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# primordial goop

Gabrielle Vatthanatham

In the beginning, there were three or so little fat green things contorted on the small branch of dill my mother brought in from the garden. I only saw because she motioned me fervently with her free hand like she was afraid noise might cause the grubs to fright, stir and fall. I didn't know they were worms until I managed my way over to her.

I wonder if it's some offense to be made to touch one of them without my consent. Without theirs too. Regardless, the little worms were placed into my hand by my mother who thought it a very sensible thing to do. The things paid no mind to my indifference. They only bent themselves back—moving dill from branch to mouth—not eating—this was conveyor belt style sustenance. If they stopped, they'd die:

Survival of the fittest.

“Go and find a place for them.” My mother didn't stay long enough for me to ask what she meant. But there was a speck of light caught on the edge of some sentiment in her eye that let me know that it had been joy that moved her back into the vines and burrs she called garden and I called jungle.

In it some patterned chaos of summer weeds called basil, blackberry and Jerusalem artichoke amongst the bramble and wires called dill where the eggs were made and left to grow old.

It's a jungle out there.

I paid enough heed to her though. There was a laundry net we used for washing bras and other delicate things that I put them in. I set the base with a sturdy piece of cardboard and laced a string of twine on the construction so that it might hang on the kitchen chandelier like a plank swing on an old oak tree or a tot's hands around a mother's neck.

I thought everyone should want to see them, especially at dinner time.

My mother returned bearing gifts. “Siblings” she called them. They probably weren't, but I didn't have the heart to tell her otherwise. She trusted that I would reunite the bugs in the net whilst she went out to salvage any more caterpillars. When she was satisfied that her hunting had produced all of the siblings she let herself take a stay from her gardening to play with the little worms.

Holding one in her hand she touched it gingerly, tenderly poking at it until it poked its

little yellow antenna at her in aggravation. No one will talk about it, but it leaves a stink like acrid venom and stains the skin like curried eggs. She seemed to smile more at the response though, and I was reminded of a little Chinese proverb my mother taught me when I was small.

You're poking a worm in your hand. And you keep poking at it until it bites you. When it does, you let it fly away. I never poked on worms growing up.

"Such a bad mom," my mother stated matter of factly.

"I'm sorry?" I turned to look on her.

"The butterfly mom had all of her babies on a dead dill plant." she stroked the caterpillar in her hand as if her touch could nurture it: could make up for the time it had spent without care and without home.

"All of the babies were eating dry dill before I brought them in."

I nodded a while before she asked me to hold one of the worms. I didn't feel like arguing when she said

"Look, it's chubby like you."

She brought herself from idleness some twenty minutes after to buy dill for the little worms. I stayed to watch them through the net. I don't know how my mother had the will to carry them in. Spring green skin stretched tight around their bodies, black bands striated their entirety and though they had

only food for kindling, all of them were too fat for their own good. They looked carcinogenic. Like holding one could tempt any good cell in the body to become bad.

The first one hatched en route to Galveston Island. Day twenty-three hour: high noon. Hanging from the rear-view mirror of our Nissan Murano this worm had the audacity to emerge and drip bug juice on the console. I don't remember ever seeing my mother so excited. She relished in the good luck she had in bringing them along for family vacation as if she had paid mind to see a tot's bare feet touch ground for the first time.

"Look!" she said taking the bug out. It crawled on her hand as if it remembered her warmth or benevolence or taste—I heard caterpillars taste through their feet, or butterflies maybe. It's so hard to tell the difference sometimes.

"It likes to hang because it has to dry!" she laughed unreservedly turning the bug to face us.

“Look! It’s your big sister!”

It was hard to imagine that four weeks had moved hand enough to trade green bug for blue and black one. I still remembered them as they were during the first two weeks when my mother diligently cleaned and fed them every morning and night. It was ritualistic the way she cared for them. The way she would take them out in turns saying “hello, hello”. Exponentially. They grew exponentially, and there was nothing we could do about it but say “hello, hello”. She was so proud of them. She had to have been. Every time I had chance to look on them, I saw them crawl around, under, over, beside and through one another. Children chasing each other around a prickly pear.

There was only this black thing now. Not really a worm, but not really a butterfly either.

She watched it walk a bit, traverse the length of her hand before she allowed herself to grow concerned. She frowned a bit, but then decided that it was too early for the little thing to encounter fear.

