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Publication Date

2022-03-18

Undergraduate

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

TRANSMUTATION

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY

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LOS ANGELES, CA

18 MARCH 2022

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ABSTRACT

TRANSMUTATION

By Frances Nicole Guzman

This collection of poems aims to follow my ever-changing identity through its stages of growth and discovery. Each poem represents a step in the process of accepting and embracing my true self. The collection carries pieces ranging from focus on my family to my passion for various interests. Through them, I argue that I, like many others, am simultaneously a product and rejection of my environment. Together, these poems divulge snippets of my life and self as an individual. Tidbits of the various hardships I have overcome thus far intend to illustrate the physical, mental, and emotional journey I have traveled to better the lives of myself and my loved ones. Alongside self-discovery, the goal of these pieces is to call attention to societal stigmas of the communities I identify with (namely LGBTQ+ in this specific collection). I focus on using symbolism, alliteration, and recollections of childhood to realistically define myself.

Name Games

Changing my name was rejecting the first gift my parents ever gave me
And although I accepted, I didn't welcome it

Each nickname derived from it is both
An act of betrayal and affection

I lived a long life as both a woman and a girl
And to live for others meant to kill a piece of me

Embracing myself meant excluding them
I held myself tighter with hands that I had once allowed to tear me to shreds

In the mirror I saw what I could become
Instead of letting time tyrannize me

There was no reinventing, only recognizing
I used the voice my parents also blessed me with to refute their word as law

Coming out was an act of defiance to them
An unusual, unexpected, and unwanted change

Although they would never understand that this isn't a change but a confirmation
Of who I have always been, hidden deeper behind my own skin

I'll never know if my ideal self meets what they have imagined for me
Still, even one's imagination is just an assumption

I joked about my gender

And mimicked the perfect daughter my parents envisioned

It felt like they were spitting my name like a slur

Maybe they felt it too — the acidic taste it burned into their tongues, and they were just trying to rid themselves of it

It was my name, but it was never me

They called me a disgrace and a fool

So, I took that idea and ran with it instead of running away

Your search - "Frances" - did not match any documents.

Suggestions:

Har • le • quin

/'hārləkwən/

synonyms found: jester, joker, mime

Mosaic

“Nothing of me is original. I am the combined effort of everyone I’ve ever known.”

— Chuck Palahniuk

I hold my breath when going under bridges because my friend swears that it helps you find true love. I believe that bugs are hidden in fallen leaves when they crunch underneath my foot, a shared belief offered by my childhood best friend. There is a joke that I have taken too far and now I hate otters to spite my ex. And if I accidentally hit my elbow, I relish the pain because my mother taught me that it meant I had a surprise coming soon.

When I find my right palm itching, my mother says to buy lottery tickets and root for the underdog because we’ve been them before. I equate sneezing and ringing ears with someone mentioning or talking about me. The number three is one of my favorites because good things come in three (but so do bad things). And if I ever spill salt, I make sure to throw some over my *left* shoulder. I have never opened an umbrella indoors because I was told that the day wouldn’t be the only thing that got rained on if I did. As my father taught me, I always pick up heads-up pennies when I find them and turn over tails-up pennies for the next person.

I am made up of my father’s ears, grandmother’s precious eyes, and my older sisters’ egos. I have inherited their beliefs and sacred superstitions. I am an unfinished art piece with delicate strokes from years of effort and rushed ones from quick meetings. I am a novel scribbled on the back of a café napkin with chapters written full of mysteries about myself that I have yet to unravel. I am a musical masterpiece, shaped by a symphony of scores shared onto me. I am my own magnum opus — unique but not original.

Pleasantries & Promises

When I was younger, you couldn't force me to utter a single *please* or *thank you*

Now, I answer my mother's *thank you* with my own

Each action of mine is not a courtesy or obligation but a choice I embrace

There's not much she could say to rival the amount of gratitude I hold for her

There's not much I wouldn't do for her if I had the ability

Each promise to myself is an extension of my promises to her

Maybe that's why we share the same scar on our pinkies

A small reminder that I refuse to ever break a promise

A Mother's Love

with a name as sweet as Rose
you'd think my grandma would help others bloom
instead, she stunted her dearest daughter

