

5-16-2008

How to Peel a Mango

Trisha Rezende
University of New Orleans

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>

Recommended Citation

Rezende, Trisha, "How to Peel a Mango" (2008). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 691.
<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/691>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

How to Peel a Mango

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Poetry

by

Trisha N. Rezende

B.A. University of Central Florida, 2003

May 2008

Copyright 2008, Trisha Rezende

*For Mommy and Daddy,
the benevolent gods
who, for me, have made safe
and soft those edges
most children are taught to fear.*

*And Kevin,
for being brave enough
to be the black sheep
and nimble enough to never fall
from your pedestal.*

In the words of Czeslaw Milosz, a Polish poet, “When a writer is born into a family, the family is doomed.” Thank you to my parents, Glenn and Roma Rezende, for treating my creative impulse like a blessing instead of a curse. You’ve unfailingly encouraged my love of books and my desire to fill them with my own words. Thank you for not only teaching me how to temper passion with reason, but also how to ignite reason with passion. I want nothing more than to grow into a daughter who deserves you. And thank you to my cool big brother, Kevin Rezende, for making me feel as cool as you every time I earned a Student of the Month ribbon, got on the Honor Roll, wrote a poem, or wore two different colors of rubber bands on my braces. You gave me the courage to put my words into the world. I love you, my trinity.

Thank you to the other four members of The Quintet: Melisa Moore, my moon, for our midnight beach trips and for making this world a better place by teaching troubled young minds how to explore creative outlets; Amberly Fox, my Shim Sham queen, for influencing my work and my life with her elegance and eloquence; Amanda Pederson, my phoenix, for her compassion and for keeping my secrets that have yet to make it to the page; and Grace Owen, my golden-haired miss, for inspiring me with her dedication, focus, and new-found calm on the roadways of life. My blue-eyed beauties, I could not ask for a more eclectic bouquet of muses.

Thank you to Team BloodSugarSexMagic: Danny Goodman (a.k.a. Danny-san), for humoring me with discussions about Aquaman and for believing in my work enough to bully me into sending it out – should Mad Betty ever decide she needs a steady mate, I’m sending her to you; Casey Lefante, the brave one, for always knowing what I’m trying to say even when I don’t and for using her crescent moons to look into our psyches in order to create characters who help us to better understand ourselves; and Julia Cianci, the mystic, for lending serenity to the most bewildering situations and for being unafraid to tap into the mysteries of the world. With you three, the search for adventure is adventure enough.

Thank you to my boys: Jesse Manley, for encouraging me to take my work as far as I can with as few words as possible and for talking through with me those bits of life that get in the way; Michael Gemme, for being my ally on the Green Lantern Core and for constantly reminding me to just do it; and Matt Mosley (a.k.a. Honey) for diminishing my bias against country music and for showing me that freedom is something you must be bold enough to let yourself experience.

And, finally, thank you to my thesis committee: Kay Murphy, for your ever-willing ear, for spurring me to explore the taboo in both my life and work, and for pushing me to traverse the spaces between definitions – you make me feel like what I write is valuable; Niyi Osundare, for bringing charm and poetry into the briefest moments, for giving a fledging the attention worthy of a master, and for inspiring me to write mountains into existence – you make me feel like what I write is beautiful; and John Gery, my first friend in New Orleans, for caring about that naïve poet who found herself far from home, for letting me cry in front of you as I swore, time and again, I am not a crier, for the copious amounts of time and energy you’ve not only put into my work, but also into keeping me on task, and for just believing in me. Whether or not my words are valuable or beautiful, John, my friend, you make me write them.

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| In Moments of Silence: A Preface | 1 |
| Sideshow | 9 |
| I. When His Hands Grow Big Enough | |
| Farm Hands | 12 |
| Burgeoning Fruit | 14 |
| Dolphin Story | 15 |
| A Flashback | 17 |
| Closely Planted | 18 |
| Three Patriarchs | 19 |
| II. Her Tongue Past My Lips | |
| Painted Bowl | 21 |
| When Your Father's a Fish and Your Mother's a Goat | 22 |
| "Dothead!" | 23 |
| Kalibari | 24 |
| Miscue | 26 |
| For the Philtrum | 27 |
| III. Mad Betty | |
| mad betty lectures the schoolyard girls | 29 |
| mad betty reclaims lilith | 31 |
| mad betty judges solomon | 32 |
| IV. Do Not Curb Your Nature | |
| Self-Portrait in a Spoon | 35 |
| Jordan | 36 |
| The Grocery-Cart Collector | 37 |
| when we/they have everything we/they want | 38 |
| The Lovely Zulu Lady of Royal Street, New Orleans | 39 |
| Scorpion | 40 |
| Vita | 41 |

In Moments of Silence: A Preface

In Trinidad, according to my mother's background, I was a fourth generation Trinidadian of part Indian descent; according to my father's background, I was a fifth generation Trinidadian of part Portuguese descent. In the United States, I am a first generation Trinidadian-American. It was in America that my true awareness of my multi-racial status developed – more as a consequence of my position as a foreigner than from any other more organic realization. I quickly learned that America was no melting pot and that Americans did not necessarily take note of difference in order to celebrate it. I am foreign. I am multi-racial. I am an Other squared. Perhaps I should stay silent.