“What if it’s hungry. If we raised it inside will it know how to find food?”

“We can open up the window and find out.”

My mother frowned at me hard. The skin of her small lips pursed up as she did it too.

I was sorry for it.

My mother was not. She turned to my father and in twenty some years of marriage and family, he had recognized that face four distinct times.

“We need to stop at the next gas station”

There was no argument to be made.

At our stop, my father was sent to retrieve a bag hard candies which we all assumed my mother would enjoy at her leisure. When he returned, my mother immediately tore through cellophane to soak one in her mouth. But there was no leisure in it. She pushed the candy around with her tongue as if testing it to dissolve—needing it to. Even if she risked splitting lip or teeth in her fervor she continued at it until, I suppose, it gave way to her. No one knew what she was doing when she took a finger to her lip and collected a string of saliva and suspended jolly rancher, red and viscous. She held it out to the little bug, still wet with amniotic juice. Oh no, my bugs aren’t fed formula. Just pure, unadulterated candy goop from momma.

I was really sorry for it.

“Look!” She said laughing again—small lips spread wide around her mouth. “It eats.”

Her firsthatched was released, without delay, near a tuft a vegetation courtesy of the condo’s landscaper. Weighing a hearty three paper clips, our very proud mother could not be happier to find that it was indeed a healthy flyer.

If we had not been reminded by the periodical absence of my mother from the unit we all filed into after the changeling’s release, we would’ve all forgotten about her other little worms. As soon as baggage was carried from car to condo my mother rushed in her madness up to the terrace and fastened the net against the iron railing of the balcony. “There you go.”

There was a couple smoking cigarettes on the terrace of the adjacent unit and I wondered if they wondered what my mother was up to. She only thought that the little worms might like the warm salinity of the air and the sound of the ocean like we do. She’s a beautiful woman.

Between days twenty-four and twenty-eight two more hatched amidst the heat and humidity they spent under seven Texan suns before we were due at home. But in that time when we had danced, trampled, and burned on the sand, those two little worms were coming back to something they had known once whilst the others had no care to born again. And though we had no care for an explanation, my mother assured me that it was normal for malnourished caterpillars to emerge late. They were homesick. They just needed another week to actualize all that was meant for them. To trace the thread from egg to caterpillar from caterpillar into—

Days twenty-eight to forty saw them on the chandelier now two weeks overdue. My mother who had played role of harvester, and nurse, and demi-mom to those worms now played the role of false hope. Imagine two weeks of five-pound bundles of grocery dill, two weeks of bulking for hibernation, two weeks of hello, hellos, three weeks of gestation to be made null by—

“They just ooze! They just ooze! It was supposed to come out, but it just oozed!”

Imagine if all women were forced to perform their own caesareans. I remember not wanting to move close to her. I could not be bothered to see the cause of her distress, nor to look upon the fate of those little worms.

Such a bad daughter.

When she held her hands out to me she offered broken shell and dark green goop:

pestilent spit on a concrete floor.

I was reminded of a principle I learned in a progressive biological science class once.

In the beginning there was the world. And all the world was watered muck, dust, particle, matter until some unmoved mover decided one day: “wouldn’t it be cool to have life?” and ZAP the first worm was formed.

They call it the theory of primordial soup.

Primordial soup?

\*Primordial goop

And on the seventh day, God rested the entire world on the black wing of a little worm known sometime as: caterpillar.

I think I was born to be sorry.

“They just ooze! I didn’t know!” I watched my mother lay eyebrow scissors on the granite counter.

“I know”

“I didn’t mean to”

“I know that too” I took the goop from her hands. Is it disrespectful to throw something like that in the trash when we allow so much ceremony for human corpses? What is in a worm corpse that is worth any less? Empty shells collected as pastime for fate to look on and say, “I remember what lived in here.”

“Do you think they feel pain? Do you think I hurt it?” my mother wouldn’t look at the thing in my hands. She looked at me.

I just wanted to play with the goop. That sort of cosmic limbo where all karmic debts might be taken and paid in full. That liminality. Not of this world but the next. Betwixt and between. So close yet

so far. Close but no cig—

“I don’t think there’s anything to feel.”

