

Transmutations: I was baptized in a bathtub with glitter

"I choose to believe in magic," I say, "Why not? It's as real and not real as anything else. As you, or me." I am folded into her, tucked into a dark corner of a bar. I like when a babe can hold my softness. "Why not choose more beauty? To see more meaning in life, the grand interconnectedness of it all," my hand in hers, caressing the boundary between us, feeling into it. "Without taking anything too seriously."

I shuffle the deck, thinking of her, and the Ace of Cups falls out onto the table. An invitation... a dare? What I bring to her: a piece of wood washed ashore. A bird's nest. Poems and maps and a book that I tell her "is very important to me." A dinky shell. An animal skull. Dug from my chest, with dirt-encrusted fingernails, I hand over these grubby offerings.

I'm sentimental. "For you," handing over two tangerines, wearing a boyish grin, sheepish, wide-eyed, a tuft of hair tousled. A gesture that wonders, "Could you love me?"

She gave me a piece of petrified wood from the desert, her home. Alone in my bedroom, I take it from its place on my bedside table. I put it in my mouth, feeling its texture with my tongue, trying to suck out the essence of home, an attempt to understand.

Here: an orange smashed into the brick of the sidewalk.

August 2017, North Carolina.

Sweet southern summer heat weighs in my lungs. I love how sweat beads from each pore, skin glistening, saltwater collects into waves, drips into puddles; heat wrenching my body of toxins. In a bathtub, I am baptized with glitter. I'm 29 years old, and this time I consent to the ritual. The saint tells me to look into an empty frame hanging on the bathroom wall across from the tub to look into my future. I stand in a puddle of water.

I see a home. I see myself surrounded by love, art, family.

Later that night, I fall in love.

I pushed my finger into half of an orange he held in his hand, extended towards us, and the three others standing with me followed suit. Together we stood, our fingers in the same fleshy pulpy hole. He stood there, the other half of the orange in his other hand, which he lifted to his mouth and sucked, and we all felt it, all together: our fingers, his mouth, his tongue, his hands, the orange, Becoming an interconnected fleshy mass. The orange, not a conduit, but an active agent.

March 2016, Chicago.

It was still cold. We were there, searching for a home. I had a cold, and I stuffed my coat pocket with cough drops. She was cold, and I gave her my coat, because she didn't wear one that day, and it was a problem I could fix. Then I was cold, so I bought another coat to keep me warm. It was on sale, a really good deal, because it was supposed to be spring and supposed to be getting warm and winter was supposed to be ending. But I was cold even when we went back to Chicago that July. Sometimes winter lasts all year.

February 2017, Atlanta.

A different lifetime. It was getting cold. Not Midwest cold, but cold enough to pull my coat out from the back of my closet. We didn't find a home in Chicago, and so somehow instead, I found myself in Atlanta, alone, trying desperately to make a home. At a bar with new friends and a new crush, I'd put my hand in my pocket and find those cough drops. Fidgeting with the paper wrapped round the little medicinal candies, I'd felt my heart full and searching, longing, in this new place, not-quite-home, not-yet-home, trying-so-hard-to-be-at-home home.

Staring at my hand filled with these cough drops, I remember first stuffing them into my pocket, along with a silver packet of little red pills and wadded tissues. During that trip to Chicago, I'd also take a small candy from a pile in the corner of the art museum, round and wrapped like the little medicines. This act: the consumption of a lover passed, disintegrating.

Later she asked if I ate the candy. She refused to; didn't want to be implicated in the virus responsible for a genocide.

Me? I want to touch, to consume, to become: insatiable, voracious appetite for life, for love, for stories, for magic, for feeling.

The orange: a ritual, an offering, a sacrifice.

February 2018, Baltimore.

I put a pair of underwear on my head, inhale deeply, and weep.

I waited too long before returning the underwear. I thought they would come back. I stuffed the underwear in the bottom of a trash bag with the other belongings left behind: a comforter, a candle I'd bought that reminded me of them, a book that we read together, that I borrowed and never finished, that not long after I'd ask to borrow again, to finish, to still not finish. I still have it, unfinished, in the pile of books set aside at the last chapter. A refusal to part, a resistance to letting go, a radical ability to let the story be what it will become.

Infinitely wavering at the cusp of that last chapter: tonight we sit across from each other, eating an orange they've sliced on a paper towel, and learning how to love each other differently. I tell them about my new lover: the citrus offerings in my hand outstretched before she leaves the country, the pictures of orange peels she sends me while she's away.

They know I'm falling. They know me, after all. They keep coming back, after all. Here, again, a transmutation: one of many iterations of me in relation to them, how we breathe into the space between us.

The orange: sometimes the fruit, sometimes the color, sometimes connection with the universe, self, and others, sometimes the scent of the residue on your skin after peeling open, sometimes sky, sometimes breath, sometimes rot, sometimes love...

Today, Baltimore.

On Falling/Be-cumming a Saint
She pulls me on top of her on the floor. She gasps, "You're so fucking hot."

To be desired for what once was such a source of shame. This body, how I wear my softness and masculinity.

The words pierce me, steal my breath. I collapse onto her. "You are," and nip her neck.

How I used to drink because I didn't know how to survive as my soft self otherwise. How to want what this soft body wants, stung with shame so intertwined with these desires, electric fires throughout this soft body to want to want with desperation, so hungry.

She bathes me. Another baptism. I consent.

Please, make me holy.

I make pilgrimages to the ocean to cleanse my soul: saltwater baptisms in healing waters.

I'm rewriting history through the taste of skin.

I die a little bit every time, in that release, to be reborn.

There are stories written in my skin, a thin soft membrane wrapping around me, holding my gooeyness. There is glitter so deep in my pores it can't be washed out, and I want to drown in those baptismal waters.

Maybe the stories meander on like this, because they're still unfolding, always. Like my reluctance to finish reading books, adding them to that pile, wavering at the last chapter, so the story keeps going infinitely, always.

Maybe it just is: the stories of the stretch marks on my belly, the stick-n-poke of a cloud on my chest, the skin hanging loose even as my body hardens beneath it, becomes smaller within a shell that was once much larger, the scar on my left knee from when I busted it open falling onto a wooden stair coming home alone blacked out many years ago, the gap in my teeth that was ridiculed in childhood, that returned despite the orthodontist's efforts, the softness in these gray eyes. That's been here all along.

Stay up all night with me so I can press these stories into you, and taste yours, too.

And the stories in the trail of objects collected along the way: a rock, a glowing shell, a tiny orange plastic dinosaur, a note I keep finding folded in a jacket pocket that says, "Thank u for making me happy all the time," years and years of finding, unfolding, refolding, a blank Valentine crafted from construction paper, a cough drop, a receipt for a hoagie at Wawa in Philly, "love always, love always, love always," on and on, always to become a discovery, as I suck on a remnant of petrified wood, life as a love story unfolding continuously, a quest to find god as something that we want, some kind of truth weaved with some kind of magic:

like how she grabbed my hand as I walked in front of her leaving the party last Halloween, how she stopped me in the middle of the street in the rain to press her face, painted as a skeleton's, against mine for the first time. I feel the beginning of that rumbling in my chest: "Closer to God," I think.

Take ten percent or take it all. There's no difference when everything is nothing or anything and something. As Real as it is Not Real. The glow silhouetting you on the horizon: I capture the image just before falling into the water.

Just take me.



Liz Clayton Scofield, #transformational orangesculpture, 2018. Photo courtesy of the author.