

A woman with long dark hair is looking upwards, her face partially in shadow. She is positioned in front of a large, vibrant pink flower sculpture that appears to be made of a textured material like paper or fabric. The background is a large, textured wall in shades of green and yellow-green. The overall lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows.

CHICA/MUJER

CHRISTINE STODDARD

Chica / Mujer

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Dedication

I dedicate this chapbook to all of the girls and women I have ever loved.

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Author Bio

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La Hija Mixta in Spanish Class

“Where did you learn to speak Spanish so well?”

Hearing the question made my throat constrict. I was a biracial freshman on the campus of a tiny, private liberal arts college where about ninety percent of the student population was white. Naturally, the classmate asking me the question was white as well. And white was also how at least half of the world perceived me most of the time. Back then, being young and scared and one thousand miles from home, I didn't correct them. Our campus was too small and too isolated, with only a sneeze of a town for miles around. Why wouldn't I try to pass when white privilege *usually* worked in my favor?

Notice I placed an emphasis on “usually.” There was still the heartbreak of erasure, which, admittedly, was mostly self-inflicted at that point. It's hard for someone to acknowledge what you are if you won't admit, well, what you are. No identity is a chalkboard. Even with the eraser in my hand, I could hardly call ignoring half of my heritage empowering.

Without money for the salon, I regularly ran hydrogen peroxide soaked cotton balls through my hair to lighten my dark brown locks. I relaxed my massive curly mane with a mild children's formula and chopped off the chunks that hadn't straightened to my liking. I ended up with the triangle hair of nobody's dreams. Every night, I massaged my face with bleaching cream and every morning, I rubbed baby powder onto my skin. I slathered myself in sunscreen, even though I avoided direct sunlight at all costs. I was going to be *más blanca que todas las blanquitas*.

But I knew I would never end up with a peaches and cream complexion; even at my palest, I was light olive, not porcelain. Some people would always suspect an “otherness.” They would comment on my “exotic” look, pointing to features I could not hide, like my hips or my cheekbones. Still, I tried to pass for white as often as I could. Life is kinder to those with fairer complexion. You know that when you grow up witnessing your parent of color endure things that your white parent does not. All of my efforts to pass were part of an elaborate defense

mechanism.

So when one of my classmates asked the question about my Spanish one night after our study group broke, my heart skipped a beat. There was no malice in her voice, only curiosity, but even that terrified me. My mind skipped to childhood bullying and lunches I tossed rather than eat in front of my taunting classmates. The difference between then and now was that I had grown up in a much bigger place than where I attended college that year. There were options for escape back home. On that campus, there were none.

She knows, I told myself. I immediately turned around to gather my books so I wouldn't have to meet her eyes when I replied. Then I said, "Just, you know, high school classes."

I refused to tell her that my mother was from El Salvador, a country I had never visited. I refused to tell her that I was ashamed of my imperfect Spanish – that even when I earned high marks and awards, it was never enough to satisfy my secret but flawed definition of *latinidad*. I refused to tell her anything at all because I did not want her friendship.

Friendship would mean disclosing secrets and I wanted to leave nothing behind when I transferred to a new school. I wasn't open to vulnerability because that would've required too much humility. It's difficult to confide in a friend when you can barely acknowledge you have a problem. I needed to define myself using my own proud process. Part of that process involved transferring. The need to go someplace bigger where I wouldn't have to duck from my identity on a daily basis wasn't my only reason for transferring, but it certainly was a factor in my decision. I could only keep up the farce for so long. The prospect of being "discovered" made me paranoid, which in turn made me miserable.

When you subject yourself to that level of mental gymnastics, you have to develop your own coping behaviors, if not for the integrity you've already started to lose then for your sanity. One of my survival tactics that year was listening to Manu Chao's song "Me Gustas Tú" on repeat. It had always been a favorite of mine, but its lyrical simplicity comforted me in a time of need. It's a song about liking someone and that was a period when I desperately

needed to like myself.

Me gustan los aviones, me gustas tú/Me gusta viajar, me gustas tú/Me gusta la mañana, me gustas tú/Me gusta el viento, me gustas tú/Me gusta sonar, me gustas tú/Me gusta la mar, me gustas tú

I would sit alone in my dorm room, drawing or reading for hours as I mouthed the words to this song over and over again. I confined myself to my bed, nestled in sheets I probably washed once all year. Then I pressed play as many times as I needed. If there was a place to indulge in my late teens self-absorption, it was in flyover country.

Yet instead of using my white privilege as an advocacy tool, I holed myself up in that room. It was easier to retreat to my imagination than to address how race impacted those around me. That may seem like too high of an expectation for an eighteen year old, but I had always been an overachiever. Why not redirect some of my neurotic obsession to perform, organize, and accomplish? There were students of color on campus who, unlike me, did not have the option of masking their heritage. No number of toiletries could scrub away their blackness or brownness. They were stuck. I vowed that when I transferred to a larger, more urban school, I would change. I had no courage in the cornfields. As much as I made that happen at my new university, I tend to dwell on my failures, and one in particular.

A couple of years after I transferred, I befriended a fellow biracial girl with a more burdensome background than my own. I say that because we went to school in the former capital of the Confederacy, and this friend had one white parent and one black parent. We bonded over our “otherness” because even though we attended a diverse school, our program was remarkably white.

Sometimes there isn’t a single reason why a friendship fails. In this case, I now claim most of the responsibility. One of my many faults during our friendship was my impatience. I saw this friend replicating my freshman year behaviors—the denial, the angst, the insistence on passing as white—but, unlike me, she tried to remedy the pain and confusion with drugs and alcohol. Today I regret my lack of

compassion. Even though I related to her dilemma, I knew that in a place that still flew the Confederate flag high in the sky, her plight was worse. I went from Florence Nightingale to a deserter faster than I care to remember.

People occasionally call us biracial folks “tomorrow people,” implying that one day race relations will have progressed to a point where everyone will be blatantly, happily mixed and racial hatred will end. But we biracial folks are the people of today and the people of yesterday, and our history shows that such change may never come.

The Americas can trace the start of racial mixing back to 1492. In much of the rest of the world, however, racial mixing began much earlier. Yet the antagonism over our very existence as biracial people has festered for centuries. I have hope for race relations in the future, but I’m not blind to the fact that they may never significantly improve. There may always be biracial people who try to pass for white.

Deep in the Roots

Casper Rawlins never liked us playing in his fern-filled yard at the sleepy foot of Mill Mountain. But we chillun never liked him and we loved the sprawling magnolia on his lot. So we paid him no mind, except to run away at the sight of his mean old self. He stood nearly seven feet tall, like a bear on its hind legs, and his smile was fiercer than a possum’s. Finn Jasper James, the redhead who lived on the other side of Casper Rawlins’ house from me, said he saw him turn into a wolf once. Even the littlest of us knew that was far-fetched. Wolves hadn’t roamed Virginia since the Civil War, our granddaddies told us so.

No, Casper Rawlins was a witch doctor from New Orleans. He moved to Roanoke to wake up smelling the Blue Ridge air and face less competition in his wicked trade: ripping babies out of mamas who didn’t want them and using them for his voodoo spells. He collected them in jam jars he yanked out from the garbage. I don’t know who told the story first. All I know is that since I was old enough to leave my mama’s yard and join the big kids in terrorizing the neighborhood, I took the tale as fact.

When I reached third grade, the big kids said Libby

Messina, a high school junior who used to feed Mama's dogs when we visited Grandma in La Plata, ran around Big Lick kissing men. I never bore witness. What I saw was that Libby wore V-neck blouses, ruby lipstick, and gold rings on every finger. When I asked Finn how come she looked like a movie star, he said she looked like a hooker. And when I asked how come she kissed all those men, he said it was because she wanted to make babies.

"But she ain't grown," I replied, my teeny brow furrowed in confusion. "Where she gonna put her baby at?"

"Her mama will probably hide her inside the house like how my Aunt Morgan did to my cousin Minnie."

"How come?"

He rolled her eyes and spat, "How can the big kids even stand you?" Then he hopped on his bike and sped off.

"You ain't a big kid, neither!" I shouted when he was too far away to hear me.

The summer after fourth grade ended, even I could tell Libby was pregnant. She didn't wear her elegant blouses anymore. All of her clothes had Virginia Tech and Hollins logos on them.

"My mama said all she gotta do is visit Casper Rawlins and he can take her baby away," said Finn one afternoon at our church playground. It was a Saturday and we were the only ones there trawling the jungle gym. We had started spending more time alone.

"Like that witch in Rapunzel?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I dunno. You know him and his spooky stuff. He's got a way."

Finn and I watched Casper Rawlins' house for days but never saw Libby near it. Then one day, Sarah Blackwell, a lanky sixth grader and notorious gossip, was walking by the playground when she spotted us.

"Guess what?" she called out as she headed toward where we sat by the slide.

"What?" Finn said.

"My mama told me Libby went and had Casper Rawlins rip her baby out right good," she said, mischief fluttering in her hazel eyes. "He paid her so he could use it for his voodoo magic."

"She still so big?" I asked.

"No, stupid," Sarah said. "He popped her like a bubble

and now she's a string bean with boobies again."

