

CAN SERRAT:
CHECK POINT
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Can Serrat Check Point

During my three weeks in the Can Serrat writing residence I worked on an, as of yet untitled, chapbook of poetry exploring the relationship across several generations of women loosely based on the women in my own family, and featuring some biographical details, as well as dipping heavily into the mythology and folklore of Eastern Europe. Through my writing I have worked to reconcile the ideal image of family with the history of mother, grandmothers and great-grandmothers who all existed as individuals and people before they became defined by their relationship to their daughters.

As most of my writing, the poetry I produced during my stay at Can Serrat focuses on womanhood in the more general sense, as an identity steeped in silence, grief and marked by losses and numerous miniature daily traumas.

During my residence I produced two experimental prose poems, five poems, and worked on editing and polishing another five poems, as well as taking notes during the Racons for a potential series of personal essays on mental illness as a keystone in shaping one's identity. The poetry that I worked on can be found below, but I ask that it not be published on the Can Serrat website, or used in promotional materials, as I am hoping to seek publication for these works.

pray for rain

i dance across the cracked cobblestone
wildly, and without restraint, summoning clouds.

i am so big in my love, and hungry too,
i pray spring rain washes the prints of my grubby hands off your skin

i don't know how to keep my hands to myself,
i come to you, heart in hand, jumping in puddles

i hope spring rain drowns these noises out
i hope i stop screaming, brakes screeching as

i skid to sudden halts on my knees before you
let me walk out of this love alive,

i pray spring rain will heal me, please
i had tried to cast my eyes away

i had hoped to yearn more quietly, to be more worthy
the sun peeks above those sprawling cotton candy clouds

i pray the spring rain is quiet as am i,
i pray you let the aftermath be swift

i pray to be less hungry, i pray you kinder
i am struck blind by your teeth flashing in a smile

i had not known my own desperation, until you quieted it
i didn't even know i was in love

i write us into happy mornings, street lamps breaking into glittering lovelights
and i walk alone in the drizzle

i leave my marks on you, impermanent,
purple lipstick in your bleached hair

i dance across the cracked cobblestone
wildly, and without restraint

i pray you out of my heart
and i pray for rain.

the social, ethical, and moral ramifications of a mosquito

it's august so the mosquito sings
happy golden days of summer,
bathed in liquid heat

tiny, delicate wings framed
like glasswork, and spindly legs
dancing in the flurry of dust particles,

suspended in eternal stop motion,
rendered visible by a single passing
ray of lamplight across the room

it's august, so the mosquito sings
soft, tinny noise, one long note
held in a single, continued funeral song

its life becomes an elegy
sang to the sweetness of
dreaming for that single touch of skin

when she comes out of the sea
saltwater drops clinging
to the pale tops of her breasts

to the lightning-scar shape
the stretchmarks over her supple hips
and the rounded pallor of her shoulders

the mosquito yearns for her flesh,
sun-reddened and bitter with sweat
it's august, so she is ripe

so the mosquito serenades her,
a funeral procession of one,
wailing inexpertly, trailing its wings like a shroud

mosquitoes bite. she knows this.
it's august, and the bloodletting begins.
the press of a hungry mouth to flesh

the wound, cherry red, aching,
the blood, spilled, mid-song,
she smacks that hungry mouth silent

it's august, so the mosquito sings.
it too, wishes to be alive for the duration,
leaving its essence under her skin,

the life-span of fourteen days,
the duration of the love affair,
in august - a fondly remembered inconvenience.

a portrait of my mother as a young girl

in the zinc-glazed blue bath-tub overlooking a snowed-in st. petersburg
steam rising gently turning itself to dreamincense along the mirrors,

she nibbles slowly on her grandmother's pearls,
rolling them between her teeth, while soft-still her hands gently prune,

leans back, her freshly henna-hued hair running blood
into this scrying bowl, where her still-young body dips gracefully

show me a place
where daughters are not abandoned and
where mothers sing like silver and

submerged in a dusty bath-tub full of suicides
overlooking the grey northumberland landscape with its passing blurs of healing

teeth lining the inside of a child's mouth like jade beads in a bracelet,
vanilla-thick water hugging warmly this unlovable body

