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Sugar Acts

Amanda Raquel Gomez
Old Dominion University

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SUGAR ACTS

by

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M.F.A. May 2018, Old Dominion University

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT

SUGAR ACTS

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Old Dominion University, 2018
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Sugar Acts is a poetry collection which seeks to incorporate themes such as women, gender trauma, the body and its position toward and against society, identity, heritage, and colonization, topics which can be considered abstractions but have very visceral and real physical manifestations. These themes wreak havoc on the body, namely the female colonized body, and as a Puerto-Rican American woman, I am asking the question of what it means to make sense of 21st century colonialism. This thesis, then, attempts to discover the ways in which trauma resides in the body and continues to be passed on to each new generation as its own harrowing birthright.

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This thesis is dedicated to Dr. Luisa Igloria and Tim Seibles, without whom this collection would not exist.

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There are so many things that art can't do... not all wounds need healing and not all scars are ugly.

The Lonely City, Olivia Laing

In all my life I have never witnessed such misery, sickness and suffering.

Samuel Gompers, AFL-CIO President

Say it softly and it's almost like praying.

"Maria," West Side Story

FOREWORD

Boxes, Cast of Stillborn Colts and Calves: Sculpture
Nicola Constantino: 2000

after Eduardo Corral

This is how the dark sleeps under your feet:
boxes, wells, drain pipes rammed with bodies
discarded in haste. Contorted bones splayed
in a mass grave like a stalk of grape stems. Veiled
by a curtain of black sediment. Their bodies: broken
branches buried underground. Once, I tossed
an armful of sticks into the air: lightning. I thought
it was a rustled beehive. How small beasts
are angered to kill.

SECTION 1

The heart, I think, is too accustomed a word

too much emphasis on its caprice, on its doing
without expectation, its waking when the body
moves itself to surrender. I am surrendered,

but know I lack the sweetness of trust.

I have become detached from ordinary things:
a stranger's sneeze in the laundromat, an old
scarf I think I ought to wear more often;

a beetle tickling my arm. Still, I want to navigate
the fictions of loving, as if what
comes to me should be something larger
than the act of measuring it out.

Rules for Meeting a Puerto Rican

Start singing a song from West Side Story. Mention how Natalie Wood looks like an authentic boricua. Debate the age of the characters. Are they adolescents or young adults? Say it doesn't make a difference. Ignore the person if they say it does. Ignore them if they say their parents were sent to the mainland when they were only children. Make a funny joke. For instance, if the Rican hasn't seen the movie, say something like: *Wow, I would think you of all people would've seen it.* Invent a reason why you found the movie meaningful. Tell stories about your Hispanic friends. Forget the word Hispanic. Forget there was ever a Hispanic in the world. Name them: thug, criminal, gang member. And when you've done everything I've told you, because you're only trying to make them comfortable, you're just letting them know you know how to relate to them because you watched a movie about their culture, forget anything you know about their culture.

Maja

for my grandmother's perfume

carnation-soaked cloves citrus fruit
a late spring like paint by numbers
how she applied it *find your pulse*
she'd say heat sites: wrist
ears throat how pressure
activates smell scent as though
shocked the body returns
to the womb again nostalgic return
to something it can't remember
you don't want to forget sometime
other than now in the spare bedroom

When we say *bellies* we mean all of it –

cellulite, fat. When we say every new
year is *the year*

we'll finally

lose weight, what we really mean

is we're overweight

and worst of all,

some of us don't even have

a uterus anymore.

As for me, I can't say I'd be upset

if I lost mine; I might even

prefer it. Once,

at my yearly physical I asked

my doctor if a hysterectomy

was an elective procedure or if

I could be considered a uterine donor.

When he didn't laugh

I tried again: *What's the difference*

between a woman without an asshole

and a woman without a uterus?

The first one's single. The second one's

taken. I thought it was pretty clever considering

I came up with it in so little

time. I was disappointed

when all he could muster was a frown.

At the time, I didn't think I'd miss having

a uterus. I wanted to act

while I had the chance. You know

before I met some boy and changed

my mind. My friend says

I'm wired for crazy, which really

means I'm attracted to men whose lives

are broken drains; he tells me – *Slow*

down, maybe stop dating.

It's okay to stop for a while.

But I can't. Or won't. He's right. I know

not just because my therapist agrees,

but something about

the way I grew up: my mother

and I never getting along. I was always

doing something wrong or wearing

the wrong clothes. Like how she found

my first g-string while folding

my laundry. When I came home

from school she waved it in the air

and screamed: *Do you wear this in public?*

I said: *Yes, and nothing to cover it.*

What's a mother to say? Other than
*You're being a smartass. Who the fuck
do you think I am? I'm not
one of your little friends.*

The last time I wore it:
seventh grade math class. The guy behind me,
the one who used to unclasp my bra
for laughs, upgraded the day I wore
my thong, snapping it like a rubber band
over and over in class.

Why didn't you tell the teacher?

Was she angrier
about the underwear or my lack
of a spine responding to that boy?
I couldn't find the words
to tell her the teacher, Mrs. Green,
saw it and said nothing. Hurt or angry
or both, I wanted her to think
I liked it. *It's not a big deal.* Or maybe
it was: *Well at least I can wear one.*

I don't remember exactly what
was said. It's been so long.
All I know is I wanted her to think
was that her only daughter was a slut.
That my body was more attractive.
I could control it, as in
I was thin. Now, it's been years since
the fridge has been filled
with *Slimfasts* and *Nutrisystem* meals,
or since she's asked for my old dresses
that don't fit. *I'll need something to wear
when I lose weight* she used to say.

What I've learned
is maybe we're both ashamed of our bodies –
mine for what it attracts and hers
for what it repels: a daughter who's never
home, never calls. The impossibility
of having another one.

Love Poem: Seahorse

after Donika Kelly

Leafy Sea Dragon, Phycodurus eques

Nothing sticks
out like me. Broody
ventral pooch, prehensile tail.
Rarer still - my cerebral
pectoral fin. I call
myself spectral: furnished
by movement, each
protrusion a sprouting
wing. Love, if I could,
I'd release each one
for you, stem by stem -
My silenced griefs, tumbling
into the coral depths until
the ocean is heavy
with my disrobing.

Prayer

West Side Story, 1961

When Tony visits the fire escape,
 you can hear Maria's father briefly call out
Maruca, her pet name, affectionate shorthand
 for Maria or our Lady of Guadalupe
 standing with the baby Jesus on her nightstand
 or St. Maria: patron of youth, purity, and victims of rape;
 venerated for her aversion to sexual sin. Call her: virgin,
 unadulterated gem, our blessed girl. *Say it
 slowly and it's almost like praying.* Her name:
 an invocation or blessing that I am left
 with the vague interpretation nobody gives
 two shits about girls who don't act
 like they're supposed to as Tony whispers the lyric
 before reaching the alley. Which reminds me of a play
 I saw once in high school: three girls standing in a row
 with a single rose clasped in their hands
 while a man walked around glancing up and down
 their bodies. If a girl offered her flower
 he'd destroy it. Crumple and crush the petals
 with his fists before dropping them on the ground.
 Of course, the last girl didn't put out. Her reward:
 marriage. I'm sure it was meant to teach us abstinence.
 To be disaffected by hormones. I tried to wait. I did.
 But when I woke up in my boyfriend's bed and found
 an orchid in full bloom on the bed sheets
 I gave up. No one questions a man's responsibility
 in sex. After it happened, I vowed I'd take whatever I wanted
 from men, but reciprocation plays
 a fine instrument. Look at me now: empty cunt
 like a sock on the street, bastardized version
 of what *maruca* really means. A slang or ghetto Spanish
 pronunciation of *muneca* meaning wrist or doll.
 What I'd like to think an inside joke which has lost
 its punch about how we prefer delicate things. How sensuously
 the single r rolls off the tongue. How her name: Maria
 is like exhaling stars. Something
 like dusty glows prying themselves loose from candle flames.
 Like Mother Mary's aureole. The same radiant
 luminous cloud shrouding Maria. Watching her bent over,
 cradling his head, I wish to be soft as well. Sanctified enough
 for a man to look at me like this. But I'm no angel.
 I don't want to be on a pedestal by myself. I want
 to remain all dirt & filth.

