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## Retaggio

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Divya Mehrish

*Retaggio*

Panting heavily, a polar bear shifts her weight onto her hind legs. She is emaciated. She waits as a stream of bubbles circles the slice of ice upon which she balances. And then it happens—the bubbles dissolve. The bear stifles her breathing lest she draw attention to herself. She is so close. Slowly, like Botticelli's Venus birthed from sea foam, the seal emerges from the depths, head erect. The bear grinds her teeth. This is her one chance. With her last energy, she lunges forward and swipes at the blubbery animal, gripping it with her claws. She locks her jaws around the seal's neck and drags it away from the ice's edge, one leg wrapped around her catch. For a moment, she lies down on the ice, body pressed down on the seal luxuriously. Before feasting, she must catch her breath. She closes her eyes, letting the slippery wet of the seal's body seep into her brittle hair. The seal is fighting against her—thrashing, writhing. But it, too, is weak. The weak can recognize their own kind.

When the polar bear feels strong enough to lift her torso up again, the seal has suffocated. And so, she begins to eat, tearing through the blubber. She paws and chews ravenously, stuffing her body with as much as she can handle, and then more. She is eating for two.

~

*"Hush. And listen."*

*As if the body is tender,  
 my mother's stories rouse me in the belly of dawn.  
 Her voice, the sound of red sand blistering chapped feet.  
 We crave water, the triumph of cold over burn, the whetting of thirst.  
 I lie in a sleep that is too warm and womb-like for dreaming.  
 Body curdling like bad milk, I encase my hips in a chrysalis.  
 Her stories come to me before my throat is ready to gulp,  
 like unripe wine, like early menstruation.*

~

It is 1970. Summer in Prato, Italy. The textile factories are in full swing, churning out yards of patterned cloth like butter. At dusk, my mother's mother leaves the factory, her feet swollen from standing all day, her stomach rumbling. She turns left after leaving the back door, taking the long route to avoid the swarm of Socialists engulfing pedestrians in pamphlets. She must make another inconvenient turn before reaching the city center to avoid the town hall meeting that all the locals know is being chaired by Communist. The heat and humidity, she decides, make for fertile ground for political *sciocchezze*. She misses Sicily: her birthplace, the birthplace of her children. She misses not just her family, but also the predictable routine of farm life. Life was harder in the South—food scarcer, pockets emptier, the labor more physical, the Mafia stronger—but the radius of life was smaller, tighter, closer. Now her circle has expanded, and with it, the need for more. Only the day before did she finally realize that she no longer works to live—she lives to work.

But she consoles herself with the reminder that she works for her children, for the daughter and son who will have more on their plates than she ever could dream of wanting. Her purpose is to make her children grow, to ripen them. Ever since she lost her first babies during the stillbirth two years before her daughter was born—she crosses herself now, as her stomach drops—she has made her purpose to keep her children alive.

She reaches the market a quarter of an hour before it closes for the night. She quickly gathers her necessities: flour, sugar, eggs, meat. She counts her coins for the fourth time that day. Yes, she does have enough money this week to buy an extra portion of steak for herself. As she arranges the items on the counter to pay, she notices a well-dressed little boy holding his mother's hand at the next counter over, sipping a carton of juice. The saleswoman follows her gaze. "Ah yes, we finally have those cartons of fruit juice in stock. They are excellent for young kids. Lots of vitamins to make them grow big and strong." The woman meets the saleswoman's keen gaze. "We keep them right over there." The woman glides left, following the angle of the pointed finger. She lifts one of the rectangular cartons, turning it over. She sees text. Some description of benefits, she assumes. She never learned how to read. Her father made her leave school in second grade so that she could help look after her newborn sister and take care of the farm.

The woman decides to buy two cartons, one for each of her children. But when the saleswoman adds the prices of all the items together, the woman gasps quietly. With a knowing look at the lady, she slips back to the butcher station, parcel of meat in hand. She returns it to the butcher, asking him to remove a piece and retie the string. The man gives the woman a hard look and sighs as if he's been asked to perform this task many

times before. But the woman doesn't feel ashamed. In fact, she feels a kind of pride bubbling in her chest. The woman might not be eating tonight, but her children will feast.

