

# Menarche

by Mitch Alcantara

I am learning to be a woman.  
It entails a lot, I've come to realize.  
Only now do I come to know my body-  
Like a stranger in the fog, coming beneath moonlight.  
How I come equipped with things I've not realized I've had:  
Like breasts and lips  
And their implications:  
The presence of a woman  
(I've yet to decipher what that means)  
But it is mine-  
Or so they say.

Before, I was rough hands that loved to play with mud  
And bark  
And dead leaves  
And all things autumn  
-even if there is no autumn in my country-  
I guess all things change and withering,  
All things elemental- saying good night.  
*Who does not long to touch good nights?*

Before, I was shameless.  
Topless with my flat chest and bulging tummy.  
Now, they tell me to swallow this wicked shame,  
Taught me to hide this womanliness like it was gold because they were after it.  
Who I never knew: Wicked monsters, would-be men.  
Things like that.  
But I never cared for gold  
And I had loved to dare my monsters ever since.

It is not them I am afraid of.  
It is a different fear:

The fear of newness, of growing into old bones,  
Of learning how to first walk again.  
With a ruthless grace.

This fear-  
It's like learning how to ride a bike:

The nervousness of rickety wheels rolling,  
Of you on top of cold metal on a warm day,  
Of balance and new things, and shifted weights.  
The fear of losing ground because there is something new between my legs.

See, I never knew the slopes I danced with.  
Now, allegedly, my ass is a mountain.  
And I shook mountains when I danced.  
My hips: they are hills that longed and whistled.  
At first I was frightened of its music:  
The sound of seeds cracking in the darkness.  
But now, I accept it.  
As it is part of life.

My spine are the sand dunes in Ilocos.  
Many would ride down on it.  
The wind will kiss them as they do.

This is my body.  
And I am taking it to dinner.  
Asking it questions bravely  
And with an openness that rivals that of a curious child.

I'm beginning to understand its language.  
The melodious accent of harsh u's  
And sharp e's  
And r's that roll-  
The cackle of its warrior  
Dancing to the rituals of holy blood.  
Ferocious and unapologetic of its tenderness.  
The high notes of a priestess  
In a meadow.  
Her warmth a dagger in the silence of brute force.  
The baritone of a gardener  
In spring.  
Blessed with the alchemy of making hatchlings  
In the bleakness and the cold.

I take it to the bedroom.  
And we talk in front of mirrors.  
With the lights on.  
With our clothes off.  
Unravelling new doors into our temple.  
Relearning new verses of old prayers.  
Meeting images of God.

*Mitch Alcantara is a junior research consultant for public health and public mental health, and a former assistant professor of Psychology in the Philippines. She is not a poet but she loves stories and verses and dabbling in writing and the arts, and deeply believes that creative arts is a necessity for development and rights advocacy because true development work includes soul work too.*