

Solar Eclipse // Myself in Orbit

KYLE, TX | DECEMBER 24, 1997

“The moon got lost,” he said. My brother was two years old when he saw his first eclipse. It was July 11, 1991 in Ruiz, Mexico. I was still a distant possibility, but my dad tells this story as we look at slides in my aunt’s living room. Each wall has a celestial tapestry, the knowing smirk on the moon’s and sun’s faces, push-pinned to the wall. Smoke wisps past a screen caught in the light of the projector. Back then all my aunts and uncles went to church and their cigarettes burned faster than incense. We all believed God would save us from ourselves.

HOME | CHILDHOOD

My brother’s first word was “clock.” Even as a child he was in tune with time’s influence on everything. Somehow he’s able to tap into the universe’s ebb & flow. He loses track of time easily. Forgets what day or month it is, but if asked to let you know when ten minutes have passed he doesn’t need a clock to do it.

My first word was “food.” My lack of depth embarrasses me. As a child, I worked hard to be good at something so I read as many books as I could & memorized vocabulary words. I wanted to be extraordinary like my genius brother. To be smart without even trying.

His IQ is over 140, but he’s dyslexic. The kids at school bully him. I don’t treat him as well as I should either. I’m mean with envy.

SAN ANTONIO, TX | 2001-2006

I'm in the classes for "dumb" kids because I'm not good at math. At my school you're only allowed to be good at both reading & math to be "smart." My reading PSAT scores are in the 95th percentile in the country. I'm given an award with kids from the "smart" classes at a ceremony. A parent asks me what I'm doing there. I don't answer.

I write a letter asking to be in the honors teacher's English class. She lets me take her class after I explain I've read the most books in the school for Accelerated Reading for two years in a row. In class, I'm quick to answer & understand the high school-level books. I feel like I'm really in the class I should be. Finally.

We write children's stories as a project. My teacher tells me, "I thought you plagiarized your story. I asked my friend in publishing if you did. Did you write that story on your own?"

KYLE, TX | APRIL 4, 1999

My cousins are chasing a chicken with a five-dollar bill taped to its wing around the yard. I feel self-conscious, but play along knowing I'll never catch the golden hen. She flies onto the round hay bale & my cousins start climbing up, unspooling the hay until it's a pile on the lawn. The hen gets away.

My grandfather, Pappy, sits on the porch in his chair, a cigar tucked into his shirt pocket. A trucker hat covers his balding head & dark shaded glasses obscure his eyes.

My skin is as dark as his. I stand out compared to my cousins & my grandmother. They have fair skin that burns quickly in the sun. I want their blue eyes for myself. If I had blue or green eyes, I'd be beautiful like they say on TV. Every part of me feels too big. I wear oversized shirts that swallow my body in totality.

SAN ANTONIO, TX | AUGUST 2006

I straighten the curl out of my hair & get frustrated when humidity curls it again. I'm not pretty enough to dress girly. My friends tell me I'm one of the boys. They like that I listen to "good" music. Unobtrusive with my band tees, a penumbra of black eyeliner. I reap the benefits of male privilege. I don't realize I'm part of the problem, part of what makes me feel like my body is an unfit home.

SAN ANTONIO, TX | 2009-2010

Grief has made me smaller. People notice & comment. My Spanish teacher tells me it must be love that made me skinnier. But it's fear of the next outburst, my parent's relationship becoming a chasm, hospital food by my grandmother's bedside—grief above all else. My PE coach is impressed that I can run faster than I ever could before. He thinks it's because I'm twenty-five pounds lighter than I was when I started school three years ago. I don't tell him I've had practice running away. It's all I ever seem to do nowadays.

NEWARK, NJ | 2015

My hair is longer than it's ever been, almost long enough for me to donate. All my energy goes into supporting the people I love. Another friend died the summer before. I notice the fullness of my hips in the mirror and like it. No one comments on my weight. I don't own a scale for once in my life.

Each year I love myself more, but doubt returns on the moon's cycle.

