

Spring 4-12-2018

The Face of a Young Girl

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The Face of a Young Girl

A thesis presented to
The Graduate Faculty of
The College of Arts and Sciences
Department of English
Georgia College & State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Isabel Acevedo
April 2018

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Georgia College and State University in partnership with The Academy of American Poets for awarding the Frankye Davis Mayes Poetry Prize to “Adam”, June 2017.

“Aubade” was first published in *Berkeley Poetry Review*, Issue 47.

“Lost the Root” was first published in *Aster(ix), Asterisms*, Summer 2017.

“Black Olive” was first published in *Tule Review*, Spring 2017 and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

“Aguacate”, “Isla Verde”, and “Puente” were first published in *Mortar Magazine*, Issue 2.

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THE FACE OF A YOUNG GIRL

Lost the Root

Spirit, grow like flamboyán, a blaze
blooming red. Everything red.
Black and brown, mancha
de plátano—I can't see it now.
Come back to me, Isla,

that I might taste you in the gradation
flesh of a mango. Flicker in the mauve
moon freckled water. Call to me
in the salted blue mouth, call

in the swinging
creaks of coquí on the tree bark.
Rise from your green ripple
mountain. Raise me.

Puente

for Gustavo Cerati

I look for you
in Puerto Rican heat,
and Papi singing
in his Suzuki,
water on either side
of the bridge to Isla Verde.

I am sorry, Cerati,
that we can never return
to the sandy shores of our childhood.
Our feet are no longer soft
or small enough
for the walk backward,
to birthday parties,
when Papi held you
and your family sang
Cumpleaños Feliz.

I don't know you, but I know
how to say love:
risa, familia, sana sana.
I have seen
Abuela's blue-green bowl
fill with mangoes.
And I know I am too old
to let the juice stay
on my cheek, too old
to lift my dress
and dance in the street.

I have heard your voice
against air, tearing
through the back seat
on the freest ride—

And I know the song
is never the same

no stanza break

once you are alone
in your room
and the loved ones born
out of that music
are gone.

Ese Pobre Lechon (That Poor Pig)

*Ese pobre lechon, que murió de repente
con un tajo en la frente y otro en el corazón...*

Abuela took a bite of ese pobre lechon.
Le meterion diente a ese pobre lechon.

I am slow to speak, and so, quick to be alone.
My mouth is as dry as ese pobre lechon.

Is this blood of my ancestors or only my own?
I ask the dull eyes of ese pobre lechon.

The plates are laid bare of all but the bone.
I am picked clean as ese pobre lechon.

Bells ring in the church, another year gone.
I am as at home as ese pobre lechon.

The hammock swing—torn between chuckle and groan—
always goes back to ese pobre lechon.

A Welcome

It has been an American year.
I cannot remember the last time
a guava invited me to eat.

I step out of *Muñoz Marín*,
and I am frightened.

Has it been too long?

On my tongue,
the accent turns to pebbles.
It moves as an iguana
through thick mud.

I stammer through *calle sonata*
to visit *familia*. Abuela
asks me if I'm hungry
and returns to *la cocina*.
I must say *sí*, say *gracias*.

Slowly, my tongue
relearns the rhythm.
I feel my heart red
as *flamboyán*.

Out the window,
I see my mountain
mother, a cloud
on each shoulder.
Sheer curtains
reach with the wind
to touch my cheek.

Parade

The wedding photo is waiting in an old box.
My mother's face as a young bride is beacon white.
As a child, I clung to her curls in the dark.
I could not separate her hair from the sky.

My mother's faith is pure as a young bride.
Her face looks like her mother's. She looks like me.
I cannot separate our hair from the sky.
The dead are whispering in my sleep.

Her face looks to her mother's and finds me.
A parade of pink lips and white dresses.
The dead are whispering, come and see
a family history of being left, loveless.

A parade of pink lips and white dresses.
The wedding photo is fading in an old box.
A family history of being left, loveless.
I am a child, clinging to her in the dark.

José y Marta, Semana Santa, 1999

Resurrect José y Marta,
side by side *en el patio*.
Wrap Marta in olive cloth,
put José in cool blue—
let them breathe.