Finn and I were silent. We heard a crow cawing overhead.

"Anyway," Sarah started again, suddenly solemn, "my mama's going to start praying for her. You should, too." Then she skipped off.

Finn and I stayed by the slide, where he held my hand until his mama called him in for supper.

The next day, I woke up with a red dot in my panties. Mama sighed and took me to the bathroom to show me how to use a sanitary napkin. As she washed the teeny stain out of my underwear, she got quiet and said, "I don't want you hanging around that Finn boy alone, anymore. You understand?"

I nodded because, all of a sudden, I did.

The following summer, I had no friends. Finn had moved to Richmond and the girls in my grade had stopped noticing me. So I spent my days reading and spying on Casper Rawlins.

Two weeks after Independence Day, I was camped out in Mama's squash patch close to dark. Mama was still working and the house felt too big with me by myself. I squinted in the dim light, trying to finish the last pages of my book. That's when I heard the soft growl of a voice that belonged to one man and one man only:

"Heavenly Father, Your Love is eternal..."

Casper Rawlins was on his hands and knees before his magnolia, cupping a jar full of an off-white mass. Though I barely saw it, my frozen heart knew it was no turnip or herring. It was a baby receiving its Christian burial, with Casper Rawlins as the stand-in for a pastor. He cast no evil spell and looked smaller than I'd ever known. And now that I was a big kid, I had no eager ears to soak up my gossip, nobody to run to after the juicy sighting. Not that I had the courage to speak. For the rest of the summer, I was stricken with one question: When would it be my turn to feed Casper Rawlins' tree?

I am the age my mother was when she killed herself – to the month, the week, and the day.

Everyone says I could've been her twin because I look just like her. I say I might as well have been her twin because she never saw me as her daughter. Instead, I was a perpetual nuisance.

I can still hear her Lauren Bacall voice snapping at me as I toddled about:

“Put your stupid bear away. You're too old for it.”

“That's not a boo-boo. It's a scratch. Use real words, and stop crying.”

“Go to your room and don't come out until you're ready to fix yourself dinner.”

My mother never wanted to be a mother – mine or anyone else's. She feared the stretch marks, the changed breasts, the torn labia. Her dread of lost freedom came second.

“I haven't gotten my nails done since before you were born,” she used to say. “You turned me into a regular frump.”

Nobody knew she was a frump but her.

My mother was the kind of beautiful people noticed: tall but not too tall, slender yet curvy, long-haired, clear-faced and bright-eyed. She had dropped out of high school to become a trade show model, working until she met my father on the hood of a Jaguar. Oiled from head to toe, she wore a leopard-print bikini. My balding father wore a gray suit and carried a briefcase. He bought the car right then and there and asked my mother to go for a ride with him. I arrived three months into their whirlwind marriage.

Sometimes, when I was supposed to be sleeping, I'd watch my mother wallow before her vanity as I hid in the closet. She'd dip her fingers into various jars, smear lotions on her face, and study her reflection before wiping her face clean. Then, sulking, she would slip into her cold bed. My father was never home most nights, and I didn't dare move until I was sure she had fallen asleep. Cuddling was forbidden.

When I study my reflection now, I see my mother. Perhaps I am a few pounds heavier. Perhaps I am more prone to smiling. But it wasn't just sheer luck that, throughout my teens, when I showed people pictures of

her, they believed I modeled on the weekend.

The main difference is that I will not run the hot water. I will not smash the mirror and take a shard into the tub. I will not sing “Down the road, the long, long road,” as my baby plays House in the den. I will not paint the bathroom tile red as I leak to death.

I will put on my clothes and go to the den and pick up the baby and hold her tight. Put her down and show her how to tie an apron and cut a cake and eat a slice.

This is our house – the same house where my mother lived at my age. But by tomorrow, I will be older than she ever was.

The Lucky Ones

Before Tinder and Grinder and OKCupid, we had the East End Bridge. It was not a land of love but a land of fucks and you could give as many, or as few, as you wanted. But you came there to lie in a bed of used condoms, shit-covered leaves, and broken glass with one intention: to give, or receive, at least one fuck. Alcohol and drugs were merely appetizers, and the only restaurant you go to just for appetizers is TGI Fridays. All others either win or lose you with the main course.

Summer after summer, the East End Bridge boasted a loyal customer base. Even in the wintertime, you could find local kids embracing one another, panting little clouds of their warm breath into the air, stretched out on a strip of cardboard if they were lucky. A mediocre meal is better than no meal at all. Everybody’s got to eat. Or as my mom used to say, “Everybody’s got needs.”

We went there because most of us didn’t have our own bedrooms like kids in the movies. Most of our parents didn’t have jobs, at least not steady ones, which meant our trailers were almost never conveniently absent after school, and none of us had our own cars, let alone hot rides with leather seats. Privacy was another middle class luxury we couldn’t afford. You either went all the way under the East End Bridge or saved yourself for marriage like Pastor Jenkins commanded from the pulpit of our otherwise-abandoned strip mall church. *Chastity is a virtue. Chastity is*

divine. Chastity will save you from hellfire.

I had planned on saving myself for marriage less out of a concern for hell than a concern for cutting myself on a smashed bourbon bottle under the East End Bridge. It was no bed of roses, even that time our biology teacher, Ms. Russell, discarded fifteen bouquets there. Her fiancé sent the flowers, one for each month they had dated, after she found him cheating with his niece. A few of us were huddled around a bonfire one Saturday night when it started raining petals and thorns. While the blanket of red and green improved the scenery a little, our spot under the bridge was still as sorry as it had ever been. Yes, I'd claw myself out of town if I had to and lose my virginity someplace clean and quiet, anywhere but there. I didn't think that was too much to ask. Then I saw Pastor Jenkins fucking my mom doggy-style.

Most kids hear their parents having sex at some point, but few have the misfortune of catching them in the act. Best case scenario, it's Mom and Dad tossing and turning under the sheets with a moan here and there. His cock and her snatch remain a mystery. Worst case scenario, it's Mom with someone old enough to be your grandpa, both of them playing it rough with every wrinkle and sweat gland in plain sight. Her tits are flopping faster than your cousin flips hash browns at the Waffle House down the street, his ass looks like something that belongs on a 100-year-old toad, and both parties are breathing so hard you're convinced they're about to break. It's poignant when the ancient pastor cries, "Jesus!"

I yelled, "I hate you," as he withdrew from Mom, and ran out the door. I escaped so quickly that I never saw them register that I had witnessed the debacle. After that, I thought nothing of "fornicating" under the East End Bridge.

His name was Ned, he was in my Spanish class, and he rode me on a flattened Budweiser box.

Desert Storm

I did not lose the baby—she died. There was never any question about where she was. First she was inside of me and then she was in the toilet. She didn't hide. She didn't run away. I never had to phone a search party. When she called my womb home, I felt her. When my body expelled her like poison, I saw her. I always knew exactly where she was.

We did not try again for a year because that meant putting his cock where she had been last. Trying again would mean replacing her and I was still sorting out what had happened. One day I was pregnant and the next day I wasn't. I couldn't figure out the cause, only the effect.

He said I would be my normal self again if only I said yes. But I kept saying no, and soon he was the one who would break down sobbing because blue-veined cheeses go with gin and stout, didn't I know that? Or the lint roller belongs in the top left drawer, so why was I putting it in the top right?

The first time we embraced in all those months was right after I downed too much Moscato because I had grown cheap and childish. Even though his first thrust was hesitant and shy, I thought he had punched my cervix. When I squirmed, he dotted my forehead with kisses and I froze. The next thrust was faster, bolder. Each thrust went harder, deeper. A voice told me to lunge for his neck, so I heeded the call and bit him like in the old days before she died. He bit me back. At one point we established a rhythm, an understanding. The last thing I remember before falling asleep was suppressing a tiny burp that tasted like semen and sweet wine.

The next morning, I did my hair. I did my make-up. I put on my most beautiful Oscar de la Renta. I left the house and I walked the way elegant people walk in old movies. I noticed birds and sunshine and little white flowers pushing out from the sidewalks of Washington. I even noticed little boys playing catch in their front yard without cringing. It was Tuesday in Tenleytown and I headed to Chevy Chase on foot. I joked that I wouldn't get there until Thursday and had a real chuckle. Not a polite one. An actual chuckle.

He and I got into the beautiful habit of making love. We left hickeys with no remorse. We wrote notes to each other

and left them for each other around the house. We said fuck it to cheese and wine pairings and had what we wanted. And then one day, the test came back positive.

“When will I feel the baby?” I asked the doctor several weeks later, wringing my hands.

“Soon,” he said and smiled.

“No,” I said, suddenly realizing how small my voice sounded. “Why haven’t I felt the baby yet?” I met my husband’s eyes. He looked away.

The doctor clasped my hand and said slowly and firmly, “Your baby is healthy.” On his way out the door, he patted my husband’s shoulder. I sighed.

The next night, January 16, 1991, we were watching TV after dinner. ABC News correspondent Gary Shepard was on the air, reporting live from Baghdad, where the city sat in silence. Suddenly, at 6:35 p.m., Shepard said, “Peter, I’m looking directly west from our hotel now, and throughout the entire sky there are flashes of light.” Then came the sound of tracer fire.

