



4-1-2017

The Brand

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Recommended Citation

O, Chain (2017) "The Brand," *Calliope*: Vol. 48 , Article 9.

Available at: <http://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/calliope/vol48/iss1/9>

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THE BRAND

CHAIN O

Does it mean anything? they ask,
peering curiously at the brand on my right-side pelvis.
I wonder how to reply.

One answer is that it means nothing. This is true.

Another answer is, This is what they called me in Venice
and Rome,
in glass shops,
in churches,
on street corners,
California,
Sacramento,
San Jose.

That I've shielded lovers and friends with my body, with
my grasping hands, with umbrellas, from hurled stones
in a thousand languages,
learned to walk fast.

This story is also true.

They told me on television, late night
preaching specials,
or by forbidding their daughters to see me,
blocking my number from their phone.
I can't count the plotlines surrounding my trauma or
death, can't even count the angles from which
I am reflected.

The Internet is a beautiful place for witch trials,
but this sort of unsolicited harassment is not new. It has
been around for hundreds of years,
always in the form of White Cis Straight Male Gods
saying things like
Unnatural or
Abomination. I am a candidate for burning in several
dozen categories.
Funnily, the rapists always seem to get off fine.

I remember a childhood with summers spent at a
camp called Wolf Mountain,
and bonfires and bug spray and zip lines,
and reciting from the Bible. I kept mine, tried to read
it, struggling over clumsily formal words;
I never got to Leviticus. I set a story in a church once
and you asked me
if I had ever even been.

I thought of girls I've kissed in churches and the cathe-
drals I was chased out of in broken English. I said, not
very much.

I have a picture of myself being christened, and con-
fused recollections of Sunday School.

I don't remember when I gave it up. Maybe when I
realized they didn't want me.

It was before my friends did, I know that.
The weird dualism of youth group dances in a field of
yellow and blue yard signs paid for by the
Mormon church

on my neighbor's front lawn, who would clog our street
parking with their meetings and later
someone robbed their house but before they left, they
set it on fire.

Don't you know hate? I thought, and left a letter in their
mailbox after our first black president won and my state
gave up its rights. We get it, read the hand-penned
note,

You won. You don't have to rub it in.

The signs went down after that. I wonder if they knew
shame like I did.

In my Cultural Anthropology class they taught us about
the advent of marriage in ancient tribal nations and
people still argue that God invented matrimony, one
man one woman and that the rocks know the birth of
man happened in Africa,
but Adam and Eve were white.

Did you know they surgically mutilate infants at birth to
adhere to a binary not provided by nature but

abortion is a crime? I watch people tell me our society is advancing and read about the health clinics closing, about bathroom bills, it seems there are more gravestones to erect on November 20th, each year. I spent hours writing their names. I checked my university's YikYak stream and saw death threats getting the thumbs up.

I couldn't remember the names I've been called if I tried,
(monster)
(abomination)
(he-she-it)
or maybe I could and don't want to. But they all sound the same to me,
like a self-immolating priest, like a brother, like a congressman for roaring crowds,
like all the cuts on the wrists and hips of youth

who loved me.

It's all the same word, the same lie:

S I N N E R

but

I don't think I tell them this at all. Instead I say something cheeky;
it means what it sounds like. And I wear it so red it looks scarified when I commit, godless and treason, every sin they ever said I would burn for after death. Why wait?
Judgment need not delay for me; instead I burn, burn, burn,
so bright that I make them all stop and wonder: maybe I am divinity after all.