Resurrect *padre y madre*,
beside my bed, praying
to God, holding hands—every
meal, bless and bless.

Every night
Marta dreams
God grants visions—

His fat and freckled hand
picks her up by the rope of her hair,
sets her down on a new road.
God says, *walk*.
Resurrect yourself, here.

Isla Verde

My father sits under a palm tree
because he cannot swim.

In the water, I dive
and resurface, dive, re-
surface, pulling us in
and out of existence.

When he sees me,
my head is a black olive
bobbing in blue sea.
When I see him,
his head is a coconut,
warped in heat.

The sun
lights a ripple
and snaps
my father in two,
leaving a white scar.

If You Were a Farmer

Would you learn faith?

Wait. Pray for rain.

Understand that the sun,
the turn of the Earth,
is not against you,
but outside you.

Would you accept
each silver strand
of hair, each hard line
on the forehead, each
rainstorm and drought—
Would you accept this

and grow your wife a mango tree?

Give her the fruit, ripe
and sweet, every morning?

She can cook for you.

Sancocho, rice and
beans, something warm
for your belly when you return
tired from the work.

Can you be satisfied
with that love,
this land, your labor?

Farmers know
which fruit to tend
and which to let rot.

Farmers know
they will be buried
with the rotting fruit,
with no applause.

Father, they know
to stop fighting, when
to lie down.

For That Summer

Papi's apartment in summer:
a back yard: brown soil full
of gecko-green trees.
Inside: one table
and many books.
A stray lizard on *Amor*
en los tiempos de colera.
A rainy afternoon at three

turns brown soil black,
glitters gecko-green trees.
Papi teaches me life,
shows me art. I forget
to love this time:
a rainy afternoon at three.

I understand
we have left
each other.

Let's remember
that Sunday at three:

beside the fence:
a large *corcho blanco* tree.
We climb
holding melted ice creams.
A stray lizard
startles you.
We eat on a branch,
wipe our hands on bark,
see the sun fall.

The Blue Room

after Intuition #2 by Esteban Vicente

Now, the red sun
at the window—not
the sole source of light—
presses to feather-mist.

I am the cloaked red figure
entering in sky shadows.
Sun, blue light without
time, below.

Abuelo is coming.
He appears to my right,
feels a part of everything,
head bent down to me.

Dead four years. Now
I remember those white
wisps. His eyes—
the room color.

Isa—he holds me.
I know he's not
dead. I know it
inside the blue room.

Aguacate

I am in awe of the perfect avocado.
Sea turtle skin. Wild rainforest green.
It curves like a pregnant woman.

Puerto Rico is full of perfect avocados.
The island so ripe, wild rainforest green.

Bliss: the humidity of Abuela's kitchen
where I unlock the avocado. Knots of green
line my fingers. My hands become trees.

It never lasts long enough. I leave,
only for a moment, and look,
it is a brown fist.

Colonia

The tourists disembark
their cruise ships,
pass the beggar,
turn up their noses
at the stench of piss
in parking garages.

The beggar, burned
brown by the tropical sun,
calls *platano, platano*,
three bunches to a stick.
Platano, platano, no plata,
no oro, not one peso
for the beggar who,
at night, sleeps sitting
in the doorway
of an abandoned Church's Chicken.
He sleeps with his elbow on his knee,
palm waiting for un peso, oro, plata...

Students in the streets.
Debts are rising. PROMESA
presiding, dictating. Protestors
blocking, chanting
¡Puerto Rico, si! ¡PROMESA, no!

Atop the green hill,
El Morro looks with two faces—
one to the sea,
the other to the graves.

God-fearing

The preacher tells me, if you believe you'll go to heaven.
But when I woke on Monday, I realized I don't know God.
Death scares me just as much as God's existence.

Abuela almost died today on an airplane,
she must have confused an angel with a cloud.
The preacher says, don't worry, she'll go to heaven.

It is near impossible to console a dying woman
because, when we look outside, the winter day is a diamond.
I cannot forget death or God's persistence.

