

## BENÇA

My grandma's skin  
is my favorite weighted blanket,  
each fold telling of the *caatinga* hills  
she climbed by herself.  
The crutches by the tilled wall,  
reminders of each lesson  
she passes down her lineage  
through begrudgingly tight embraces.

My *vóinha*'s smell  
is my favorite expensive perfume.  
Inhaled antidepressant,  
affectionate memory of a timelessness  
no amount of passing time  
can stripe my fearful soul of.

My *vó*'s voice  
is my favorite scratched folk album.  
It's the name of every grandchild  
mingled together, out of order,  
invented right there on the spot.  
A careless smile made on demand  
of a lightness she doesn't know she has.

When *minha vóinha*'s rocking chair stops creaking,  
the day there is no more *benças*,  
velvety flesh,  
sedative scent,  
or tuneless tones,  
the first thing I'll miss  
will be the ground under my feet.

I am the breathlessness  
of getting the call / of speeding through  
the night / of the hospital / of the  
rusty chain of words / of  
screaming at the reception desk.

/

I am the anguish  
of a grandmotherless granddaughter / of  
dilated pupils adjusting to my newfound  
darkness / of a cup overfilled with a hidden  
hole at the bottom / of losing  
the last bracelet she ever wore / of  
seeing her everywhere and nowhere at all.

/

I am the inconvenience  
of being the main guest to a party  
I don't want to attend / of a dead  
weight having to be tracted forward  
by force / of going to the cemetery hoping  
no relative sees me and tries  
to talk me out of walking in.

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I am the frantic  
cacophony / of / a / jammed / intersection / the /  
stress / turning / my / insides / into / a /  
plane / looking / for / a / stable / altitude / but /  
never / finding / it / my / blood / pressure /  
plummeting / skyrocketing / like / a / water / fountain /  
hidden / in / the / outskirts / of /  
the / Versailles / gardens / my /  
cannibal / grief / eating / me / alive /  
the / boa / constrictor / nesting / in /  
my / chest.

/

I / am / bare / ly / my /self

*e/v/e/r/ s/i/n/c/e/ s/h/e/ Ue/ft/*

## PUNCTURED

In my neck of the woods rumor has it that the act  
of accidentally breaking a glass detours an evil aimed

at somebody to the now-turned-rubble-of-shards: frag-  
mented protection. A month ago in my bathroom a big sliding door

made of etched glass with shiny see-through stars shattered  
at my light touch mid-bath. Every fragment beaming blood

red, the tails of a thousand comets. Though the noise was  
dramatic enough to elicit thoughts of unscheduled demolition,

my only bruises simulated the depth of harmless paper cuts,  
a mild aftermath. By dodging this evil and leaving the room spotless,

a catastrophe was delayed, the tides lowered for a while  
and my grandma gained a few extra weeks of life. Hopefully.

*I'd shatter every glass in the world to keep you around.*

## TWO SIDES, SAME COIN

My grief is half-young-child-mid-tantrum,  
half-young-person-who-has-seen-way-too-much-for-her-age.  
It's holding my grandma's hand while she withered,  
whispering in her ear she'd be home soon  
as she screamed for dear death, turning my face away  
so she wouldn't see me watching my worst nightmare  
on pay-per-view, crying my *vóinha* goodbye.

My mother's grief is wildflowers breaking through concrete.  
A rock-solid surface trying to hide the wreckage underneath.  
Stiff, but doomed to burst at some point. As dandelions,  
her tears will come blowing in the wind: everywhere,  
each petal the same wish which will never come true.

My grief is showing up to the hospital every single day,  
and to the cemetery several mornings in a row right after.  
It's pinning a paper saying *we love you* meant for the ICU wall  
on her grave, writing her handwritten letters, sitting  
in front of her resting place, asking her if she's read them.  
It's trying to fix everything, solve everything, schedule everything,  
only to break down in front of every worker putting up with  
just another Tuesday.

My mother's grief is avoidance. It's too painful a pain to be  
felt, heard, or talked about. It's summoning courage to attend  
visiting hours as the game was in overtime, saying  
*I love you so much I love you so much I love you so much*  
enough times to hear back an annoyed,  
but soul warming *eu sei, minha filha*.

My grief is driving at top speed at 2 in the morning  
after hearing someone had been called in for news.  
It's shaking to my core as I opened the door right on time  
to hear the nurse say *we did everything we could*.  
It's phoning my cousins to let them know, ringing my father  
as my eyelids tried hard to windshield the rain on my soul.  
It's waiting for him to arrive so I wouldn't tell my mother alone.

My mother's grief is resenting watery eyes and faces only  
showing up now, it's rolling up her sleeves and claiming my  
grandma's legacy before it's even gone. It's holding no regrets for  
every Sunday spent in rocking chairs enduring the heat, for every

doctor's appointment paid without a flinch, for sharing  
her mother's love with her eldest daughter despite everything.

My grief is hanging on to bits and pieces, it's going  
Through her stuff to find a signature I could glue on myself, my heart  
forever her property. It's wondering how I can ever go back  
to my deadlines when time has simply stopped. It's sleeping  
tugged to one of her shirts, wearing her jewellery, going  
through videos and photos, telling everybody everything  
about her. It's designing the invitation for her 7th day mass  
myself, making sure it's unique, sweet, and loving like her.  
No tacky clouds on a blue background for a queen – my queen.

My mother's grief is silent. Angry. All phases mashed up together  
in an internal hurricane of wound and agony. It's questioning  
her religion while still searching for God Almighty,  
now that her earthly Mother is physical no more.  
It's being concerned with me as I worry sick about her.

My mother's grief is in hiding.

My grief is writing this poem.

Our grief is pure, unadulterated love.  
It will keep her alive.

## **GRIEF IS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE**

*After Anne Marie Wells*

Grief is a foreign language  
I was privileged not to speak for 26 years.  
It shares linguistic roots with unpleasant feelings  
selling future learners the false promise  
of brief and effortless fluency.

I thought I knew grief, but I didn't.  
I mistook it for sadness like people  
think Brazilians speak Spanish, cursed it  
like a bigot hearing an immigrant's accent.  
Then my grandmother passed away  
and I enrolled into language school.

My class schedule is a dull replay.  
Every Friday afternoon nap is  
the result of an exhausting week  
of half-living in the ICU holding her hand.  
Every Friday sunset means packing my bags  
to spend the night with her, but never getting to.  
Every Friday evening amounts to remembering  
her collapse, mentally replaying her yells, painfully  
realizing she was already long gone at that point.  
And every Saturday at 1:30 am  
is like losing her  
again, and  
again, and  
again.

I thought I knew grief, but I didn't.  
Now, I'm fluent.