I almost turned to my husband and cried that the war had started when the quickening occurred. It felt like the baby was brushing a fluttering butterfly against my belly.

“She’s kicking!” I cried.

You, the Immigrant’s Daughter

I parted your lips and lapped at you like a kitten laps milk, but you couldn’t enjoy it. Even in the dark, barely touched by the timid moonlight, guilt haunted you like tradition. You shivered as if a ghost shot through you.

I’ve heard that if, after oral sex, your partner doesn’t look like they’ve been exorcised, you’re doing it wrong, but that’s exactly how you looked and I *knew* I was doing it wrong.

Because everything we did was wrong—in your culture and mine, woman on woman, in darkness and in light.

“Let’s get matching tattoos,” I said when you rolled over and sunk into the hot pink and green serape on your bed. “Maybe ouroboros or something.”

I said it slowly, drunkenly, stroking my rosy belly and then your coffee-colored one.

“You gringas could sell your parents into slavery and convince them it was a good idea.”

Your voice was rough yet warbling, and I wondered how you could sound that way when you hadn’t downed the beers or puffed the cigs I had. *Women who drink are putas. Women who smoke are putas.*

When I stared at your little mouth, you pushed away my circling pointer finger. Your short, bare nails brushed my lacquered black ones.

I shrugged my shoulders and said, “My mom has a tattoo. A butterfly on her ankle.”

“My mom says tattoos are for putas,” you said and then, after a pause, “Sometimes I think she wants to be a stereotype.”

I chuckled. “Speaking for white people, I don’t think there’s a single one of us who wants to dance the way we dance.” I bobbed my head and waved my arms as goofily as I could.

Instead of laughing, you sat up and locked eyes with me in your usual intense way. “But you want the good stereotypes. You want college and marriage and picket fences.”

I nodded. “Sometimes.”

“Mexicans want the good ones, too. The faith. The work ethic.”

“No putas.”

“No putas,” you repeated. “But putas are like mermaids—they’re still part human. Maybe more than that.”

We sat on the serape, legs dangling over the bed like mermaids’ fins dangle from seashore rocks. I thought about the mermaid found on a beach in Veracruz last summer, the one that, according to the Spanish-language media, turned out to be a creation of the “Pirates of the Caribbean” special effects team. I wondered if her sculptor had imagined her gay or straight, bisexual or asexual, puta or non-puta.

“My turn?” I asked, finally breaking the silence.

Your answer involved pushing me on my back and pressing your face to the wet warmth between my legs, in the dark, barely touched by the timid moonlight.

The White Cat

College meant escape. So when I graduated, there was no way I was crawling all skink-like back to Tolby Hollow. The last place I called home was anything but. Half the time, my foster mom was drunker than a black bear who happened upon fermented apples. Come the new year, we always had more bills than firewood and she could never be bothered to pick up a hatchet. I spent more time coaxing eggs out of our scrawny chickens than I did hanging out with friends. In fact, I had only one friend: Tilly, whose world was as small and as dark as mine. On Friday nights, I wrote letters to my dead parents before Tilly and I burned them in a bonfire ritual.

Crossing the stage was an out of body experience. That moment when I shook my department chair's hand and took my diploma was a moment out of a movie. I didn't belong there. In an alternate universe, I was an addict who squatted in abandoned buildings covered in kudzu. That was my legacy and what uppity white-trash hillbilly thinks she can change what's written in the stars? Yet photos of me donning a cap and gown are evidence that I defied all expectations. Instead of taking up a needle, I took up a pencil. It wasn't a noble act. It was the only way I knew how to rebel.

To get to that place on the stage, I even boarded a plane—for the first and only time in my life—and saw miles of Roman ruins in Italy. My eyes, the same eyes that woke up to weekly beatings and empty cupboards and black mold, had cried at the Colliseum. The tears turned into sobs when I realized I wasn't crying because of the structure's beauty or wonder. I was crying because I felt victorious. Those were the same tears a gladiator must've shed after taking down a lion. All of those hours spent fighting with school counselors and post office employees and scholarship committees had brought me here. I was here, exactly where everyone told me I didn't belong.

But the euphoria over my college graduation was short-lived. I had to feed myself and fast. Tilly and I indulged in a single night of crushing cans and reading professors' notes on old papers before we settled on a plan. The next

morning, Tilly—a fellow anthropology major and scholarship kid at our all-girls private college—would drive me into Roanoke and we'd flood every business with our resumes.

"You got an extra flash drive?" Tilly asked a few quiet moments after we finalized our strategy. Gwen Stefani's voice on my laptop was the only sound in the room. We were lying on my dorm bed, staring at a tiny spider trawling the spleen-colored ceiling. The last beer was long gone.

When the last No Doubt song on my hard drive ended, I said, "That's pretty much the only thing I *do* have."

No restaurant manager in the world cares that you aced your senior seminar because your GPA has no bearing on how well you'll greet customers or take orders. But Tilly and I weren't thinking about that when we got to Kinko's. All we could think about was how much we hated being hungry.

"You think twenty is enough?" I asked as I fiddled with buttons on the copier.

"Twenty? It won't even print two," Tilly muttered. Then she turned and waved at an employee who could've passed for someone's creepy uncle in a bad made-for-TV movie. "Hey, excuse me?"

"I'll be there in a minute," he said before disappearing behind a shelf of filing folders. He never came back.

I studied Tilly as she tinkered with the machine again. Tolby Hollow had made her solid as a sycamore. My mind flashed to that Sunday afternoon our sophomore year of high school when we ran into each other at the food bank downtown. Neither one of us said a thing. I wanted to hug Tilly and tell her that one day we wouldn't have to kick copiers in run-down shopping centers, but her exclamation of "Fuck this, let's just hit up Market Square and leave our phone numbers" jolted me out of that feeling of tenderness.

"Yeah, let's do it," I said.

Tilly drove a Ford Explorer that had failed inspection three years prior but she never bothered fixing it. We got in and attempted to buckle our busted seat belts anyway. We kept the windows down less because of the heat than because the exhaust blew into the cabin. The A/C only

worked sporadically, anyway. Once the blue box finally started, it rumbled down Electric Road the way it always did: noisily and perpetually on the verge of death.

When we got close, Tilly double-parked outside of the Taubman Museum and told me to run. I bolted toward a deli with olive green doors. Inside, the stink of pastrami hit me hard.

“Um, hi,” I said to the beautiful boy slicing bread behind the counter. Even with mustard stains on his apron, he looked as clean as the Hampden-Sydney boys I never had the courage to approach at intercollegiate mixers.

“Hi,” he said. “What can I get you?”

“Are you hiring?”

“Yeah.”

I waited for him to say more. He just stared at me. Nothing.

“Um, well, here's my resume.”

“Here, fill this out.” He wiped his hands on his apron and ducked down to pull out an application from under the register.

“Could I have one for my friend, too?”

He grabbed another application, placed it on the counter, and pushed both sheets of paper toward me. I glanced down at them and then back at him.

“I like your hair,” he said.

I wasn't sure I heard him right. “What?”

“It's pretty.”

“Oh. Thank you.” Before I knew it, I was nervously twirling a tendril. “So that's it?”

“Yeah, just fill them out and bring them back tomorrow.”

“Cool. Uh, what was your name again?”

“Michael. Yours?”

“Doreen.”

He wiped his hand on his apron and extended his hand. It took me too long to realize he wanted to shake mine.

“Nice to meet you, Doreen,” he said, clinging to my hand like a snapping turtle.

I blushed. “Yeah, you too.”

Then I picked up the applications and tripped past the wicker chairs and tables to the sidewalk. When I got outside, I couldn't remember if I was going left or right. Tilly called my name before I could figure it out.

“Oh, hey!” I waved and walked toward the Ford. “You found parking,” I said once inside the car.

“Yeah, I had to circle around a couple of times. Those the applications?”

“Yep. Let's fill them out now.”

We grabbed pens from the dirty cup holder between our seats and spent a few minutes scribbling. Tilly put her pen down first.

“Four years of socio-linguistics to work here,” she said. “All summer long, we're going to be taking orders from high school kids and their parents on their stupid college tours.”

“It's not forever. Plus, it's a cute place.”

“I still can't believe we didn't apply to grad school.”

“You got \$200,000 in the bank I don't know about?”

“We probably could've gotten full-rides again.”

“Yeah, and when did we have time for applications? Was I supposed to worry about all that when I was writing my thesis?”

“Look, I know. I just thought I'd be going farther away than this. I mean, what if my mama overdoses again? Am I going to cave in and go back home? Am I too close to say I live too far away to help?”

“You don't need distance. You have me. This is far enough for now.”

“Is it?” Tilly turned to me. Her face crumpled into the face of the girl I met when we were both six years old and wearing free clothes from the Baptist church down the road where an all-white cat with yellow eyes lived. No matter how far we traveled down I-81, we'd always have Knoxville in us.

“Yes.”

We hugged and my mind went to that white cat chasing mice in the churchyard. When Tilly and I let each other go, I checked the last box on my application and asked if she'd run our papers inside.

“Take a look at the place,” I said. “It's not bad.”

