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Her

Alessandra Narvaez-Varela

University of Texas at El Paso, alessandra.narvaez@gmail.com

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HER

ALESSANDRA NARVÁEZ-VARELA

Master's Program in Creative Writing

APPROVED:

Sasha Pimentel, Chair

Andrea Cote-Botero, Ph.D.

David Ruiter, Ph.D.

Charles Ambler, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

.

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Alessandra Narváez-Varela

2017

For my mother—Amanda Socorro Varela Aragón— the original *Her*

HER

by

ALESSANDRA NARVÁEZ-VARELA,
B.S in Biology, B.A. in Creative Writing

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at El Paso
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

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Critical Preface

Introduction

The term “confessional”—what I can now appreciate as a groundbreaking though controversial mode of poetry introduced in the 1950s by poets like Anne Sexton, and, more recently, complicated by Sharon Olds—is the only way I have known how to write since I held a pen as a girl. The controversy stemmed from confessional poetry’s autobiographical nature, which, by presenting personal experience against a poetic background reserved only for practitioners of “high art,” struck some as authentic and others as shocking. This is illustrated by reductionist criticism of Sexton and Olds’ work that focuses on their seemingly pointless “oversharing” of anatomical realities, and on their poetry’s “pornographic, self-indulgent, self-pitying, and violence-obsessed” qualities (Brickey 5-6).

This perception, however, cannot be separated from the gender of these poets, as demonstrated by the *New York Times* review of Sexton’s *All My Pretty Ones* (1962) by James Dickey, who, in critiquing her insistence on the “the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience...,” is necessarily targeting those “bodily experiences” that are exclusively female (Sexton xx, xxiv). This connection is supported by an even richer echoing and supplementation of Dickey’s words, 37 years later, in William Logan’s review of Olds’ *Blood, Tin and Straw* (1999) for *New Criterion*:

If you want to know what it’s like for Sharon Olds to menstruate, or squeeze her oil-filled pores, or discover her naked father shitting, *Blood, Tin, Straw* will tell you. If you want to know what her sex life is like (it’s wonderful, trust her!), she’ll tell you, and tell you in prurient anatomical detail the Greek philosophers would have killed for—she’s the empirical queen of lovemaking, of every secret session of the body.

Twenty years later, these uncomfortable female bodily sessions—openly identified as menstruation and female orgasm, among others, by Logan—are at the core of subjects explored

in this thesis, named *Her*, because, just like I never considered writing in any other mode that wasn't confessional, I never have been able to escape my body and its physiology as the instrument through which I perceive the world. This is why *Her*'s thematic focus is on events that range from body image and childbirth, to rape and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) that still afflict women every 6.2 seconds in the United States, and 200 million girls and women living in 30 countries, respectively (Solnit 19; "Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting").

The aesthetics of confessional poetry are ideal for this collection because they eliminate "the stance of authorial distance...and widen the scope of permissible subject matter to include intimate and disturbing experiences formerly classified as too personal," especially experiences that can be more easily appreciated, and sometimes understood, by my sharing of a body with the girls, teenagers, and women in *Her*. This unabashed proximity to the female experience also facilitates the embracing of the "disgust" and discomfort that still result from the exploration of the physiology that makes the female experience distinct, which is believed to be at the root of many of the acts of violence committed against women. Thus, my work seeks to explore feminism through confessional poetry not only as a label, but also as a means to foment the social action I believe poetry can spark if effected carefully. For this purpose, though work by Sexton and Olds serves as an important sounding board for the quality of my work's confessional reach—as much as this label has mortified this and other poets, which is also explored later in this preface—I consult the feminist work of figures like Cherríe Moraga, who, through her active pursuit of a place among the canon of poetry written by white feminist women in English, made me realize I could use Spanish and Spanglish to upset the linguistic and gender norms in poetry, and that I could incorporate my Mexican heritage as another lens through which to envision the collection.

Her as a title also reflects the perception of women as both object and subject, who, by being referred to as “her”—a pronoun that should denote the subject’s possession of material and immaterial things—when we talk about them, are robbed of their agency regarding their narratives and their bodies, which, as suggested by the quick way we draw conclusions about women’s lives based on how they look, could be considered synonymous. I introduce this first with “Shameless,” an ekphrastic poem inspired by René Magritte’s “The Rape” which opens *Her*, where a woman, whose “face is a pair of breasts, one navel and a triangle of pubic hair”—a simple image meant to present her physically and metaphorically nude—is objectified by men, and rejected by wives, girls, and even her mother who has stopped inviting her over for dinner. The woman is also ostracized by the speaker, who, by reducing her to an anonymous “her,” colonizes her body, and in doing so, hijacks her story:

But who’d want to? *All* that face, netless, a hair could swim
with the cilantro, radish and hominy*—
 where is her sense
 of decency?

...

*My mother’s dish is pozole...

The asterisk, a personal commentary about my mother’s continuing invitation for dinner, communicates relief because she’s effectively the woman I write about and allude to the most in this collection, thus becoming her storyteller, and introducer of these questions: despite my status as her daughter, how much right do I have to retell the stories she has shared with me, and am I appropriating her narrative by doing so? As a female poet, this is a significant concern explored thoroughly in this preface, for, in writing about women, there is a danger of unintentionally but actively participating in the re/possession of other women’s stories, including

the subject of “Shameless,” who serves as a symbolic amalgamation of the women and girls featured in *Her*.

For this reason, the first section of this preface discusses poetic license and the topics and challenges I faced when writing *Her*—social consciousness, self-awareness, the confessional label, and the limited presence and representation of men. These themes serve as subsections as I seek to carefully consider the risks inherent to addressing feminist themes in *Her* through confessional poetry, and the measures I should take to avoid the reductionist, colonizing pitfalls of doing so. This is important because, though the passion I feel for women’s issues is facilitated by my biological kinship with them, it doesn’t make it any easier to write about their lives and how they’re affected by acts of violence and disempowerment, whether “her” is represented by my mother, a classmate, a rape victim, or an African activist I have never met. In fact, this difficulty, and the potential to appropriate a subject’s story, extends to men, since presenting them exclusively as abusers, enablers, and/or emotionally unavailable beings imbued *Her* with an inadvertent but clearly objectifying element, which I’ll discuss in the last subsection of “Poetic License.”

Finally, I will discuss *Her*’s narrative arc and how it determined the order by which I constructed this manuscript, its points of view, my revisions, and how these factors contributed to this collection’s urgent tone, which, though expected from feminist, confessional poetry, proved a complex quality for me to achieve and maintain. My hope for this urgency is as a wake-up call for the reader, since the ways women are viewed, dissected, and treated are a reflection of a society whose sexism we too often wish to consign to the past, as if it were merely a problem of our grandparents’ generation.

In my four-year experience as a high school tutor, this couldn't be any less accurate as poems like "The List"—inspired by my conversations with students who are victimized by others' and their own perceptions of themselves as "ugly" despite the biological perfection evinced by their physical health—demonstrate, we have not only inherited, but worsened, the problem by introducing a media and social-media driven obsession with the way a female, and even a male, body should look. Though in the universe of *Her* body-shaming can be perceived as the "lesser of two evils" when we consider rape, I believe it's equally important to pay close attention to the vicious ways girls and teenagers see themselves, and to talk to them to possibly inject a sense of awareness about the power of words, and hopefully stop a toxic monologue that can accompany a woman for the rest of her life and determine her choices, or lack thereof. As the speaker of "The List" states,

...words are just sour
milk until they reach out through
your navel, thumbs first, hands
second, until their elbows pass
your belly, feel for a heart, press

your breastbone. Until it cracks.

...

This "cracking" is at the root of *Her*'s urgency to tell "her" story, and ultimately it is what inspired my efforts to assemble a collection where, though women and men are irreparably hurt by our society's colonizing, violent diatribes, they—we, and most importantly, our children—are also capable of healing if given the chance to talk, and of learning by listening to others' stories of life and death.

Poetic License

The definition of “poetic license” is complicated due to its broad range as a theme, issue, and/or decision that is considered as prominently in poetry as it is in other literary or artistic genres. This is significant for *Her*, as poetic license—beyond its formal definition whereby the poet “plays” with metrical rules, syntax, and/or grammar as a “a matter of aesthetic judgment and sensibility” to alter or enhance the impact of the poem—can also result in work that does not engage in a deep exploration of its subject (“poetic license”). That is why the judicious use of poetic license when writing confessional poetry about themes like rape is vital to *Her*’s thematic legitimacy, because I am neither a rape victim nor survivor, and as much knowledge as I can acquire from my body, anecdotes, and research, there is an undeniable separation between realities that must be respected. This effort stems not only from my desire to guard against a potential perception, by female survivors of sexual violence, of *Her* as superficial, but also to prevent the patriarchal amalgamation whereby survivors’ rape narratives are either homogenized or erased from the public’s consciousness, thus adding to the irreparable violation of their humanity.

“Light” is a poem inspired by Jyoti Singh, and titled after the translation of her name from Hindi to English, whose rape and murder made global headlines in December 2012 due to its especially vicious nature—she boarded a New Delhi bus assuming it was operated by official drivers, only to find herself surrounded by four men who trusted the use of this particular vehicle would trick victims and facilitate these crimes—and her battle against internal hemorrhage, which she lost two weeks after she was found (Barry). This poem is one the most illustrative in terms of the challenges previously outlined regarding poetic license. The first, applying poetic license that results in thematic tourism—which can be understood in this context as a poet’s

writing about a subject s/he only understands at a basic level—was reflected in the choice of a point of view that made it clear I couldn't possibly understand what Jyoti went through, so “Light” had to either feature a third person, thus adopting the tone of an omniscient speaker that could only observe Jyoti, or a lyrical “I” that made the speaker's status of observer evident throughout the poem.

Ultimately, my rationale for choosing the latter was because omnipresence implies, almost automatically, a level of omnipotence and wisdom I could not possibly adopt for reasons that I've stated already, and that, surprisingly, in remaining an “I,” there was a connection that, though small, went beyond the limited one established by our female bodies: I had been in New Delhi five months before Jyoti's rape and murder. This spatial connection, however, also proved inadequate at first, because, despite the lyrical “I” that solidified my status as observer, I could easily make of Jyoti just another “object of rape” to be ogled, and thus fail to successfully address the question posed by Tania Horeck, author of *Public Rape: Representations of Violation in Film and Literature*: when it comes to feminist, subversive efforts to write about rape, “Are we bearing witness to a terrible crime or are we participating in a shameful voyeuristic activity?” (qtd. in Gunne et. al 3). The voyeuristic potential of “Light” afforded by the first-person point of view was also exacerbated by the nostalgic tone that could result from processing that the same New Delhi that had given me breath-taking views of national buildings and parks, as well as a taste for nightly adventures to find and taste local street delicacies, had served as a background to Jyoti's violent death.

This extensive list of considerations—point of view, setting, and the risk of both thematic tourism and voyeurism—however, had to be dealt with, because if I “shunned” the part of Jyoti's story I could attempt to write about because I could, at least, explore the physical surroundings

that she occupied when she lived, I might, in some way, perpetuate rape as “a monologue by men about an invisible woman” (Allen qtd. in Gunne et. al 8). Jyoti’s visibility then, would be afforded by the symbolic and metaphorical presence of light in the first stanza of the poem, which, as previously mentioned, is the translation of her name into English:

There’s light in Jyoti’s
end, her feet, and I
don’t say this lightly—

she crossed one
of many busy New Delhi
streets, its cars, the Honk

OK Please, murderous
with speed, uninjured; she
ate spicy dumplings,

The poetic license in imagining her comings and goings were justified by the information provided by Jyoti’s parents in the documentary *India’s Daughter* where they described her as an active young woman, who, as a physical therapy intern, traveled back and forth to go to school (Udwin). Following that, the inclusion of “spicy dumplings” acts as the first imagistic connector between Jyoti and myself that is purely imaginative, but that was important to the creation of the comparative setting, whereby Amanda, my travel companion, and I had actually ventured into the New Delhi night to buy spicy dumplings from a street vendor other American students had told us about. These naïve dalliances into a foreign country of which we knew little also serve to illustrate how our perception of safety was, until then, unchallenged, as we never considered rape a risk, or even a possibility. That said, in trying to rescue Jyoti’s story from a dusty placement in the rape narrative archive, her presence had to be palpable through the body, which, though previously foreshadowed in the first stanza where the light is physically in her feet, emerged in the weight of Jyoti’s steps, steps that must be felt in our own:

... truth
is, I only felt the callus

of her soles guide
our step when Amanda and I,
children, by all accounts,

decided we knew better
than anyone how we
should spend our blessed

time in India—don't tell
us what to do, we know how
to cross a street...

Though my attempts to salvage Jyoti's story are humble, I believe that "Light" also tries to fine-tune both our ears and eyes to those rape narratives that—due to the survival of their victims, the low social or economic status of their victims, or the guilt that has been wrongly directed towards the victims due to views that shamelessly identify "sexy" clothing and demeanor as root triggers for rape—have been erased from the public conscience:

...it's harder to see
Jyoti's light, and other
lights, spilling like fire-

works against dumb,
dead walls, reach
and save only some,

a handful (of us): women,
vigilant of even life-
less, faulty streetlights.

Another unexpected risk related to an irresponsible use of poetic license emerged as a result of deciding to feature the women and men in my family, and most importantly, what they said, sometimes in confidence, which inspired a significant number of poems in the collection. My first instructor of poetry at the college level, Dr. Rosa Alcalá, brought this up in 2011 when

she was asked what she felt about a poem written about her by a student who shared it with the entire class. Though the six years in between her answer and the writing of this preface prevent me from directly quoting her, its nature can be paraphrased: the very act of presenting “her” through a subjective, poetic lens couldn’t translate into an emotional impact on the “real” her. Evidently, her collected approach to a poem that openly identified her as the subject was a result of her familiarity and professional experience with poetry, but the same can’t be said of family members who are not well-versed in the ethical reaches of poetic license, and thus not immune to being used as a source of inspiration, even if doing so only renders a fictionalized version of them—the use of “fictionalize” instead of “poeticize” being conscious because the latter is commonly used to refer to the adding of empty structural and linguistic adornment to either a subject or person with no other purpose than to sound “poetic.”

This is illustrated in “She Must’ve,” a poem whose epigraph, “My wife is so, so smart she hasn’t learned how to do creases right on my pants,” immediately names my father as the source. As the poem progresses, it explores how this observation, shared with his male friends when my parents had just started their life as a married couple, had an effect on my mother’s self-perception as a wife, and more importantly, as an intelligent woman. That said, though this mother is not my “real” mother, as an emerging poet, it was inevitable for me to consider the feelings she would have after I betrayed her trust by sharing my father’s sarcastic assessment of the convenient reaches of her intelligence, and that of my father’s too, for it rendered him as a one-dimensional, insecure, misogynistic individual. That is why I tried to reach a balance where I could justify the use of these family “facts”—as fact-oriented as a person’s memory of a painful comment can be—with a genuine effort to explore what those words meant to the poem’s pursuit of the truth, and not my parents’ or my own. Thus, though it was challenging to let go of the

effect of my father's words on her, and on me, as he is, after all, still my father, it was the imagistic force of the night that would justify the epigraph; though she had carried this secret with her for so long, it was the act of revealing it to me, surrounded only by darkness and the moon, another commonly feminine symbol, that gave her "permission" to say it, and hopefully exorcize it:

...The kitchen

was often our confessional,
and late night, our time, because
her husband went to bed

by 8, every night. Tonight,
however, we are called outside,
perhaps by the moon, to do crazy

things like have babies before full
term, turn into werewolves,
or dismantle the man

of her life, fiercely, and the gavel's
fall is absolute —

According to Russell Brickey, in his introduction of *Understanding Sharon Olds*, the value of scene in confessional poetry is common, for it supplements "the proviso that many of the finest confessional poems are predicated upon pure sensation or explicate emotion, no matter how conceivably prurient" (9). In the case of "She Must've," the emotion to be explicated—and what is, I believe, the truth of this particular poem beyond the absolute fall of my mother's, my father's, my, or even the reader's gavel about the epigraph—is the wish for a woman's happiness at the beginning, middle, or end of her marriage, and ideally, at every stage, and this despite the challenges inherent to fulfilling a role—wife—that can't possibly encapsulate the many dimensions of her being or determine her intelligence, whether she is a master of the art of ironing or not.

Social Consciousness

Poetry is one of the most apt artistic mediums to spark social change, which is contingent on the activation of a social consciousness in readers. Before that is conceived and tangibly executed in our specific body of work, though, we must say the unsayable, and that requires visiting “places,” here mostly understood as subjects, that we would rather never visit. Poet Audre Lorde deftly expresses this in her seminal 1977 essay, “Poetry is Not a Luxury”: “For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams towards survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (37).

As a poet and a woman, one such place, or “idea,” as defined by Lorde, besides rape, is Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), which, due to a very basic training in women’s health, allowed me to imagine the pain associated with the short- and long-term health risks experienced by FMG victims: excessive bleeding, painful menstruation, obstetric complication during delivery, and a higher probability of contracting Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) due to the trauma to the vaginal tissue (“Health risks of Female Genital Mutilation”). Nevertheless, whatever knowledge I accumulated during those years could act as a catalyst for the thematic tourism related to the misuse of poetic license because, whereas I have not witnessed a rape, I have been in the same room while women, placing their and/or their babies’ health in the hands of both expert and novice health practitioners, suffered a pain and vulnerability I could at least sense since I saw and smelled the sweat of mothers-to-be, held their cool, clammy calves, and was the one, at times, to ask female patients to disrobe their torsos to

palpate their breasts for lumps, or “scoot down and spread their legs” to facilitate access to their cervixes.

That closeness to these women’s bodies—which somewhat expanded my understanding of motherhood and childbirth, but didn’t erase my status as an observer—heightened the nervousness behind the writing of poems like “Cut,” titled after “cutting,” the more colloquial synonym of FGM, because having a better understanding of the constant pain and discomfort of FGM victims, I could exercise poetic licentiousness, that, as its name implies, surpasses the dangers inherent to poetic license, resulting in poetry that not only threatens to appropriate their narratives, but makes of FGM and our social responsibility to learn about and fight it just one automatic cause *Her* had to feature due its feminist agenda. Fears of poetic licentiousness aside, as stated by Lorde, I couldn’t bask in the “luxury” implied in ignoring FGM if I was to use poetry to “give a name to the nameless” in women’s lives.

Acceptance of this responsibility required that I uphold my familiarization with the human, not the academic, factor of FGM, as a main source of inspiration, and that is how, while reading an *New York Times* article about two girls who were mutilated by a Michigan doctor in April 2017, I was led to “It’s Genital Genocide” where Leyla Hussein, a FGM victim, equaled the practice with “genital genocide” (Higa). The consideration of “genocide,” along with the mostly negative reaction of her word selection illustrated by readers’ comments, was the genesis for “Cut,” which is a rare aesthetic move for *Her*:

I.

Google Search: Female Genital Mutilation

New York Times (7 articles remaining)

"Michigan Doctor is Accused of Genital Cutting of 2 Girls"

"Father Imprisoned for Genital Cutting is Deported to Ethiopia"

"It's Genital Genocide"

Comments:

FGM is a horrible practice, but comparing it to genocide is to minimize the unique horror of the systematic murder of millions of people in an attempt to eradicate an entire ethnic group. There have been other genocide besides the Holocaust, but FGM is not one of them. Pick another word.

"Mike," from Texas.

Notes: Genital Genocide, alliteration. Question mark.