"i learned how she liked her coffee and became more bitter than the beans i brewed and when she asked me to sing, i found myself solemn as i would stutter and silence myself. she pestered me to be her prize-winning petunias while she was parasitic, paying no mind to the passing petals after she picked up her payment for first place"

my own mother helped me prosper without plucking or picking
i wasn't blighted by the bruising kisses she blessed upon by blushing cheeks
but bashful at the bright-eyed beauty she bears

and when i found myself to be imperfect after inspection,
she didn't turn my vulnerability into something volatile
rather, it was her reflex to rid me of the rotten reflections

the seeds of doubt sewn into her skull
blossomed into sun-kissed sutures
and she wears them as a crown

now, when i stir sugar straight into her sweet tea, i can't help but think that she's sweeter. and when i sing softly, she says to scream and to never stop for anyone. despite her contempt for them, she teaches me to make earrings out of pressed petunias and compares my beauty to award-winning annuals with no ulterior motives.

she tends to me, tenderly.

Annual Report

after Lia Purpura

I shall begin from the start, colder months defined by visible breaths and new beginnings. Their minds communally corrupted. Their beliefs societally shattered. Alone within houses when the New year struck and the cheer grew within their chests alongside beliefs for a better being. Their eyes gleamed green with hope.

...

I shall stand beside a sharp tongue, your colorless cavern confining it inside. Your collarbones protruding, forgotten spaces between, prominent. Your illuminated irises, where the light behind them faded. And there at your chest, the draw of your last breather: electrical disturbance, arranged by aching alone.

...

I shall touch, with all eyes on me, eyes forced closed, the rouged cheeks. Mimicking your infamous blush, no emotion present. And with no sign of injury, your body resembled rest: unturning, no longer animated, frozen like a doll, frozen in time. Adding to my collection, I slip you onto a shelf, posed and picture-perfect porcelain.

...

I shall note the broken beer bottles, swishing liquor, spills stressing my sorrowful state, stolen summers and springs, sunken senses. Mixing medication with mead, maybe soon I will meet with you. Microdosing becomes my multivitamins, anything to alleviate the agonizing pain prescribed. The smokey and sandy half-empty bottles were all that remained of my sanity.

Synesthesia

In Greek: “to perceive

Together,” dual senses

Coursing through our bones

A new meaning to sour notes

Concurrent and parallel

Melody

Soulful, humming hymn

Duos and duets reworked

A cut arrangement

Serenades turned to solos

Absent unison, studied

Senses

Pre:

I.

The line at the grand opening stretched outside
Anxiety seeping its way into my veins
Steadily, leisurely, making sure I'm aware
Timed to perfection when it becomes my turn
Even the dessert becomes flavorless and unenjoyable after

II.

Sweaty palms wiped themselves off my jeans
Making contact with the newly laundered denim
Each pass, dampening them more
Light odor wafts through the air
Leaving its impression in my wake

III.

Loud laughing fills the room
In our small, reserved cubicle
Shhhh, the librarian whispers
Though we cannot hear her as our
Ears ring and voices reverberate
Nothing could silence us

IV.

Fingers wound in my hair
Easily, our bodies fit together
Effortlessly, we become one
Languid lovers, resting

V.

Lining up my vision as I

Overly focus on those around me
Only interested in the affairs of others, but
Keeping that secret to myself

Post:

V.

Less and less attention paid
Opportunities missed
Obstructed personally
Killing myself slowly

IV.

Fogged brain turned from symptom to standard
Early nights became chronic insomnia
Effectively erasing any past progress
Left behind, lost, lied to, lonesome

III.

Light, lively laughing became sinister
It was mistaken for the screams of the damned
Suffering below, underneath me
Though now, becoming me
Entering my system
Now, these voices were inside me

II.

Scented candles provide a comforting aroma
Maybe because they smell like old friends
Etched into my memory are their scents
Lately, I find them in every fragrance
Luckily, I only remember the good ones

I.

Today, I tried something new

And have already been excelling at it
See, growth isn't linear, it's semisweet
That translates to "it all gets better"
Even if it's currently worse

Desiring Daylight

no amount of lost sleep
could keep me from you
the sole reason i rise and rise again
is to see what your canvas becomes today
you color match the rosy hues from my wind flushed face
morning dew shimmers at the corners of my eyes,
your image is reversed and highlighted
so that strangers, too, may gaze upon you
without the blinding gaze of your beauty
which stares back with returned affection
that is solely reserved for me

“will you return tomorrow?” you asked.

i've never missed a day
sometimes too excited to sleep
that i'll spend time with the moon too
her solemn aura vastly contrasts your own
with her, nights were changing yet monotonous
with you, colors weaved themselves between your rays
vying to be closer to you, savoring your streaks of sun
i envied their presence among yours
jealousy stuck in my throat, guarded by praise for you
but we were closer than they could ever hope to be
never distanced through distance
nor singled out through separation

“how many more tomorrows will we get?” left unasked.

when my own sunset comes i wonder
whose turn will it be to ask?
you could never understand the concept

of ceasing to exist or being unimportant
you have been here long before my kind
tasked with forming entire planets
still, for you, fear is foreign
how can the immortal be fearful of the insignificant?
when i pass, will you be imbedded in the fiery flames of hell?
or hidden behind the clouds in heaven?
will we meet again in my afterlife?

