SQUARING THE DECK

MONICA ISABEL RESTREPO

I.

(20 points)

Before becoming the highest playing card in the deck, the ace was an *as*, bad luck, the side of the die with only one mark. Here's what I've learned: The ace both shields and exposes. The longer you hold on to it, the more potential upside, but also the bigger the risk. When I draw an ace, I keep it with me for the entire hand, even when it has no correlation with the rest of the cards I'm holding. Of course, not everyone plays the game this way.

Here's my first memory of decay: I am seven years old, safe inside the walls of my grandmother's purple-carpeted room in the small town of David, Panama – the forgotten town where my mother is from -- a place where the biggest thing that happened that decade was the opening of a McDonalds, a place where 90 degrees with 85% humidity is the coolest it ever gets. *Virginia is for lovers*: the wooden sign that hangs inside the door that shields us from the scorching heat. A small air-conditioning unit blasts the room with cold air, the only place in the house where this kind of luxury is permitted without pause. My grandmother, Maria Virginia, or Tita Tita as we call her, speaks in refrains and offers advice only to those who listen. She teaches me the tricks of Rummy 500, the card game we play all day and night, until even toothpicks can't prop our eyes open. Shuffling: the deck must be "squared" by creating two even piles and intertwining the cards

with the fingers, thumbs always in. Dealing: the cards must be distributed one a time in a clockwise motion. Risk: each card has its own value, making some cards more dangerous than others. "*Hay dos tipos de ganadores,*" she says, "*los que usan la cabeza, y los que tienen suerte.*" To win, I must either play smart or get lucky. I listen intently, cross-legged on the bed between her and my tubed-up grandfather, Chicho Chicho. After multiple brain hemorrhages, his body and mind are in a "barely there" state. Barely walking, barely hearing, barely swallowing, barely breathing. For Tita Tita and I, his heaving breaths are the natural background to our late night card games -- me, her, him, and, Don Francisco, the TV blaring loudly even in our sleep, every night a *Sabado Gigante.*

Here are the things I remember about my grandparents' house: The shiny brown marble Labrador dog statue that sits still and angry in the front entryway. The painting of a spiky orange-haired clown whose maniacal eyes follow me every night into my grandmother's bedroom. The shiny treasures in the bottom drawer of my grandmother's bathroom, each jewel carefully wrapped and sealed in tiny silk Chinese envelopes.
Tita Tita reveals her little trophies to me. She takes out an envelope. I hear the click! of a button, the zzzzip of a zipper, and then I see the brightness of a stone. Occasionally my grandmother repays my loyalty to her with a trinket. I always get more jewels than my sister, because my grandmother loves me the most.

When my grandfather dies, my mother goes to therapy. When my grandfather dies, I am in college, still unaware of myself. When my grandfather dies, I do not go to his funeral. My memory of him remains of a gentle man in decay, delicate and tubed-up, alive and barely breathing.

II.

(10 points)

The King of Hearts (dubbed "Charles" in the 15th century after emperor-conquering Charlemagne) is famously known as the "suicide king" in the Rouennais pattern of the card. However, there is more to this popular catch phrase than meets the eye. Card historians argue that the King of Hearts holds the sword *behind* his

head in preparation for attack, not *through* it as an act of suicide. Others interpret him as being on the defense: the King pulled out his sword and lifted it behind him to protect himself from an attacker. "Suicide king" remains the popular interpretation, even though historians have yet to find an adequate motive.

Here's my first memory of death: I am in the eighth grade when our classmate, Mariana, leaps from her bedroom window. The teachers tell us it's an accident, but we know better. We've seen those sunken eyes. During lunchtime, rumors swirl about a suicide note. Here's what I don't tell anyone: I want there to be a note. In English class, I sit and wonder what she may have written, compose a series of proposed suicide notes in my head. *Mom & Dad: It's not you, it's me. I'm sorry, but I can't bear to live.*

Now that I'm a mother, I wonder if it matters less *what* she wrote than *that* she wrote it. An attempt to communicate – the final act of compassion? To leave something tangible behind; something for a mother and a father to hold onto. Something to store in a damp box of mementos in an attic, or to glue permanently to the back of a picture and forever enclose in a frame. Words for a mother to use in her hunt for clues, symbols scrawled like Egyptian hieroglyphics on wood.

