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INHERITANCE

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2018

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
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ABSTRACT

Inheritance follows the journey of a boy finding himself through the discovery of family secrets and his own sexuality. This hybrid work, part poem, part essay, explores a boy transitioning to adulthood while unearthing secrets about himself and where he comes from. He finds solace in the retelling of stories passed down from within his family and encounters creatures which shift, morph, and lie. In this surreal world, people commune with spirits, the dead find a voice, and a boy breaks and remakes himself. The work divides into three parts, beginning with *memoiresque* poems from the speaker leading to an interrogation of masculinity in “Reclaiming ‘Man.’” The second section then turns inward combining lyric and narrative voices in “potion making,” “Studs,” and “About a Cat” to explore the speaker’s experience with queerness. The final section offers a combination of memory and the mystical to imagine roads beyond societal pressures. *Inheritance* is an acceptance and dedication to freedom.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE STORIES MY MOTHER PASSES TO ME.....	1
MACHISMO 1.....	3
MACHISMO.....	7
DOGMA	8
MOTHS.....	9
MASC	10
PENCIL MARKS, AN ESCAPE.....	11
RECLAIMING “MAN”.....	12
STUDS.....	25
ABOUT A CAT	26
LIPSTICK.....	27
BELOW SCHOOL CAMERAS WHERE.....	28
POTION MAKING	29
WHAT’S THE DEAL WITH COMING OUT?.....	31
BIRTH.....	38
MIAMI UNDER.....	40

LONGING	41
RAMON.....	42
CALL ME BY NAME.....	44
ISLANDS.....	45
TO ENGRAVE	46
HONEY.....	47
QUEER AS SPIRITUAL.....	48
LEARNING TO RIDE	52
FEATURED PHOTO	53
UNTANGLING OF KNOTS.....	54
BASTARD	56
APPENDIX: READING LIST	57
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	60

THE STORIES MY MOTHER PASSES TO ME

I yell in the dead night. My mother runs to my room
passes her hand on my forehead. *What is wrong my son*
I only look at her figure in the darkness, my night light
shrouding her tired body in dim glow. She sighs
sits on my sheet and begins to speak. Listen:

I hold an island in the palm of my hands. The sun blankets the shorelines with
Shocos poking their heads from their desert burrows. They wait
for night. The rhythms of carnival beat through the soil
even with no drummers pounding their instruments.
Time melts dead into living, streets turn from asphalt to red clay,
as cacti line the path through wilderness.

A young man sits on a corner of the dirt road, plays his guitar. He can't remember
when he heard the melody, but each note guides his spirit fingers to pull on nylon
in the rhythm of soil. His body becomes luminescent as he walks.
The dead do not stay in one place for long. A cachon sniffs the dust he leaves behind.

A Black child crouched on the side of the road,
dirt covered, with black eyes, knows the song
and reaches into the earth and fashions a crown to place on his head.
He grabs a stick and runs in front of the spirit, and twirls
his new wand, ordering all who know to follow.

A dark skin woman contrasted by her sparkling white dress
joins the two with her trumpet in hand,
each sound making the plants grow and smile—the embrace of the clear days.

An old man from el campo hears the music from his porch and wakes his bones from ache.
His beard is mixed with age and gray, his body gaunt but still he follows,
He knows.

Giant hands reach out from the ground and crack open the earth to reveal a ten-foot-tall woman,
muscular and thick and wearing her favorite overalls. Each of her steps shaking the island
inhabitants to the beating of a drum. She bellows the secrets of freedom.

A little girl in shorts, a t-shirt, and pigtails,
carries a drum her mother and grandmother passed to her.
She sees the procession and follows behind, hiding
in bushes shying her face. She runs to the footprint left
by the giant woman, and places her small, toddler hands

in the middle of the massive crater, her mouth shocked
by the imprint. She giggles and runs behind them,
playing her drum to match the giant woman in her footsteps.

All of them climb to the mountain summit
where if you put your ear towards the sky, you can feel God whisper as dusk descends
onto the island full of rhythms and people, a land sacred with its secret buried in clay and ash
displaced by men who travel for sport, hidden from the reprieve of summer.
The group stands on the mountain and looks to the stars,
mapping home into their memories and asking.

MACHISMO 1

I am

always

right.

Take words

as law.

But be

Silent.

Women's

mouths

must manage

closed.

Me llevo

You give

Robo

Your spirit

You make

Me gano.

I am simple.

Women must

Complicate.

Men are killers.

We puff
Our chests
And grab
Our testicles
Like they give
Reason
For us
To kill.
Take our
Words as law
And you may
Even still
Die.
When we finally
Finish through law
Violence and
Worst of all
Passivity
¿Podemos
Limpiar
La sangre
de nuestra manos

con nuestra bolas?

We'd be too far

Diseased

And dead.

Lower your

Shoulders.

Lay down

Your arms.

If men are strong

Can we not protect

Women?

Do not strangle

But shield

The people

Who fear us.

La epoca de machismo

Must end.

Begin the hard

Work.

Intend to finish

When all non-men

No longer see danger.

Prepare for eternity,

Together.

MACHISMO

There is una canasta twice the width of my shoulders,
and triple my height strapped to my back
carrying the worries and testimonies of my family written
on napkins with ink. The words turn to smudge,
I hold them closer to my sweat chest,
already forgetting what they reveal.
My pocket holds an equally sweaty rum bottle,
the perspiration building a water stain on my shorts.
Caballeros, ¿dónde estan?
Tobacco and Havana Club leave my spit,
staining my open guayabera
Ya son las horas
A beg. A challenge.
I am heavy, pained,
lift the bottle near my lips for more.
My brother runs to me,
swipes the bottle from my hands,
places his arm on my shoulder.
The best hug we can give.
No llores, a command.
Less a comfort.
I shake him off. Even an arm
can cost too much.
The night is open with the asphalt
road pricking my bare feet
as I stumble under the barrio streetlights,
the canasta fibers overflow and prepare to snap.

DOGMA

My friend ■ believes in Christ.
All loving, he likes to caress his cat
while he complains about my youth
being only 4 years older than me.

I cannot say his lord's name
in front of him, he throws the stone
tablet and points to commandment
number 4, assumes we all saw Moses
walk down Sinai both times.

But I do not believe him,
nor see the tablet as any more
than stone. I want to tell him
my people were here before
Sinai, before the carved symbols.

Not one of them dares to say the names of my
God, unless they strap it down and watch
the name sink down their gluttonous throats.
Let them choke.

MOTHS

He knocks on the door as
His brush-like antenna touches the ceiling
of my tiny first floor apartment.
I open the door, my mouth gapes,
breathless at his 6-foot frame.
His fuzz-filled arms reach
into his leather messenger bag and he
hands me a manila envelope.

My condolences he says.
He occupies any available
living room space, wings
extending towards each
encroaching wall. Let him
stretch.

They flap and he begins
to shrink size into a man to a cat to a moth.
He flies into my hand and stares at me.
I could crush him with my palms
for delivering news of death here.
His eyes like a child you meet on the street,
unknowing of the harshness of man's
hands but only knowing the lightness
of his touch.
I open my window and let him go
back to his nightly route.

