

beady bead blues

tightly coiled tufts
fall on cold linoleum tile
for a moment suspended
aghast at
their forced separation.

it's my fault
often content letting
roots remain tangled
introducing wide tooth comb
coercion only
when nimble fingers
could not ease away
fragile strands

never was there
time to nourish them

and when did I
start to value
weekday 9 to 5 efficiencies
over my own cultivation?

will my daughter
take after her mother?
Lord knows I was tender-headed.

commencement

to the girls
who made me squirm
inside the rawness of my cocoon
conducting marionette dances
early evening late-night sleepovers
the droning of quick buck
rebel just because skater-girls

you taught me
how light pancakes
quickly brown turned burnt
in Georgian sun,

who was icky and
dirty and stinky and gross,
how to be one of few,
and those who could not

and how no matter how many times
itchy scalps scab drowning in lye pools,
my hair would never bounce the same
that when white boys called me,
it was to see what it was like
to be with someone of a different shade.

I grew through bravado
willing my esteem to bare
through citrus husks
in the hopes that one day
apathy would will itself,
flowing, burning through clenched fists.

how to lose a clarinet solo

it began gradually
forming in status inherited
on a high school football field.

I was loudest out of self-sacrifice
petite stature
unafraid to bulge cranial veins
free notes from wooden cage
if it meant our instruments
being heard

the moment was to be brief – a retreat of brass
a whispering of woodwinds
letting me soar
high above the unkempt grass

I emerged alone.
caught my parents' eyes first
across the 20-yard line
aware of the freshmen,
peers at my back
expectation filled and hanging—

this was seniority.

I was act four.
it wasn't more than 8 bars
quick, crisp perfection
pounded into memory, fingers
clicked metal
night, day

but chipped reeds, rotted padding
formed my shell of confidence
fumbling musical spew reached short of
that single high A
the catalyst for its fracture

silence born from the keys
mere exhausted puff
failed to connect

I submitted myself
tears and sweat streaming
down polyester jacket,
crumbling back into the uniformed mass.

the iron maiden and other adornments

incessant self-criticisms remind me to wrap the unreachable enough
in gauze mummy-style tight around my brittle frame

I carry myself as slippery ceramics
that fall between butter-fingered grasp

I grind details into the ground until ash
loop indecisions into infinities
think too much, talk too much and too little
blinded by what I don't know

my flaws have become the pyre,
those who are better than myself, the ropes
self-deprecation, the eager match

desperate, frantic,
my last words were—

trust me my thoughts will follow through this time and
I'll perfectly balance strategic spontaneity
on bird's nest head
hold my weight confidently as voluptuous pillows
not twigs and flat bottom
I'll unpack the densest lines into a single thread of continuity,
find my competence—

if I sacrifice my ego
on this altar,
what will remain?

Spanish three.

“¿cómo estás?” was repeated back to me with crude parroting and dumbfounded expression. It always infuriated me. My responses, if dripping in the language of English’s romance cousin, would be met with a laugh, silence, or a quick retort.

quiero compartir.

“why you learning that?” – my dad, speedy Gonzales style.

y practicar así no me olvido

I wanted to be fluent and considered speaking at home to be practice.

“there she goes with the Spanish again” – my sister, quick to conclude I was in the business of showing off. I was better than everyone and knew it.

I wasn’t trying to make you look bad.

“go talk to Grandpa Angelo” – my mom. My father’s stepdad. He was Puerto Rican and had an accent that still dripped with the flavors of his youth. He was loud and my parents could never understand a word he said.

I’m still semi-fluent in Spanish.
And I still apologize for my every success.