“will you return tomorrow?” i ask back.

i've felt pain, suffered through grief, and fallen in love
and although i know it is empathized with
how could you create me without knowing anything i've endured?
how can you not have lived a life you've created?
you can dry my tears with your scorching heat
yet never realize why they left my eyes
we will never hold one another
yet you've touched me in more ways than one

“let's make tomorrow, today.” we agree.

Starlight

after Courtney Peppernell

I'll treat you like the moon while
admiring all your phases.
As I count the freckles on your face,
I'll create new constellations
and never forget their coordinates.
You have lived with yourself
while I am still learning of your eccentricity.
Let me teach you how to
see yourself from a different lens.
You are a star by birth and inclination.
You have smothered the sun with the way you shine.
All the things you overlook
about yourself
are all the things I refuse
to omit from history.
Even if you won't let me,
I'll build an observatory
just to show you
that the galaxies in your eyes
can never be paralleled by any
found by astronomers.

Never Forgotten

after Fiphie

i have been thinking about the way your head searches for the sun like a sunflower chasing the last rays of light in search of warmth. and how deeply you bow to show gratitude, with your ears between your legs, head brushing the ground.

i have been thinking about the time your head lay against my chest and how i couldn't tell if my heart was racing faster than my ears could follow or if it had stopped beating completely. and the time you pulled me closer and how it had skipped a beat, a missing beat that now belonged to you.

i have been thinking about the inevitable. about how we are bound to make a choice. about choosing which fork in the road that we or you or i will travel. about how, no matter which way, i will always be by your side, and you will always be my favorite person and i will never forget how you take your coffee or like your eggs.

i have been thinking about how love can fade and change into something so different from the start. about how your heartfelt habits can become terrifying traits. and how love is both sinister and sincere all while shifting.

i have been thinking about why i haven't thought about this before.

i couldn't muster up the courage to ask.

perhaps i stopped myself because i am too afraid of being told the truth.

Learning the Difference

Heartbreak is the taste of my high school best friend responding to my coming out, *I accept you, just don't try to hit on me*. How do I tell her she's not my type? That she won't ever be? How can I say that coming out and confessions of a crush aren't one and the same? How do I respond to my family's adamant confidence that *Bisexuality isn't a thing. Maybe it's just because you haven't had a boyfriend*. How do I admit that I've hidden past relationships like failed report cards, stuffed in the back of my chest of drawers?

If I looked back at the worst break-ups I've had, they wouldn't be lovers or past flings but friends who've grown apart. How do I say that I've unintentionally created my own dictionary where Serenity means disappointment rather than peacefulness because it was the name of my childhood best friend who I have no way of contacting again? How do I respond to the confession of a high school friend who told me that *I know a lot of people don't stick around, so I'm going to try and be your friend for as long as I can*? How do I move on when she's no longer around? Did she really try to hold on to me as long as she could? Was I loosening her grip?

And still, I believe in love. I hide it inconspicuously between moments of *This reminded me of you* and *I thought you'd like this*. I'm blatantly bold with phrases of *You mean a lot to me* and *I'm glad you're in my life*. I reciprocate it in warmth and reveal. I note how *I love the scrunch of your nose when you smile*, and *I hate that you put your feet on the coffee table (but I let you do it anyways)*. And I make sure to say how *I like you because you sing in the mornings, and I love you despite the fact that they're off-key show tunes*.