MASC

Your hands left their indentation marks from the number of times you wanted to touch my shoulders. “Don’t move or I’ll make it hurt.” I learned not to move. The grip on my yet growing traps like you wanted to rip them off. I stay quiet. You smile. I’m older now, but even your congratulatory pats wade into their made sand pockets of my shore. Like an invasive species hiding beneath layers of minerals and crushed rock.

PENCIL MARKS, AN ESCAPE

An outline,
drawn with harsh pencil marks,
contains all my flesh. “Man”
shoves a straw down my throat
and prepares to drown me in oil.
dark sludge fills every cell
compressing, suffocating
my nuclei and DNA strands.
My fingers grow taut and stiff,
extending for an eraser.
Skin shreds as the oil
compacts me back into
the rigid outline. The shreds
in my hands aren’t enough
to stop the leaks in my tear ducts,
the foreign clog in my throat.
My arms explode, innards erupt holes
through me with oil discharging
through my top layers. “Man”
observes as my body stops pulsing,
thinking me gone. But my dust
escapes, the same links
connecting acid strands and IDs
form a new image of me. I
leave my ruptured body behind,
I fall back into air and sky.
The outline cannot hold me now.

RECLAIMING “MAN”

One of the earliest memories I have about what being a man means comes from my sixth birthday where I staple my thumb. I receive one of those art sets for children with the markers, pencils, paint, and a small gray stapler. I am too curious and want to see how the staples make two papers stick together. I cry and wail as the staple digs into my skin. My grandma takes me to her bathroom and helps me pull out the staple, a solitary drop of blood coming from my thumb. I continue crying, and my Omo Ramon enters the bathroom and tells me to stop crying. “It isn’t for men.” That doesn’t soothe me. He laughs and picks up the small stapler. He staples his thumb, looks at me, and says “Men don’t cry see? Stop crying. It doesn’t hurt.”

I am 21 years old, and the year is 2017. I attend the University of Central Florida, and for all four of the years I take classes I am an active member of the Glee Club on campus. We sing, we dance, we perform: usual Glee Club activities. In my senior year, my friend Madison convinces me to run for an office position with her. Most of my close friends have graduated or left the club, but I decide to stay and run for a leadership role. I win. I am elated. I feel like I can really help others find the same joy I found in the club for my years in undergrad.

Madison and I become fast friends. We become each other’s confidants within the club, the shoulder to lean on and the ear lent for gossip. Madison is a political person by nature, meaning she can sometimes be standoffish and arrogant, especially when it comes to decisions involving the club. She is the music director and can find interesting harmonies to make voices pop. Some call her a dictator behind her back because she never takes anyone else’s song choice seriously. She keeps her choices within the same sphere of genre. “Because pop rock is just

better,” she contends whenever I question why we can’t have other genres of songs. She always scrounges her nose up in disgust to my question. I let the conversation pass onto something else.

Fall semester of 2017 is here and I am the treasurer of the Glee Club. I am in a long-distance relationship with my Leena. I have a new roommate named Mitch who becomes close friends with me. As the semester goes on, I spend more time with Madison. We have movie nights with other friends. We help run Glee Club. We watch the entirety of *Teen Titans* together every Thursday throughout the semester. She understands me, who I do not have to mask with. I treasure our *Teen Titans* binge nights. She accepts my rants about how *Teen Titans* seeks to tell stories about overcoming abuse and masculinity. She tells me I’m cute. I thank her but remind her I am with Leena.

A year prior, I asked Madison to go on a date with me. She laughed in my face and tells me she does not want me. But now we grow close. She begins to tell me her story, about her family, her past, her abuse, her mental illness and how it affects her. I connect with her story. I think I connect with her.

During one of our binge-watching of *Teen Titans*, she decides to introduce alcohol into our regular activities. She says her mom bought her some wine. She drinks most of the bottle down and I drink a glass. She begins slurring her words and giving me suggestive looks. I ask to go to the bathroom. I come out and she is waiting for me outside the door. She latches onto me and bites my neck. I tell her to stop but she keeps on. I try and remove her from my neck and say she needs to get in bed, that she’s drunk. She begs me to stay. She begs and pouts and whines. I tell her I can’t. She drops to the floor and cries. She tells me that no one will ever love her. I help pick her up and tell her that I am her friend, I care for her. Once she’s up, she rushes for my

neck, leaving more marks. I push her off me and put her in bed. I tell her, “I don’t want you to make me a dishonest man. I am with Leena.” I leave her crying in her room and run to her roommate, asking the roommate to look after Madison as she was a drunk.

I go on a trip with my grandmother to Aruba when I’m 10 years old. My grandmother and I stay with one of her nephews, who I know as Omo Carl. He lives on a part of the island near the mountains. I always love to see the cactuses and the rich greens on our drive from the airport. Omo Carl is a kind man, who laughs hard and naps harder. Some of my favorite moments with him are just sitting on his patio and feeling the slight breeze of a hot Aruban summer. Omo Carl always feels different than other men in my family. He’s funny but not offensive. He’s kind but never turns back to ask for his kindness to be repaid. Even when he scolded me for looking up porn on his computer, he never makes me feel like I did something wrong. He is like yellow, bright, welcoming, and vibrant, though this is ironic because he is allergic to the color and never wears it.

He lives right next to his brother, who I know as Omo Elvin. I am less fond of him.

I walk home worrying about the marks on my neck. I did not like this feeling. I pass my fingertips on the raw, bruised skin feeling hot. I didn’t want to tell Leena. I didn’t want to end my friendship with Madison. I tell myself Madison was drunk, and I would ask her about it in the morning. I get into my apartment and sleep.

The next morning, I hide my marks at work under a hoodie. I text Madison asking how her night was after I left. She replies, “Hey 😊 I feel really good after last night.” I ask if she remembers anything. She says “No, I don’t even know how I got in my bed.” I tell her I put her there and she thanks me. I continue asking her if she remembers anything from last night and she keeps denying any recollection. I can’t blame her. She’s my friend and she was drunk. I can’t hold her accountable for something she doesn’t even remember. Besides, this is not something to get worked up over. I’m a man, I remind myself. I don’t need to talk about it.

During this trip, my grandmother and I go to Omo Elvin’s house for a party, full of adults I have never met. My grandmother and Omo Elvin’s wife, Tantie Gina are inside his house speaking while the rest of the family are outside. Omo Elvin has two children, a son and a daughter. His son, Roderick is a sport fanatic and is talented on a BMX bike. I have no idea how to ride one.

Roderick asks me to get on the bike and he will show me. I hesitate; even at the age of 10 I didn’t want to embarrass myself in front of others. However, Omo Elvin, beer in hand hears the commotion we are drawing and then stares at me. “Go get on the bike, you have to try.” I tell him I do not want to. “Come on get on the bike, it’s so easy!”