This choice to show my process to the reader, which also illustrated my own hesitancy with the term through the consideration of the poetic value of “genital genocide” due to its alliterative quality, also made the selection of a lyrical “I” much more simple than in “Light,” because my status as an observer who was trying to process the cruelty behind FGM couldn’t be questioned. This also resulted in the lyrical ease and solidity of the second section, which is lacking in my writing about Jyoti’s rape through a naïve tourist’s eye, maybe because I could consider what losing that “something,” purposefully left ambiguous, would mean because the loss of this small piece of female flesh implied a greater one, as suggested by the speaker of the second section of “Cut”:

...I will the loud second to come

with a hard belly, a strange pain that is
no pain, and ridiculous decibels like bells

of a church whose holy hour is hourless.
So there it is, the something I grieve for

as the girls go back to their classroom,
learn about birds and bees, and wait

for their mamas to tell them about woman-
hood...

In describing sexual climax firstly through the body—a hard belly—then through the relatively simple metaphor of “ridiculous decibels like bells of a church,” which can be easily “heard,” or at least imagined, I attempted to highlight the girls’ loss of empowerment through the

enjoyment of sex, and what I believe is also a loss of sexual identity, for in surgically removing the clitoris, any future sexual encounter with a man could achieve his orgasm, or result in pregnancy. This tragic relegation of women to the role of frigid wives and mothers due to the absolute removal of any possibility of sexual pleasure in fulfilling these roles' challenging, often all-consuming, responsibilities is the truth the poem attempts to communicate to the reader, in order to spark her/his social consciousness. Difficult issues of gender-based violence, like FGM, deserve our attention, regardless of our gender or our degree of physical and emotional wholeness.

This sense of kinship by the use of "same, but different speakers" is characteristic of Olds' poetics, which, though "virtually always female...unapologetic in its celebration of the sexual act...the visceral, the hedonistic joy of sex," is also conscious of "the potential for violence associated with the acts, and the emotional disequilibrium human beings experience before, after, and even during" (Brickey 84). This potential for violence—itsself indicative of the social consciousness required to consider the experiences of women whose realities are far from hedonistic—is illustrated by "Necking," featured in Olds' *The Wellspring*, where a speaker reflects about her teenage, sexual awakening while recalling not only that "the rape/ and murder of our classmate had happened in these hills," but also the death of an unspecified number of women due to radium poisoning who worked in "Cyclotron" and "the Rad Lab," as mentioned in the poem (88). Though *Her* doesn't follow Olds' effort to educate the reader about the multiple challenges faced by women in one poem, it is my belief that the maturity afforded by continuing to write and learn about these will allow me to address that limitation in future collections.

Self-Awareness

“Cut” was the most satisfactory experience in terms of **evoking** a social consciousness in my reader and myself, mostly because a word inspired its writing, which then resulted in the inclusion of a first section that established boundaries between actual FGM victims, and the second lyrical “I” speaker, a sexually empowered woman who reflected about the latter during intercourse. In addition, there was the previously described relative “nearness” to the pain FGM victims would feel due to my brief experience in women’s health. But beyond the barrier of the pain I could and couldn’t imagine was that of color, and the fact that, in addition to “Cut,” the poems that most overtly sought to create a social consciousness in the reader were those inspired by women of color who have fought to change the lives of girls and women through action, not words.

This is the case of “Goddess,” a poem inspired by Dr. Stella Nyanzi, whose nude protest about her working space at the Makerere Institute of Social Research, and her impassioned fight for wide access to sanitary pads for African women, brought her international attention, and an appointment in the Ugandan court of law after “insulting” President Yoweri Museveni and his wife, Janet, online, for failing to fulfill campaign promises regarding women’s health. Her feminist cause—the basic right to a product that ensured women of all ages could go to school and work on the days they menstruated, and not be relegated to the house—would clearly enrich *Her* in view of its own feminist agenda, illustrated in writing poetry inspired by women including Jyoti Singh, Leyla Hussein, and my own mother’s struggle with womanhood. However, I rapidly realized that at the center of “Goddess” there is the black female body, which only complicates matters, for I’m not black, and therefore, the inclusion of Dr. Nyanzi’s naked

body had to overcome the voyeuristic, exoticizing eye that has historically assessed its worth, by positioning me as an outsider:

What pushes our bodies over-
board is not what pushes
Stella: the black brassiere

coming off violent, romance-
less, her breasts, imperfect,
ample charcoal pointing

...
...but it's no surprise. Goddesses
in black are not, goddesses don't
strip unless their necks are broken-

Despite revision efforts inspired by this awareness about the female black body, which places it as the unmistakable source of imagistic and symbolic force, images like the one provided by the title itself, “goddess”— though used consciously to focus on the social and artistic obsession with white standards of beauty in spite of efforts to focus on the feminist cause of this African activist—might facilitate the comparison of Dr. Nyanzi’s body to those of white goddesses, thus steering the reader’s attention towards the external qualities of her body, and not necessarily the power she’s reclaiming by disrobing in the first place.

Months after writing “Goddess,” though, I found myself writing “Forever Fonda”—inspired by anchor Megyn Kelly’s nonsensical question to actress Jane Fonda about her facial plastic surgery during a promotional tour of her latest movie—and not long after that, I went through a torturous revising stage of “Francesca Breaks the Window,” a poem expressing my admiration for actress Meryl Streep and the courage she displayed when she confronted recently elected President Donald Trump’s discriminatory and sexist agenda during the 2017 Golden Globes. Evidently, the effects of “Goddess” on my consciousness had not translated into my writing efforts, and it was precisely the interruption of revising “Francesca Breaks the

Window”—one evening after the bell had rung, by talking with Lupita Muñoz, a woman of color who works as a custodian in the same high school where I work—that made me consider a question that had only flirted with my subconscious: Besides Stella Nyanzi and other women of color I had already written about, why did I write about white women whose skin color and wealth at least afforded them a public platform to voice their concerns, or, in the case of Fonda, something as simple as her anger?

This basic but vexing question had fueled the emergence of Black Feminism, Mixed Feminism, and Latina Feminism, sometimes collectively called Women of Color Feminisms, whose main preoccupation is the “recognition of the alterity (otherness) and uniqueness of the distinctive experiences of women of color, particularly as distinct from the experiences of mainstream (white, Western, or Euro-centric) feminists” (Fernandes Botts 225). The solidification of Women of Color Feminism, and, most relevant to my own experience as a Mexican woman, Latina Feminism was a reaction to the feminist agenda characteristic of the first and second waves of feminism, of the nineteenth century and the 1970s, respectively, whose main academic and creative representatives were white, middle-class educated women. Yet, here I was, a woman of color in the twenty-first century, still writing supposedly feminist poetry about the experiences of white women whose fame had monopolized my attention. How had my lack of self-awareness as a working-class woman of color reached this point, and, most importantly, what could I do to change that?

Once again, Ms. Muñoz’s willingness to share some of her life story with me while she worked proved invaluable, for she is not only the inspiration behind “Lupita,” but also the reason why I was forced to address the largely myopic feminist content of *Her*:

...But Lupita pays
no mind, she’s worried

about the time she thinks
she's taken up from paper
Meryl: her poem stinks
of a groupie hand. I
can't say anything
to Lupita—Meryl *is*
fabulous, but where's
Lupita's limelight, dressing
room, the cult
followers, the platform
to speak about the woes
of women and the world?

The form of “Lupita”—a one-stanza, short-lined poem—was chosen not only to slow the speed with which the poem was read, but also so that it is read more than one time, for I wanted to encourage the reader, especially if female and of color, to linger on Lupita as a woman as worthy of attention as Ms. Streep or even me, who, though not white nor wealthy, can afford the luxury of spending half of my time writing, and not doing heavy physical labor in order to help my family. It can be argued “Lupita” is not my first effort to present Mexican and Mexican-American working-class women of color as legitimate subjects, for my mother is a vivid example of the latter. Yet the lens through which I view her, and am able to write about the physical and emotional fortitude that allows her to both run a small business and raise children, is still skewed towards identifying her as a mother first (another lacking area in my emerging feminism), though efforts to talk about her role as a tireless businesswoman have already materialized in poems not yet included in this collection, but whose revision will assure their presence before I consider submitting *Her* for publication.

Along with the presence of my mother and Ms. Muñoz in *Her* as efforts to recognize the otherness of women of color, another concern specific to the Latina Feminist Movement—“the cross-cultural dialogue and the extent to which such dialogue is limited by differing levels of power”—is here illustrated by the inclusion of Spanish and Spanglish, which, though not

planned, follows the aesthetics of work by iconic Chicana writer Cherrie Moraga, who saw in unbalanced cultural and linguistic exchanges one, if not the most important, instrument to deepen the discrimination, isolation, and sexism experienced by Spanish or Spanglish-speaking women living in the United States (Tong et. al 225). My reasoning for the unconscious writing of bilingual poems, other than the superficial one provided by the fact that I had been formally educated about poetry in an English-speaking environment that focused on work written in English, is expanded by Moraga in the epilogue of *Loving in the War Years: Lo que nunca pasó por sus labios*, titled “La mujer que viene de la boca”:

...re-learning Spanish scares me. I have not spoken much of the lengua here. It is not so much that I have been avoiding it, only that the conclusion brings me to the most current point in time: la lengua...I want the language, feel my tongue rise to the occasion of feeling at home, in common. I know this language in my bones...and then it escapes me... “You don’t belong. ¡Quítate!” (141).

This “¡Quítate!,” which Moraga uses to give actual muscle to the “shoving,” rejecting motion she felt Spanish gave her when she tried to use Spanish in her creative and activist work as a lesbian feminist of color, resonates with me as a female poet native of Ciudad Juárez, México, who has lived in El Paso, Texas, its American neighbor, since 2007. This is because I too know Spanish is the “language in my bones,” or the language I dream in, but it was still inexplicably challenging to view it as part of my aesthetics until October 2016, when I wrote “Real Mexican,” a poem that features Spanglish, for an Advanced Poetry Workshop exercise that asked us to adopt a persona. Though the latter is not a part of *Her*, “Anthony,” the male ex-convict persona I chose to write as, offered me a glance into the linguistic issues I had internalized as a result of both my education and the inferior view “real” Mexicans have of “pochos,” a derogatory term for Mexican-Americans who speak Spanglish, which is instilled in children from a young age. Thus, “Real American” felt more like a fluke because, even though

“Anthony” allowed me to reverse that academic and cultural perception of any variation of Spanish as lacking, or even insulting, it also felt like I was engaging in linguistic tourism, a term that like thematic tourism, implies a poet utilizes a second language without structural, symbolic, or prosodic justification.

My coining of terms that explore the empty exploration of either a subject or language might be a reflection of the weaker, but still present self-perceived status as a poetic tourist due to my recent entry into the field. Yet, when “Real Mexican” gave way to more poems that used Spanish or Spanglish because the music afforded by the words or phrases I used was unique—or because, beyond an impulse, the poem asked that I use these since there was no adequate translation for their context—I realized I was not guilty of linguistic tourism, only linguistic guilt. I believe this is what Moraga refers to in this short epilogue, besides, and more tangibly than, the invisible rejection we felt from Spanish as a living language that undoubtedly informs our identities more than English, but that had been forced into reclusion by the purist linguistic views of our academic and bi-cultural environments where English always wins in terms of art and writing.

In this way, “Bad Words” and “Bruise Kiss,” the poems I feel apply Spanish most successfully and that feature women of color, were written because I finally shoved back, and ignored the “¡Quítate!” The first may be the most metabilingual, for in finding the reaction of a toddler boy to his mother’s use of “bubis”—a common colloquial word for breasts in Spanish—amusing, since he asked, almost embarrassed, why she was cussing in public, I felt I could explore the weight of actual cuss words in Spanish, which is significant, because their impact in my daily life, let alone in poetry, is much more visceral than the English ones:

My ear is out of ear-
shot, perhaps less than

Elena's, but I heard nothing

like fuck you, chinga
tu madre, mother
fucker, hijo

de tu puta madre...

My decision to have the epigraph present the interaction between the mother and her son, instead of making it part of the actual body of the poem, was made because I wanted to give “chinga tu madre” and “hijo de tu puta madre”—two strong cussing expressions in Spanish—the spotlight, in order to compare their actual offensiveness to “bubis,” which, judging by the reaction of the boy, might seem to be worse than using the latter or even the more common “fuck,” for example, which has unfortunately become part of colloquial speech. While I let out a quick smile when the mother rebutted her son's attempt to improve her manners in public by saying, “It's not a bad word, mijo, es mi cuerpo nada más,” (the mother's response, verbatim)—thus appropriating the language she chose to use to talk about her body in a swift, effective way—I was also appalled at how early this boy had learned to find offense in the terminology, either colloquial or medical, for women's anatomy. This is perhaps the truth “Bad Words” aims to communicate because we should mimic the mother's admonishment on a larger scale every time women are shushed when “breast” and, in that same vein, “vagina” and all its variations are part of a conversation, or when women consciously lower their voices to not be deemed inappropriate—because we should question the discomfort we feel when we talk about our anatomies:

I wish I had her whip-
like, silver, mother,
cut-it-out tongue

to see the bad,

to hear the bad,
to uproot it like

weed from grass,
no paper or shear
cuts; nada menos,

and nothing like
“son: chinga tu madre,
fuck—now, that’s bad.”

“Bruise Kiss,” in line with “Bad Words,” explores my use of Spanish when the female body is involved, but it goes one step further by exploring how it can even appropriate a lifeless female body when photography and yellow journalism is involved. The subhuman treatment given to a female victim photographed in the *PM*, a daily publication sold in Ciudad Juárez that invariably features gory, sexualized headlines and photos of living or dead, private or public, women—and by the equally demeaning headline “Acaban con sus sueños: Matan a chavita y la tiran desnuda”—is precisely what captured my eye, and led my efforts to write about her. Though I didn’t buy the *PM* to find out more about her—because it would only add, if insignificantly, to the *PM*’s exploitation of her body—the voyeuristic origin of “Bruise Kiss” added to the issues related to the irresponsible use of poetic license previously mentioned, because there was a chance I would not only appropriate her story instead of extracting it for her, but that I could also, not unlike this ghastly newspaper, steal the last word in terms of her life, or of who she was: a word or words that belonged only to her despite the premature end brought on by her murder.

In this way, just like I had gone to the body for a way to connect myself to Jyoti Singh, it occurred to me that my thighs, badly bruised after a session of pole fitness, which happens so often to beginning and experienced practitioners as a result of the pressure applied to skin by the pole as to deem these bruises “pole kisses,” could afford that connection, if only because it was

the most visceral means I had to imagine what violence against my body might feel like. That said, the difference between my bruises and this young woman's was obvious, and it's precisely that "same, but different" quality that, like other speakers of *Her*, who always highlight the differences between themselves and women who had been hurt or killed as a result of a violent act, could build a sense of kinship that would allow me to imagine what the last thoughts of this deceased woman would've been: "Dios Madre Dios Madre Hormiga/ Errante tickling my hand: *These aren't bruises. These/ aren't bruises. These aren't bruises. These—.*"

"Light," Jyoti's poem, was troublesome precisely because of the risk of further erasing her story by making it that of a careless tourist, but my decision to even dare to imagine and write this woman's last words makes "Bruise Kiss" one of the most risky poems I have written in terms of my efforts to judiciously apply poetic license and Spanish to bring justice to these women—if only through poetry. Thus, my decision to translate "God," "Mother," and "Atomic Ant," still proves challenging, but just as Moraga talks of Spanish being so intimate that's in her bones, I thought this woman would think of these religious, familiar, and animal images in Spanish. Conversely, the decision to not translate "These Bruises" was to re-establish the bodily connection between the speaker and this woman, and most importantly, to mark the difference between the muttering of this phrase to bare the pain of holding a pole with thighs and that of repeating it as a sort of prayer when close to death.

The writing of "Bruise Kiss" is not the culmination of the realization sparked by my lack of self-awareness as a female poet of color whose poetic repertoire can include Spanish, for this is the only poem in *Her* that addresses the femicides that have plagued Ciudad Juárez for more than two decades. But it's perhaps the physical and emotional nearness to my place of birth that prevents me from furthering my efforts to write about these victims at this point of my writing

career, as embarrassing as this limitation is for, as a *mujer juarense*, I feel I should be producing work that talks about the women who continue to suffer. That said, I believe I need time to mature as a poet before I am able to engage in comprehensive research that would allow me to write about these women in a way that honors their lives and memories and that would add to the meaningful body of art inspired by the femicides, instead of making them empty emblems of my poetic ambition. This is, I believe, part of my responsibility as a Latina feminist poet whose fuller, evolving sense of self will determine when it's the right time to eliminate this second, undeniably juarense ¡Quítate!

Confessional Label

Unlike Sexton, one of the first female poets to assume the weight of this label, I embrace the word “confessional.” According to Janice Markey, author of *A New Tradition? The Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich*, Sexton's reluctance was justified because of the critic's myopic focus on the directness and frankness with which she addressed taboo topics of the 50s such as a woman's sexuality, body, and identity. These critics often ignored that Sexton's choice to speak from a first-person perspective didn't necessarily mean she was “confessing” to anything; it was merely the point of view she favored to arrive at a poetic truth that surpassed autobiography (102, 103). Additionally—in accordance with my view regarding poetry's potential to first awaken the social consciousness of our readers to then effect social change, even if it only translates into making small alterations to behaviors or perceptions the reader never questioned before—Sexton's poetry often invites action, which she favors, as she explains what happened after reading “Heart's Needle,” a poem by W.D. Snodgrass, another poet who was categorized as confessional:

I had written about half of my first book when I read that poem, but it moved me to such an extent—it's about a child, and he has to give up his child, which seems to be one of

my themes, and I didn't have my own daughter at the time—that I went up to my mother-in-law's where she was living and got her back. I could only keep her at that time for a week, but the poem moved me to action. It so changed me and undoubtedly it must have influenced my own poetry (Markey 106).

The act of picking up her daughter can be perceived as insignificant, as the bodies of feminist poetry and women's movements that followed Sexton's work expected grander actions in the name of the rights of girls and women. However, for Sexton, who suffered from depression and wasn't always able to take care of her children as a result, the fact that she was able to physically reach for her daughter after reading Snodgrass's poem was nothing short of grand. This is what I want *Her* to achieve in my reader—a need to *do* anything that positively impacts girl's and women's lives, which can range from starting a non-profit organization for battered women, or starting a career in law to defend rape survivors from a second rape during legal depositions, to simply taking the time to listen to teenagers talk about their broken hearts. This is why, if using a first-person voice in my poetry—which can be perceived as egomaniacal, shallow, or too willing to share intimate details—is what is required, then I gladly accept the risks of labeling myself a confessional poet.

“Egomaniacal,” a word I used to describe potential assessments of the poetic voices in *Her*, is another reductionist qualifier that has to be confronted, because, in adopting a first-person voice, there is a risk of ignoring the larger historical and social context that surrounds the life of one speaker. As expressed by Anis Shivani, “poets have forsaken keen knowledge of public figures, public events, and public history, so that even when forced on occasion to confront a large-scale tragedy (usually it is which obliges them to pen a few lines to ‘deal with’ the crisis, rather than a Whitmanesque exposition that embraces the good and the bad, before calamity strikes), they approach it through the screen of private experience” (qtd. in Brickney 9). This exploration of public life through a personal lens is indeed complicated, as I hint to in “Poetic

License,” for in viewing the world’s problems through a lens that is inherently subjective, there can be a tendency to only superficially touch on what Shivani calls the “large-scale tragedies,” to focus on our personal laments.