My family and I immigrated to Orlando, Florida, the summer before my eleventh birthday. My parents thought that greater opportunities lingered abroad for both them and their children. That Fall, with my island accent thick as molasses, I started the 6th grade at Howard Middle School. By the time I entered high school, I had already been socialized into adopting the bland American accent – at least while in the company of Americans; though, every now and again, molasses worked its way past my lips as if I were regurgitating its bizarre sweetness. I couldn't say *ham sandwich*, my favorite school lunch, but would consistently pronounce it *hahm sahn-witch*. My most embarrassing slip-up occurred during a presentation on a British author in eleventh grade; my Trinidadian accent tumbled from my mouth while my knees shook and my ears reddened. Everyone assumed I had put it on for effect since, spoken slowly and with proper grammar, it resembled the accent of Trinidad's British colonizers. I never corrected them, and I have since regretted not having the courage to claim my voice (even though I have certainly excused my 16-year-old self). Initially growing out of this regret, as well as out of my ongoing

struggle between Trinidadian and American dialect, my preoccupation with the perspective and voice of the outsider has shaped my work as a poet.

Another aspect of my upbringing that often shimmies its way into my poetry is my highly varied spiritual background. The turn my poems may take toward spiritual mysticism results directly from my being reared in a family composed equally of Hindus and Catholics. My mother and the majority of her family are Hindu. My father and the majority of his family are Catholic. On any given day, some saint or god might warrant a small show of devotion, if not a full blown festival. During the spring, within a few weeks of each other, my family and I would observe first Ash Wednesday, then celebrate Mahashivratri (“The Night of Shiva”), when Shiva is believed to perform his wild dance of simultaneous creation and destruction, then hide eggs for Easter. Even in Trinidad, teachers looked quizzically at my brother and me, children wearing the red bracelets that designated them devotees of Shiva who, two weeks earlier, had come to school with the mark of Ash Wednesday across their foreheads. As a child, I never noticed the contradiction, nor did I ever feel especially singled out. In fact, I felt fortunate to be able to celebrate both – twice as many holidays, twice as many gatherings at which I’d get to romp with my cousins.

One might think that my religious devotion spun like a revolving door pushed by Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s tramontana, but instead it fostered a deeper, ever-present connection to the spiritual realm and its mysteries. Moreover, a dual Hindu-Catholic upbringing introduced early on the issue of gender expectations. Navigating between the abundance of powerful goddesses in Hinduism and the predominantly male-driven Christian theology made for a bumpy ride. A reader might readily understand, if he/she took into account my mixed race as well as my

position as an immigrant, the interest many of these poems have with the dualities of language, character, and faith.

As naïve or poorly read as this may make me seem, only recently have I discovered that issues of otherness, as well as the spiritual and cultural dualities that have permeated my autobiography, are acceptable, valid themes for my poems. This is not to say that they had not been apparent in my work since my hesitant beginning, but initially I lacked the courage to fully explore them. And whatever strength I have now, I owe much of it to poets such as Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Lorna Goodison, Marilyn Chin, Ai, and Martha Serpas. Not only have these poets explored their own otherness and dualities bravely and gracefully, they have done so in ways that expose the “blur” existing between the insider and outsider as well as that which exists between other dichotomies. In “Contradictions: Tracking Poems,” Rich writes, “you can learn/ from the edges that blur O you who love clear edges/ more than anything watch the edges that blur.” I have carried these lines with me from the first moment I read them. They inspire me to expose in my poems not only those edges slicing through my own life experiences, and their subsequent cloudiness, but also those edges outside of my own experience. I believe that poetry should not just be a self-centered endeavor which helps its authors make sense of themselves, but also it should be communal in order to help us understand each other so that we more clearly see the blur instead of those sharp edges which may divide us.

Dread, Ai’s 2003 collection, accomplishes this kind of communal outreach through her use of dramatic monologues. Her speakers, whether or not they are confused, or even delusional, speak their truths as they know it. This sharing of truths creates a connection between the speaker and reader that perhaps diminishes the edges dividing them and encourages the reader to notice the blur between them, or at least between those aspects of life that concern them. In

“Dread,” for instance, the poem after which the collection was named, a female police officer speaks to us. She has lost her brother in the 9/11 World Trade Center catastrophe. After disclosing that she and her brother lost their parents to domestic violence, she says about her brother, “[I] saw a boy who having barely escaped/ the inferno of family violence/ would still finally perish in fire’s cold embrace.” While the poem taps into the experience of loss, it simultaneously shows the connection between domestic violence and war (in this case, a terrorist attack) as if to show readers that violence is violence – its affects are painful and damaging no matter its source. Poetry such as this has communal value.