Sometimes it's Necessary to Bury Sweetness

1.

We should worry Anita has a point, sharp-edged
 as the belt buckles that bruise
 her hips as the Jets tug at her waist. She says
girls here are free to have fun.
 Worry when she tells Bernardo to ease up,
 let little Maria attend the dance.
 We know what Anita's really saying is girls
 can have sex whenever
 they want. After all, what could it hurt?
She is in America now.
 And we know she's right. We should worry
 when we don't see her again
 after she's raped; worry the film is faithful
 to the narrative of brown girls.

2.

There's always this: the narrative of brown girls.
 Their bodies: bedrock too rough for men to rest
 their heads. Would you believe me if I told you I want
 nothing of comfort? Today, I am a girl the world
 forces to swallow rain. Before a date shifts the car in gear
 to drive me home, he unzips his pants. Tells me
 the least I can offer him is a hand job. Instead, I do
 what he doesn't ask, I put him in my mouth.
 I thought I had to get home. It sounds crazy now,
 but I didn't know I had an option. After I finish
 he takes a pen from his center console. Writes *IOU*
 on my left arm. Kindness is a luxury. Once a woman is assaulted
 chances of it happening again are higher.

3.

The chances of it happening again are higher
 especially considering the fact that at least one in three Latinas
 experiences sexual violence. Just look at my family. I'm 26
 when my mother finally tells me she was molested. I'm 26
 when I finally tell her I was molested. *Your grandmother too*
 my mother adds later in the conversation. Little histories
 we've buried from each other. When I unearth them,
 a beehive blooms from the dirt like a flower. I eat
 a spoonful of its nectar. I call out for someone to share it with
 but no one answers. Don't tell me destruction
 is beautiful like that. Grandmother, mother, daughter fragments
 of each other, fragments of our bodies.

I ask her what would've happened if we ever talked about it, but really,
it doesn't matter. *I can't tell you* mama answers.

4.

I can tell you one thing, mama says
during the bridal shop scene in *West Side Story* just before
the dance, in the original script Anita tells
Maria: *With those boys you can start in dancing and end up
kneeling*. Some say it's all about marriage:
kneeling before the altar knocked up, but mama disagrees.
She tells me: *they're not talking about praying*
even though Anita says this in the movie. No, it's sex.
Once, when I was younger I remember
a friend's advice on how to give better head: *it's all about
eye contact* she said. Not just submission,
but the act of relishing it. Maybe Auden was right – *The terminal
point of addiction is damnation* and I was a girl
burning in a fire of my body's making.

5.

I was a girl burning in a fire of my body's making. I'm afraid
that all I know is how to talk about loss.
For instance, some studies state Latinas are more at risk for eating
disorders. Mostly if they're 2nd generation.
For me, I was eight. On vacation, I told my parents I liked
to throw up. Then, at sixteen a cousin pinched
my arm fat and said: *This needs to be gone next time you visit*,
so I decided to stop eating so much.
When he saw me, a friend's dad praised my success: *See,
sometimes all you need is to close your mouth*.
At the time, I weighed twenty pounds less than now. I am a mirror
of everything I don't want, an entrance
for others' desires. In a dream, I am a python bathing in a swamp.
In a dream, there is no Eden, no Eve.

6.

I mistook a swamp for Eden. There is no Eve. Only a dream
where my stomach is a clump of worms nesting
in the ground. I make my bed on snakeskins and scorpion hooks:
cathedral of the misinterpreted. I wake
in a mango grove where the fruit is pallid and bruised,
shaken in the wind like trout fish writhing
on the end of a lure. The gauze of their scales wrapping
my limbs. I'm close to desiring darkness.
I'm a coward; a massacre of wanting. Every word
I speak is a woman on the roadside lifting her dress.
An act in obtaining permission. This language
does not belong in my mouth. I am a skeleton
of honey. Yes, sometimes, it's necessary to bury sweetness.

7.

Sometimes it's necessary to bury sweetness.
 To mistake your lover's skin for a salt mine. Once
 a Vietnam veteran told me: *You could always tell
 the soldiers who just came in from their marches. Their pants
 speckled with white patches.* Salt gems
 from the sweat gathered in the folds of their clothing. We're standing
 on the stairs leading to his basement. The walls:
 draped in memory. *This is one of the rare occasions he's talked
 about what happened,* his wife tells us as he sheds
 his silence the way a rattler removes its skin. All that is bitter:
 a watermark, a hymn of rain. Maybe this is why
 when I imagine an alternative ending for Anita, I see her
 leaping across a horizon of fire escapes. Her body
 a forked tongue rising like a canary remembering song.

8.

Like a forked tongue rising as a canary remembering song
 I am not real. I am imagined. There is no such thing
 as alternative endings, so forgive me if I don't believe it
 when I attempt to rewrite Anita's ending.
 I don't have time for false hope. My body is physical. Steeped
 in constructed histories. If I am erased
 I will be the one to do it. I will erase Anita too. And I will follow
 the Western scripts. I will play the sextpot, the Latin
 lover. I'll wear my accent thick as a fur cloak around my throat.
 I'll come close to strangling myself
 but not before you laugh. I promise I can make that happen.
 And when I'm done playing maid
 or bank robber, you'll call me beautiful or tragic,
 you won't see the sharp-edged shiv in my hand.

Exposure

To celebrate Broadway's revival of West Side Story, photographer Mark Seliger recreated key scenes from the film

In one frame, J.Lo embodies Anita, all defiance and charm at once. What Rita later called the role —

conchita-lolita: generic ethnic like some clownish version of Carmen Miranda dressed up as Miss Chiquita.

In a pop culture countdown, she was named fourteen for best snack mascots of all time, aka

“The first lady of fruit,” a breakthrough in a mascot world dominated by men. About forty years from her inception,

the fruit morphed into a woman. Something about bananas with legs just never sat right, and of course that whole bit

practicing putting on a condom with a banana. White folks just weren't ready to see a male fruit. Sure, it was an accident —

but somehow that metamorphosis came off racial. Like when men tell me *latinas got ass* after we've just had sex.

Erasure

Whatever I felt, I'm not sure. For weeks, we talked about when it would happen. Except, that night we never discussed it.

I blacked out on his bed after throwing up. Everything else: a blur. After that, I couldn't do it with him unless I was drunk.

Something about him made me sick. Perhaps, he felt it too. Or it was the guilt. Every time he finished, he rolled over in bed

while I clung to the mattress' opposite edge. Apologizing for the space I took up. Most nights, I searched the cupboards

for anything - whiskey, beer, the last gulp of our mouth rinse. Anything to knock me out. To feel less repulsed in my skin.

Months ago, I drove around the city high and drunk hoping I'd be pulled over by some tough ass cop. Maybe a ticket.

Jail time. I fantasized every awful outcome. I wanted a reason to stop. Maybe then I'd find a reason to love myself.

Just two weeks ago I made out with an ex's best friend in the bathroom at a Mexican restaurant: revenge

after he lied and flirted with a friend, but I could barely hold myself up. I clung to the restroom wall flailing my arms

asking the dude to stop as he pushed his hand down my pants. I wish I could say I had more self-respect.

