



Letters to My Mother

"& I was free."

- Ocean Vuong

Letters to My Mother

Victoria Smits

I. Dear Mom,

You remember me, but don't,
because when I remind you
of the day you and dad
came for my freshmen
parents' weekend,
it vanishes from your lips.
and I am invalidated
inside your breath.

That day, I pulled on the sweater
you knit, one of several
I carried to college,
this one lifted from you.
It was the off-white
fisherman knit,
one of five you crafted
for each family member:
olive for dad, periwinkle for me,
rust and mustard yellow
for my brothers, and you
with traditional off-white.
On one Advent eve
we wore them together,
a quintet of your pride,
lighting the candles
at the front of church
signifying hope, faith,
joy, peace.

But on this day
I partnered the heavy
coiled sweater
with lined white wool pants,
smooth ballet slipper shoes
and my favorite socks.
I was surprised you and dad
made the trip, and maybe
would have tried to salvage
the day had I known
you would not attend
my graduation four years later.

What words do you or anyone
expect when you visit family
after some time?
I know it didn't dawn
on me as I descended
my dorm steps and sighted you
and dad twenty yards away,
your first words across
the sidewalk cement
would arrive in a shout,
"Vic, your legs
have gotten so big!"

To have a body quantified
by shape and weight and form
was your skill, is your skill. Your litany

of mother assessments
imprinted as my first
memories: "You were such a big
baby! You ate so much!
Did you see the picture of me
in the light green bikini
when I was young?
I looked amazing!"

This, a strange dichotomy
given my active child's body
was lean and lithe.
By high school I dieted
while playing soccer and basketball,
running in my free time.
It is my never ending story,
how even in the unmooring years
after the birth of my last child
at the maternal age of 44,
you claimed: "I never
had a stomach like yours;
mine has always been flat!"
"What are you doing
to change that? Do you think
you'll always be that way?"

This subtle recitation
snakes its way inside
my mind, settling
in my brain's nest, so each
mirror, each reflective glass,
each summation by another
holds your voice, clearly,
assertively, assessing my worth.

You never hit me
(that was dad's realm,
albeit intermittingly).
You were always there.
But does your presence
nurture a whole me?
I see my body and I hear you.
A vicious voice at times,
disappointed, astonished,
disgusted with what it sees.
I don't recall much else
from that day you arrived
from New York to Michigan,
to watch me play soccer, tour my dorm.
I only hear your voice and see you
across the sidewalk,
yelling your appraisal
according to your code,
a code of my body's worth.



II. Dear Mom,

Your computations eclipse me & my body:
visual assessments are fluid and constant.
Each time I visit, a tally of your seven
granddaughters emerges
from your lips - mere moments
after I arrive: this one, and that one,
and the other are all too fat.
You've even offered
money to one granddaughter
as an impetus to lose weight.

The thin ones glean your gold stars,
"She should be a model!
She's really thin like her mother
who never had a problem with weight."
It is only as your memory dissipates,
repeating yourself every few minutes,
that I corral the necessary grace
to wonder how you arrived here,
a place of verbal trophies
systematically dispensed over time.

I recall visiting your parents
in their later age,
my cousin's new fiancé
assigned merely as "homely"
by your mother,
alongside side-mouth distaste.
You chimed in, "Maybe
that's all she could get."
A disorientating collusion,
but I grasp, now, your mother's
inherent request:
"Your countenance,
despite deemed by the god
I worship, is the virtue
I hold most high."

I ask what words
you heard in private, then.
Is this why you never became
a journalist and traveled
the world alone?
You had to prove
your body could garner a man?
Your lips apport an incessant trail
of verbiage on this body and that:
"Her arms are bigger than mine."
"She looks worse than me at my age."
"She's at least 250 pounds; she really let herself go."
"She's a big fat blond who's holding everything up."
"Why, when you're heavier, would you wear that dress?"

"I think you should change your appearance, Vic.
Go, get a haircut. Wear some make-up.
It would make you look younger."

I write these phrases down,
noting the accumulation,
the dearth heaped upon
my childhood, motherhood, humanness.
These words, a stalwart against entelechy,
form a frame so sturdy, so maligned.
How does extraction of your voice occur?
How do I make war with the power it evokes?
Is there a me without this cage?

I know her. I know her. I do.
The depths hold her.
She is wise, creative, astute.
She is making up
for lost time, for all the bodies
she has tried to be
in order to find her own.



III. Dear Mother,

Your diatribe on women's
bodies, including my own,
disavows you as mother:
I must mother myself.

