

## ABSTRACT

Title of thesis:

BEASTGIRL

Elizabeth Acevedo, Master of Fine Arts in  
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*Beastgirl* is a collection of forty poems that respond to the necessity of myths. Sectioned into two parts, part I aims to examine how colonialism and patriarchy collide and intersect. From bio-myths to better known myths about Columbus and the Caribbean, the speaker elevates the folkloric, the domestic, and the island imaginary as imperative pieces of understanding the self. In part II, the speaker maps herself onto a transnational experience and aims to transport the reader to the grit and grime of urban living. The public nature of those city poems are paired alongside intimate poems depicting the speaker's brother suffering from schizophrenia.

BEASTGIRL

By

Elizabeth Acevedo

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# Dedication

For my families: of blood & bond.

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- *The Acentos Review*: “On a Bronx-Bound 2 Express Train”; Summer 2012

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## Part One: Bio-Myth

And all the people saw themselves  
when they heard the word  
I

--Pedro Mir, 'Countersong to Walt Whitman'

## Pressing

The living room is haloed Mary, wooden crosses, psalms  
the glass-wrapped candles: tall, thick  
burn, mingle with incense *Alleluia*

I sit on the sofa with the neighbor's girls  
adorned in flouncy Sunday dresses & piety  
this day is reserved for prayer circles & the women

thumb rosary ropes through calloused fingers  
the neighbor's girls bow their heads, murmur underneath their breath  
*blessed are you...the fruit*

I close my eyes & holding a couch cushion on top of my lap  
press thumb to self fervently, moan along  
is this prayer

When the circle comes to a close, Mami pulls me to her  
catches a whiff of my hand—*Jesus, did you bathe today, girl? Go wash, girl*  
& I know this is a hidden thing, wash away thing, pray it out thing

Nightly, when everyone in my house is asleep, watch me roll onto belly,  
my fingers find me unbidden, with bitten tongue  
I train myself quiet

I have a knowing about this unstopped need            does God watch  
stop, slow down, speed up, circle, press & pray, & press & pray,  
press & suppress & pray    blessed are you            the fruit



La Ciguapa  
*For the Antilles*

They say La Ciguapa was born on the peak of El Pico Duarte.  
Balled up for centuries beneath the rocks,  
she sprang out red, covered in boils, dried off black,  
and the first thing she smelled was her burning hair.



They say Atabeyra carried La Ciguapa while in frog form—  
held her low in the belly until squatting she laid her  
into soft dirt: an egg made of ocean. Millenniums later, La Ciguapa  
poked through and the blue water burst and grafted onto her skin.



They say La Ciguapa pried apart her jaw  
and spit herself out, soft and malleable,  
but at the last second her legs scraped against  
fangs and inverted her footing.



Her backwards-facing feet were no mistake, they say,  
she was never meant to be found, followed—  
an unseeable creature: crane legs, saltwater crocodile scales;  
long beak of a parrot no music sings forth from.



La Ciguapa, they say, was made on one of those ships; stitched  
and bewitched from moans and crashing waves. She emerged  
entirely formed, dark and howling, stepped onto the auction  
block but none would buy her. They wouldn't even look her in the eye.



They say she came beneath the Spanish saddle of the first mare.  
Rubbed together from leather and dark mane. Hungry.  
That she has a hoof between her thighs and loves men  
like the pestle loves the mortar;

she hums them into the cotton thick fog

of the mountains. They follow her none word nonsense  
and try to climb her, tall and dark and rough as sugarcane  
and don't know until they're whittled down how they've scraped

themselves dead. They say the men were the first to undo her name;  
thinking burying it would rot her magic, that long cry  
they were compelled to answer; they hung all five-toed dogs  
because they alone knew her scent—

there was a time her silhouette shadowed the full moon, they say.



They say. They say. They say. Tuh, I'm lying. No one says. Who tells  
her story anymore? She has no mother, La Ciguapa, and no children,  
certainly not her people's tongues: we who have forgotten all our sacred monsters.

## El Jefe's Witches

When Mami told me the stories,  
of how brujas were El Jefe Trujillo's favorite spies,  
that he would have them fly to homes  
and sit like fat crows with their ears  
pressed to the zinc techos, their magic eye  
able to move through and watch the  
rebellious below as they spoke  
in murmurs and code about fleeing  
or murdering El Jefe, or sometimes, something  
as simple as how the milk market was down,  
but whether insurgency or insult,  
manmade or magic they were disappeared—  
for even the utterance of Trujillo's name unaccompanied  
by the reverence of God was enough to be removed—  
I only ever wondered about the brujas;  
what did they do when El Jefe was assassinated?  
Did they yellow and wilt like Peace Lily leaves?  
Was it all just forced labor and now free  
they could go back to making balms  
and setting bones and lighting fat candles for our dead?  
Was the bad press too much? Birds shot in the hundreds  
for being imagined brujas...did they go underground,  
take on normal jobs selling boletos and eggs  
at the local colmado, and braiding hair  
on the tourist beaches? Forgetting the winged  
words that drifted up to their ears  
heavy and excited with blood?

