The Perfect Mango

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Childhood

From my room I hear them speak they think I am a child
I am already old much older than they are. In my mind
I see maman I see her eyes wandering she is not listen-
ing to the conversation sometimes she nods she is not
really there but they don’t notice they lost their eyes as
their faces outgrew their features. Papa laughs out loud
he doesn’t think it’s funny he is tired I see sleep as it sits
on his lap he pushes it away angry he likes to stay up late
sometimes even if he is tired. I am big now they put me to
bed they don’t come to kiss me goodnight until the guests
have gone then they remember I wait for their kiss. Until
then I listen to them speak. Papa speaks of me he tells
them secrets he has kept from me he says I’m wonderful
she’s great you know he says look what she’s done yes says
maman she reads already I can feel them smiling guests
make them smile. I don’t know why guests stay away the
house is usually silent maman doesn’t like it when I make
noise my brother is little he is sleeping shhhh she says
but she doesn’t have to tell me I already know. You think
I am little but really I am big much bigger than you are I
am six I am two and a thousand.

In the morning I wake early I listen for the sound of
papa’s ring on the banister and then I know it is earlier
than six. In the bedroom across the hall I hear maman
pretending to be asleep. In the small room my brother
the perfect mango

screams he has diaper rash maman says I don’t think so I think he just likes to wake the house after a dark night. I don’t like him much he is not a girl so little with his dark black hair and he cries all of the time. Maman holds him in her arms I hear papa leave she feeds my brother with a bottle her eyes far away she thinks I am not looking they think I am a child I’m not I want to say but they don’t listen no one listens to children.

I want to tell you about my childhood but there isn’t much to tell I have been a child many times and in between I have been older than you will ever be. Today sitting in the café with all of the others sitting around me eating their eggs and toast bacon and home-fries I am among children many of them but they pretend they’re big just like I pretended I was big when I was much smaller than the others.

Every year maman makes me a cake with raspberry jam between the chocolate layers with fudge on top and smarties. I blow out the candles and my aunt says what a big girl I am. If I could reach her face I would pinch her cheeks and smile then she would know that it hurts and maybe she wouldn’t do it next year. When I grow up I’ll never say you’ll know better when you’re grown up because as far as I can tell they don’t know better and they’re all quite big at least twice my size. Sometimes people still pinch my cheeks not often though because I am so big I can look over rooftops and step on grown-ups walking below.

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From the window to my left I can see the world moving time at its heels. All around me I see sparkles of time held on invisible thread with fragments of childhoods left behind. In the leftovers on their plates the unfinished crusts the yellow of their yolks the fried potato they forgot to eat in all of these pieces there are glimpses of the
childhoods they would rather deny. Talking about childhood is not for them it is reserved for people like me who like to tell stories and for those who don’t want to grow up. What they don’t know is that they’ve betrayed themselves with their messy plates they’ve revealed that their mature faces are nothing but masks to conceal the children they’ve covered up.

I can tell you a secret about being grown up but you must never repeat it aloud. The children we weren’t in a world that grew up too fast those are the children we are today. You see, it’s much safer to be a child when there aren’t grown-ups around who are supposed to take care of you who are still children themselves having children. If maman were to make me a birthday cake today one like the ones she used to make it would have twice as many smarties and thicker fudge and most importantly it would have many more candles to blow out and I would wish many more wishes I would blow harder because my breath has strengthened and my wish would come true. When I was little my lungs were still too weak I never blew all of the candles at once I never got my wish.

Today I will tell you the story of my childhood it will be the story of my day we will pretend it is my birthday. Today I will blow out all of the candles on my cake and my wish will come true. My wish will be to tell the stories of all of those who sit and speak in hushed voices at the tables around me but we will pretend that this is my story because they will deny everything I say. That is another sign of adults concealing children. I will call this my story but you will know that this is also theirs and yours.

Twenty-five years ago I was born into this strange place people call the world but really I have lived a thousand years. Already on that day when I was dropped into space and time I knew I had lived many centuries but maman didn’t like to store that many candles in the house so we kept up the pretense that my first day began at your side. From that moment I grew and grew sometimes my nose
was unfortunate sometimes I had a bird’s nest on my
head but you really meant my hair your back is not long
like mine you said meaning your waist is thick your face
is long oval you said meaning the shape is not mine wide
cheekbones your breasts are so large you said meaning a
body is more beautiful without breasts to mar the line of
the clothing you said standing in my clothes in front of
the mirror. It should look like it does on the hanger like
it does on me you didn't say. I want to be you maman I
didn't say.

* * *

I am learning how to fly to get away from those words
that seer me still to get away from the desire to cut off my
breasts to hide in thick layers to keep your hands to keep
my hands from my body. I have been learning to fly now
for many years. I still crash sometimes in fact I did yester-
day. If you look closely you’ll see a bruise on my stomach
but that only happens when I’m being too careful and I
forget to let my wings move with the wind. I remember
the first time I flew. It was the day papa announced to me
that there was another child with maman in the hospita-
tal. He dressed me in the pink wool outfit the one with
the bonnet that grandma made for me to go to the circus
and we went to the hospital but when we got there they
wouldn’t let me in because they said I was too little. Papa
let go of my hand and I let my feet float off the ground
I flew high into the sky so high that soon I was looking
through the window at papa and maman and the little
one screaming at her side but they didn’t know I was
there because they think only angels can fly.

I didn't fly much after that. There was a time in my life
when my feet became so heavy I could no longer leave the
ground. I forgot to fly and then it was a long long time
before I tried again and found I could lift myself high
into the sky. I couldn’t tell you even if I tried how long it
was between those flights because time passes through me sometimes slowly sometimes quickly and I think that was one of those slow times.

These days I have to be a little more careful when I fly because I am big now and I have to watch to make sure my feet don’t get stuck in chimneys and that I don’t fly too close to satellite dishes because if I did the people watching TV would see me on their screens and who knows what might happen then.

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