In my poetry, I attempt to further the idea of the blur and, by extension, community by using metaphors and conceits. The speakers or subjects of my poems become everything from flowers to fruits, from flora to fauna, from mermaid to satyr, from grit to goddess, with the hope that by showing how easily one thing becomes another, by showing how easily the blur may be traversed, otherness becomes more acceptable. A reader might conclude that my use of italics, particularly in “Sideshow,” interferes with my attempts to show connections – after all, this device is more often than not meant to separate – but, to me, it makes sense to first be able to highlight the differences in the language of the Other before allowing it to represent the language of my speakers. Another strategy readers may encounter in my poetry is the use of line breaks or exaggerated space breaks as a substitute for punctuation, which is usually accompanied by a disregard for capitalization. With this, I hope to achieve one of two things: first, as in “Sideshow” and the Mad Betty poems, to identify the otherness of the speaker, particularly when dialect is a factor; and second, as in “Closely Planted” and “when we/they have everything we/they want,” to underscore the identity of the speaker in order to bring to attention what is

really at stake – the source of true tension in the poem: in “Closely Planted,” the brother’s survival, in “when we/they,” the exasperation of trying to do what’s right.

In addition to being able to explore otherness as gracefully as Rich, Ai, Lorde, and others as well as to exercise my favored poetic devices, I have one wish for my poems – that each one, no matter how blatantly it is laid before the reader, still contains a bit of mystery or wonder. I believe it was the fall of my twenty-third year when I first opened Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *Strange Pilgrims* at some random bookstore. He had been recommended to me during a workshop a week before. I skimmed the table of contents to find the shortest story. “Light is Like Water.” About five pages long. I read it leaning against a bare wall. Then, I read it sitting cross-legged on the floor. I bought the collection. Then I read the story again as soon as I got home. The wonder the story left with me never diminished. The children in the story so intricately intertwined their imaginations with their reality that they drowned – they had determined, for a game of make-believe sailing, that light had the same properties of water. Despite its apparent simplicity, the story held me in a state of wonder. I would soon learn about “magical realism,” the descriptive tag under which Marquez’s work is often placed. This is not to say that I want to infuse my poems with magical realism, but using mysterious explanations to make sense of the real appeals to me. I would like to leave at least a dash of mystery or mysticism in even the smallest moment of a poem, and hopefully, eventually, as I grow as a poet, I will be able to affect my readers as “Light is Like Water” has affected me, so that the silence, which often comes after the final line of a poem, is filled with wonder.

Although, as with my enchantment with mysticism, the forthcoming statement may also expose me as a fledgling poet, I had not recognized a unifying theme among my poems until I had gathered them. Perhaps this is a common though well-kept secret for most poets. The

majority of my favorite collections generally are composed around some cohesive theme, though they usually give the impression of effortless. This is what I want for *How to Peel a Mango*. Jane Hirshfield seems to have mastered the appearance of effortless cohesion in her collections. In *Given Sugar*, *Given Salt* and *The Lives of the Heart*, her poems show the influence of her Zen Buddhist beliefs as, through them, one of her larger themes – interconnectedness – is readily discernable. In “Button,” for example, readers are smoothly guided from the “life” of a horn button to the life of the animal from which the horn was taken. Then, in *Talking Dirty to the Gods*, Yusef Komunyakaa uses form (each poem consisting of four quatrains) to show he can eulogize a maggot with as much grace and grandeur as he can Shiva, the blue god of the Hindu trifecta. Though writing a collection of poems unified by a specific form would have provided quite a challenge – and perhaps have been a little fun in a straight-jacket sort of way – my subconscious had already infused the poems in this collection with a concern for navigating the blur between dualities, as well as a preoccupation with the perspective of the outsider. While in many poems these concerns appear as conjoined twins, there are a few that focus more on one than the other.

So as to prepare the readers of this collection for its themes, “Sideshow” intends to serve as the host who initially presents, and quickly intertwines, an interest in the blur with the voice of an outsider. Then, the blur between childhood and adulthood is explored in “When His Hands Grow Big Enough,” the first section of the collection. To further complicate this fairly straightforward dichotomy, elements of mysticism are included against the backdrop of the speakers’ reality, particularly in “Closely Planted.” This layering of reality with mysticism will reappear time and again in subsequent sections. My hope is that readers come to understand that, at least for the sake of these poems, mysticism exists within reality. By aligning the outsider with

mysticism, and, by default, the insider with reality, as mysticism is shown to be a characteristic of reality, so is the outsider shown to be a part of the insider's world. Through this, the blur is revealed and a greater sense of community may blossom.

In the second section, "Her Tongue Past My Lips," four out of the six portraits present subjects or speakers who are either subtly or directly involved with the mystical. More often than not, this mystical involvement comes in the form of a goddess who diminishes their positions as outsiders – whether due to loneliness, race, or gender. The goddess becomes a figure in whom the outsider finds comfort, as she either transforms the speaker of the poem or, in fact, becomes the speaker. For example, in "Kalibari," the goddess Kali transforms the speaker from a girl unhappy about her feminine characteristics into a young woman who is now able to recognize feminine power. Then, in "Dothead!" the speaker becomes the goddess Devi, which, of course, empowers her despite of the racist comment flung at her.