She nodded and got out of the car. I pulled out a stick of cinnamon gum and stared out at Market Square. The white cat always fascinated me as a child because it stayed so clean. Nothing in any of my foster homes was that clean, not with the clogged-up sinks and the soiled carpets and

the broken appliances on the lawn. Despite living outdoors, the white cat stayed immaculate.

Then the car door clicked open.

"You didn't tell me about the babe behind the counter," Tilly gasped. "He's gorgeous!"

"Yeah," I grinned.

Her voice got hard. "Oh, lemme guess—you call dibs?"

"No, I ..."

Her voice softened. "I know, little virgin miss. I'm teasing you. But, really, he's a hunk."

"Yeah," I said sheepishly. "Now where else should we apply?"

"Are you kidding? Those jobs are ours. We'll ditch them when something far away calls."

Within two days, Tilly and I were both working at the deli. We signed a lease for an apartment the size of a chicken coop, but at least we could walk to work instead of relying on the doomed Ford. We learned how to slice charcuterie, identify more kinds of cheese than we knew existed, and wrap to-go orders prettier than Christmas presents. The owner dropped by when he felt like it, but never worked full shifts. It was Michael who trained us. He guided my hands on the meat slicer, peered over my shoulder as I labeled the cheeses, and helped me carry supplies from the storage room. He mostly talked to Tilly, who has experience as a cashier and waitress, to tell her what she was doing wrong.

"You're going to get really good at this," Michael told me whenever he noticed me wrestling with plastic wrap or flubbing at the cash register. He leaned in close when he said it. Though I liked the attention, I never encouraged it. I was too shy and too unsure of what I wanted.

I never told Michael that every restaurant I had ever worked for had fired me and rather quickly at that. That's how I ended up working at the campus library all four years.

Whenever Michael stroked my shoulder or complimented my appearance, Tilly tried hard to save the dagger eyes but her level of self-control ebbed and flowed. One time she chucked a whole bell pepper at Michael's ear. Another time she tripped him. Once she slapped him and then tried immediately to kiss him. Michael laughed off

every outburst.

No matter what happened between Michael and Tilly that day, Tilly and I ended every shift with a smoke and a root beer on the same Market Square bench. By the end of two weeks, it had become our new ritual.

"How much money do you think we need to get away?" Tilly asked on what I counted to be our twenty-eighth day of work. It was the longest I had lasted at any job outside of the library.

"Come on, Tilly. We just started."

"It's good to have goals."

"Yeah, but, I mean, I don't hate it here."

"Uh-huh. That's because you're in love with Michael."

"I am not!"

"You practically let that boy whisper in your ear."

"No, I don't!"

"He's seducing you. That boy wants you over a pickle barrel."

"Do you hear yourself?"

"Yes, I do, and I know I'm right. You're falling for him and you won't let yourself make plans because of it."

"At least we're not in Knoxville."

"That's how low you set the bar, isn't it?"

"Why are you being so judgmental?"

"Because you need a kick in the ass, Doreen."

"Doesn't it feel nice not to scramble for once? Why can't we coast for a bit?"

"I'm not going in tomorrow. You and Michael can have your love fest. I'm applying to other jobs. At this point, I'll take a job teaching English in Korea. There's no damn way crossing a state line is far enough."

She threw her cigarette down and stomped on it without offering me a drag. Then she stormed off in the direction of our chicken coop. She didn't turn around when I called her name.

The first time Tilly's mama overdosed was the first Friday night of our freshman year of high school. The fireflies had already gone for the year and the evenings were getting shorter. We put on long-sleeved shirts to stave off the chill that began biting the mountain air. We had started our bonfire ritual that summer, only a few weeks before a neighbor found Mrs. Deskins convulsing on

the kitchen floor. By Monday, all of Tolby Hollow knew how Mrs. Deskins foamed at the mouth.

Back then, the tone in my letters to my dead parents was sad, never angry. I burned the letters to hide them from my foster parents. It was only later that I burned them out of hatred and resentment. The bonfire was my idea, but Tilly made it possible. She brought the kerosene and the marshmallows. That night, she started the fire and let me watch as I shredded the letters in silence.

“Should we chant something?” she asked when it was all set.

“Next time.”

She nodded as she threw another tree branch onto the fire. After the first piece of paper turned to ashes, I felt something or someone join me on the damp log where I sat. I jumped up and screamed.

Tilly howled and pointed but was laughing too hard to talk. “It’s the white cat!” she finally sputtered.

We watched the cat’s citrine eyes glow in the moonlight until we heard the wail of an ambulance. The red lights flashed at the top of the hill near the main road. We watched the ambulance travel down the hill. Then it halted at Tilly’s trailer. We left the fire raging and ran.

When I got to the deli the next morning, Michael was already there spritzing the countertops, his muscles rippling through his red shirt. He looked up when he heard the door open.

“What happened to Thing Two?”

“She’s not feeling well.”

“At least it’s Sunday. We can handle it by ourselves. Me and Captain D.”

And since we didn’t have a single customer all day, it was just us in the storage room when he pressed me hard against the wall. I’ll never forget that raw feeling between my legs or how hard I cried. The tears I shed were very different from the ones I shed before the Coliseum.

When I got home, there was a scrap of paper on my pillow with the note “Mama OD’d again” scribbled on it. The ink was red, the letters all caps. Tilly had cleared out all of her belongings. I sat on her bed and stared at my cell phone before deciding not to call or text her. Even if I was pregnant—which I wasn’t sure was the case—it didn’t

matter. Knoxville came first. Knoxville always came first. I brought a lighter to the hem of my deli apron and started to burn it before I told myself ashes wouldn't change anything. So I blew out the flame, scrunched the apron into a ball, and tossed it in the garbage. After I emptied the coffeemaker to bury the apron in coffee grounds, the kitchen smelled like a coffee shop until I took out the garbage the next night.

When Michael wouldn't stop texting me, I blocked him. If he had gone looking for me, he would've found me working at the Tex-Mex restaurant a couple blocks away. People came there for the margaritas, meaning I usually had plenty of leftovers to bring home. I took my smoke breaks by myself, with only an alley cat for company. My feline friend was a dead-ringer for the one Tilly and I grew up with. It paced around the back door when I came into work and it always was there when I left for the night.

Then one day about a month into working there, I took the day off to go to Planned Parenthood for a pregnancy test. I broke down when the test came back negative. Michael may have taken my dignity, but at least the burden ended there.

When I returned to work the next morning, I rounded the restaurant to the enter through the backdoor like usual. The backlot looked the same until I looked down. The white cat had been run over and almost perfectly flattened. Its guts had been pushed out into a purple pile next to its belly and dark brown streams stained the pavement. Edged in fresher blood, the cat's citrine eyes sparkled beneath the streetlamp. But I couldn't linger. The dawn shift had just begun.

The Worst Slumber Party

When you share your room with your sister, every night is a slumber party—at least when you edit out the spats. Nostalgia deletes the memory of her slashing your homecoming dress junior year and you cutting off a chunk of her hair in return. You have no recollection of her using your favorite lipstick to draw a line down the center of the room (allotting herself the bigger half.) You definitely don't

remember her selling your underwear to middle school boys the minute she started high school.

Once Mami called lights out, all had been forgiven. “Never, ever go to bed angry,” she used to say much like her mother before her, the same cock to her oblong head.

What you do remember are the nights you and your sister clutched each other close well past bedtime. You giggled about cartoons, crushes, and all the worst teachers. Your sister’s hair smelled like cinnamon and her eyes were really gray, even if most everyone called them blue. She always pulled your curls, watching them spring back into place and laughing every time. In return, you called her Mud Pie because her skin was so much darker than yours—but only ever in the cocoon of your room. At school, she was Mariela, just as Mami had named her. Never Mari and *definitely* never Mud Pie.

Back then, you shared a bed because Mami said they didn’t come free. Really, it wasn’t a bed. It was a mattress, threadbare and off-color, the same indescribable shade of bubblegum that’s been living on the sidewalk too long but not quite long enough to be black. The mattress was so warped and worn that you woke up every morning with backaches and the two of you constantly stole the blanket from each other. One sister wrapped herself up while the other curled up and shivered, not wanting to wake the burrito. She looked so peaceful.

But Mud Pie promised the bed famine was a temporary challenge for the Gomez sisters. All great heroines must suffer sometimes.

“Because I’m going to college,” said Mariela. “After I graduate, I’m going to make so much money that all of us will have our own beds. Huge ones with headboards and even throw pillows. Gotta have throw pillows when you’re rich.”

A beat later, she added, “You’re going to college, too.”

You nod because you are three years younger than her. Then you close your eyes and dream like any other night.

Soon after that, Mariela is talking about college instead of cartoons and crushes. She lights up when she shows you the admissions brochures. She even brings them to your sorry mattress so you can pour over them together.

“They all kind of look the same,” you say more than once

as you peruse page after page of manicured lawns and large, imposing buildings. You toss aside the brochures from less picturesque schools.

“No, *mira*, this one is all stone. This one is all brick,” she replied one night as she piled more brochures on your lap. “Besides, that’s not even what matters.”

“But don’t you want to go to a pretty one or, like, one by the beach?”

“I’m not going to college to *party*.”

You shrug and tug for a bigger share of the blanket. “Your loss.”