A growing number of people look at me. My palms are sweaty, and I feel small tremors all over my body. “Do it,” he says. I get on the bike and at first, I have balance, but quickly my shakiness overcomes any confidence I have. The bike begins to circle, and I fall into the dirt. Everyone laughs. I stand up and try to tell him off. “I told you I couldn’t do it!”

“That is because you aren’t good,” he laughs. “Don’t get angry at me because you can’t ride a bike yet.”

A steel ball forms in my stomach. I feel my face turn red. Omo Elvin sees this and takes a sip of his beer. “Look just to show you,” he walks over to me and picks up the bike.

He gets on and begins riding around me with his drink in hand. My anger rises.

Everyone around us laughs.

“How is it that my son can ride a bike and you can’t? He is only 7 and still he rides a bike better than you.”

I start to yell at Omo Elvin, what I say I can’t remember. It doesn’t matter as he cuts me off mid-sentence, still riding around me and says, “No you don’t do that to me. If you want to be angry, be angry at yourself. Go inside with the women if you want to be emotional.”

He punches all the breath out of me without laying one finger on me. I put my head down to not see anyone else at the party and head straight for his house.

After finishing the official end of our Glee Club semester with our Winter Showcase, Madison invites me to come celebrate at her place. On a Monday. Not our usual Thursday slot. I remember asking what we would do. She tells me she wants to cook for me and maybe have a glass. I am a bit weary, so I tell her only a glass for us each. She cooks something different from the usual food we’ve eaten with each other: salmon, rice with lemon, and squash, or some yellow vegetable. She pours our glasses and puts on *Hot Fuzz*. I eat my food with her plate barely touched and I drink my glass.

The room begins to swirl. I feel more liquid go down my throat. I feel my forehead being sucked on and tongue. I look at my phone; hours pass quickly. I am looking down on it in the

light of her living room. Then in a moment I am standing in the dark of her bedroom. I can hear her asking me to come to bed. She tells me, “I can’t wait for you anymore.”

I wake up in my underwear. *Bob’s Burgers* is playing the background, but I can barely hear anything. I am in a tunnel, with faint sounds echoing until they are unrecognizable. I am cold. It is dark, with only the tv light gracing my face. I hear a breath. I turn to see Madison fully clothed. She is snoring. My mouth is dry, my stomach tightens like I am wringing out a towel. I get out of the bed and fall over. I can’t balance myself. My thoughts: *Phone. Home. Mitch.* I look around not knowing the layout of the room. My legs shake as I get up. I hear a rustle. “Baby? What are you doing?”

From the bed, Madison’s eyes survey me, wide and watchful. Her eyes move to every motion I make breathing, staring, licking my dry lips. I tell her I want to go home. I need my phone. She turns her head sideways as if puzzled and hurt by my request. She points to the corner of the room. “I put it over there.”

I lean on her furniture and move towards my phone. It’s 2 am. I got there at 6. I call Mitch, and Madison asks me what I am doing. I tell her I’m calling my roommate. “Can’t you just walk home?”

“No, I want to be picked up.”

“You know you can just sleep here tonight?” I look at her. She looks back at me.

“No, I want to go home.”

She looks down, a little defeated. “Alright then.”

Mitch doesn’t answer. I call him again. Voicemail. Madison catches on to this. “Oh well I guess he’s not answering, come back to bed.”

I just stare at my phone. *Please I need him to pick up.* I ring one more time and he answers. I tell him to come pick me up. At first, he hesitates. “I don’t know man I don’t want to move right now.”

I feel Madison’s eyes pierce through my back.

“Please. I just want to come home.”

He hears my weak plea. “Alright, but you owe me some gas money.” He chuckles to ease the tension. I hang up the phone and turn my head. Madison shifts her head to the television as if she was not just staring at me. “Where are my clothes?”

She looks at me like she just noticed me. She tells me they are in her laundry. “I thought since you were staying the night, I could run some laundry tomorrow morning.” I ask her to get them for me and she does. Mitch texts me a few minutes later and tells me he is downstairs. She walks me down. Before I get into the car, she grabs hold of my arm and tells me “I had a really nice night with you tonight.” I nod slightly. I get in the car and we drive off. I tell Mitch I can’t remember anything; I pace our living room for an hour, with Mitch having to talk me down. I go to sleep that night late. I call out of work the next day. I feel like death. I don’t get out of bed until 1 in the afternoon.

She texts me, says we need to speak about the night before. I’m in a daze. *Why would we need to talk? What happened? Did I do anything? Is it my fault?* The questions bounce around my head. I feel exposed, as if someone stripped all my clothes off in public and I cannot do anything. I’m immobile. I can’t decide. So, I tell her yes.

I walk to her apartment. She greets me and I sit on her couch. I dare not look in the direction of her room. After awkward moments of silence, she finally asks, “So how did you like it?” Her face full of anticipation.

I look at her and look down to the floor. “Honestly I can’t remember. I don’t remember how I got off the couch.”

“Well don’t say that.”

“It’s true,” I persist.

“No that can’t be right,” she tells me. “We were doing something.”

I swallow my building spit. Fear rises from my stomach into my esophagus. I fear what I am about to ask.

“What exactly happened?”

I look to her face and watch her eyes drop excitement until there is only despair.

She explains what we did. How she “shared” my body with me. How she enforced an intimate moment onto me. How she held me. From this point, I am numb to my fingers. My toes lift from the floor. I feel myself ascend towards the roof and then through. I can see clouds and faint airplane lights in the distance. The height makes me nauseous. I can barely breathe in high altitudes. I am gone, as my body stays behind frozen on her couch. I feel no claim to it anymore.

“Look, you must remember.” She pleads. “Obviously I felt you involved. You must’ve felt something.”

I can only stare. I feel like miners excavating my innards and throwing them out through my holes. Bit by bit, pieces of me flew until I hollow.

She cries. She asks, “What are you going to do now?”

“I guess I will tell everyone.” Is that where I go with this? What do I even say to anyone?
To Leena? Am I at fault?

She looks at me and begins to fidget fingers to wrists, like an old habit she never truly kicked. “If that’s what you want to do.”

Is this where I go? I don’t want people to hate me. This feels wrong. I feel wrong. Am I wrong? Is this what being wrong feels like? It must be.

“Just go Kenneth,” she tells me. She digs into the scars on her arms hard enough that the skin begins to tear. She looks around the room. She looks and stares at the knives for a long while. Even in shock, I can tell what these actions mean. I worry, an excuse to not focus on myself in the moment.

“What are you thinking?” I ask. She takes a while to respond as if in a daze. She looks from the knives to me as if all the energy escaped her body in one go. “I’ll make it, so you never have to hear from me again.”

My eyes grow wide. “Look I’m the problem obviously,” she says looking towards the sliding glass door leading to her small balcony. “I can make this all go away. All you have to do is leave.”

I hear her murmuring to herself, *now how should I do it? The knives? Or should I fall?*

My breathing becomes fast and out of rhythm. This could not be happening to me. I don’t want her to kill herself. I keep talking to her saying I was going to call her mother. “How fucking dare you,” she responds. “I offer to do you a favor and you are going to tell on me? If you just walk away both of us won’t have to worry anymore. Then you don’t ever have to tell anyone.”