Whatever that means. Sometimes, I wonder if that sort of thing exists for girls like me. I was 26 when my mom finally told me,

she too, was sexually abused. What if things turned out differently for us had we talked? I wonder if I would've shared

what I've longed to escape. The last guy I dated laughed when I joked that Latin women were built

for pain when he left me with bruises on my arms and legs. I told myself I liked it. Something about it made me feel

special in some perverse way. Then there was the guy who liked to embarrass me. Sex: a game of chicken

in public locations until I cried or asked to stop.
All I know of my worth is what boys want of my body

and I give it to them willingly. Even if they don't ask.
Once, I drove a couple hours just to hook up with a guy

I barely knew. It would have been nice if it was just about
the moment - the way we played guitar and sang in between

our interludes. But night is a band-aid I rip off too soon
searching for another boy to find this body less repulsive

than I do. That next morning, when I realized it, I found
my panties on the floor before rushing to the bathroom

to check if it was true. Despite the pain, I forced my pee.
A few droplets stained the rim: my own Rorschach test.

My Grandmother's Wedding Day

24 December 1961

The heaviest faces are of teen brides,
girls living among women. Look:
there's a calendar of Jesus pitying
my grandmother. The veil over her face
as if it's made of plastic.
Her face is clean. Her hair
brushed, gleaming
in the photographer's light.
Her existence an experiment: what
it is like to document suffering.
See how her expression is stitched still.
She creates the look you want: all
willingness and naiveté in Italian lace.
Has she chosen to stand rather than sit?
Her head nearly touches the bowed
ceiling and pipework above.
There's something familiar in all of this.
Her face: what a flower would be like
had it bloomed in mud. And yet here
she is, uncuddled and deceptively
safe. No one to tell her today her body
belongs to her but no longer.

The Body as Expiration Date

“Transplanted” (2016) by Michael Janis; fused glass with glass powder on ceramic form

I’m moved by the face behind the glass brocade,
the anonymity of no outstanding

features. We are linked by what I’d like to think
is sadness or fear. An hour ago,

I massaged my chest. I felt something celled,
an amorphous lump the nurse

had warned me to check. When I see her again,
assuming it’s still there,

she’ll wave some baton across my breast:
ultrasound for the flower

blooming inside of it, like these fluted petals
on the statue’s head. According

to my brother, a doctor, I’m too young
for cancer. Most likely, it’s

benign: a cyst, a harmless sac of fluid.
But oh - how the mind

has a habit of disobeying: this shy, hungry organ
so precious for its inner chaos.

Sometimes, I think myself to pain: I can feel
the small nest inside me

throbbing. I wonder if I’m dying. Fear pokes
at my temples and wrists. I want

to have a reason to make something of this mess,
the way a woman unzips her dress

to admire herself naked in front of a mirror,
the simple pleasure of being

anyone’s and no one’s. What other reaction

would be normal? The body
so enormous with death, it takes all my strength
not to disappear inside it.

Shopping Spree: An Elegy

Laughing at a joke,
 something most people do,
 a co-worker tells me:
You sound like a cheerleader.
Excuse me? I ask.
You know. You're just all bubbly and peppy, she says.
 And it's not that she's calling me a cheerleader
 but *cheerleader*
 in that something in my laugh says
 superficiality, shallowness, the fake
 bitch that talks behind your back.
 Some trope fashioned

 from airbrushed movie actresses,
 Playboy pics,
 fucking teen girl trends in ads for Abercrombie & Fitch,
 or watching Jennifer Love Hewitt
 being interviewed by Conan
 encouraging women
 to vajazzle their pussies.
It's like a sparkly secret in your pants, she says,
 her skin all clear and glittering
 under studio lights.
 She's all bronzer and waist
 expanding the distance
 between feminine expectancy
 and reality.
 So thinking of my co-worker's reaction –
 the joke pandering insult,
 she's not the only one, I'm sure, thinking:
Do I always need to worry about my looks?
Will it always be like this?
Will I always have to _____?
 I can relate.
 Once I maxxed out Mastercard –

 with every shirt I tried on I thought: *Damn!*
I look really good.
 When my parents asked
 about the excess shopping bags
Come on, I said. *Haven't you ever felt the need to be liked?*
 Like most parents they responded
 with that cliff proverb:
If your friends jumped off a cliff,

would you do the same?
If you were honest
you'd answer yes
like I did.

Cinderella dressed in yella

was what we chanted
jump-roping or jumping
from tile to tile
playing hopscotch
you could tell
we loved a good
rhyming game
or any game
with lyrics depicting
couples: boy and girl
hurling themselves
into one another
flailing this way
and that over
misunderstandings
or missed
opportunities until
there'd be some
unexpected calamity
and the girl was helpless
waiting for her prince
charming to fight her
battles and then
living happily ever
after and that's what
we wanted so we blew
upon dandelion florets
in the wind our lips
pressed like a kiss wishing
for boys to come find us
and tell us how beautiful
we were and mesmerized
they'd find a way to undo
our hurts to be with us only
no one told us to undo theirs
no one told them their hearts
were lodged in spring-trapped
doors and the joke
was on both of us which
wasn't the plan and seeing
how the heart is a walnut
scattered on the sidewalk
in sunlight gathered
like a herd of mule

cows, sluggish
and in refusal
of unfolding - soon
love will resemble
a portion of it, this
small thing sprawled
and welcoming for
the faithful observer.

When Someone Leaves You

My ex's mom has cancer. I know it because he posted a link to her gofundme page. I hate to say this, but it made me happy.

When he called the wedding off ten days before, his mother said, No one's to blame here. These things kind of just happen.

I guess that's why I laughed seeing his profile picture of them together. At the hairline, it's obvious she's wearing a wig. Call it

the best form of revenge. Like a punch line to a cruel joke you'd laugh at, if others weren't around to watch your reaction.

Besides, isn't that why dead baby jokes exist? Once, I heard a comedian wanting to facepaint his newborn on Halloween.

That way when people asked, he could say she was a zombie or an abortion. A friend of mine got pregnant in high school.

Asked me to drive her to the clinic, but I never did. It just passed three days later. She showed me in the toilet. What I saw looked

like silly putty when stretched out. I still talk to her every so often, even invited her to the wedding. Since I couldn't cancel

the venue, I made it a vacation. Wanting to see how I was doing, she drove down to visit. One evening she asked: Remember

that day back in high school? When I told you I was knocked up? I thought my world was crashing, but it wasn't. Just like right now.

And I didn't mean to say it, it just came out. I do that, saying things I shouldn't: But you didn't even want it. And I thought

she looked the way I did when he called it off. Not the crying or how she avoided my stare, but the way she packed up and left.

I am in love with the way men tell me I'm beautiful;
their mouths are like butterflies tied on a kite's string.
I've tried to untie them. My hands little fires with which I dissolve
their flesh. It feels something like smoking a cigarette.
That familiar warmth between my fingers. That light
headed ease. Love if you're there, what if I told you the stars
are tourniquets for broken hearts. Sometimes, I wonder
if we were ever built for loving. Somewhere a couple
is making love like how they've seen in movies. What I am saying
is it's an illusion. But speaking purely for myself, I ache
to be erased like this. Last night, I was with a man.
After we finished, we were strangers. I evaporated: skin and bone,
white as the beta fish I owned for a week when I was six.
I fed him too much assuming he never had enough.
When he died off quickly, I closed myself off, the way an addiction
takes the place of loss. Mine: I love the way other bodies smell
on my sheets. Mostly because it's something they can't take
away. The things I've been given in my life were never intended
for me. Like a lightning bug, I think I'm wanted for an average
amount of time. It makes sadness seem like a tradition.
A courtship that never ends. I wonder if I am more satisfied
than I should be. Dating blogs and magazines all tell me:
Men like a girl that waits. Their entire reproductive system
a reasonable excuse for ghosting whatever they want.