I can't sleep on my back, it feels like a coffin.
I confess, I want Earth's treasures: that gold
leaf, my lover's voice, hot chocolate—all heaven.

I return from Abuela's house and cannot speak the word *gone*.
Ask *why?* Ask *how?* Say *please, God. Please, God.*
In the shadow, I see death. In the light, God's existence.

Abuela is crying out by the sweetgum.
No, it is only an owl alone in the wood.
The preacher tells me I'll see her in heaven.
But death? God! I question all existence.

The Devil's Dream

1/

The homeless man
wore beaten
clothing, thinning flesh,
and sweat. In his hand,
he rolled three
batteries, each click
punctuating a pause.
He asked,

Have you heard of the Devil's Dream?

Click.

In a vision,
John saw the Lamb break
seven seals. The four horsemen
ravaging the earth, the sun
pulling a black shroud over
its head,
then the moon bled.

2/

I feel the anger in me
when I'm confronted
with a boiling face, I imagine
the punches it would take
for them to bleed. I am satisfied
and ashamed.
What became of my feather heart?

*They tied me down. Click.
Shot it up—click—in my veins.*

I become wild.
Imagine throwing myself
against walls, slam
the door on my fingers.
Does that make me crazy?

He's so dirty, so homeless.
Does that make him crazed?

I cannot unsee
the devil at his back,
but also behind me.

It's the mark of the Beast.

3/
After her rape, I knew
how one can break
more than the body.
Her hands yearning
for the embrace of mommy
like a child waking
from a sick dream.

I see her curl like a smoke ring,
see the broken nails reaching
most when I am standing
between a strange man
and the dark.

Beloved,
never avenge yourselves;
leave it to the wrath of God.

But I look to Him,
then I look to her.

*I'm trying to be pure,
to be a godly man.*

Matthew 10:35-36

The photo: me in front and you behind.
We are children. Your hand on my shoulder.
Sister, why won't you let God in? We are
older and, to you, life has been unkind.
You spent years waiting for love to begin.
Who saved you? No one. I'm sorry for
this helplessness, but should we be colder?
I have tried my best to hope for a heaven.

Mother had a dream of you in a maze,
and beyond, a fortress. An angel light
leads you—its hand on your shoulder. It says
He has not left you. Mother says you fight
demons. Forgive my push. Forgive those days.
Stay with me in this life, and after.

Plucked Oranges

These are the last of the season.
Burnt oranges speckled brown
like the freckles on her tanned nose.

She presses the blue bowl
like a scoop of the sky
holding many little suns
against the dip
of her girlish waist.

The ground around her feet
is littered with carcasses.

Colors drip, sticky
like orange juice
in summer heat.
Leaves darken
their green, tree bark
sags into dusk's obscurity.

She must go home
pursued by a long shadow.

Of My Image

The dream created
a shadow room
and a woman
unfamiliar to me.

She was beautiful,
but I was not happy. I saw
her breasts were plumper
than my own, the nipples
shyly pink. Mine are
dark, vengeful.

Yesterday, the doctor found
a tumor in the right one.
A river stone. Only
a doctor or a lover
would notice. The thumb
discerning a hard pebble.

In the shower,
in the mirror,
I cannot help but observe
the indifferent pupils
of my chest. I poke
the offending breast
right in the eye.

I told the woman
you are beautiful,
but she knew
what I meant.

Black Olive

Delicious berries
fill that bowl
with an uneven edge.

My hair is a coarse tassel.
My mouth is an olive.

I count forty olives.
They dive into my mouth,
taste as honest as trouble,
mean and sour.

I cry and feel foolish,
suck my lip down
to my teeth. I must devour
all forty. I will
assume their being.

Just three
would make my eyes
dark and byzantine.
Ten would make my hair
coil and gleam. Twenty
would offer my body
a dominant curve,
and thirty could make
my skin turn cold
and unfeeling. But forty,
forty will make me speak
the language of bitter fruit.

