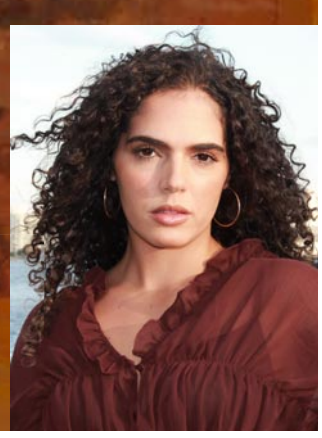
Once, While Disemboweling the Chicken

readying it for my lover's dinner, I remembered
my abuela slashing the rooster's throat. I was four.
Held the wet blade in my hand and cried. For days
the carcass hung like a cross over the red front door
until it shriveled and stunk, turned gray as dried petals.
Abuela said don't cry. She said be fearless & god-fearing
as any white man, so I became just like guajiros
carving the air with bright machetes.
At home, in school, in America, razors slept
in our socks like small slick moons and hydrangeas
bloomed despite the heat while I became a woman.
For twenties, my tíos chopped weeds with green machines
spinning big metal mouths filled with hot blades.
You must praise the Lord with your body, Abuela said.
You must give yourself over as santeros do, without doubt.
At every ceremony for Dios, I held the white cloth
in my hands like a soul. Abuela slashed the bird
like a man unbothered. I thought the trick to surviving
this country was to be good or beautiful
or merciless like its people, but choosing didn't matter—
soon I'd be pinned on a bed like an animal
while someone else's hunger made a sacrifice of me.
Of course I tried to fight him off, but Abuela's birds
taught me when your arms are pinned behind your back
there's no chance of breaking free. *Across the neck*,
she motioned, *like this*, as she slid the blade
and prayed and ate. How can I forget
the hen's throat now—her pulse ablaze with fear
as I combed her feathers neat, placed her gently
on the altar. *Mira Isa, you must kill the bird.*
This is how we speak with saints.
This is how we prove our worth.
The knife was light. Blood ran through my hands
like a storm. I shouldn't have been surprised;
it was easier than I thought—replacing fear
with numbness, cleaving the bird's breast in two.
Stilled, her wings bent back the way my wrists bent
when he cooed me quiet, squeezed my neck.
Hands warm and strong as a god's.

Isabella DeSendi



Isabella DeSendi is a Latina poet and educator whose work has been published in *Poetry, Poetry Northwest, The Adroit Journal, Rattle, Brink*, and others. Her chapbook *Through the New Body* won the Poetry Society of America's Chapbook Fellowship and was published in 2020. Most recently, she has received support from Poets & Writers, Brooklyn Poets, Storyknife, and Bread Loaf; and has been named a finalist for the *Rattle* $15,000 Poetry Prize, *Frontier Poetry*'s Digital Poetry Chapbook Prize, the June Jordan Fellowship, Narrative Magazine's Annual Poetry Prize, and Palette Poetry's Spotlight Award. Isabella holds an MFA from Columbia University, and is excited to announce that her debut book of poems *Someone Else's Hunger* is forthcoming from Four Way Books in 2025.

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