Following this section so focused on otherness, Mad Betty introduces herself in her eponymous section as the ultimate Other, tightrope walker between dichotomies, and Queen of the Blur. She speaks in a West Indian dialect associated with less educated islanders, though presumably to a more highly educated audience. I mean her language often to tend toward the crass and her subject often toward the immoral, while references to Christianity, if not direct allusions, may also surface in each monologue. She may appear insane, blatant enough through her name – perhaps akin to Langston Hughes' Madame poems, or *Jane Eyre's* mad woman in the attic, or even Crazy Jane in Yeats's poetry. And yet, as she shares her wisdom, I mean for her to become a mystical goddess figure herself. I also associate her self-centeredness with madness, yet her sermons are intended to initiate social change. Influenced by, among other sequences, the clustering of Ai's Psychic Detective series in *Dread*, Mad Betty's monologues are gathered with

the hope that together the fullness and complexity of her character might become more apparent across several poems.

In accordance with Mad Betty's concern for social change, the final section, "Do Not Curb Your Nature," extends my interest in social conditions, without meaning to abandon the spiritual dualities of earlier poems. While "Self-Portrait in a Spoon" and "The Lovely Zulu Lady of Royal Street, New Orleans" directly address issues of race as well as the plight of the outsider, other poems in this section explore the status of the outsider as it results from the subject's spiritual, physical, economic, and/or national exclusion. Yet, this section is not without its elements of mysticism. For example, the namesake of "Jordan" is a shopkeeper capable of inspiring stigmata in those who look upon his crucifixion tattoo. Jordan's spiritual power distances him from those around him, while the appearance and unknown capabilities of the grocery-cart collector make him an outcast. I believe that a closer look at reality cannot help but reveal that mysticism is deeply rooted.

By using poetry to look at the blur between dualities, whether dealing with issues of race, language, culture, nationality, gender, or religion, we not only can become more comfortable upon the side we rest, but also become more willing to explore the side that seems foreign. The larger goal, I suppose, as I allow myself to aim too high, might be to use a multi-cultural poetic to encourage communities to base themselves more on inclusion rather than exclusion. And I can think of no better community to start with than the poets – the heralds, the soothsayers, the lovers of variety. The more diminutive and admittedly self-centered goal would be for this multi-cultural poetic to create a safe shore where Others, like me, might not only be unafraid to hold the thick molasses on their tongues, but also be bold enough to share its strange sweetness.

Sideshow

*Fractures in identity
[are] signs of possibility
rather than absence
-Stephanie Hartman*

in three tugs
i can peel a mango
with my teeth
the naked sun in my hands
its rays leaking to my elbows

i've never seen a Trinidadian
do it any other way

i perform poolside
so my American friends
can have a story to tell their friends
about the tropical girl they know
(though i make them swear never to share
the secret of my act)

and i'll never tell them
of my first few days
in an American classroom
how because it didn't open out
onto a savannah my hands
like the feathery branchlets of a fern
caught in an island breeze trembled
so badly i had to memorize
instead of taking notes on
whatever the teacher said or

how by the last day of junior high
i had tucked between my mattress and box-spring
a diary full of translations my word
equal sign their word each with a story to help me
remember: when i asked for a *rubber*
Mike Hutchinson turned on me
his gorgeous blue eyes glistening
as a swamp under a mid-afternoon Florida sky

[strophe break]

and called me a *freak*
here a rubber ≠
an eraser

or how when Katie Doebellar wanted me to *pinky-swear*
not to tell anyone she couldn't spell *Tallahassee*
i thought American girls disgusting
because in Trinidad *pinky*
means vagina so

i learned a second English
picked up a silly accent
with *t*'s like *d*'s
over-announced *e-r* endings:
Ka-ra-bee-in wah-
derrs instead of *Kah-rib-*
be-an war-tas
only spoke
with my own silly accent
when nervous
drunk angry

or loved
and in moments of silence
became the American girl
who happens to know
how to peel a mango
with her teeth

I.
When His Hands Grow Big Enough

Farm Hands

I.

Vishnu lowers me from the mango tree,
the glare from the galvanized roofs of pig pens
stinging his eyes. His hands and arms
do not strain. Branch by branch,
the scaly bark etches trails of blood
across my bare stomach,
and I want to stretch my neck
to lick each line away.
Burning my insides, he presses
 into my scratches, then
dots my forehead and says,
“We are married now.”
When his hands grow big enough
to shake my father’s,
we will kiss.

II.