Though I have established my awareness of this challenge, and my reasons for choosing to meet it as a poet who writes about experiences she has never had, it is interesting to consider how the autobiographical element, which Sexton didn’t deem vital to get at the truth of a poem, can indeed facilitate the realization of the crises that affect other’s lives. The crisis of girl-on-girl emotional violence, which I was able to become aware of by using autobiographical information, might be small when compared to rape or FGM, but its effect can be powerful enough to be perpetrated and suffered by many generations of women if we don’t discuss it through poetry or, at least, conversation. Though there are a number of poems that address the latter, “Wicked” and “Savage Nerd Cunt” constitute my efforts at making the reader aware of the ways women hurt each other, consciously or not.

In “Wicked,” a poem in five sections that features both free-verse and prose poetry, the contemplation of what girlhood is, and how fragile and complex a stage it is, is sparked by the speaker’s overhearing of a female teenage student who calls a male classmate a “girl” after what is assumed a verbal reaction to her focus being disrupted by him. This leads to the speaker’s admonishment whereby she loudly asks, “What’s wrong with being/ a girl?” The reader might expect a concrete answer after the speaker talks about memories of her paternal grandfather, who showed her how a girl should drink from a bottle and sit with a straight back; and her grandmother, who exacted revenge on her husband after all the years of serving him first by letting his soup at the hospital “grow grease spots.” Yet I realized that the answer was not as

simple as girlhood being as flawed as other stages in a woman's life due to our socialization to be good and polite, while also being reserved and distant.

This complexity mortified me because, having asked that question myself that day at work, and not only being ignored but mocked, implied that, if the student had looked at me for an answer, I wouldn't be able to say anything remotely articulate. Though "Wicked" started as "Girlhood" because I thought I could just keep working on the poem at hand, the image of my grandmother lingered and made me remember how, months earlier, she had half-jokingly insulted me in the same way she had done with my mother decades earlier, when she asked her if there was a loose thread hanging from the hem of her dress to make fun of the thinness of her legs:

II.

*Me dijo que tenía una hebra colgando del vestido—me preguntó que si no sentía el hilo.
Revise el dobladillo, no había tal—No, me dijo, hablo de tus piernas.*

—My mom on her mother-in-law's joke
about her having threads for legs
just after having miscarried a second time.

III.

*Me dijo que tenía una hebra colgando del vestido—me preguntó que si no sentía el hilo.
Revise el dobladillo, no había tal—No, me dijo, hablo de tus piernas.*

—Me on my grandma's joke
about my having threads for legs
just after waltzing in the living room wearing shorts.

Though the effect my grandmother's words had on me was less serious because my mother telling me about it prepared me to confront her by revealing I knew she had used the same "joke" on my mother, it was still disheartening that one of the female presences that was supposed to be most vested in the protection of my body image did what no bully had done to me when I was a

girl. Thus, more than transcribing her words to exorcize their power, and expose her cruelty, it was the very decision of sharing them with my reader that made me consider, for a moment, that someone must have treated my grandmother in this way when *she* was a girl in order to repeat this offense twice. Regardless, it was not until I had an interaction with a friend that was close to her in age, but differed greatly in the way she treated me with love and respect despite not being related by blood, that I realized there was something to what felt like an unfounded theory to excuse her wish to hurt the very women she was supposed to celebrate:

She's a wicked, wicked woman, Sarah said after I told her about my grandma's joke about my and my mother's legs in her library-turned-dining room in New Hampshire. But that's all she's ever known, she added.

This observation, made by a woman whose life experience afforded her the objectivity and wisdom to look beyond the cruelty of my grandmother's words, and associate them with a learned behavior, only made sense: how could one expect my grandmother to show love to women who seemed more whole than her, if she had only known the misogyny of my grandfather, who referred to her as "mujer" (woman) and not by her name, and who abused her by ordering she always served him food first, and other offenses not mentioned in "Wicked," which included adultery? Though my grandmother has never confirmed this, I still contend that she was also hurt by women, very likely her mother or grandmother, and that, in my experience, is worse than being hurt by men, because one is quick to expect solidarity, if only due to our shared biology. This subject is explored in the final section of "Wicked," where the speaker tries to answer the larger question of what girlhood is, when it comes to our interaction with other women:

Or when girls hurt girls, hearts
wrinkled by every girl—

mother sisters aunts girl-

friends best friends grand-

mothers—who told them to kill
compliments if not earned,

to covet others' legs or ass,
if yours were crucified

by hands that should've held
you strong: *Grandma, I'm sorry*

*no one told you 'you are
beautiful,' because you are.*

The lack of solidarity between women is alarming, and, though the use of “wicked woman” as an insult is antiquated, replacements like “bitch” have emerged, and women only support the patriarchal dehumanization of women by applying them to themselves or other women without the goal of re-appropriation. For this purpose, after “Sarah” says “But I’m a wicked woman too, you know,” in response to the speaker confessing that she wished she could be her grandmother, there’s an implication that “Sarah” could be cruel in her own way, or simply, that she’s not as perfect as she seems, and that this is acceptable. That is why the speaker then relishes in her small act of rebellion, for in denying her grandmother, she’s departing from the image of the loving, revering granddaughter, and finally confronting her bullying behavior, so perhaps, being “wicked” could be good, after all:

But I’m wicked too, you know? Sarah finally said. I could only wonder what she meant, but I remember feeling wicked myself the moment I turned on my grandmother, and liked as much as hated the feeling of denying her. All of her, in a way—even if she never knew. I’m a wicked, wicked woman too, I said. Sarah didn’t elaborate on her wickedness; she just handed me a pint of Cookies n Crème ice cream. Apparently, you beat cold with cold.

Of note is how the act of “confessing” by a woman commonly carries a shameful, saccharine undertone, which is inaccurate because, as Sexton puts it when talking about the burden of carrying the confessional label, “...I’ll often confess to things that never happened. As

I once said to someone, if I did all the things I confess to, there would be no time to write a poem” (Markey 103). Thus, “confessing” in a poem can be as autobiographical as imagination and the poet allow it to be, especially when in search of a larger truth or crisis that affects other women, and therefore demands that we write about it. This is illustrated in Sexton’s “For My Lover, Returning to His Wife,” included in *Love Poems*, and her speaker, who in confessing to being the lover of married man, strangely argues not for his leaving her, but for his loving her after their affair ends. Thus, in addition to ordering that he “climb her like a monument, step after step,” she also orders him to appreciate his wife as “exquisite,” “all harmony,” and the “sum of yourself and your dream” (Sexton 188-190).

The compassionate, guilty tone of the speaker, however, is ultimately employed to arrive at a truth where there’s empathy for, and solidarity with, the wife, which counters the expectation that she should absolutely resent her. This reversal of the girl-on-girl violence we have come to expect between the lover and wife of the same man—who is typically spared in a situation where he is the common factor—is precisely what “confessing” in poetry, and more specifically, confessional feminist poetry can lead to, which I believe is a valid approach to dealing with this tragically common and scarring crisis experienced by girls and women.

In looking at the public through private life in confessional poetry, the “personal is political”—an idea-turned-to-motto introduced by Carol Hanisch’s 1969 essay as a reaction to some radical feminists’ criticism that consciousness-raising groups that were organized during the second wave of feminism were nothing but opportunities for “navel-gazing” and “personal therapy”—provides another argument to support the confessional mode *Her* adopts in order to write about women (Hanisch). One of those “navel-gazing” subjects refers to appearance, and the rigors associated with fitting impossible standards of female beauty, which were not

necessarily perceived as another form of patriarchal oppression that deserved political attention. This notion has since been challenged by the many reverberations and explorations of “the personal is political,” yet the personal aspect of this particular issue, which perpetuates girls’, teenagers’ and women’s perfectionist, judgmental views of their own bodies, is still of political and social relevance, as the incidence of eating disorders among adolescent girls has increased over the last 50 years (Morris et. al).

That’s why the focus of *Her* is heavily directed towards discussing appearance, for the perception of my body as imperfect despite the perfection evinced in its physical and physiological health is hardly part of *my* biography. This is explored in “Savage Nerd Cunt,” a poem that originated as an exercise in the judicious use of vernacular, written from the perspective of a Mexican-American female teenager who can’t help but compare herself to “Kim,” whose waist is as slim as a wasp’s, and whose shapely buttocks afford her a “swing” that leads boys to believe she’s “the last coca en el desierto”—an image that makes this last can of Coca-Cola in the desert evoke thirst and excessive heat, making of girls like “Kim” symbols of survival and of the lustful coveting someone must feel if they were lost in the desert and suddenly spotted the sweet liquid. The decision to adopt the persona of a female teenager came from my bi-weekly interaction with high school students due to my tutoring job, which provides me with opportunities to listen to what girls say about their and their female classmates’ bodies.

Once again, however, the role an adult female figure plays in the harsh judgment of a body that is in between childhood and womanhood, and thus largely destined to be, for lack of a better word, amorphous and lacking in clear external indicators of beauty, has to be considered as detrimental as the role the media and, more currently, social media, have in painting an unrealistic image of the female body:

I'm not *dead* as in cool, and my dead
abuela let me know as much: square
hips are wrong, wavy hair is neither
here nor there, and the pus-full, white
peaks scarring my brown skin are unlady-
like...

The inspiration for this flawed “abuela” (grandmother) was also based on my paternal grandmother, who had targeted my “square hips” before she did my thin-as-thread legs, and this itself is alarming, because though she made the first observation when I was a teenager myself, I had largely blocked the memory, and instead felt ashamed by my narrow hip bones ever since. These kinds of recollections, painful as they might be, are what I want to trigger in female teenage and adult readers, because to be aware of the origin of body image issues often lends one a wider understanding of why, if it was a girl or a woman that pointed out these supposed flaws, their vitriol must often be a result of having been targeted themselves. This also explains why I decided the speaker should try to appropriate the image of “the last coca en el desierto” when speaking about her mother, who she perceives as another victim of the “Kims and abuelas in her life,” and who she suspects got pregnant as a teenager precisely because of the magnetic pull her beauty had on men:

but I wonder if she was
ever nerd cunt enough to fight
the tiny waists and hearts of the Kims
and abuelas in her life, and become
her own coca in the desert: deadly sweet
and acid enough to burn through metal,
but wanted by all, even sun and sand—
watch their tongues stick out.

I used the teenage vernacular in “Savage Nerd Cunt” initially to fulfill the requirements of a class assignment, but the more than a dozen revisions this poem went through to genuinely represent the voice of a teenager opened my mind not only to their symbolism, but also their

prosody, which I tried to enrich by imbuing this poem with the halting, yet stream-of-consciousness quality of teenage slang.

Though one could argue that adopting a different point of view and voice allowed me to write this poem, it's undeniable that the autobiographical component, and yet another act of confession regarding my grandmother's cruel behavior, made me realize that girls and female teenagers are now forced to grow up even faster than my generation. Because this wasn't clearly communicated by "Savage Nerd Cunt," as it was this poem's writing that allowed me to listen more carefully to students' stories of body shaming, I wanted to write a poem that could mimic the voice a majority of women have heard at some point of their life, with the purpose of making both teenagers and women conscious of the name-calling we often subject ourselves to because seemingly everyone—from our mothers to the media; from the sugar-free products to our dogs—is telling us to lose weight, undergo plastic surgery or buy special clothing to feel, but most importantly, to look beautiful. This is explored by "Centimeters"—whose title references the 90-60-90 centimeters ideal measurement of a woman's bust, waist and buttocks—and why it features a speaker that openly calls the woman who reads her "whale," "cow," and "Crisco ass": I wanted to awaken my reader by any means necessary:

...you will surpass
the balloon, the hippo,

the ball (a baby-could-
drown beach ball) the whale,
the cow. *Crisco* is a rough

word, as pretty as when
Crisco ass was your name—
you know, the one you gave

yourself,...

The imperative tone of the second person was important because in the repetition of the “you” and its variations—“your,” “yourself”—a total of thirty-three times, I intended for the reader to identify herself as the perpetuator of these derogatory labels when we talk to ourselves in this unkind manner, and to recognize how, unconsciously, we teach girls to do the same when we casually critique our bodies in front of them.

Ultimately, I believe the confessional mode is very apt when exploring the crises women face daily either as a result of something as “harmless” as calling or thinking of oneself as a “cow,” or as something as horrific as rape, and when embracing its autobiographical component by using it as a carefully and justifiably in terms of form, subject, and prosody as poetic license. Then again, if the label is still problematic, the appropriation of the act of confessing and writing confessional poetry is urgent because in exposing the most intimate, painful details through a fictitious or autobiographical first person, we are also challenging the view of outspoken women as “gossipy,” “loud,” or “inappropriate,” for it’s precisely the relative ease with which women can generally communicate with each other, and others, that makes real the possibility to bring down patriarchal tenets that rule everything from the way we look, dress, and talk to the way we choose to express our sexuality and pain.

“Absent” Men

“Violence doesn’t have a race, a class, a religion, or a nationality, but it does have a gender,” Rebecca Solnit, author of *Men Explain Things to Me*, concludes to support the findings of police reports and academic studies regarding men’s higher tendency to commit acts of violence against female partners or strangers when compared to women (20). This largely explains *Her*’s purposeful male absence or peripheral presence in poems like “Light” or “Shh” because, if my purpose is to give *Her*’s female voices agency over their bodies and narratives,

then this must translate into giving them the poetic spotlight, where their male abusers or killers' role is that of a satellite, and necessary only because they altered the chronology, quality or length of these women's lives. An exception to the latter is "Beauty," titled after the pseudonym given to the assaulted women in question, whose epigraph has no qualms in identifying the responsible parties and thus making them share some of Beauty's spotlight:

On April 28th, 2017, as part of the promotion of the renowned Magnum Photograph Awards, LensCulture published a photograph taken by Souvid Datta featuring a fully identifiable young girl having sex with a man in the red light district of Sonagachi, India.

This structural and aesthetic decision also allows the poem, not the photograph or the controversy surrounding it, to tell a part of this young girl's life, as horrific as it is, and to call out Datta for objectifying and serving as an accomplice to what was essentially rape. In yet another uncharacteristic move, the poem also identifies Datta, here deemed a "mute historian" and "lazy hand," as a significant factor in re-writing Beauty's story:

the dent
the camera could've made on the head
 of a man that huffed and puffed, huffed
 and puffed, blowing old
breath on her cheeks and young
 mouth, until her house was blown away.

Datta's simultaneous action and inaction in terms of using his camera to capture Beauty's rape, but not stopping it by attacking the rapist, here illustrated by "the dent/ the camera could've made on the [rapist's] head", might explain why he's featured so prominently, when compared, for example, to the overt erasure of Jyoti Singh's rapists. This is also what might render "Beauty" as one of the most polished poems due to its uncharacteristic wish to "hurt" a male criminal, if only on paper. Due to the rarity of the tone, and even the style of "Beauty"—whose jagged margins attempt to reflect and heighten the anxiety and unease the speaker feels as a result of "watching" Datta and wanting to hurt the rapist—*Her* finds itself at a feminist

crossroads because it can't totally align with radical feminism, whose view of the patriarchy and its executors is so absolute that it results in men's assessment as repulsive and deserving of social crucifixion, or, even with liberal feminism, whose focus on the equality of the sexes would dictate the inclusion of poems that explored how, for example, the equally flawed socialization of boys is an important factor in the dehumanizing treatment of women.

This lack of feminist affiliation was initially not alarming, but as the process of revising the collection continued, the presence of men as nothing more than perpetrators of violence made me question the legitimacy of this view. This was exacerbated by the social encounters my tutoring position also facilitated with male teenagers, who either demonstrated behaviors that did not fit the "violent, closed off" stereotype, or who were obviously at odds with it, mostly illustrated by not being able to answer a question as simple as "are you alright?" when their bodies clearly indicated they were upset. That said, feminism's myopic analysis of the social construction of gender and its effects on women, as introduced by Simone de Beauvoir in 1949 in *The Second Sex*, has been a concern for some time: "Research over the past decade in sociology, media, and cultural studies strongly suggest that we need to develop a much more sophisticated approach to understanding cultural constructions of masculinity... particularly in light of the ongoing crisis of men's violence in our society, and around the world" (Katz 349). *Her's* efforts to do the latter is illustrated in "Boy," whose speaker is frustrated at a boy's "mm-hmm" response to inquiries about his well-being:

...Maybe that's why your mm-
hmm's sound deeper these days, when I ask
are you alright?

...

...*Is that it?* I know nothing about being
a boy, and I've tried to ask you about it

since I caught you staring at her

The “her” here alludes to the girl the speaker thinks is behind the boy’s change of demeanor, which is a reflection of my theory when I observed a normally gregarious male student’s body language change visibly after a female classmate responded mockingly to one of his jokes. Though I was never able to get an answer during or after class when I approached him in the hallway, this hermetic disposition made me realize that the burden girls carried to fit the “sensitive” or “nice” stereotype was also shared by boys when they were unwilling or unable to articulate their emotional turmoil:

Am I close? I’m dying
to teach you more than why theories

can be erased with evidence, and kill
my theory of you: strong, quiet, emotional

only about his mother or dog, seeing girls
like her only in terms of how big her breasts

and ass are now that she’s grown into herself,
braids giving way to loose hair, *boys have*

cooties t-shirts to short-shorts. So, add an “I”
to your mm-hmm this once: prove me wrong.

Though “the girl-problem” constitutes the most likely theory for the “discomfort”—another word that reflects the superficiality with which we understand boys’ suffering—for the student, and by extension, the fictionalized version of him, it’s still weak because I have not observed or tried to engage male teenagers about their experiences as easily or actively as I have females. This makes “Boy” an effort to supplement *Her*’s goal to enact some degree of change in women’s lives, for one poem that suspects boys are sometimes more than they show to the world does not mean the collection is fully investigating the consequences of embodying or breaking the “silent” mode. “Hoe,” which was written many months after “Boy,” was a more direct

attempt to understand the latter by exploring why male teenagers might use misogynist language when expressing love and/or anger, here illustrated by the epigraph (written in rap lyric form by an actual student), and how he justifies the contextual incorrectness of “hoe” in the first stanzas:

*I don't choose I replace
you the hoe in this case
I'm stacking this money
believe you played yourself, honey.
—J, English 1st period*

I chose hoe, it makes
sense in my ear—

what's right about
writing that bad

girl good, anyways?
Do you want

me to go for ho,
instead? Look, a hoe

fits, you're a tool
for lit guys, you dig

dicks, at them,

As the poem progresses, it's clear he's responding to criticism from a female teacher and classmate, who, in suggesting he uses “ho” or “whore,” are reacting to his grammar and style, not the emotional origin or significance of his rap:

and so it goes,
young and old

chicks, telling me
about her, writing

me because they (always)
know better. So:

*Hoe, hoe, ho,
ho, whore, (bitch)*

ho, I'm supposed
to be heartless,

He reveals that he has expensive sneakers and headphones, the latest iPhone, and even “lost puppy eyes girls/ die for” as a result of being “loaded” by means he leaves unspecified, and closed to further inquiries, thus adding a socio-economic dimension to his tough persona, but a “her” is still treated as the main reason to explain his discomfort and his rap. This reduces him to the same stereotype through which girls, and later, women’s heartache is always assumed to revolve around men, which only adds to the other reductionist treatment of men in *Her* as violent. Joining the efforts of “Boy” and “Hoe” in featuring a misunderstood or stereotyped male poetic protagonist is “First Kiss,” which also focuses on the urgent need to talk to boys about their emotional selves, and “The Kinder Second,” a reflection on my father’s need for isolation from living in an all-female, all-knowing household, where his mistakes and shortcomings are targeted:

(mother sister niece and I), the girl

squad, who cook, draw, fight,
read, breathe, move, are better

than him, and we will let him know
as much because it's the natural

law...

