

MEMORY GARDEN

My garden is part mangrove,
part seed. Some days
it offers ancient wisdom. Others,
it is infantile.

My garden was once plagued by violence—
it has been burned and flooded. It has known anger,
grief, resentment. My garden
once contained rocks. For years,

its layers remained shrouded
in chemicals and landscape fabric.
My garden was depleted of sun.
It was covered in landmines—trauma
buried like treasure.

I begin tending to the garden
as if I were gardening on the moon,
with no idea what I might find.
I dig slowly—
hold roots in my hands
and pray.

You are here,
I say. Despite
an accumulation of horrors,
you are here. Resilient.
Adaptable. Capable of growth.

I will reclaim
every inch of you.

WHERE QUESTIONS HAVE BECOME BURIED & MEMORY BECOMES FLIGHT & BIRDS BECOME STILLNESS

I. Buried

Can you see this?

she asks. You are a lilac feather
reaching for Smurfette frames.
Truth is wet earth. Withered limbs.
An empty well. Your mouth is circular,
like rivers. Like memory. There are places
your mind has been, places your body has been.
At times, you can pinpoint exactly
where they have collided.

(What do you remember?)

It is late summer in the garden. Your hands wander,
discovering history. When you arrive,
the yard is sectioned with plywood fences,
overgrown with petunias.
The entrance gate rests on a rusted chair wheel.
Two iron chandeliers hang off the grand oak.

(Has he ever threatened her?)

Beyond the oak,
an overgrown bougainvillea
battles an army of invasive petunias for sun.
The water feature is an algae pond.
An extension cord runs over the grass.
On the south side sits a neon pink fort—
the words “Hello Kitty”
spray-painted black on its plywood walls.

(Has he ever hit her?)

In its heyday,
Hello Kitty functioned as an outdoor playhouse.
Now dozens of wasps inhabit its beams.
You pry the walls loose with a hammer,
arms covered in vinyl to shield from stings.

(Has he ever trapped her in a room?)

Beyond Hello Kitty is the wilderness—
inhabited by Brazilian pepper trees whose violent limbs
threaten to suffocate the fragile crape myrtles.
Birds live here—hawks, herons, egrets,
and swallow-tailed kites.

Only the haunted cries of the limpkin
keep you up at night.
Memory is a broken bird.
Pajarito triste. The wail of the limpkin
is the sound of wings fluttering. Of your mother's body
covered in brown feathers.
The twisted, elongated neck.
You dig your hands into the earth
reaching for roots.

(Has he ever choked her?)

II. Flight

The days that follow are thick with fog.
Even the wild rabbits in the yard are mist.
You drive to Pensacola
under a flat gray sky. When you return,
the house has fallen on you.

You are underwater. Nightfall comes
sooner than it should. The unspooling moon,
the swell of the tide. Each time you surface,
a miracle rises. Drowning must be like this,
you imagine. Part punishment,
part dream. Like seaweed and driftwood.

Every morning at dawn,
you whisper an incantation,
a rosary in your chest. You swim
toward the smell of eucalyptus
burning on the shore and sit alone
waiting to be taken
by the next storm. Once,
you had no idea of the things
that would break you.

Your shore fire goes silent at dusk.
You are reminded of moss
and turpentine,
of freshly painted walls,
of the things you don't want to leave,
of the ones you no longer want.

There are clues in each transition
of the moments that have been,
of the ones that will never come. You say,
thank you for calling to talk about yesterday
even if the past is of no consequence—
crumbling parts of an abandoned house,
a useless prophecy.

III. Stillness

There may come a day
when all you know is that you were once—
that you existed. A collection of bones
dragged from place to place.
The knowledge that any given moment
might be your last. *Did you hope to find light
by taking long, needless steps into the dark?*

This is a question you ask yourself often.
You have a tendency of avoiding physics.
You carry your expectations from room
to room, shifting their weight on your shoulders.

You arrive at the empty house and pretend
the expectations never existed.

There was a time when you had no idea
of the things that would break you. Certainty
was the altar on which you prayed.
You have since become permeable,
porous as shells. Fluid
as sand in the marsh.