## Salt

After *Pariah* by Marcos Dimas, c 1972

A carton of salt had been placed on the rocky ledge separating me from the Hudson River. I climb, grab, pour a dime into my palm. Didn't know then it was left as an offering. Mami upends the back of my hand. *Deja eso, eso lo dejó una bruja.*

For a whole month I'm afraid to sleep. Clutch my Barbie sheets afraid my seasoned hand will float and claw at air on its own. Afraid there is someone other than me in this body. *Mujer embrujadora*, you of all things knotted and kinked, skin of every color found in plum, of storm torrents, of flesh that knows the collision between *cuerpo* and *malecon*:

Mami sensed the salt inside, knew the blue dog you are painted to be. Close-lipped witch, I've felt your cowrie shells of teeth along my wrists. I've learned to chew magic like it was cassava. Woke one morning carrying a red sun for a forehead. You taught me that; how to cross my ankles and pose pretty but imagine daggers, how to hoist myself at the water's edge, dig into rocks. How to twirl in circles of cigar smoke. Here, now, alone.

## The True Story of Joan, a Bio-Myth

Joan is a beastgirl. From forehead to heel  
callused. Risen on an island made of shit  
bricks, an empire. A doctor pulled Joan  
from her mother's throat: a swallowed  
sword, rosary beads. Joan's father is a  
dulled sugarcane machete. Joan,  
crowned in her sun-dried umbilical cord,  
claws, craves only pickled plum wine.

This is where she  
will end: enveloped in wax. Scratched  
and caught beneath your fingernails.

## Conversations

My mother calls and sandbag sighs  
into another of her lists:  
She found Papi shivering inside  
a bottle of spiced rum. Again.  
My grandparent's bills are loose napkins  
that won't origami into pretty swans.  
My brother won't drink the milk anymore—  
he knows about the medicine.

There is a timer on these calls  
but the bread always burns in her irises.  
I put the match out on her throat.  
When I was little, she never cried  
where I could see her;  
hung rosaries from her eyelashes instead.

I convinced myself then silence was strength.  
Won't feed from her fingers  
the hardened aches she offers.  
I fold into two walls. Hide from her hands.  
Peel my ear when she reminds me  
daughters are meant to veil themselves behind the skirts  
of their mothers, *when are you going to visit?*

I don't tell her this is why I left.  
*You know, I know...it's easier to be far from this.*  
*From me.*  
We both heave           wordless.  
She whistles softly through her teeth  
and I am packed with the air of her.

## Papá

peeled oranges by never lifting the knife from waxy skin  
until the entire fruit sat undressed on his palm.  
There, on his balcony, I was all saucer-eyes  
focused on his sure hands, his silver wedding band  
flashing like his smile under the Dominican sky.

He was a neighborhood hero, head of a clan of fifteen  
children, and king of his balcony— where passing neighbors  
raised a hand, or asked his opinion on the weather;  
where young men paid respect by nodding their head  
and he would raise his orange knife in return.

His good eye was still good then, and he laughed as I  
stole the ends of the orange skin, coveted like a ribbon.  
I didn't even like them, the oranges, but the swirl of rind  
could become a coiled ground lizard, a peeled noon sun,  
a leather accordion of fruit; anything could be anything back then.

Now, as Mamá cuts the oranges, leaving the flesh in their peel  
Papá grabs at the slices unable to find his mouth.  
He keeps forgetting he will die in this New York cold;  
they've had to explain to him—he forgets often—  
that he's too frail to return.

Mamá made the decision after the last time they visited DR  
when a thief jiggled the lock on the door, broke into the bedroom  
and laughed at Papa's cursing, his toothless mouth and white glazed eyes;  
he held a knife to Papa's saggy-skin covered ribs,  
until my old people handed over their rings, Mamá's gold chain, the dollars.

And although I heard the story secondhand, I keep on remembering  
what Papá does not anymore: the thief leaving as quiet as he'd entered.  
Papá's trembling hands wiping away his own tears.  
Mamá patting him gently and lamenting that it wasn't his fault  
that the island had fallen apart.

## After He's Decided to Leave

When the bottle of hot sauce shattered in the kitchen  
he stood in the doorway, shook his head at the mess.

Not worried if I was injured,  
mostly curious at what else it was I'd broken.

You are so clumsy with the things you hold,  
he never said.

The red stain on my chest bloomed pungent,  
soaked any apologies I might have uttered.

I used his shirt, the one I used to sleep in,  
to wipe the counter and pale-colored kitchen floor.

That night and the next for a straight week  
as he prepared boxes to leave

I hunched and scrubbed the tiles. Couldn't rid myself  
of the things that I'd sullied, of the look he left behind.



## Paint Me

with wide brushes  
coil my hair  
pepper some salt  
loose  
over both shoulders.

Let there be creases  
in the skin  
folds that hide  
these secrets  
full of shadows  
let me be  
Frida Kahlo-end  
braided into myself,  
no still life  
North American apple.

Lounging here  
in a bookworm's room  
show the words  
that have mountained  
at my bare feet

that have stood  
me up.

I was not born  
for stillness  
let them see  
this woman of acrylic  
throbbing canvas.

Show them this mango  
heart ripening.

## La Última Cacique

Anacaona traveled music-like.  
Leaving goosebump footprints on the spine  
of the highest mountain.  
She knew she'd have to hide,  
when those men began to show  
their skins did not clothe gods:

it was in their eyes. Blue and green as  
Atabeyra's waters, but starved, clawing,  
first the women, then the children,  
the root vegetables from their beds.

They dropped gold  
into the mouth of their hands  
until her people had nothing more  
than fisted wounds  
for this never ending hunger.

Anacaona fled into the trees  
where the earth thrusts at sky.  
*She should have fought,*  
it is easy to say.  
But when they came  
she merely tried to soothe them  
like frothing dogs  
that could not be patted to rest.

Who amongst us understands the need  
of a white man's anger?  
They burned her people alive.  
Gifted her a collar of rope,  
cheered as her fingers scraped  
at her throat for air.