This tendency to treat men as violent or emotionally inadequate might constitute “the natural law” of feminist confessional poetry, as Sexton’s and Olds’ work either largely views men as “inconsistent and selfish and wantonly turn their positive potential into negative action” or as “victims of their own biological urges,” respectively (Markey 109; Brickey 84). This can be a result of this preface’s liberal treatment of both poets as feminists due to the confessional

approach of their poetry, whereby talking about the female experience and body unapologetically they echo the previously discussed “personal is political” dimension of feminism, as characterized by works by self-proclaimed feminist poets like Adrienne Rich, who in “‘breaking down the barrier between private and public’... sought to validate and to politicize women’s experience by defining the self, rejecting cultural definitions, and revealing the substance of her life” (Juhasz 25). Nevertheless, the consideration of Rich’s poetry, mostly affiliated with a radical form of feminism, would also be limited due to *Her*’s incomplete, though genuine, efforts to consider men as more than the sum of their socialized façade by including these poems, which make its categorization more likely aligned with liberal feminism (Dean). For this reason, *Her*’s investigation into the socialization of boys and its effect on their manhood has to translate into more poems that, while not taking the poetic spotlight that is rightly given to women, would at least awaken the reader’s curiosity regarding what many scholars have deemed necessary to dissect men’s experience to afford feminism’s goal to improve the quality of women’s lives—which unites all branches of feminism—and to give this goal a greater chance of being realized.

Narrative Arc

The assembling and revision of *Her* was a significant challenge due to its lack of sections, which makes the narrative arc, and the many narrators and speakers contributing to it, harder to follow or even identify. This was a result of initially and somewhat randomly grouping together poems written in the period between my second and third years in the program, to give myself an idea of what I was trying to say about women, who emerged as my subject as organically as when I chose to write in the confessional mode without planning to. In addition, before the work of structuring *Her* began in earnest, I was asked to consider why some of my poetry reflected my admiration for poetry of urgency, as illustrated, for example, by the work of Patricia Smith, an African-American female poet whose musical, complex, yet deceptively simple poetry hypnotized me since I saw her performing “Skinhead” in a recorded Def Poetry Slam on YouTube when I was an undergraduate student. My appreciation for Smith’s poetry grew in 2015 when I read “13 Ways of Looking at 13,” in which, following Wallace Steven’s famous “13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” she presents an African-American female teenager in thirteen ways that made me realize how imagistic, realistic, and subversive of boundaries between the private and public I wanted my own poetry to be:

You touch your forefinger to the fat clots in the blood,
then lift its iron stench to look close, searching the globs
of black scarlet for the dimming swirl of dead children...
...

That boy does not see you. He sees through you, past your tone
of undecided earth. You are the exact shade of
the failed paper bag test, the Aunt Esther, you are hair... (Smith 72, 77)

This is perhaps the poem that cemented my interest in writing about women, more so due to the contact I had with teenage girls whose simultaneous vulnerability and resilience still

amazes me, but, more importantly, it was Smith's urgent tone that I have obsessively tried to emulate since then. But, *what is urgency in poetry?* This question was raised by professor Sasha Pimentel, the director of this thesis, who helped me realize why Smith's work was so addictive and inspiring for many emerging poets. Valerie Mejer Casco's essay addresses this question with reference to several poets, which sheds some light on, and gives variety to, the definition of urgency I was forming when Smith's work "hooked" me, and while revising *Her*:

I suppose you could talk of urgency whenever the poem surrenders a demand for transformation, whenever the poem pushes someone to act as soon as possible (del Pliego)

It's a scream, an expulsion, an excrescence—between beautiful and fetid—like a short breath returning to drowning (Martínez Sierra)

This combination of action, interrupted breathing, and even fetidness—literally present in *Her* through poems that talk openly about menstruation, commonly associated with a pungent iron-like smell, for example, but also in the symbolic stench of rape—sets the tone for the readers of *Her* by evoking a sense of urgency that starts primarily with the senses, whose point of origin is almost invariably the female body. That is why, as stated in the introduction, the first poem, "Shameless," paints a vivid image of a woman, judged by both men and women, merely on the basis of her nakedness:

Her face is a pair of breasts, one navel and a triangle of pubic hair.

Has she no shame, her long neck tall, her hard
nipples, her short hair with amateur highlights
against a blue landscape where surely men mow
lawns, beer bottles breaking their perfect greens?
She's an outcast—wives don't bake for her, girls'
bicycle bells are silenced when she walks, dogs
growl...

Though her nakedness is made literal due to Magritte's "The Rape," where a woman's eyes, nose, and mouth are substituted by breasts, navel, and pubic hair, respectively, its

metaphorical quality lies in the phenomenon of a woman's body often *becoming* her life, for depending on its attractiveness, the quality of the latter will be determined. This analogy may not be readily accepted nor recognized by the reader on page one, but "Shameless" serves as the first voice and female subject that constitutes a multifaceted, polyphonic "her" whose narrative is told, appropriated, revised, and/or affected by anyone *but* her, and so it is logical to start the collection by identifying the characteristic that defines our socialization as human beings—our gender—which is associated with the sexual characteristics of our bodies that declare us female or male, thus determining how we will be perceived and treated, in most cases for the rest of our lives. That is why the eight poems that follow "Shameless" stay with the female body, the distorted perceptions of which crucify most women's experiences in an image-obsessed society bent on capturing it on camera. This is especially the case of "Unseen," "Frowning," "For My Sister On the Eve of Her Episiotomy," and "The List," where girls and women are made invisible and/or hypervisible due to the state and age of their bodies.

Besides "The List," mentioned in the introduction because it addresses the lasting effect cruel monologues related to our bodies can have in our lives and choices, "For My Sister On the Eve of Her Episiotomy" stands out not only because it's a prose poem, but also because I explored other aspects of women's lives, such as pregnancy and motherhood, while remaining anchored to the female body, and its harsh objectification, through images of my sister's swollen belly, and, after she delivered my niece, by her overexposed, raw reproductive anatomy:

I'm here, I think I said, arriving in the room where not two, but eight people swirled around the center: a surgical throne where your spread legs almost sucked in the doctor's hands; the doctor, who thankfully was able to stitch you close despite all of it: the too-loud Luis Miguel soundtrack, the oohs, aahs, she looks like me, she looks like you, she looks like him—*never* she looks like her mother...

The chaotic scene, based on actual events, is exacerbated by the rapid listing of environmental and human factors surrounding the birthing, bloody body, which is meant to crowd the reader as much as the mother. She, if only by becoming the focus of the poem, is given the importance she should've had not only when her body became a vessel—the nine-month period where pregnant women are often complimented for their “glow,” and commonly touched to feel the life growing behind their navels— but also, and most importantly, after her body, down to her bones, underwent painful shifts and permanent changes to carry, deliver, and raise her child:

You, who gets no balloons that say “you’re a mother” or aahs because your body made it through this ripping of flesh, served as the background for a picture where I held Leyla, and looked at nothing else: your legs still wide open, knees exhausted, half of your head peeking at the lens.

The lens, here represented by an actual camera, constituted another challenge in assembling *Her*, for a poem’s point of view is as important as its imagery, syntax, or prosody. Point of view may weaken pieces that are otherwise carefully constructed, and ultimately the collection as a whole—especially if it doesn’t have sections to help situate the reader, and when individual poems act as pieces of a shared narrative arc from which no concrete “protagonist” emerges. Professor Pimentel recognized this challenge after I submitted the first draft. Realizing the reader would need a clear compass to understand “her” story, she asked, “how can one use pronouns as witness/context/audience to construct a narrative arc even if the narrative is not a narrative of plot, but point of view?” As a result, *Her* follows a chronological order based around specific points of view through which “her” is written about or observed: a lyrical “I,” “them,” “you/us,” and “him,” culminating with a group of poems with diverse points of views.

This relatively simple design—based on speakers or subjects grouped by the pronouns that colonize “her” narrative through acts of violence that range from body-shaming and

objectification to sexual harassment and assault—was actually a complicated task, especially in the case of the first pronoun, the lyrical I. As discussed extensively in this preface, though sometimes the “I” was the result of adopting the persona of a teenager or a vicious “voice” that destroyed a woman’s self-esteem, the speaker is mostly based on my observations, experiences, and research, and this position of power within poetry should be handled carefully. That said, after the four revisions it took to assemble *Her* into its current presentation, and the consideration and acceptance of the risks involved in using poetic license when it came to writing about women through a confessional mode as a woman, I realized the leaking of the poet’s “I” through the more or less defined “pronoun sections” was necessary in order for me to be present throughout the collection, and have my voice, besides the female body, be the anchor the reader would need to follow along as different acts of violence towards women are addressed with no apparent logical order. This continuous presence was challenging to maintain as I naturally stray away from the spotlight, especially when it comes to exploring pain I can’t possibly understand, but it’s precisely this unease that allowed me to inject the first section with tension, at this point understood by taking structural and thematic risks that would establish the following contract with the reader: stay with me to taste, smell, touch, listen, see “her,” so you can *talk* to her at some point. This is what “Her,” the last and title poem, asks in a very concrete way:

Wake up, neither she [insert her name, one
you think you know] nor you are Alice, and you haven't looked beyond
her calves covered by white knee-high socks, a blue A-line dress, an apron—
I dare you to learn what makes her a body
 of unseen falls, her [insert her name, *her*,
the one you think you know] eye-
 less face—cheeks hollowed by the speed
 of air—a triangle of breasts and hair.

The bracket—which allows the reader to fill the blank with the name of a woman she/he perhaps has talked or heard about, but really don't know because no real dialogue has ensued—mirrors

that of “Shameless,” after the speaker reveals even the naked woman’s mother rejects her, but this insertion asks for a specific dish instead:

Even her mother has stopped inviting her
over for [insert dish only her mother’s love-
ly hands, dripping some kind
of oil, some kind
of acid, can cook for her]

Though brackets are a small aesthetic risk, *Her* needed to question the comfort of two or three-line stanzas that characterize most of the collection to “hook” the reader, without alienating her/him by beginning with a poem like “Little Girl Blues,” which stubbornly opened the collection for three out of four revisions, and aimed to ease the reader into the contract by presenting a little girl at a Walmart who, after seeing a white woman and being bombarded by images of white beauty, expressed a wish to be blonde, blue-eyed, and skinny “when she grew up” despite her brown “halo of curls.” Based on my overhearing of a girl’s wishes while I waited in line at the cash register of this supermarket, and my flat attempt to tell her she was beautiful just the way she was, this poem was cathartic from its first draft, which made it difficult to cut from *Her*, but it failed to set the urgent tone needed to “lure” the reader into a narrative where we’d see this girl—being one of the parts of the overarching “her”—grow up to be erased by rape, minimized by objectification, but hopefully also empowered as a symbol of strength and fight embodied by Jyoti Singh, Lupita Muñoz, or Dr. Stella Nyanzi.

Tension in poetry, a vital element that “implies a use of language which serves, within limits, to keep the poet from falling into sentimentalities, irrelevancies, exaggerations, unqualified didacticisms, formlessness, vagueness, incoherences...” has to be maintained, and as expected, this is as challenging as sustaining an urgent tone (Van O’Connor 555). Therefore, I tried to balance the manner in which I communicated urgency without preaching, using

unjustified controversial language or images surrounding the female body, or suddenly applying too experimental a form that could alienate the reader, while also aiming to inspire her/him to keep flipping the pages to get to the last poem, where I ask the reader to learn about the women in her/his life by simply talking to them. That is why after “Shameless,” a peak-and-trough-like pattern was followed to not only get the reader’s attention, but also allow him/her the time to meditate on what will be communicated by double-peak poems like “Bruise Kiss,” “Cut,” or “Beauty,” where the senses, and ideally, the mind, are assaulted by images of raw violence against the female body, and thus, the life within it. Double-peak poems are located in the last quarter of the book, so this building up of tension relied on trough poems like “The Lie,” where the speaker laments the strength of her mind telling her stretch marks actually make life difficult; “Dream Oven,” a sarcastic look at the male, capitalist CEO take-over of women’s domestic lives and identities; “Cooking,” which presents a group of women talking about their failures in the kitchen; “Ugly,” a humorous take on my experience of being called “ugly” when I was in middle school, and even “Curves,” a poem located just four poems before the double-peak section, where, unexpectedly, the speaker boldly questions the use of labels like “plus-size” or “curvy” to describe average women, and asks, rather angrily, “What does a curve/ have to do with you,/ and her, and her, and her?”

Though “Curves” might be classified as a semi-trough poem precisely because of that anger, the strictness of the peak-and-trough tension pattern, and even the “pronoun section” had to lessen to allow for some poems to be either/or in order to carry the reader through to the end of *Her*, and make the reading experience as intense and subtle as the collections of poetry that have changed the way I write and read poetry. That is perhaps the major challenge in assembling *Her*, for a decade-long formation in science trained me to be strict about my parameters and

results—which explains my drawing of tables, writing of flashcards, and numbered lists to identify “pronoun section,” subjects, and point of view, and even the use of peaks and troughs to visualize tension—while disallowing any room for inaccuracy, or in the present context, the leaking of the poet’s “I” and subtlety between highly tense poems.

Her’s current shape, however, requires further revision, as this section has discussed, for I have to overcome science-influenced black-and-white approaches to a body of poetry, as much as I have to trust my instincts as an emerging poet with a biology background, and some medical training, that allows me to view the female body in way that makes the acts of violence committed against women all the more urgent to address through poetry; for, if the various questions that have helped me structure *Her* have taught me anything, it is that we—as poets, women, men, students, doctors, teachers, parents, and everything in between—have to learn to challenge the rigidity of “answers” etched on our brains by a society that continues to victimize our children based solely on their bodies, and not their diverse, complex personalities.

The latter might be cliché at this point in time, where feminists, regardless of affiliation and wave, have fought, in various ways, for the equality and respect of the female body—but—in the spirit of questioning the norm, why aren’t we talking more about it so we can do something about it? Ultimately, this is one of the main purposes of the sectionless *Her*, where rude, innocent, quiet and/or angry speakers might seem to be talking out of turn in a conversation that involves beauty and violence—a conversation that might remind the reader of a dinner with her/his family or the U.S. presidential debates of 2016 s/he regrets having attended or watched precisely because it bared humanity’s true colors. So what if it’s uncomfortable, all this “ugliness”? I ask as poet, for the losses are not greater than what we might gain when we challenge our instinct to change the topic when children ask about sex, girls write they’d rather

be like Kim Kardashian rather than Michelle Obama in persuasive essays about beauty versus intelligence, or our morning coffee is ruined when we learn a 17-year-old girl was assaulted three times in a row by different men after leaving a club in London.

We must talk; there is no other way.

Conclusion

The use of the confessional mode in feminist poetry is challenging due to the risk the poet takes in appropriating the experiences that don't belong to her through the irresponsible use of poetic license, the thematic and linguistic limitations inherent to a lack of self-awareness, and the fear associated with negative receptions of work that says "too much" about the female experience, which can result in the ignoring of additional factors—represented in *Her* by the absence or peripheral, and limited consideration of men—that affect it. That said, I still posit that if *Her* engages in a thoughtful revision and consideration of these risks, which include, among others, featuring more women of color, Spanish, and men, the act of confession through poetry is one of the most efficient steps we can take in sparking the conversation necessary to enact tangible change in the lives of girls and women. The latter stems from the judicious use of our biographies as a most genuine tool of exploration that can facilitate the discovery of poetic truths, which, reflective of the truths that commonly evade us in life, can actually help us find the right words to not only talk to ourselves, but to others about what makes the female experience so ridden with emotional and physical violence, whether perpetrated by ourselves and other women, or by men. Now, while Anne Sexton, Sharon Olds, and Cherríe Moraga, the poetic figures that represented the epitome of craft, mode, and/or subject relevant to this preface, might not be representative of all the body of work of confessional and/or feminist poetry that could facilitate a fuller assessment of the aptitude of the confessional mode to successfully explore

feminist issues, I think that it's a solid starting point as a feminist poet of color whose early "confessing" of her experience through poetry was an instinct. This instinct—in my relatively short and sheltered experience as a tutor and woman—should be refined and valued in feminist circles of female poets so we can reach girls and teenagers earlier, and thus communicate to them the worth of their voice, and their power over their narratives, so they can feel empowered enough to prevent or speak out about their emotional or physical abuse. That is what *Her* is ultimately after, and what I have set out to do as its author, and as a poet beyond this graduate program.

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Her

Shameless

after René Magritte's "The Rape"

Her face is a pair of breasts, one navel and a triangle of pubic hair.

Has she no shame, her long neck tall, her hard
nipples, her short hair with amateur highlights
against a blue landscape where surely men mow
lawns, beer bottles breaking their perfect greens?
She's an outcast—wives don't bake for her, girls'
bicycle bells are silenced when she walks, dogs
growl. Her name is misspelled in the office, on
plaques: words escape her, she is so— Hell!

Even her mother has stopped inviting her
over for [insert dish only her mother's love-
ly hands, dripping some kind
of oil, some kind
of acid, can cook for her]
But who'd want to? *All* that face, netless, a hair could swim
with the cilantro, radish, hominy* —
where is her sense
of decency?

*My mother's dish is pozole: the one-window kitchen—lighting the sink—the dark counters, crowded with bills, Barbie's lost shoes, half-wringing rags—in the overstuffed blonde wood drawer—— one-too many wooden spoons — the fridge humming with overpriced, Mexican limes as big as apples, sold in Food King— still call me. *Gracias a Dios, Ganesha y el gallito Kellogg's.*

Unseen

“If I can’t unsee this then you can’t either,” caption written by Dani Mathers, an ex-Playboy model, for a photograph she took of a 70-year-old woman changing in the shower area of LA Fitness.

Her eyes burn at the sight
of the fat rolling, and the breasts
dropping to her unholy

knees, so she covers her mouth
to stop a scream, so she
covers her nose to unsmell

old skin. And she seems
truly scared, poor thing,
of womanhood, in all its

grandeur and shape: we bend
to reach the shower handle,
and bellies reveal either

pies, babies, or yoga: we
bend, mostly unafraid,
of eyes that scissor

us and our nipples falling
like merengue peaks upside
down: we breathe out

heavy air, from sucking
it in all day: no silicone
anywhere, the blood runs

unencumbered, the cellulite
digs in, puckering up
for a kiss to lax muscles

because they’re letting
go with so much grace: no
silicone will ever live here. Heart,

take it, when we pull
our waists closer to our
spines, forcing ribs

and veins to show,
so they can photo-
graph well for Dani.

For My Sister on the Eve of Her Episiotomy

I couldn't make it on time even though I dreamed of you and your belly splitting open, and I woke up to a cold sweat on my upper lip (unusual in sticky Galveston): maybe it's because you sent me that picture, your belly not yours anymore— Leyla's fists, torso, ass breaking all strength of the skin. It was a nightmare really, but nothing like standing outside the El Paso airport, waiting for a ride to take me to you, because then it was all about you. Locals and visitors stared at me; I didn't realize it was odd for people to wail in an airport, less so when the dry heat felt so good on my acne. She finally arrived, the mother of the father of your daughter, and she looked at me horrified: was I OK, was I alright? *your sister--look at the baby's picture, she's a beauty*. Though not the one I had in mind, where I stupidly imagined her coming out of you all grown up—dark hair, elegant posture and your nose on her—ready to take the world by the ears, to take us on a ride where I could finally be an aunt. I'm here, I think I said, arriving in the room where not two, but eight people swirled around the center: a surgical throne where your beating crotch almost sucked in the doctor's hands; the doctor, who thankfully was able to stitch you close despite all of it: the too-loud Luis Miguel soundtrack, the oohs, aahs, she looks like me, she looks like you, she looks like him—*never* she looks like her mother, when that was clearly the case: it was just too hard, the genetics of it all, your carbon copy in our mom's arms holding her. Holding, with something more than grandmotherly love, until it was my turn. I loved her, that's all I can say— I loved her like one loves a painting by Pollock, and I said: I'm your aunt, I'm sorry for being late. *Aunt, but first a sister*: that's what I never said because I forgot, along with everyone who asked how you were doing, but turned their bodies, mid-sentence, because Leyla sneezed, or the spare mucus on her head made a cloud. And just like that, faster than the snapping of fingers, you became a mom. You, who gets no balloons that say "you're a mother" or aahs because your body made it through this ripping of flesh, served as the background for a picture where I held Leyla, and looked at nothing else: the blood between your exhausted knees, and the sweat of half your forehead splattering the lens.

