

Adoptee Lit: A Generative Writing Workshop

Maria S. Picone

Hello and welcome! Thank you for coming out to the workshop today. Feel free to write into these pieces as desired.

Initial Quote:

“Adoptee stories also frequently feature coincidence and reunion...my desire to write was probably a desire to give myself the agency I didn’t have in life. To give my desires the power of plot.” – Matt Salesses, *Craft in the Real World*

Why adoptee lit?

No matter what identity you are, adoptee lit challenges you to examine the following questions:

Who are you?

What are your audiences? Who do you write for?

How can you bring your identity into your writing in a way that invites readers in?

We Were Not Always Like This by Matt Salesses

fiction

<https://centerforfiction.org/fiction/three-fictions/>

I went out with the boys to celebrate saving my worthless job. The boys were in a rare state, waving arms even with drinks, sloshing on each other with gusto. During the third round, brass knuckles appeared on the bar, courtesy of Randy, my closest friend and the most disconnected from reality. Maybe we were all on board for a fight as soon as we saw those knuckles, a symbol of our angry youths before the suburbs. We were the boys because we were the boys who had made it: rural and urban weak but suburban strutters. Randy eyed a group of pretenders and flashed his brass. The cops came so quickly we hardly earned the cuffs. Later, in the station, Randy cried, on the hook for his weapon of minor destruction. I tried to be sorry, too. Yet I felt only wonder at our idea of pleasure. “Bring the boy,” I said on the phone, sensing a lesson in testosterone. The wifely woman brought only make-up. A black eye was a matter of Shu Uemura to her. I wondered how much we could hide from each other if we wanted it mutually.

Notes from a Missing Person by Jennifer Kwon Dobbs

hybrid/CNF

<https://www.essaypress.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/kwondobbsEPspread1.pdf>

Recipe

First I hand mix the thinly sliced steak with honey, soy sauce, garlic, sesame oil, black pepper and salt while practicing how to say their Korean names: golgi, manul, ganjang, hoochu, sesame oil. How do you say sesame oil? What is salt? As I forget, my hands squeeze and fold the marinade into meat. What is honey? Is this the right texture?

As the taste of my hands works the mixture together inside the blue plastic bowl, my tongue won't take in the flavors. Tongue requires boiling then cooling in ice water before unsheathing it to get to the tender flesh. Dark and stiff, tongue needs to be shredded into strips or else it's chewy. That's what I read anyway.

Yet I'm remembering the sweet smoke of a Hongdae restaurant, adoptee friends shouting "Geonbae!" and shooting soju, bulgolgi spread like a blackening skirt because no one's paying attention, the scowling ajumma running over with scissors and tongs. Hungry, I watch her balance, cut and arrange the strips, as if her hands know the weight of the meat, the intensity of the fire; or she's annoyed that we're drunk and burning our food because we don't know what to do. We're trying.

We keep drinking. We can't feed ourselves. We can't ask for more perilla leaves, lettuce or that sauce made out of red pepper paste and beans. How do you say perilla leaves? I've run out, but I keep eating anyway in that fluorescent-lit dining room surrounded by strangers calling out orders, whose Korean words collide and point at us while we snap pics of little metal plates arranged on our table. Will I ever eat like this again? I want to remember the correct taste.

It should be so simple, but how do I say "family"? How do I summon them? I just want to sit down and eat with my family. I am always asking someone to help me eat. I am always pointing to my mouth and sighing, even as my hands create something for a stranger to read.

Forgiveness is Not a Star but a Dragonfly by Marci Calabretta Cancio-Bello

poetry

<https://agnionline.bu.edu/poetry/forgiveness-is-not-a-star-but-a-dragonfly/>

Here comes the dreamer, we said.
Come, let us crush the irised wings.
Your brothers' teeth are long
and sharp as a tiger's stripes.
See how we devour this dragonfly whole.
What can we reap from a dreamer?
If only you were not as you are,
we would not have sold you.

Such silver
lines your coat now. See how you've grown
comfortable with your own death.
What animal gnaws at you now?
We didn't know you would be king.
If only we had.

The Medicine Veil: Arrivals & Departures: A Diptych by Sun Yung Shin

CNF

<https://agnionline.bu.edu/essay/the-medicine-veil-arrivals-departures-a-diptych/>

The Foreigner, The Insomniac

Recently I visited my 78-year-old mother in her prefab modular home in an unincorporated town in rural Illinois, down the road from a supermax federal prison, among marshlands rich with crimson-capped sandhill cranes in their cool blue-gray plumage, trumpeter swans with matte-black beaks, and red-winged blackbirds whose epaulets are actually two distinct shades of flame and sunset—and not far from the Mississippi River, sometimes dotted with American white pelicans, sometimes shadowed by solitary bald eagles returning to their nests—and together we looked through haphazard sheaves of photographs, which I’d saved after my father’s death, when we sold his small rambler (apparently “rambler” and “ranch” are interchangeable, except ranches may have basements) in Alsip, Illinois. And while chatting about my arrival in the United States as an approximately 1½-year-old former legal orphan, current resident alien, from South Korea—about how I screamed and cried and wouldn’t stop screaming or crying, and how I wouldn’t sleep during my first six weeks with my new family, and wouldn’t let my mother hold me because she was blond, but would let my new father, because he had black hair—my mother said, suddenly and matter-of-factly, “Yes, we had to give you phenobarbital.”

“You gave me phenobarbital?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Where did you get it?”

“The pediatrician.”

“Dr. Wallin? With the clown paintings on the walls and the Bible stories in the waiting room?”

“Yes.”

“Well—did it work?”

“Yes, it worked.”

More about me:

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Buy my chapbooks:

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