"*Da igual atras que en la espalda,*" Tita Tita would say. When the outcome is the same, what does it matter the intention?
Now and then, I picture Mariana sliding open her bedroom window. A breeze rustles her honey-colored hair. She closes those downcast eyes, the tips of her lashes reaching the amber circles under her eyes. She opens her arms, frees herself.

In the meantime, another classmate of mine is very much alive. Like me, Jason lives on the fringes of normality. Hair to his shoulders, chiseled jaw, skin the color of a milky latte, a nose with personality. Maybe he sees me as a kindred spirit, one that I am years from seeing for myself. Jason follows me around with a video camera and tries to convince me to join him in his quest for pleasure. *C'mon, M, let go. Explore the world!* Everything about Jason makes me uncomfortable: the voice consumed with passion, the way he subconsciously picks out words in his sentences to emphasize

and draw out. His clunky camera. When it watches me, my cheeks flush hot pink from horrific embarrassment.

What Jason doesn't understand is that, unlike him, I care what others think of me. I am a good girl. I should be loved. I'm smart enough to be class valedictorian, but not popular enough to be elected class president. Unlike Jason, who revels in his outsider status, I yearn to be accepted, to be normalized like the bell curve in my AP Mathematics class. While Jason makes videos, I neatly check the boxes in a list titled THE PERFECT DAUGHTER.

Jason goes on to make a living out of documenting experience. Today, his website describes him as a "media artist, futurist, keynote speaker, and TV personality." In one of his videos, Jason discusses the impermanence of beauty, explaining how moments of happiness can also lead us to feel devastating sadness.

My daughter and son have never been good sleepers. During the night, my husband and I hop back and forth between rooms; our bedroom, the baby's bedroom, the living room, back to our bedroom, my daughter's bedroom. There are nights when my son is soothed only by the smell of milk on my chest, nights when my daughter is reassured only by the touch of my hand on her salted cheek. It is during these long drawn out hours that sadness creeps up on me, when the house is too quiet, when the amber light of the moon glows through the windows. In this middle state, my mind travels to a time when my children will sleep through the night without calling my name, tucked into beds I have not made for them, hugging sheets I have not washed for them, reaching out for a body that's not my own.

"How do we respond to this?" Jason asks, emphasizing the *how* as I watch him on my computer screen, hair now neatly cropped. "Do we love harder? Do we squeeze tighter? Do we pretend not to care that everything and everyone we know is going to be taken away from us?"

III.

(50 points)

The Queen of Spades is a woman who rules her King, an individual who refuses to be reined in. Sometimes associated with intelligence and creativity, other times with sexuality, still other times with malice, the Queen of Spades represents the full extent of a woman's power. In the popular game of hearts, she is the most feared card in the deck. When she makes her appearance in Rummy 500, the Queen of Spades defines the path and outcome of every player's hand.

Here's my last memory of birth: It is six in the morning, and I am in the C-section delivery prep room of Baptist Hospital in Miami, Florida. A lightning bolt of contractions runs through my spine and thunders into my abdomen, the sting of a million fire ants running stomach to thighs. Unlike other kinds of pain I have experienced, I relish this one, hold onto it tight like the grip of my daughter's hand. "*De las gallinas no se ha escrito nada,*" I hear Tita Tita say. Nothing has been written about cowards.

A doctor walks through the see-through curtain that divides this 20-square-foot room from nurses who yell at laboring women like cattle ("Number 1 ready for prep in room 5!"). His eyes dart through the room, and I sense that he is out of his comfort zone, perhaps not used to seeing this much womanhood in the antechamber to extraction. I round my hips, bend my body, rest my elbows on the bed I refuse to lie on despite hospital protocol. My unwillingness to lie like Kafka's cockroach is offset by other physical constraints: a needle in my wrist tubed to a gelatinous IV bag, a plastic fetal heart monitor strapped to my stomach.

Although this is my first time meeting this man, I don't need to read the mint cursive letters on his robe to know that he is Dr. H, the doctor on call. He and I have engaged in heated exchanges over the phone ever since my water broke two days ago.