In an empowered protest,
I birthed my own
babies to right your wrong,
a surrogate to your truant
mothering with the tangible,
alive, tender.
Amid your objections
I nurse them longer,
feed them whenever,
attend their agency
when they wail.
My toddling daughter baptized
herself in baby blue sidewalk
chalk claiming, "I'm me."
And I let her naked body
roll in the warm fairy dust;
she will love each inch
of herself, each curve
and dimple and bend.

I discover I cannot
protect her against you
as she ages into adulthood.
Deemed exquisite,
defiling my efforts, you anoint
body accolades any moment
she's in your view.
Unsettled in her knighting,
she queries bewilderingly,
"Why does grandma
say those things to me?"

I don't have answers
to offer; salience drapes
her consciousness -
contours and measurements,
balance and leanness
deem some
more valued than others.

Away from the origin
story, the ancestral narrative
of a woman's worth,
my daughter
channels the Divine,
creating ethereal images
and earthen shallow vessels,
molding rest and peace.
The liturgy of beauty
is syphoned through grace,
a final closure
embodied in her art.



IV. Dear Mother,

I deputize my therapists,
Harriet, Mary, Nancy, across time -
mother names and mother bodies
trained to say things right.
In circuitous routes
along memories, moments,
travails of being your daughter,
I hear a new voice.
By proxy my new mothers
birth me - deep, waiting -
held captive in the generative
cushioned fluid of my own womb.

We parse out body and mind,
the only two chapters in your book.
In company with outward appearance,
you value genius and intellect.
Every mention of figure and shape
balances a concern of academic acumen.
The counter conversation to your
granddaughter's bodies is the whole
of your grandchildren's success:
"I am so thankful they are all so smart."

As I crawl forward in the pick-up line
for my youngest's school, you ask
about his IQ, "Have you ever
had him tested for intellectual acuity?
Because he seems so smart
and I'd like to know if I'm right."
Words fail me. And why do they?
My younger brother would hold
the courage to reply,
"Why the fuck does it matter?"
"Why do you care at all?"

My reticence bewilders me.
Hesitancy cursing through
the umbilical cord of me to you,
I only summon a gentle urging
and this juncture dissipates.
Perhaps all the energy
mustered to defy you,
holds hands with my complex
DNA, and in turn fails
witness to my entirety.
The worry of hurting you,
the injurer, confounds -
a perplexing motherboard
of coded honor handed
to me through your religion.

The loss of short term
memory means you repeat
your assessments and queries,
often just minutes apart.
"You look like you've lost weight."
"You look like you've lost weight since last time."

The only method imparting
an impact, a probability
for change, follows my father
and brothers' technique:
loud voices, expletives, disdain -
a system I do not follow,
a system that would force your tears.

I chaperone myself
to the moment
where I am now.
Your presence
is almost intolerable:
a being who birthed me
yet injures me still.
The space we inhabit
together, a chronic
festering wound,
quells as I take my leaving.

"In everything, do to others
what you would have them do to you."
I will mother myself.



V. Dear Mom,

I often wonder
if pursuing an MFA
is for you and your acceptance.
Does your mother voice
lie wait, latent in my identity -
primed to claim this work?
Will you, upon my graduation,
allege your catalyst landed
me here? All the library
books you had me read,
stacks and piles, a bounty
of eager stories offering escape,
led me to *Jane Eyre*,
your English teacher's heroine,
a white woman's liberation,
she "chose her life with dignity,
integrity, and pride."

Your recursive memory
forgets I am in school -
escorting my relief.
The pilgrimage to singularity
(do you hear Jane in that word?)
behooves a peeling,
layer upon layer,
the translucent onion skins
of your voice waft and fall
to the floor. I am
left with a raw and luscious
core, seasoning my future,
the inception of me.

I make inside my studio:
generate, fabricate,
compose, produce, birth.
Douglas Firs outside
my window advise:
"Stay the course
toward the Divine,
the creative spirit
of this earth."
Limbs breathe, moss
materializes, needles
brush one another.
Erect, towering,
the woodland domain
mothers me.



VI. Dear Me,

I saw how you planted
seeds in those raised
garden beds.
Each particle of generative
DNA thirsty to birth
wings: Indigo, Marigold,
Coreopsis, Madder, & Weld.
With these you will
dye bisque-hardened earth,
linen, cotton, and flax.
You will spin an installation
of a life so free
it flies,
a corporeal exploration
and mind passage
with virgin rites.

You are no longer
the interloper,
adopted by your mother,
fed in the fluid
of her womb -
a pawned woman,
serving patriarchal
effigies carved
by men.

Celebrate the crossing,
toast yourself
and your leaving.
Stretch the cervical opening,
easing into a new life.
You are the interceptor
of generational
adulteration, a stitched
tear evolving onward,
a mother who mothers
herself.



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