We Hide Ghosts Between Conversations

i've never spoken to my father beyond quick football tidbits and brief glimpses of his past odd jobs. he never graduated from high school or landed a full-time job or traveled the world. still, his stories could teach lessons spanning several lifetimes. he could teach you how to train pigeons like dogs and how to haggle for the best price in any store and how to make sure your home isn't plagued by ghosts if you believe in them like he does.

sometimes, he'll let me sit with him in silence, helping him organize all the pennies he's accumulated from the loose change of store purchases. and if my mom was at work, he'd let me help him sort his pills for the week after he was diagnosed with schizophrenia.

those small moments taught me how to learn how to better manage my money and appreciate every cent. the routines of pill sorting were practice for when i began to take my own.

he cleans the house before my mother gets home from work and thaws the meat for dinner before she has the chance to ask him. he stays up late with her after watching scary movies because he knows she can't fall asleep if he does first. he won't hold her hand when they're walking down the street but he'll kiss her forehead before sleeping.

he remembers my routine and brings me food in between lectures and meetings as an unspoken way of checking up on me. when he hears me rustling under the covers from my room, he'll greet me with fresh coffee, two sugars and four creamers just the way i like it, before i have the chance to rub the sleep from my eyes. although he grumbles at the sight of strays appearing on our doorstep looking for my care, he's still quick to feed them for me when i'm away from home. and in times that i can't care for myself, he's quick to make my bed and help fold my clothes even when he knows they'll be slept in all day.

in the mornings when i wake and catch myself singing, i am reminded that i am my father's child. i see pieces of him within myself when i horde change and rewatch the same movie on repeat. i've learned that not all ghosts are to be feared and that we are so caught up in the unseen that we miss the tangible horrors in front of our eyes. but that i can still find happiness in the eyes of stray cats bound to my front door and the swelling of pride my father has when i awake to care for them as if they were my own.

Taking Back What Was Never Ours

i've abandoned myself once before
lost the true sight of what was in store
for me and those that i care for

we were close and not just because of the one bedroom
didn't push our hope aside, didn't focus on gloom
fighting to thrive and thriving to bloom

it's hard to get ahead while looking behind
and focusing on learning so you don't become blind
all while remembering that you have to be kind

because we weren't raised with guards all around
we built ourselves up to the top from the ground
hand-in-hand we would never let each other down

the opportunity of community provides unity, you see?
fighting to be heard, so they listen to our pleas
because no one is free until we are all free

i'm opening the doors and busting down walls
it's our turn now, we are not your dolls
it's our shot now, we're making the calls

Hardships

i. elementary

i moved around a lot when i was younger
and i silently thanked my parents when we finally settled down in an area
when you move around a lot, you either make friends easily or stick to yourself
unfortunately, i was the latter

i made friends with my parents
a naïve, model child who swore pinky promises were binding
even now, i'm compared to her
and it becomes hard to see if the direction i've grown is the right one

ii. middle

i silently thanked the strict uniform code at my school
when every outfit looked the same,
no one could tell I wore the same one this whole week
and that it was the only one i had

i'd hide behind hand-me-down sweaters
and hope my clearance priced pink and blue polka dotted tights
were enough to distract from the stain on my shirt
that i definitely got yesterday

iii. high

i transferred to three different high schools
before our living condition allowed me to settle at one
but unlike at school,
i could never really settle at "*home*"

did you know it's a law in motels?
every 28 days, it was like clockwork

my parents and i forced to take the day off
and erase our trace of being in the small studio room

iii. college

i've navigated my way blindly
as the first in my family
where older siblings are taught to lead,
i have been shoved to the front to guide them instead

writing about my past became standard instead of shameful
with each scholarship i brought in
how could i be grateful to the hardships
that caused my family to grow up quicker than they should have

Home

In between the shelves at the library, I am protected between the pages of my favorite book

I've felt it during drives to our favorite park and when every red light and stop sign became an opportunity for you to sneak a peek at me

It's on the tip of my tongue when I drawl out your name, pretending I'm only trying to memorize how it sounds when it's already been eternally etched on me

It's the feeling of my mother's hands on my hair, intricately weaving her love into every braid as she gives me a few more minutes of rest while I lay asleep beneath her

It's the act of making tamales with my family during Christmas, wrapping mine with extra corn husks since they know I hate olives

It's the surprises my parents have for me after a long day out, a sign they've been thinking about me

It's my friends asking me to tutor them in American Sign Language and they being quick to learn the sign for "I love you"

This is home

Lessons

i.

Things are hard and there's some things that'll always be hard. Think of them as waves in the ocean. Each time you're triggered by smell or think of a past memory, it's a wave crashing on the shore. As time goes on, those waves will still crash but the intervals in between will get shorter. Soon, the tide will calm down. You'll either have moments of melancholy or you'll accept them and embrace the memories. Either way, everyone has their waves. It'll be okay, the ocean is a beautiful thing.

ii.

