LOVING IN THE WAR YEARS

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LO QUE NUNCA PASÓ POR SUS LABIOS

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Last night at work, a woman younger than me with rosary beads and a scapular wrapped 'round her neck came floating into the restaurant, acting like she was gonna have a fit or something crazy—her eyelids blinking a hundred miles an hour, her eyeballs rolling up into her head, only the whites showing.

It was sunday-rush and she stood there in the middle of the floor, telling everybody they should all leave immediately because Jesus was coming. And what was funny is that everybody stopped eating, their forks hanging in the air in front of their open mouths, and listened. Just for a second, but for that second, she had their complete attention.

As a nut, people noticed her. She'd be nobody if she weren't a crazy woman.

I hate religion, I said to Jeanne the hostess who kept trying to get the crazy woman to sit down, shut up and eat some soup. I hate that she has all those words about salvation and Jesus and suffer to pull off this scene with. Confusing the point.

The woman left and came back at least seven times before she finally left for good. Nobody wanted to throw her out—to where? But every time she came in again, my stomach would get all tied up in knots and I kept getting these hits of myself at about eleven years old, shaking my body up and down trying to rattle the "impure thoughts" outta it.

She and I, we're the same woman, but nobody notices me like that.
ANATOMY LESSON

A black woman and a small beige one talk about their bodies. About putting a piece of their anatomy in their pockets upon entering any given room.

When entering a room full of soldiers who fear hearts, you put your heart in your back pocket, the black woman explains. It is important, not to intimidate. The soldiers wear guns, not in their back pockets.

You let the heart fester there. You let the heart seethe. You let the impatience of the heart build and build until the power of the heart hidden begins to be felt in the room. Until the absence of the heart begins to take on the shape of a presence. Until the soldiers look at you and begin to beg you to open up your heart to them, so anxious are they to see what it is they fear they fear.

Do not be seduced.

Do not forget for a minute that the soldiers wear guns. Hang onto your heart. Ask them first what they'll give up to see it. Tell them that they can begin with their arms.

Only then will you begin to negotiate.

IT GOT HER OVER

You're lucky you look the way you do, you could get any man. Anyone says anything to you, tell them your father's white.

—Michelle Cliff, Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise

1
To touch her skin felt thick like hide, not like flesh and blood when an arm is raised the blue veins shine rivers running underground with shadow depth, and tone.

No, her skin had turned on her in the light of things. In the light of Black women and children beaten/hanged/raped strangled murdered in Boston Atlanta in California where redneck hunters coming home with empty white hands go off to fill 'em with Black Man.
Her skin had turned
in the light of these things.
Stuck to her now
like a flat immovable paste
spread grey over a life.

Still,
it got her over
in laundromats
when machines ate her change
swallowed whole her dollar bill
when cops stopped to check what the problem was
Remember
I could be your daughter she used
looking up from the place on the sand
where two women were spread out, defiant
where he read, the white one
must be protected that time
saving them both.

It got her over
when the bill was late
when she only wanted to browse not buy
when hunger forced them
off the highway and into grills
called “Red’s” and “Friendly’s”
coffee shops packed suburban
white on white, eyes shifting
to them and away
to them and away
and back again
then shifted into safety
lock inside their heads.

2
She had never been ashamed of her face.

Her lust, yes
Her bad grammar, yes
Even her unforgiving ways
but never, her face
recently taken to blushing
as if the blood wanted
to swallow
the flesh.

Bleed through
guilt by association
complicity to the crime.

Bleed through
Born to lead.
Born to love.
Born to live.

Bleed through
and flood the joint
with a hatred so severe

people went white
with shock
and dying.

......

No, she had never
been ashamed of her face
not like this
	ragging her own two cheeks
her fingers pressed together
as if to hold between them
the thin depth of color.
See this face?
Wearing it like an accident of birth.
It was
a scar sealing up
a woman, now darkened by desire.

See this face?

Where do you take this hate
to lunch?

How
to get over
this one.

WINTER OF OPPRESSION, 1982

The cold in my chest comes
from having to decide
while the ice builds up on this side
of my new-york-apt.-bldg.-living window,
whose death
has been marked
upon the collective forehead
of this continent, this
shattering globe
the most indelibly.