Reasons for Dating White Boys

Admit it: you want to be something other than what you are.

::

Growing up, cover girls were never dark or Latina. I thought white boys only dated blondes.

::

The definition of white boys as I knew it: passivity. Never expecting a girl to cook or clean. Or at least, that was before I realized they liked me for mi cultura: *Latinas*, they said, *know how to take care of their men*. As if taking orders was in my DNA.

::

Whenever I'm home, my mother asks if I've served our guests, asks if my father needs anything. My mother doesn't even know when she's hungry anymore.

::

I dreamt I would leave a life of waiting on men. I dreamt of becoming anything other than my mom: consequences of machismo.

::

When I met my ex-fiancee, a white boy, otherwise a reason for making this list, I knew in the beginning it wouldn't work. Late one night in his basement I thought what the hell. Spread my legs.

::

It doesn't make sense when I say it: but I wanted to be agreeable. To soften my sharp edges.

::

I always make jokes about Latinas dating white men, so when someone asks me why that stereotype exists

I laugh and say: *You're not a threat
if you're with a white man.*

::

Assimilate: Finally, a duty
you've done right.

Body Laws

1. I don't know what the body wants when it's mad. The way it takes control without permission. Its most basic tendencies not destructive, but instructive.

::

Holding its breath, your body releases lactate and carbon dioxide in the blood stream. Without oxygen, your blood fills up on hydrogen protons. What scientists mean: your blood's *acidic*.

If you can hold your breath for a long time, your body chemistry starts to change.

::

The worst kind of anger is passive: internalized self-contempt. The kind where you sabotage yourself. The kind where you stop participating in classes because you're tired of being ignored or cut off. You don't realize how long that anger's been sitting in the back of your throat.

::

When men cut you off, if you can manage, hold your breath. Relax. Let the blood flow. Like muscle memory, your body has practiced a long time: what it's like to bathe in a man's mouth.

2. A student died this week diving from a cliff.

She just landed a local design job. They said it was the next step for a talented young woman.

She was just so bright and very lively. She was always laughing.

What if a woman doesn't want to do what's expected?

::

Location: Elk River Falls. Jane Doe: Water lapping backside of body against gray metal rocks.

*Funny, how the neck must twist before it snaps:
like breaking a banana off the bunch.*

What you heard was right. Her eyes were spotted monarch butterfly wings.

They called her body juniper.

It was a blue body.

It was a salt bodied ocean.

It was a lizard:

Her body threading against the rocks like a corn stalk in the wind.

::

Peel: the skin off your body. Toss it on the ground. Gaze down at it like a giraffe.

::

Recurring dream: You're late. Everyone gasps as you shuffle in. Look down: your flesh is exposed. What I'm telling you is what you already know.

::

Your eardrums are canary wings flapping.

They sound like a waterfall, when a waterfall is a cedar log cracking in half.

3. They say a snake will soak itself in water before it sheds its skin: soaking in a summertime bath, except, of course, for the ones held captive. Some have problem sheds: sloughing only patches of skin.

::

My grandmother used to tell me that demons inhabit your body, and if you don't have a candle to light to the Virgin Mary you should think of something nice and laugh. The mind escapes numbness, constraining the body to mimic the effects of stress, only so you find yourself breathing again with a sigh that makes the air play jump rope in your belly.

::

You remember the playground in elementary school: the metal rocketship, the merry-go-round, the swing set, the monkey bars. You remember playing four-square and double dutch most. You liked being able to jump in between the opposite turning ropes. Your favorite rhyme was *Cinderella dressed in yella*' because you liked the line: *went downstairs to kiss a fella*.

Sometimes, you wake up realizing you sing it while you're sleeping. *Made a mistake and kissed a snake. How many doctors did it take? 1... 2... 3...*

::

Someone tell the preacher to sit down. Get off the stage. Aren't we done with this yet? Sarah didn't sin. Too old to have kids, God decided to come along for a visit. Told Abraham it was not only possible, but he was going to make it happen. Of course, the preacher says first: she eavesdrops, as if privacy only exists for a man. And then, she laughs. *Ladies*, his voice booming from the pulpit, *let this be a lesson to never disrespect your man. Sarah sinned because she mocked God; believed him to be a liar.* He gets all of this just by her laughing, the sound of knocking a hollow jack-o-lantern.

::

Whenever you read a myth about a snake, almost always expect a woman. It's good fortune to encounter a snake. Be warned though. If you're pregnant: you'll birth a child with a constricted neck.

::

Those snake flecks of skin glint in the forest pearls: gems flushed by living organisms. They are the feminine gem: passed down from grandmother to daughter to granddaughter. Once, they were thought to resemble the moon: they protected from dragons and fire.

4. You're sitting in an honors seminar on leadership that meets once a month on Wednesday nights. You're the last one to answer the teacher's question. As usual, you're the only one to disagree. As you explain your stance on the issue at hand, one of your classmates interrupts: *Do you position yourself in the room tactically?*

::

You don't understand, so you ask him to repeat. Of course, he asks you this after you've disagreed with all the men. As if to say: *If you were a man you'd not only understand but agree.* The reminder: women are trained from birth to discipline their bodies. Crossed arms and legs diminish their own existence.

::

But his question puts it out there in a subtle fashion, so you tell your body to breathe, remain open.

You consider laughing for a moment, but because you will be around these men once month you decide to hold off.

You take a few moments, and only then do you remind them you were early for class.

You entered the room and chose your seat first.

Stage 3

Dandelion
florets in the wind
collect themselves
like balled up fuzz
everywhere –
pillowcases,
shower drains.
Under fluorescent
lights she grips
toilet handlebars
for breath
and cries.
She is a wilting stalk
with bones
no bigger
than her hands.
She pours over the edge,
her hair, undressing
itself from her head.

Hostage

“... *negative ethnic and racial stereotypes... [influence] the kinds of recommendations [women] receive about reproductive surgery.*” - *Iris Ofelia López, Matters of Choice: Puerto Rican Women's Struggle for Reproductive Freedom*

On the first day, she wept.
 On the second day she separated
 her legs. I ran in the kitchen
 for a cool rag. *Take care*
of your mother, my dad says.
She needs to heal – surgical
 menopause: something that doesn't
 want us to produce anymore.
 He is trying to make childhood
 grown up, that language
 of making and tears. I'm six and
 don't understand. On the third day
 the house is silent. Think of a cat. How
 it nestles, making
 softness out of anything
 it pleases. On the fourth day
 she asks for warmth. I don't complain
 about missing cartoons. She watches
Gone with the Wind. I bury my legs
 in the bed. *Isn't it all beautiful?*
 my mother asks. She's in love
 with the south. She adores
 the past: the formal
 manners and hoop dresses, the mansions
 lined with magnolia driveways.
 I wish she was this way more often,
 trapped in bed, awake, as I enter
 her bathroom. On the seventh day,
 I drown myself in her perfume.
 Examine her delicates: lace
 camisoles and pearl strands, hoping
 to find a map of my mother's softness.