~

Amidst the streaked light of snowfall, one can make out the gyrating rumps of two creatures—one quadruple the size of the other. The mother nudges her infant's nose, licking snowflakes off his rumpled forehead. The flowers of frost are cold in her mouth, colder than usual. When she had been with child, the mother believed that the scope of winter would shrink when another life entered hers; when there was another with whom to share the endless nights. But winter just expanded, lengthened, deepened. Now, there is a constant need to find food, more and more as her son grows. And she sleeps less and less fitfully as the cub gains energy and learns how to play with snow, sink into the powdery surface and slide across ice. He begins leaving her side spontaneously, silently, stealthily sneaking off. She knows wolves roam these parts, that her little son is no match for them. She knows, only too well, that her baby might be gambling his life away without even realizing. And so, she begins to feed him her portions of fish and seal meat, trying to make his body grow as fast as it can so that if he ever needs to, he can be a match for ravenous wolves and adult polar bears alike. Perhaps her presence is intimidating enough to a wolf, but the mother knows that she is no match for a hungry polar bear bachelor. Not confident that she can protect her son from all potential attackers, she commits to equipping him with the tools necessary to fend for himself. At night, the boy cuddles against her breast, sucking hard on her teats. But her body no longer produces milk. In

fact, she stopped producing milk long ago, even when she was still living with her son in the little den she had built to bear the infant. Her baby, however, is ruthless. Nourishment from the sea is not enough. He wants his mother to give herself to him, too. But there is only so much she can give away. He is hurting her now, biting her nipples, breathing desperately. She moans, trying to pull her sleepy body up from the ice. He doesn't let go. She growls, baring her teeth. The boy's eyes are closed, his mouth clinging tightly to his mother's chest, legs tucked between hers. She claws at him, first at his hips, and then at his chest. He lets out a cry, the sound tainting the starless sky like a flash of lightning. Instinctively, he curls into himself, shuddering. When he finally unravels his body, the mother sees a dark line zipped across the soft pink of his hairless stomach. She has cut her cub. With a slight shiver, she puts her right claw into her mouth, tasting the steel of his blood, once a gift from her own body.

~

*"Sometimes in the body, there is quiet."*

*My mother's voice is soft, like abalone, too soft.*

*I remember the taste of her rage, the biting sting of blood  
inside my cheek, steel. There was a time I tried to paint the violence  
to therapists, hands and words violating a body I quickly learned to unpossess.*

*But memory became an unnecessary burden, a sour aftertaste.*

*The muscularity of forgetfulness put its palms on my lips.*

*And pressed.*

~

It is 1961. Autumn in Caltanissetta, Sicily. The crumbling stone outhouse is nearly a thousand meters from the main farmhouse, set behind the pigsty. Amidst the sounds of oinking and splattering of diseased dung, my teenage grandmother wails between the tight walls. Her chest heaves, neck straining as she tries to lift her head. She is too tired, and her scalp collapses heavily onto the earthen floor. The midwife, whose arrival was nearly two hours too late, tells the girl she must not exert herself. “*Non alzarti, Signorina.*” The old woman realizes her mistake only after, as she tries to soak up the pooling blood with a dirty rag. The young girl is, in fact, married—even if only just. She is a *Signora*. Even if her husband is in Catania, looking for work. Even if the girl eloped with her husband because her father refused to give his blessing to a man who had no land to his name. Even if the girl is living in the outhouse-turned-shed of her great-aunt, she is still a *Signora* because she has a gold band on her left ring finger and because her husband has already entered her body and has evidently made himself at home in there.

