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IF MY MOTHER WERE A POET

If my mother were a poet, she'd say things like: "Let the sea run its promise" and "We made love in fragment sounds and movements" and "The world, life, is an open space that people fill." And she'd scream them out from an open window at the people below, blinking through the sunshine, and that's how everyone would know it was morning.

She would value artifacts from the past, like love, even though they'd make her feel less safe, knowing that we carry these into public spaces.

She'd once told me how she was tired of men, weary of their dreaming. "I wasn't meant to live in a world where women spend all their days at home in their curlers and bathrobes," she said. "Painted toenails hiding in their slippers, while smoking cigarettes and waiting. Waiting for their men to get home so that we can fix them their drink and hand them their paper and massage their feet as they read, all the while not looking at us or saying a thing until they felt like they're ready to. I wasn't made out of convenience for convenience. I was made to live! *That's* what I want to tell them. I was meant to live, you motherfucker!" Only she never did.

Later that night she slapped the shit out of me for asking her to leave my father for good. It was during another of those periods where they seemed to fight every day, always behind a closed bedroom door, their arguments growing more and more painful. I learned that, for them, a bedroom was nothing more than a storage space for marriage and other hoaxes.

If my mother were a poet, she would've labeled it such: a white sheet of paper taped to the door reading *Marriage & Other Hoaxes Found Inside. Enter At Your Own Risk*, a room where they rumbled like street gangs, making my heart ache for the city outside, making me run for that neon bridge over the Miami River. Waves jiggling up from that dark water, and people, strange people, crying out, "Look at that boy! That limping boy!"

That was how they taught me that marriages exist at the edge of ravines, a parody of "Home."

She asked me not to tell anyone about my father's "Cancer of the Fist" (her nickname for why he'd hit her). She pulled the car over on the side of the

highway, then asked me to get out and play lookout while she pissed on the grass, acting as if she were committing a crime, as if her crouching down over the grass was the same as a car parked illegally. That was the moment when she asked me not to tell anyone, while taking her piss, and I remember looking up at that cloudless sky with that unprotective heaven, then pursing my lips together before answering, underneath the sound of passing cars, "I won't tell anyone."

I guess that makes me a liar now.

As a kid, I hated my hands because they were my mother's hands. A spitting image. I'd confessed this to her once while we were alone. She sat there patiently and listened. Then she grabbed my hands and examined them like some gypsy palm reader before letting them go. Then she examined her own. And I remember that Wonderbread smile, just before she slapped the ever-living fuck out of me. I'm talking one of those third-world, ancestral, builders-of-ancient-civilization galletazos that leave a face like Moses coming down from the mountain. "How do you like my hands now?" she asked.

A delicate woman she was. But that was how we learned about each other: around conflict. How she chose to educate me. How her parents chose to educate her. Around flames.

When I was only five, I told my father I wanted to be the ice cream man because that was who I believed was coolest at the time, until he told me the ice cream man was a bum. So, I had to switch my dream. "We're all gods at some point," he said. "And all at the same time—when we're young. Why do you think we attribute immortality to the gods? Because when you're young, you really believe you'll live forever—just like a god."

I sometimes imagine my father (the god) shaking, after he was finished with fucking his mistress, how he'd almost cry trying to explain to her how much he *really* loved his wife and children. How he'd pull out the photograph tucked inside his wallet while riding the Metrorail at night, over that neon bridge over the Miami River, while standing in his tall, strong-looking trousers—tall as demons—in his penny loafers with no socks, and always with a black comb in his back pocket. But he never did, because that photograph never existed. It was never there. All he was ever good at was using up all the hot water when he showered, and pissing in the bathroom sink when he came home drunk, then trying to fuck my mother in the bath the following morning, only to hear her complain about how the bathroom smelled like piss.

Yeah, I remembered my father. All too well, which is unfortunate, because for children forgetfulness is an essential part of survival.

I saw my father in a kind of spiritual white, torso like bright, washed stones and me leaning into it. He saw me as his dark contradiction: the dark face of a watch he was always checking, until his last languorous day when he finally disappeared like voice particles in the air.

Here would be the lines a young boy would write at 2 a.m., in the middle of a war, while wearing his cardboard Burger King crown, if he were a poet then: "Listen to the old ruins you leave behind boil and gurgle."

Afterward, my mother would always respond, "*Lo siento*."

"*Lo siento, lo siento*," I'd say. "*Lo siento*. You say that too, too much."

"Like a footprint made of water," she'd say.

I would've left a note under the windshield wiper of her car: "I love you, even though every time I say it, or think it, or write it, it makes my insides feel like they're made out of bendy plastic."

Later on that night, she would have left under my pillow: "We are sworn enemies of the rain."

We'd become a flat surface—like water; Time falling around us, not touching us, giving us more reason to love the existence of water. And Time sees it, too. Watching us, its eyes wide, making a sound almost human, and she'd call that *Gravity*.

The day after my father left us, I watched my mother sit quietly in her bath, legs stiff like pale planks. Her knees shining wetly. Eyes squeezed shut. I could see the yellow gold of her wedding ring through the water, wet yet still yellow. I felt so little then because I was little. Little and watching. But at least she still existed there, forming a body. A living body with a living face.

If my mother were a poet then, she would've said, "All I have is what I can see," and I would've lingered until she looked at me and said, "All I have is you," only she didn't, because she wasn't a poet then. Instead, we both sat in silence, her in her tub and me on that loose toilet seat cover that would slide from side to side, both of us swollen with conversations that were never going to happen. Biting my fingernails until they were rubber like all those days, nights, hours.

If my mother were a poet then, she would've pressed her hand against the center of my chest, pressed her ear to it, and then she would've said: "That was immortality."

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“What?” I’d ask, smelling the oily scalp through her hair.

And she’d say nothing while keeping her ear to my chest. And then I’d realize that she wasn’t talking to me in that moment—she was talking to God, letting him know that immortality was a physical place, a place no one is supposed to see, only touch—feel.

“It’s okay, Ma. It’s alright,” I’d say. Because I wouldn’t know any better. Instead of asking, “Why should I be afraid? I’ve always belonged to you.”

During her final days in hospice, she mentioned someone leaving an ashtray in her room. If she were a poet, she would’ve said, “Someone left this ashtray in my room, so I’ve left it full of dreams. This will be my monument because I don’t want to die on this bed next to an empty ashtray.”

Sometimes I wonder: If I put my ear to the floor, would I hear her again? Like a passing train on a track? There has to be something more to us. Other than our bad choices.

Some of us are afraid of dying. My mother was afraid of loneliness. She called it, “The door with gloved hands.” And she really said that, my mother who was not a poet.