I finally realize what she wants. I tell her I won't tell anyone, that this could stay between us. She takes a minute to gather herself and begins to perk up. I tell her this can never happen again, and I leave the apartment.

I am in Omo Elvin's house and I sit down in his living room. I still have dirt from outside. I put my head into my hands and hear my grandmother walk near me. "What's wrong Atu? What happened?" I don't remember what I tell her, but I ask for water. She goes to the kitchen and the back-door slams open. Omo Elvin comes inside his small house and sees me on his couch. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I went inside I didn't want to be outside anymore."

"You think this is acceptable? You are bringing your filth to my couch. And who is going to clean it up? Me. I must clean it up. Not this time. You are going to clean all your dirt off my couch." He runs to the kitchen and grabs cleaning items and hands them to me. "Come on get up."

I stand up and begin cleaning. "No you are cleaning all wrong," he shouts. "Look at all the dirt!" I am frozen, with only small tears running down my face.

He looks at me. "Oh, are you crying?" He laughs. "You're 10 years old and you are crying when you dirtied my house. You better not cry in my home. Men don't cry." I held in my tears. My grandmother stepped in and told Omo Elvin we were leaving. We must get out through the back entrance, through the party, through all the people and their stabbing stares. I hold onto my grandmother and we walk out. I lean on her until we are almost to Omo Carl's house. I sob,

unable to be soothed. My grandmother throws me into the shower to get me clean. I shout curses as the cold water runs onto my back.

We do not visit Omo Elvin again that trip.

The next months feel like a blur. I break up with Leena because it is my fault. I do not tell her. I begin seeing Madison more because it is my fault. I beg for her to take me and make me hers because it is my fault. I feel what I think is euphoria. I think I am free. I lose all my friends who are friends with Leena because they see I am dating Madison. I begin to explore sex with Madison. Since I am the one who started this mess, might as well see it through. It is my fault.

After our first-time having sex, she sits up on the bed and looks at me. She begins to cry. I try to console her not knowing what spurred this on. “I don’t know what I am doing,” she says. “I don’t know if I even want you.” She cries more. I accept it. This is also my fault.

As the relationship continues, she finally accepts me as her boyfriend and tells everyone the story of how we fell in love: I cheated on my ex with her, the most romantic thing in the world. She tells everyone this story. She reminds me of this story in front of friends, her family, and when we are alone. She makes the whole world know I cheated. She leaves out the alcohol. She leaves out the night after of me wanting to tell people what happened.

Months into the relationship she tells me a secret. “I remember everything after I drink.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Remember the last night we watched Teen Titans? I remember everything, and I was only acting drunk to get your attention.”

I laugh.

“I still think it was messed up when you said you didn’t want me to make you a dishonest man. Look where we are now.” She grinned. “Like I also remember the night you cheated.”

My heart sinks.

“You apparently had way too much to drink. I barely had any but I was acting drunk so we could be together that night.”

I don’t leave her until 6 months after she assaulted me. The relationship is its own abuse. Her drinking, her issues with money, her physical attacks, her constant sexual belittling. I endure it all. Until one Monday night in May 2018, she tells me that she hoped she would never have to touch my penis again unless it was going inside her. I question this. She tells me, “I just think you should get over it by now.” This is the first time I realize how dirty I feel with her. I am wrong to her. I am a mistake. A few days later I finally break up with her, ending with her shoving me out of her apartment.

I could have left the relationship anytime I wanted. I could have come forward at any point. At the time, I keep reminding myself that men don’t feel these emotions. The concept of assault never even crosses my mind. I think back to my Omo Ramon and Omo Elvin. They drill into me a sense of male entitlement, something I would never aspire to in their eyes. They teach me to hold my emotions, only the occasional rage, but never to be pointed at them. Men condition each other to exhibit and withstand violence. Violence is our language and repression is coping. Of course, I could never be assaulted or abused. I was a man. I should be doing the abusing. Even when I finally tell my mother about my abuse her first question is, “Why did you get yourself in that?” I never have an answer for her.

STUDS

I once asked Oma* if I could wear a stud on my ear.
I wanted to shine as I passed

middle schoolers in the hallway, with my hair gelled
back and my now free, off white teeth hiding behind a smile.

Studs are for girls, she said *don't let me catch you*
wearing studs around this house, you know not to be weird.

I pursed my lips to accept her answer,
the most defiance I could muster as a preteen.

I understood studs weren't for everyone
but *weird* was what her mouth managed

when I was six and a half as she caught
my hands full of my cousin's Barbie collection—

too young to know the rules for boys

or girls sluts f*** femmes mascs tops switch failures
panties boxers sneakers heels glitter dirt anklets nails dye

nightclub dancing at Southern Nights with man,
his sweat trickling down my face as foreheads touch.

Would she think *weird*
if I get studs now?

*Grandmother in some forms of Dutch and Papiamento

ABOUT A CAT

I.

My Oma does not know I have a cat. My mother knows. When the cat pops into frame on Facetime, she turns the phone away from my grandmother to not reveal the secret. My grandmother always asks, “What’s wrong with Kenny?” but she never receives an answer.

II.

The cat stays up with me during my study nights, and I unload all my worries, doubts, and loves like emptying a basket of newly bought dresses into a river which ends at my closet. Sometimes I think it best for them to never meet as I fear my cat would rub onto my grandmother, climb to her shoulder, and begin whispering the heights of heels I wish I could wear.

III.

Oma surprises me one morning. I wake to hard knocks on my door and I run in my boxers to peep the visitor. I wait there as my apartment begins to melt into me, leaving me to expose my cat. She comes in and the cat rubs onto her leg. She frowns, *I am not fond of cats.*

LIPSTICK

Oil, wax, dyes, preservatives--
the ingredients are simple, but why does my skin fold
its layers until callus
covers the once fleshy
exterior.

My earliest
memories see my mom
putting it on her lips
in the morning before work. I come
home from day care,
run into her closet,
and wrap myself in one
of her cheetah print dresses.

I wanted to be
like her. She would stare
the hazel swirls she calls
eyes into my own, almost
as reflecting then laugh.
I wonder if she saw herself
in me like I saw myself in her.

BELOW SCHOOL CAMERAS WHERE

the insides of the hallway spread; he grabs my school polo in his tight hands. The floors spread until my feet slip and I'm airborne. Kiss me. The tiny, limited hairs on top of my pubescent lips curled back into their follicles. Do I even know where to start? The air conditioner breezes hard, cold air. He cups my cheeks as his hands adorn my face. A reminder for our goosebumps to stay tense. He bites my lips and untangles my knotted insides. Our toes stay alert, for any sound of alarm. His look reveals a new life for me: a new language I'd been speaking, but only now could my tongue make out the pronunciations.