When the girl gives birth, she doesn’t have a baby. She has two. The old woman doesn’t tell her this. Instead, she commands the girl to keep her eyes shut. Between screeches and howls, the girl clenches her teeth and nods painfully, a rivulet of sweat infested with tears dribbling down her dirty chin. The midwife takes the bloodied rag and, with practiced hands, tightly rolls the two silent infant forms into the cloth. She tries not to look too closely, but she can make out that one of the forms is female and the other

male. The babies are four months too early. They may be breathing—just barely—for the time being, yet they are too weak to survive for more than a few days at most. The woman knows this, or at least she tells herself she does. And so, she carries the dripping parcel of premature twins out to the pigsty and tosses it into the trough. Then she goes to the well and rinses her hands of any sin. She stoically crosses herself. Then she returns to the girl. She is sorry for the child, lying weak and anemic on the earth. The child who is now childless. She lifts the girl gently and lays her in a patch of clean straw strewn across the earthen floor. With clean rags, the midwife cleanses the girl's body of any evidence of birth. After some minutes, her wailing dissolves into the occasional gulp. She understands, from the delicacy with which the rough woman is tending to her, that something has gone wrong. But she still whispers, almost incoherently, "*Dov'è il mio bambino?*" The midwife cracks her knuckles for a few moments, playing with the question. How many times, she wonders, have women asked that question? How many times did the Virgin Mother herself wonder *where is my child?* And then the midwife knows how to answer. "*Loro...eh...lui è con Dio.*" *They...he is with God.* The old woman inhales sharply, clucking at herself for slipping. She clenches her eyelids shut, trying to ground herself. She doesn't see how the girl's body shudders.

As the midwife leaves the haggard girl, now resting in her cot in a clean nightdress, she tucks her rosary between her breasts like the secret she is keeping. Before slipping out through the doorless exit, the old woman wonders if she is really protecting the young lady from any additional hurt by hiding the fact that she lost two babies instead of just one. A loss is a loss. She considers correcting the story, but the young woman is sleeping, and so she takes her leave, wordlessly. When the air feels calm and slow and



uninterrupted by the *anziana's* breathing, the girl blinks her swollen eyes open, uncried tears still caught between her thick eyelashes. She curls into herself, her middle still soft and warm and full. She feels so empty, so alone. She wishes now that she had asked the midwife to let her hold them, to press them against her chest, even if they were already dead or about to die. She doesn't even know what they smelled like, if they shared her husband's soft chin and rolling forehead, if they had inherited her delicate fingers. She has no memory to roll around in her mouth, to keep her satiated when she is hungry for motherhood. All she has is the knowing that she birthed two babies, and she lost both—she had a double shot at life, at *giving* life, and still she failed. All she has is the fractured memory of her body convulsing, twice, into two splattered, bloody, excruciatingly silent lives.

And she has the taste of her own body between her lips. Her body had shuddered a third time, about a quarter of an hour after she birthed her twins. The midwife had taken the placenta, boiled it in the main house, and brought the steaming flesh back to the girl on a little plate. She hand-fed the girl her own insides, against her will, forcing the organ her body had expelled back inside her. The only reason the young woman chewed the tough meat and swallowed it was because the old woman promised that these nutrients would grant her the ability to birth a healthy child the next time. The only reason she listened is because of her faith in “the next time.” *La prossima volta*. But still, she wonders how consuming the very organ that failed to provide her infants with sufficient nutrients to make them strong enough to live is any sort of promise for future motherhood. She wishes, for a moment, that her mother was with her now, to hold her and pray into her neck with gentle kisses. But the woman disowned her once she married her husband at

sixteen years of age, even though she returned to the door of her childhood home the next day, just with a ring on her finger and her insides deflowered. She sobs into the straw, both motherless and childless.

~

In her sleep, the polar bear's nose twitches maniacally. She is inhaling the scent of her cub, memorizing his presence. Mother and son sleep braided together—limbs twisted and insulated. He has doubled in size now, and so has his appetite. Now, as the season of blizzards approaches, the mother worries about how she will continue to seek out enough to eat. She knows she is not alone in her hunt, that there are other mothers and other bachelors looking to feed themselves and their children.

In the morning, the cub slithers out from beneath his mother's heavy paw and waddles out into the sunshine. He is enthralled by the light, by the texture of ice against the raw pads of his paws, against his soft lips. He burrows, creating a little nest of snow where he can make himself at home, away from his mother.