Night after night, you fall asleep among piles of brochures. More than once you wonder if they’d be a more effective cover than your threadbare blanket.

Mari wrote essays, ran to the copy shop, printed this and that, and cursed too loudly when she messed something up because she knew Mami worked hard for the money.

“These applications are so expensive,” she muttered as you waited in line with her at the bank. Everyone there had clothes that look catalog-fresh, not like they fished them out of a donation box at the church down the block.

A year later, Mari is at a college among cornfields. You weren’t home the afternoon her acceptance letter arrived. She sobbed by herself at the kitchen counter when she read the part about her full-ride. You were making out behind the dilapidated tennis courts at school, learning how someone else’s teeth are supposed to feel.

Once Mari shipped off to school, you had the bedroom to yourself. You wiped off the lipstick divider between your side and her side, and spread out your meager belongings. Dust bunnies grew because Mari was not there to clean them. And sometimes, at night, instead of texting your friends, you cried hot tears because you missed Mud Pie. You knew Mami heard you as she did her crossword puzzles in the next room over, but she never came to console you. The next morning, you would eat frozen waffles together in silence—that is if you caught sight of your maternal ghost at all.

It wasn’t until winter howled through Phoenix that you and Mari were reunited, but her eyes are stormy and her head hangs low, as if permanently bowed due to some monastic vow. When you slid into bed that first night

together, she nuzzled your shoulder like an infant.

“What’s the matter?” you asked, wanting to wiggle away but knowing to stay still, stiller than she was in that moment of absolute quiet.

“I’m not going back,” she finally uttered. You go cold.

“You have to go back. You’re the smart one. You have a full scholarship.”

She whispered darkly, “I’m going to tell you a secret.” Then she turned away from you. “I was raped at a party.”

And all the sounds of Phoenix that you always hated—the screechy birdsongs, the intrusive insects, the insufferable dessert wind, even the gunshots and the car horns—seemed to collide into a cacophony amplified by Mud Pie’s wailing.

When the prickly pear cacti bloomed that spring, Mari was still home. She relinquished her scholarship, took up waitressing, and bought two beds by the end of the year.

Artist Statement

I pluck my hair from the root because my scalp can make the sacrifice. Because I want to create from my own body. Because my children are hungry. Open the studio. There is no paint in the house. Open the fridge. There is no milk in the house. Open the cupboards. There is no bread in the house. We don’t have eggs or peanut butter or carrots or canned beans or anything edible at all. We finished the last bag of corn chips before the weekend crept up and shook our shoulders in another one of its cruel tricks.

“I’m here,” the weekend slithered. “Here to haunt you. Kill you.”

At school, the children eat because there is some fairness in this world, or at least pity. My daughters line up in the cafeteria, fill their trays with permitted items, and punch in a special code when they step up to the register. Then they sit down and fill their stomachs. But at home, we have no special code. There is no acrylic in the house and my children are hungry. There is no charcoal in the house and my children are hungry. There is no pastel in the house and my children are hungry. But there is a bottle of glue at the back of my desk. Holy, holy, holy.

For canvas, I cut out a panel from a cereal box from the days when we had food. Then I stumble to the porch, the only place with ample light since I can't afford to replace half of the bulbs, and I begin pulling out my hair, strand by strand. I crouch over the rail and yank until I have a handful of Titian strands. My hair is my paint.

From this hair I will craft a woman in my own image. She will possess the large, sore breasts of a woman still nursing. She will try to conceal the scarred vulva of a woman who has given a painful birth by arranging her black curls just so. Perhaps then a man will love her and stay. Perhaps then she will no longer carry the burden of feeding her children alone.

I tell myself all of this as I arrange and paste until I run out of strands. Then I twist, twirl, and tug yet again with the repetition of wiping a soiled child clean. I patch and paste over and over as my woman takes shape. My woman needs no other subject, no accessories, no objects in the foreground. My woman will hang in a gallery. May the whole city see the desperation in her red eyes. May the whole city feel the rumble of her stomach.

"What are you doing, Mommy?" comes a faint little voice. But I do not answer by opening my mouth. I answer inside my head: I remember when you were born, Sarah. Your father and I had already split. I had nothing to eat. They gave me nothing at the hospital and there was nothing in the house. So I huddled on the crumbling porch and stared at the moon, thinking I could eat it if I stared long enough. The next day there was no food, either.

Finally, on your third day since leaving my womb, Grandma stopped by with two brown paper bags stuffed with groceries. It was pay day and she wanted to celebrate your life even if she hated your daddy almost as much as I did. I was huddled on the porch again, this time watching the neighborhood children play in the streets, wondering how many of them were hungry, too. I was sucking and pulling my hair because, even then, it was my bad habit. If I pulled out enough hair, maybe I would stop being hungry. Maybe all I would think of then would be my scalp stinging from the hurricane of my hand uprooting so many strands. Grandma almost toppled over when I charged her and seized the bags. I ate right there on the lawn: a green apple and chocolate pudding without a spoon.

Let's wait for this to dry. Then we'll catch the bus to the art gallery and hand in my lady of hair. Maybe someone will notice her and buy her. Maybe there will be food at the opening reception. Maybe then we will eat.

The Red Sea

Daddy stood at the yellowed porcelain sink, staring at my stained Hello Kitty panties. I had never seen this man—the direct descendant of the first Scotch-Irish settler to take down an elk in the Shenandoah Valley in 1715—so small and wilted. He hunched over the basin and rubbed his face with his sunburned hands.

Meanwhile, I stood in the bathroom doorway of our illegally converted carriage house, looking at him looking at my soiled, soggy panties. I was thirteen and, twenty years later, can still feel my mortification in that moment.

“Look, Katie,” he finally said, “if I can clean out the coffee stains from my work shirts, I can clean this.”

I slowly nodded, taking a moment to study his mottled face ten shades lighter than mine as I began chipping the paint on the doorframe.

“But blood and coffee aren't the same, Daddy,” I said.

He closed his eyes and sighed. “What time does the library close?”

“It's Sunday.”

“Dammit. Well, I'll go to the one in Carytown tomorrow and search for, I don't know, *tips* on the Internet. There's gotta be other dads who—”

“Dad, it's OK. We'll just let the soap sit.” I accidentally tore off too big a chip of paint, making a surprisingly loud *craaack*. “But, um, what about the...?”

We locked eyes and I could see him thinking, *Don't say tampon*.

“You know.” I uttered at long last. All of Richmond must've shaken from the momentous rumble of my words.

“Uh, well, I'm sure Mrs. Collins is home. We could knock on her door.”

Mrs. Collins was our widowed 89-year-old neighbor. She and her husband had moved here back when the neighborhood was still considered a “good” one by uptight

white suburbanites. I liked her because she never made me feel strange for having a white dad. But even as a seventh-grader, I knew Mrs. Collins had been menopausal for longer than I'd been alive.

"You sure she remembers how to use a you-know-what?"

Dad's face broke into a smile. "I bet it's like riding a bicycle," he said. "You never forget how to do it."

A couple minutes later, we waited on Mrs. Collins' porch as she made her way to the door with glacial pace. While I blocked the rest of the memory, I do know Mrs. Collins told me to try sanitary napkins first and she just so happened to have a diaper-size pad.

The following afternoon, Dad put a print-out with tips for menstrual blood removal on the 'fridge, but I didn't see it until later because I was trawling the streets with Marty Monogue, a white boy who also went to Binford Middle but lived in a different neighborhood.

When we had enough of chasing stray cats and peering through people's windows, he turned to me and asked, "Wanna go to Texas Beach?"

I shrugged. "I guess. The frogs should still be out."

"Yeah, we should put some in my mom's dresser before dinner."

Twenty minutes later, after hiking down a steep hill and crossing the train tracks, we were on the silty shore of the James River and I immediately spotted my first frog jumping in the reeds. In a single lunge, I caught it. The frog was small and brown and scared as I cupped it.

"Way to go, Katie!" Marty said and slapped me so hard on the back that I stumbled forward, scattering pebbles into the water. The frog instantly peed and warmed up my hands.

"Hey, watch it," I muttered.

"Sorry. Wanna go swimming?" he said all in one breath.

"We don't have bathing suits."

"So? You have underwear, right?"

I blushed in response. Then I noticed Marty's elfin eyes glued to my left thigh.

"Katie..."

I glanced down to find a large drop of blood determined to reach my ankle.

"You're bleeding!"

“No, I’m not,” I shouted and pushed him, still clutching the frog in one hand.

He pushed me back and yelled, “You’re disgusting!”

“Shut up!” Another push.

“No, you’re gross!” Yet another push.

“No, I’m not. This happens to all girls, stupid!” Fighting tears, I backed up, threw the frog at him, and raced back up the hill before I could even tell if I had hit him.

When I fell, I tore at rocks and roots to get back up. Marty didn’t follow me.

I ran all the way to my bathroom to shower and change my pad. Then I planted myself on the sagging sofa and starved until Dad swung by with McD’s before he went back to work.

“Your mom always wanted McDonald’s when it was her time of month,” he said.

As I tore through my McDouble and small fries, I vowed that Marty and I would never talk again. I briefly wondered if the frog I threw at him had died and if Mom would’ve thrown the frog, too.