POTION MAKING

Needed: 1 handful of tobacco, 1 tobacco leaf (for rolling), 3 talks of *you don't know what you're talking about* or *you'll find una mujer in no time*, overheard whispers of *maricon*, stolen kisses from 3 different crushes (any gender), 5 flores of different colors mixed with water from the first rain of May, a stick of red lipstick (don't be shy), Grounded petrified tears dust of past flames, 1 mango seed (heavy and hairy), Water (the foundation), chewing gum, a large bowl (you're going to need it).

Roll the tobacco onto the leaf. Make the roll tight but comforting like a hug from your mother every time you leave her house. Don't let it suffocate the inside. Light the cigar. Let the smoke fill your lungs. Copy the men you've seen. Hold it between the index and middle fingers. Try and reclaim their puffed-out chests as they slur words from the side of their mouths. Know this will never be you.

Shove the fiery side in your mouth. The embers will only hurt if you let them. Put your head into the bowl and blow. Your lungs are now in the bowl.

Spread the jars filled with captured whispers and the talks with your grandmother equidistant from each other. Tell yourself they don't mean it. You know these are not lies, you heard them yourself. Your ears are now in the bowl.

Hold the stolen kisses tight in your palms. Make a little opening in your hands and whisper secrets held close: the nights you attempted to run away, the dread dropping the pit of your stomach to the earth's core when your friend outed you to the entire high school population, the fear silencing you from telling the ward psychiatrist you were queer because they would keep you there longer. Kiss your fingers. Drop everything into the bowl and watch the years escape your fingers like confetti. Slow at first, and then all together. You feel lighter. Your lips are now in the bowl.

Rub the mango seed like a worrying stone to feel its rhythm. Place it on the table and press until its hard exterior is crushed. The seed needs to break before it can grow. Find an opening to the center. Sprinkle the dust thinking about all the people you wanted to feel free with while you curled their hair in your fingers. Take the *agua de flores* and pour a little into the seed. Feel the seed spread its beginnings roots and place it in the bowl. Your heart is now in the bowl.

Add water.

Pop the gum into your mouth and begin chewing. Chew your preferred body and mold it right.

Look into the mixture and see your reflection. Press your finger into shavings all the ridges of your face. Your slanted nose. The acne scars mistaken for freckles. Fill the case with the mixture. Watch as the color runs into the newly formed cheeks. Watch the slight color run to your toes.

Take the lipstick and put some on your lips. You can't help but see your mother in the new you

WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH COMING OUT?

I grew up in a household where homosexuality was not seen as a sin, but definitely seen as an act others could do but the family could not. My grandmother would say that people had a right to choose who they loved but always snipped our conversations short whenever I would begin to muse about anything adjacent to liking men. She would applaud men for going with classic looks and combed hair, but God forbid if a man wore anything skintight or danced too well. These actions are not inherently tied to sexual preference, but they were enough to raise an eyebrow from her.

When I was young my grandmother never questioned some of my actions. I obsessed over the Backstreet Boys and *NSYNC, even begging my parents to buy me some of their CDs. I choreographed elaborate music productions in our living room and roped everyone to be my back up dancers. When *NSYNC showed their video for “Pop” at the 2001 Nickelodeon Kid’s Choice Awards, I begged my mom to record it on our VHS player. I rewound the tape and was mesmerized the boys in the band. Their style, their hair, their dance moves. Looking back at this video, I completely forgot that the band were surrounded by women almost groping them during most of the video. My memory only remembers what the band did, how they did it, and how it made me feel. I watched the tape so many times over just look at the band and feeling something that I could not name. They also air humped the floor, and I wonder why my parents let me watch it so many times?

For a long time I knew I wasn’t *straight*. I began to first think about attraction when I was in middle school when bullies called me “gay” or a slew of other slurs for presenting more feminine attributes. I was raised by two women so it would be normal for me to want to copy

their habits, if only bullies understood that dynamic. But suddenly “gay” became a concept I needed to think about as I began discovering what attraction meant to me. It helped that I was in theater; at least they didn’t see queerness as something to be bullied over.

Around 10th grade, I began to understand my experience with attraction. I was in a musical theater program at the time with an openly gay theater director. Seeing him confidently navigate through the world while being out made me feel comfortable about investigating my sexuality. I felt attraction for the first time that year with both girls and boys. Before this, I was not attracted to anything. Of course I “liked” people but only so far in the sense of liking being around them. There were crushes and curiosity wrapped into a performance, but when I came to this point: I wanted, I desired. I questioned if this was even allowed. *Is liking both even possible?* I researched what these feelings were. I frequently reminisced in my room about intimate moments with some boys I had over the years. I saw what I admired about them with a clearer view, as if I finally cleaned the first layer of dust from my eyes. I never displayed any outward affection to others, especially to boys. Most of my admiration and longing I kept at distance, silencing any feelings I had. I feared I could not understand them.

That year I knew I wasn’t ever going to be straight. I had come across a term in my adventures on the internet: bisexual. What a discovery! A word to describe something that already existed without needing a name. I ran with it. I felt like I could be seen under this light.

I decided to tell five friends in total. Two were my best friends at the time (who were also dating), two were from my AP European History class, and the last one I called Freddie. I messaged them over Facebook and shared the good news. I poured my emotion to them, with hopes to be understood. I trusted them to keep this a secret. I wanted to rollout this news like an

old motel rolls out its new towels, a few rooms at first and then all at once. I tested the waters for their approvals and overall received congratulations from everyone. Freddie seemed ecstatic at this news. I kept the Facebook messages between us. As I looked back at the messages, she seemed like she wanted me for me to not feel so scared about who I was. I found her sentiment from the messages a little more comforting than I remember. I told her I did not want my grandmother to know. She told me she didn't think my grandmother would care and that she would be accepting. I still haven't told my grandmother.

Excitement overcame me for a little after this coming out. I walked the halls a little happier, as if my life would be different from this point. I believed life would begin fitting its pieces around this event. A few days after our messages, I walked into class and felt everyone's gaze on me. I was not used to have people focus on me, I thought I was someone who blended into crowds and became one with classroom walls. I took my seat. I didn't remember whether it was a note or a verbal joke, but it was about being "gay," from someone who I didn't tell. Aimed at me. Someone who Freddie was friends with. I don't remember the next parts. Class ended and it was off to lunch. I had lunch with most of my class and some of the upper classmen that knew me. I walked into the cafeteria and the stares of everyone that knew me and even some that didn't. I was bare. People stared like I was an exhibit they could pry into. I couldn't eat then. I sat outside for the first time ever in my high school tenure. My best friends at the time both sandwiched me in the middle of their seats, trying to comfort me without causing too much of a scene. One of them asked, "What does it feel like for everyone to *know*?" Years after high school, I wondered why he had asked me . I didn't answer.

I learned from the person who told the joke that it was Freddie who told him. The others he didn't speak to, so it made sense.

