How the Desert Got Its Cactus

after Sandra Cisneros

Before you became a cactus, you were a seed; black and dainty. You were a field of possibility under a moonlit sky. You were the sky. You were the joint tucked behind the pretty boy's ears. The tattooed knuckles I longed to kiss. T. R. U. S. T. You were the soft tufts of fur in el viejo's ears. The lime juice covering pungent cloves of garlic auntie used to boil for maladies from earaches to the flu.

And when you learned sorrow, you were shaken, as though someone took a storm cloud and strung you up with it. Put it in your midday tea and let it simmer. You were bitter dandelion. You were messy. But we both are, so it's ok. Sometimes.

Baby told me a story about the armadillo. Painted a red summer on my cheek and told me to laugh, to take my medicine. You were Colfax. Home to the chin and the boot that left its mark. You were chicken bone and coyote. Left to lasso the mountains and died up there.

Flowers grow on your thick limbs. Crucifix of the desert. Transpire our dusty transgressions. Clay stained scripture pours out of you in place of rainfall. Goodness, gracious, amen.

Ashia Ajani

Ashia Ajani is a sunshower, a glass bead, a carnivorous plant, an overripe nectarine hailing from Denver, CO, Queen City of the Plains and the unceded territory of the Cheyenne, Ute, and Arapahoe peoples, now living in the Bay Area (unceded Ohlone land). Ajani is a lecturer in the AfAm Department at UC Berkeley and a climate resilient schools educator with Mycelium Youth Network. A BSF Award recipient, Ajani has received fellowships from Just Buffalo Literary Center, Tin House, The Watering Hole, UC Berkeley's P4P Climate Activism Residency and the Milkweed Hub Chrysalis Institute. Their words have appeared in Sierra, Atmos, World Literature Today, Apogee Journal & Frontier Poetry, among others. Ajani is co-poetry editor of the Hopper Literary Magazine and Fall 2023 Poet in Residence at SF Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD). Ajani's writing is a kaleidoscope of their work as an eco-griot and abolitionist. Their debut poetry collection, Heirloom (Write Bloody Publishing), is out now.

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