“Probably not,” I said to myself, sitting in the dark now that the sun had set. Dad still hadn’t changed the lightbulb in the living room. So, as the crickets’ song descended upon Rosewood Avenue, my mind wandered to Randolph Pool around the block.

I pictured myself hitting the pavement barefoot, darting out from the streetlights to return to the shadows until I turned right to cut through an alley. When I reached the fence circling the pool, I surveyed my surroundings before starting my ascent. Even when my knee snagged a loose wire, I kept going. When I got inside, I immediately began stripping. I balled up my sanitary napkin, tossed it to the ground, and sprung into a cannonball. My splash created a tsunami. I came up for a deep breath of air, exhaled, and floated on my back as my menses gradually snaked its way out of me and danced with the cyan waves. I didn’t leave until the chlorine burned my nostrils, my fingertips were raisins, and the pool was crimson.

Panda

Woodley Park was a hot lamp in the summertime and the tourists were all moths. They flocked to the leafy, upscale neighborhood for the zoo, or, more specifically, for the pandas, even when the panda exhibit closed to celebrate the birth of twins. But it wasn't just the tourists pressing their noses up to the glass. Washingtonians also were overcome with panda fever, just as I, a soon-to-be new mother, had experienced baby fever a year earlier. The panda exhibit was a shrine; 11 months before, my marital bed was a shrine and Drew and I made a daily pilgrimage. When the exhibit was open, you could wait in line for two hours for the privilege of watching the pandas roll over, swat at flies, or gnaw on a bamboo shoot. When I began to show, I could wait for days for Drew to touch me. Baby fever had cooled into a waiting game.

I wasn't so much amused by the pandas as I was the city's enthusiasm for them. It distracted me on those days when I was dizzy, vomiting, and achy. The mania thrived beyond Woodley Park. Children roamed the National Mall, Chinatown, and Capitol Hill wearing panda hats and T-shirts with as much zeal as Justin Bieber fans. The year before, when the topic of changing the Washington football team's racist name became a national debate, many Washingtonians suggested the team be called The Pandas. But who really wants to be named after a lethargic, oversized raccoon that can't even effectively perpetuate its own species?

When Mei Xiang's tentative pregnancy announcement aired on the news, Drew and I were sitting in the kitchen, eating microwavable chicken sandwiches and canned green beans. It had been 100 days since the female panda was artificially inseminated and, despite performing an ultrasound, zoo veterinarians couldn't tell if Mei Xiang was pregnant or pseudopregnant.

Drew rose to clear his plate. As he walked back from the sink, he called pandas "lazy teddy bears," absentmindedly patting my swollen belly as he explained that the panda reproduction program was "a waste of federal spending."

"If they're an argument against evolution," he said, "why would God invent a creature too stupid to get it on? Pandas are just as much an argument against intelligent design. Talk about survival of the dumbest and cutest."

I was reading an article in BBC World claiming wild pandas and captive pandas are, behaviorally speaking, two completely different animals when I went into labor three months too soon. It was the same day Mei Xiang popped out the first of two cubs. Like Mei Xiang, I didn't know I had been carrying twins.

Despite the hubbub, no one is particularly enamored of newborn pandas. They are pink and wormlike with tiny white hairs not unlike the scraggly roots that spring out from a turnip. The public expects them to fluff up and fatten up into scampering cartoons, but it doesn't happen in a week—and one of Mei Xiang's cubs lived less than that. When panda mothers give birth to twins, they are known to favor the stronger cub over the weaker one, often resulting in the snubbed cub dying. The naturalists at the zoo thought they could trick Mei Xiang into loving her cubs equally by alternating them. That way, she would spend as much one-on-one time with the weaker one as the stronger one.

Newborn humans aren't as adorable as we'd like, either. I don't remember holding my son and daughter after they were born, but I do remember watching them in their incubators. That's when I finally got a good look at them. With their crinkled alien features, they hardly resembled the models in Baby Gap commercials. Yet for all their lack of pinchable chubbiness, I loved them.

Neither was prone to adorable wiggling, either, but I loved them. In fact, they barely moved except to breathe. Yet my son moved even less than my daughter. He also was much smaller, redder, and more wrinkled. Without the nurses telling me, I knew he wouldn't survive. The realization came on Day Three, right as the credits for *Judge Judy* were rolling. On Day Four, I witnessed him draw his last breath. When I looked up from his tiny body to pray or curse God—I can't remember which—the television caught my attention. The weaker panda cub had died.

In the future, humans will have found the cure to mortality. Maybe if my children had been born a thousand years from now, they would have lived forever. Maybe in a thousand years, pandas will no longer rely on humans to propagate. Or maybe then, pandas will be extinct. But no

matter how many years pass, my daughter will never have a brother and my husband and I will never have a son. We are too heartbroken. Mei Xiang will try again, or at least she will succumb to mankind's intervention. I will raise my daughter and, once in a while, I will take her to the zoo, but I'm not sure she'll ever see a panda. At least not with me by her side.

This Is Why

I crumple on the exam table, feeling small and dusty like a battered moth. Eventually the grease on my body began to congeal after days of not showering. Now I am coated. When the doctor re-enters the room, I will myself to perk up, to appear a less wilted. I may be here because I'm unwell, but I don't have to *look* unwell, I tell myself. I have my pride. Perhaps not full-fledged confidence, but pride, a pride that is as stubborn as I am.

"So," the doctor says, as she looks me up and down. "Menstrual problems?"

She is a small, plump Salvadoran woman with freckles. So is my mother. They both have the same liquid brown eyes and thick, dark hair. My gaze rests on the doctor's full lips as my hands fall to my stomach.

"Yeah," I say. "My cramps are really bad."

The doctor raises an eyebrow. "How bad?"

I shrug and stutter, "I-I d-don't know. Bad?" My voice rises when I wish it wouldn't. Now my intonation has ruined everything. I am the moth pinned to the board. Stuck. Am I not already helpless enough, being a 19-year-old woman, an immigrant's daughter in a land of Confederate generals' descendants?

Then she asks the question I knew she would ask, the question she was responsible for asking, the question I dreaded.

"Well, what are you taking?"

My head is swirling, my stomach is swirling, my whole body is swirling, except for my abdomen, which is burning, and I just want to scream, but I am a moth and moths do not scream.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

“No painkillers? Motrin? Midol? Aleve? A generic ibuprofen?”

I shake my head. My mind skips to the agonizing girl curled up in bed yesterday. Then it flashes to my grandmother clinging to the sofa in San Salvador, taking another swig of Tíck Täck and popping another pill. She is as grubby as I am, but older, drunker, sadder. It has been almost a week since she left that sofa, almost a week since she was raped again. She took an icy shower to wash away the blood after the attack and has not showered since then. When she finally pulls herself off the sofa, my grandmother walks to the kitchen, downs 60 tablets of ibuprofen, drenches herself in kerosene, and lights herself on fire. My mother is the age I am now, and at work when it happens. She is always working, except for those five days she takes off to sit at my grandmother’s side in the hospital. On the fifth day, the abuela I never had dies.

“No,” I mutter as I stare at the doctor’s right shoulder, afraid that if I meet her eyes, I will cry. “I do not take painkillers.” I do not tell her that my mother kept the ibuprofen locked up in our house. It was simpler not to take painkillers at all than to have to ask my mother permission. Even at college, my mother’s stern expression and questioning

“You must take Motrin,” she says firmly. “It will make the suffering much easier.”

She is referring to a different kind of suffering than I feel in that moment, the physical manifestation of my womanhood, not the burden of my family history. Suddenly I tense up the way I do when classmates offer me alcohol at parties. My muscles get so tight that it hurts, and I’m the moth willing itself to camouflage with the bark on the tree beneath its spindly legs. Yet I am not hiding. I am in plain sight of my doctor. I exhale and my muscles relax. I meet her eyes and say much more calmly than I thought possible, “Addiction runs in my family.”

The doctor’s face softens. “I understand, but if you take the painkillers exactly as directed, you should be fine. You

will not get addicted. Just follow the directions on the bottle.”

“What if I take more?”

“Don’t take more.”

“But what if I do?”

“You won’t,” she says. “It’s a huge help that you know your family history. You’re aware and you’ll be cautious. Take painkillers only as prescribed and it will be all fine.”

Fine. All fine. The words ring and the scene of my grandmother on the sofa goes black.

The doctor pats my hand when I don’t respond.

“Right after this, I want you to go to the drugstore and buy a bottle of ibuprofen,” she says. “Come back next month if you still can’t manage the pain, but you must do this first.”

I nod.

“Promise?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll go the store and you’ll take the pills and you’ll be fine.” The doctor’s voice is faint and echoing at this point.

“Fine.”

“Good. Now off you go.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course. Bye now.”

When I walk out of the exam room, I have the wings not of a month but a butterfly. And a couple of hours later, as I stand in the shower, I notice that the cramps have lessened. At least one kind of suffering has ended.

Mouse House

You carefully arranged each piece of straw, each stolen shoelace, each scrap of newspaper. Mama Mouse wanted her nest. She wanted to burrow deep into that hovel on Clay Street and cozy up to her mate. The love will come, she said, The babies will come. All my dreams will flourish.