of a milk and honey daughter,
gracelessly straining to a prozac-glazed sun

she leans back, freshly bleached hair sucking the color
out of this cracked scrying bowl,

like midas-touch,
passes it forward

чүтө [chuto]

it was my brother's name
when he was much too small
for a much too long full one;
started off simple and sweet,

first, he was Pavel, for my grandmother
Pavlina, who was placated at last
to have a child in the family named after her,
but he was small and the name was vast

so we called him Pavelcho
like they had called her Pavlinka
roughly this translates to "wee Pavel"
but only roughly, because

all the absolute love of my mother
doesn't translate at all
in a language that doesn't have the grammatical agility
to incorporate name diminutives

that add letters instead of subtracting them,
as if making the name longer,
will make it warmer to wear,
and still, it sounds smaller,

my brother as a baby responded
only to the "Chu" part of his new
long-small name, so that
is what he became

"Chu", like the sound of a train
for a while; then he was
Pavel again, then "hey you"
but the quickest way to get him

to look up from the screen,
pause his game, roll his eyes
"what do you want again?"
is to say "chuto"

that is to say, "the chu",
the one and only, who
now stands a foot taller than me,
outweighs me by a good fifty pounds,

if he tried, he could probably throw me,
and yet, i imagine him,
tiny, round, red and angry,
screaming, as they usually do,
them, being babies,

he's not grown up at all,
he's sure not an adult,
my brother – Pavel, or Paul
who i know as The Chu

cancer

[this poem redirects from the article on *bad things that happened to our family*, if you think this is a mistake, please notify our support team]

disambiguation: deadly, disease, deceased

before it was a bad word
it was a constellation of stars,
and a sign in the chinese zodiac

it was a genus of crab
that means

noun

BIOLOGY

1. a principal taxonomic category that ranks above species and below family, and is denoted by a capitalized Latin name

before that bad word had it's
terrible terrible fame it was
an electronic circuit simulator,
something related to computers,
too long and technical to fit into
an explanation that could reconcile this term with

it's bloody current history of
being in a movie called "The Emperor of Maladies"
and being in a journal of the scientific kind
splattered bold, a title
that reminds you nothing of how

before that it was a character in transformers,
it was a character from the marvel comics,
it was the name of some bad albums by Confession
and My Disco and Showbread
and also the name of a death metal band

it's also a song title,
for groups that teenage girls listen to in their beds:
twenty one pilots, who like to put a little line through the "o" like so
∅
and filter
and my chemical romance
and sick puppies
and subhumans

postmarked from behind the garden wall

my grandmother was a red 1978 chevy malibu, who liked the open roads, and listening to bootlegged cassette tapes of american rockstars, while my grandfather slept in the backseat, clutching me – less than a year old, and the size of a reasonably shaped cantaloupe - to his chest. i remember her bleached hair under the silk bandana she wore, and her stylish big sun glasses, hiding half her face, the soft dusky pink of her lipstick making her smile look like it had a big secret. her nails, painted pearly rose, tapping on the black leather of the steering wheel, and nothing quite revved her engine like the thought of getting out of town and on to the countryhouse, those unpaved dirt roads village through village - her endless kingdom.

when her engine stopped running – probably it was the mileage – the doctors in their mechanic way opened her up and took some stuff out, and sewed her back up. she showed me the scar on her stomach, and she drove within the speed limit for a while, one day, she, who was beyond thunderdome had to pull over, they pulled her over, and then, well, it goes like it – graveyards have parkings too.

the car gathers dust in the garage, and i don't drive.

the russian steel exporter, a honeymoon on the rocks

the golden-dipped beaches of the old resting stations of the communist party officials like the top of a perfectly glazed crème brulee,

the sea water sapphire into turquoise with greenery and jellyfish in delicate gemstone colors,

the red dress of lena in the distance, like the flags atop the lifeguard's booth,

me, with my burning lobster-feet ankle-deep in the sand,

the sun on my rolex, and in my hair, and in my eyes,

my throat hoarse, and my brain full of cotton balls and question marks.

lena suddenly still, abrupt. facing me bug like, with large black sunglasses dolce, dior,

the wide brim straw hat, yellow and round, sun-like on the blue sky, flapping in the wind.