Adam

You need the night and a light,
God knows, the stars to
fill you with faith that is
like despair. There, a rock
for beating. Here,
a flower to remember soft—

new grass soft, lion fur soft.
You must define light,
and name yourself, too
for the order of things. There is
so much to know—plant, rock,
animal—until there isn't. Now, here,

in the garden, you are alone. Hear
the antelope groan for a mate, soft
and low in the falling light.
You need someone, too.
But first you must trust what God is:
stubborn as a rock.

God who turns water to rock,
He will meet you here
in the garden. He will tread soft
as a panther, and wear only light,
and when He comes to
you, fall on your knees, exclaim, He is!

And this is
what He will do: turn over a rock
and gather the dirt, make an incision, here,
under your heart, soft
skin grinning, the light
off-white bone to

grip and snap in two.
Dirt, bone, breath, and then, there is

no stanza break

a stomach smooth as a river rock.
There, a hand for touch. Here,
a mouth to tempt. Hair soft
as the wolf you named when light

was newly known. Here, there is yet rock without violence,
light still of God, but to love her, you must give up soft,
give up bone, and never again will you be clean.

Aubade

The sun is only just beginning
to burn. Birds
swarming in a lava
lamp. I move

so slowly.
I do not want to leave you,
but I must be going.

Somewhere, something is burning
on the stove. I am beginning
to burn,

but it is slow
like the birds waltzing—slow,
elegant smoke.

Somewhere, lovers are meeting,
kissing: delicate vapor.
But here, the sun is burning,
I must be going.

Look at the blackbirds,
look how they are swarming,
stretching—slow sun
smoldering. I really must be

going. Look
at the waltz in the sky. Birds know
always when to go and they go.
I must be—

Somewhere, a light is switched
on, the bulb burning and someone
saying: That time already?
I must be going.

On the stove, something
is burning. The birds are going,
the day is beginning.

My love is beginning
to burn, but the sun—look
at the birds, ballroom dancing.

Greenway in Winter

I run into a friend.

(how nice
sometimes)

I meet her eyes
here
at the park.

They are brown.

(your eyes are brown)

Her eyes remind me
of a deer's, wide,
baby sweet.

Your eyes are not
her brown,
but the steady logic

of dark earth turning.

(i could plant my hand
in your eye,
watch my new body
grow)

There is nothing to hide in your eye.

(your eyes
are not here)

She's left—my friend—
and now, I'm leaving.

I crunch every brown leaf.

Whatever

Tonight I'm a grump.
The moon is smudged.
(Stars—who cares?)
You're not here.
I turn on the lamp.
(What's the point?)

The lamplight pretends
to glow candle cool.
I remember your bare
torso and rumpled jeans.
You leaned against the bed frame.
One candlelit hand on your chest.

I wanted to sing,
hold me! To shout it, loud!
I didn't.

At this moment,
no candle,
no you,
I could sing it,
(hold me!)
I could shout it.

A Question

The cat
with a missing ear
devastates
my daisies.

A bird
dies, slamming
its small body
against the window.

I find
a dead cricket
on my pillow...

I search
the dark corners
of our room:

desk,
underwear drawers,
your face turned
away in bed.
A moonbeam grows,
runs from your head.

What I Wanted

with a debt to James Wright

I.

It is better to forget as
to when the
night stopped. My eyes: plump
sleepers. At dawn, a squirrel
is always shifty. My heart scampers.

II.

The rod of sun across
the table is silent. The
calculated yawn, the exposed roof
of your mouth—I take the hint. Of
our love, there is nothing the
guests want to hear. Baby corn
on every dinner plate—someone get a crib!

III.

There is the
moon
and suddenly
every light stands
up
in the alley, in
the middle of town, the
passersby can't know this delicious darkness.

IV.

And?
How can I
see
your love that
is not enough? It
(everything!) is
becoming impossible.
The way we move to
conclusion—we can only count on each other to die.

V.

I am miserable. Trying to remember each
happy moment
with the dogged drags of
time,
it is
an obsession, a monster, a
waste, a mountain.

VI.

It is difficult to have an
epiphany these days. The eagle
in the woods greets me, rejoices.
I can't be the only one dreaming in
animal noises. You snore, and the
crinkle of your lip is jaguaresque. Oak
nightstand to my left, what can he give me? Trees
no longer speak to me. Of
my life, I can only hope for heaven.