Frowning

There is one photograph where—I—think—I—
at least—fought the air’s tingle on my breasts with tissue
paper, and the lens’ sticky hands. I was five: the festive red
and gold plaid, a bow brushing the curls back. And the frown.

Someone said *stop* riding the carousel, *pause*
after hitting the piñata. *Pose*. Mom used
it as the welcoming snap, enthroned in lace
and chiffon, for my quinceañera
party. Guests noted the “strong” personality:

the how cute, can you believe she’s a woman
now drowning all echo of Julio Iglesias’s “De niña
a mujer,” the sawing canines (each table
had their own cake and five kinds
of canapés), the celebration of bleeding—high

heels— the crucifixion of gravity—fainting
after tampon attempts—being
seen—not seen—subtly—touched—groping,
rubbing breasts after the bra wire—cut
skin and lungs—tearing hair off—face—
limbs—armpits—*colita*:

(that’s what my mom calls vaginas). All—publicly,
though no one gave me pads, razors, foot soles, foot
rubs, back pats, arnica, Kleenex, Pepto-Bismol, sports
bras, Cortizone, Monistat, Zolofit, or, at least, cotton

underwear. I was angry then, the last photograph: smile-
free, girl-free—I dressed in dresses
because my mom laid them on my bed—woman-
free—I dressed in dresses with hairy legs, but

I’ve been frowning ever since.

Centimeters

90-60-90: this is you,
or ideally, that's you,
and don't anyone tell

you different: in multiples
of three—grandmother,
mother, daughter—you

will repeat 90-60-90.
90: call it bosom, better
if you're buxom, rack-

blessed: did you know
there's vampire breast
implants? It's rather

simple, really—Draw
blood from your arm,
centrifuge down

to the platelets, inject
those puppies in your breasts,
make them sagless, stop

that bunching up
in the mirror, you're
not fooling anyone! 60:

It's your center's mass,
the hula-hoop's circling
point, but if you keep

ignoring the *abdominal*
fat ratio in the diabetes
pamphlet in the doctor's

waiting room, in your man's
wandering eye, in Vogue's
zero girls, in your mom's

gift of *Juicing for Life*,
in the Nutrition Facts
of Greek Yogurt, in your dog's

mysterious rejection:
you will surpass
the balloon, the hippo,

the ball (a baby-could-
drown beach ball) the whale,
the cow. *Crisco* is a rough

word, as pretty as when
Crisco ass was your name—
you know, the one you gave

yourself, which brings
me to 90: a pill-bottom
is great, if a bottle

of pills share your night-
stand; sure, they
don't snore, and blues,

what blues? But really,
girl, who's the fool? J-Lo
is meh, OK, Kim might be too

assy, your sister just
got lucky, but that cousin,
man, did she have the balls

to do what you can't, or
won't: have gloves suck
the extra lard from

your belly, stick it
in your butt, or if
you have the bucks,

have a silicone, three-
dimensional sickle
be tucked under

your pill-bottom. What
is that, you ask? Girl!
A middle line on a flat

surface, and yes, the middle
line is your butt crack.
The questions you ask

terrify me, you're *so*
cute, but, are you dumb?
What a waste, I guess,

that doesn't cut it
no more, so, at least, buy
yourself some skin-

colored Spanks, sugar-
free water, and pants
that will make you an ass.

The Lie

She asks me what's so bad about stretch
marks—vertical, mainly horizontal traces

of dead protein, their coil giving
out, just like a Slinky in a toddler's

hands— and I can't answer. I can't say
life *is* difficult next to my lover, who runs

my hips with his fingers and spells
our names (I guess) in the blank space

left by the tailwind drawn on my skin
by a plane that couldn't handle spurts

of anything—growth, sky, turbulence—
and who, when bored, draws XOs

on the tic-tac-toe he found on my right
hip. The sideward fall of my breasts

is made evident by striae too when I lie
on my back, but he says that as long as

he catches them, their fit perfect for his
palm, all else is greed. I agree, I've asked

too much when I've painted over
these protein accidents with Sharpie

to imagine myself a zebra, a meant-to-be
bicolor, and deserve the magic of what tattoos

my body with neon white when my lover
presses against me, unaware of my eye's

scissoring hyperbole, the lie etched
with indelible ink: this *is* difficult.

Savage Nerd Cunt

for my students at Anthony High School

I'm not *dead* as in cool, and my dead abuela let me know as much: square hips are wrong, wavy hair is neither here nor there, and the pus-full, white peaks scarring my brown skin are unlady-like. Kim *is* dead, her avispa waist moves with swing, so boys think her legging-clad butt, which must sweat like a can of coke in the summer, is just that: the last coca en el desierto. Kim calls me nerd cunt to say hi, later and bye, and though my mouth draws the "r" that starts off *ratchet* to answer back, I never can say anything, maybe because I read Sandra Cisneros for fun, and words like that sound made-up, but Mango House or not, you don't become one, finger-licking good and yellow, you aren't savage, but not rabies-like, clawing your throat out, dying of thirst, savage like street, poppin' or hot. I like nerd cunt, though, especially when grandma's panzona caution tale syruped our Sunday pancakes— "Cuídate, hijita, porque si se va, se fue"—and I knew I would not do what mamá did, becoming a mamá at 16, and cut the crusts of the virgen bread to feed boys, and never get them back. Don't get me wrong, she is as savage as they come because she's smart, and calls me "linda," and "ángel," and touches my hair as if silk bugs made it, but I wonder if she was ever nerd cunt enough to fight the tiny waists and hearts of the Kims and abuelas in her life, and become her own coca in the desert: deadly sweet and acid enough to burn through metal, but wanted by all, even sun and sand—

watch their tongues stick out.

After Her

She says write a poem about me, when I say
I can't join her and her daughter for a maize

adventure on a Sunday afternoon. *How horrible!*
I say to her half-serious request. *How horrible,*

and she laughs out the girl inside her, the one
she hides in her pockets, in the nostrils of her button

nose, which flare, as unabashed as the fight
between her beautiful breasts and the button-

down tops she wears, involuntarily: she's an art
teacher at an elementary school. The call takes

less than five seconds; she knows nothing
will pry open the door behind which I hide

my pen, and its otherworldly efforts to write,
actually, about her, since I tried to adopt her

morphing body into my olive-on-a-toothpick
teenage frame. A flat belly has never been

in me, and I didn't care about it until I saw
how her hips widened, and her chest burst

at the seams of tops that once hung lifeless
on her ribcage, and her middle, now dubbed

abdomen because, overnight, muscles became
ribbons of taut skin that I and the world wanted

to touch, as if to feel the woman below her,
and not lose a beat on a birth of a self

girls only notice in older siblings; boys
have in their genes to smell. I want to be

her: *I want to be her I want to be her I want to be her*
was the pseudo-prayer burning in my kneeling

bones, but vanity being one of the famous seven,

it's no wonder how nothing came of it: God wore
earplugs, bored angels and even my abused night
lamp used my mumbling as a lullaby. For me,
it was a lifetime ceremony of wanting all
of her in me, until I stopped, until, half-way
the *how horrible*, and after we hung up, I
knew I was still after her in that place
where dust bunnies have seeped into the wood
under my bed. That's what horrible is—to write
about you means etching my skin with a teathy-
pen for not being you: perfect, sweet hourglass.

The List

*C'mon, really, please tell me, I say.
Miss, are you ready? Here it comes.
—Students talk “ugly,” 6th period.*

Celeste is half woman, half
girl, and she doesn't like her
lips face hair eyes legs eye
brows skin nails. Christian
is half man, half boy, and he
thinks he's bony acne not
masculine enough. I am half
understanding and half wanting

to say a list of dislikes don't make
hate easy to swallow. The acid churns
in your gut, and there's nothing
buttery about it: words are just sour
milk until they reach out through
your navel, thumbs first, hands
second, until their elbows pass
your belly, feel for a heart, press

your breastbone. Until it cracks. Words
you'd never say to anyone else—
disgusting motherfucking pig—worm
deeper into the muscle, make a home,
claiming to be hip mood-changing
enamel on the steel nails of words: whole,
they're the only living thing that is
whole. Don't let paper fool you, it

howls, just like your torso does.

Bad Words

“¿Elena, tú crees que me quepan las bubis en este vestido?”
[No response; Elena is out of earshot]
“*What* did you say?”
“What?”
“You said *bubis*”
“¿Y?”
“Mama, you said a bad word!”
[Boy in cart covers his mouth]

My ear is out of ear-
shot, perhaps less than
Elena’s, but I heard nothing

like fuck you, chinga
tu madre, mother
fucker, hijo

de tu puta madre; saw
no one wearing sailor
stripes since sailors

are supposedly artist
cussers. Her breasts
could spill out

the dress she wants
to wear to the beach,
but there’s no insult

in their size, as there is
no insult in mine, small
as they are, fighting

the tireless fight
against glossy tear-
drop shaped ones

in girls, 15, made
to look 35. Her breasts,
though, unlike mine,

and the muscle pumping
red beneath,

detected nothing

but a toddler's non-
sense coming between
her and her blessed

shopping spree
at Fallas Paredes.
It's not a bad word,

mijo, es mi cuerpo.
Nada más, she brushed
him off, just like that.

I wish I had her whip-
like, silver, mother,
cut-it-out tongue

to see the bad,
to hear the bad,
to uproot it like

weed from grass,
no paper or shear
cuts; nada menos,

and nothing like
“son: chinga tu madre,
fuck—now, that's bad.”

Mr. S

David: I guess there's limits to what money can buy.

John: Not many.

Diana: Well, some things aren't for sale.

John: Such as?

Diana: Well, you can't buy people.

John: That's naïve, Diana. I buy people every day.

—Indecent Proposal, 1993.

He sprinkled drops
of saliva on her ear-

drum with Paris
tales—I can imagine

*you walking, beautiful
Mexican girl, Eiffel*

*tower erect, doused
in Chanel: I'll buy you*

*everything you
want— She wants*

to say no without
saying no: her parents

own a coffee shop
inside his glass sky-

scraper, her
wallet is full

of quarters
to pay the meter,

because of him (parking down-
town El Paso is a nightmare,

trolley lanes being built
to erase Segundo Barrio)

—in a way, *all* is because
of him: is that how power

feels? Her upper lip
shakes when she smiles

to his *I was never here*
(smirk) before running

as fast as his arthritis
lets him, as rancid

as the cologne of white
hair and sweat pinching

her neck. He will get
another latte before

adding Champ-Élysées,
el Puente Libre, a stroll

in a Maserati on Sunset
Drive to the offer,

where perhaps less
saliva, steady

breathing, might
prevent a heart

attack. After these bodies
of land, asphalt —could he buy her

Ciudad Juárez too?

Daddy, Look at Me

*These legs and breasts, uneven
with goosebumps, are only*

for your eyes: This was her
caption, the one she meant

to text, not imply, when a boy-
friend sent her skin, spreading

and winged through, to the green
fields of her dad's cyberspace.

Subject: *Happy Birthday, Daddy!*
The hands of the subject, liver

spots and knuckle hair on, opened
his gift—bile rushed out, mustard-

yellow, landing on the keyboard,
and freezing the image of limbs

and a torso he had seen fully
naked when a pair of hips spilled

her out, and when she had her bum
cleaned, kicking legs with rolls

like the Pillsbury boy. She looked
so beautiful, her head honeyed and bald,

what hurt could possibly come to her?
She was so little, berry-like—so

his— the subject forgot about want
and what men do when bodies travel

in pixels and land in their laps when
they are lovelorn, boiling, and no caution

or caption can object to the ticklish
heat in their fingers, hearts: Send To All.

From Jack with Love

Unlike a traditional escort service, I was surprised to find such an educated, smart population —"Jack," on "Seeking Arrangement: College Students using 'Sugar Daddies' To Pay Off Loan Debt," by Amanda Fairbanks, The Huffington Post online.

Jack calls himself a humanitarian because he helps college-educated women with their "good debt"—debt accrued due to law school, medical school, and that hearty American hunger

for the proverbial low-carb, low-fat, high-protein, have-it-all-be-it-all, twenty-first-century holy grail, because, hey, that's what you need to keep it fresh. Fresh enough for Jack, who only sugars

25-year-old birds because it's an "expensive job"—one buys it because he's in the Diamond Club (\$2400/month) of Brandon Wey's wet MIT dream, though he goes by Wade

now, because it's snappy names that pull girls like Tracy, who got \$350 after a swim and sex; Jennifer, who says she's a trusted confidant, and Suzanne, who

kisses her diploma with an open mouth. But *who* is Jack? His name on his Platinum American Express is a white tongue-twister so 'Jack' is strong and sweet enough to capture

his "white hair and bushy eyebrows...red, flushed face" that break the mirror of the Jack from decades earlier: Italian-shirt-and-stud-ripping

pectorals and wrists paying brown hands to whip egg whites and black coffee for her, the morning after last night, when he saved her from a sour Happy

Hour, where she bared her bills, so, the halo around Jack's face is the never-seen embers of a true hero—*not* a humanitarian—as he rubs

his mound of green flesh carefully against her frog-like thighs, choking his high pressure: she leaves after 30 minutes (thank god), because she's too much

like his pigtailed grandkid, who wants to be a movie star

An Education

after Christine Reade, main character of “The Girlfriend Experience”

Doe-eyed,
 small-nosed, perky
breasted: she is a girlfriend,
a daughter on her belly,
 on mute-white sheets, 1000-
count threads, looking at her lover
with nothing
 in there, or inside her
chest pelvis. For her, sex is
what I can't say it is: loose
 change, in a wallet
someone forgot on purpose, on
a bench, with photographs of love
 faces inside. Her experience
is an education for me—body
detached from beats, unapologetic
for being cold complicated,
 but is she?
After Halston one-shouldered her
in tight blue, and she paid up
her student debt, she loses it: breath,
 ice-like stare, that neat chignon
on her doll-like head,
 but is she
lost? In the end, she chooses
 escorting over law, and her boss,
mildly interesting blonde, is fired
 up and out of the law firm
when a video she made, has him
grabbing her, asking her
 to stop her crazy
 girl brain:
Doe-eyed, small,
in a non-small way, she wins,
and finds, always
 in her fingers, a good end.

Sugar Babies

Her adventures in 'sugaring' started three years ago when she got hit on by an older guy and rebuffed him, saying, 'Look, I'm not interested, so unless you're offering to pay my student loans,' and he said, 'Well...?' After that, 'he paid for stuff. He helped me out with my living expenses.'

— *Vanity Fair*, "The Young and the Rentless," August 2016

Just look at her, trained to look
like talk like
this so the big fat ugly old young cats like
her enough to pay for her
unparalleled

shaved legs and crotch. But look at you,
pressed
under the sweat of a champagne caviar belly
burning smooth like plastic: so shiny,
so new—

cha-ching, cha-ching

is vulgar onomatopoeia
to some people/poets/people, but the register
and lottery coins

ain't drowning you
gold

perhaps is hope that twinkles in the eye, loosening
your tight ass, because

the double X
made you rubber-like, because you were just

born—

She confesses she isn't physically attracted to any of these men, but what I'm looking for in this transaction is not sexual satisfaction. Do you like everyone at your job? But you still work with them, right? That how it is with sex work--it's a job. I get paid for it. I do it for the money.

Haven't you Haven't we
Done it
all?

Dream Oven

Use your soul to have at ‘em brown
spots, spilled yolk
and cereal (your mom said so¹)
and please, put some elbow grease into grease, melt
it out, but don’t forget to cover your hands in Playtex,
your new best friend,
(Abram Nathaniel Spanel²
says so)

Who cares if kneeling marks
your already knobby knees? Your husband
took to you like that. Who cares if bending makes
cramps worse? Your husband—this is the bacon
he wants; pop a Midol, eat half a saltine. Done.
This is the oven of your dreams,
la crème-de-la-crème, the who’s who you need
to cheat out perfect Mary Callender’s
pies (Jeffrey Dallas Warne³
says so).

Fantastic tidbit—Playtex also makes Gentle Glide, so
stop it with the baby pads, you’re a woman, girl: pain
is dull; the party’s inside the burning metal mouth
that was never cleaned

by blind girls, by generic
brand cleaners, by previous
wives who gave two peanuts
about spic-n-span
lives (*we*⁴ say so).

Stop: Stop: Stop. Doin’ a little cleanin’ never killed
any gal. Sniff it out, roll out some Puffs
(David S. Taylor⁵
says so).

Say it with me, girl: *This* is your dream.

¹Life CEO.

²Playtex CEO.

³Mary Callender’s CEO

⁴*The* CEOs.

⁵Procter & Gamble’s CEO.

She Must've

My wife is so, so smart she hasn't learned how to do creases right on my pants.

—My father, early 1980s.

We are standing outside, nighttime,
under the streetlight, close
to the porch of her house, talking

about the men in our life. She had
her hair done earlier, her silver
tough to tame, extra brown

hair coloring staining her
forehead. She speaks with her hands,
and those doe eyes of hers—

how much I've written
about them, yet there's much
I haven't been able to see,

to understand. She must've
been once like me, a newlywed, in love
with thinking of new ways

to arrange the bedroom
furniture, the salt and pepper
on the Formica counter, in love

even with the faulty
washer that made the floor
shake. Like me, she must've tested it

so often, even if it meant
fishing socks out of the dead
rinse cycle, turning her fingertips

into raisins after she finished
wringing them out one by one.
And like me, she must've felt

the tingle on the nape
of her head when her husband's hand
touched her thigh to say

*you're beautiful, I'm sorry
for not doing the dishes, I will
try to drink less coffee, eat*

*two eggs for breakfast, honey,
it's been one whole day since we had sex.
"She must've" is my creed because*

I want to believe she was, at least,
once in love with love, just
like she talks about my sister

and the men she loves
like faulty holograms. But this
is her present now—her waist

burns from the uneven
weight her flat feet put
on her hips; her back has hunch-

backed a little from doing
numbers for her and my dad's
restaurant, and from telling me,

since I was young, while crying,
her body concave
at the center, like being sucked

from her gut, that she stayed,
she stayed, she stayed
because of us. The kitchen

was often our confessional,
and late night, our time, because
her husband went to bed

by 8, every night. Tonight,
however, we are called outside
perhaps by the moon, to do crazy

things like have babies before full
term, turn into werewolves,
or dismantle the man

of her life, fiercely, and the gavel's
fall is absolute —*this is*

what Carlos told his friends

about me, can you believe that?

And I can't; Carlos is the other
half of my cells, and I've loved

him since he lifted me, without
effort, and told me, without words,
he was absolutely mine.