Dreaming of Warriena Wright

Growing up, my best friend's mom told us stories about wife-beating husbands, strangled corpses, and child abductions. It didn't help much either her husband was a cop. He kept her up to date with the latest crime patterns in the area: *Always have your keys in hand when walking to the car* she'd say. Or *If you're in a bad part of town stopped at a red light, don't wait for it to turn green. Just drive through. You're a sitting duck if not.* But the craziest advice was when she told us that if a man ever wrangled us into his car, to rip off a button, assuming we had one, and put in the ignition that way the key wouldn't fit, assuming we wouldn't be tied up or locked in the trunk, assuming the button fit the slot. So naturally, when I left home I binge-watched shows like *Law and Order:SVU* and *Snapped*. One night, lying on the couch, I caught a *60 minutes* episode about a Tinder date gone wrong. Warriena Wright, a girl my age, was trapped on a 14th floor balcony. Trying to escape her date, she attempted to climb over the rail, reach the neighbor below. But drunk, she slipped and fell. Technically, yes, he didn't kill her, but if that's the last resort to safety, it might as well be murder. The best part: he recorded the entire night: his phone tucked in his chest pocket. When asked by the reporter why he would do such a thing, he said: *I can't remember what happens when I drink. I was protecting myself in case she made a false claim of rape.* What he doesn't say: he gave her a red necklace with his hands. At the morgue, they found a snip of her jeans lodged in her skull: evidence her body bent in half, as if she hugged herself mid-air to reach the safest place she could before death.

Autopsy of My Mother

In the dream when my mother dies, I am the coroner
wheeling her into the exam room to split

her chest. I cut a y-shaped slit that curves underneath
her breasts, separate tissue and skin,

exposing the ribs the way a parent might pull back
the covers before tucking the child in bed.

Then, just like that I crack her sternum. Pluck
her heart like a strawberry from its stem:

clipping its cone-shaped body from the cursive stalk.
Her pulse beating against my skin:

a horde of horses scaling the ridges
of my hands. Why is it

I've dreamt this dream so many times?
What holds my attention is not her body

so much as my steady grip; my indifference
towards the fact of her death. My mother:

a stranger, a study in wounding. Starved for understanding
I continue to cut, drawing the scalpel from stomach

to pubis region. I scoop what's left from the bowl
of her pelvis until it's empty. I want to crawl

into it as if it were a cradle, and perhaps, she'd hold me
there the way I always wished.

What You Should Love
after Dick Allen

Small disappointments. Coloring
 pictures and diagrams in college textbooks
 ultramarine blue, for no reason
 but to mimic churning of schooling fish.

Love leaving the blunt crayon ends
 when you're finished, stuffed in the pages
 like sentimental gifts you plan ahead:
 cream-filled cupcakes, cards imprinted with kisses.

Love half-impassioned attempts:
 burnt bread loaf batches, makeshift tablecloths
 from yesterday's cartoons and classified ads
 under off-kilter lumps of wax balanced on candlesticks.

Love sterile apartment walls,
 layered coats of fresh white paint. Apathy
 disguised as refreshment. How underneath
 tape strips leave outlines of exclamation points and periods.

Love polished patterns of water. A leaky
 faucet – how sunlight glances off the falling drops
 flickering like an off-limits diamond
 necklace seated in a locked cabinet.

Receipts you forget to throw away.
 A blunderbuss of crumpled paper
 at the bottom of your purse, laid out
 like thickets of baby's breath, belonging only to you.

Ordinary things. Sitting
 on a rickety chained swing. Peeled onion skins.
 Love the light things first,
 what cannot stay, then what you cannot lift.

SECTION 2

‘Que Puerto Rico!’

‘Que Puerto Rico!’ -

“you’ll echo
the words
of columbus”

“what a rich
port”

“the heart of the Caribbean” “where
the americas meet”

“old land
of new promise”

“our new possession”

Inheritance

This thing
inside my breast isn't
cancerous. The doctor says
it's only fibrous
connective tissue which
the nurse before him
mistook as dangerous.
A warning:
take up less space
than what I
already inhabit. This body,
an island
invaded. It's true,
I am safe
for now, but below
this split skin, abnormal cells
are maturing, overriding
the messages I send them
to stop growing.
Or, it's nothing.
My fear's only a girlish
premonition. Doesn't
the truth betray
our bodies like this?
Pain: a necessity
towards understanding.
Please know - whatever it is,
this history, this body
I've been given
was made to outlast.
I have nothing to lose
except my voice.
God forgive me –
I don't need
saving.

Dark-skinned Father, Light-skinned Daughter

Pennsylvania. 1996. There was one category 3 storm.

“She wanted him close enough to feel excluded, to be aware of the distance between them.”

-From *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko

We filled the tubs with water. Nailed down window shutters.

When it started, the thunder popped
its knuckles. Roof tiles rustled.

Before rushing everyone to the basement, he pushed me
in the closet. In such a dark space, the light bulb spinning from its cord
was a trapped moth flapping its wings.

Expecting at any moment to be let out,
I rubbed my eyes waiting for bright patterns to flicker.

I wanted the world to melt in every color –
the red reef’s coral, the dull white seagull against a cerulean sky,
my pale skin to his dark brown.

But imagining how ugly that would be, the color of a midnight
hurricane sky – the color of his eyes, I changed my mind.
The wind was my medicine – when the storm lifted I waited
until it rose again.

Offering

April and a morning shower blankets us, covers
the shed out back where my father's fishing equipment
is stored. On mornings like this, he searches
beneath rain gutters for worms loosening the earth
with his hands, sifting it back and forth; collecting
each body he finds in an old crusted tupperware for bait.
Sometimes, when there isn't enough, he cuts them
in half. How concerned he is, ensuring there's enough.
It's the silence he likes: the solace of being alone,
standing on the bank holding his fishing rod, watching
nothing but the tug of the line against the current until a fish
bites the lure. Most days when he brings home a good catch
I like to watch my mother clean the fish. I stand
by the kitchen sink staring at her red-sugared hands
as she tugs their heads backwards, stripping
the skin from its flesh: this new kind of nakedness.

My Aunt Texts Me a Picture of My Grandfather

As far as family portraits go, it isn't all great.
It's got that old San Juan nostalgia vibe –

backdrop of crumbling faded pastel buildings
reminiscent of a promising New World, and there,

to the left of the frame is my grandfather, shoulders
squared up to the camera. His brother standing

obliquely on the right, head tilted, pokerfaced,
squinting at the flash. He's leaning, of course,

against my grandfather – no doubt a big brother
thing to do, assuming his own parenting role, holding

my grandfather back for his own good.
They're both dressed in the same attire:

crisp white collared shirts, linen pants, the end
of a jibaro existence resting on their backs.

I imagine this is why my grandfather is bent over,
head turning from the camera: he's pressing

his ear towards something, listening for instructions:
how to survive in America without English.

After the Stroke

My grandfather doesn't realize it:
 sitting at the dinner table, he's slipping
 in his chair. He leans like a tilted beam defying
 his body's best attempt to prevent him from falling.

With his good hand, he lifts
 his fork to his mouth. One cough
 is all it takes for me to look up and see him
 breathless: squirming to ease the pressure on his lungs.

I've been scared about his health
 for months. After the stroke stole
 the left side of his body, I can't explain it,
 but I think he wants to leave me by starving.

I'll tell dad, once a few weeks have passed,
 that I don't think grandpa's eating. He'll call me:
Miss Hollywood. Not until later
 will I understand what he meant:

you're being dramatic. Now, when I look back
 I wish I could've explained
 how grandpa's tongue was pocketing
 his food around his bottom gums. Packing

each bite down until spitting it out
 when no one was watching. At least,
 that's what I imagine. I wasn't there when he did it:
 answering a voice somewhere in his head

to finish the task nature didn't. His offerings:
 morsels and drool in wadded napkins
 he hid in his sweater pockets waiting
 for the chance to toss them. That's what I think too,

the night he died. I ran to his room to tell him:
it's time for dinner. He was in his chair clutching
 a napkin; his lips sprawled open,
 as if singing a song only God could hear.