I WANTED TO STAY CLEAN

But dirt found me
covered me like clay
like wet dough—too heavy to hold
almost delicious.

I wanted to stay warm
but winter found me
wrapped its bitter arms around me
until I closed my eyes and lingered
as if it were sunlight on my back.

One day I looked around
and recognized nothing—
the entirety of my life
transitional. The moon hovered
above the swamp, offered its final
cadence of light, and I stretched
into that familiar dark

pretending to be home,
pretending to know where home was.
Not because it was everything.
But because for the first time
nothing was empty.

FLORIDA IN MIND AND BODY

She calls Florida her *flor ida*—
her *gone flower*.
And after every storm,
she speaks of reality
in logical terms. *Hurricanes*
will continue to come
and when the water rises...

Memories will become submerged.
Objects will become lost
forever. What words
will we speak before drowning?

If there is more to come,
we will never know it.
If there is a better time
during which to exist,
it will not be ours.

If survival hinges on routine—
on habit and speech patterns,
do we dare ask the things that concern us
or allow our words to sink?

Do we swim and seek refuge
or abandon all questions? Of course,
everything dies, but until then
we continue breathing.

To live is to exhale repeatedly
into hurricane-force winds
trying to persuade a body
to remain attached to a peninsula
that has only ever wanted to drift.

UNTIL WATER

The mother bird walks further from the nest.
The fledgling falls. The fledgling
falls. Then spreads her wings.
Begins to understand
distance. Come winter,
she finds a space full of wild light.

Some people can never know drought.
It is because she was born on an island
that every phrase

must be an ocean.
She is a raft drifting,
drowning,
sinking.

What else could she be?
She is tired after every storm,
immune to the pull of the current.
The treble soars and neon
pierces the sky.

She has drawn a desert and decided
both her legs will be mountains.
The earth steadies. Her breath rises.
Again, she is water inside.
Her dryness—
unremarkable.

Desire is a resurrection fern
longing for rain.
She has problems with memory.
She knows the winding road
under the George Washington Bridge,
the knife edge of the cliff,

the fear of falling.
The places she returns to
are always similar—the hallway,

the last December,
the singular ocean.

*It is the places we leave behind
that are most treacherous,*
she says. This, too,
she learned in winter.
The same can be said of flight.

The past is a bird covered in earth.
She walks further from the nest—

ventures beyond the road
toward the colossal hill.
She moves slowly through ruins.
The flood comes. Another hurricane passes.
The universe is rushing water.

WINTER DANA

Quiero decir: *depresión aislada en niveles altos*
or high-altitude isolated depression
or days get shorter—
a fallen trellis,
an oxidized garden gate

deteriorated from lack of use
or the ordinary passing of time.

I want to say: darkness seeps in.
Either the sun is fading
or the earth is hurtling away
into the unknown of space.
The point of no return,
that place called memory.
In any case,

we are bound for cold,
for a lifeless orbital path
devoid of existence. Of course,
it may be as simple as the seasons turning!

I want to say: Let us forget.
I want to say: Let us never forget.
I forget the difference.

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Letisia Cruz is a Cuban American writer and artist. She is the author of *Bigwig's Illustrated Guide to Birds* (Tolsun Books, 2024), *Migrations & Other Exiles* (winner of the 2022 Idaho Prize for Poetry, Lost Horse Press, 2023), and *The Lost Girls Book of Divination* (Tolsun Books, 2018). She is the recipient of a 2022 artist grant from the St. Petersburg Arts Alliance and was selected as a 2022 Dali Dozen Emerging Artist for her project *Rituales: An Exploration of Faith in the Caribbean*. Her writing and artwork have appeared in *Poetry Daily*, [PANK], *Ninth Letter*, *The Acentos Review*, *Gulf Stream*, *Saw Palm*, *Third Coast*, and *Duende*, among others. She is a graduate of Fairleigh Dickinson University's MFA program and lives in Saint Petersburg, Florida with her partner and their three cats.