But, this is my mother's time,
the moonlight her spotlight,
and she must've been dying

to tell me about his remark, waiting
for me to maybe love him
a little less, or love and live

with another man
to understand. But I can't, I
can't unlove him or him,

my husband, (he's my body's
instinct), no matter the fear
of having to tell my daughter,

moons from now, fingers
almost twisting
to make a point, almost cracking

from too much Tide, and the lack
of other fingers interlocking with mine;
that I pray nightly to whatever

in the skies for her to hear
me, for her to know I must've, I must've, I
must've, I was happy once.

And how the possibility
would excite me, her body
so young, yet so in tune with mine (I

made her, she's mine) until I heard,
like I've always had, her heart
breaking quietly for my heart, and had

to stop. The moon's rage is covered
by uninteresting clouds, and we both
know it's time she rest, and I

drive back: my husband's chest,
the moles on his neck, are still soft
with love, and I *must* kiss them goodnight.

Monster

This is about you, India, woman that walks
behind a man who I can only call by his
last name. Remember that doctor, walking
on your dried country land, a landlord,
the highest caste in your casteless ladder,
telling stories about pregnancy and his love
for a certain kind of country dahl? I remember,
or maybe I dreamt about the band playing
all night before the wedding he invited us to,
my hands in henna, painted by the bride,
and the all-American Amanda who took it all
so well: the spice, the restrooms, the compulsory
squat, and my Mexican non-chola looks. We
both waltzed to the dangles encircling
your wrists, the Bollywood breaking
the small van's speakers at 10 am; we
both knelt to your taste, Amanda turning
green, and I yellow: too much cumin,
mustard seed or chili. But we kept it up,
ten pounds heavier and lighter in the month
we stayed there, until we heard about
the monsters—women who killed
by scalpel or bread scraps, apparently fanged
and easily spotted. It broke our ear-
drums, when we met one, while the doctor
explained what the needle did, what
the vacuum slurped; and the monster,
oddly small, enamel chipped against
the bed rail, her soon-to-be-hollow
belly, roared due to the crunching
of pelvis muscle. All for naught. Judging
the brown-eyed monster afterwards, felt
wrong while Amanda and I took in the Chai's
warmth as answer for *all we thought, all we
thought* we could fix in you, but we lost
all thought as the days went by, and monsters
and the living, beautiful fruit of their scalloped,
swollen belies (I imagine that's what monster
have) played, cooked, carried on. So, India,
this is for you—my dumb heart, at the mercy
of your monster-hood: (please)

Eat it. Throw it. Feed your child.

Mothers and Daughters and Sisters

I.

The house is full of fight—
the mother wants daughter one
to want to stay home, daughter two

wants the mother to want
her to be gone. And maybe
she should: the sink is piled high

with runny eggs and salsa
in small bowls; the liver-n-pea
Gerber cracked dry on small spoons;

the Rx to cure blues, suicide
ideation wrecking havoc, breaking
the might of the faux granite island.

II.

Daughter 1

And what if I wanted to sleep
with him after having known him
a couple months?

Mother

I did not raise her to sleep
with anyone after knowing them
a couple of months.

Daughter 2

And what if I wanted to leave
medicine after having said I
wanted it since I was a kid?

Mother

I did not raise her to leave
things she said she wanted
since she was a kid.

III.

My sister has paid rent half
of her adult life. I've paid no
care to pay anything:

—it's just a temporary 180, man—

I went from cutting skin
and learning that fat covered
the heart, to cutting fat

from words to make them fit
the poem, and strip the unfit
image from the layer of dandruff

and howling stress puts
on my scalp, and those unholy
temples. Watch me lose it: mind,

weight and pen over nothing
that pays the bills. My sister,
she's paid rent half her adult life

—it's just a temporary 180, man—.

IV.

The house is fighting
for new fights, loves, maybe
even a child. We found

it too fast, but the realtor
said to get our foot in
the door, make an offer,

touch the grass we
would water, the bleach
that would fill the pool, wash

out its blue tile. But I found
the master room too small,
the carpet a drag to pull

out, and the small closet
something close to sin.

He found, he says, the house

version of me. The house
fights my frown: it doesn't
know who's moving in.

Wicked

With fatal, fatal love a girlhood goes.
—Louise Imogen Guiney

She said *you're like a girl* to a boy
who bugged her, but I was too far

from the action; I sit at the back
of the computer room, less privy

to action than teachers and other
tutors in this high school. My voice cut

through—*What's wrong with being
a girl?* Response: none from the girl,

a general *oooh* from the first row
that heard me. Girlhood, as I knew it,

was all about good— teeth, digestion,
skin, grades, and later, breasts (mind you,

I had none till I was eighteen). *Good
girl*, title prized golden after folding

napkins like almost swans, and sipping
coke with my upper lip inside the bottle,

not out, like men do. My grandpa
taught me that, on an August day, sweat

on his forehead, appalled by the enveloping
of my lips around the Coca Cola

green glass, but also amused by the ways
of the twiggy granddaughter he nicknamed

“prieta” to mean tan, or brown (depends
on who you ask). *Derecha como la flecha*,

he recited to me another day, to mean
my back should be an arrow

when sitting down to avoid
the back of the chair, even if it was

a barstool. My grandma's lessons were less
direct; she lived by my grandpa's firsts—dishes,

coffee, sopa—differently, but exactly, all
the time, as if to say girls can eat lukewarm

sopa, men can't. He died slowly, his prostate
growing cells like the cauliflower

he hated in his stews; his toothpick-thin
index finger as straight when I hunched

in one of the chairs that surrounded
his deathbed. My grandma didn't cry—

She let his broth grow grease spots;
his bones were chalk by then, fightless.

II.

*Me dijo que tenía una hebra colgando del vestido—me preguntó que si no sentía el hilo.
Revise el dobladillo, no había tal—No, me dijo, hablo de tus piernas.*

—My mom on her mother-in-law's joke
about her having threads for legs
just after having miscarried a second time.

III.

*Me dijo que tenía una hebra colgando del vestido—me preguntó que si no sentía el hilo.
Revise el dobladillo, no había tal—No, me dijo, hablo de tus piernas.*

—Me on my grandma's joke
about my having threads for legs
just after waltzing in the living room wearing shorts.

IV.

She's a wicked, wicked woman, Sarah said after I told her about my grandma's joke about my
and my mother's legs in her library-turned-dining room in New Hampshire. But that's all she's
ever known, she added. Sarah, 75, travels internationally at least thrice per year, and she lived in
Africa for some time. She was also a financial analyst who majored in Home Ec while in college.
Can you believe it, she asks. No, I say. People wouldn't think I got anything from it, but it got me
that first GE gig. She says she wanted to be a nurse, but her mother's friend laughed when she said

it out loud during a dinner party. I wish you were my grandma, I said. Why? she asked. She's curious like that. It's love for a woman who isn't mine in blood; it's a blunt wish to be like you. Just like you, I said, looking at her. Then the table. Then the window. ("Silence is cold" in New Hampshire breaks metaphors because silence *is* cold). But I'm wicked too, you know? Sarah finally said. I could only wonder what she meant, but I remember feeling wicked myself the moment I turned on my grandmother, and liked as much as hated the feeling of denying her. All of her, in a way—even if she never knew. I'm a wicked, wicked woman too, I said. Sarah didn't elaborate on her wickedness; she just handed me a pint of Cookies n Crème ice cream. Apparently, you beat cold with cold.

V.

If being a girl is cussing only
when you're alone, driving,

trapped in traffic, under El Paso's
sun, then I'm a girl. If girlhood

is drawn by the shape
of our mouths against other

bodies of glass: liquid: flesh:
then I've done it right—

I neither slurp, nor lick,
my lip quivers with something

close to anger, but not quite,
when girls thinks being a girl

is an annoying poke
on their ribs, the taking

of their pen, the interruption
of their math, or just a train

of thought so precious, they
feel like calling a boy a girl.

Or when girls hurt girls, hearts
wrinkled by every girl—

mother sisters aunts girl-
friends best friends grand-

mothers—who told them to kill

compliments if not earned,

to covet others' legs or ass,
if yours were crucified

by hands that should've held
you strong, beautiful: *Grandma*,

*I'm sorry no one told you were,
because you are beautiful.*

But they are not alone—
a girl is a girl is a girl,

it's others, your grand/
father/mother that flip the page

of the dictionary where the word
is found. Definition—the one

they want. God saves us girls, pray
their soups do not get cold,

pray we don't tear each
other apart, nails filed and sinking,

just like when I grab the wheel, *damn*
traffic, sweat holding my hands.

Forever Fonda

Jane Fonda
Forever:
Activist, Sex
Symbol, Legend
—W Magazine; May 19, 2015.

You had to see the curve of her
breast, and her face had to be

iced. After her name, a word—
forever—and then four more, “sex”

cutting the dry description so
your time reading her was justified.

Look! A bleeding heart: unwed
teenage mothers her cause

(always her cause!)—that must be
why she’s a diamond, not a live

fossil, hips round at 79. Enough
is never enough, so you ask her

about the work she has done
to her cheeks, her lips, and you

wonder *what* else (is it a pact
with the devil or are scalpels

that good?). “Is that really
what you want to talk about?”

she replies. She becomes anger,
she becomes a ruler: measured

geometry in her chin, not one
inch off-camera, and a 90

degree between her back
and the scratchy, navy sofa

you’ve put her in. But you had
to know, didn’t you? Old

skin is lovely as long as
it's on an aging Han Solo,

wrinkles cutting his forehead, smirk,
all-knowing, because he was born

certain, because he's human, he's
lived, and he's also forever, no

subtitles needed: the papyrus
that hangs from his neck is proof

enough. Not her—your hands
had to take your faithless

eraser and take her away: smile,
crow's feet and frown (especially

frown!) and the regal, ever-
fighting muscles that hold her head.

All that erasure, and yet, you had
to see her still woman, sporting

feathers that cost more
than your lens, and a cinching

metal belt around a tiny waist
clad in white, because white

on white says fresh, and truth-
fully, even though a shimmering, low

cleavage would suit her, you
just had to make it clear she could

be your grandmother, and sex—act
and thought— can't be tied to Jane.

The Fight

They said Ruby hit the girl out
of nowhere, they say Ruby's mom
is to blame: she records her

fighting other girls, encourages
her to pull their hair until
it's left their heads— see the drop

of blood running down
their foreheads. But I say nothing,
girlhood could just be a story

women tell girls without
saying a word, where girls
fight clean, that means, inside

their heads. Then, Ruby's mom might
be onto something, because Ruby
is anything but not brave—

*(she sneaks out after school,
the old windowsill the only hand
that stops her, to work at Dollar*

*Tree to get the hell out, away,
from her mother: she's started
to bring men home to teach*

*her how to fight half-naked,
ungloved, like street boxers
do, knuckle deep, but her leg*

*work needs work; she jumps,
instead of pacing back and forth
from her ankles to toes,*

*ankles to toes: one of these days,
she will get that right, one
of these days nothing will stop her).*

They said Ruby hit the boy out
of her fight, they say the teachers
didn't know how to stop her,

how to react: would Ruby hit
them next? But I saw nothing,
when the word *fight* came

from the hall, I wanted to believe
girlhood wouldn't touch me,
so I froze, waiting for Ruby to knock

me awake, though my eye fights
the image of Ruby: red hair flying,
a girl's body running down the hall.

Cooking

It doesn't happen as often as men
would think: women huddled around

any kind of table or corner to gossip
about the many ways boyfriends,

husbands, partners don't pull
their weight in the kitchen: he

doesn't wash fish dishes with vinegar
and baking soda, he doesn't scrub

the spaces between the fork's
teeth right, he can even find his way

to the salt, if it's not with a flash-
light. We laugh, and then, this:

*The first dish I cooked was chile colorado; my husband ate it, and smiled. I
ate it, and felt the devil-red sauce, meat coating my tongue the same way babies
must feel about cardboard baby mush. But you wouldn't know about that, would you?*

she points to an older woman,
spooning her fideos, slurping quietly,

*Maybe, who knows? But I do remember this: my husband loves tortillas de harina,
so I made them for him. The rolling pin was old, I was new at it. The tortillas were born
bad, square-like, and that's when he said: ¡Ay, miya, le faltó azúcar a estos buñuelos!*

The noodles are crunched
by her molars now, all finesse

forgotten before our teeth
unmake him—let's see him

“cook” Campbell's, cereal,
his hands, on that alien

thing they call stove, one
would think it'd bite

his hand off. And the roasting
goes on, with tales of fuming

caldos, because caldos are
supposed to scorch your tongue,

of spiceless caldos because
he can read the caldos's

mind, and no tasting is required
if you stare hard at the bowl,

and you're careful of the vapors
zinging your eyeballs. The competition

had many runner ups until someone
said she was also guilty of telling her mom

what her cooking always missed: flavor,
texture, pasión. It was a thing in her family.

¡Te pasas! we managed to say to hide
our own fingers toying the blessed

Mexican attempt at hummus, and the raw
chicken á-la French we poked with our knives

before saying everything with our gone-
cold meat, *Shouldn't you be good at this?*

Not all of us are, but it's clear
what we excel at, often: cooking

each other, high heat, cheap tongs,
picking at our flesh, like meat on ribs.

But the fideo woman comes
to redeem us with the dish

best served cold, as much as he
will ask us to ramp up the wattage

on that damn microwave, didn't
he pay good buck for a GE?

Did you know what I did since then? I never cooked tortillas or buñuelos again. Not in 35 years.

Goddess

On April 10th, 2017 Dr. Stella Nyanzi faced charges of cyber harassment and offensive communication for calling Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni "a pair of buttocks" and for stripping away the title "Mama" from his wife, Janet, after she failed to deliver on her campaign promise to provide free sanitary pads to impoverished young girls across the country. Dr. Ngozi also made headlines by undressing as a protest for being locked out of her office in the Makerere Institute of Social Research, headed by Mahmood Mumdani, due to due to a supposed failure to teach in the PhD program.

What pushes our bodies over-
board is not what pushes
Stella: the black brassiere

coming off violent, romance-
less, her breasts: imperfect,
ample charcoal pointing

at us—her office was locked
for two days, and on the third,
her skin resurrected:

the orange top was too
heavy on her lungs, so "Mamdani
is not a god" gnawed her

throat, the baring of Museveni,
his buttocks reduced to a pair,
was harsh in her unmanicured

hands, but it's no surprise. Goddesses
in black are not, goddesses don't
strip unless their necks are broken-

down, their dark legs asked
to spread all over the canvas
of choice, rubber-like, as long

as they don't overshadow the who's-
holding-the-brush-pen-key-who. Stella
will claw out their eyes, though,

spit their word on their faces,
because she *will* deliver
pads to the skinny-legged

girl walking miles
to school; she *will*
have her office

unlocked: promises
in blood become blood
promises, and they're thicker

than paint—all those whites:
ivory, egg, bone—Mama
Janet, and she *will* make

the buttons fly to give
flesh to slogans on fear-
free rag days, so shame-

ful red leaking red
won't show in the cheeks
of that girl, that girl

and that other one. Stella's
goddess is that push
back, areolas one

with air, shoulders
round, though the fences
in front of her office

that frame her body, tell us
that freedom of body
tastes metallic; freedom

from the one that touches
our chin to get it right,
(not so high, please!)

is staining, hot,
but Stella reminds us
we can undress hard.

Skinny

Less of me means
a loss of fat, space—your concern

for a widening belly
or the bump of sales

of stretchy pants
is the snip snip

you use to cut
my umbilical cord

from my mother, Earth,
an extra spoonful of—your fingers

pinching the chocolate
muffin top, my orange-

ass, dimpled by
your poking, measure

something like
my worth

in inches, in gold,
in pounds, in times

I've pinched myself,
and prayed for your pair

of scissors—your coldness
to my blood, the slab

of meat I've cut
from my arms, from

my thighs to get
the famous gap

to fit into terribly made
Gaps, is no surprise.

Less of me means

your big, your craving

for peanut butter
and jelly in the middle

of the night
is A-OK—your OK

is, you think,
what I need

to expand when seeds
snatch my inverted

pear, but not
when the fridge

calls, mysterious,
to fill my shelves

with pizza, ice
cream, and the sour

wine, Skinny
Girl brand, I love

to hate, (where's
the sweet kick?)

Less of me is a restraint—
simple, economic

four-letter word,
but c'mon, you try

now, to disappear:
gut gurgling raw.

Light

There's light in Jyoti's
end, her feet, and I
don't say this lightly—

she crossed one
of many busy New Delhi
streets, its cars, the Honk

OK Please, murderous
with speed, uninjured; she
ate spicy dumplings,

in that corner place,
and didn't spill out
her soul down the toilet,

like Amanda, and I
later did, the airport fluorescent
stall light, the only disgusted

witness; she wore sleeves
in a hundred degrees of Indian
sun, and walked without

hips praising the bone
elastic of her curved joints
(how the pelvis sings

when able to walk
like it wants, naturally),
calling to herself anything

but attention, perhaps
only betrayed by the pep
of her mind, which was, sources

say, in love with physical
therapy, and late nights fueled
by Chai-tea eye openers brought

by her mom. But she couldn't
pick another bus, another
stop, another month—December 2012,

unremarkable as it is— to shake
me awake after Amanda and I
crossed one of those raging

streets, barely with our lives,
giggling when the Indian
feat of our lives was success-

ful: We hadn't been killed
by the cars; in fact,
they stopped in the middle

of the street when they saw
our nervous, foreign
feet grasp the hot cement

for encouragement (we
had to get our dumplings,
no matter what). Why, then,

are Jyoti's feet full
of light, if there wasn't light
at the end of that tunnel

of a bus that carried
her body bloody
to a place that had to sing

when she arrived?
I can't say I know; truth
is, I only felt the callus

of her soles guide
our step when Amanda and I,
children, by all accounts,

decided we knew better
than anyone how we
should spend our blessed

time in India—don't tell
us what to do, we know how
to cross a street, call

a cab, stop a bus

to let our bodies enter
safety, and carry on

to whatever destination
we want. Jyoti, the light
you shone on my proud,

slightly less girly chin
still blinds me after
the fact, but always, since

the life on your feet,
one last twitching big
toe gave out, purposeful:

Alleys, poorly lit
or bright study halls, lonely
or busy nights, vehicles,

public or private,
with smiling or fussy
drivers, known, rich or unreadable

countries are no safe places
for us. *We know*
that now, and it's hard,

but it's harder to see
Jyoti's light, and other
lights, spilling like fire-

works against dead,
tall walls, reach
and save only some,

a handful (of us): women,
vigilant of even life-
less, faulty streetlights.

A Day in the Life

One—*Mister, Sir, Doctor, Dean, Chair, First-Name-Basis* guy.

Two—I *was thinking that, I wonder if, I've been doing research and,*

Three—(Apparently) Strike a Wonder Woman pose, legs open in an inverted V,
hands in hips, chin tall, and you'll get what you want:

the raise, the OK, the rising
of your 80s shoulder pads
that you borrowed from mom—

you think of her, then,
her mushroom-like curly
do, and all the purple eye-

shadow; she looked older
than what she was, which is
what you are now—Superwoman

in-the-making, pancaking
your face, spraying down
your waves (straight hair

is more professional), painting
over lips, eyelids, black
circles—all in all, a glamorous

raccoon mutt; you don't hiss,
and you certainly don't
scare anyone (except

when ironing
your hair played second
to sleep). *Bitch,*

she's a bitch—you
haven't decided if it's good
or bad being an animal

in heat because you
yelled a bit, or put out
Charlie from accounting

when you said *you*
messed up, Charlie,

get it together, man.

