

Marina O'Callaghan

A Glass, Darkly

My mother says she can see my blood written all over my face.

Starting at about second grade, she has described me as being a visibly European girl in an American setting, mostly due to the way I dress myself, but also in part due to my features. I have a memory of a day in elementary school where I said I felt like I didn't fit it with my peers and she had me spend a while looking over her shoulder at her computer screen while scrolling through Google image search results for "American actresses" and "French actresses," all so she could make the point, "You aren't doing anything wrong, you're just different." She's always been attentive like that when something distresses me, she doesn't want me to feel overlooked.

She says the shape of my face is distinctly round and English, that it's like someone traced a pie plate and added ears. She says that the most American part of my face is my mouth, making me stand out amongst my relatives as the only one with lips. She says that, unlike herself or my father, I do have a hint of cheekbone that gives me a distinctly Slavic look, likely inherited by way of her father.¹ I look myself in the mirror and I don't particularly agree, but she must be on to something because on a few occasions I have introduced myself to people as "Marina" and seen their faces light up before asking me, "Are you Russian?" Usually, I smile and say, "Polish, actually."²

According to the eminently reputable site Forebears.io, the highest density of Marinas in the world is in Belarus, with one out of every seventy-one people there bearing the name. The highest overall number of Marinas is in Russia, with the 2014 figure clocking in at over 1.8

¹ "...and cheekbones that slashed high across her face" (John 4).

² "'Cuba,' he said. 'I'm from Cuba'" (García 47).

million. If one recognizes Abkhazia as a nation independent of Georgia, then that is the country in which Marina achieves the highest *rank*, as it is the ninth most popular name in the region. If one does *not* recognize Abkhazia, then the next highest rank the name attains in any sovereign state is number eleven, in the Italian enclave of San Marino, a fact which never fails to delight me. The very Slavic popularity of the name fits well with my face and ancestry; my maternal grandfather was born to a Polish immigrant family in Massachusetts before entering the Boston foster care system for reasons that have been lost to time. My name also has nothing to do with any of that, because my mother named me after an obscure Shakespeare character, apparently predestining me to be an English major.³

Thou art thy mother's glass, says the Bard's "Sonnet 3." I look myself in the mirror, and I don't know if I particularly agree, but everyone who knows my mother says I look like her.⁴ Then again, everyone who knows my father says I look like him.

My mother doesn't read any genealogy into my nose. It's been years since she's seen my father, and it's been long enough since a surgery in her twenties that she can't remember what her own nose used to look like, so I imagine she feels she lacks a frame of reference with which to compare mine.

In sixth grade, I was in a car accident that smashed my face up quite badly. On scale, it could have been much worse, but my initial stay in the emergency room was next to useless. They observed me for a few hours then let me go with no diagnosis or treatment for any of my extremely visible injuries. I don't remember any of the pain, but I have a very clear memory of

³ "That was one of those unknowns we never could figure out: whether he got his name from his grunting or if he had modeled his grunting on his name" (Glissant 41).

⁴ "*They say I have her eyes and her smile*" (Lahens 151).

the annoyance of having to ask permission to leave my hospital room so I could go to the bathroom and finally wash off all the blood myself. I had worn an outfit I really liked that day and no one would listen when I said I didn't want it to stain. I locked the door behind me and stuck my entire sleeve under the cold tap, completely ignoring my face for the moment. *Out, damned spot.*

When I was discharged, my mother was very proactive about getting me an appointment at a different hospital, and she was particularly concerned about making sure I went in to get my broken nose reset before a week had passed. She said that by then the bone would have healed too far and they would need to re-break it in order to fix it.

After that, the medical proceedings went very smoothly. The anesthetics and pain relievers the ENT doctor prescribed worked perfectly, the procedure itself took about fifteen minutes but felt like the blink of an eye to me, and I had some fun figuring out a way to tie my glasses to my hair so they wouldn't rest on the cast. Everyone who knows me says that, once healed, my face looked exactly like it had before. I look myself in the mirror, and I almost agree, but not quite. Right on the bridge of my nose, just below where my glasses sit, the bone is ever so slightly wider than it used to be.

Ever since the accident, I have been given to chronic nosebleeds, and it is *terribly* annoying to have a nosebleed in a dorm bathroom. People get very alarmed and feel like they should do something to help when all I really have to do is wait a few minutes and it will sort itself out. Sometimes, when I'm at home and can be sure of my privacy, I stop trying to stem the blood flow and just stand over the basin, watching my reflection drip. If I'm feeling particularly macabre and vampiric, I roll up my sleeves and drag my arms over my face from elbow to

fingertip, drenching my hands and forearms in vivid red. I look at my stained skin. *What, will these hands ne'er be clean?*

My mother was the youngest of four children, somehow conceived and birthed after my nana had left Catholicism and was on birth control, and she has no idea how many bones she broke before age ten. Several of her toes, a wrist, and her nose at least twice, maybe thrice. Her parents never seemed to notice, and they certainly never brought her to a doctor for any of those injuries. The only acknowledgement she got was chastisement for limping or comments about how much uglier her face had gotten. She laughs when she talks about it now, saying that the 60s were a different time and her parents could hardly be blamed. I remember how angry she was when she realized the ER doctors ignored me.

Every time she broke her nose it would heal itself more and more crookedly, so when she moved to the UK as an adult she finally took herself to the doctor to get it fixed. Since it had already healed years ago, the doctor had to break it again to reshape the bone manually before covering it up with a cast. This was done completely unanesthetized.

She was satisfied with the result she got once everything had knit back together. She says the doctor sculpted her nose into a perfectly inoffensive shape, but God only knows what it used to look like in 1967. She may once have had her father's grand Polish nose, but she will never know. It's not like anyone took photos of her.

I'm in my bathroom at home. I look at my face in the mirror, watching my Polish-Irish blood pouring over my American rosebud mouth and my round English chin. On a few occasions when I have introduced myself to people, my name and face have made a liar of me. A liar by omission, eliding a few steps of genealogical coincidence, but a liar nonetheless.

What's in a name?

My fingers drip with red and *all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand*.

The perfumes of Arabia, in this case, being silver nitrate, with which my ENT doctor made a valiant but ultimately ill-fated attempt to cauterize the artery in my nose.

I think about that elementary school memory of looking over my mother's shoulder at those search results, and if I flip the picture into negatives then I can see a little girl with a round face and no cheekbones trying not to cry as her parents demand she play tennis on broken toes. I think about all the ways that that girl, now grown, has told me I am beautiful, and how she reflexively insults herself whenever she catches her own reflection, as if anticipating that someone else will say it if she doesn't do it first. She tells me I am important and valuable and worthy of respect, and for her every act of love that has made me who I am, I can reverse the image through a looking glass and see the ghost of a child who is very much like myself except for a life defined by lack.

My mother says she can see my blood written all over my face.

I look myself in the mirror, and I agree.⁵

⁵ "When she turns her face to me, I see that the Lady has my face" (Llanos-Figueroa 316).

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