I never confronted Freddie. I became too worried about my family finding out. If what felt like half the school knew then my mother, who always prided herself with being involved in my school life, would know. Worms took residence in my body. They squirmed inside of my feet making each step feel like soggy oatmeal. The worms moved into my legs, used my veins like underground tube public transportation. It was not long before the worms made nests into chest. I did not breathe easy during school. I faced bullies before I was out. The worms grew small mouths on their bodies and spoke prophecies into my body. They promised I would be an easy target. They told me she would know. I carried these worms for days, hollowing out from the stress of their nests.

I wanted my mother to hear it from me. The very least I could do was to tell my mom what she would soon know. I waited until my grandmother was asleep and sneaked into my mother's room.

"Mom?"

"Yes, sweetie pie?" She always responded with some form of pet name.

"I need to tell you something." I stood by the closet door, completely magnetized to the metal frame. If the world could have eaten me at any moment, I would've preferred then. I went around in circles in my statement, asking if she would love me no matter what, if she would still treat me the same, until I finally spoke those words. "I think I'm bisexual." I sobbed and asked if she still loved me if she was going to kick me out. She smiled and said "I loved you since the day you were born. No use in stopping now." She agreed to keep my secret from my grandmother. I

was a lot luckier than other queer stories. I felt like at least my mother had my side. I appreciated her support then as I still do.

This was my first time coming out.

I wondered for years why Freddie would out me to a good portion of our high school. For years I demonized her in my mind and cursed the day I was outed. What she did was stupid and wrong. She betrayed my trust, and I was alone for a long time after, a feeling that would only worsen in college. When I found the messages years later, I didn't see the demon who outed me to the whole school, I saw someone genuinely trying to comfort a boy who was scared. Did she out me out of malice? I didn't find the answer to that just by looking at the messages. My memory clouded some truth from me, but ultimately, I was still forced to come out to my mother.

The second time I came out was in college. I thought college would be a place to explore myself in terms of queerness. I wanted to know where I fell exactly, what relationships felt like, what it meant to love, and of course I wanted to receive an education. I downloaded Grindr and messaged men here and there. One got really close to my apartment, but I panicked before he reached my place and stopped replying.

I hadn't learned what my queerness was or how it was beautiful yet. I only knew queerness as something to be ashamed of. A little voice inside me beat me for even having these wants. I began to think that maybe I didn't deserve sex. If I didn't deserve sex but felt the same level of attraction to what I thought was everyone, then I must have been: asexual. I looked for the asexual flag almost everywhere to commemorate the occasion. I never bought any. A part of

myself might have felt like I may have been lying a little. I told my mother I was asexual. She told me the same thing: she loved me, and she always would.

Years later I began to see myself as a sexual being. I was stuck at a crossroads between what to call myself. The persona I adopted no longer fit me. I came back to the idea I may have always been bisexual as well as the inner turmoil that came with the realization. Was I an impostor? Of course I have had queer encounters and sex, but was that enough to let me understand what it meant for me to be queer?

I sat down with one of my bisexual friends as he convinced me to watch the series finale of Sense8, a popular queer tv show made by the Wachowski sisters. I had not seen the original series but decided I had nothing better to do. The next two hours the show treated me to depictions of love and sexuality like I have never seen before. Girls loved girls, guys loved guys, girls loved guys, everyone loved each other for who they were. And the artistic and expansive orgy scenes made me see making love through a queer lens. I was seen. I was understood. I went to bed without much fanfare, but my thoughts jumped from scene to scene, replaying all the important bits of the finale over and over in my head. I woke up the next morning and confidently told my friend I was bisexual. I believed myself this time.

When I revisited the series, a new understanding of coming out enveloped me. A character on the show, Lito, dealt with a closeted relationship while being a popular actor in Latin America known for masculinity. As Lito was on the verge of being outed via blackmail from a mobster, his new family comforted him and allowed him to make his own choices on the matter. Lito was never shamed for his choices and could have autonomy on when he came out. While he eventually faced the world in an interview on the red carpet of his movie premiere, his

cluster joined him to advocate understanding with “labels” framed at the opposite of true understanding.

Coming out seemed so scary when I was growing up. The truth dawned on me that we can always be in a process of coming out. Sexuality can be fluid, and we can discover new parts of ourselves along the way. Was I faking being asexual? In the moment, I wasn't. I felt like I was. I became what I needed. Am I faking being bisexual now? No. Queerness is not a monolith, you don't get to have only one time coming out and then the rest of your life is changed forever. Some people can come out every day of their lives and they are always on paths of discovery. We die and are born again many times in life. Coming out is no different. Queerness exists on a spectrum, a phrase becoming more popular in current queer communities. Instead of giving into despair that no one will ever truly understand my queerness, I revel in the fact that we each can exist in our own levels of attraction and sex.

BIRTH

you spoke about the night
as the moon hung low to embrace you
you welcomed their advances
one arm outstretched the other round your belly
you waved goodbye or was it hello?
as they opened their coat
using the small sky embers
to spell out your choice:
the early arrival
never conceived
before this moment

Pray to your gods.

With dark and smoke
the cave rounded the mountain base,
a path to the summit where salt and blood
paid for entry. Cracks of thunderbolts
captured in bottles hung as lanterns
mapping the way back.

An elder's breath blazes fire unto my spine.
My closed eyes affirmed
secrets handed to me from members
here and not, destined in pact eternally.
Open. I do. A prayer for my home.

MIAMI UNDER

I steal a rock	it calls to me	on the natural bridge
Aruba houses many	each a marvel	of the sea's strength
The rock	feels warm	when I hold it near my chest
the sea smooths	its creation	gives life with its waves
I steal it	because its beat	calls me
the same rhythm	waves whisper	when you open wide

The bridge is gone. A once miracle
called home by the sea. Aruba is an island.
How long before its miracle gets called home?
Cactus and desert underneath shoreline
only the tip of Hooiberg poking through wavetips
finally living its namesake. Roads leading
down, houses down, everything down as sea rises.

As Miami roasts into a new decade, our shoreline fighting every inch
I wonder can we survive the creator's call? The bridge leaves an empty space
two points above water intended to meet for a short time. Miami will be points
piercing through surface, revealing my home—gone—underneath.

LONGING

when the deep faults in my hands
were only a toddler's footprints in the mud
as raindrops made riverbeds on future
Martian crater fields,
you told me
secrets of the coming musk of rain
new, like the first time my small alien hands
grasped your index finger affirming
my breaths as reality.

RAMON

I still remember the hot Christmas Eve when you reached for your piece
your eyes bulging from your head half drunk, steaming muscles almost knocked my door down.
I could only process a sliver of reality as your ex begged you to come back to the car.
I sleep in that Christmas, alone wrapped in my sheets.

We build a shed together; I scurry past questions about my life
you let me listen to yours. The work is hard, which each concrete slab
laying the foundation for where you keep your tools. I cringe when you move too quickly.
I recoil when your hands reach above me to adjust the roof. This is a good memory.

You were the stranger in my closet, the monster peeking over bed when I turned over
the thin sheets to cover myself. I hide. I am not here. Neither are you.
But I always find you. You call my landline and pressure me to reveal a secret
unless I want my ass beat. I give in. *Dumbass*.

