the wax between her flat teeth swallow godhood. Her teeth are made of ivory & harvested to feed her mother-daughter-mother when she cries. Her bones were always made of wax & melt when she ceases to be a daughter. If the daughter ceases to be a daughter where will she fall? The sun cannot catch her & her mother is stuck in her own wax weeping. If we are all angels are we all daughters? If we are all daughters who are the mothers & who is the sun & who is god? The daughter spits out the wax picks it off her hand her nails scraping down the wings like asphalt & smelling of smoke & iron & frankincense. This is the musk of godhood of childhood of motherhood. Where does the daughter learn to be a daughter? How does she learn to fly? Who punishes her for these things & why is it her mother-daughter-mother-daughter? If the daughter stops tending to the flame of her mother where will the wax go? If the daughter ceases to be a daughter how will she be punished? Can a child turn into wax without being a daughter? Can the child fly? What if the child was never a child her child at all but given a different name a different life a different mother & melted wings? Child bones are brittle & grind to dust under the blaze of mothers of god of daughters. If a daughter steps out of her itching skin when the sun sets who will tend to her bones bleached in the moonlight feathers sprouting from the entheses where tendons once flexed & flew & crumbled? Mother-daughter-mother-daughter-mother spins in a circle of ivory fire & wax & wails for her fallen daughter-mother-daughter-mother-daughter & places the feathers onto her arms.

I think my inner child just needs a hug

she's gone through so much lately, and the worries
she has now can't be soothed by her parents, not

when they each cast their own hand into the melting pot
to try and neutralize the salt that crusts her edges

or the flavors that were born in her veins, or when they
stood before her simmering form and poured water

on the flames beneath her feet, water that flowed smoothly
from their lips but landed on her skin like bubbling acid

burning *we want what's best for you* into the soles
of the tender flesh they were supposed to protect.

How do I explain to her that there's a man in the world
who wants to erase the existence of people like her

to pretend the world has never been anything but white
right, his mouth tight with hate, heart hard to smite

her and that the same people she would run to for reassurance
helped put him in his position of power, gave him his fire

and that he is by far not the only one like himself
just currently the most vocal? How do I look

into my own burnt-brown, once hopeful eyes and say
one day all you'll have is me knowing that I am not enough

to hold that hurt, to ease that pain of loneliness
that causes cracks to form in her foundation, water expanding

and shrinking again and again, and that she will need to stoke
herself alone? I can't, so instead I'll just hold

her close to my chest in our bed under the textured ceiling
we used to trace the shapes of animals in, the glow of plastic

stars shining green light on our faces, blankets tucked
up to our chins.

The Definition of Nonbinary

non·bi·na·ry *adj.* **1a.** not restricted to two things or parts; **b.** as in, free to move from one end to another; **c.** as in, fluid; **d.** as in, existing between and beyond the known. **2a.** relating to or being a person who identifies with or expresses a gender identity that is neither entirely male nor entirely female; **b.** as in, some days I wake up and want to be covered head to toe in millennial pink and wear skirts with petticoats and taste like ripe strawberries and other days I want to be robin's egg blue and wear button-ups with the top three buttons undone and taste like sweat; **c.** as in, some days this feeling fluctuates by the minute, and I think it would be easier if I were a changeling or a fae creature who could snap their fingers and alter something about their appearance at will; **d.** as in, the options given for my gender are so linear even "queer" doesn't fit right, because yes it is odd to others but it's what I've always felt like, from when I hated pink and wore boy's size six shoes and board shorts in high school, to when I grew my hair to my waist and practiced a full face of makeup seated at a vanity for hours a day in college, I knew that I existed somewhere in the middle; **e.** as in, how do you explain your gender to your parents who only know two when even to you it's as ungraspable as the taste of umami?

So Much of Poetry is About Sex

that it makes me feel like I can't be a poet
until I've been held unconditionally
in someone else's arms

until I can describe the innermost folds
of their body like an overripe mango
taste their juices on my tongue

until I see the tides ebb and flow in their eyes
more satisfying than glacier water
or salty minerals mined

until I know what it's like to let someone
know the physically private
parts of me

until a lover has woven our legs into sheets
pillows tossed to the floor
our bodies the only home we need

until I've traced their face with my fingertips
enough to remember the shape of their lips
with my eyes closed

until I can see them in unconventional things
like the way my hand turns a doorknob
or the taste of morning

only then will I be a poet capable
of understanding the human condition
of writing the great poems

but what does it matter if I've only done
these things with friends not lovers
it's poetry/love all the same.