Think of English as a punishment

The word alligator: a sharp edge.

My grandmother, circa 1953, locked
in her third grade classroom closet: punishment
for mispronouncing.

Think of dyslexia as loneliness:

That she learned English is a miracle. She learned
to speak it the way she learned to live
alone, after years of living without her mother.

Think of abandonment as necessity:

Imperative to say, yes, my grandmother was abandoned.
No child wants to leave her mother she said.
Her only reason: an education.

Think of her accent as captivity:

Sixty years ago, she was reading
new words in a foreign language.

All of this to say that now, she won't.

Grant

1. v. Agree to give or allow (something requested) to. To bestow a favor, especially by a formal act: to *grant* a request. To eradicate identity. To convert an islander into citizen. As in they “granted” us citizenship. *That all citizens in Porto Rico... shall be deemed and held to be, citizens of the United States: Provided, That any person herein described may retain his present political status by making a declaration, under oath, of his decision to do so within six months of the taking effect of this Act.*
— See also *Jones Act of 1917*
2. v. Agree to or admit (to someone) that (something) is true. To devise a web of lies. To scheme and plot so that nothing untrue is not said. To create a language of negation to achieve what you want. *They have the Latin American excitability... America should go slow in granting them anything like autonomy. Their civilization is not like ours yet.*
— See also *Judge Peter A. Hamilton, Counsel and Friend to President Woodrow Wilson*
3. n. A sum of money given by an organization, especially a government, for a particular purpose. As in buying participation, or free will. To cheapen goods. To buy low and sell large, the quintessential model for a capitalist man. As in, they *granted* us free trade in what we sold, not what we bought. Ignoring economic laments.
— See also *20 Congressional Record, 63 Congress, 1st Session, Appendix, pp. 18-19*
4. n. A legal conferment. Protection. A binding contract providing defense for the defenseless. They were once defenseless and nationless. Now, they are guarded. Now, they must protect their citizens. *Through its passage, the Jones-Shafroth Act... imposed mandatory conscription into the U.S. military on Puerto Ricans, precisely at the moment that the United States entered World War I. As a result, more than 18,000 Puerto Ricans served in the U.S. armed forces during World War I.*
— See also Wikipedia entry, “Jones–Shafroth Act”
5. phrase. *Take for granted*. The failure to appreciate something. Most likely as a result of familiarity. Written in the past tense, but an ongoing occurrence. I wish to all my heart to have my name written in ink. *U.S. Congress Will Finally Recognize the Borinqueneers, the Puerto Ricans Who Fought in WWI, WWII, and the Korean War.*
— See also *The 65th Infantry Regiment: Borinqueneers*

Grind

for Rita Moreno

West Side Story, 1961

In the drugstore taunting scene, before Anita lies
about Maria's death - we forget Rita's painted face:

forget, in this movie, Puerto Ricans are only
dark-skinned – we're silent – run, we think –

hoping she'll escape, as the boys, catlike, claw
her skirt – grind her back against cement, leaping

around her legs as fast as light bulbs burn out.
That they will rape her is understood –

not just because she's had sex, or is thought to be oversexed –
but that some women were built as fodder for violence,

their innocence taken hostage. Later,
Rita would admit how the past came knocking

at her throat, how it bruised her soul. How, she too,
was almost raped. *I was filled with every terrible rage*

she says, *when I said the line, "Don't you dare touch me":*
her jaw a sharp arrangement of bone, as if to say,

this is the hurt we sew inside our ribs,
cutworked, patterned: a trauma set in place.

Passing

Yes, this is another poem about race: I'm trying to understand what it means to be mixed. What it means to pass: that I lost half of myself and left the other half at home. *This is what America wants*, I thought. They want me to be silent long enough to say: *yes, this country is great*. But when I speak up in class it is as if I'm speaking for generations that haven't felt safe. For generations that buried their language in the front yard of their house, like mine.

::

They tell me I should be less angry.

I'm always angry.

They tell me I should be quiet in class.

I'm never quiet.

They tell me I should know to keep my head down.

::

When I sit in class and speak up, the girls behind all agree, say: *she doesn't need to disagree all the time*. They don't know what it's like to be hushed. To fight for the chance to be heard. To fight so that I'm not silenced in a second language.

::

The one thing my momma gave me:
girl if you're talking you better raise your damn voice.

::

My Spanish is grieving. My Spanish is waiting at the door.
My Spanish wants me to pick it up when I return home.

::

I like it to stay put. It's another burden
on my back. It's something that gets stuffed in my back
pocket and falls out somewhere on the walk
between home and school.

::

In workshop, a classmate informs me *white* and *light-skinned* are the same thing. *No big deal*, he says, *you probably just missed it*.

The Rescue Puerto Rico Bill

"America," West Side Story, 1961

Public Comment : "The 'How we screw Puerto Rico' bill."

Public Comment : "Any aid to Wall Street is economic necessity, any relief to 'white communities' is compassion & humanity, any aid to black or Hispanics is entitlement that needs to be cut."

Public Comment : "Wall Street 'vultures' will make a killing."

Public Comment : "Cut welfare, invite PP [Planned Parenthood] down there to help with abortions. In about 150 years this useless little island might become solvent."

Public Comment : "I, for one, am tired of bailing out women who insist on having more babies to increase their welfare check. These women consider this welfare their paychecks. Gotta stop. If they had to take care of the babies they squat out, their birth rates would mirror those of whites."

Public Comment : "They need to be held on a tight leash."

Public Comment : "We were never given the choice to decide if we wanted to stay Spanish, become American, or be independent. The choices were political and made for us."

Public Comment : "Pull the ungrateful plug, let it sink. They had their chance."

Public Comment : "They aren't bailing out Puerto Rico; they're bailing out the speculators who bought the bonds for pennies on the dollar."

Public Comment : "Can't we sell them to the lowest bidder or give them to China to help pay off our debt?"

Public Comment : "We are not a brothel or a piece of meat to sell or give, we are human beings."

Public Comment : "Honestly ... what has changed in Puerto Rico since West Side Story and that song."

Always the hurricanes blowing. And the population growing. And the money owing. And the sunlight streaming. And the natives steaming.

To the inhabitants of Puerto Rico:

In the prosecution of a war
 the United States
 have sent armed forces to occupy Puerto Rico.

 We have come wrapped in the flag
 spurred
 to destroy all those present

a nation of free citizens, power rests in us

Therefore,

 we trust, Puerto Rico's enthusiastic acceptance
 of the United States. The principal objective
 will be to put an end to the
 authority of
 the people of this country,

 to offer protection of your persons, your possessions,
 and grant you

 rights and benefits offered by our government. This is a war
 of destruction. Our purpose
 under the control of our forces to grant all those

 the benefits of civilization.

