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Origin Story

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

ORIGIN STORY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Rose Marion Lopez

2020

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Rose Marion Lopez, and entitled Origin Story, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Lester Standiford

Donna Weir-Soley

Julie Marie Wade, Major Professor

Date of Defense: November 6, 2020

The thesis of Rose Marion Lopez is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2020

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

ORIGIN STORY

by

Rose Marion Lopez

Florida International University, 2020

Miami, Florida

Professor Julie Marie Wade, Major Professor

ORIGIN STORY is a collection of lyric essays that examines coming into adulthood and forging a life with a long-time significant other. These essays explore the speaker's identity as a daughter, sister, partner, and eventual wife and mother across multiple states and countries of residence. They incorporate both traditional scene-based storytelling and hybrid innovations of text, image, and fragmentation to present the speaker's journey from as many perspectives as possible.

The literary influences of ORIGIN STORY include Rivka Galchen's LITTLE LABORS, Tim O'Brien's THE THINGS THEY CARRIED, Tony Earley's SOMEHOW FORM A FAMILY, and Kazim Ali's BRIGHT FELON: AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND CITIES.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
Point of Origin.....	1
Portraits.....	12
Conversations with a Toddler.....	24
Good Mom.....	28
Interview.....	49
Building Blocks.....	54
Needy Children.....	74
Halo.....	76
More Conversations with a Toddler.....	89
I've Seen Dark Before.....	93
Two Daughters.....	99
Interview.....	116
Dread.....	123
Happy Hour.....	134
Thing.....	138
In the Beginning.....	157
Two Sisters.....	163
Even More Conversations with a Toddler.....	175
The Lupine Lady.....	178

Two Sisters

When my sister and I were children, we used to draw floor plan sketches of our dream houses. Sometimes the drawings were just a bedroom, sometimes the whole house. I could be remembering wrong, but I'm pretty sure my dream house was often a treehouse. That is, a regular house, but in a tree. It needed a turret, with a spiral staircase. I liked the idea of a loft, or maybe just an attic bedroom, one with dormer windows and sloped ceilings.

Sometimes the drawings my sister and I made were crude, hastily done, the lines wobbling. Other times we were exact, taking rulers to make the walls straight and even, drawing the beds as perfect rectangles.

I always wanted a bedroom with a window seat. I wanted my window to look out on a mountain range instead of the neighbor's bathroom (never mind that we lived in South Florida, where the only mountains are landfills). My sister and I liked the idea of bunk beds. We each had a room of our own but, for a time at least, wished we had a room to share. I think we imagined our bedroom like the one in the movie, *Three Ninjas*. We'd have a trampoline rather than a ladder for reaching the top. We'd have walkie talkies, and a light that flashed when our parents (or intruders) were approaching. I also desperately wanted my own phone line; I think I got that from *The Babysitters Club*. I wanted to take and make important phone calls, to run a busy business that brought in cash I could store in a lockbox, which I would keep in my window seat. My window seat would have a false top that I could lift and hide things inside. I have always liked everything in its place, and, as a child, if that place was a secret, I liked it even better.

Our best friends were also sisters—there were three—and they had bunk beds and their own phone line, but not walkie talkies or an intruder light. The oldest sister had a canopy on her bed, and my sister and I thought that was a sign of real sophistication. Sometimes our dream house bedrooms had beds with canopies. It's possible, too, that sometimes my dream house was the warehouse space that appears at the beginning of the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* movie. It's occupied by teenagers only, and they do cool things like ride skateboards and paint graffiti with spray paint and play cards. (They also do bad things like smoke cigarettes, engage in underage drinking, and eat poor diets of Little Debbie snacks, pizza, and potato chips.) Those teenagers are living the dream, man, for sure, but that dream comes at a price, because in order to live in this super cool space where anything goes, they have to fight in Shredder's army.

It's not that I wanted to live in a parent-free space. I only wanted a skateboard ramp in my room, and to spray paint graffiti on my walls, and maybe to eat a lot of Little Debbies, which my mother never bought for us.

When we were children, my sister and I also played boarding school. We usually took on the same personas. I don't remember mine, except that she was interested in meeting a handsome boarding schoolboy and kissing him. My sister called herself Skye Blue. I don't remember anything else about her, but knowing my sister, Skye Blue had long mermaid hair and could sing like Mary Poppins.