With the fluorescent light
like a cold moon baring his back,
the coarse-haired boar’s grunting
atop a pink sow promises a full pen.
The toothless farmhand yawns
at their progress, as he traces back
and forth one hand’s lifelines
with the thick fingers of his other,
until I step forward to ask,
“What is that pig doing to her?”
His reddened cheeks introduce me
to embarrassment and make me wonder
if I, too, should blush
or turn away.

III.

Behind a young sow, a first-time mother,
my father kneels, the stillborn’s placenta

gathering around his rough bared knees –
blue and purple blood vessels swirling
against a cranberry-colored gelatinous mass.
Limp, the piglet rests upon the four fingers
of his right hand, his thumb massaging her chest,
while with the other hand, he channels
small puffs of air -- once, twice --
into her snout, until squealing,
she begins to squirm.
Blood drips from his fingers
onto mine, as he passes her, pillowed
in his massive palm, to me. I cradle her,
sticky and wet, between my hands.

Burgeoning Fruit

The way pits press against
the insides of cherries our buck teeth
pressed against our lips. Even though
I wore dresses on Sundays,
our haircuts made us both boys
at first glance. “We’re six,”
we’d say, standing like toy soldiers
shoulder to shoulder, prizing
that year’s nine-month gap.
We wanted to be twin brothers,

until I turned seven. One week
after my birthday, I found you
waiting – your tears mixed with spit
in the creases of your mouth.
With fists heavy as green mangoes,
I rushed to shove the culprit, big
as Uncle Collin’s rusty wheelbarrow,
one two three times into the playground clay
until your tears and spit had dried
white on your brown face.

That afternoon, while we dangled
from the limbs of a neighbor’s plum tree –
the bully’s bruises still darkening our hands
to prove we were the same – we agreed
my turning seven could be a good thing
for two plums not quite ready to ripen
and fall.

I told him a story about a dolphin
playing in cool, Caribbean currents, did he
uncurl, while I fanned the ridges
swollen across his back.

Closely Planted

brother Shiva¹ is looking at you
his eyes pitch-black lakes of perfect symmetry focused
while i am small and wet under the lid of his third eye
which waits to sprinkle your atoms across the deserts
the eye that remembers the pierce
of your needles as well as you and me at dawn
running between grandma's lime trees so that
at noon we could compare our long scabby scratches

yours were always worse because as you ran you flayed
your arms hoping to fly

brother Shiva is looking at you
as i hold tight to his eyelashes as long as lifetimes
his pupil pulling me into Parvati's² pool
where she bathes her ivory-tusked son as gently as our father
bathed your face your syringe dancing between his bare feet
before shaking you into consciousness

i always hoped those new scabs meant you were flying
through lime trees

brother Shiva is looking at you
and i am but the grit in his eye easy enough to blow away
through lime trees that would leave my arms hands feet and neck
because we are closely planted as scabby as yours

¹The Hindu god of creation and destruction. A life is taken after he looks upon it with his third eye.

²Shiva's wife with which he bore Ganesh, the god with the elephant's head.

Three Patriarchs

At thirty, my brother has inherited his god-father's ability to love every woman – her curves like a pencil's or a pumpkin's, her skin as fair as doves' wings or dark as King David's robes. He kisses each woman's wrist now

and again, tenderly. As long as his grandfather's, his arms enclose seventy-eight inches – enough to embrace two of his women at once (while his charm attracts another three).

Though he'd rather not have his father's eyes, brown like wood chips and so severely slanted no grin can lift their creases, he longs for his father's strength

so that only one woman may hold him.

II.
Her Tongue Past My Lips

Painted Bowl

From room to room she wandered
searching for just the right place to put it –
her pace so steady and slow,

had the bowl's flowers been real, no pistil
would have stirred, had it been filled
with anything but nothing, nothing

would have spilled. With its rim
swollen, beckoning like the lips
of her former lover's open mouth, its girth

burst forth like the hips of Boticelli's Venus.
With the soft flesh of the goddess in her palms,
she could no longer call it "bowl,"

but "oyster," "womb," "unrequited,"
until, walking with it, she mistook herself
for what she held.

When Your Father's a Fish and Your Mother's a Goat

Born by the crests of waves and wind-blown earth,
between the trinity and the third eye of a god, you began

your journey. Neither fair as the insides of seashells
nor dark as the seeds of kiwi, you love most

those who exist outside both. Though often, sweet
tart, you hang from your knotty branch –

the estranged fruit consoling the others fallen –
remaining more fauna than flora. As you become

a mermaid for your father, a satyr for your mother,
androgyne, you possess the right to taste the pollen-

coated fingertips of every proffered hand. But when, caught
in the sugarwater that pools in your palms, the Kraken

laughs and stretches its eight-petaled blossoms to tickle you,
through eyelash-fringed slits, you slip away

from the space between fact and myth
as the shore between parent and ancestor narrows.

“Dot-head!”

During our walk at sunset
someone yelled it
through his car window

and I smiled, envisioning myself
in a green *sari* embroidered
with lotus petals,

at my brow a jeweled *tilak*,
coral-colored henna glowing
on my hands.

