



The
Eating
Game

Christine
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chapbook

Sears Publications

Biography

Christine Stoddard is a Salvadoran-Scottish-American writer and artist who lives in Brooklyn. The founding editor of *Quail Bell Magazine*, she also is the author of *Hispanic & Latino Heritage in Virginia* (The History Press), *Ova* (Dancing Girl Press, 2017), and two miniature books from the Poems-For-All series.

Acknowledgments

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Projection

The bride dreamt of a white wedding and so
a sparkling white wedding she had.
Dappled in snow and framed in icicles,
the reception unfolded one December night.
And that is how the bride came to slip
and fall on ice mere feet from the altar.

She recalled looking in the mirror
after trying on 30 wrong dresses
and sobbing until
she dry-heaved.

Blood nourishes.
Taste the vitamins.

After the ceremony, stuck behind a crashed car,
the bride wiped away her smeared mascara.
Her tears fell in rhythm with her
desperate breaths as
her mother held her hand.
Her back hurt almost to
the point of not hurting.

At age six, she trimmed half an inch
off the side of her paper doll
because she thought her plump.

The prettiest girl in class
had a protruding collarbone.

When the driver announced that
they had arrived, the bride packed
her compact and stepped out
of her carriage and shed her
fur stole and darted to
her dressing room.

Some moments cut like slices
and there is no way to
gather them up again.

The skinniest slivers
slipping through fingers.

Huddled in their car three traffic lights away,
her bridesmaids soaked in the city.
Skyscrapers glowed periwinkle
from behind the elegant deception
of polluted fog that glimmered
in the first whispers of winter.

One month before the wedding,
a man who promised to grab pussies
was elected and
throng of New Yorkers
protested outside the
seat of his kingdom
peering and sneering over Fifth Avenue.

But that night,
throng of tourists
roamed the streets
lined with Christmas trees.

Once her mother vanished, the new wife
guzzled champagne and popped a Percocet.
Her body did not feel like her body.
The bride stared out the window and
onto the sprawl of storied
buildings upon buildings.
Maybe her body was
not her body.
Maybe her body had
never been her body.

Did Virgin Mary's body feel like her body
when God touched her womb?

The bride peeled off her gloves
and marched downstairs
to wide applause from
the wedding guests.

When she met her groom's eyes
from across the ballroom,
he did not see the ghost of her.

The bride sniffed the crab cakes.
Savor the smell. Eat the smell.
Then she danced and mingled
and danced some more.

Ribs
and tulle
happily ever after.

Emetics and Ermine

Whenever your mother cooks decadent meals,
all you see and smell are freshly scrubbed toilets.
You can feel the porcelain seat grazing your chin
and the coolness pressing against your red cheek
after another exhausting lovemaking session
with your dear appliance friend, Kohler.

Friend with benefits? No, no benefits.

You were nine years old when you decided
you wanted to become Zsa Zsa Gabor
when you grew up—but thinner.
A life of pearls and ermine stoles
was the only life for you.

Drape everything from your skeleton
and paint your skull with lipstick.
Hang diamonds from your eye sockets.
Pose for another photo; flash your gold teeth.

When the bathroom door is shut and you
have been there weeping for an hour,
you take comfort in the long-awaited
tickle at the bottom of your throat.

Angels sing to the tune of nausea.
Hallelujah to the vomit gods.

The best dinner is one you can down quickly
and propel quickly, even before company departs.
There is a bloody science to glamour, Mother.
Only Kohler can ever understand.

Barbie's Thigh Gap

A harem of Barbie dolls invaded the living room
and set up camp to entertain the roves of girls and boys
cycling through the house after school.

But Sylvia could not just watch the dolls—
she had to possess one as she had to possess everything.
So she snatched her neighbor's Barbie and hid it at home.

The kidnapped doll slept fitfully in a shoebox under Sylvia's bed
until the evening the girl decided to remove her
and place her on a makeshift examination table.

Sylvia had cleared her desk of all its butterfly notebooks and crayons
to inspect Barbie's body, from blonde head to tiny toe.
Naturally, the doll was naked as candles before the burn.

After Sylvia prodded Barbie's breasts and considered her buttocks,
she seized a Sharpie and began marking the doll
with a series of dotted lines.

Trim this and trim that and maybe, Barbie, you have a chance at
achieving beauty, at earning love, at looking half as comely
as Sylvia's mommy, the lady crouched in the hospital bed.

And You Never Saw Her Eat

She admired the thinness of ghosts,
their enviable two dimensions
and their ability to evaporate
like stars vanishing in the fog.

If only she were as flat as a flounder
or a piece of blank parchment
sleeping on a neglected desk,
not even a splatter of ink to
puff it up by a millimeter.

She did not cook her vegetables
or even entertain the
mere thought of bread.

But you only ever heard her state

these rules and habits,
her daily meals as invisible

as the boulder she bears.

What A Happy Birthday

A cake crowns the table
and a woman looks in fear
as demons jump in the icing.
Foam dresses their mouths
as they jig and shriek,
but she is the only witness
to their supreme evil.
They taunt no other
party guest at the table
because they would never
believe that they haunt
all that delights eating beings.

Second Trimester

Nothing fits because nothing can fit
and all the silk adorns the dressing room
floor as if it were designed for the carpet
to wear because at least it can wear it
without weeping tears of pure regret.

She counts calories and sheep
and still her body does not
mimic her repeating dreams.

Hug this carrot but pummel
that pasta with all the fury
in your bloated fists, girl.

Take no photos and unplug
all social media, lest the
posts come to rankle you
as cake and cookies do.

This was once the perfect dress
for an almost perfect body,
if not an imperfect soul.