It was a hot day. It always  
is on the Island. Her toes made wind  
as she swung, then grooves in the sand  
as she was lowered and a world ended  
and a new one cracked open:  
swallowed us all.

## Mirrors

What does a country do when a mirror hinges from a tree?  
The mirror is not a mirror but a neck; not a hinge, but a rope.

What does an island do when it is not an island but a mouth?  
A mouth spawned by coins and captured between a Spanish jaw.

What does a mouth do when gnashing mirrors sharpens its teeth?  
Mirrors made of polished obsidian cracking against the pressure of teeth.

What does a woman do when her claim to the country is just a claim?  
A country is less a country than a rope wrapped in a flag,

then a woman is not a woman only distant fingers trying to slip between noose  
knot to help a body breathe.

February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015

*for a man nicknamed Tulile in Santiago, Dominican Republic*

it never begins when the body hangs from a silk tree.

it always begins when the body hangs heavy and knotted  
to the silk tree, and the tongue slips out of the mouth  
—like a swollen maggot?— no, simply like tongue.

this began when the body hung heavy from rope,  
knotted to the silk tree and the tongue, swollen with creole,  
slipped out of the mouth, a simple tongue.

it didn't begin with the tongue, swollen with creole,  
slipping out between blue lips; hands bound as if praying  
couldn't push the tongue back into the mouth.

did it begin with the tongue, swollen with creole?  
the shoeshine polish on the long fingers clutching a winning  
lotto ticket, a stolen lamp, the tongue bragging with glee?

it will begin again by forgetting the tongue, the black shoeshine polish  
on the long fingers, winning or stealing, the dirt caked on bare feet,  
the tree bowing low in the park plaza in this city of caballeros.

begin here: black polish, skin, dirt. a city named after gentlemen.  
the shoeshine boy, not yet twenty, known by no real name,  
known for no real reason to have been strung up  
the way only a black bruised body takes flight.

it never ends here-- these bodies hanging from silk trees.

## Regularization Plan for Foreigners, 1922

Trujillo says: *I will fix this.*

And so the man digs the ditches.

The dirt packs beneath his nails and when his wife kisses  
his fingers at night she tells him they smell just like graves.

He holds her close, his bella negra of accented Spanish,  
who does not think how a single word pronounced wilted  
could force him to dig a ditch for her.

Some nights, he dreams of yellowed eyes. Of sweat-drenched  
dark brows. Bodies stacked like bricks  
building a wall that slices through the sky.

Borders are not as messy as people think.

They are clear, marked by ditches, by people face down,  
head-to-ankle skin-linked fences: Do Not Cross.

Puedes ser nada disfrazado en piel y pelo?

He's learned to turn his ears down like a donkey  
when the children of Haitians plead, *Yo soy Dominicano.*

*At best they're mules,*

El Jefe tells the ditch digger, who is glad  
he was born on this side of the flag. *This remedy will continue,*  
El Jefe says. And so the ditch digger repeats the instructions  
like a refrain for cutting cane:

aim low, strike wide, look away as the open earth swallows them.

La Santa Maria  
*For Hispaniola*

Leave that bitch at the bottom; wooden husk dulled and molded,  
weighed with water. We don't need any more museums of white men.

Leave something for our black dead to play in. The bones of their once  
brown bodies walking the Atlantic floor to dance around this first vessel.

We don't need Columbus' ship when he's already given us an ocean of ghosts—  
imagine them in the thousands. Hundreds of thousands. Long released

from their skin crawling forward on an elbow, on a knee, knuckles, all gnaw.  
Pressing eye-less skulls to the portholes. Knocking. Finally being let in to somewhere.

They stumble across the deck, touch the mottled curtains, spit on the iron fasteners,  
place copper coins between the disks of their spine, dance.

I hope pirates have brushed fingers with these ghosts, that they've been led to all the  
gold and pulled apart the ballast until it is nothing but a pile of splinters,

a great heap of wood meant to be left at the bottom; sell no tickets for this bringer  
of apocalypses... but if, when you pull her up, you want to make a bonfire,

I've got the matches.

Juan Dolio Beach

The white man holds the girl's breast to the sunshine.  
Rubs a thumb across the nylon fabric covering her nipple.  
Squeezes. To test firmness? Ripeness. Her body  
a highway-side fruit stand, she is chosen the same way  
Momma taught me to pick avocados.

*Don't stare*, my cousin says. *It's just a part of the tourism.*  
The girl bats at his hands, playfully. Not so playfully.  
I can't tell, too far in this area of beach  
where I toe the sand and sip *Presidente*.

The man's accent isn't English, the bills Euros and wet  
as he pulls them out of his swim shorts' pocket.  
She steps away. He pinches her ass. Playfully. Not so playfully.

I try to think of sex worker's rights as I watch her,  
skin colored like a bruise, thick patch of sun-lightened hair.  
Barely older than the last time I was here when I was fourteen.

The white man says something into her ear and laughs loud;  
her smile is like the edge of a butter knife,  
and my breath catches, can't tell if the sweat on my palm is mine  
or the beer's. My throat becomes a tostonera  
that presses the words flat

—Auxilio! Auxilio!—

the cries from a crowd near the water splits open the moment  
and the girl runs towards the drowning.  
The white man doesn't look at her as she runs  
and I will his eyes my way, to see all I've been wanting to say,  
  
but I am not really a woman from here: I own nothing he wants.