We rarely fought. Every night, one of us had to clear the table and empty the trash and the other had to wash dishes. On weekends, we were assigned chores. My mother made a chart; there were chores in column A and chores in column B, and every weekend we switched. When my sister and I fought, it was over whose turn it was to wash dishes

or whose turn it was to do the chores in column A. When my sister got mad, her nostrils flared, and one eyebrow went up so far it practically disappeared into her hairline. One year on St. Patrick's Day, my father made corned beef and cabbage and garlic soup (though he could not be further from Irish). The whole house smelled like unwashed feet. It was, I think, my sister's turn to do the dishes. Her nostrils stretched and contracted so quickly I thought she might hyperventilate. She was queen of the silent treatment, too. She didn't speak to me for the rest of the night, though if you asked me then, I would have said it was my father she ought to be angry with.

My sister was always making a big fuss about recycling and being kind to the environment. Our house was about half a mile from a McDonald's and 7-Eleven. We walked together, with our cousins, on any given afternoon to get All-American meals for \$1.89, or a Slurpee. On the walk home, after two or three rounds of brain freeze, with tongues stained blue, I'd toss the empty Slurpee cup into the grass. My sister may have stomped her feet, ordered me to pick it up with a pointed finger.

There aren't any trash cans around here, I'd whine.

So hold it until we get home.

I knew if I didn't, she might not look at me for a week, so I'd retrieve it, grumbling.

Another time, before a baseball game, my sister, my parents, and I went to an Italian restaurant near our house for a late lunch. I wanted spaghetti with meat sauce. The restaurant made their sauce with veal. My sister insisted I order something else. I did not. Our parents sat between us at the game, and any time I caught my sister's eye, she set her

mouth into a straight line that told me she believed I would be the sole cause for the death of the planet and that I was an animal-hating devil.

Until she was fifteen or sixteen, I think my sister's greatest dream was to be a dancer. After that, I think she wanted to star on Broadway. She took ballet and jazz classes. She took voice lessons. She was always singing or dancing or both. We'd be standing at the back of a line twenty people deep to buy movie tickets, and she'd break into the theme from *Rent* loud enough for the people at the front of the line to hear. I did not want to be a dancer or a star on Broadway; I only wanted to be perceived as cool. I'd shush her and glance around and she'd sing louder, do a pas de bourrée, perhaps a little leap.

But in middle school, she had three best friends. They had a notebook they passed among one another between classes, in which they wrote all their great secrets: the boys they liked, the girls they disliked, what happened between fourth and fifth period, why they were angry with their parents. They signed their notes to one another with special symbols—peace, love, harmony, or happiness, respectively—and it's possible they coordinated hairstyles. Despite all my sister's singing and dancing, she was cool, and her friends were cool, and I wanted to be like them, and be a part of their group. One afternoon, the four of them were hanging around our house doing teenaged girl things. Baking cookies. Gossiping. Maybe swimming in the pool. Late in the afternoon, my sister packed a duffel bag. They were going to one of the other girl's houses for a sleepover. I wanted to go. I cried to my mother. She said it wasn't up to her, but eventually asked my sister if I could tag along. I don't even think my sister blinked, just said yes. She and her friends spent the night brushing my hair and tweezing my eyebrows

and painting my nails and didn't do anything mean like stick my hand in warm water, so I'd wet myself while I slept. I wish I could say I was ever so kind to my sister, but I'm not sure that's true.

My sister and I never had invisible friends, but we did have a ghost named Gwendolyn that haunted our living room. At least, that's the story we invented by manipulating the movements on our Ouija board. Gwendolyn was a young girl, like us. Let's say twelve. I don't remember the consequences of her death, but I'm sure they were tragic. Perhaps she drowned, because when I was a child—and even now—drowning seemed like the worst way to die. I still remember dreaming, as a three-year-old, that I was being chased down a wide beach by people who wanted to kill me. I saw my family crossing a bridge above me, and I called out to them, but they either didn't hear me or didn't care. I ran into quicksand, and as I sank down, the people chasing me moved in. I cried to one of them, Wait, I love you, and I think then he and I were drowned in the sand together. I'm not sure if that counts as being buried alive, but I think of it as synonymous with drowning, since the cause of death is a slow and agonizing loss of air.

I read a story once by Chuck Palahniuk in which the narrator recounts being stuck to the machine that cleaned the bottom of his swimming pool. The details of how the narrator came to be there are gruesome (so gruesome that people have passed out from hearing that part of the story read aloud), but the thing that disturbs me most is the idea of being just below the water's surface, unable to break through.

Anyway, we chose the name Gwendolyn for our ghost because I think my sister and I both thought it was elegant. Our parents had (still have) a grandfather clock in the living room that chimed every quarter hour. When our best friends of the bunk and