I take your children out for pizza and tell them I want to beat you, so I can finally feel
safe from you. I do not surprise. I wonder when I welcomed your old habits into me,
when your thick working hands began to look like mine, when the feeling of strength
became intoxicating and addicting to where damage does not matter anymore.

Now, I see you are morphed, removed from the scary image I hid from as a child.

When I remember you, I see your messed up apartment in Hialeah Gardens where my mom and I fed your Chihuahua-mix, your only friend at the time. I remember how you would run to your mother and put shutters on our home, preparing for a hurricane.

I remember the times you would sleep at my house after working three shifts. You have new children now. I do not know what to think. Each year the storms pass and maybe I feel you getting greyer and soft. Can storms drown the old parts of you? You pat my shoulder now I do not feel any malice from you, but my reactions are the same.

CALL ME BY NAME

Call my by name
follow me through desert
with only stars washing
our path with fire. Steps
in darkness release our
tension into the sand
the wind carries the specs
with hands harnessing
the breath between tiny
stones. Hear me. Can
I call? I wish to see your face.
Show me how the cacti rise
and welcome you. They are
your subjects. Take my eyes
I will pull them out for you.

Let them fly under your cloak
made of the space between stars.
You hide the questions children
ask while playing with their toys
with the tongues of those who answer.
Grant me childhood, bring
days of running into open fields,
of throwing my hands into dirt digging
to find if worms speak and turning
on my back watching clouds become
your body.

ISLANDS

Movement from little dots to entire land masses
motor mouths making and motivating stories
passed down from parent to child, names attach
to islands. To signify a symbol in sound, to hear
their similarities. *Name. Nombre. Nòmber.*
Clear bells in my ear canals. Ring and ring.
Mash the noises until I pronounce it right.

Food. Comida. Cuminda. I intake
to deconstruct. *Ras.* Before the Dutch occupation,
a surname from Catalan: *they live on barren land.*
Who were they describing? The red earth
did not bring them rubies so they mark
the people as barren. *Water. Agua. Awa.*
The tide is different in the Atlantic, but Caribbean
shores can sound the gap between language.
Ayo. Adios. Goodbye

TO ENGRAVE

my grandmother made
herself born outside of Amsterdam.
she would hide history under her blouse, not explain
why her skin was different to mine,
the heat her skin an accent from small Aruba
why was it more natural to speak
languages of people I barely knew?
I remember language. Language caresses
the sides of my cheek, stirs my mouth cavern
with buzzing from my lip tips
echoing to the reaches of my cave walls—
wet, dark, unexplored.
Language is the footprints running
across my rocky floors, leading
to the people who made me.
can I deny how
my mother would speak
how I thought, how I lived? estranged
as a child forced to never question
the lie, to deny how the rocks called us home.

HONEY

Embers can taste like honey
off the tip of a lit cigar. Leave
the spit out from my puffs
and I inhale creation. Reach
into chest, let's get the tobacco
moving. Let my words be
inscribed in a book or tomb
stone, the river can run rough
or calm like daybreak but let
the current course impact stream
rocks like a kiss.

QUEER AS SPIRITUAL

“Queerness in a way saved my life... Often we see queerness as a deprivation, but when I look at my life, I saw that queerness demanded an alternative innovation from me.” – Ocean Vuong

“This question of possibility... There's a one-to-one correlation between the expansiveness of what I view as being possible and my queerness...” – Bryan Washington (“All The Ways To Be”)

To “be.” To exist. To take up space is a highly contested feat. No matter how individual we as beings may be, there are always people who attempt to dictate which is the right way to live and what is considered sin, or wrong. As a recovering Catholic, themes of guilt and shame still haunt me, scars of a remembered indoctrination will always taste like spoiled wine.

Catholics do not go dive into the spiritual beyond angels, demons, and Christ. A memory of their housed self-hatred came in the form of Sunday school and night classes for confirmation. At 14 years old they teach me how to meditate, ignoring the fact I have been meditating for most of my life at this point. *Do it our way, through Christ.* They guide me through a meditation along with a classroom full of teenagers. They mention a beach and the waves and Jesus coming to save us from drowning: The Works. They deny any other type of meditation. *We respect other cultures, but this is the right way.*

I remember my Catholic teacher tells us on the first day of confirmation class that we are all atheists. We somehow do not believe in God. We lost our way. We are only 14. In Catholicism there is always an air of always sinning but always being saved,

The same dichotomy they also apply to how they treat queer people. Yes, the pope did indeed say gay is okay, but still fails to allow queer people into the clergy and in other positions

of the faith. Queerness can exist in the church if it is not seen, heard, experienced, or mentioned. When Catholics enter a church, the faith expects their queerness to wait outside. Queerness cannot enter the walls of the Church, while a priest advocates for loving thy neighbor.

Catholics love tradition. They bury themselves into the rights and practices left behind by the institution but teach themselves to never question it. Things are the way they are. There is no movement. Catholicism is far from people understanding why they exist. Spirituality demands questions of the real and the unreal. Spirituality demands a dismantling of self, of faith, of love, of trust, of belief, to rebuild the self into the best self. Is queerness not the same? Can queerness and spirituality exist in the same circles if I see them function in a similar fashion?

I live, as everyone does, in a heteronormative society. I am to love only women and foster children to extend the belief system. I have a set of rules to follow and wrap myself in. I am told to believe only one way of existence is right. Catholicism and heteronormativity are the same here.

I remind myself of Vuong's words. Queerness demands alternative innovation. Queerness, an act of loving and living against the system assigned to me, demands questioning of what I am surrounded by. When I look at myself in the mirror, I question if this existence makes me complete. What if my hair grew to touch the floor? What will I discover when I begin to act closer to who I am rather than what I have been programmed to be? Who can I become if I listen to the urges buried deep, the person who has been covered to please others? When I look at people I wonder if love can only root itself in places mandated for men. Can I love differently? Can I experience a new way?

A phrase familiar to all Catholics is guilt, specifically “Catholic guilt.” From early on, the Church inspires me to police my actions in service of the Catholic god. The Church hardwires into my memory what actions to questions and to root all my logic from the view in which I am pure sin. I do not belong here and do not deserve any of their god’s love, but because I receive it anyway, I should live life prostrating at his feet. I will never learn to stand tall if I continue like this.

I step foot into a Catholic church when I am older, years separating this recent moment with the last time I visit a church. A large crucifix is always hung behind the altar. Jesus is always shown suffering, a reminder that we suffer without him. Jesus, more specifically the crucifix, is something that follows Catholics around. As a queer person, the shadows of masculinity and conformity watch my every move. It is there when I eat, when I love, when I even think about expressing myself. The rules of being “normal” infect my life daily, as when I navigate life away from those standards, the more damage I find it has caused.