The Porto Rico Line

- Say / the thousands of tourists who visited Puerto Rico in pre-war days /
- Say / [they] would scarcely know the island today /
- Say / the war has brought... important progressive changes /
- Say / they will be reflected in the future commerce of Puerto Rico and the mainland /
- Say / [they are] third on our list of Latin American customers before the war /
- Say / Puerto Rico now looms as an even better prospect for post-war trade/
- Say / from us, Puerto Rico wants trucks, automobiles, gasoline, oil, industrial machinery, electrical appliances, meats and other foods she does not raise herself, lumber, shoes, textiles, fertilizer, paint /
- Say / we, in turn, count on Puerto Rico for sugar, rum, coffee, tobacco, tropical fruits, coconuts, fine needlecraft, lingerie, buttons, basketware /
- Say / [she] develops her resources further /
- Say / there will be more things for us to buy... and to sell /
- Say / before the war, [we] had reached a total of \$187,000,000 a year with her alone /
- Say / [we'll] continue to play an important role in this growing exchange of goods /

Gateway to the Future: or Jaime González speaks at a public forum to discuss the mega-resort,
Riviera del Caribe, with the residents of Ceiba
a partly found poem

:: let's develop roosevelt roads base for the exclusive benefit of the residents of ceiba ::

i'm going to be very sincere :: i'm an employee :: i've been given instructions :: i'm following those instructions :: i am only the messenger :: i have my tasks :: i am a hired gun :: i was hired to perform a task :: i'm doing a job :: i've been given guidelines :: i have this job to generate innumerable benefits :: i'm going to tell you something :: i don't think that the puerto rican tourism industry is passing through one of its finer moments :: i'm going to make a statement :: i'm going to be sincere :: i've been given a task to focus not only on ceiba :: i've got to tell you now that you'll have to go over my head if any of you don't agree with the task i've been given ::

:: let's get rid of some of our inferiority complexes ::

can-kickers :: half-buckets :: part mud puddles :: puerto potties :: stay knocked up cunts :: lazy beasts :: want everything done for them sticks :: ship-wrecked mexicans :: ain't got no better than coffee pickin hands :: community effort :: corn row cacos :: riced out brown pits :: part toxic dirt :: part rotten glass :: block hoppers :: land hoppers :: surrogate citizens :: pretty sure that last bit's self-explanatory :: now don't you want to do better :: be something :: other than suckling leeches

:: have you had enough? ::

some of the shops will sell various things that i can't buy :: you can't buy :: oh well :: such is life as they say :: such is life :: not everyone has been born so blessed :: we are not excluding anyone :: for those that don't have even 50 cents :: to buy a limber that were only 5 cents :: when I was a kid :: at least you can walk :: free of charge :: on the sidewalks :: in front of the ocean :: watch the cruise ships :: watch the tourists disembark from the ships :: watch tourists with money :: watch the tourists go into the shops :: watch them buy expensive things

:: not everyone has a right ::

it's for those that can afford to pay:: for the ferry:: or the beaches :: or the restaurants :: or Cirque du Soleil:: it's simply to give access :: to those people more lucky :: than you:: that have yachts :: that come here :: dock :: for a couple of hours :: you should just keep playing the lottery :: or the revancha :: or whatever it is you play :: perhaps one of you can buy a boat too

:: if this gives you an inferiority complex then I feel very sorry for you ::

empire brings gifts :: in exchange for exotic :: unblemished lands :: to consume:: it makes nation look :: fashionable :: first :: you like it :: the performance of imperial visitors :: they make you seem god-like :: part celebrity :: part pig:: this is how you become a slave :: you were made to inhabit :: luxury :: from a distance :: orbit citizens of freedom :: remind them of their wealth

Thinking of You

Because your destiny
is in our hands today.

Because we now have
the opportunity to inherit
security.

Because your free choice
will be threatened.

Because we think
of our best interests.

We will vote for your future
security
with pride.

Sugar Acts

after Craig Santos Perez

“before civilization
there was no
disorder

“bombas every night now
people complain
of noise

**

“the Americans didn’t
care about us
but men *[afrentaos]*
in Congress were nice to discuss
our status

**

“people in our village couldn’t
afford toys our families
were poor so we made ourselves
dolls from mango
seeds

“we sucked the rind off
the grooved pits drew
faces

“when they deteriorated we
dug up yuccas combed
their roots like
hair

era una aguacatao

**

“from their tariffs sugar
sank in the days
we had nothing we
evacuated

era una aguacatao

**

“they took our land
they say
people left people were forced
out they had no
money

era una aguacatao

- Operation Bootstrap, 1947: a strategy to modernize and develop Puerto Rico's economy; provided unlimited access to goods, labor, and capital to the U.S. They called it a success: US corporations flooded into the island; people lost their jobs and migrated out

**

“we left after we got married we had
to follow our husbands we had
to take care of
our children

**

“we are little
we are home
they *say*

**

“we worked as domestics we ironed
always outsiders' clothes
we had fevers
often

era una aguacatao

“we lived in a world
of women girls we
grew fast

married white navy
beans

“that's what we
called them

era una aguacatao

**

“they took our land
they say
people left people were forced
out they had no
money

**

“what kind of country
needs permission to speak

its own language

-“Spanish Only” Bill Clears Hurdle in Puerto Rico - March 5, 1991: *Gov. Rafael Hernandez Colon is expected to sign it into law this month*

**

“they made us citizens to fight
in their own war we have not fought
for our own
War

- Unlimited goods can be defined as but is not limited to: bodies capable of producing sugar. The use of bodies, in this case, meaning land. Land meaning they take what's *rightfully* theirs.

Do You Ever Write Translations?

My mouth is a well
where my shadow goes to drown.

I wish it weren't so suicidal. I tell it
to be patient. Isn't the present

always just a little unsatisfying?
When I think about all the men

I've kissed, I also think about the ones
I wish I could. I am in love

with desire. Water overflows, claiming
the riverbanks for itself. But mostly, I am in love

with excess, wanting a bed made from
touch. I know because I've tried before.

Listen: this isn't a poem about love as you
would have it. This is about holiness, a tiny

pebble placed underneath the tongue. A prayer
can be small. A mouth can be kept from speaking.

Western Tourism

1.

In the beginning, the island was a frog that walked like a human. When there was darkness she opened her mouth and swallowed it. Her eyes became our moons. She plucked one out and gave it to us saying *this is how you'll find me again*. By morning we looked for her; she'd already packed and left.

2.

Harvest the eyeball. Freeze the sclera. Use the whole part, or cut it in half.
A specimen of oysters.

::

Harvest acceleration. Bird droppings. Acid.
How close green is sublime.

::

The sound of white is what you hear when a child releases a kite.

3.

When they came, the first words they stuffed in our mouths: *I pledge allegiance*. A dark devil we couldn't chew. Even our spit couldn't save us.

4.

The history book of our own nation is a pamphlet in English.

5.

Once the water has healed and the shells unearthed from the ocean, the frog will return. She will whisper to us: a guava scent.

6.

An arrow starts somewhere. Think of yourself, wherever you want that somewhere to be. Call it home. Call it *I*. Everything before you: an endless trajectory.

Body as Compass

Every scorpion is a direction:
 a tapestry woven
 of anger in every narrow,
 curved tail

I wear it in a gold earring

I take up residence
 in the capitol –

My rebellion

::

is the mantis
 who waits alone –

it wears the look
 of a crane
 rising

::

I can't call my body
 home

Instead, I carry it inside
 my pocket pressed
 between clam shells

I am the diagram
 of undesirable
 until clouds sink
 into the ground

::

Garnish yourself with pleated
 tongues: each one a mark
 of fire

Breakfast

The white couple next to us is finishing
 their breakfast. Between a bite of grits and eggs
 the woman asks her husband a question:
 “it’s about time we take America back, isn’t it?”

Only her question is not a question. Something
 about her words sounds ominous. Her tone suggesting
 someone in this dining room should try her,
 so they’ll understand how much she’s had it.

Behind her, the news anchor is reporting
 on protesters surrounding the Trump Tower in New York.
 Before she finishes the story, she chuckles
 nervously; as if the topic of race

is inappropriate. *Maybe I shouldn’t be talking*
about politics the lady continues, and since her husband
 makes no response, she turns her face towards me.
 I do my best to keep my mouth shut; put myself

in her place. I wonder what it would take
 for her to think America’s great again.
 I think of my mother, my grandmother and her sisters:
 where they were when they realized

they were uninvited guests. As for me,
 I was standing in line for recess
 when a boy called me a spic in the third grade.
 If I knew what it meant

I might have called him a caulkie* back.
 I would have let him have it; ensure
 he never used that word with me again.
 It’s moments like this still happening;

happening right now. Which is why I refuse to respond
 when she wants me to engage.
 It’s simple really: I want her to know that what
 she’s searching for, she can’t have.