Strike the pose now:
air feels good in caged
crotches (all that leg-

crossing to sit right),
hands lose the wire
bones from silent

fisting under
the desk, explaining
your crooked jaw

and the monthly
expense of dental guards
when Johnny says

*it was my idea,
it just came to me,
it was magic, really*

to the boss, and
what was the idea?
Ask Lovelace, not Deep

Throat, but Ada,
her lace-gloved fingers
(that's how I like to think

of her hands) on would-be
computers, who *luckily*
didn't go into poetry,

(her mother said).
Ask Knight, Margaret
about the paper

machine she fought
for with teeth—
she's the reason Charlie's

Sloppy Joe only
half-soils his desk.
Ask yourself,

ask her, bitch
about it, walk
tall, no spread-leg

pose required, complain
hard and loud—mouse
women are Mighty

Mice in disguise,
Batman without pouty
Bruce, even Catwoman

without the garbage-
bag tight ass
leotard, and the insane

love for cats--*Bitch,*
you better stop, my pussy-
cat is better than you—

is that you calling, super
woman? Your shoulder
pads almost heaving

in synch with your
chest, the make-up
fading, giving way to real

skin (those girlish
freckles you *have* to
hide), the wonder

of anger in you,
how it can be a beautiful
thing—Save it

for Charlie, he's stealing
your Post-Its, pizzaz
and eye since

you started here
(hospital office
school classroom)—

Get on him, get
on them—*Strike a pose*,
Madonna recommends.

Bride

from "Too Young to Wed" by Stephanie Sinclair

Anita is red—lips, dress, middle
part, hair clips, cheeks:

she's getting married, and she
looks calm, almost too old, behind

the yellow fence that frames
her for schoolgirls to look at,

gossip, and maybe fear.
They, like you, paint her

a woman; they, unlike you,
don't know the difference.

Anita's steel turns to runny
gold, as the thread of her

cries for *mama, come*,
unweave the fabric

of a girl-turned-woman
overnight. Her heart

is not that of a girl anymore,
but the heart of the necessary

mule, a man in blue, is
of a boy's, when he carries

her on his back, on her way
to her intended. There,

a woman, stale-bread
hearted, from starving

and losing hers too soon,
her face baked by the sun,

and who knows what else,
calls Anita out on her weak

opera: *Now, why are you crying
so much? Are you doing something*

that no one else has done?
You want to answer for Anita,

but how? She grows older
by the second, slow yet chummy

due to the cymbals, drums
and food around, so she says

nothing as the muscles
of the mule-boy put her

in a sort of throne made up
of cocooned sheets, handles,

and an umbrella, that will
take her to sheets she

hasn't smelled before. Anita,
she's the bride you never want

to imagine: the baby fat
around her is still warm.

Breast Anatomy

Feel the breast, its tree-
like glands, always waiting
to feed, to be full: buttons

and fabric hurt in puberty,
and those sports bras
you wanted act like

elastic hands, fingers
spreading out, keeping
a small pain close

to your heart. You *know*
tissue is for drying, not
for balling up, and hiding

behind your blouse, your chest
sweating bullets, but these balls
will become friends with the sore

nipple, as unknown
boys and man will gawk
and wonder if they're real,

if they could cop a feel
to prove themselves right.
(men, you're told, *know*

breasts—flapjacks, melons,
and tennis balls; no wonder bras
are always the wrong size).

In adulthood, the yo-yo
of your BMI feeds the yellow
crown of fat that surrounds

those all-too-eager glands,
which hurt your back, your
pride, *exhausted*, from swelling

up and down: gravity is master-
less, heavy, how you wish Newton's
apple didn't fall, just like the yo-yo

which does come back up, after
rolling down: strapless everything
holds on to more than flat skin;

flower patterns bloom, stretch
out, plaid slants some, and buttons,
the poor bastards, wave

a white flag: Do you
remember their projectile
flight when they lost

the fight? In motherhood, sacs
grow, and a mouth, wet
with instinct, sucks on

casein, calcium, colostrum;
words that means zilch
to it as its sweet belch

powders your nose. Your
purpose: open the flow
to the hose in your chest

spilling white, wetting
everything from silk to rags,
and everyone, staring

at the pink, half
nipple sun rising
out from your mommy

bra: *There's places*
for breast-feeding,
ma'am. Now the prunes,

because if you're old, prunes
must resemble whatever
it's under those loose

tops you've been hinted
to wear by your best
friend, the squeal

in her voice, as she says
He-llo to your tatas,
you know, the lolas,

the girls, huh? But you've
always hated that, breasts
being called girls,

because you're not
a girl, and thank God
for that, because finally

everything feels a bit
better, whether or not that mole
on your left breast became

a skin tag, and tweezing
the hair from your areolas
doesn't mortify you

that much, heck,
you might consider
stopping, throwing

away every instrument,
ointment, exfoliator, even
that expensive rubber band

that bruised your eye,
but that gave a millimeter
lift to your décolletage.

Feel the breast now, milk
ducts closed for business,
fat in peace with the tree

of your life: it's rough
to be the sum of two pieces
of flesh, but the pair's due

a good name, and *you*
will pen it: you don't have
to cop a feel—they're real.

Curves

"Girl," comments Adwoa Aboah, eyeing her [Ashley Graham] up, "only you can make Spanx look hot." —Vogue, "The Great Beauty Shake Up," March 2017

Watch her grab the other model's
waist without trust, and the black
turtle neck that shrinks them,

thins her out. Less space is better
for covers, and the beach
that holds their minimal

weight made enough because
of her. Watch yourself watch
her and wonder if she is fat

although she looks just like
you: hourglass shape, plus-
size, curvy, curvaceous—

What does a curve
have to do with you,
and her, and her, and her?

The concave and convex
of a woman's body
bristle with words;

the pimples in cheeks
and ass, too easy for no-
body to erase, the blood

that must clot against
cotton too stubborn to
hide a smell that is iron-

like, almost too strong—
Watch me write about mens-
truation after looking

at Ashley Graham, she pulls
off a body we've worn only
to ourselves, at night

with no flashes of light
or eyes; a body that beats, frees
our waists, narrow and wide.

Ugly

Ugly is what ugly does, I imagine Forrest Gump explaining
that to the boy who called me ugly, after tapping
my shoulder, while I waited for my mother
in the mall. Sure, I was
a sitting target—a gray jumper, navy knee-
length sock, light mustache and limbs like sticks—
but I wonder if forgetting his Ninja
Turtle prize after he ate his Happy
Meal or missing his mother's Christmas kiss last year
made him see me. I'm also curious whether or not
he wore a wife beater, or if I made it up. In the end,
it's about what got broken: his heart
and his clavicle before that, I've heard splinters
can make their way south, deflating all lub-
dub, leaving a hole that not even
dirt can fill.

Ripe

I'm *ripping* even though it's not a word,
and the girl who looks at the grotesque

tampon in the pink, fun wrapping is *ripping*
too: Tell him about the dark blood

blotting even through denim, the glue
of the wings (but wings as arms on Always

hugging the crotch of panties) getting stuck
on the hairs you're supposed to rip

off with scalding amber, strips
of paper with yet *more* glue, or his

razor (the three-blade, blue handle
stabilizer, and extra moisturizer makes

legs beg to be ripped too). That's mechanics,
though, now tell him about the pool (bright

red only in theory), that haunts your being
asked to stand up, to dance, to lie down,

to sit; about the splotch of thick crimson
that surprises you when the moon, dead-

lines made you rip the calendar apart, Post-Its
flying, and there it went: the visit from Florence,

the aunt (but Florence for Flo, close cousin
to flow; it can be heavy or light). The hard

part is next, though, and you'll rip him
one too: his mother was a girl once, ripe

at age 9, and he could've joined the two
thousand or so funerals of ripped walls

of her uterus no one attended, or offered
to clean up, but her. Don't tell him to use

his imagination: he's a tale of blood,

and that Kotex aisle that makes him

blush is part of him too. *Riping*
is more uncomfortable, but this is life

stewing—clotted, and swirling Kool Aid—
making or flushing down the porcelain.

Hoe

*I don't choose I replace
you the hoe in this case
I'm stacking this money
believe you played yourself, honey.
—J, English 1st period*

I chose hoe, it makes
sense in my ear—

what's right about
writing that bad

girl good, anyways?
Do you want

me to go for ho,
instead? Look, a hoe

fits, you're a tool
for lit guys, you dig

dicks, at them,
dirt itching your

teeth like a flesh-
eating plant, you

know, eating flies
and whatnot. Ho,

miss pushes, spell
it ho if you're going

for it. I like whore
better, Destiny says,

and so it goes,
young and old

chicks, telling me
about her, writing

me because they (always)
know better. So:

Hoe, hoe, ho,
ho, whore, (bitch)

ho, I'm supposed
to be heartless,

feel good, slap
that other guy's ass

when he scores
a field goal; fly

inside her dead
mouth, wings

like papery
gum; she did

give it good, though
I've only dreamt

about it: navel, ass,
all of her red

hair loving
me, *my* dick,

not hoeing around.
No matter, I'm loaded

now—don't ask
how. I'm money,

can't you smell
it? I have Jordan's,

an iPhone 8, lost
puppy eyes girls

die for, I have
Beats, and a real

beat (actually)—
can't you feel it?

Forget the hoe,
honey, just come

back to my lyrics
back to me (please?).

First Kiss

Maybe you would expect it of him, flexing
his overgrown pectorals at 18, telling

a captive female audience about the kiss
he thought would be the best “first”

for the girl he calls “amor de su vida.”
It’s inevitable—we all weigh in,

young and not-so-young, on the mis-
deed: la amor had told him what she

wanted at 16. Instead, Fernando went full-
on creep, said Lesly, his best friend:

“This is how it went, Ms. N: he blind-
folded her, I mean, he got his friend

to cover her eyes in the library, a public
space! and went for it, while an iPhone

recorded *all* of it.” Fernando protested:
“going for it” was a small peck, nothing

else, and he just read her wrong. Question,
I said, before we killed him, Olympic-

style, all scores below 5, how could you misread
her if she told you what she wanted? Fernando’s

perpetually smiling mouth closed
some, “I dunno, but I wrote her

a 6-page letter saying I was sorry, saying
how much I love her.” Ay Fernandito, I replied,

men complain women never tell
them what they want. She did--

“¡Miss, no sea así! ¡Ya está como todas!
Pero sé que me quiere, lo veo en sus ojos.

¿Qué estamos haciendo pues?” Five

months had passed by after the first
kiss, and la amor had closed off.
“Ms. N, it makes sense to me,” Lesly
backlashed, “He made it *his* thing. *Also*,
he told her that she had to know he
loved her because he had a *hot* waiting
list.” Fernando laughs, dismissing all
of us: we are messed up, we know
nothing about grand gestures, we forgive
as much as quarterbacks forgive lazy
running backs. He wrote a long, love
scroll, how doesn’t *that* count for anything?
Lesly and other girls continued to squash
his romantic attempts to “peck” her,
and I realized one thing as Fernando fought
off the female guillotine with flexing
pectorals, making some laugh, and others
give him the gag sign: He might never
tell us anything anymore, and this *is*
tragic—How many times can you count,
with one hand, how many boys told you
anything about their boy-hearts, even
if it’s about an ill-fated plan? But pectorals
killed my nostalgia because he says
he’s not making them flex anymore,
just like nervous eye twitches. Are you
alright? I ask. Fernando stares at us, my eyes
on his left arm, maybe he self-induced a heart
attack. “No, miss. Es mi corazón: rotísimo!”
For the first time, for a minute, we believe
him until the bell rings, and leaves, half-smiling.

Bruise Kiss

In pole fitness, you get bruises—known among practitioners as “pole kisses”—as a result of limb misdirection or fast, uncontrolled spinning around the pole, thus marking areas of the body such as inner thighs, calves, wrists, hips, and feet.

When I sit on the toilet, my thighs,
purple and mold-green, file against

each other, mercilessly. My neck hairs
rise, dandelion-like, aware of *her* thighs:

pale, front-page, on the *PM*, yellow
newspaper, swollen by the headline,

“Matan a chavita y la tiran desnuda,”
and the price of 5 pesos, sold by tan guys

in neon vests on the avenue after crossing
the Puente Libre; on the newsstand at Circle K,

close to *Vanidades*, the chips and cacahuates.
Her pixelated skull makes her body her

face, so if you know her, you better
know her by heart, after all: panza llena,

corazón contento. This is the first picture todos
vemos de ella: her belly down, trasero al aire,

palms open and up against rocks and desert
weeds. I’d grabbed the paper by the ear, inked

my fingers, but I couldn’t buy it—only store
her in my cell phone where still, breathless

she waited for me—to remember her body
in my own skin: *they’re not bruises, they’re pole*

kisses, the instructor’s T-shirt says. My armpit
hugs the pole, the gap between my thigh fills

with metal as I lift my body upside down
and I hold a crucifix for ten seconds, unshaven

hairs pulled to the tune *they’re not bruises, they’re*

pole's kiss, they're bruises, they're kiss-- Bloody

hell, bloody— My thighs burn
when I stand from the toilet; I wince

when I put arnica on, but I'll live.
These bruises, their impermanence

marked by a purple-turned-brown,
could be close to kisses in the grand

scheme of her—how she laid there, toditita,
for everyone to see, her lips and nose

a palimpsest of her face. "Fists erased it,"
the *PM* said. Her pain must've done something

other than cuss, bruise, kiss; her limbs
must've twisted, hit the pole with light speed, bent

on holding the dirt with her toes, rosary-like,
below her: Dios Madre Dios Madre Hormiga

Errante tickling my hand: *These aren't bruises. These*
aren't bruises. These aren't bruises. These—

Baby Doll

from "Too Young to Wed" by Stephanie Sinclair

I.

This is how it goes: Girl begot human doll,
but Sulmi always begot Bieber fever

first, just look at her oversized cotton
top with the IheartJB against her own

heart, just look at Justin's once baby
face hanging loose because the belly

is nine months wide, and if a hand or leg,
Sulmi is told, sticks out, it is a warning

sign: go to the hospital, run, but kill
the fire, or you'll burn down your child-

hood home where Justin's "Baby, Baby,
Oh" was stopped by a begetting knock.

II.

Giovanni, 26, saw Sandra, 13, shopping
for tomatoes, corn, or that morning's
pastry whim. She lifted the powder
sugar with the tip of her tongue, like
a telenovela star. So, Giovanni asked
his parents to talk to her parents,
and she was given to him. No receipt,
or sales tax. A year and some
months later, Sandra's bony shoulders
sport pink spaghetti straps (not enough
sugar to bake or lick), her breasts
shinning from fullness, her son,
still an infant, testing the black
strands on her tired head. She says
that if she has a daughter, she will
send her to school to do better
than her. Giovanni, wearing a Pacman
T-shirt that says *Let the Games
Begin*, looks away, but he gives her

the benefit of the doubt, so he will
forbid the hypothetical daughter
in Sandra's oven to shop on weekends,
and make pastry and boys a sugary
mess in her naïve telenovela mouth.

III.

Babies don't know better: breasts
are for suckling, and this girl's
breast, pulled from her small chest,

will give in. Babies don't learn
what they should: mosquito bites
feed them, bloody milk or not,

and the girl's face is a puzzle
that could be solved by almost
anyone: she wished for big breasts

once, she touched the sore tissue,
and though she felt a spark
of sex, she knew nothing about it

yet: her sex was pink and peach-
like, her small hips thought watermelon-
sized heads opening them was a myth,

but out they go: babies should know
better than to open a cleft too soft
even for long bike rides, yes, babies

should know—girls dream of baby
dolls with dry breasts—but they play
dumb, touching their nose with toes.

IV.

Almost invariably, almost plastic, babies are covered by thin blankets, a tube inserted through their
nose; their legs, like meatless chicken wings, could be broken in two by any two-year old.

Beauty

On April 28th, 2017, as part of the promotion of the renowned Magnum Photograph Awards, LensCulture published a photograph taken by Souvid Datta featuring a fully identifiable young girl having sex with a man in the red light district of Sonagachi, India.

Just for \$60, you enter the contest,
a story to be photo-
graphed by anyone—naked
torso, brown small hands,
and they say, her eye away from the eye
of Datta, whose yellow plight
for girls like her, married at 12, seems
to need a mute historian, a lazy
hand. She's called "Beauty"
now—then 16—as much as beauty is
a tale of faces of color turning
away distressed as much as
beauty is white, with teeth like a horse,
never spreading images of their knees
hugging hips that dug a hole
in "Beauty," who has been holed away
ever since she was promised
a menial job by a "vast, wiry-haired,
wild-eyed woman." Menial, like:
Cashier Concierge Crossing Guard Sex
worker; menial—like the redaction of the face
name of a child, like the dent
the camera could've made on the head
of a man that huffed and puffed, huffed
and puffed, blowing old
breath on her cheeks and young
mouth, until her house was blown away.

Shh

If it's legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut the whole thing down.

—Senator Todd Adkin, 2012.

I.

Carlos, a gynecologist, said
women's thighs couldn't be pried

open, if they didn't want
to. He said this, purple

tie and fine slacks on,
the hand of his partner, a man,

on his shoulder. I tried
to assess this fact, my own

thighs strong as fingers
forced open by my 4-year-old

niece, when I held up
my palm to say "stop."

He said that's how doctors
knew women faked it—thighs

are infallible story-
tellers—he said before I

could tell my niece story,
and how she laughed, merciless

at my lack of strength,
and authority

over digits, over her
wild pulling of Barbie's

head when we were
supposed to play nice: Ken,

newly acquired, less
buff than mine, would marry

“Mommy,” a popular name
for all her dolls, after

going for ice-cream,
and buying a pretty dress.

I’m a doctor, so I would know,
he said, putting a blunt

stop to the echoing laughter
of my niece in my head,

as she mocked my hand’s
call for “Stop! It really hurts

her.” Carlos, I said,
I only played doctor

for a year, and did pap
smears, unfortunately

for those ladies, and not
once did I feel anything

but fear, even as I out-
lined the procedure

in plan English, and assured
them all would be well,

their heads peeking over
the fallen hammock of fabric

between their legs, and scoot-
down behinds—*Sure, thank you,*

sounds great, let’s get it
over with. Carlos, in tune

with the softer (or
so he thought) half

of his nature, knew
better than to expand

the lecture, than to say
anything to a woman, that

though out of medicine,
and perhaps never really in,

knew what thighs really
felt like, absolutely

strong, yet pried
open by any instrument,

flesh or metal, wood
or plastic, that absolutely

wants in, whether or not she
holds her hand up (*stop*).

II.

When she told me, I couldn't believe it. I hadn't been raped myself, so until then, I realized one couldn't even imagine the taste of rape until you were, in fact, raped. Not eye-raped by the screen, intent on showing the sweaty legs of victims, and their almost-always pretty faces. I don't know what to say, I said, but I'm glad I didn't say anything about *Law and Order: SVU* (which I frequently confuse with SUV, damn it) when describing the goosebumps I get when I hear what I think is the gavel's fall, *tun-tun*, on deaf cement when they show the address of a victim, the court, or a greasy spot in New York Olivia visits to conduct her investigation. I understand, she said, but *we* exist. I won't lie, maybe she didn't highlight the word 'we,' but that's how the separate membership, as arbitrary as choosing to let *that* apple rot in your fridge and not *that one*, made me feel. I feel, I don't know what to feel, I said, and she patted my back. There's nothing to say, she said. I couldn't understand that—Olivia always had something to say to the victims, especially because she was an almost-rape victim herself when she went undercover in a prison, *especially* because she was the product of a rape, so she had a sweet spot for female victims—I think she saw the sad eyes and curling chin of her mother on them. Theories aside, something grand, deep, wise, tearful, burning had to be said, right? The only thing that burnt though were our ears, with what the teapot, and the water, poor thing, hollering for us to kill the heat. We did, and the evening continued unremarkably, except for the sniff I stole from her hair: she still only smelled like patchouli, not wounded bird. I can't lie—months went before the clickety clack of Olivia's modest heels, her most telling weapon against New York perpetrators of heinous crimes, and her grave-but-not-too-grave-for-viewers voice, my and my mother's lullaby on insomniac nights, became unbearable. It seems something grand, deep, wise, tearful, burning is always being said by fictitious people, or by people who call other's bodies their bodies as pink, private and raw as they are. I am neither, rape naïveté ripped like a scab, so when another friend revealed herself to be a member of the *we* club I listened hard to her body. No gavel made a sound.

