

3.

i landed in san francisco with \$500, a shaved head, and an electric Smith Corona typewriter in 1996. i came here on a Greyhound bus that smelled like fish and dropped me off right above a rotting sewer grate in downtown. i had no friends. i had no job. i stepped off the bus smiling, i had been smiling almost the entire time. i had waited for this day my whole life. i was gonna leave LA and never come back. i was gonna go to san francisco and i was gonna do everything i wanted. lots of people said i was a runaway. i had no place to live. but, i knew they didn't know what they were talking about because i was home. i was already home.

4.

In 1997, you read in a bar on the border of the Mission and Folsom. You read with a group of women everyone wants to sleep with but are secretly scared of. You are noticed by now, people might even say you fit in. You make friends by telling your sad truth. Only, you are not sad. You are alive. And the truth is whatever you say it is. And if it sets you free, fine. And if it only exists in a story then at least you tried. Every show and reading feels this way because it is still safe, still safe to be wild and free and young. These things don't cost much money yet. Of course you take them for granted. The bar is gone now. You look at the cream and beige condos now standing. Once, it was dark and lovely, you climbed up an illegal smokey staircase, you stood on a pool table and read at the top of your lungs to a room so full it was spilling onto the streets, and out of the windows was hot wax running down the side of your hand. Once, it was over, and there was clapping and thunder and so much noise for more, more, more, give us more. Once you were enough and San Francisco was a beautiful, crooked place that let you be clumsy. You can't afford these condos, but never let them tell you that you didn't live here.

FUCK

You were hoping she would say, “Will you fuck me?” But she asks you to go inside her. You know in order to do this some part of you already is. You use what you always fall back on, your hands. And this time it is a fist. The truth is, you never go in that way. You’re never sure she’ll let you and sometimes doubt your ability to push in the right ways. But they ask you to. You know your bodies fit when the femme under you doesn’t even have to ask you to go slow, to take it easy. You like to think this is the secret language of femmes. It’s not reserved for anyone in particular just the ones willing to hear it. You know there is a type of magic hidden inside them and she wants you to find it. Then, one hand slides itself into their hair and grabs it just enough to tilt her head back and let a small moan escape from that beautiful mouth where so many words live. Then you take your other hand. Your good hand. The hand you can’t live without because you use it for everything. The hand you take for granted until right now when you feel the muscles in your body tighten and your heart beat against your bones you wonder if she can hear it. You take that hand, and you go to work. It makes its way inside and their face changes and she opens for you like pages and water. And she allows more of you to enter them and you can’t help for a split second think of all the ways and all the people and all the whispers that have been right where you are right now. You take their archaeology and try to read the writing on the wall, try to find the culture and the history so that you, you can be different. You won’t take it and put someplace else for everyone to see. No. You will let it stay put and just be thankful you got to see it at all and thankful their eyes are closed so she can’t see the dumb look on your face because to you, this is not discovery. It’s not fine-tuning an instrument, it’s not trying to hit the right notes. It’s just a moment. And you want to make it last as long as possible. So you keep going and maybe now you’re thrusting your good hand deeper and deeper while your other hand gently holds their throat or cups around their head like a baby bird. You hear the sounds she makes, feel their nails dig into your arms and back and their body is in flight and you move together. Then, it starts to happen. The good hand takes the form of a fist and though it pushes into them it doesn’t fight its way in. And the pushing is a punching, faster and faster. And once again you can’t help but think where you’re fist has been. How

many protests its cut through the air, how many times its defended the country of your body against those who would hurt it, how its punched walls and doors and windows and could never find a way out of its own pain or into its own sanity is somehow right now completely holding this femme up and if this hand moves a certain way it has the ability to ruin them or set them free.

This is no dick. No cock. It takes time to enter.

You have to forget yourself so that you can practice the lost art of listening, not to their breath but to their want. Patience is not a virtue here it is a requirement and there is a strong chance you might not make it all the way in sometimes but a sure chance that you are forever changed when you come out. And their mouth that is usually so full of words only manages to let one of them out, “Fuck...Fuck.” And when their sounds have turned to high-pitched moans, then screaming, then crying, then more screaming and the length of them has become one wide-open geometry— then.

Then you really give them what she wants, what she’s asked for. You go. Inside. And to say that she cums doesn’t quite cut it because really, both of you arrive. Together. And your hands, these tiny wonders that you criticize for being too small or too rough or not fast enough to keep you fed or housed turn out to be everything that one femme needed right then. And you exit the same way you went in but never the same. And you let them breathe it all in, while you lie on top of them and kiss them and fall into their hair you let them feel it all and you hold it. That space.

That moment, now gone. It leaves you, but it lives somewhere else now.

CHAPTER TWO.

When a bodyspiritbeing lives in pain, often, often. When all other opportunities have been lost. When all, when all. When there is only the thought of the edge, you meeting it, again relief. When there is only you and one more step.

Imagine
Imagine
Imagine

It's not romantic. You should not feel romantic right now.