me, sunburned, cigar in hand, beckoning.

landscape with a blur of healing i. grieftick

the witch wife wails uncontrollably down the hallway through the wind whistling about the house

I hear her howls,

her banshee screeches as she bemoans her dead, I lay awake in bed and listen to my witch wife's funeral hymns

I dream of having the kind of love that is so powerful, it reaches back in time and with spindly hands undoes whatever violence

has made the witch wife wail
her hair wild around her face, a veil
of cobwebs, and piles of witch wife's lashes

on tabletops and chests of drawers, like fairy nests and drops of candlewax on our hardwood floors and nail marks on our splintered doors

my witch wife wolfishly stares at the full moon and gently haunts our home, room by empty room I dream of a kindness so soft

it wraps itself around her heart like cotton wool
and reteaches her to breathe instead of scream, mouthful of grief-clean air, one after the other

i go to kiss her chapped and brittle lips goodnight
for now, with rain, and hail, and english weather, satisfied to be just us - a witch, and a beloved wife.

ii. a brief interlude to recovery

I stand at a bus stop, surrounded by brutal sheets of rain beating down on the grey concrete in sad refrains

a woman calls to me

“do you want a bracelet for your pretty lady?”

I study her aged brown face, and crooked fingers

rapping over the display of third hand goods, and my eye lingers

fairytale tenderness, bring the witch wife a new crystal ball, cracked; a mismatched set of tarot cards, unevenly stacked,

a rusty, iron cross

a buddha figurine, missing three fingers,

a perfectly round red bead,

a fake pearl necklace, that she doesn't need

a blue eye, red stringed talisman

a bag of crystals the roma woman let me scoop out of her boxes, and sold me by the pound
three rocks I found on the road home, still wet

the witch wife pauses briefly in her wailing

and sets her candelabra down, dripping cinnamon scented wax on the carpet and table I turn
the light on, and try to scrub it off as much as I am able

while she picks her gifts out of my bag,

I want to trust the magic of the hag

I want to trust that if witch wife puts a crystal in the kettle before boiling her tea

and puts on the fake pearls, and sews the bead into her black dusty dressing gown and wears
the cross, and the blue eye, and the Buddha in her pockets, climbing down the stairs to pay
for our takeout

then after a fashion, she will be healed will stop witchly wailing, and screaming will let me
sleep

she puts the rocks I gave her in the pile and gifts me with her rusty smile

coffin ballerina

girl-child spins on grey concrete, raising dust clouds, brings up chubby bread-white hands
delicately-
a backyard ballerina of missing teeth and scraped knees

i says :when i become a stork i will fly to the place where the sun is bright so high, so high
and i will be in grandmother's arms:

girl-child spins on a rosy carpet, gently wearing it into soft grey
grandma's dust-gilded picture turned face down,
a dainty one-legged ballerina dances her single-move routine amidst pink tulle in a jewelry

baby teeth and heirlooms and claire's trinkets in one place,
i says :i hope i don't ever forget how happy i used to be when the sun was bright so long ago
when i was in grandmother's arms:

girl-child spins, and i says :i hope feathers grow where these scars are, let me find a place
where girls turn to firebirds,
wings in place of arms, and long red legs like chopsticks
let me stand like a ballerina in a jewelry box

and twirl to the tune of grief:

girl-child plunges into the deep,
hip-high the water brushing hip-long hair,
slowly swaying, grazing split ends glistening with salt,
i says :i hope i become a stork after this. i hope grandmother finds me again:

her absence clings to my arms like mud, i am not yet bird, still grasping at girlhood red
chopstick leg buried in the wine-moist gravedirt,
one legged, hands raised to wings above my hand,
undainty, ballerina-like amidst pink-tinged grief,

baby teeth, and memories, and grandmother's warm hands pressing up against the silk
stuffing of the coffin lid

i stand rooted in death

gruesome fairytales for messy girls

the story is about the girl that the evil stepmother sends into the forest,
 unwanted, unloved, unmothered
you are sweet in your victimhood, says the witch, licking her teeth, *come here, i am salvation*
 and the girl follows this ungentle voice through the trees
 the witch is a childless mother, is selfish and cruel, keeps snakes and toads
 unfamiliar with offering softness nor comfort, as the girl is too with receiving it
 and the stryga heaps abuses on the girl, so gentle in her motherless grief
 the meek what inherits

says the witch *you have been kind, so i too will be kind to you* fists bone-carved fingers in the
 golden fleece of her hair,
 and pushes her under the water, and commands her to breathe.