But the love never came and the babies never came and there was no flourishing of dreams. They festered instead. When you scurried away to build your nest elsewhere, I cried because you were alone. Mice are not meant to live alone. But sometimes sister mice must live apart.

I remember the headline from *Medscape Medical News*: “Mice Can Avoid Menopause, But Can Women?” Back when I edited copy for the hospital, I ran into more pregnant women on a daily basis than there were people in my high school graduating class. That's what I get for growing up in Appalachia but living and working in Norfolk. Too far from Richmond to snuggle with you and gnaw on wood.

I had my own nest in Ghent, a warm one not built *for* love but *by* love. Papa Mouse loved me and I loved Papa Mouse. We were getting on like mice in love do, so we knew we'd be not two but three soon.

There's a Yahoo! Answers thread called “Our mice buried their dead cagemate ...?” It reminds me of how I had to bury my happiness under the cage litter, that way you wouldn't see it. That way you wouldn't think of how your buck mouse had found another doe.

“I still have stuff at our house,” you said one night while we sat on the porch, making fun of the passing marathon runners. Purple and gray tinted the shadows beneath your eyes. You wore no makeup and your hair jumped out like Einstein's. You hadn't showered in days.

“His house. This is your house now,” I said.

“You know what I mean.”

“Use the right words: 'me,' 'my,' 'I.' No more 'we' and 'our'.”

“Can you stop being a big sister for five seconds?”

I chugged my root beer and threw the bottle in the recycling bin by your swing.

“Give me the key,” I said.

“What?”

“The key to his place.”

“Why?”

“I'm going to get the rest of your stuff. That way you never have to go into that damn apartment again.”

“I can take care of it myself.”

“I don't care if you can. I care that you don't.” I kicked the recycling bin. Bottles crashing against one another filled the silence between us.

“It's like all the other breakups before,” I said, much lower than before. “You'll get through it.”

“I'm getting old.” Fear flashed in your eyes.

I kneeled down and patted your hand. “All of us are. But

you will love again. You are strong and you are beautiful.”

You looked down at your lap and whispered, “Thank you.” Then you stood up and fetched the key from your purse. You placed it in the palm of my hand and hugged me long enough for a few runners to stumble by.

“You know,” you started as you pulled away and collapsed on the porch swing. “You’ll never be able to carry all that stuff by yourself. I mean, there’s not too much left, but it’s heavy.”

I shrugged. “I’m going to call Judy to help me. She’s not doing anything today.”

So I did. Judy agreed. All it took was the promise of food.

Judy and I nearly kicked his door down since the lock was ancient and rusty. When nobody answered, I forced the key one more time. The lock clicked. He wasn’t home.

We scampered up the stairs, nearly tripping over a stack of pizza boxes and PBR cans. Your former bedroom looked like a crime scene. Drawing supplies, condoms, stuffed animals, and dirty clothes made up one foul-smelling potpourri. Judy glanced at me.

“Let’s put shit in garbage bags and come back for the chairs,” I muttered.

Later that afternoon, we piled your living room high with our finds while you hung out with friends on the other side of town. Judy and I split a rotisserie chicken from the corner store before she split. I scrawled you a note and tucked it under your pillow. New nest, new dreams.

After tossing his key in the James River, I hit 64. I missed Papa Mouse and Papa Mouse missed me.

The next morning, I rolled over to quit my phone alarm and scroll through the web news. Apple and Facebook were encouraging their female employees to freeze their eggs, and all the bloggers were wondering which companies would follow. We never talked about it. For now, we will remove “freeze” from your vocabulary. Your nest can’t stand to get any colder.

China Street

Labor Day promised independence from pawing bosses and boyfriends who thought themselves deities. The moon

sauntered out from a curtain of clouds, whispering, “All things must end.” Even freedom—nebulous as a wisp across the sky—eventually ends. Because rent costs more than a wink, and parents fret and call and yell, and starvation in a land of omnipotent fast-food chains is a reality. Because ordering the number one combo does not conclude your choice-making for life. It gives you a sloppy burger and over-salted fries that you have the privilege of scarfing down and resenting for the rest of the day.

So the three sisters flittered through that leg of the city that squats over the river. The girls panted and fluttered like three baby bats carrying a picnic basket full of mason jars. Those jars contained the late liquid lunch the sisters had prepared for an evening of fireworks. Three-hundred and sixty-four days earlier, the front page of the newspaper had shown gold flecks exploding above the shit-brown water. The photo would have made an ugly postcard, but the newspaper had the nerve to sell it as a print, anyway.

If enough grandmothers wanted it to liven up their nursing home apartments, the newspaper stayed in business. But some astute layout editor had let the wrong date go to print: 2004 when it was 2014. It wouldn't have mattered except that Facebook had already been invented.

“I don't even care about that stupid mall goth,” Nissa scoffed. She yanked her end of the picnic basket handle too hard and somehow scratched Amelia in the process. Chandra, who had stopped helping with the basket a few moments earlier, was rubbing her engagement ring.

“Ouch.”

“What? It's not like I care about him.”

“You. Hurt. Me.”

Nissa shrugged and muttered sorry. “Anyway, he's married now. He's got a baby. This gross thing with alien eyes. What the hell is he doing friending me?”

Chandra, who was now walking ahead of the younger two, sighed.

“Can we just watch the fireworks?”

“First we have to find a seat near a place where we can bury your bottle of bourbon,” Nissa said. “Then we'll watch the damn fireworks.”

“Fucking fireworks' would've been better. Alliteration.”

“Shut up, Chandra.”

“Wait,” Amelia said. “You never told me about any bourbon.

What’s that about?”

“Oh!” Nissa clasped her hands and squealed in a mockingly high voice, “Don’t you know? There’s a Southern tradition where you bury a bottle of bourbon a month before your wedding date so it doesn’t rain. And even though we’re not Southern—”

“It doesn’t matter if we’re not Southern. We’re getting married in the South.”

“Yeah, like Charleston Barbie or something, except that you chose River Rat Central.”

Chandra glared at Nissa. When Amelia placed her hand on her shoulder, Chandra shook it off. Dozens of other city low-lives trekked over the broken sidewalks toward the overlook. All the clean-cut citizens were watching the fireworks at the baseball diamond, but not until after a heartfelt rendition of “The Star Spangled Banner” blared across the stadium, no doubt. They would sing with hot dogs in hand, dimples twinkling with dewy goodness.

Chandra, Nissa, and Amelia all had the same voice when they sang, which is one of the reasons why they didn’t like to sing together. Another reason was that singing in unison made them resemble three green-eyed trolls—nostrils flaring, clutching their bellies when their ribs said enough. Thirdly, Nissa turned any song to sex, despite Chandra and Amelia’s protests. “La vie en rose” became “La vie en hoes.” “Jingle Bells” was “Jingle Balls.” Even “Happy Birthday” was “Happy Boob Day.” So they hadn’t sang together since high school.

“Did you know he knocked up Savannah Harrison junior year?”

Nissa stopped and threw down a blanket in one of the only clearings left. The girls plopped down.

“The one with the pierced nipple?” Chandra asked.

“Yeah, but Katie Weatherford had a pierced nipple, too.” Nissa said, “Anyway, Savannah had to get an abortion.”

“She didn’t have to,” Chandra said.

“What do you mean she didn’t have to?” Nissa scoffed. “She was 16.”

“She could’ve had the baby.”

“So if you got pregnant now, you’d have the baby?”

“Well, I’m not 16.”

“So you’d have it?”

“I’m getting married.”

“So you’d have it?”

She paused and pulled a mason jar out of the basket.

“Maybe. I’d have to ask Allen and see what he thinks.”

“How is it at all his decision when it’s your body?”

“What if it’s my only chance? What if Allen wants to keep the baby and raise it as our child?”

“You’re 24. You can try again when you’re older, when you’re ready. After you’ve finished law school.”

“That doesn’t mean—”

“Hey,” Amelia piped up. “Where’s the ketchup?”

Suddenly the fireworks boomed, illuminating the bridge and the Civil War ruins before descending to their death like shooting stars destined for the river. Starting as a deep crimson, the fireworks quickly tapered off into a salmon pink before disappearing into the depths of the James. The city—uncomfortably humid, cars pulled over to the side of the street, lightning bugs living out their last days—was temporarily suspended by the fireworks’ magic. Yet the magic did not touch Chandra. Anxiety took hold of her for a minute, maybe more, until she felt the familiar bloody warmth return to her crotch.

“Do you have a tampon?” she asked Amelia quietly, still staring at the fireworks.

“No, I stopped using them.”

“Why?”

“They hurt.”

“You’re putting them in wrong. Give me a pad.”

Amelia fished the pad out of her raggedy knapsack and handed it to Chandra.

“Would you come with me? It’s Noah’s flood down there, and I need a look-out.” Amelia rolled her eyes and stood up with Chandra.

Nissa glanced from the fireworks to her sisters as they slunk toward the woods. “Where are you going?”

“To piss,” Chandra called over the roar of the fireworks as she and Amelia sped up. The outline of a red heart lit up the city’s humble skyline.

Amelia and Chandra ambled down an alley until Chandra saw a nook in the bushes. She backed up into it, got down, and pulled down her soiled panties. She shivered as her urine carved a little ravine in the dirt.