Cut

I.

Google Search: Female Genital Mutilation

New York Times (7 articles remaining)

"Michigan Doctor is Accused of Genital Cutting of 2 Girls"

"Father Imprisoned for Genital Cutting is Deported to Ethiopia"

"It's Genital Genocide"

Comments:

FGM is a horrible practice, but comparing it to genocide is to minimize the unique horror of the systematic murder of millions of people in an attempt to eradicate an entire ethnic group. There have been other genocide besides the Holocaust, but FGM is not one of them. Pick another word.

"Mike," from Texas.

Notes: Genital Genocide, alliteration. Question mark.

II.

The trip to Michigan, the sky-blue hooded
woman doctor—all of it, just a tummy ache,

a germ battle, not a nightmare. *Girl, calm
down!* But their little hands, their heat

imprinting on a car window, moving landscape,
saying goodbye to *something* is what gets me.

I'm whole in between my legs, too whole,
I'd say, when the jungle of hair covers even

my thighs, and shorts are weak against wild
curls, but the *something* I share never goes away

because of biology, my eyes on the ceiling,
a tongue macheting off the nonstop thought

between my legs—his jaw could snap
anytime, just like that. Bone can only take

so much of me and the soft speculum his nose
becomes as I will the loud second to come

with a hard belly, a strange pain that is
no pain, and ridiculous decibels like bells

of a church whose holy hour is hourless.
So there it is, the something I grieve for

as the girls go back to their classroom,
learn about birds and bees, and wait

for their mamas to tell them about woman-
hood. Their eyes and the ceiling will

not meet, just a wall, maybe, where red
graffiti about their bean, button, boy

in the hood, skittle or pearl has been
macheteyed into and out their mama's wild.

III.

You went in, your short white coat announcing your medical student status, and pretended a woman's naked middle was nothing new. You're a woman yourself, and you were taught how to handle a speculum, plastic or metal, and rotate it as you go into the vaginal canal, taking care of not pinching labia minora or pubic hair in the process, until you see the pink doughnut, ready to be swept for a cervical cell sample. But sweat, and a slight pulsation in your ears, interfered with your wrists, and you pinched the patient. Her ouch is soft, and after you added "ma'am" to the apology, she said, "It's alright, sweetie, that's how you learn, right?" But you didn't learn, at least, not there and then. You pinched the patient a second time.

IV.

clitoris (n.)

The anatomist Mateo Renaldo Colombo (1516-1559), professor at Padua, claimed to have discovered it. He called it *amor Veneris, vel dulcedo*, "the love or sweetness of Venus." It had been known earlier to women.

Online Etymology Dictionary

V.

The tale of oh, god's, sweat
 in the small of your back,
 and a smile in your eye
is in that little pink face,
 our smallest one,
 hidden by hair,
and a mound of skin, erect
when its sung to by tongues

willing
to sing just
because it lost the hide-and-seek
game of our underwear and our thighs,
Crazy-Glued by our mothers'
penny dare, (*how* the breeze felt
holy). But the tale is mis-
understood sometimes by dumb fingers, deserving
of paper cuts for turning
pages, briskly, with their pens
or pointy hangnails that erase all sense
in those oh, god's
you think you heard
your mother make, alone, at night,
but maybe you dreamt it because pillow-
trapped cries followed *Oh, God*
where were you! which makes you wonder
if she's not alone, and God *is* there, cutting
all her will to paint
some red in her cheeks,
which she sucked—a guillotine could've
sliced the air in two—when you asked
about the button in your crotch
that felt strange to press when you were
just a girl. *It's nothing, nothing*, she slapped
any questions from you
since then, but press on, if it's still there,
read hard, learn the tale,
fight for it, if it's been cut
from the protagonist role because it was
too hard to play princess.

VI.

G alliteration aside, no matter how slow or fast you drown the light of a candle, the light will still go out. Genital Genocide does cut it, Mike.

The Cosmic Millimeter

for P, a real princess

My dad holds my hand, my eyes like pewter reflected on the eyes
of a guppy, and the glass of a pet shop, where a man stares back—
I turn around, he does not move or blush, his long, dark-haired

gaze says something between *what?* and *aren't you pretty?*
aren't you sharp? but I knew he lied: he didn't know my pretty
sister or seen the bronze stars on my math journal. Confusion:

this is how it starts for some of us, because beauty goes
from a princess admired from far away to being yanked,
like her: eyes so green, a face so round, they had to be tasted

by a man who hugged so hard her hymen broke, who said without
music: “pull your pants down, Chilean princesita, show papi
that bald bud.” Confusion again: her pubis was not a pubis

because there was still no want, just watch the male everything
my niece says looks like “Eric, the prince” and kisses, shameless,
on the cheek, climbs his lap without a care for the protruding flesh,

with the trust you and I have lost in the space of a cosmic
millimeter, measured by an invisible, white ruler, the same
that kept that man from proving I was fair, fairest of them all,

and allowed that other man to snap her soundless in between
his hands. Clarity: in filling the blank from being complimented,
to being scarred there is no word that sticks as much as lick —

just watch the sweat pouring from Monica Belluci's upper lip,
her mouth, a waning moon begging the man to stop, to stop
her rape (our rape) of fifteen minutes on film non stop.

Cuidado, Leyla

The one-eyed lady stares
at me from her place

of power, and *her*
imagination: Beauty

is not symmetry, or thick
hair, the lady (maybe she's

a girl) has eight straw-
like strands, black

as the Sharpie I
scoff at as a girl's

drawing device: the ink
can pass on

to the wood, the paper,
or whatever suffers

the pressure of her
young hands. She

doesn't care: caution
is still a tale,

and she will draw
her Cyclops ladies

wherever she
wants. I feel

envy at this, the rough
lines of her thoughts

on *hermosura*: unkempt
brows, a soft belly

where a jumping
navel is a doorbell

to a house that is dust-

less. No one says

a word about her
body, and no/

body should,
or will, if my ears,

like knives, catch
“Leyla, you are__”

and you should be__”
She will be her-

self: an inverted u
for a nose, a wide

u for a smile, and three
eyelashes in her one-

eyed lady if that’s
what she wants. *All*

while keeping
in mind to keep both

of her lovely brown
eyes, and the hyper-

pink hue of her heart;
all while I try to stop

saying: *cuidado*
Leyla—cuidado

when she draws,
when she breathes,

when the lace
of her girlhood

is unraveled, muddied
for the first time.

Lupita

Her wrinkles are not maps
of her—how do you write
Lupita's life just like that?
She says she looked after
her parents since she was
young, that's why out of 72,
she only got two years
of school, a lifetime
of work in gas plants,
or schools like this one,
cleaning the mess of girls
like me whose work is
on paper, and paper-like,
compared to Lupita's
evening shifts, the toll
on her hands—ammonia
seeps into the vein tree,
and it laughs, victorious,
at latex, almost zinged
after eight-hours of trying.
But Lupita doesn't suffer
fools (she says her chin
has pointed more up
than down when it comes
to bosses *porque si te humillan,*
mija, han de estar muy tristes);
women who mess with married
men—cuide a su viejo, *mija,*
porque hay mujercitas malas—
or women who don't work
hard, and still complain (*para*
eso Diosito nos dio manos).
Would she speak to me
if she knew I complain,
masterfully, about the hard
work in even the softest
tasks? Think putting extra
soles in your shoes to avoid
blisters, think losing favorite
pens to students, think
brushing the temple frizzies
away (you look too unmade
for work, and God,

how you wanted to sleep
five extra minutes!)
But Lupita mustn't know
about my egg shell, easily
cracked by generic
Windex, and the vinegar
I use to wash away
lime from the double
vanity. She must never know
I know nothing about
bleach's witchcraft
on skin and glass, smiling
clean because of fire,
chemical and somehow
alive. But Lupita pays
no mind, she's worried
about the time she thinks
she's taken up from paper
Meryl: her poem stinks
of a groupie hand. I
can't say anything
to Lupita—Meryl *is*
fabulous, but where's
Lupita's limelight, dressing
room, the cult
followers, the platform
to speak about the woes
of women and the world?
Absent too are flashes
from cameras to light
her way when she stepped
in casual streetwear and slip-
free Sketchers at midnight
to get her brother insulin.
And the Oscars! Where's
the damn Dolce dress she
must wear to get her fifth one?
She plays a devoted woman
to perfection because she's
devotion—to her *papis*,
Dios los tenga en su gloria,
su hermano, que se junta
con mujercitas malas, but,
never *her*: hands, curved
back, and those eyes
in glasses, gold rimmed,

looking at you perfect,
because surely you must
be. *Esto es suyo, hija,*
todo suyo. Cuídelo, she
recommends, pointing
to forgotten Meryl
with her gloved hand.
Will you dare tell
Lupita about the women
you've decided to write
of and about? Lupita suffers
no fools; it's a waste
of her precious time.

Girl Out

The Blue Sky Laundromat welcomes
you with soccer on a flat screen
that flickers and a Dexter industrial

washer free to do your comforter:
the wet sheet origami, folded over
and over again in cycles. It grips

you. “Billie Jean” interrupts
the trance, and the culprit
laughs—a girl holds a tablet

like a boom box, and her head bobs
while some sort of bow shakes on top.
You want to shh the girl, but a stink eye

does the job: She walks away
for a minute, then comes back, flips
a laundry basket upside down and sits

in front of you, in between the latch
of your Dexter’s and her mom’s. “Señorita,
I feel for you,” comes out smooth,

and your feet release a spastic, beat-
less tap you didn’t plan —the girl stands
up and dances like nobody and everyone

is watching, a mint green fabric flower,
not a bow, blooming out of her high
bun, while her legs, in light-blue flannel

tights, and her hips, in a skirt with black
and white polka dots, fight the hum
of the washing machines: her scolding

becomes yours—the girl has been kicked
out of you so often, she hasn’t come back
to laugh at your stink eye, until now.

Rhapsody

Even holding a mirror
to it is a balancing

act: thighs, taut or Jell-
O, have to hold

the shaking,
and the neck

is nothing like
Twizzlers, even

when the subject
is captured: it

doesn't crack
a show of teeth,

a Mona Lisa
smirk, Picasso's

pursed lips, bull-
red, blowfish: off-

track, Pablo, *so* off-
track. Still, see

it to know it,
they say, who-

ever you want
they to be,

but the show mostly
ends in glass shards

over the cherry
wood floor your lover

installed, scratching
it: *Gasp. Waaaa?*

Ugh: Reactions

reflect your fingers'

dexterity, your OB/
GYN's tact, gender—

*(why do gloved women
open it the hardest,*

sometimes?) Coming
is juggling: watch

how the ceiling spits
the Walmart/life

list: yogurt, for
healthy pH, Snuggle

to get rid of pills
on socks, Q-tips,

batteries, Post-Its,
your partner's

nasty Berry or Peanut
Butter Cap n' Crunch,

*(s/he never brings real
berries or peanut butter),*

clean the cobwebs
from the yoga mat

under the bed, sleep
the required 8, email

boss, student, mother,
father, swallow horse

pills to justify Hair-
Skin-Nails non-GMO,

organic, salt
of the earth \$30

brand, and slow
down on coffee

(the shrink said
he didn't drink

any, though *he*
never told you why).

Gasp, indeed. *Then*—
after ticking boxes,

inking your head
with mental notes—

maybe, a throat-
less noggin' shines

through: a tongue,
a penis, silicon, finger

is there! Around, in,
or close enough to

it, so something
they call a spot

blisters your gut,
and all thought of Germ-

Ex wipes to wipe
the Walmart cart

fly away,
fearless

against wobbly
mirrors, unfinished

lives. Simple,
yes? I think

not, but who am I
to tell you how business

is—should—be
down where Queen's

anyway the wind blows
makes most sense.

Special

“Es que miss, I’m not sure I should ask or tell you,” Ingrid says.

“I’m not sure either, but tell me,” I say.

—A common exchange on Tuesdays and Thursdays, after the bell rings.

The *miss* separates us, and this bothers
you, I’m a *missus* now (why won’t I

change my last name?), and sex should be
life for me, in the sense that washing boxers,

along with socks, and trying recipes
for chicken where chicken won’t taste

like chicken, have joined the other bees
in my head. “Sex is everything and nothing,”

I want to quote a smart lady to stop
the talk, and have *you* tell me

if going for a Brazilian instead of a bikini
wax will make things easier for you the first

time: it weighs heavier than you
thought, especially when I

is involved, and even though you’re too
young for that or other first times, (lips

like fish, and not really deft at saliva
exchange, or the eyes-closed etiquette you

have to see if you’re hitting the mark!), I
say that *the first time should be with someone*

special, and when you scoff, because
“special” is the Facebook equivalent

of “like,” I consider saying this: I
waited, one year shy of 25, and I

bawled. My body was only used
to the self-imposed chastity calzón

that itched no worse than cheap
leggings and swim bottoms. He

waited after I raised my hand, stopping
his palm from finding my body: bundled

in a white bathrobe, watered-down
red on my index finger, nostalgic

of the iron I had kept to myself all
this time. *I would never do that, pee*

comes from there ¡guácala! the girl
on my temples pounded, but she was

open to forgiveness soon, as the jazz
he played to set the department-store

mood he thought would de-cocoon
me to tell him, maybe, that there was

some greatness in what we did: Love,
sharing sweat at the groin, and that fart

sound it made when it traveled
to our bellies, which made us laugh

in the middle of *stop, stop, is it in yet,*
is it in yet, and the thought of painting

a red Rothko on the sheets, the industrial
amounts of peroxide to wash it out.

At this point, you'd ask about
the pain, and I'd say *Ouch*

is relative, and if you measure pain
with blood, some women bleed

like horses, some women break
the red levee when riding horses,

and some others, just pattern
the crisp cotton with polka dots.

But “special” is still on your head,
and I’d say special tasted like the eggs

and Harvest Grain ‘n Nut from iHOP
he went to get that night; his offer

of the Styrofoam box delicate,
avoiding the screech of plastic

against my hands, while sitting
as far as he considered close

enough, until he touched my pinky
finger, the digit that felt most sex-

less as the night aged, and I came
back to a 25 I knew nothing of,

and how we tried to sleep, we were
both exhausted—*Miss, where are you?*

brings me back where you’re still
waiting for me to define “special”

What was special about yours, miss?
I rest my head on my chin because I

think two years later— always a miss, and a missus,
(if that calms you down), in a house with walls

that laugh at the sock mystery (where do they
go to?), and envy our never-perfect sex—I think

I know something about *it. Everything, I guess,*
I say; your eyes unquenched by the lack of details,

but special is what you think special
is. In my case (should I tell her all

of it?), *it was the eggs, in yours*
it might be a hairless pubis against

his. Pubis? you scrunch your nose. *Es que miss,*
you see? I’m not sure I should’ve asked at all.

Boy

This is for you, wearing an earring, hair slicked
back, and that pout that doesn't give a hint

of what your pupils spit at: phantom
mustache, small muscles and that stubborn

cheek acne that you know takes her eye
away from you, and to him: tall, handling balls

like he did braids in elementary school
—hard, brilliantly—but it turned her neck

around, right? Maybe that's why your mm-
hmm's sound deeper these days, when I ask

are you alright? I've seen her cuddling
his biceps like the puppies he's made her

believe he saves from being put down,
though you know his time away from soccer,

baseball, or whatever sport he plays now,
is spent getting lit with that other girl he

passes on the hallway like he does a fly.
Is that it? I know nothing about being

a boy, and I've tried to ask you about it
since I caught you staring at her, your acne

suddenly cleared, something resembling teeth
between your mouth (because smiling wide

is for losers), before she touched the nape
of his head, secretly, while the Biology

teacher turned her back to write "Cell
Theory" with chalk, and he didn't feel it,

you're sure, because he didn't break
out into dance, did 50 push-ups, or look

at her, at least. *Am I close?* I'm dying

to teach you more than why theories

can be erased with evidence, and kill
my theory of you: strong, quiet, emotional

only about his mother or dog, seeing girls
like her only in terms of how big her chest

and hips are now that she's grown into herself,
braids giving way to loose hair, *boys have*

cooties t-shirts to short-shorts. Boy, please
add an "I" to your mm-hmm this once.

The Kinder Second

My dad hated that Vogue cover
because she spooked him: raw egg white

skin, lonely eyes, and a crown of pink
roses on her head. Who else had frightened

him, those dawns, laying inert on
the bathroom counter, looking, however

distantly, at him?—My father's body
is a strange map, left unread by anyone

in years. Behind closed doors, I bet not
even the steam that wets his calves,

which are my calves too, has figured
his north or south. Then again, a daily rise

at 3:45am, and a cadaveric blonde
cherub would spook anyone,

but he must be strong for us—
(mother sister niece and I), the girl

squad, who cook, draw, fight,
read, breathe, move, are better

than him, and we will let him know
as much because it's the natural

law. Proof is in the forgotten soy
or almond milk, and the midnight

garbanzo and greek yogurt snack—
Why do you hate me, daddy?

I toy around when I find all or half
amiss. I now realize, after thirty

years, with no boys around to play
ball or come to him for Hungry Jack

dinners and not the Kotex Overnight

With Wings on his Walmart list,
that he must hate us for a split second,
every day, just to keep his wits

about him, but I'm relieved he loses
mind and body the other second, the kinder

one, when his head touches the pillow
at 8pm. Shhh, is heard in unison, when

the youngest addition, a curly girl riding
her green skates on the hall, screeches in joy

or pain—*Papa is asleep, and we must
remember to turn the Vogue cover on its head.*

Her

after my mother's pozole, after I mm-hmm when she talks about Josesito, her high school crush

You can see under her skirt, as she falls down the rabbit's hole; she couldn't grab onto the hands of clocks, or the leg of a chair, or even the tail of the rabbit that led her there, but it wore a bowtie, it smelled like watered grass, and it was never late for any date, it treated her like a diamond carrot—you just can't find one, and if you do, you keep it to crush,

shine or show off. You can see through her, enough to write her story, fill the blanks: black or white rabbit, she followed it down, right? Wake up, neither she [insert her name, one you think you know] nor you are Alice, and you haven't looked beyond her calves covered by white knee-high socks, a blue A-line dress, an apron—I dare you to learn what makes her a body

of unseen falls, her [insert her name, *her*,
the one you think you know] eye-
less face—cheeks hollowed by the speed
of air—a triangle of breasts and hair.

after she waves goodnight, in the middle of her dark street—the rearview mirror suddenly not enough—I know she's love—Dios, Ganesha, gallito Kellogg's: dejámela cien años más.

Vita

Alessandra Narváez-Varela holds an MFA in Creative Writing, a B.A. in Creative Writing, and a B.S. in Biology from the University of Texas at El Paso, where she worked as a creative writing instructor for undergraduate students from 2015-2016. She has also worked as an English and Biology high school tutor in Anthony, Texas since 2014. Her work has been published in *Acentos Review*, *Razor Literary Magazine*, *Duende* and *Huizache*. She may be contacted at alessandra.narvaez@gmail.com.