Let's not talk of the future tonight.
The nursery can decorate itself.

Boycott That Store

Your wallet is yours alone
and your body is yours alone
and your wardrobe is yours alone
but your anger toward that store
is not yours alone.

No woman has that figure,
their mannequins the loosest interpretation
of the female form that walks this earth.
How is it that mannequins are so like zombies?

That fabric will not stretch to envelop your beauty.
It will pull and tug and shame what is yours.
Abandon its florescent lights for sunshine
and adorn yourself in fig leaves instead.

A VOW

Corsets hug the skeleton tight and
kiss the vertebrae with lace lips.
Flesh is an unwanted obstacle
to love—of fashion, of self.

She fingered a veil
that would enshroud her
so she could cover her body,
rendering even her silhouette
invisible to curious guests.

My neck will not show.
My arms will not show.
My legs will not show.

Divert their gaze with a train
that must be carried
by dozens upon dozens,
and all eyes will ricochet
from the altar to the back
of the chapel but not to you.

With the stilettos, you walk
on stilts, teetering into marriage,
into a new life with a new figure.

I ate my last piece of bread for life
at the rehearsal dinner.
Sneak, munch, relish, and gone.

Thirty Pounds in Three Months

On August 8, 2016, all 5'1 of my Salvadoran flesh and bones weighed 115 pounds.

My weight was documented, though I am myself undocumented.

This doctor accepted all patients, including ones whose parents stopped communicating with the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services

when she was still in lacquered pigtails, watching *Topo Gigio* on Saturdays.

The doctor's office quoted me the same rates any documented person would pay,

but, sometimes, I still wondered if the office manager would call the police to cart me away in my hospital gown, *nalgas* flailing in the faces of passersby.

I did not harbor much trust or even hope, given that I was always second-guessing where to dock my ship next. Was it safe to live here another year without papers?

I worked for an auto repair shop, taking my weekly salary in cash, which my boss skimmed off the top from overquoted jobs that clueless customers also paid in cash.

But if my boss fired me, where would I work next? Who would hire me without my papers in order? Who would pay me as well as this seedy little business paid me every week to keep their office in as tip-top shape as I kept my ship? How would I feed my son? Would I have to return to El Salvador, which I had not seen since I still thought *Papá Noel* was real? Since I was too young to appreciate the *lorocos* in my *pupusas*? These questions were etched in my psyche, as common as asking what the weather was or if I needed to go to the grocery store. But the news made them multiple. With each tweet, each meme, each sound bite, I gained half an ounce.

I became less mobile. I sat on the sofa, hugging my son as I scrolled through my phone as a reflex. In reality, I was barely aware of his presence. I mainly thought of him when hunger hit me. No, not hunger, simply a need for food. The election spurred my oral fixation and I had to shove whatever snack, however unappealing or unnecessary, into my mouth. He said. She said. Back and forth ad nauseam.

On September 8, 2016, all 5'1 of my Salvadoran flesh and bones weighed 125 pounds. I might have noticed if I weren't so preoccupied. Instead, I boiled more beans after work and obsessed over the latest immigration scares, as if my fear could change anything. All that changed was the fit of my clothes, especially pants.

By October 8, 2016, I had to buy new clothes as urgently as I needed to visit the doctor. That was how I found myself dialing the doctor's office from the dressing room of a discount department store. I wept as I spoke to the receptionist.

The doctor could not explain my weight gain. She only asked questions for which I had no answers. Normally, I had answers to questions, but suspected pirates would raid my ship at any moment. Surely I could not respond to "Who are you voting for?"

with "I am an illegal alien and cannot vote even though I have lived in this damn country most of my life—25 years—but that's how it is because the law is cruel."

The doctor promised to run a few tests and get back to me. I heard nothing.

By November 8, 2016, I did not recognize myself with 30 extra pounds on my frame.

My face was bloated, my hands were fat. Yet as I watched a map of the U.S. blush until it glowed red, I knew I wasn't suffering from cancer or a thyroid condition. And I knew that it would take me four years to lose the weight, though I might be slimming down *por allá* because of the new administration.

Ascetic

Lettuce.
No mayo.
Half a tomato.
Sans fromage,
as mother said.

The chicken must be boiled.
All skin removed.
All fat banished.
Off the bone.

There is no bread.
Never any bread,
just as there is
no satisfaction.

Dine on distractions.
Dine on dreams.
Dine on tiny plates
and never from bowls.

Do not pray for satiation
because it will never come.

You will never come
because you will always
wonder how many calories
there are in an orgasm.

Vanishing Letters

We were high school lovers,
the kind that never fucked.
So I never knew the
depths of her bones.
I never sucked her clavicle
or clutched her pelvis.

But when we graduated,
we wrote each other letters
about the moons' siren call
and whether puffins danced
until she stopped writing
me any kind of letters at all.

Thirteen months later,
when her mother emailed me
an invitation to her funeral,
I asked why my dear friend
would never see sunlight again.

Her heart failed.

But I adored her, and I always will.

Her heart—the organ—failed.

But she wasn't sick.

She was sicker than you knew.

She was the kind of young woman
who eschewed premarital romps,
not out of any religious faith,
but out of contempt for her body.

Her wrists had been lace
and her waist made of ribbon.
No fat, only wisps of sinew.

I begged her to love me,
but I never begged her to eat.

Chemo for Breakfast

The tumors will not eat eggs
and they are immune
to the fatty fragrance of bacon.

Coffee has become too bitter
even for flagellation.

This vitamin tastes
like musty air,
but it may extend your life
by a month or a year.

In that time, you will lust
for flavors
you knew before the cancer
seized your pen
and wrote
your next chapter.



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