"I got an abortion," Amelia said.

Chandra, who had just unwrapped the pad, stuck the adhesive side to her pubic hair in shock. "What?"

"Yeah, the same day as Katie Weatherford. That's how I know her nipple's pierced. We were at the clinic together and she got it done right after. Well, not like right after, but a week or two—"

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought you'd judge."

"Why would I...? Who—? I thought you were a virgin in high school."

"I would've been. But Henry Newport put a pillow over my face when we were studying at his house one day after school," Amelia said very simply before breathing out, "And he raped me."

Neither one spoke. The crickets chirped loudest with the fireworks sounding like bombs in a distant land. Chandra ripped the pad off her vulva, winced as the adhesive tugged at her curly hairs, and placed the pad inside her panties. She wiped her hands and stepped toward her sister. Amelia froze when Chandra hugged her.

"You didn't use soap."

Chandra grinned. "Sorry, the gnomes ran out."

At that, Amelia burst into sobs. Chandra squeezed her tighter and tighter the harder Amelia shook. Chandra thought of every woman who had ever been raped, going back to the slaves who once worked the earth they were standing on, to the Indians who lived there before, just generation after generation of women attacked by men who saw no wrong in their transgressions, whether in sprawling plantation mansions or beneath blooming magnolias. There was no such thing as a picturesque violation.

When Amelia's tears finally ceased, Chandra grabbed her hand and walked her back to Nissa. But instead of sitting, Chandra and Amelia stood to watch the last fireworks die, fingers laced. Nissa bolted up at the end of the show, attempting to carry the basket by herself.

“Hurry up! We have to beat the rush,” she snapped.

“I’d have it,” Chandra blurted.

“What?”

“If I got pregnant now, it wouldn’t matter what Allen wanted. I don’t want a baby right now.”

Nissa did a double take.

“Okaaay,” she said slowly.

“That was random. C’mon, let’s go to Fall Out.”

Fall Out was the city’s notorious goth bar and fetish lounge. “Are you okay with that?” Chandra asked Amelia, locking eyes. Amelia grabbed the basket handle to help Nissa. “Sure.”

Then the three rushed to the sidewalk where the rest of the crowd was already heading.

“Your phone’s ringing, Chandra,” Nissa sighed. Chandra dug through her purse while she ran to catch up with her sisters. Though Allen’s name popped up on caller ID, she turned the phone off and dropped it back in her bag.

When the sisters loaded into the car, Chandra blasted the radio and belted out “My Moon My Man” along with Feist. Nissa mouthed the words until Chandra urged her to sing louder. When Amelia joined, they formed one perfect harmony, not caring if the strangers on the street couldn’t tell them apart.

Copied

When you died, I made copies of your portrait. It was 3 a.m. at the 24-hour copy shop and I smelled like someone had dumped an entire bottle of Burt’s Bees bubble bath on me because that’s exactly what I did to myself when you popped out from between my legs. You were a jellybean. You were so pink I could’ve eaten you. Placed you on my tongue and savored you. To bring you into my body again. Make us two beings in one again. Then we would’ve been Mommy and baby splashing in the tub. Dream Daddy might’ve swooped in with a rubber ducky or toy ship. The perfect scrapbook moment.

Instead the olive green sweats from my fat days were barely staying on my hips and my huge Hanes Her Ways were bunched up to my belly button. Maybe I had lost

weight too quickly, I nagged myself, tugging at my baggy T-shirt with “Save the Ta-tas” printed across the front. I had on no makeup. I had on no bra. All I had on was a base layer of grief and an overcoat of nostalgia. The one cashier on duty pretended not to stare when I hobbled over to the copier. Since there were no other customers, I took center stage. Gaze upon my sadness, boy. Gaze upon this once-upon-a-time mother and her hands turned raisins from four hours spent in the tub.

When I nodded at the cashier, he nodded back. He was sallow and heavy-lidded. Otherwise, he might as well have been a cardboard cutout behind the counter. I didn’t register any of his other features. Instead, I wanted to imagine yours.

I had always hoped that you—or whichever baby came along—would have my mother’s dimples and almond eyes. Your father wasn’t a particularly handsome man, but, still, I wanted you to have his height, his freckles, and the laugh I once heard daily. Most of all, when I looked at you, I wanted to know that you were mine. I didn’t want there to be a mistake at the hospital. I didn’t want you to spend eighteen years in someone else’s home. If you made the front page of the newspaper, it would be for an award or a good deed, not some scandal.

All those musings were old, of course—three decades in the making, renewed this evening. When Lionel Richie blared on the radio, he reminded me that you were gone. The real scandal was that your death would never make the newspaper. You would never win an award or perform a deed of any kind. No one would ever take your headshot or your mugshot. You had had no hair, no lips, no chin, no distinguishing features at all. If you resembled your grandmother at all, then you resembled her prenatally. *If.*

I had no photos to compare. You were a two-centimeter chunk of raw chicken breast drenched in blood. Something tells me your great-grandmother—a woman who only hung paintings of flowers on her walls—wouldn’t take or keep such photos, even if she could. When Grandma was conceived, the ultrasound hadn’t even been invented yet.

But in the sonogram, there was no blood. You were black and white, which meant that I could fill in the colors. I could choose your dreams. I could paint the life that would

have been.

I stood back and watched the paper shoot out of the machine, sheet by sheet by sheet. Through the copier's beeps, I asked God why your father had gone out of town this weekend. Even though this was a man I now knew mainly through the Powerpoint printouts he left on the breakfast counter, his presence would've meant not losing you alone.

The past couple of years, he had hustled for promotion after promotion so we could ready our nest for you. We made love in between presentations and meetings and deadlines. In those 26 months we tried for you, we watched Britcoms and held hands until I finally gave in and rolled over. Now I had to tell him that instead of rolling over all those times, we should've just watched another episode of *Fawlty Towers*. We barely discussed the weather—except when it might change his commute or delay a business trip.

Maybe I would call him in the morning. Maybe I would just wait until he came home. Maybe I'd mutter something during the credits of *Are You Being Served?* These days, I no longer rolled over. One TV show after dinner was never enough and conversation was too much.

When the copier spat out the last image of you, I pressed three hundred printouts to my chest. The cashier nodded as I walked out. Then I headed to the car in a daze.

Once home, I went straight for the kitchen drawer and grabbed two rolls of tape. I inched toward the nursery because it scared me. Yet when I got to the doorway, all of the teddy bears comforted me. I sat down in the rocking chair with a green bear motif. Another one with blue bears faced the window. One for me, one for Daddy or Grandma. I rolled two tape doughnuts for the first sheet of paper and then stuck you on the wall. I repeated the action three hundred times. You replaced the teddy bear wallpaper.

Dark as it was, the room became a womb. I was inside of you, just as you had been inside of me. I would sleep and maybe when I woke up, you would be born, and your father would be somewhere in the stars. Genesis with no Adam. We would be blind for four days until we saw the sun. Then life would really begin. But we'd have to be quiet and wait for our Eden.

Locofo Chaps

2017

Eileen Tabios – *To Be An Empire Is To Burn*
Charles Perrone – *A CAPacious Act*
Francesco Levato – *A Continuum of Force*
Joel Chace – *America's Tin*
John Goodman – *Twenty Moments that Changed the World*
Donna Kuhn – *Don't Say His Name*
Eileen Tabios (ed.) – *Puñeta: Political Pilipinx Poetry*
Gabriel Gudding – *Bed From Government*
mIEKAL aND – *Manifesto of the Moment*
Garin Cycholl – *Country Musics 20/20*
Mary Kasimor – *The Prometheus Collage*
Iars palm – *case*
Reijo Valta – *Truth and Truthmp*
Andrew Peterson – *The Big Game is Every Night*
Romeo Alcala Cruz – *Archaeoteryx*
John Lowther – *18 of 555*
Jorge Sánchez – *Now Sing*
Alex Gildzen — *Disco Naps & Odd Nods*
Barbara Jane Reyes – *Puñeta: Political Pilipinx Poetry, vol. 2*
Luisa A. Igloria – *Puñeta: Political Pilipinx Poetry, vol. 3*
Tom Bamford – *The Gag Reel*
Melinda Luisa de Jesús – *Humpty Drumpfty and Other Poems*
Allen Bramhall – *Bleak Like Me*
Kristian Carlsson – *The United World of War*
Roy Bentley – *Men, Death, Lies*
Travis Macdonald – *How to Zing the Government*
Kristian Carlsson – *Dhaka Poems*
Barbara Jane Reyes – *Nevertheless, #She Persisted*
Martha Deed – *We Should Have Seen This Coming*
Matt Hill – *Yet Another Blunted Ascent*
Patricia Roth Schwartz – *Know Better*
Melinda Luisa de Jesús – *Petty Poetry for SCROTUS' Girls, with poems for Elizabeth Warren and Michelle Obama*
Freke Rähä – *Explanation model for 'Virus'*
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Naomi Buck Palagi – *Imagine Renaissance*
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Dan Ryan – *Swamp Tales*

Sheri Reda – *Stubborn*
Christine Stoddard — *Chica/Mujer*

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