Queerness goes beyond who I fuck and who I love. Queerness goes beyond performance and identity. Queerness is the questioning of “normal.” Queerness is always the questioning of “being” as it demands not only the truest self but also the self that is willing to risk the comfort of heteronormativity for something new. Queerness and spirituality also demand and cause transformation, back into the selves we truly are. As I search for enlightenment through kindness, through self-examination, through honoring the dead, through asking for their guidance but also showing them tradition can be something new, I become closer to the inner beings who guide my every action. Queerness also enacts self-examination into the transformation of my truest self whether it be by how I perform my gender, my renouncement of gender, who I decide

to love, how I decide that love can manifest, all these modes of queerness fit within the spiritual space.

Every day I give thanks for being queer. For understanding and questioning the world around me. For being able to see every part of myself, make a new home where I can reside, and find others making their own homes, their own spaces. I run into the world and beg for new insight so I may learn more about myself and how I can become the most whole me.

LEARNING TO RIDE

An outline of a man teaches me to ride a bike.
I take off my training wheels and ask for his hand
to hold me. It's an outline, it does not hold me.

I wobble and worry my fingers into the handlebars
as I struggle for balance. I send my feet out searching
for stability. The outline cannot teach me how to peddle.

I collapse with the bike on top of my legs,
I call for the outline to carry my bike from me
it stands there motionless, not even noticing me on the ground.

I lay there hoping it would come rescue me, hoping
that its edges could be filled in with color and its hands
with warmth to pull the bike from me and get me to try again.

I snake my way from under the heavy bike,
an outline cannot hold me so I shouldn't ask it to
I repeat, with force. I try to believe my words.

FEATURED PHOTO

I was 12 when my mother's hazel eyes reflected to mine and changed from the bright amber greens to somber subtle gray streaks like a piece of Alexandrite quickly hidden from sunlight. *I don't know she said.* She tried to wrap her arms around me and herself.

I was 16 when she sat me down and put her hands on mine, tripped over her words, the how-to-explains and the maybe when you're older you'll understand. I looked through all the photos in my family's album of her and me, cutting out careful places I knew someone would help complete one day.

I was 18. The eyes of someone who has only been an outline, a figment of a person I wished would come on every birthday, burned at me through my laptop screen. The featured photo of a late-night article with mugshot. I stared back into those eyes and screamed. My hands, detached from my body, shook, with my legs soon following. The violence in their shakes turned them to puddles of goo and ooze. I melted into the carpet of my tiny college apartment, the only thing left of me was two fiery amber marble-like orbs, staring at the screen.

UNTANGLING OF KNOTS

Lying on my bed trying to untie a deep and twisted double knot
I hold the clump mass
string in hand

My mother handed it to me at 12

telling me it was given
to her by her mother
but for what she would not

tell me

She tells me instead

“it will always stay with you”
the ball-like multicolored knot

I throw it into a field

periodically

to always find it return

its physical bulge pressing lightly into my thigh

Now

it rests
in the middle
of my palm

every fiber hangs onto

each other with

string

tightening their bonds

keeping their secrets trapped
at the center.

I take the strands

between my fingertips

breathe

and begin ripping the ropes from their holds
I watch the fibers struggle to keep pacts
their secrets thrown out to winds of conversation

The unburning of documents detailing family members forgotten and purposely lost in unmarked graves

I tear

Their disfigured
and misshapen
as the breath of my ancestors free themselves

from the former center of a knot
They whisper *unravel*
Another knot appears

open the knots and let
the strings breathe on their
own again.

ords reclaim space for themselves

BASTARD

My name is not mine. Neither is the right to know family.
Others have pictures of who they came from. Some share
an ancestor with me if I go back far enough. But my line
does not have names, or documents, or written histories.
I have the name given to any bastard on Aruba, the name
of the mother. The father can always be missing.
The mother will gladly pass down her name.
who else I am related to? I only have maiden names,
an island, and oral stories where I do not know the origin of.

APPENDIX: READING LIST

1. [Insert boy] by Danez Smith
2. A Family is a House by Dustin Pearson
3. Autobiography of Death by Kim Hyesoon
4. Autobiography of My Hungers by Rigoberto Gonzalez
5. Beloved by Toni Morrison
6. Blood Dazzler by Patricia Smith
7. Canto General by Pablo Neruda
8. Catrachos by Roy G Guzman
9. Coconut Curl y Café Con Leche by Tatiana Figueroa Ramirez
10. Company of Moth by Michael Palmer
11. Dance Dance Revolution by Cathy Park Hong
12. Double Shadow by Carl Phillips
13. elegia / elegy by Raquel Salas-Rivera
14. Faces in the Crowd by Valeria Luiselli
15. Ghost Sickness by Luis Alberto Urrea
16. Gypsy Ballads by Federico Garcia Lorca
17. How to Write an Autobiographical Novel by Alexander Chee
18. How We Fight For Our Lives by Saeed Jones
19. HYBRIDA by Tina Chang
20. Jimmy and Rita by Kim Addonizio
21. Lament for the Death of the Bullfighter by Federico Garcia Lorca

22. Late Empire by David Wojahn
23. Lighthouse by Terrence Hayes
24. Mean by Myriam Gurba
25. Millennial Roost by Dustin Pearson
26. Night Sky with Exit Wounds by Ocean Vuong
27. Obit by Victoria Chang
28. Paradiso by Jose Lezama Lima
29. Piedra de Sol by Octavio Paz
30. Poem of Deep Song by Federico Garcia Lorca
31. Poet in New York by Federico Garcia Lorca
32. Postcolonial Love Poem by Natalie Diaz
33. Refuse by Julian Randall
34. Sonnets of Dark Love by Federico Garcia Lorca
35. Strange Pilgrims by Gabriel Garcia Marquez
36. Surrealism in Latin American Literature: Searching for Breton's Ghost by Melanie
Nicholson
37. Surrealist Manifesto by Andre Breton
38. The City In Which I Love You by Li Young-Lee
39. The Displaced Children of Displaced Children by Faisal Mohyuddin
40. The Essential W.S. Merwin by W.S. Merwin and Michael Wieggers
41. The Fire Eater by Jose Hernandez Diaz
42. The Labyrinth of Solitude by Octavio Paz

43. The Man Suit by Zachary Schomburg
44. The Tradition by Jericho Brown
45. The Undressing by Li Young-Lee
46. This Wound is a World by Billy-Ray Belcourt
47. Tomas Tranströmer: Selected Poems, 1954-1986 by Tomas Tranströmer
48. Unpeople Eden by Rigoberto Gonzalez
49. Walt Whitman: The Collected Poems edited by Francis Murphy
50. We Want it All: An Anthology of Radical Trans Poetics edited by Andrea Abi-Karam
and Kay Gabriel
51. What It Means When A Man Falls From the Sky by Lesley Nneka Arimah
52. When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities by Chen Chen
53. while they sleep (under the bed is another country) by Raquel Salas Rivera
54. Woman Hollering Creek by Sandra Cisneros
55. You're the Most Beautiful Thing That Happened by Arissa White

LIST OF REFERENCES

“All The Ways To Be with Bryan Washington and Ocean Vuong.” *The A24 Podcast from A24 Films*, 21 December 2020, <https://a24films.com/notes/2020/12/all-the-ways-to-be-with-bryan-washington-ocean-vuong>.