## The Parties, 1993

tio hector loves the parties.  
the ones that start after 10 pm and last  
until la madrugada—tio is a man made  
for dawn, shiny shirts, and dance shoes.

sometimes mami lets you go to parties  
with tio and his sons. dresses you  
in hoop skirts and bows and reminds you to act right.  
you usually throw a tantrum around 2 am—

either flustered by the stream of strangers  
pinching your cheek, or hungry,  
craving sleep and tired of hide-and-seek;  
you never last as late as the other kids.

tio hector always gets annoyed. his accent slurring  
he tells you to stop being a baby, *grow up, eli*.  
you don't cry when you hide underneath the coats  
on the hostess's bed. you are quiet when tio

comes in and kisses a woman not his wife,  
dances her softly around the room.  
you barely breathe when you hear noises  
you've only heard when papi watches late night tv.

and when tio finds you under his fur  
and carries you to his brown chevrolet  
he doesn't say a word. and when everyone else  
in the car dozes, you don't tell how close  
tio hector drove to the guardrails.



## Theories on Facial Hair

I'm told that on the island women with mustaches  
are the most coveted; grow the hair on their upper lip  
long and thick, are chased by all the men  
because sexual prowess flags their face. I tell them  
Americans only love Frida Khalo in theory;  
that the eyebrows bridging across our foreheads  
are where confidence suicide jumps. That womanhood,  
like shaving, is easier if you just go with the grain.

## First Job

I rise with the bread.  
Sleepy-eyed and yawning  
walk the four blocks,  
clock in and clean the windows.  
Forget to lock the door.  
Put the day-old bagels  
near the front of the display.  
Sweep. Wash the counters.  
Check the register.  
Forgot to lock the door.  
By the time I hear the welcome chime  
the bum already has his dick in a fist, stroking.  
Miguel, baking scones in the back,  
hears me scream.  
Laughs as he runs the man off.  
*Why your hands shakin', girl?*  
I forgot to lock the door.  
And so I mop. Greet customers.  
Percolate coffee. Warm bread.  
Smile.  
Pretend the girl inside of me  
isn't just a small roach  
always waiting for a broom to fall.

## What That Mouth Do?

contorts

a pair of spreading swan wings  
a black hole seaming itself closed  
a puckered up plum... intact pit

fuchsia tinted window  
pushing tongue out for a drive-by  
it be sawed-off            it be saw

a wolf trap      an open bird cage  
a water-colored chinese lantern—  
tea candle in womb

it split spill    suction knives  
it be snake and fangs  
and tangles      a pout

women like us have one answer:  
this mouth stacks itself rows of bricks  
narrowing walls that close in    crush

## Stranger Tells Me My Body Be Temple

and so I show him where  
I have stuck my fingernails  
    beneath this chipping paint,

spat on the stained glass;  
used crooked backbone as scaffolding  
    knowing it won't hold up a broken ceiling

I tell him, *I've glugged down  
the church wine and given sermon.  
    Men flock but they never seem to come*

*for their spirits. If it were up to me,  
I'd burn this altar nightly  
    and dance alone in the rubble.*

Pray that shitty pick-up line elsewhere.  
Because if anything it is the pure  
    holy of instinct:

like closing your eyes  
and guiding an earring  
    into long ago pierced flesh.

## It Almost Curdles My Womb Dry

Imagine the boys:  
they will help me carry grocery bags.  
Then whistle. Whisper.  
Crook fingers in my daughter's direction.  
She will accept their invitation.  
Chill behind paint-chipped staircase.  
The cheap vodka will burn her throat.  
But not how they will later.  
They become more thrust than thought.  
Watch them grab wrists and ankles.  
She is now a rope they jump.

For the years that follow.  
When she wakes me. Her bed puddled  
in piss. I will scrub these hands raw.  
Tremble at what they couldn't prevent.

I hold all the smiles of my daughter.  
Tipped up to the milk of this promise:  
she will not walk hunched.  
Forced to turn herself into a corner.  
Taught her body it is a place to huddle.  
She will not smile polite as men make war on her.  
She must be  
Carved from hard rock

sharpened      shrapnel      a spearhead

her whole body ready to fling itself  
arrow the hand of the first man  
who tries to cover her mouth.

## Part Two: Brother Myth

“ Help your brother’s boat across, and your own will reach the shore.” – Hindu Proverb

## Brother Myth

A chub cheeked one. One of hollow face.

The milk brother is tall, bull-chested,  
the shine of his father.

The other is boiling marmalade,  
quivering stomach, quick fists.

It's okay to think of Cain and Abel.

Like in that first pair, one of these two  
also heard voices; was considered unwell.

The younger brother is the yucca's bark:  
earth-dark. Coarse. Having become only skin.

The older brother is the flesh:  
where the goodness pulses; where hunger's quelled.

The sister? Like all sisters, the storyteller.

One brother, difficult to tell which from a distance,  
leads the other to a field on fire.

There these men dance beneath an awning:  
knitted shadows of brothers past.

The knife, when a brother reveals it, a thing of magic,  
a thing of awe; they both marvel at the first sparkle of blood,

neither cries, neither cries out.

There is no tussle as one learns what must happen.

He casts out his arms, he waits. When the carving is done  
they wear their grotesque skin like a fine new robe

and they are known to everyone as they have always been.

## Under the Bed

Mami says Rob put me under the bed  
I was five days old and still used to darkness  
so I didn't cry or nothing made no sound

Pops thought Rob threw me out the window:  
jealous older brother trying to reclaim  
his place but when asked

Rob just shrugged said he ain't know where  
I'd gone off to la niña se fue se fue se fue  
they slapped that shrug right out

but he still didn't say frantic parents  
turned the crib inside out small apartment  
they unseamed it looking for the baby

good thing Mami kept a clean house  
no dust mites to bite me no harm no foul  
just regular kid stuff hiding the baby

doctors probably have a million reasons  
no one remembers how they found me  
if I finally got milk cravings and wailed

if Mami's ghost umbilical cord drew her to her knees  
where the last baby she expelled  
was sleeping if Pops heard the wood shift

who knows anymore  
Rob never did say why he did it why  
he didn't say when they asked

if he was trying to hide me or hide me from.