Indelible. A catholic word
I learned
when I learned
that there were catholics and there
were not.

But somehow
we did not count the Jews
among the have-nots, only protestants
with their cold & bloodless god
with no candles/no incense/no bloody
sacrifice or spirits
lurking.

Protestantism. The white people’s
religion.

......

First time I remember
seeing pictures of the Holocaust
was in the tenth grade and the moving pictures
were already there in my mind
somehow before they showed me
what I already understood
that these people were killed
for the spirit-blood
that runs through them.

They were like us in this.
Ethnic people with long last names
with vowels at the end or the wrong
type of consonants
combined a colored kind of white people.

But let me tell you
first time I saw an actual
picture glossy photo of a lynching
I was already grown & active
& living & loving Jewish.
Black. White. Puerto Rican.

And the image blasted
my consciousness
split it wide I
had never thought seen
heard of such a thing
never even imagined the look
of the man the weight
dead hanging swinging heavy
the fact of the white people
cold bloodless
looking on It

had never occurred to me
I tell you I
the nuns failed to mention

this could happen, too
how could such a thing happen?
because somehow dark real dark
was not quite real
people killed
but some
thing not
taken to heart
in the same way it feels
to see white shaved/starved
burned/buried
the boned bodies stacked & bulldozed
into huge craters made by men
and machines
and at fifteen I counted 22
bodies only in the far left-hand
corner of the movie screen
& I kept running
through my mind
and I'm only one
count one
it could be me
it could be me
I'm nothing
to this cruelty.

Somehow tonight,
is it the particular coldness
where my lover sleeps with a scarf
to keep it out
that causes me to toss
and turn the events of the last weeks
the last years of my life
around in my sleep?
Is it the same white coldness
that forces my back up
against the wall—choose.
choose.

I cannot
choose nor forget

how simple
to fall back
upon rehearsed racial memory.

I work to remember
what I never dreamed possible

what my consciousness could never
contrive.

Whoever I am

I must believe
I am not
and will never be
the only
one
who suffers.
MINDS & HEARTS

the road to recovering
what was lost
in the war
that never pronounced itself

left no visible signs
no ration cards
sailor boys
ticker tape

parades, the road
to recovering what was lost
in a war that never pronounced correctly

the road to recovering
what was lost in a war
that was never pronounced
dead
missing in
action, prisoner

of our minds
& hearts

NO BORN-AGAIN CHILDREN

"Somebody in my family just died!
Now are you gonna stay dead or pull a lazarus?"

Woman, if I could simply rise up
from this bed of doubt, miraculous and beaming,
I would.
  if I could,
  I would.


You told me that when your brother saw the train coming
he didn't move. He was transfixed somehow
intensely curious a boy of twelve with a body of pure
speed and a death wish
he's ready to dump into the nearest river
or body that can swallow it.

  He opened you up, pink and hungry, too
  but for the tenderness in his fingers talking
  you into, coaxing you into
  turning cold and quiet into you.

And taking the orange into your five-year-old fist
the boy coming at you again, you flung it out the window.

He stopped dead cold in his tracks.


I don't know why your brother died. I don't know why.
  Was it the face of the orange, alive and bright, spinning
before his eyes? The vision of a girl
pushing life through the hole of doom that bore you both?
It was a suicide, woman. A suicide we both refuse
daily with all our good brains and tenderness. Still,
you can see me in him, can’t you? Riveted onto that track
putting my cheek up against the size of a locomotive
just to see what it’s like
just to taste how close it’ll get before—

stone still & trembling
I split off that rail.

But I am not your brother. I will not die on you
no matter how you dare me
to reenact that tragedy
like your momma dragging you down
to the railroad tracks
still hot from his suicide

another child dead.

No, I will not die on you and yet, death keeps us
watching. We look to each other for miracles
to wipe out a memory full of dead men and dying
women, but we can’t save each other
from what we learned
to fear.

We can’t.

There are no miracles.
No Lazarus.
No born-again children.

Only an orange flung out of a window
like a life line that bears repeating
again and again
until we’re both convinced.