The sun is drooping, flailing its rays against the horizon when the polar bear forces herself upright. She is ravenous to the point where her stomach has numbed itself. It is time to scavenge, to feed her son. She stretches out her limbs, her nose tingling as she inhales the air in search of the musky flavors of his fur. Pausing, mid-stretch, she turns behind her, then ahead, then to each of her sides. Chuffing wildly, she rears her head.

*Where is her son?*

~

*“How will you begin again?”*

*The morning I woke with fear of the art*

*your mothering had mastered,*

*I realized there is only one genesis.*

*“Let there be light,” God said, and light appeared.*

*There is no undoing, no redoing.*

*God was pleased; the light remained lit.*

*My beginning cannot be begun, again.*

*I am a consequence of love, decontextualized.*

*A diapason, the dismemberment*

*of daughterhood. I am the inhaling*

*of the aftermath, yours.*

*I am about to implode.*

~

Every morning, my mother’s mother lays out two plates of light brown bread, each coated heavily in sugar. Beside each plate she plants a carton of fruit juice. As she waits for her children to sit at the table, she ties the apron strings tighter around her waist. She pats down her sides, her fingers drumming alongside her rib cage. She has lost a good

deal of weight. Her lips pucker into a small, pleased smile. As if in response, her stomach growls angrily. She sips only at the black coffee she brewed earlier that morning. That is all she will allow herself today.

“*Non lo voglio, mamma,*” her daughter whines as soon as she approaches the table. “I don’t want the juice.” Every morning, her daughter complains, and, every morning, her mother reaches for her husband’s belt hanging from the hook by the main door. She has never belted her children—it’s her husband’s duty—but now that he is away in Germany, working for Volkswagen, she must be responsible for punishing her children into obedience. *Mustn’t she?*

Her son begins to eat, hungrily, desperately. He eats with his hands, tearing chunks of bread off the crust, sucking on the pillowy flesh, and dipping the moist pieces into the mini pools of sugar on his plate. Between slurps of fruit juice, he requests another slice, and then another. Each time, his mother dusts an extra layer of sugar onto the crusty bread, trying to satiate her son. And then he asks for water, for more juice, anything to conquer his unquenchable thirst. *My son is growing,* the woman tells herself. *It’s my duty to nourish him.*

Her daughter is still sitting at the table in silence, her ankles tucked around each other as she stares angrily at the table, the plastic straw still attached to the back of the fruit juice carton. She is refusing her mother’s food, her mother’s demands, her mother’s love. The woman locks her gaze with her daughter’s. Eyeing the untouched slice of sugared bread, she warns her child with a reproachful glare in her eyes. And then her daughter does the unthinkable—she lifts the ceramic plate of her breakfast and shatters it to the ground. “*Non lo voglio.*” Her daughter’s hoarse voice slithers out of her body like the

tarry fumes through the smokestacks at the factory. And then, her voice caged within barred teeth, "*Ti odio!*" *I hate you.*

Without flinching, her mother wraps the belt around her wrist, the buckles at the other end, as she approaches my mother. She teaches her daughter a mother's love, responsibility, duty. These lessons cannot be unlearned.

~

The polar bear's cub has been gone for a full moon cycle. The mother no longer sleeps, no longer scavenges. She has no one to feed but herself, and no need to feed herself if her body has become useless—she has no child to warm, to nestle, to mother. She spends her days shrugging off the falling snow, her weak shoulders drooping and rising painfully as she searches for the silhouette of her cub, the too-large ears set against his tiny head, the too-short, waddling limbs. He is too young to live without her, without her milk, without her protection.

And then it strikes her. Instinctively, primally, she burrows her nose into the ground and begins following the scent. There is something meaty in the air, a richness exuded. She salivates, her eyes growing wide and wild. Her eyes narrow, beady and red. Her body suddenly full of energy, she bounds into the wind, the patterns of her paws disrupting the sleek overcoat of a snowed-in winter.

In the distance, an off-white lump, stained by dirty water and blood, gyrates. Something is rolling on the ground. No, it's running towards *her*. Huffing now, the polar bear growls. She is out of breath, overwhelmed by the deepening pit of her stomach. For

a moment, she pauses on a shard of ice, lifting herself off the ground to stand on her rear legs. Her ears twitch in the wind as makes out the sound of moaning. Something is hurt.