I think my mother felt satisfied with that response. So we let twelve more days fall be-

tween the weave of the laundry net. My mother would not allow herself to touch the worms. I had taken to reading about them though. Of learning of ways to expedite metamorphosis.

If I played Bach or Handel, wouldn't they come out to be perfect little prodigious things? Or if I oriented them to the East, some vibrational energy could be conferred to the worms that might still save them: make them comfortable enough to gain consciousness, realize all that my mother had done for them, understand that it was time to move on to something new, and emerge out of pure respect.

I also read that if you pinch the tail of a chrysalis and the worm does not move it means it won't ever move again.

I told my mother this in week eight when all the worms had calcified like small shards of stony gravel.

From egg to caterpillar from caterpillar into—

gravel. How proud that gravelmom might be to know that some couldn't-be-helped biological process in her produced seven little low-grade metamorphic rocks fixed to the sides of a white laundry net hanging from the chandelier of a Chinese woman's home.

"I don't like looking at them anymore" my mother told me at breakfast week eight, day two, hour: too early. "I don't want to keep them in the house anymore" she furthered. I thought I saw her top lip tremor when she finished with:

"It makes me sad."

"It makes me laugh. We have petrified caterpillars hanging on our chandelier!" I said. But I was sorry for it, and I apologized.

"No, it doesn't make me laugh." I admitted. "What should we do with them?"

What should we do with them? Because we were the living. Because we got to decide things for the dead. Those worms no longer belonged to themselves. Did they ever belong to themselves.

I watched my mother's eyes move. Whether she contemplated cereal or death, milk or suffering, mother or child, those eyes ran over net, then closer to broken shells, then floor, then coffee, then to me, then shells, then back to me: her daughter. She looked at her daughter when she said

"Burn them."

“Why?” It would’ve been so much easier to leave them out on some branch or wood. To let whatever become of it happen. Never again left to neglect, or dry dill, or hurt. One day I should like to be a shell on the beach.

“Do you think they still feel?”

I sat there over the warm mist of my food. Thinking of it.

“Maybe somewhere else. But not here.”

“Then burn them.” She reasserted. “I don’t want the birds to come for them. Just in case the butterfly mom comes back.”

“Would it make her sad?”

My mother nodded “maybe next time they’ll do better” she suggested. “Next time.”

Her look was far away and I knew she was recalling happier days when those caterpillars still belonged to her like they could be called Gabrielle, Isabelle, Ivan or Estelle.

Those calcified worms made food for flame on the fourth day of the eighth week over an overambitious grill. My mother did the whole of it, but I stood close to watch her. I imagined as she let each one give way to flame that she said a prayer for it: hello, hello. Goodbye, goodbye.

It came so naturally to her, to love and to nurture something that was not made of her flesh, was not crafted in her womb. Did not speak or move around the world like she would. Would not prefer pumpkin over squash in the lazy turn of fall. Would not grow into her shirts or perfume. Would not live, or laugh, or love like we do. She loved because in her own quickening, fate knew to make her a beautiful woman.

When all the sometime caterpillars were burned and my mother had turned down the propane. We sat a while on the veranda facing the jungle where those worms were born and buried live. I saw the turn and bend of every wire and weed. Heard the droning cries of gnats and other winged things. And in the midst of that space I thought there was something in the humidity that was heavy, and smoky and raw like the temporal half of the universe decided to sit right next to us and linger on the breath of the still air.

“Why do they do it?” I asked my mother. I don’t know if I really expected an answer, or if I just wanted her to say something to me.

She turned her large, square face towards mine and I thought: one day I'll look exactly like her: small pout and crinkly smile: black brows and all.

“What do you mean?” I clarified.

“If they know there's a chance they won't come out of it alive. Why do they do it?”

My mother let us be silent for a moment. For more time than would make me comfortable, but with all the sensibilities of a mother; she waited a minute in her response—Just a minute—If she had it then she let it oxidize—take on some quality of the air and mist—let it hang on her tongue just a second longer so that in my discomfort or boredom I could be made to steal a glimpse at the fruits of her garden, hidden beyond the thorny underbrush of her weeds.

“They do it, so they can be like you,” she said.

“Oh.”

I remember now that the Chinese proverb I thought I had remembered was wrong.

You're poking at a worm in your hand. Because it doesn't bite you, you let it go.