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**NOVEMBER AGAIN**

she called it, the black pearl of my conviction
the security of knowing
at least our fear is unchangeable.

at the beach in november, there is a woman
with a thin silk robe draped around her bare shoulders
the rest of her bare, too, and a child coming after her.

naked on the beach and flaunting it, waving the silk
robe up around her head, leaping over its skirt, dancing.
the child humming to himself, like accompaniment.

three times, I imagine myself coming up to her,
taking her by the wrist, explaining to her
how she should cover up, not expose herself so,
not joyfully like this.

passing the woman, I find a thin stone on the shore.
I lick the sand and salt clean from it, then rub it
dry and dull on the thigh of my pants.

leaving the beach, I place it in my pocket.
YOU CALL IT, “AMPUTATION”

Macalister’s boy took one of the fish and cut a square out of its side to bait his hook with. The mutilated body (it was alive still) was thrown back into the sea.

—Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse

You call it
“am pu tation”

but even after the cut
they say the toes still itch
the body remembers the knee,

 gracefu lly bend ing

she reaches down to find her leg gone
the shape under the blanket dropping off
suddenly, irregu larly

it is a shock, Woolf says
that by putting into words
we make it whole

still, I feel
the mutilated body
swimming in side stroke
pumping twice as hard
for the lack
of body, pushing
through your words
which hold no water
for me.

FOR AMBER

when her friend Yve died of a stroke

I want to catch it while it’s still fresh
and living in you, this talking like
you don’t know what’s gonna come outta your mouth
next. I watch the bodies pour
right out between those red lips of yours
and without thinking, they’re changing me
without trying, they’re transforming
before my eyes.

I told you once
that you were like my grandmother
the white one, the gypsy
all dolled up
in a white cadillac convertible
with Big Fins—she red deep
behind the wheel, her bleached blonde
flying. At stop lights she’d be there
just waiting for some sucker
to pull up, thinking she was
a gal of twenty. She’d turn
and flash him a seventy-year-old
smile, and press pedal.

Oh honey, this is you
in all your freeway glory,
the glamour of your ways.

And without stopping
last night you talked about the places
in you thinking of your body
that are lost to you, how we locate
that damage in our different parts
like a dead foot, you said, how we run
inventory—checking on which show
promise of revival
and which don't.

What I didn't tell you
was how my grandmother stopped
all of a sudden
turned baby, all of a sudden
speechless
my momma giving her baths
in the tub, while I played nearby
her bare white skin slipping
down off those cold shoulders
piling up around her hips and knees,
slowing her down.

My grandma turned baby
and by the toilet I'd sit with her
she picking out designs in the linoleum
saying this one looks like a man
in a tub, scrubbing his back
with a brush,

and it did.

HEADING EAST

We are driving this car on determination, alone.
The miles seem to repair us
convince us that we are getting somewhere
that we won't have another breakdown
we end up leaking into somebody's movie
trapped in a ghost town shaniko, oregon pouring rain
we dive under the car
expose its underside, our fingers
feeling into the machine for its sore spot
"I've got it," I scream
"I know where the hole is," our eyes fire each other's
thinking we have conquered the unknown
we patch up the lacerated hose with black tape.

In this town of livery stable, turned museum
we roll out our bags onto the floor
of an abandoned caboose.
we are in somebody's movie

Two women stranded in a ghost town.
They are headed east.
They think they'll make it.
MODERN-DAY HERO

I would not have stopped, but there was the love that I wasn’t getting from you which I had to put somewhere. Setting down the two six-packs of beer onto the sidewalk, lifting up the head of the woman lying next to them.

A modern-day hero. If it takes heroism to win you back, then I guess that’s what it takes. Kay and I lift the woman into my car. “There, honey, you’ll be fine,” I hear Kay say for all of us, to each other. “There, honey, we got you. . . . Yes, hold onto your purse.”

That was how I found her, clutching her purse into her belly. Every other part of her limp, but her hands tight around her purse. And there was a man with her—drunk like her—trying to get something out of her. Move her. Leave her. Take her purse. I don’t know. All I know is that he’s standing and she’s face down with a mouth full of cement.

The police cars arrive. Some white man comes charging out of his house. “I called the police,” he shouts, glad for himself. I could have throttled the guy, waving his hands over his head like a crazy person. More men to contend with.