It's a magic river Magic witch Magic forest
 The girl turns gold Gold hair

Gold hands Gold heart

the witch sends her home. the stepmother locks her away again.

there's more to the story, at the end there's a prince.
 the moral is
 if you are kind in the face of violence, you will be rewarded the moral is
 be grateful that this isn't worse than the worst you've had the moral is
 a sweet victim
 fills her lungs with liquid gold on command.

the stepmother sends her own daughter into the forest wanted, loved, mothered
 who will not take standing the witch's selfish demands who is afraid of snakes, toads and all
 things rough

and when she is pulled from under the water, gasping, grasped by her hair in the witch's
 unkind grip,
 she has turned to a girl of tar

she trudges home
 the prince marries a girl with golden lungs
 the evil child has a mother and a swarm of snakes
 the moral comes down to something about laying down and bearing with it the moral comes
 down to something about wanting more and tar pits
 the evil child manages to dip a single finger into the gold water as a keepsake the witch has
 no one to make her bed and feed her snakes
 the moral is something about letting gentle victims go rewarded

no firebirds in the wild

after a. s. pushkin's ruslan and ludmila

have you ever heard the sound a peacock makes? a graceless, lumbering pin-cushion of turquoise feathers,

mournful screech, after mournful screech, their albino tails draping down the tree trunks like a drag queen's shabby boa

looking at the reflections of their bottomless eyes in the lakes, glint a thousand golden needles,
the death, of the death,

golden eggs buried in the embers of amber, and ruby, and topaz autumn leaves,
the peacocks shackled in the gardens of the japanese hotel sing to the tune of fairy tails and remember that they were phoenixes too

Statement on the Writing Process at the Can Serrat Writing Residence

During the course of my residence I focused primarily on polishing the distinct voice that I have already developed in my writing, and formalizing the set of imagery across my poems, in order to create a collection of works which loosely relate to each other, and can be looked at as a uniform production. I experimented with metaphor, and description, taking inspiration from traditional Eastern European Slavic folklore, particularly Bulgarian, Russian and Romanian fairy tales, which have a very distinct sound, and structure, quite different from Western ones. I enjoyed being able to apply my peers' comments to my work, as their comments gave me a lot to think about, particularly with regards to specific language choices, and the idea of "dream sense" vs "realism" in poetry and poetic writing, and to what extent making it my trademark writing style can infringe on the clarity of my self expression.

I found the Racons very engaging, as they allowed multiple perspectives on important topics to come through, and that made it possible for me to apply those perspectives in my further work. The presentations of various other writers, and the conversations about their approaches was especially helpful in crafting my own works. The conversation on translation with Melba Escobar was especially useful in that sense.

As someone who frequently works in languages other than English – particularly Bulgarian and Russian, I have always found the idea of crafting the inaccessible poem, a poem that would keep the reader out, while also remaining interesting, particularly appealing. It is the overarching idea throughout my collection to create poems that are both foreign and difficult to access, and at the same time can be understood, and not alienate the reader too much. I have done so graphologically, with little use of capitalization, and punctuation that is not necessarily traditional, which not only suits my purposes, but is also something I find aesthetically appealing.

I was able to cast my eye into the intrinsic motivations for my writing, and reflect on the specific bits of family history I explore through my poetry, and the issue of transferrable grief and upset, and how these emotions interact with each other, and influence the way others interact with my writing. It was through a very frank and emotional conversation with Jia-Ling that we reached an idea to plan her performance so that it would interact with a Racon on generational grief, an idea of inheriting, among other things, our parents' personalities and fundamentally evolving into them.

Her performance fueled me in the last few days of my residence to revisit all of my writing through a new lens, with more compassion for my lyrical speakers, and for myself as a writer, and originator of those emotions. Overall, during the residence, I was able to produce a lot of raw work, which fits into the spaces of my overall body of work, and I have gained plenty of material to work with for further development.