VII.

Crying

VIII.

You give me this
hand—your right hand—and it is
warm. What
more can we ask? I
say nothing, but to be wanted.

In April

Cherry blossom tree,
tell me why I have trusted
this man with my roots.

I long to be cooled,
thin stem of wine glass, weeping,
curved cup to be sipped.

The warmer season
turns my hair more swamp than silk.
Can he love what sticks?

I don't want to want.
My heart is a sad, fat thing.
And my hands? Stupid.

He is still quiet.
Blossoms bite their lower lip.
I want to scream.

The Downpour

The wind comes
without you
and with wild rain.
The willow sags with rain.
I recall your hair,
heavy with wet, neck
bent, your hands
wrapping strands
to knot atop your head.

Once, you exited my shower,
and always you flicker
like these petals.
The thought and the thunder
nearly kill me.

In this wet corner of sky,
a twisted braid
of melting clouds.
Blades of grass
arching their backs
in the rain-sweep.

The air pushes
my world into the earth.
I have to cup my hands
and dig everything back out.

The Main Course

I'm looking for myself
while making breakfast,
while looking at this mango
and trying to dice it.

It slips.

Despite that,
and the tender veins,
and the hard center,
and the slow sweetness—
despite my desire
to be as desirable as
this mango,

I'm not this mango.

Everything
is rotting: fruit,
the world, and—
most alarmingly—
I don't know
where my heart goes.

Maybe I'll make a bed
for my heart
in this empty half
of mango skin
that burns the corners
of my lips.

Yet, leftover
pulp persists and delights
my tongue—

My tongue that is warm,
slick, and feels
everything in small
portions.

It's not unlike
my heart, except
the feeling is real.

Longest Total Solar Eclipse

July 16, 2186, lasting 7 minutes and 29 seconds

When it has been so long
since and you
have been so far
from, there is nothing
to do, but look.
All else is
indecipherable.
You and he become
indistinguishable,
become each other to become
something wholly
other. Color
sucked from the Earth,
all else is
muted grey.

Then, you must be
self and separate
again. Each
must leave
to remember
the minutes, so long.

The memory keeps you in orbit,
when you are waiting
for the meticulous geometry of a meeting
in the ever-expanding space.

New World

Give me a mountain or a field.
I must remember what the world isn't.

It is not one cement block
atop another. Not the dirty,
pot-holed street, the car horn's
goose-honk. It cannot be
my wicked, naked body,
and, certainly, not his.

Give me a black rock with a sharp elbow
into the sun. I will sit
in its unshakeable pool. I could follow
the red root at its edge.
Will it lead me to the tree
of life—that forbidden knowledge?
Give me all there is to know
 or else
return the ignorant world.

Night

The sky is a black eye. I try to sleep,
but I was thinking about death and now
have heartburn. Today, a man at a cheap
gas station approached me and said, *Hey, how
ya doin?* Half his face purple, swollen,
deformed. We talked. I left aware of my
vanity. Tonight, I guess, I'm thinking
of stupid luck, my pretty good life I
could lose. I ask Eli if he believes
in heaven. Maybe he says yes, but it's
2 a.m. *I hope so*, I say. He buries
his head in the pillow. I press my chest
onto his back and feel my heartbeat then,
solid, bull's head ramming against its pen.

Midtown

You tell me when we kiss
you hear a flute.
For example:
this music at the bar:

there is a flute.
A human voice.
A first soprano
like my sister.

On TV,
someone thinks the world is ending!

Even though I don't
believe it, I hold you
deeper when we kiss

and when we kiss again:
a flute.

The Face of a Young Girl

I want you to kiss me with your blue mouth
beside this bunch of blueberries.

It is delightful to bump into you,
plopping your berries in a bucket.
I like to see you there in your floppy hat
with the knotted string at your chin.

You sing quiet as breathing
and whistle for the birds.
They whistle back—they love you!
I want to pop you in my mouth like a blueberry.

You find a plump berry
and pick it just for me,
place it delicately in my palm.

We are living inside a big blueberry,
sweet and juicy.