## Waterfront SEU Metro Station

through the speakers the conductor's voice scratched a stop away from mine  
we stood still waiting for an explanation about the hold up  
late for dinner craving sweatpants and wine  
i shook my head at a fellow passenger sharing our impatience.

*a man has jumped the tracks at waterfront.* my stop.

and i can see him how he decided jumping  
was the best way. figured the quaking earth would understand  
how his bones felt,

how they can rattle in the hollow. he believed  
the only forgiving dress was sewn of smoke.

and what hands scraped  
him off the rails? did he have anyone to receive him: a box full of skull  
shards and scrap of a yellow shirt? were we all taking him in that night?  
the passenger i shared a moment with

huffed through her teeth checked her watch again  
leaned towards me whispering *if you're going to jump at least be  
considerate enough not to do it during rush hour am i right?*

nodding i politely half-smiled and the train brakes  
screached itself music.

## The Therapist Says to Talk through the Door in Case You're Listening

Brother, my heart is a peeled clementine and I don't wince anymore when you stick your thumb in the hollow middle, pull apart. You don't even swallow these pieces just set them underneath your bed (next to the safe box Papi pried open because he was afraid you'd bought a gun. It was actually a bundle of never posted letters to Obama asking him for the money owed to you for having penned the *Sixth Sense* and *A Beautiful Mind*), and as this scent of rotting citrus blossoms in the room we shared as children I can hear you murmur, your laugh echoing my scraping at the wood of your door. Brother, I am splintered, drawn blood. We both know how to slip medicine into milk, how to gift each other with our backs. The hundred kinds of *get out* someone can backhand against a name, take them all, palmed, opened, don't be afraid that I'll ever try to walk through this door, because the surface against my cheek is the only comfort you've shown me in years. Brother, you always said clementines were too sweet. Fold, shrivel, leave nothing behind but molded skin.

## Extractions

*For Rob*

On the day I'm getting my wisdom tooth removed  
I shoot my brother five times in the chest. Hold his hand  
the way he hasn't let me since before his diagnosis. He dies.

The oral surgeon reminds me this procedure is necessary,  
the erupted tooth has infected, inflamed the gum. (I let  
it grow despite pain, convinced it had purpose  
to puncture through; to burst forth crown needing air.)  
The oral surgeon tells me it should have been removed years ago.

My jaw nerves deaden. Screams echo in my ear.  
The surgeon nudges pliers into my mouth,  
*You will feel pressure*, the assistant holds me down.

I tremble myself awake. The blood on my hands  
is not my brother's. The tooth has been plopped down in my palm.  
My own blood. I know my mouth already mourns it.  
*It will hurt for a bit, but things will be easier now.*

I want to tell the surgeon to put the tooth back. I can brush  
as many times as needed. My jawline will learn to make room.  
It can't be decided like this, on a pendulum of expendability, ease and aches.

## Laying on of Hands

He is the only sibling who never confirmed,  
a wild boy, type to make you sprinkle the floor with salt  
before murmuring his name. The smack-dab  
in the middle brother, and nobody  
was gonna make him do shit he didn't want  
to do and he didn't want to take Christ, let  
that water sprinkled on his baby forehead  
be enough to usher him good. Or let it not.  
A laying on of hands. Rob, he wasn't no  
rosary wearing boy, no bible verse boy.  
Keep your crosses, boy. A laying on of hands.  
He never said ghost. Never said his dreams had grown  
limbs. Never said the church, heavy with incense,  
moaning old women, men with twisted tongues,  
was what he lived daily in his church of a body:  
there be a pulpit somewhere inside of him,  
a lake of holy water— he floats upwards, glinted.  
This is why he's always smiling. A laying on of hands.  
His body decorated in mosaics, stained and glass  
behind glazed eyes, my brother be holy,  
he be fast spinning to tambourines so loud  
he can't hear the weeping, he has a congregation in there  
clapping, singing, Alleluia!  
Behind my brother's teeth a thousand candles  
flame, and he be praise and praise and all bread and wine,  
unlined with pews, kneeling to the god: himself.

Some days,  
it's like I'm waiting to feel his palms on my forehead,  
hear prayers laced between his questions,  
as if he's ever going to ask me:  
*What's hurting you, Liz? And heal.*

## On a Bronx-Bound 2 Express Train

we jerk to stop in the tunnel, delayed again.  
And as if that's not enough,  
a man settles a damn drum between his legs.

A couple of us groan.  
With quick hands he offers three hard slaps.  
Head cast back, eyes shut tight:

*the drum is a love story, he intones  
to those of us who've picked our heads up,  
between God's foot falls and our thundering need.*

A woman yells from the back,  
*"You tell your drum to tell God for me  
that I need to be the fuck off this train!"*

Most of us laugh but the man's hands  
keep throbbing heartbeats onto the skin,  
and by some kind of magic

halfway between nowhere  
and where we want to be  
a hush takes over.

Our skin aware; strangers, lightly touching, straining.  
The train lurches into the next stop,  
and the man stands, removes his hat:

I have nothing to offer except a sudden thirst  
swollen in my throat  
I didn't realize I'd been saving,

but he isn't requesting payment  
simply bowing as he allows us one last echo  
to hum a hundred prayers into a hallow sound.