You become what you need. The donations of your time, compassion, love are those you wish to have returned tenfold. And you don't share them because you expect others to do the same, you do it because you know what it's like to live without.

iii.

I can't promise you that things will get better, but can you guarantee that they'll get worse?

iv.

Feeling small isn't always a bad thing. Every sequence of events is created by small, manageable steps. Break it down if it's too much and don't worry too much if you break down in the process too.

v.

What you have is something you once wanted.

Family Albums

my family photo albums are missing
maybe they were swallowed up by the fire
or hidden deep within lost storage units
have i lost myself too?

gone with the albums are my childhood fears
instilled in me by my sisters' retellings of ghost stories
that had me buried beneath my knitted baby blanket,
squeezing shut my bleary eyes with a death grip on my teddy bear

gone with the albums are my childhood hobbies
the collected seashells eternally imbedded with sand
have found their ways back to the beach
or depreciating atop a shelf at the thrift store

gone with the albums are my childhood beliefs
the tooth fairy with the glittering pink tutu and magical wand
equipped with her fairy dust and gold satchel of coins
offering a trade for my baby teeth

but the memories of the albums are not my own
because i refuse to be gone and forgotten
or constrained between cover to cover
that'd cause more than just its spine to crack

with no tangible evidence of my childhood
how can i be sure that i had one?
still, without proof of a past

i can begin to reinvent myself anew

Recreating

I can't remember my sixth birthday party or the accident that gave me the scar on my left shoulder or the time I stole from my sixth-grade science fair, according to my mother. Even now, it feels as though my brain takes preventative measures to keep me safe.

I can't remember specifics, but I know this love feels like my favorite memory. It's expanding beneath my ribcage, a bloom that aches, a bloom that hurts so good. Just on the edge of a blurry consciousness. Even my most precious memory becomes fuzzy, yet I keep adding to the details because I can't bear to let it slip away completely.

Deafening

Your accent rings in my ear
The heavy baritone of it reverberates
In the bar we had our first date in
Together, we created a perfect harmony

We were dynamic
Then dissonant
You were my forte
But then I fell flat

Our clashes were a cacophonous crescendo
They were natural and constant, yet droning
Our words were sharp, trilling
We fell out of rhythm, played at different tempos

First, bending together
Now, beating the other
Occasionally we struck a chord
Still, we fell out of tune

Time was common then cut
Our bridge couldn't provide relief
Skipping steps, following motions
Encores eliminated, give it a rest

Soon, we began to keep score,
Reviewing one another,
Placing the fault on each other,

And then we break and repeat

Unit

A report about a robbery

Turned into a mess

When my mother was arrested

On Christmas Eve no less

She slipped through the grasp

Of my clammy hands

And slid into a jumpsuit

Which the court demanded

My heartbeat matched the tempo

Of the pounding headache I had

And who was I to go with?

When the prison also had my dad

The monarch of our unit

Imprisoned in one of his own

In this ruined castle,

He was dethroned

My case was no different

Than my parents, whom I adored

Trying to save our family

Turned out to be my chore

I stayed with the prison guards

In a cell block 2x2

In the confines of my own mind

I wish there was someone that knew:

A true nuclear family

Waiting to explode

Running from the cops

Will bring your sentence back tenfold

Hairku

- I. Don't be ashamed
A never-ending supply
Like vines in nature

- II. Shaved to silky smooth
Defiled beauty
Forced upon women daily

- III. Barren or blooming
Is breathtaking either way
Reclaim your own choice

- IV. Physical defense
Alongside liberation
Refusing stigmas

Myths

Is this a game?

Who is being played?

Are you the creator?

Or a pawn alongside me?

What is our purpose?

Would it matter?

Could it be changed anyways?

Has this always been my fate?

Is this what hell is?

Should I resign? Refuse?

Then, where would I go?

If this is all I know, who am I?

If I were me, would I know?

If this is all I am, who's to say I'm not hell incarnate?

Would mortality change me?

Am I immortal to begin with?

Does hell have no end?

Will I never receive an end?

Is this what I am?

Then, who are you?

Who?

A nobody from nowhere getting lost in all the stares

Wishing I could take you back as a whole without a crack

You're shattering at the seams it seems, holding onto nightmares rather than dreams

Thinking you have reached your peak yet not knowing what you seek

A world full of secrets hidden from view that you never truly know what's waiting for you

Bound by fear instead of embrace as you're tempted by love rather than the chase

Maybe loving too much is your curse, is that great or could it be worse?