The three of us—the woman, Kay and I—are getting quickly outnumbered. Two cars have pulled up with four cops inside. They pile out. There’s only one brown one in the lot, but he’s the one that says, looking at me, “Can you ladies get her home all right?” “Yes,” I answer. And we do.

As the cop cars pull away and we pull the woman into my car, I can’t get you clearly out of my mind. All along wondering how you could see me here, managing these men to save a woman. Lifting this woman up that long flight of stairs, home.

THE WARBRIDE

The minute we got back from Monterey Beach, sat down to table with two taquitos apiece laid out in front of us, I knew our relationship was on the road to recovery. The waitress, built like Tia Vicky—stocky, stick-legs, make-up & busy efficiency—convinced me.

Who can survive the Pacific Ocean? When not bordered by 24th Street Mission District storefronts. When not L.A. Venice Beach pre-redevelopment. When not simple like two sisters who knew the sun’s setting into the water as the course of a day—no big deal, no romance. Floating in a big black tube beyond the waves. Still counting on the fact that a mother would surely live forever—like a life forever wakening in the kitchen, cooking.

Who can survive the pacific ocean? Not in California. I know the beaches too well to fool you into thinking they are anything but fatal. It’s not the water, exactly; it’s what drives people to its edge. ROMANCE. SEX. MOMENTS OF QUIET CONTEMPLATION. STEAK & LOBSTER & cliffside mansions owned by Hollywood producers clinging to the canyon walls, praying this winter’s mud will go around them.

“That rock is old,” a friend said, “brittle and bitter. It was never meant to hold . . . ;” slipping away. But the beaches are about serious living, as if there were actually some huge neon splitting the orange atmosphere overhead as you barrel down highway one, warning: Danger. Pacific Ocean Ahead. Check Your Life for Meaning.

It’s about taking stock. Makes sense now, in retrospect, how I would find my eyes so fixated on those stockpiles of weapons the army used to store in big cement tombs on their beachfront property just outside Monterey. When I was a warbride, my boyfriend’s job was to keep guard there, smoking joints. I wishing there was some real Vietnam he could object to, conscientiously. But I’d spread my legs for him anyway in seaside Motel 6’s to relieve his misery that he was not out shooting shots & the shit with
his dog and his buddies. And what else would I be doing anyway, if not spreading my thighs?

With you, it's supposed to be different and I guess it is when the beat of your hand against my bone/isn't worked against the beat of the water flooding memory/against the walls of my heart beating fast/against the flash of boys beating off, inside me.

**LO QUE NUNCA PASÓ**
**POR SUS LABIOS**
A LONG LINE OF VENDIDAS

para Gloria Anzaldúa, in gratitude

SUEÑO: 15 DE JULIO 1982

During the long difficult night that sent my lover and I to separate beds, I dreamed of church and chocha. I put it this way because that is how it came to me. The suffering and the thick musty mysticism of the catholic church fused with the sensation of entering the vagina—like that of a colored woman's—dark, rica, full-bodied. The heavy sensation of complexity. A journey I must unravel, work out for myself.

I long to enter you like a temple.

MY BROTHER'S SEX WAS WHITE.

MINE, BROWN

If somebody would have asked me when I was a teenager what it means to be Chicana, I would probably have listed the grievances done me. When my sister and I were fifteen and fourteen, respectively, and my brother a few years older, we were still waiting on him.... I write “were” as if now, nearly two decades later, it were over. But that would be a lie. To this day in my mother's home, my brother and father are waited on by the women, including me. I do this now out of respect for my mother and her wishes. In those early years, however, it was mainly in relation to my brother that I resented providing such service. For unlike my father, who sometimes worked as much as seventy hours a week to feed my face every day, the only thing that earned by brother my servitude was his maleness.

It was Saturday afternoon. My brother, then seventeen years old, came into the house with a pile of friends. I remember Fernie, the two Steves and Roberto. They were hot, sweaty and exhausted from an afternoon's basketball and plopped themselves down in the front room, my brother demanding, “Girls, bring us something to drink.”