## Superstitions

For sleeping: Don't fall asleep with your knees up or you'll invite a ghost to mount you.

For ghosts: Never ask them what they want. That's some American shit—a ghost lets you know without you asking.

For ghosts that won't leave: Use frankincense. Conduct a rosary circle. Lead them to a tree that guards gold.

For nightmares: Upon waking speak your dreams into the air: the witnessing daylight will prevent them from coming true.

For nightmares in which teeth shatter like crashing dinner plates: Someone you love has died. The teeth always know.

For menstrual periods: Don't touch any child not your own and don't wash your hair until you've bled for six days.

For the evil eye: Cross yourself and stay away from folks who would give a compliment but not follow it with a blessing.

For reading or eating: Don't do both at the same time.

For kitchens: Open an oven or open a refrigerator, but don't do both within thirty minutes of each other.

For men: feed them well and feed them often, the fatter the man the more likely he's too heavy to leave.

For cheating: watch out if you skip a hoop while fastening your belt—one time too many means someone else has been minding your man.

For superstitions: treat them all like salt, scatter them behind you; a trail leading towards home.

## Unnatural Deaths

My mother's Tio Manolo—  
made me thankful  
I only had to see him  
when my parents took pity  
and invited him over for Thanksgiving.

Thumping hard on the door  
with his cane he walked in hunched,  
stumbling, in godless greeting  
his stutter, or my tolerance of it,  
worsened every year.

He pissed every five minutes,  
sucked his teeth at the hamster cage  
stowed away in the bathroom—  
told Mami we should smother the rat spawn,  
not feed it.

He drank until he was radish red  
and cursing during grace.  
My brothers and I made fun  
of his c-c-c-oño as he reminded us  
he gave my mother her papers

otherwise we'd be worm shitting  
island babies.  
Mami would cut her eyes at him;  
*It's a day of thanks, Tio.*  
He'd ask for a refill of spiced rum.

When I was twelve, my mother made me choose  
between the hamster or a new puppy;  
*we have only room for one pet, Eli*  
and I thought I was being generous  
when I set the hamster free in Morningside Park,

Tio Manolo drove away every home attendant  
and friend. Didn't know any of his neighbors  
and lived a childless life. So it took three weeks  
for the police to find his rot of a body sandwiched  
between a fold-up bed.

At the funeral Mami says how when she first arrived here

Tio Manolo gave her a pair of wool socks,  
a box of generic hot cocoa; how he hugged her  
in the cab that first autumn day as she cried  
at the leaves falling from their wooden bodies.



## Pareja

is the Spanish  
word for pair.

Often used  
to describe a romantic partner.

As in, *¿Donde esta  
tu pareja?*

or *¿Y tu pareja,  
que piensa?*

But a pair feels  
like a heavy thing,

popped out of a mold  
and perfectly aligned.

*Do we match?* I ask him.  
*Do we match?*

And he shakes  
his head no.

*We're socks,  
differently patterned*

*but hugging tight  
in the washer.*

*We are pant legs  
patched at unmatched*

*points on the knees  
but still creasing close.*

*We're more like gloves,  
sometimes balled up*

*in separate pockets  
but longing*

*not to lose the other.*  
This is what I imagine

he means, because my pair,  
he ain't no poet,

so instead he says,  
the best pairs aren't perfect

and so I translate  
and know just what he means.

## Beloved

*(for Jordan Davis)*

It's easy to forget a pot of beans when you're numb.  
The burning crinkled my nose but I didn't stir,  
so when you come home

after work asking, *did you hear the verdict?*  
I can only tell you I forgot to lower the heat,  
that the stovetop stained where the beans split  
open

and pushed out from their skins; the boiling pot  
sputtering blue-black water I can't bring myself  
to clean.

Cubans call the dish *Moros y Cristianos*  
a name tied back to the time  
when the North Africans conquered Spain.

No one knows why the Cubans named it that,  
named their most popular meal  
after black power. I think they were being hopeful.

We say a silent grace over plain white rice.  
And I wonder if you, like me, pray for an  
unborn child we've already imagined shot in the  
chest.

Tonight, no music plays and for the first time  
since I learned to cook I understand  
a meal can be a eulogy of mouthfuls.

Neither one of us scrubs the stove. Some things  
deserve to be smudged. Ungleamingly remembered.

II (for Eric Garner)

your words, the night of the garner verdict, lack of indictment—what does one call an event like that?—were, *you should leave me*.

*the world is rotting timber, you said, & they will always see me a loosened ember, a loosie, lit and waiting to fall on all the combustible they be.*

anyone near you will burn, is what you didn't say. but was the plea, as if this loving of you is a choice I can walk away from now. because of this.

if ever i had any holy in this body, i tried to wrap you in it then but you didn't believe in god that night, & fractured, i couldn't glaze myself mirror.

i tried to reach for your hand, to place kisses on your forehead, whispered hope i don't believe about this world. you wanted no reminder that your skin is always mistaken as an exposed landmine.

that night, you counted the white spots on your body: the callused points on your palms, whites of your eyes, spots on your nails, your teeth. this pretty speech we were taught in college. you shook your head, not enough.

