

when the signals come home

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Inheritance

To raconteur tongue,
 solar flare temper,
Mom's cheekbones,
 Pop's weak eyes,
to knuckle-busted hands,
 arachnid fingers,
Bible names,
 terracotta curves,
to plantations taken,
 vows broken,
a potential future: green-
 legged and stalling
 until the surgeon's saw,
to musical ears,
 a fine reed of mouth,
solitary mothers,
 separations, restraining orders,
to holes:
grandfather-shaped,
and fathers who
 fantasized absence,
plastic spoons,
 tall folks,
to soldiers, sailors
in violent jungles,
roseless spring days,
 nights above melodic
 crack vial crunches,
to Bed Stuy,
 gunshots beyond school fences,
grandmother midwives,
 Ellis Island,
to Atlantic graveyard,
 blackened sea floor,
bad hearts,

troubled brains
to titles, never-ending christenings,
mistakes both breathing
and not,
to accepting blame,
love under gaslight,
child-shaped collateral,
juvenile bullseye,
to never ending right:
a daughter, a poem.

**i. “maybe i’m just like/
 my Father**

—“When Doves Cry” by Prince and the
 Revolution

Find the River

After Talking Heads

1.

Back in the day when Civil Rights was in vogue, Bedford-Stuyvesant boy back when it was *do or die*, a river of silver roamed in my father's mouth, dragged and sharpened over whetstone recruitment at the chime of eighteen. A man in Nicaragua far from home: serrated and leaking from butchered astronomy and Bed-Stuy, *always Bed-Stuy that eats its young like the East New Yorks and the Brownsvilles* (lies we startle trust-funders and yuppies with but still they stay and things change). My father, right-handed, but always trading steel with the left, ambidextrous-knuckles quicker than the drop of bass, the eighties left him without a unit, a knife and the melted river swaying to life between his lips.

2.

My mother trapped hummingbirds in her stomach which fluttered when she laughed. Brooklyn-girl, single-mothered, house full of uncles, aunts, and cousins who chased a whiff of the American Dream in war-ill Korea. House full of Spanish, English, *a village, a village*, my mother heavy with love and a cut-out where her old man should be. Had my older brother at twenty-three, beautiful and screaming so many promises, the night black and simmering with stars ready to open their kitchen windows and shout librettos. Mom, college-fresh, a taxing, government woman.

3.

Brooklyn Hospital in the nineties, my parents and brother waiting as I'm cut from Mom, all Lorca-green and a month late into the new, weary space. My name fell from her lips then—the story of my name: Jesus swaddled in a river's mouth, *descending* as John the Baptist watched.

J,

the first letter
of my name, coiled
to lead the current
of sounds as Mom
opened the Good Book
to find my name there.

A reed with a curled end,
an axolotl with its joyful
tail tip uplifted.
Cosmonaut of language,
it buoys above
the horizon—
the David Bowie
of the lexicon.
Sometimes,
J masquerades
as *H* when Spanish
makes a home
from Grandma's lips.

I's moon, romanced
from his gravitational pull,
and given its own
space, stars, name,
This letter overwhelms the mouth
as Mom makes
a hymn of my name,
her trills a litter
of bells—satellites
for the waiting ear.

Graffiti Love Letters: Skewered Abecedarian

Someone's bound to be a
king in *Kings*
loose-lipped grins at the bootleg
man. Shops are all
neon
hand
grenades devastating the sidewalk
open or closed. Jehovahs and
panhandlers peddle similar gods and there's no time for
quiet when metal handles metal.

Someone told me that under all this stone,
there's a dream. The only things
under all this stone are more steel, folks, and screeching. I watch the
vexed cop
with the beach glass eyes, some newspaper like
Xenias boa-knuckled in his triggerhand. Always speeding, his rubber
yammers over roads with no appreciation for the
school
zone.

Saturdays with the Koi

For Jonathan

I can still taste the cocoa bread clouds
in my mouth, the warm braille imprinted
on my tongue courtesy of Christie's.
Yours is plump with beef patty,
the bag clutched in your hand
like an upside-down balloon.

We are cartographers of hands
these Saturdays. We chart every callus
and line as Dad holds ours, twin rolls
of footsteps on either side of his own.
We watch the koi create
swift circles under the pond's skin.

There's not a ripple to be seen
as they bully the turtles
in flashes of color—robbing
them of the bits of bread we pour
onto the water's face.

Recipe

The first dish I tried to make was scrambled eggs
with cheese, sprinkled spices. Dad raised them against
a sea of pearled grits, an island of butter at the center.
I built chicken parm on top of Dad's old recipe

With cheese, sprinkled spices. Dad tried to raise us against
Mom's cooking but her recipes held fast to us.
I built chicken parm on top of Dad's memory.
On my birthday, he brought home lobsters from Chinatown

but Mom's recipes held fast.
Beef was the domain of Mom.
Dad brought his lobsters from Chinatown as
her stews sang inside her crock pot.

Beef was the domain of Mom,
boiled in its juices. Potatoes bobbed
above the water, singing inside the crock pot.
Dad hummed as he cut my ice cream cake.

Stewed in our juices, our heads bobbed
between homes. Dad's army knife opened cans,
and hummed, my ice cream cake cut
as our taste buds floated between plates.

Between homes, Dad's army knife opened cans
and memories. In his freezer, meat rotted
as we floated between their plates.
The first dish I failed to make was scrambled eggs.

One Father's Day

Dad broke
open and cried at our small church

as if the pastor's sermon on forgiving
one's father removed him

from the concrete
he built around himself.

Holding my younger brother and I still
under each arm, the only movement came

from his body rocking
in the pew, cracked

by his loud sobs.
Dad's head bowed over us

his tears raining upon our bodies.
He never spoke a word of his prayer to us.

I never knew he could cry—
never knew he could find a place

with us where he could weep
so freely and I wondered if this

instead was the boy my father was
before he fitted the cracks in himself

with cement—before he decided stone
was a better alternative to soil.