But you feel different. Maybe you don't. Maybe you have shit for an imagination. Maybe you have decided a long time ago or even five minutes before reading this that you don't need to imagine because imagining things maybe sets them into motion and you are more superstitious than meets the eye. You are not stupid and it's a shame because so much of this wouldn't mean anything. Wouldn't that be nice.

Regardless, maybe you don't see see this. And that. And the truth is, you still think it's a desperate bid for attention/privileged/whiny/drama. And well, it is. And well, it isn't.

Let's just use the edge from now on. Imagine the edge. In hiking, the edge is how you test your limits. Not the climb. Not the height. I would know. I hike everyday, almost two hours per day. It is a beautiful, soothing, and luxurious activity that requires nothing except decent shoes and the willingness to get lost. I feel born to hike. Now back to the edge. Hiking is up, is distance. You know you are going, advancing, adelanté. So measuring your success by climbs, by canyons, by mountains is to be expected and becomes rather easy. Even when you know the climb will be tough, you still know and the weeks or months or even years preparing for that one climb becomes routine, becomes habit. You are not studying that. We are talking about limits here because everybody will want to climb it too and will want to try; they will think they will have the best route, the best way, the best idea to get there. And the way they make those decisions, we make those decisions, is by seeing how close to an edge we can get. Is

it an edge we can hike down. Is it an edge that is sharp. Does the edge have stones around it which is a trail marker but you always believe is actually an altar. Do you stand at the edge of the altar, look down, and don't feel dizzy anymore. That's the real danger. That's the test. How comfortable are you at the edge. What will you do when you are not afraid to look down anymore and in fact, looking down is not vertigo, looking down allows you to see deep inside, so very deep. Maybe you don't even see the bottom.

This is not a metaphor; that is really hiking.

This is what you tell yourself everyday you wrap the front part of your feet against a rocky edge to straight down. It is a canyon you visit like church. There are always a murder of crows there. They fly so low to you that their black wings are blue in the sunlight. You can see the jagged edges of their talons. They make figure eights in the bowl of the canyon. When you put your arms up you look like a conductor and they are your orchestra. You forget about the edge. You use to be afraid of heights, afraid of edges. But now you see the murder and think, "This is just where my friends live." This is where I live.

This is not romantic. You should not. Feel. Romantic. These edges are tricky for hikers. Imagine for suicidal tendencies. Imagine this is where you live.

CHAPTER THREE.

While it was not encouraged, it was an option. That's what I remember most. That there was this option called "suicide" and while it wasn't encouraged and wasn't talked about often it did exist and it was an option. I could decide to die.

Sherry's mom from school did that. She decided. She decided in a bathtub not with razors but in a bathtub with pills and booze. She decided naked. She decided with freshly washed hair that smelled like lavender and tomorrow. She decided hours before her husband, Sherry's dad, got home from the auto body shop he co-owned. She decided at dinner time which meant there was no dinner and the last thing she ate was a cherry donut at breakfast (her favorite). She died sticky and sweet and alone.

When school started again after Easter vacation, Sherry told me about her mom. The bathtub. The cherries. Sherry didn't cry when she told me. She said it matter-of-factly only it didn't happen that way then because we didn't know that's how one spoke. But that's how I remember it. Sherry sounded certain, clear, sad, "My mom committed suicide."

I knew Sherry's mom had died but I still didn't understand what suicide meant. I didn't want to ask her. I looked it up in the dictionary at the library, my church, my sanctuary, the only place in South Los Angeles that felt safe to me, felt true to me. If it was in a book, in here, then it must be real. That's where I really learned the word. I read the definition over and over. I checked on it in the Encyclopedia Britannica. I looked in the card catalogue for the word and there were countless books with the word suicide. So, it was real.

It was real, I thought, "It's real, I can do this if I need to."

That was when I felt relief. I slid from the wooden table into the equally varnished, wooden seat. The current book I held with both hands. Open. Then laid flat on the table, my hands spread across left and right pages.

The neighbor-man and two relatives were still touching me whenever they liked. I spent years trying to hide, to be small. Maybe they would forget about me. But they never did and hiding, avoiding, and running were already becoming limited opportunities. Unlike suicide, telling was not an option. Telling was more abuse. No, no telling. No talking. What for. I was not the only one, my siblings hurt

too and we all banded together and tried to get through it, just get through it, it will be over soon, it always was. But, I felt tired. It felt endless. Even with others it was lonely, terrifying, and endless. These adults would always say it was the last time, they were sorry, they didn't want to hurt us, they tried everything, it was one more time, no need to tell because it wouldn't happen again. Until next time. And next time.

After six years of this I concluded there was no end in sight and that even with others I didn't think I could keep my mind much longer. Again, that's not how I remember it exactly but that's what happened. My mind was nervous. It was running out of places to run to.

But then suicide happened. There was now a thing called suicide. I could decide to die. When there was no more use running, no end in sight—I could decide an ending. My own ending. With my own mind, I could create an ending. I was introduced to an ending and for the first time I felt hope. I felt relief, sitting in the wooden seat in the back of the musty library with all my friends on the shelves. I breathed deep and long.

