Savage Pageant: A Genealogy

When we were little,

my sisters (being the youngest, I too) thought

the pregnant form was disgusting.

Nothing is as plain or crass as expecting:

the awkward roundness

of past sex on a body-stage
and all that skin stretching

What we really wanted was

combustion to burn the deed

around our own real estate. What

we really wanted was inelegant:

a clean break from the spectacle

with gas station snacks
and water when we needed.

My grandmother had eleven pregnancies and an infection.

My mother had four and wished for boys.
Sometimes you can’t put all the bones back where they’re supposed to go.

I had a boy and they took you out with a knife.
Strange Beasts

for miscalculation

With all the morning bees we caught fleeing from ziplocks held high above our heads I felt lighter than a pixie dust chugging contest in the back of third period waiting for Mr. Fletcher to turn us out for a better office Didn’t you know the way I shook the time the leaves talked back to me outside Pierce Hall the way the petals of each dandelion juror unfurled to reveal these strange beasts we taught the things we called bees to float up into the sky to burst into individual bundles of paper to carry our notes downward down back towards the dirt of the Earth back towards the ground below our boots to sprout something bigger
than both of us
some creature
too large for
those plastic bags
to contain
Ariel

With hair up-staring—then, like reeds, not hair—
Was the first man that leaped, cried, “Hell is empty
And all the devils are here.”

—Shakespeare’s The Tempest

Darkness grew a little finger
and led the company

of men into the sea. Driven mad with the after-places of memory:

the trace substance, the years of sleep roused by the crack.

There was nowhere else to go but over they cried.

There were no instructions on how to create an illusion.

So swiftly inside a storm they recall:

a spirit released from prison for service was still a prisoner.

The ship and its rich garments were breaking apart.
It is possible to not know what lies
underneath your skin.

The smell of gas, a minor accident—
say fuel element failure.

We touch the pieces of dried grass
on our descent, gather

back together a bundle in place
of a vocabulary for names.

The great misstep, the human element:
defect as communal birthright.

And how to remember what was
never written? The memo

recommends departure, the memo
suggests trace substances

still in the hold—hold them still
leaking on roofs over tongue.

A stubborn breed, this animal. The
only retribution: unforeseen fire.

We pour our mistakes into black pits,
close the lid, and hope that the

smoke story might not reach the frontal
lobes of chain-link and ashtray.

We drink the water, we brush
our teeth with the water,
and force another match into
flame now growing dim by the
march of palms. No time to put it
out and no time to waste on
exit music. There is a rumor I
shouldn’t tell you, but I will.
Count your hands by syllables,
divide what’s left by the root.
We are not who we say we are and
the farther we go back, we’re
tracing blood—filling bodies with
this chemical breath, sending out
piecemeal parcels of well-lit verbs.
JESSICA Q. STARK is a mixed-race, Vietnamese poet and scholar originally from California. She received her PhD in English at Duke University, a Master’s of English from Saint Louis University, and a B.A. in English from the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of three poetry chapbooks, the latest titled *Vasilisa the Wise* (Ethel Zine Press, 2018). Her chapbook manuscript, *The Liminal Parade*, was selected by Dorothea Lasky for Heavy Feather’s Double Take Poetry Prize in 2016. Her poems have appeared in *Hobart, Tupelo Quarterly, Potluck, Glass Poetry Journal*, and others. She writes an ongoing poetry zine called *INNANET* and works as an Assistant Poetry Editor for *AGNI*. Find her on Twitter @jezzbah.
Praise for
SAVAGE PAGEANT

Jessica Stark’s *Savage Pageant* is a map, an “undulation,” a “fold,” something lightly sketched then traced on “something blackened, worn-out, and organized.” Stark’s brilliant move in this powerful new work is to problematize the paper itself: the surfaces that receive the many marks that a poet, an inhabitant, an animal, an archivist or an audience-member might make. What a brilliant writer. What a lovely and strange book. —Bhanu Kapil

Part poetry book, part collection of private, personal, and public histories, part summons, part rune, this book takes you headfirst into the other world where all you can do is swim past your own hurt and traumas into the sunshine hole of the unreal. It’s a book we must remember as we begin to forget ourselves. I’ll risk it all to say that we need this book for all of time, to take with us as a guide from here until the everlasting, because, as this book says to us, “We are only here for a / short time.” —Dorothea Lasky

The body of poetry needs a new script, and Jessica Q. Stark is more than happy to oblige. At the height of her multi-tasking, birthing simultaneously son and book, she holds you captive with her carnival performance of ingenious gestures, where language and motherhood play informal games of anatomic brilliance and take you through her sanitary mayhem of pandemoniac beauty and birth. —Vi Khi Nao