“Get it yourself, pig,” I thought, but held those words from ever forming inside my mouth. My brother had the disgusting habit on these occasions of collapsing my sister JoAnn's and my name when referring to us as a unit: his sisters. “Cher'ann,” he would say, “we're really thirsty.” I'm sure it took everything in his power not to snap his fingers. But my mother was out in the yard working and to refuse him would have brought her into the house with a scene before these boys' eyes that would have made it impossible for us to show our faces at school the following Monday. We had been through that before.

When my mother had been our age, more than forty years earlier, she had waited on her brothers and their friends. And it was no mere lemonade. They'd come in from work or a day's drinking. And las mujeres, often just in from the fields themselves, would already be in the kitchen making tortillas, warming frijoles or pigs' feet, albóndigas soup, what-have-you. And the men would get a clean white tablecloth and a spread of food laid out before their eyes and not a word of resentment from the women.

The men watched the women—my aunts and mother moving with the grace and speed of girls who were cooking before they could barely see over the top of the stove. Elvira, my mother, knew she was being watched by the men and loved it. Her slim hips moved patiently beneath the apron. Her deep thick-lidded eyes never caught theirs as she was swept back into the kitchen by my abuelita's call of “Elvirita,” her brown hands deepening in color as they dropped back into the pan of flour.

I suppose my mother imagined that Joe's friends watched us like that, too. But we knew different. We were not blonde or particularly long-legged or “available” because we were “Joe's sisters.” This meant no boy could “make” us, which meant no boy would bother asking us out. Roberto, the Guatemalan, was the only one among my brother's friends who seemed at all sensitive to how awkward JoAnn and I felt in our role. He would smile at us nervously, taking the lemonade, feeling embarrassed being waited on by people he considered peers. He knew the anglo girls they visited would never have succumbed to such a task. Roberto was the only recompense.
As I stopped to satisfy their yearning throats, “jock itch” was all that came to my mind. Their cocks became animated in my head, for that was all that seemed to arbitrarily set us apart from each other and put me in the position of the servant and they, the served. I wanted to machine-gun them all down, but swallowed that fantasy as I swallowed making the boy’s bed every day, cleaning his room each week, shining his shoes and ironing his shirts before dates with girls, some of whom I had crushes on. I would fantasize some imaginary father, dark and benevolent, who sometimes lived inside my heart. For unlike him, I could never have felt culturally deprived, which I guess is the term “white” people use to describe people of color being denied access to their culture. At the time, I wasn’t exactly sure what he meant, but I remember in re-telling the story to my sister, she responded, “Of course, he didn’t. He grew up male in our house. He got the best of both worlds.” And yes, I can see that truth now. Male in a man’s world. Light-skinned in a white world. Why change?

The pull to identify with the oppressor was never as great in me as it was in my brother. For unlike him, I could never have become the white man, only the white man’s woman.

The first time I began to recognize clearly my alliances on the basis of race and sex was when my mother was in the hospital, extremely ill. I was eight years old. During my mother’s stay in the hospital, my tía Eva took my sister and me into her care; my brother stayed with my abuela; and my father stayed by himself in our home. During this time, my father came to visit me and my sister only once. (I don’t know if he ever visited my brother.) The strange thing was, I didn’t really miss his visits, although I sometimes fantasized some imaginary father, dark and benevolent, who might come and remind us that we still were a family.

I have always had a talent for seeing things I don’t particularly want to see and the one day my father did come to visit us with his wife/our mother physically dying in a hospital some ten miles away, I saw that he couldn’t love us—not in the way we so desperately needed. I saw that he didn’t know how and he came into my tía’s house like a large lumbering child—awkward and embarrassed out of his league—trying to play a parent when he needed our mother back as much as we did just to keep him eating and protected. I hated and pitied him that day. I knew how he was letting us all down, visiting my mother daily, like a dead man, unable to say, “The children, honey, I held them. They love you. They think of you,” giving my mother something.

Years later, my mother spoke of his visits to the hospital. How from behind the bars of her bed and through the tubes in her nose, she watched this timid man come and go daily, going through the motions of being a husband. “I knew I had to live,” she told us. “I knew he could never take care of you children.”

In contrast to the seeming lack of feeling I held for my father, my longings for my mother and fear of her dying were the most passionate feelings that had ever lived inside my young heart.

