

I TASTE

after Ray Gonzalez

I taste MoJo JoJo's latest scheme, foiled
and the back of my older sister's hand hard against my cheek with my best friend standing in the kitchen.

I taste the tire swing on my grandmother's Georgia farm
and my tears in the oatmeal my aunt shoves down my throat before school.

I taste the frustration of my British theology teacher when I won't stop questioning the Bible
and my younger sister's smile the day we met.

I taste the cliff's edge in Shenandoah National Park where I'm reminded what it's like to be alive
and the vaporub on my grandmother's neck as she scolds me for being "too bold".

I want to taste the same big sea Langston did
but all I taste is northern Virginia for ten years straight.

I taste the Midtown Comics in Times Square
and the bright red cover page of Coelho's *The Alchemist*.

I taste my mom calling me ugly – her not remembering just moments later –
and 3 AM conversations with my freshman year roommate.

I can still taste my mom forgetting my tenth birthday,
so I blew candles out on the Christmas pie.

I taste my panic attack in front of the ICA after we talked about goodbyes in group therapy
and the Gorilla Glue I smoked with Bri in New York and the BBQ's we devoured after.

I taste everything my mom swept under the rug
and working Shabbat dinners at Ashby Ponds.

I taste my mother's first steps in America
and my father's bipolar diagnosis.

I taste the opening scene of *Pirates of the Caribbean*
and the rush to the dance floor at every summer African party when Alingo comes on.

I taste the hills we lived on in San Francisco
and the flat in London.

I taste all the friends I don't remember,
and all the places I lived in but didn't call home,

the three-day truck ride that took me
away from Georgia for good.

I taste Nollywood movies in my grandmother's bedroom
and the orange VHS tape of *Rugrats in Paris: The Movie*.

I taste the standing ovation I received the first time I performed

and middle of the night rainstorms on the boat in Key West.

I taste my mom's jollof at the school potluck because no one else will
and the last hug I gave my grandmother.

I taste honeysuckle fields near our house in Aldie
and my first busted kneecap after falling off my longboard.

I taste every book I've dug my nose into
and every movie I've seen that made me want to write my own.

I taste my first paycheck I ever made
and the first time I drove away from my mother.

I taste the photo albums above the freezer in the garage
and the last letters I found that my father addressed to me.

OUR LIFE IN VIRGINIA

after Gary Young

We've walked enough for a lifetime:
age twelve, you five, one McDonald's gift card, we beg
the woman biology calls Mother, sunken
stomachs, she screams something I no longer remember,
or never heard in the first place – everything
is so l o u d in that house, so small – we
lace our shoes, filled with holes,
I promise once we get a rhythm going you won't even notice the snow.
We've walked enough for a lifetime, I swear
no matter where we are, I can look back,
see where we've been, tracks in the snow a mile
and a half long for two McChickens, a large fry, and a sweet tea
to share – we haven't eaten in four days, if we didn't take the chance another four
would've come and gone. The woman biology calls
Mother tells Child Protective Services her sob story – third time –
and after the agent leaves tells us not to sob – screams something
about ungrateful. We've walked enough for a lifetime.

IT'S NOT HEIGHTS I'M AFRAID OF

DAY 150: the carpet hasn't softened, my body
lands – it's never my bed. On impact
eyes stay shut. A familiar falling.
Ears ringing through. My hands

land first – it's never my bed, on impact
my knees and knuckles scrape reality.
Ears ringing matches mom's dial tone:
She's hit the floor again. She groans.

My knees and knuckles scraped
the ground/splits open before I do.
She's hit the floor again. She groans.
DAY 250: my sister trades her bed

for the ground – splits open before I do.
On my back. Waiting for the house to soften.
DAY 250: my sister trades her bed
for sleep/living room doesn't scream – I do

on my back: waiting for my mom to soften.
I am eight and this is all new to me. I haven't
been sleeping/there's no room for living –
I breathe and mom says I'm doing it wrong.

I am eight and this is all new to me. I haven't
stopped crying – day 250 living with mom
permanently. I breathe and she hardens.
DAY 350: my heart sinks midway down –

I can't stop crying – day 250 living with mom.
I hold my stomach and myself together.
DAY 350: my heart sinks midway down
my stomach – floating or falling?

I hold my stomach and myself together.
Eyes spring open. A familiar falling
into the ground – ready to receive me –
DAY 150: nothing will soften my body.

GRANDPA JACK

your thick ass coke bottle glasses
that usually sit atop your nose
are currently resting on my face

now i see what you see
or rather i see what the
20/20 vision see i called you

grandpa not knowing what the word
meant now i say grandpa knowing
you are the paternal one what

does it mean to know your
father's father and your father to
not know you is there any

meaning to be found in being
abandoned with strangers who are blood
related or am i just a

poet looking too deep into things
again there's not much i remember
about home without someone else's memories

there to guide me or maybe
there's not much i'm told about
home so there's no memories there

at all what i'm trying to
say my sister and i don't
have the same anything i'm starting

to wonder what's there to be
said about letters stashed away in
boxes in the midst of

a divorce I think they tell
the story of infidelity my mom
is such a hoarder of memories

she won't even let me have
my own I thought about stealing
them back but who am I

YEAR ONE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

after Donika Kelly

I am stranded in London, England. On my birthday,
my aunt, uncle, cousins, sister, I go to the London Eye.
When we are at the top I scream out for my mom,
I am afraid she cannot see my distress signals. My sister
is thankful she cannot possibly hear me. I am confused
about what love is. When it is not my birthday, I ride
the city bus to school with my sister and our two friends.
We talk about what it means to be different – they are Irish.
We are black. My aunt gets off at the same time we finish school.
She picks us up in the car she's been talking about replacing for months now.
The three of us walk up eight flights to our three-bedroom apartment.
The neighbors have the friendliest faces,
but I don't think they are very smart – they call me *Edrisa's girl*, my mom's name
is Elsie. I share a room with my three-year-old cousin –
two years younger than I – who is afraid of Barney. My favorite things are Barney,
jollof with beef stew, and monthly calls from my mom.
My aunt yells at me to pass the phone to my sister,
“they need time to talk to”, she reminds. My mom's *goodbye*
rocks my heart like a wayward ship. I talk to her like a crafty merchant –
like I'm trying to convince her to buy me.