~

*“Where did you come from?”*

*I am of your hands, from your hands, in your hands.*

*We have the same hands, pianist’s fingers, ballerina’s knuckles.*

*The shape of my body is the shape of yours.*

*I came from you—me, the consequence of silence,*

*my origin story itself a consequence of silence.*

*I came from the source whence you sprung.*

~

My grandmother sits in the waiting room of the hospital in Pisa. Her husband’s second cousin is a doctor here, and he has access to the insulin therapy her little boy needs. She had sat with him as the doctors hooked him up to an IV, her satchel full of homemade food, a loaf of fresh bread, juice cartons. *He is hungry. He needs to eat. He needs to drink.* When the nurses left the room, the mother quickly pulled out a carton of juice, stuck the sharp end of the straw through the foil on the top, and shoved the straw between

her son's waiting lips. He slurped down the juice within seconds, sobbing, begging for another.

"*Signora, no!*" The nurse quickly snatched away the just-emptied carton and quickly herded the mother out of the room, slamming the door of her son's room shut. The nurse pushed her into a seat in the waiting room, told her to stay put.

Boiling with fury, steaming with concern, she now shivers in the air-conditioned space, wishing her husband were with her. He has had to stay home with their daughter, to make sure she eats, to make sure she does not empty her stomach into the toilet after each meal. They can no longer leave her alone at home, even though their daughter is now only a few years younger than her mother was when she birthed her.

The woman slumps over in the chair, her face in her hands. Through her satchel, the loaf of bread pokes at her bony side. Salivating, the woman feels her fingers reaching for the bread. The nurses won't let her son have any of her food, anything she tries to feed him, and so she is free to eat it. *Isn't she?* Her fingers tremble as they grasp the thick crust. *But she is so close—almost the whole day without eating.* A deep murmur emerges from her stomach, followed by a hiccup sound, as her body wars with her mind. But then the nurse rushes in—her son. He has fallen into a coma. The woman drops everything: satchel, bread, her hunger.

~

With a roar, the polar bear swipes blindly at the creature before her, the falling snow blurring her vision. The steely scent of blood is still fresh on the creature's hair, on

its skin. It, too, is weak. The weak can recognize their own kind. The bear's tongue lolls out as she fights, consumed by a raging hunger.

As gusts of wind heave through her body, chilling her to the bone, she paws at the ground, at her neck, at her eyes, at the creature before her that has stopped fighting. With a deep sigh, she throws herself onto its rumpled body, breathing heavily. When the polar bear feels strong enough to lift her torso up again, the creature has suffocated. The snow has died down. She slithers off its body and examines her catch. It is a small polar bear, a male, perhaps a year old. The blubber will be rich, fresh, young.

And so, she begins to eat, tearing through the blubber, her actions hallucinatory. She paws and chews ravenously, stuffing her body with as much as she can handle, and then more. Attempting to fill an unconquerable hunger, an unconquerable loss, she nearly forgets she has lost her son.

When she wakes up from a trance-like sleep, her ribs sore and her stomach aching from having stretched itself out so far, she unfurls her tight limbs. There is life in her body, again. Warmth seeps through her bones as her heart pumps blood through her organs. Her left claw knocks against something soft. She turns around—it is the head of last night's meal. There is something familiar about the too-large ears that makes her tremble. With a shiver, she grinds her jaw, the taste of her own body's gift between her lips. She is childless.



*“And what would you say if you could?”*

*Mama, I cleft you.*

*My childhood was a concerto in D Minor,*

*like yours.*

*I am still learning how to pulp my loneliness,*

*how to sip at amnesia like ambrosia.*

*how do I forgive you: our inheritance—*

*il nostro retaggio—*

*shared, maybe, but devoid of purity,*

*a sentence abandoned—*

*“Please.”*

*—in midair. I would tell you I am your home,*

*I am my own home, that I would hibernate*

*in the space between our legs*

*as if I were at home in my origin story.*

*If you could.*