DAWSON SPRINGS, KY | SEPTEMBER 21, 2017

We hear gunshots in the distance. *Who tries to shoot the moon? Who tries to stop an eclipse?* My brother is watching the eclipse silently through a telescope. I feel anxious like the world may be ending & we don't know it yet. Crickets begin their symphony in the yard as the world gets cold. The sunlight turns indigo & everything looks like it's being seen through an Instagram filter.

As the sun comes back up, the rooster crows as if it's a new day. We turn from memory to daylight.

I'm waiting for my own solar eclipse—
waiting to be the main event for even a few minutes.

SAN MARCOS, TX | APRIL 8, 2019

The next major solar eclipse in North America will occur in five years. It'll be one of the longest in history. I'll be thirty-one, which is older than I thought I'd live to be. Even being twenty-six now feels miraculous. Thirty-one year old me will ask, *how have I lived this long waiting in the shadow of other people?* I'll bask in a moon without light.

LAURA VILLAREAL

Down by the Water

I unspool the evening by myself

near the water back home
nothing changes
the river remains warm

all year long I feel mercurial
like honey locust or a winged beast

I wait & wait
& learn to tie knots from grass-

hopper legs, marking minutes
night scrapes by slow—hard

enough that I hear it leaving
silver splinters behind I never stop looking for

a new place to rebuild myself
I'm so far away from home

I no longer hear cicadas
swarm inside my body

but some mornings I wake up
with golden shells
wreathed in my hair

Creation of Woman by a Forgotten God

Chaac created woman, but left her
alone in the dark forest where her tears traveled far south
& formed salt flats. Her uncut nails carved copper into a canoe.
She traveled north,
named the trees:

pine

as in the ache of her heart growing wooden
tumors. The branches sharp as needles—she wove them into her hair.

evergreen

like the growth of forest unceasing around her,
the smell of a yet-to-be-named feeling for lone in the woods.

Thunder shook the forest floor. Woman filled her arms with mud from the riverbank.
Rain tried to wash the mud from her but she persisted. She dragged
brown muck toward her bosom; over and over again

she said the word *child* until a tiny cry came from her dirty arms & the sun cracked
& the clouds scattered like scared animals leaving only blue of a second ocean.

Woman washed the newly formed human in the swollen river's crystal
water as she murmured *my child, my love* knowing only stones & lichens could hear.

The trees taught Woman the whoosh whoosh whooo—shhh
of wind through leaves to soothe her child's crying.

She echoed their tempo, their timbre.

Woman's child grew to want.
She wanted answers, wanted
names for everything she touched & saw.

To show her daughter the world is nameable,
Woman called herself Ixchel.

Ixchel's daughter chose the name Xochiquetzal & began naming
until she had an entire kingdom & army

of butterflies: *monarch, red admiral, white admiral, & purple emperor...*
Wherever she & her butterflies went, the scent of marigolds followed.

Ixchel & Xochiquetzal paddled their canoe down stream. Together
they named the birds. A raven flew overhead cawing raucously.
The bird swooped low, landing on the river's bank
in a flurry of feathers revealing himself as Chaac.

O miracle! O wonder!
What good is a god when woman can create in her own image?

Ending in Contrition or Resignation

I was never in love with a city
 & woke new,
light as moth dust
 every few months.

I wandered each watercolor metropolis
 until its streets cooed my name,
harmonizing
 under my feet.

The very next day I would leave
 another white bed wrinkled,
still cradling a lover, at times,
 reaching out a dove's wing in their sleep.

On every coast, I've taken lovers
to witness local miracles. Wonder is all I have
 to gift before

I continue outrunning
 my gold-leafed memory.
Its silhouette casting rose
 shadows on the pavement
behind me, but nowhere else.

Forgive me, restlessness, I have sinned.
It has been [] months
since my last confession.

I confess:

I cried on a train crossing the Hudson
once, wanting so badly to live
as particles in the ginger light.

I confess:

I woke up last night sure
my arms vined around my beloved,
river steady breathing
rippling from his body.

A few minutes dissolved
before I had enough courage
to search the blankets & find what I already knew—

that I held nothing.

| Here is where contrition should be recited but won't be |
| Here is where I listen for butterfly wings
& know it's my beloved sighing in his sleep |

Dear restlessness,
Dear desire to disintegrate,

I give you up.