I straightened my back, ready
as Devi¹ or
maybe Sita², womanhood

personified, for Vedanta³
to possess my tongue,
to witness the mingling

of sun and moon,
when my mother, her dark hand
grasping my shoulder, said

*He was shouting at me,
child. He thinks I am your maid.
You look too much like your father.*

¹In Hinduism, she is the Divine Mother from which all other goddesses are manifested.

²The main female character in a Hindu epic. She exemplifies feminine virtue.

³In Sanskrit, it means “the culmination of knowledge.” A philosophy based on the teachings of the Upanishads, a sacred Hindu text.

Kalibari¹

I hated pink,
rose petals, thick eyelashes,
crying, everything soft,

perfume, anklets, long hair, everything
woman. At every cycle, to Shiva
I prayed, *Blue God, grant me immunity.*

But he never allowed it. I resented the pain
of each renewal, protesting my femininity
by mowing lawns and pulling weeds

until my shoulders peeled, my palms blistered.
This is how Kali found me: sweaty,
sprawled atop sharp blades

of freshly cut grass, defeated
after failing to pull out an errant daisy.
Crawling on top of me, she dragged

her garland of severed heads up
between my thighs to settle
on my stomach. With blood draining

from their ears, their noses,
their *gada*-club wounds stained my skin
while their rubbery lips tried in vain

to slurp my sweat away. Her breasts firm
against mine, she unraveled her tongue
as if I should taste it, still syrupy

from her violent feast. I resisted her, too, but
she plunged her tongue past my lips,
my teeth, deep into my throat

¹Literally, “the house of Kali” but also a term for the devotees of Kali, the ferocious form of the Hindu Divine Mother.

until I had either to drink from it
or choke. I drank and drank,
until, rolling her tongue back

into its tomb, she pushed herself up
to dance – her waist churning,
her four arms flowing in rivulets.

This is how Kali left me: Petaled
weeds knotted in my hair, their pliant stems
a garland weighted with blossoms

not yet there.

Miscue

The red light of his lantern pendant beat
as rapidly as her heart, as he pulled
his dreadlocks free from its plastic gold beads.
She squeezed his arm just hard enough, then cupped

the beckoning light, before she leaned and whispered –
aware, more than her words, her hot breath stirred him –
her wish to hold the charm against her throat.
With ample heat, “fun” and “pretty” sighed sound

like “now” and “harder, please.”

Once she left him, the lantern still thudding,
with each step, against her chest, she could hear
“soon, yes” and “always lace” from lips between
two bodies pressed, like diary pages, shut.

Mouth full, the lantern flattening her tongue,
she thought it would be nice one day to say
the words she knew would grant her something more
beyond this trinket meant to keep her silent.

For the Philtrum

Within the democracy of the face
you count for naught. Ever ready
with their lashes, the eyes care for nothing
they cannot see, while the lips, whisperers

of the besmirched, care for nothing
they cannot kiss. As though a bed of flowers
beside a picket fence, you prefer random lovers
who use you to prove their attentiveness,

though they can never remember your name.
Even when a beloved strokes, finally, your soft
indentation, he can imagine nothing
better than to call you that tender, sweet

spot, reservoir of salt, between nostrils
and lips, between labored breath and trembling
welcome. You would make the mouth laugh at him
while the torso turns away,

yet you have no more influence over the domestics
of your home than does a dimple or fingernail.
And even in puberty's aftermath
when you are as unblemished as you were at birth,

the nostrils push their air hard against you –
a dam breached again
and again – to mold you into something more
solemn than the faces of rain-beaten pansies.

III.
Mad Betty

mad betty lectures the schoolyard girls

fuck dem boyz
fuck al dem boyz

fuck dem fas and hard
so dey tink dey is de las torn
ya ev'a goin' ta let prik ya
yeh fuck dem hard
so dat dey beggin' for ya suga
befor dey giv ya deers

dem boys like dat
yeh fuck dem hard
fuck dem hard
yeh

yeh fuck dem slo
wit a little sweetness if ya want
but slo is dey key
fuck dem slo
tro ya hands up ov'a ya head
an ride dem slo on top
so slo dey diggin' de fingas
in ta ya hips an beggin'
for de feel ah ya finganails
on dey stomak
yeh slo
slo
slo

an fuck dat fakin' bullshit
bull
shit
get off or get yuhself out
you doe wa' no lazie man
no fuck dat
fuck dat unless
unless is one a dem
my-man-dun-gone-an-had-a-hard-day
fucks
den das al rite
das al rite
now and den

cuz ya mite luv de man
yeh das al right if yuh luv
de man yeh
an yuh kud luv dem too
an if one a dem dun gone
and get yuh to luv 'im
wel das an angel yeh das
an angel
cuz no god e'va luv anyting
below an angel

yeh

if yuh luv one a dem dey angels
if yuh luv one a dem dey mens
hole on ta 'im
yeh he goin' ta get yuh bes fuck yeh
yull fuck 'im good no dout
yeh