### III (for Sean Bell)

beloved, i've dreamt your ivory bowtie  
spotted with blood. will i wake with a start,  
as bullets whistle death hymns into your flesh  
that day, i will be tying gold ribbon  
to my wedding bouquet,  
singing a song, john legend  
or india arie, nervous,  
though we've spent years  
chasing each other in circles,  
your picture, when it appears  
on the tv or my twitter feed  
will be no more than your body  
at an angle, fuzzy, being held  
by concrete where my arms should be—  
will i place that in the wedding album?  
you're the worst person  
to try to paint a thug. they will still try.  
and it will be as we've always joked:  
there is not enough education,  
enough knowledge of the law,  
a high enough salary  
to bullet-proof a man dark as you,  
but i will not fire  
the wedding band, will not pluck  
the roses clean of their petals,  
will not try to make  
tourniquets out of ribbons;  
i will meet you at your graveside,  
signal the music to start,  
sway and hum to the tune  
of a first dance with your ghost

that it's not about how the heart stops beating,  
it's about how we keep dancing,  
and cooking, and selling loosies,  
and playing with toy guns,  
and playing our music loud,  
and being allowed to get lost  
and ask a stranger for help,  
and walking into stores,  
and out of stores,  
and put out hands up,  
and put our hands in our pockets,

and put our hands  
over our mouths  
when another body falls,  
and we keep on,  
and we keep the names,  
and we keep loving,  
and we keep loving,  
and we keeping love,  
and we keep fighting,  
and we keep,  
until the counting stops.

## On Imitating

Pops argued by turning his lips into staples  
that pierced quick and hard  
before being pushed together, clipped silent  
his wound of a mouth bruised the whole room,  
and the words we never said were better  
left in our heads since they only would have  
slammed against the closed door of his back.  
Now, when my lover asks me questions  
I don't want to answer I have to remind myself  
to mend my mouth soft, to stay  
when everything inside is sharp for me to run.

## Teeth

Papi holds me  
by my bottom lip,  
*no te muevas, Eli,*  
so I hold still,  
stare at his ink-stained  
fingers and think  
the factory  
must be a dirty place  
to make his hands so.

(Mami says  
he used to take pride  
in his hands,  
how he would wash  
them clean daily,  
scrub the blue  
from beneath his nails.  
That was before  
I was born.)

*No te muevas.*  
He doesn't raise  
his voice  
and I don't move  
as his forefinger  
enters my mouth  
and runs  
along the tooth.  
*Esta flojo. Time to pull.*

And I wish  
I was a white kid.  
In school,  
they nonchalantly recount  
how their parents  
give them apples  
until the tooth  
wedges into one,  
or how they're taken  
to a dentist  
who numbs



their mouths  
removes the tooth  
then gives them lollipops.

I have only  
Papi's hard hands.  
*Busca el hilo.*  
But instead  
of getting floss  
I hide  
in my parent's closet  
beneath the puffy comforters  
Mami only uses  
on Christmas.  
Later, I hear the story:  
how Papi  
called for me, knocked  
on the neighbor's door,  
looked under the bed;  
opened the metal grates  
from in front  
of the window  
thinking I must have jumped  
through the fire escape.

## zombiepocalypse

she will look down and spot a barefoot woman,  
carrying one shoe, dragging deadness,  
decrepit (people say they feel a gnawing hunger,  
that maybe you can see it, there, in the fingers

that repeatedly clutch at air).  
she'll scream, he'll come to the window.  
*stop that noise. that's just siete's daughter, fucking crackhead,*  
*don't waste breath on her, she got no teeth.* he'll lie.

but since she wants to believe him, she will.  
not knowing they are all waiting for the unbecoming  
& it will be like this. isn't it already? how long have we just  
been growing bottomless jaws?

## Chest Pass

Tyrone and I had a one-on-one basketball challenge.  
Our summer tournaments lasting  
until our puffed up Northfaces  
got in the way of our handle.

*Don't let them fool you—  
I thought wisdom could be chest passed—  
learn to read more than the Braille on this ball,  
Its skin is not the only place dreams are allowed to live.*

We dribbled beneath the spray-painted  
R.I.P portrait of his father.  
He swore, *Me? I'ma be a baller. Play for Syracuse.*  
I was always up a game. When did we stop?

Returned from school to find he wouldn't look me  
in the face. He'd organized the junkies.  
Trained them to lineup single-filed,  
half-glimmer mannequins,

cued to step forward, wait, head nod,  
and a dap later the line one less.  
When the new boys who didn't know me  
wolf whistled, reached for my wrist, Tyrone was quick

to lay fist on their chest, push them back,  
*Yo, don't fuck with her. Go ahead, Liz.*  
With wind-chilled face I leaned out of my mother's window,  
avoid looking at the stoop when he calls up, *You still play, Liz?*

Neither of us do, Tyrone, we grown now, right  
Tyrone? Benched our childhood in the Little Park, Tyrone?  
You giftwrapped yourself around the block  
and I forgot how to walk this neighborhood without being afraid

of making eye contact. The group we grew up  
with looks at me like I own a name they don't know.  
Like my walk don't belong on this concrete, Tyrone.  
But just because they repaved the stoop

doesn't mean my ass don't remember it, Tyrone.  
*Tyrone, how's your post move? Do you still  
have your sweet spot from the corner?*

## Memory When Trying To Grow Okra On Your Terrace

When I was little I had a pot on my fire escape,  
full of dirty dirt—there is a such a thing—  
pigeons would lay eggs and I would surround those eggs  
in Mami's nail polish cotton and try to help them hatch.

In the summers, I stole tomatoes  
from the fridge and put the juicy seeds in the pot.  
Something always grew. I thought I had my grandfather's  
farmer touch. I didn't know then the only thing I ever grew  
were weeds.

