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Naca: In the Time of the Caterpillars

IN THE TIME OF THE CATERPILLARS

Kristin Naca

Auntie Ining renders fat from slabs of pork she's cut into cubes.

At the kitchen table, I render "Scene from the Garden of Gethsemane" in chalk, in the backdrop a greasy staccato.

Sweeten your tongue to the roof of your mouth till /e/s come out, if you want to pronounce Auntie I's name.

Today begins Elvis week and I's heart pounds, Elvis sweetening her meaty lining.

Though her name's the shape of an "I," Auntie I's the shape of an O. In childhood fotos an O. A wonder she's ever known love.

A returning GI, E's sweet on a girl rendered helpless when she loses her top in the staccato of waves.

At the party that night, he renders a song he sweetens with dance, a shag in his tail for the swoony damsels.

When I look down, eyelids of apostles are sweetened shut from too much dust, all my over-touching.

When Elvis clenches his jaw as someone else speaks, it's all his over-acting.

Tupelo, Mississippi, 1929. A child who would be a very tan king is born.

On the TV Elvis soothes the savage gypsies who store booty in a shiny caboose; the Acapulco cliff divers; shirtless, trapeze

artists; a tizzy of dizzy love-hung women; seriously, devoutly, desperately nuns; bullfighters—make that one. *Ah, but Don Pedro can this one sing?*

All along, the black gum in our front yard fizzes with caterpillars; locusts scorch the sky with a sticky, torch song.

In some other cases, the black gum's rendered, the black tupelo and the tupelo gum.

In waves the curious neighbors clench at the brown woolies barking up the black gum's skin.

"Green surrenders to a staccato of Os," goes the leaves' fading stomata.

When the black gum's leaves go faint and holy, my parents put their feelers on.

At dusk, the dusty apostles also fade as Christ begs for strength in the face of death!

How the silky caterpillars litter the pavement, falling through the holes they've eaten, to death.

With our fingers, we clench ice cream scoops between saltines, sweeten avocado with sugar and swoon.

When Auntie I rings fizz from the Os of a sponge, her fingers bark from all the bleaching.

"She's as big as a house," Mom and Dad pound her when she isn't around or isn't looking.

She steeps her branch in the murky water, fingers for the rice sweetening the bottom of the pan.

Pick you poison, says the neighbor, a peevish redbud blooming in his yard.

Gripped with love, I pound white rice until I'm full, white bread till I'm numb.

A chalk of scorched meat on the bottom of the pan. An oily O on the chicharron rag.

Outlines of apostles I've fingered into Os, even scalded with grease they keep sleeping.

When Dad starts with war buddies burning monkeys from trees, Mom goes to sweep the brown woolies to the street.

I gum on the chewy chicharron bark, at the fatty white parts: hard swallow.

If food is love, pound-for-pound, Auntie Ining's *a hunk o' hunk o'*.

Wise men say: "When Christ calls, fill his jug with laughter, his eye sockets with song."

No black people sun in *Blue Hawaii*, nor *Fun in Acapulco*, ni *Viven en Las Vegas* tampoco, leaving but one explanation: too tan.

In a canoe Elvis fingers his tiny instrument. O flaming ukelele of passion! Ukelele of desire!

What a gas. Dad pounds his foot, sweetening his story with, *The singed bodies fizzed*.

Elvis, have you ever known love? Have you ever never wanted the girl and still known love?

A ticked off Mom and Dad tweeze bodies with fingers through
their spiny hair.

I watch them in wonder through the kitchen window, the two
Os in the front of my head.