an ah hear too
yuh kud fuck one a dem guerls
yeh yuh kud do dat too
fuck one a dem guerls good
roun here dey call dem rubbas
cuz dey be rubbin' up on one anodder
like one a dem dun have a torn ta prik de odder
yuh kud fuck a guerl good
guerl fuck guerl
bin goin' on sin' bible times
yeh yuh kud fuck a guerl good
reel good yeh

but yeh

de bes way ta fuck anodder guerl
de bes way fuh a guerl-guerl fuck
de bes way ta fuck a guerl yeh
de bes way
is ta fuck she angel

mad betty reclaims lilith¹

dey wunted she to cut out she tung
doh god knows al dem white beards had a taste
an' de lot a dem wunted for nutun

de gurl wuz so pretty an' yung
an' wuz sharin' no secret but grace
but dey wunted she to cut out she tung

no foul breat ev'a leap from she lung
but dey wunted she beauty defaced
an' de lot of dem wunted for nutun

so she grab for de knife dey had brung
to slice off she cloting wit haise
but dey wunted she to cut out she tung

so insted on dat apple tree she hung
purple-faced nakid pass she wais
an' de lot a dem wunted for nutun

when dey shoulda praised whatev'a she sung
an' be dressin' she up in fine lace
dey wunted she to cut out she tung
an' god knows dey wunted for nutun

¹Supposedly Adam's original wife who was made out of the same clay, rather than his rib, and was therefore equal to him. She was eventually banished from the Garden of Eden.

mad betty judges solomon

de udda day i did see dis guerl i use'ta no
dong in Chaguanas market wit she lil pic'ney boi
she make 'im hole an tite to she skirt loos at she wais
she wuz a good gurl until she man done make she ho
like dey did in dee Old Testament Jerusalem

some lessons nevah stop from carryin' on ovah

i wunduh if de chile dem prostitutes fight ovah
wuz a boi chile or a guerl chile we guh nevah no
unless de King done come dong from he Jerusalem
in de sky to tell we
meantime doh i guh gess boi
dey wud'na fight ovah no guerl chile no futuah ho
to compete 'gainst mudah wit she smood skin and small wais
while muda considuhs de nine months she wait a wais
wit she hopes for a son to take care of she ovah

but who could say if eida a dem 'oman did ho
fuh a livin' or if dis part de Bible no
it eh no at all what if David's boface yung boi
did make it up for dem fokes ah Jerusalem?
afta' all lil' Solo did want to hole all Jerusalem
de way a man need to hole a woman's wais
but fuss he ha' to show de peepel he wuz no shupid boi

he had to do someting before he chance wuz ovah
so maybe he spin a tale to show he knowlidge
an' to show how he fair to all he use dem ho

but nevah wuz deh a more noble use fuh a ho
'cep by dem poor carob farmahs in Jerusalem
ha! whuz more funny is ev'ry woman arung no
dat doh Lady Israel hah de sexiast wais
an she like to shake-shake she holy land all ovah
fuh de prettiest
richest
strongest ah dem rude boiz
she won't tank Solomon fuh not halfin' dat boi

he coulda show de pain ah stinginess to dem “ho”
an teach de best tale to forev’ a carry ovah
so one sacrifice would show Crist’yahn Jew and Muslem
no right to own is wurt layin’ de chi’ren to wais

now dats a lesson de whole big whorl should be noing

doh de Lady shake she wais she eh nobody ho
she just want ev’ry boi happy in Jerusalem
so dey sure to no she not one fuh dem to fight ovah

IV.
Do Not Curb Your Nature

Self-Portrait in a Spoon

Gumming the teaspoon like a teething child, the mulatto
patted the dentures in his worn-thin shirt pocket. The others
on the bus ignored him. His hair spiraled
past his ears. His arms, beefy from the kind of work
that came with sixty years of circling

‘Other,’ resembled my father’s.
He might have brightened that chore
for his children, as my father did.
He might have turned stern and scientific,

teaching them about hybridization, how,
among flora and fauna, a mix results
in a more resilient breed. Or he might have played
more with them, to hear their high-pitched delight,

comparing their complexions to caramel
or peanut butter, then threatening
to nibble their fingers
as, like Jack’s beanstalk giant, he chased them.

Smacking his lips, the mulatto grinned at me
and removed the teaspoon from his mouth
to place it beside his dentures.
From there, it faced me, holding

my reflection as it might a mouthful
of caramel. If only his spoon could keep me
in its concave bowl, so lifting it
again into his mouth, wilting at the corners,
he might taste his own child’s laughter.

Jordan

Jesus breathed whenever Jordan bagged
a loaf of bread or dropped parking-meter quarters
into a beggar's palm. Jesus breathed
whenever Jordan played with his cigarette
or rolled a joint. In the crucifixion
tattooed on his forearm, by flexing
the muscle's beneath the martyr's chest,
Jordan could make Jesus breathe on the cross.
Jesus breathed again – and again –
whenever Jordan held out his hand, palm
splayed down, for patrons who sought
to read the word, *ELI*.¹

The fish tattooed on Jordan's index finger
swam toward *ELI*, one letter
per finger: My God, *Eli*. Eli, *My God*.
Some looked at Jordan's face as they said it
out loud, as if it were his name – *ELI*.