The Cycle of Life in Skagaströnd

I want to climb the mountain and meet my god there
put my name in their book and leave my footsteps
in something less finicky than the sand of my home state,
where instead of being swept away with the next tide
it is time that erodes the meaning of my life—where
when the snow melts, the water soaks into and lifts up
the grass my shoes flattened and crushed, then devoured
by a rogue cow or sheep so when the day comes
for them to be eaten, the person feels my sorrow
in every bite, salty juices trickling down their chin
landing in their lap, forcing them to rise and listen
to the voice telling them to go to the mountain.

Our Gender Exists in the Stars

which is to say,
it's impossible
to grasp
from where
you're standing.

Ashes to ashes
He says,
and dust to dust.
From stardust
we became

and to stardust
we'll return
sparkling
at the edge
of your eyes.

Blink
us away in tears
and we evaporate
before hitting
the floor.

Search small
crevices of even
the moon
but you won't
find us.

The sun
does its job
hiding us
in the glare
of its

rays
which is to say
we're too
brilliant
to be seen.

if i joined a space colony i think i would miss the rain

and the beaches, and the sun
because even though she'll still be there
i imagine her warmth through the porthole
of a spaceship won't be as comforting
as it is when accompanied by grains
of sand beneath my feet, or the sound
of roaring waves.

is the hum of the vastness of space comparable
to the sound of a thunderstorm? are the stars
that much brighter, other worlds that much bigger?
sometimes i think this world is going to crumble
beneath my feet but i still find it hard to leave
behind, knowing there's so much out there
i haven't had the chance to see.

if i was able to take it all with me,
the chorus of the cicadas in summer,
petrichor smell of the earth, blood orange of a brilliant
sunset, velvet of my cats' fur under my fingers,
it would be easier to conceive leaving
the atmosphere. but science hasn't made it that far
so i'll stay.

When Asked How Do I Identify:

Jagged rocks under
dark violet waves; white foam hides
how far down I go.

Cicadas buzzing;
our screams distort heat waves rip-
pling over concrete.

Smell of rain thick in
the air, not a cloud seen yet
felt, heavy on my back.

The soft velvet fur
behind a cat's ears; touch me
only once, no more.

Spanish moss blowing;
unsightly curls to some, all
signs pointing me home.

Ships in the distance
unmoving, unreachable;
our shape stays the same.

The verdure color
of a wet forest; leaves sag
weighted by sorrow.

Puff of warm breath meets
bitter cold air; condensa-
tion follows, that's me.

I Talk About Leaving Florida, but How Can You Leave What You're Made of?

In the same way that humans have stardust
in our veins, I'm sure my veins are made
of Spanish moss floating on the breeze
of my lakeside wave-washed heartbeat,
shaved hair itchy on my scalp, a patch of
St. Augustine grass, the rest of it loose on
the ground but still moving, like a green anole's
detached tail twitching; it's autumn so the appendage
is brown, summer color fading away as nights
get longer and I'll find myself outside again
cicada love songs dying in my throat, love-
bug's guts scraping off my skin and taking
the sweat with them, pure as spring water, but
under my skin lies the tangled mangrove
nerves sensing each change of the tide,
protecting the soft hopeful tissue of my
manatee heart from boat blades and fishing
lures; in the night's crocodilian eyes, my own eyes
shine, watch and wait for the chance to strike,
rounded nose just above the waterline, bent
like the heart line in my palm, planted from
Cabbage Palm trees; see, the way I move
in the breeze of my lakeside wave-washed
heartbeat follows the shrill cry of the sandhill
crane, led by the bark of the treefrog echoing
through the hanging moss of my veins.

Clermont, Florida

after Oliver Baez Bendorf's Outing, Iowa

If you've ever doubted that a body can transform completely, take the winding roads from my house to the back entrance of the neighborhood, and climb up the hill until you've reached the orange groves. Can I tell you? This land where I was raised, where I watched the moon follow my parents' cars home above the leaves, it used to be beautiful. You could roll down your windows and smell the citrus for miles on the warm summer night air, hear the birds rustling in the branches, the soft *plop, plop* of fruit falling to the ground. I dreamed of running barefoot through the rows of trees, picking fruit of my own to share with the animals I saw staring back at me from the shadows—raccoons, possums, feral cats, armadillos, sandhill cranes—connected by the gift that our home provided. Sickness and construction turned the roots to dust, left the oranges to rot and wither away, burned the area to clear it out; yet still I remain. *What we used to be matters*, doesn't it? Come, step onto the decayed, empty ground, feel the soil shift and rumble beneath your feet as the workers build to cover the track of the moon. But step further, dig your hands into the mush of life left behind and smell the citrus in the air again. Watch; I'll run so hard and so fast to make the oranges roll in my wake, and the land green, and the animals join my steps.



(© 1999) The author in a plastic playhouse, alone

APPENDIX: READING LIST

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