AFTERWORD

On Heartbreak

In Marina Abramović's *Portrait with a Scorpion*, the arthropod spreads its legs across her face, extending from brow to nasal ridge in magnetic display; despite the grayscale, the semblance between creature and woman is more likely than it seems, her visage a mirror to this armored thing. It's hardly noticeable, her emotional state. The stark contrast so overwhelming. And how does she know the outcome? A venomous sting, the unlikelihood of a good ending. Will she survive or swell up? Succumb to some inflammatory response? Will she purge her stomach, retch all night on her couch? Perhaps this is what we talk about when we talk about love: this disgusting fantastic confusion. We love and fail despite our misgivings. Perhaps, this is all: this document and its facing pages, a lesson in scars.

Notes

Samuel Gompers delivered this quote at a press conference in New York in 1904 after visiting the island of Puerto Rico and discovering the living conditions as a result of the monopoly over the sugar industry by US corporations.

“What You Should Love” borrows its form from, and is in conversation with, Dick Allen’s “What You Should Leave.”

“Que Puerto Rico!” and “The Porto Rico Line” borrow and alter language from early to mid-20th century travel advertisements.

“The Rescue Puerto Rico Bill” uses source material from anonymous comments posted on various news sites covering Puerto Rico’s debt crisis.

Major General Nelson A. Miles’ proclamation upon occupation of Puerto Rico was delivered on July 28, 1898, three days after U.S. forces landed. The text is made available by the Library of Congress at: loc.gov.

“Thinking of You” uses text from an ad in the *San Juan Star*, July 19, 1967, p. 9.

“Sugar Acts” borrows and alters language from family members, as well as from Henrietta Yurchenco’s book, *¡Hablamos!: Puerto Ricans Speak*.

“Caulkie” refers to a white person so white, they resemble caulk.

Amanda Gomez | [Curriculum Vitae]

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Education

- 2018 MFA in Creative Writing - Poetry, Old Dominion University
David Scott Sutelan Memorial Scholarship Recipient
Thesis Title: "Sugar Acts"
- 2014 BA in English, Minor: Western Intellectual Tradition. Southern Adventist University
McClarty Family Endowment Grant Recipient, graduated Summa Cum Laude

Professional and Academic Positions

- 2017—Present Creative Writing Instructor, Muse Writers Center, Norfolk, VA
2016—Present Professional Writing Tutor, Virginia Wesleyan University, Virginia Beach, VA
2016—Present Writers in Community Coordinator, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA
2015—2016 Graduate Assistant - Writing Tutor, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA

Courses Taught

Muse Writers Center, Norfolk, VA

Introduction to Poetry (2x)

Ghazal Seminar (1x)

Exploring Our Landscapes: Poetry and Place (1x)

Creative Writings Kids' Camp, ages: 7-9 (2x)

Conferences/Presentations

- 2018 "Transitioning Into and Out of Professional Tutoring: Reflections from a Director and Tutors"
Southeastern Writing Center Association
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA. February 2018.
- 2017 "Where Lines are Drawn, We Write Poems: Readings"
Works in Progress 2017: A Regional Interdisciplinary Conference of Feminist Scholarship
Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA. April 2017.
- 2016 "Seeing Beyond: Exploring Race and White Privilege in the Writing Center" 03/2016
37th Annual Spring Conference on the Teaching of Writing
Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA. March 2016.

Awards, Fellowships, Nominations, and Residencies

- 2018 Finalist, James Hearst Poetry Prize, *North American Review*, judge: Eduardo Corral
- 2018 Finalist, TQ14 Open Poetry Prize, *Tupelo Quarterly Review*, judge: Denise Duhamel
- 2017 First Place, University Poetry Prize, Academy of American Poets and Poetry Society of Virginia, judge: Craig Santos Perez
- 2016 Honorable Mention, University Poetry Prize, Academy of American Poets and Poetry Society of Virginia, judge: Joanne Diaz
- 2016 Nomination for *Best of the Net* 2016

Anthologies

- 2018 “Breakfast”, poem, *Writers Resist Anthology*, Running Wild Press, 2018. (forthcoming)

Scholarship

Creative Work—Poetry

- 2018 “Autopsy of My Mother”, poem, *The Madison Review*, (forthcoming).
- 2018 “Do You Ever Write Translations?”, poem, *North American Review*, Spring 2018. Print. (forthcoming)
- 2018 “Lessons On Bilingualism”, poem, *Tupelo Quarterly Review*, vol. 4, issue 14. Published February 14, 2018.
- 2018 “Dreaming of Warienna Wright” and “Second Opinion”, poems, *Switchback*, issue 2018, vol. 6. Published February 2018.
- 2017 “Grind”, poem, *Academy of American Poets* (online).
- 2017 “How to Report Sexual Harassment in College”, poem, *Cliterature*, vol. 43. Published Spring 2017.
- 2016 “Breakfast”, poem, *Writers Resist*, issue 4. Published December 22, 2016.
- 2016 “After Someone Leaves You”, poem, *Avalon Literary Review*, Print.
- 2016 “Dark-skinned Father, Light-skinned Daughter”, poem, *San Pedro River Review*, vol. 8, no. 2, pgs. 40-41. Print.
- 2016 “Stage 3”, poem, *Medical Literary Messenger: An Artistic Voice for the Healing Arts*, vol. 4, no. 1, pg. 9. Published Fall/Winter 2016.
- 2016 “Mastectomy”, poem, *Barely South Review*. Published Fall 2016.
- 2016 “Traveling Fathers” and “Shopping Spree: An Elegy”, poems, *BlazeVOX*. Published Fall 2016.
- 2016 “Domestic Abuse”, poem, *Expound Magazine*, issue 6. Published June 2016.
- 2016 “After Vacationing at the Beach”, poem, *Manchester Review*, issue 16. Published June 2016.
- 2016 “I Never Told You I was Pregnant” and “Maja”, poems, *Eunoia Review*. Published May 14, 2016.
- 2016 “Boxes, Cast of Stillborn Colts and Calves”, poem, *Ekphrastic Review*. Published May 5, 2016.

Invited Talks/Workshops

- 2018 Suffolk Literary Festival, Suffolk, VA
- 2017 Hampton Roads Writers' Conference, Virginia Beach, VA
 "Steal This Poem"
 "There is no 'I' in Poetry"
 "How to Give Good Workshop Feedback"
 "The Resonant Line"
 "Poetry of Protest"
- 2017 High School Creative Writing Summer Camp, Southern Adventist University,
 Collegedale, TN
 "Write Your Words"

Invited Readings

- 2017 Neon Arts Festival, Norfolk, VA
- 2017 Facing Our Fears: Reflections on Our Times, Art Exhibition Opening, Perry Library,
 Norfolk, VA
- 2017 Ekphrastic Reading, Portsmouth Arts and Cultural Center, Portsmouth, VA
- 2016 Neon Arts Festival, Norfolk, VA

Professional Service

- 2018 Selection Committee Member, WHRO's 2018 PBS Kids Writers Contest, Norfolk, VA
- 2017—Present Writing Instructor, Norfolk City Jail, Norfolk, VA
- 2017—Present Writing Mentor, Hampton Roads Cultural Alliance, Portsmouth, VA
- 2016—Present Poetry Editor, *Four Ties Lit Review*
- 2016—Present Poetry Editor, *Barely South Review*

Professional Memberships

- 2017—Present Academy of American Poets
- 2016—Present Associated Writers and Writing Programs