The Two of Us

This morning I put on my clothes. I think
 thank goodness! for these thick legs. I'd hate to teeter
on my walks. I take them every day, and today
 the sun is fat. That's necessary. On my walk, three
mothers look comfy in their sweats, jogging with
 their babies in strollers. The babies are dreaming of
milk clouds. I remember Julia is pregnant.
 I'm not supposed to know this. Eli told me because he
loves me. Last night, on the phone, he felt
 sick and said, *at least I'll die loving you*. He's still
alive. So, we're having dinner tonight—
 the two of us. The next morning: oatmeal and
oranges. Eli brings them to bed. Often,
 I dream of myself as a dumpy old woman in my
seventies. I'm certain he's going to be a
 wiry old man. Together, side by side, we're hilarious.

Burger Joint

He and I sit
by my favorite window—
the length of the wall.
It opens like a pop-up book.
Eli reminds me we're living
on a giant magnet. So, if the pull
were to stop...that's it.
The candy orange cocktail
in my hand seems childish.
I spill a lot of it
on the floor.

Outside, the lamppost
looks at me
as it has looked
at every face like mine
since 1879. In another state,
my mother and sister laugh.
On the island,
my father dreams.

Outside,
the moon can't stop
looking at the sun.
She shuts her eye.

Onion

In the kitchen,
we are playing with spices.
I want to be like abuela,
magic in her fingers,
but I am more like my mother—
magic in her heart.
The carrots give me grief.
Eli is like my father
in the kitchen. Always
getting creative. Already
off book. I
am like my mother.
Everything exact.
I have cut three carrots,
tried to make the slices equal.
They aren't.
Eli takes the onion.
I am too sensitive
for onions. In his studio,
the windows won't open
and I can't help but cry.
He kisses me,
but he is covered in onion—
it only helps my heart.
I will be leaving soon.

Consider Domesticity

I lie face down
beside you—thick
head of hair—your fingers
scratch my scalp.

We have taken
out the trash, washed
the dishes, poured
the tea.

There is nothing more
to attend to, save
our bodies.

You call me
wild stallion. My hair
falls long—strands
sitting upright, some
stretching arms wide,
some lying face down.

When we first met,
your body to me
was a piece of flint—
all line and spark.

I say, now, *years since...*

I raise my face
from the carpet, turn
to you, and this
is what we do:

disturb the carpet
to love and
dance, to speak
with limb and hand,

no stanza break

before we settle
to read, repose,
to sleep, and then,
disturb the carpet
more. Then settle, again.

It is all very cyclical,
and cyclical sounds
like sickening,
but if we don't
spin too quickly—
if we don't—

We are Alive, and it is Tuesday

Tuesday is green.
Sheep graze
green. Water runs
up to mountains
that are not taller
than us, to vanilla
cake homes in the suburbs.

Tuesday breathes deeply
as we breathe deeply.

Our minds expand
on the kitchen counter.

The sky inflates.

Gold, green, gold—
Tuesday is three swatches

and a live oak
glowing against your window.

An Island in my Palm

There are so many things I can't
hold in my hands. I am
small. I could still
love them all.

What does God want
from me? I ask you, God,
directly! Who I am,
will be—it
concerns me.

Those great-greats,
to the greats, down
to me—the whole tree.

I want to love plainly,
and for God to speak
plainly. He always looks
at me, so I ask again.

Ars Poetica

I.

Who dares
to call me a poet?

II.

My first poems
were to my mother.
Always,
I pray to her.

III.

My heart beats
like a bumble bee
bumping
its fuzzy body
against a window.

IV.

My name means
one who is consecrated
to God.

V.

What I'm saying is open.

VI.

My father
lives regularly
with bees.
Who knows how they get in?

VII.

I would like to make myself
in my mother's image.

VIII.

I stand under
the showerhead
and wash my hair
in the company of
two bees. They take
no interest in my body.

XI.
What I'm saying is vulnerable.

X.
Every poem is a flower.
Or is it every poet?

XI.
If it's quiet enough,
if I open my mouth
wide enough,
I'll call the poem by its name.