My God, how he preferred the silence
of the stock room, where he could pretend
to be nothing. But, now, here,
under the shopkeeper's command,
at the counter he stands, bored as a rosary
on a nun's lap, for all to be heard. *ELI*.
Still, he shrugs, shuffles his feet,
but never looks up, not wanting them
to know him, too afraid he'll inspire
their stigmata, lest their blood spill, then dry
and crust over his tattoos.

¹Translates to "My God" in Hebrew and Aramaic.

The Grocery-Cart Collector

Your hips rest on the good leg
while the other lugs behind
like a ten-pound sack of potatoes.
When the automatic door swings open,
you wobble through, a shepherd
without his staff, pained not to be graceful
nor quick, but proud you no longer trip
over your own feet. Behind your glasses,
their frame large and square, their lenses thick
as glass tiles, you peer at the entrance and park
yourself next to the carts, ready to help
the patrons with furrowed brows –
but in their frantic search for
relish or ketchup, they rush around
you, then pester the produce boy.
You will always be “incompetent”
or “retarded.” And as you polish
the handles of your well-herded row of carts,
the housewife in spandex, delicately unloading
frozen corn dogs onto the conveyor belt,
then the bleach next to the milk, nods at you
as she whispers behind her to the frat boy –
the jackal stalking her every skin-tight move
while tossing his six-pack from hand to hand –
*Who will take care of his
mother, in her old age?*

when we/they have everything we/they want

i.

five homeless people at the bus stop squatting around an overturned umbrella
filled with soup dumplings potatoes and compassion fattening
its impermeable hide though the metal tips of its spiny skeleton scratch
the soft tissues of their eyes their mouths do not slow to notice
the taste of their own pulp everything is gravy

ii.

for the girl who shops at boutiques with price tags that could fill barrels with soup thick
as crude oil everything is gravy don't look at her don't
look or she will throw up throw away her umbrella
though not before she scratches her eyes out is she blind blind?
blind blind blind and the gravy tastes like neglect

iii.

kevin can not find his spoon nor himself he's left his sister at the boutique
he's searched at the bus stop he's looked in his mouth he's looked
in your mouth he's poked himself with needles it's got to be in there somewhere
keep looking kevin no kevin no! blame rests not behind your eyes
and your pupils do not taste like the gravy in anything but in everything

iv.

the line at the butcher's is long kevin's next he turns his back to the man with the cleaver
then says *try between the shoulders avoid the spine you can keep the pulp*
feed the homeless he says he may be too late he's already tried looking
through the chest and eyes found nothing yes kevin the homeless will remember
the umbrella remember you wanted the soup to taste like love

The Lovely Zulu Lady of Royal Street, New Orleans

The Lovely Zulu Lady stood naked and bald in front of the import store –
her cheeks and breasts full as South African plums.

The Lovely Zulu Lady, with feet planted shoulder-width apart,
posed with her arms pressed against her sides.

The Lovely Zulu Lady boasted a painted fish on her chest
tossing across the tree sprouting from her navel.

The sign noosed around The Lovely Zulu Lady's neck announced,
For Sale, Take Me Home Today, \$69.95.

The Lovely Zulu Lady didn't blush when around her neck the frat boys hung
Mardi Gras beads – their knuckles grazing her cleavage.

The Lovely Zulu Lady stayed silent when the Southern Belle
in trucker hat and hip huggers said, "She's no lady."

The Lovely Zulu Lady's earlobes stretched to her shoulders.

The Lovely Zulu Lady stared while rough hands handled her hips and thighs,
while tourists dragged sharp nails down her stomach and fingered her holes.

The Lovely Zulu Lady didn't flinch when someone's steel-toed boot
crushed her toe, breaking her stand.

But – in the end – when the blue-eyed toddler embraced her, tipping her over,
The Lovely Zulu Lady's head hit the sidewalk and split open
like a shanked oyster, the painted fish scattering across the street.

Scorpion

my father says when i was five
my feet dirty with island soil and sand
he saw a scorpion crawl across my toes
it did not sting

poetry is not
a dove
but a scorpion the one
who stings your soles

so each poisoned
step
pulses until
you feel your true place

in the world
walking barefoot around
this American city that feels like Chaguanas
i can fool myself into forgetting

the feeling of foreign
but in poems that sting i still hear
my heart's accent though softly
come scorpion

climb across my toes curl
curl your tail about my ankle do not curb your nature
for a moment
let me carry you

Vita

trisha rezende was born on the island nation of Trinidad and Tobago. She received her undergraduate degree from the University of Central Florida. She is hoping to acquire her M.F.A. from the University of New Orleans this May.