"If this does not work out, I can decide," I told myself.

That was when I was eleven-years-old. I'm forty-two now.

Now, I want to die. It's different. I don't feel relief. I feel acceptance. I feel closure. I feel power. Finally, I feel power. Not powerful. Not empowered. Just pure power. Not over someone. Not over something. Power. A force greater than myself. A vastness I feel close to. An understanding. Okay, slow down. That's still too far. Even for me. Now. Now I grade ten essays, put the wedding photos in a box in a closet I never visit, eat a bowl of cherries while Sherry's mother's name falls out of my mouth for the first time in decades, "Samantha," I whisper, "Samantha these are still so sticky." And watch the pits slide down the drain like ice skaters or dreams.

CHAPTER SIX.

Of course, you still have monsters under your bed. After all, monsters truly understand you. Of course monsters still scare you (they're monsters! They're prone to grabbing feet, little pinches and growls in the dark). But when you are alone and he hangs up, he always hangs up, and you are on the bed thinking, Now, now, now, now, now, now When you are looking for the *pillsgaragedooropenerakitchenknifeabathubmorereasonsmorereasons*. When you stop daring. Before you can even take a step,

The monsters quietly put a large, green, taloned paw on top of your right foot. The monsters hold it and shake, gently. When you gaze down at your foot it looks like a face shaking a "no." *No, no, no*. The Monsters shake. Then the monsters hold your foot the way you hold something you love. The monsters always find you. The monsters are only joking. You may not be joking. The monsters find you to keep up your heart rate. Only you are tired of a heart, all of its maintenance. You didn't even own a new car until 38, seriously. You are not quite built for maintenance. This is what you tell yourself down in the hole you are in. Monsters can live in holes too. Monsters get it. The green, taloned paw takes a single digit and strokes over, over your high arch. Then, you get back under the covers. Of course you still need monsters to remind you, You are not ugly. You are dangerous. Very dangerous.

ALL YOU KNOW

All you know is that it snows on Christmas in Vermont. All you know is there are men named Joseph with beautiful wives and perfect children in small puffy suits who make little snowmen in the front yard. All you know is that she has gray and white hair and still looks younger than you. All you know is she is Dr now and she works in a place with heart in the name on Main St, Main Street USA, in, you remember, Vermont. All you know is that the married couple have travelled many cities, so many cities they do not remember the sunrises, they do not remember their days before the perfect, puffy-suited children, the snowmen, they do not remember the past, they do not remember you. All you know is when they move their memories belong to goodbye posts and updates and they have many, many updates, like when one child learned to read, another learned to dance, both made gifts with beads for their father and their mother bought the beads. All you know is they make everything by hand, from scratch, together. All you know is the married couple smile, wide, in every photo and they look matched, paired, elegant and it never snows in LA. All you know are the Paperwhites in December, their fragrance a sharp whistle from across the yard. All you know are the ghosts that line the walls of a house that should be perfect but isn't because another marriage is ending, a father has died, his daughter made him gifts with clay and wood from childhood, the mother kept them and now they sit side-by-side where no one sees them, no one is updated. All you know is the house is an abandoned child, if only the right parents could keep it maybe the home wouldn't feel like such a curse. All you know is that in Vermont, where it snows on Christmas on Main Street while the Dr writes prescriptions for sound baths, gluten cleanses, and the heart, there are men named Joseph who always had a beard, especially when married to you, but now the beard is thicker and bigger than ever, he speaks easily and well, he is happy and better, it is because of the beautiful wife, it must be, because you don't remember him that way. All you know is you are nobody and no one and it has nothing to do with you. All you know is it's winter, it's 70 degrees, you are not a wife (again), there are no children (still), the streets are numbers that ascend into the hundreds. All you know is you are hundreds and hundreds of miles away from the first time and the second time, that on Christmas in Vermont Joseph is happy, with the beautiful wife that was once your friend, with perfect children, no past, and no frozen tears for you.

BIO



Meliza Bañales (aka Missy Fuego) is an author, advocate, and adventurer. They are originally from Los Angeles, where they grew up the youngest of four children to a Mexican-American father and a Scottish-Dutch mother. They were a fixture in the Spoken-Word, Slam, & Queer artist communities of the SF Bay Area from 1996-2011, touring with Sister Spit and Body Heat. They competed on three national poetry slam teams ('98, '99, & '02) and were Grand Slam Champion in 2002. Their short films have appeared at Frameline and Outfest, and they were the inaugural winner of the Jury Award at the Los Angeles Transgender Film Festival in 2011. They were a 2016 Lambda Literary Finalist for Best LGBTQ Debut Fiction for their novel *Life Is Wonderful, People Are Terrific*. Their work has been anthologized in the United States, Canada, Mexico, and Europe since 1997 and has been featured on *NPR*, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, *Lodestar Quarterly*, and *The Washington Square Review*. They live in Los Angeles and Central Coast California.