We are riding the elevator. My sister and I pressed up against one wall, holding hands. After months of separation, we are going to visit mi mamá in the hospital. My tía tells me, “Whatever you do, no lloré, Cherríe. It’s too hard on your mother when you cry.” I nod, taking long deep breaths, trying to control my quivering lip.

As we walk up floor by floor, all I can think about is not crying, breathing, holding my breath. “¿Me prometes?” she asks. I nod again, afraid to speak fearing my voice will crack into tears. My sister’s nervous hand around mine, sweating too. We are going to see my mamá, mamá, after so long. She didn’t die after all. She didn’t die.

The elevator doors open. We walk down the corridor, my heart pounding.My eyes are darting in and out of each room as we pass them, fearing/anticipating my mamá’s face. Then as we turn around the corner into a kind of lobby, I hear my tía say to an older woman, just skin and bones—an Indian. I think—straight black-and-grey hair pulled back, I hear my tía say, “Elvira.”

I don’t recognize her. This is not the woman I knew, so round and made-up with her hair always a wavy jet black! I stay back until she opens her arms to me—this strange and familiar woman—her voice hoarse, “Ay mi’ita!” Instinctively, I run into her arms, still holding back my insides. “Don’t cry. Don’t cry,” I remember. “Whatever you do, no...
llores." But my tía had not warned me about the smell, the unmistakable smell of the woman, mi mamá, el olor de aceite y jabón and comfort and home. "Mi mamá." And when I catch the smell I am lost in tears, deep long tears that come when you have held your breath for centuries.

There was something I knew at that eight-year-old moment that I vowed never to forget—the smell of a woman who is life and home to me at once. The woman in whose arms I am uplifted, sustained. Since then, it is as if I have spent the rest of my years driven by this scent toward la mujer.

when her India makes love
it is with the greatest reverence
to color, texture, smell

by now she knew the scent of earth
could call it up
even between the cracks
in sidewalks
steaming dry
from midday summer
rain

With this knowledge so deeply emblazoned upon my heart, how then was I supposed to turn away from La Madre, La Chicana? If I were to build my womanhood on this self-evident truth, it is the love of the Chicana, the love of myself as a Chicana I had to embrace, no white man. Maybe this ultimately was the cutting difference between my brother and me. To be a woman fully necessitated my claiming the race of my mother. My brother’s sex was white. Mine, brown.

LIKE A WHITE SHEEP I FOLLOWED

SUEÑO: 3 DE JULIO

I am having my face made up, especially my eyes, by a very beautiful Chicana. The make-up artist changes me entirely for only five dollars. I think this is a very low price for how deep and dark she makes me look.

When I was growing up, I looked forward to the days when my skin would toast to match my cousins’, their skin turning pure black in the creases. I never could quite catch up, but my skin did turn smooth like theirs, oily brown—like my mamá’s, holding depth, density, the possibility of infinite provision. Mi abuela raised the darkest cousins herself, she never loving us the way she molded and managed them.

To write as a Chicana feminist lesbian, I am afraid of being mistaken, of being made an outsider again, having to fight the kids at school to get them to believe Teresa and I were cousins. “You don’t look like cousins!” I feel at times I am trying to bulldoze my way back into a people who forced me to leave them in the first place, who taught me to take my whiteness and run with it. Run with it. Who want nothing to do with me, the likes of me, the white of me—in them.

When was I forced to choose? When Vivian Molina after two years of the deepest, richest friendship, two years of me helping her through “new math,” helping her not flunk once more—once was enough—and her so big already, fat and dark-skinned. When Vivian left me flat, I didn’t know what happened, except I knew she was beginning to smell like a woman and once, just before our split-up, the neighbor-kid talked of Vivian growing hair “down there.” I didn’t get it, except I knew that none of these changes were settling right in Vivian. And I was small and thin, still, and light-skinned and I loved Vivian which didn’t seem to matter in the way teachers were wondering if Vivian was going to make it through the year. So, one day that year Vivian came to school and never spoke to me again. Nothing happened between us. I swear nothing happened.

I would call her and plead, “Vivian, what did I do?” “Vivian, ¿por qué?” I would have asked in Spanish had I been taught. “¿Qué pasó? No