## Say

When I overhear my students being the kind of cringe-worthy cruel seemingly innate to all thirteen year olds, I don't say:  
*Say you're sorry, Naty.* And I don't say: *Mike, you'll regret that one day.*  
And I don't say: *You should be disappointed in yourself.*

I don't say that when I was thirteen Jenalise's mother borrowed \$20 from mine. Said it was an emergency.  
Mami later gossiped how that money was good as gone because *everyone knows Jenalise's momma be the biggest drunk on the block.*

And I don't say: when you grow up, don't say certain things in front of your kids who you'll think are kinder than they are but when a girl like Jenalise tries to sit with them at lunch or borrow a colored marker reserved only for best friends they will uppercut her in the gut with well-aimed snide:  
*Get outta here, Jenalise. Begging just like your drunken wobble of a momma.*

I don't tell them that the other kids they're mean to have mothers, and those moms might walk to the bus stop one day and hiss at them to keep nasty talk to themselves.  
How they will snicker at her to her face.

I don't tell my students they should be afraid because this brand of cruelty is often void of shame when you're still this age but how fifteen years from now, on a trip back to their old neighborhood, they'll see a woman walking down the sidewalk, and remember she was somebody's mother, how their words will echo in their ears and make their necks hot, how this mother will grab them by the elbow. Whisper, *Don't I know you from somewhere?*  
Look them up and down gray hair pulling in the wind.  
How she'll smile as their face reddens and raise a hand to their cheek.

I don't tell my students how a forehead can be shame-shackled to the ground with nothing more than a *May God bless you, girl.*

## Liminalities

Knuckles knocked into the back of Kalen's skull  
and Ava's long nails scoured her cheek—  
Did she scream? I can't remember, but still feel the rush  
of our pre-teen bodies running down the hill to watch.  
The thrill of knowing it was going to happen,  
of being, for once, on the inside. Blood welled  
on Kalen's bottom lip and stained her velour—  
this was back when the wanna-be-down  
white girls wore velour sweatsuits—  
but none of us stepped in, none of us said stop  
because initiations require witnesses.

And although none of us liked Kalen—her blue eyes,  
her blond hair, the way she dated Dominican guys  
and thought she could speak like us even though  
we all knew her mouth for the faucet it was,  
spouting slang on and off given occasion —  
she probably shouldn't have been stomped out.

And I can't remember—really, I can't, how she was  
the girl chosen. If we sat around the little park  
and the older guys asked if there was a girl at school  
that “could get it” and people blanked and although  
I wasn't a part of this gang, only a neighborhood girl,  
friendly with everyone, just wanting to be liked  
but afraid of bruising my own knuckles, if the name  
of this classmate I'd known since kindergarten  
hardened in my mouth like an egg that tumbled out  
hard and fat into the air; initiations require offerings.

## I Just Know When The Train Pulled Into 79<sup>th</sup>

the group of dudes in the back of our car  
had been playing the Dipset song loud, on repeat,  
for the entire twenty minutes I'd been on the uptown bound train.  
Head nodding with this new rap group out of Harlem:  
*This is that get crunk move bitch/  
Get drunk stupid/ High like space, four-five on waist.*  
And because they looked like me  
I was embarrassed for us. Wondered  
why they didn't use headphones. Why they didn't lower the volume.  
Why they didn't think about anyone else on the train.  
I refused to look at the old white lady  
seated by the doors who kept looking at them  
horrified. Maybe I'm making that part up,  
like the pearls I imagine she was wearing,  
because honestly, I can't even remember  
whether or not the boys were bopping their head,  
or if that was the exact song they  
were playing, but it was rap, and it was loud,  
and the train was packed like a kindergarten  
crayon box, and the train did pull into 79<sup>th</sup>,  
how the old white lady, sans pearls but definitely with a fur coat,  
pushed up from her seat and waited until the doors  
were about close before she lunged in the direction of the boys shouting,  
*This is the reason why we made you sit at the back of the bus!*  
The exact pattern of words, and the way she rushed off,  
I remember exactly.

None of the white people on the train even looked at the floor,  
didn't shake their heads or offer a collective apology.  
And I became flushed again, all over, for a different reason  
when the guys didn't yell anything back.  
Didn't lower their music.

## Rat Ode

Because you are not the admired nightingale.  
Because you are not the noble doe.  
Because you are not the blackbird,  
picturesque ermine, armadillo, or bat.  
They've been written, and I don't know their song  
the way I know your scuttling between walls.  
The scent of your collapsed corpse bloating  
beneath floorboards. Your frantic squeals  
as you wrestle your own fur from glue traps.

Because in July of '97, you birthed a legion  
on 109<sup>th</sup>, swarmed from behind dumpsters,  
made our street infamous for something  
other than crack. We nicknamed you "Cat-  
killer," raced with you through open hydrants,  
screched like you when Siete blasted  
aluminum bat into your brethren's skull—  
the sound: slapped down dominoes. You reigned  
that summer, Rat; knocked down the viejo's Heinekens,  
your screech erupting with the cry of *Capicu!*  
And even when they sent exterminators,  
set flame to garbage, half dead, and on fire, you pushed on.

Because you may be inelegant, simple,  
a mammal bottom-feeder, always fucking famished,  
little ugly thing that feasts on what crumbs fall  
from the corner of our mouths, but you live  
uncuddled, uncoddled, can't be bought at Petco  
and fed to fat snakes because you're not the maze-rat  
of labs: pale, pretty-eyed, trained.  
You raise yourself sharp fanged, clawed,  
scarred, patched dark— because of this alone  
they should love you. So, when they tell you  
to crawl home, take your gutter, your dirt  
coat, your underbelly that scrapes against  
street, concrete, squeak and filth this page,  
Rat.