"Look," Dr. H says, "I don't know why or what Dr. I promised you, but here's the truth: we don't do vaginal births after C-section. Our whole practice would have to be present in the hospital, and that's just not possible.

Besides, a vBAC can go very wrong very fast. Trust me, I've been there. In that particular instance, the mother nearly died of a hemorrhage, and the baby, well, unfortunately the baby did not survive. M, let me ask you something: is this really what you want for your unborn son?"

Here's what I don't tell Dr. H: I am not just any old card in a deck. I will not believe every word you say just because you have a medical degree and a mint-laced robe. I have done my research. I know that the knifing you advocate is riskier than the natural birth I've prepared months for my son to have.

Here's what my doctor promised me two months ago: "you're a good candidate for a vBAC, M." Here's what he said two weeks ago, when he inserted his oversized finger into my vagina: "your cervix is softening, this is good news, you're making progress!" Here's what he said over the phone last night: "You need to go to the hospital. Don't worry, you will be safe. I'll be there soon."

Nine hours after his last promise, Dr. I walks into the room. A typically confident man, today he looks small; the bags under his eyes more dense, the leathered skin on his face more worn. It is clear to me from his hunched-over shoulders that this story will not have the heroic ending I had hoped. Dr. I places a heavy, apologetic hand on my exposed thigh and stumbles to the contraction-monitoring machine. I brace myself for the sentencing.

"You're not making enough progress," he says, eyes shifting as he pretends to study the waves on the page with mathematic precision.

There go my efforts at making the needle move, I think. *There goes the hard-earned oxytocin, nine hours rubbing my pink-fleshed nipples raw.*

"I've been having strong contractions for seven hours," I say, head stiff as an icebox. "Aren't you even going to check how much I've dilated?"

"The contractions are not consistent enough."

"Why," I ask, "Why did you lie to me? Why did you ever tell me that I could have a natural birth?"

"Because you wouldn't take no for an answer," he says. His eyes are calm and still, as if relieved. Truth floods out of him. "You were obsessed with this birth, M. I told you what you wanted to hear because you wouldn't

take no for an answer."

The nurses in the wing grow quiet. Today they learn the nasty tricks of the game in which they are complicit.

Here's what comes next: The Queen of Spades is given five minutes to regroup. She is escorted into the operating room. Sedated, laid down, her legs spread open like a dead frog in biology class. A clean, sharp scalpel pierces her hard belly. Space is created inside her. Organs are shifted.

At 7:11, the Queen of Spades gives birth to a beautiful baby boy. The nurses bring the healthy baby to the heat lamp on her left and hold him up for her to see. *He looks just like my daughter,* she thinks, but this isn't the image that prevails. The picture she will never get out of her head is of the man to her right: his crude, triumphant upward turn of the lips. For years, Dr. H's visage of victory will serve as a harrowing reminder.

The Queen of Spades is an outcast. The Queen of Spades is powerless. A frenetic wheel, spinning in the mud.

IV.

(10 points)

In the French deck, the Jack of Hearts represents Étienne de Vignolles, a military commander who fought side-by-side with Joan of Arc in the Hundred Years' War. His nickname, "La Hire," was either assigned by the English as a term "God's wrath" or given to him by the French from the term for hedgehog. Étienne is said to have had a choleric disposition. Today, the phrase "la hire" continues to signify the sentiment of easily being angered.

Here's my first memory of self: It is the summer after sophomore year of college, and my family and I are visiting Spain. During a warm afternoon in the cool hallways of Madrid's El Padro museum, I fall in love with the work of Roy Lichtenstein, whose art is featured in a special exhibition. There's something that draws me to the conflicted women in his posters: their exposed, apologetic femininity, their hunger for self. Throughout the remainder of the tour, I glaze over the Vasquez and Goyas, thinking instead

about how I will convince my mother to buy me a Lichtenstein reprint.

As soon as we enter the gift shop, I go for the jugular.

"Mami, I'd like to buy one of these posters," I say, pointing to the rack of colorful posters, "to hang in my room."

My mother, who thinks it's a big waste to spend money in gift shops, eyes me suspiciously.

"It will be a memento from this trip," I add.

My plea strikes a chord. However, as usually happens when I bend my mother's will, her "yes" comes with fine print. I've only browsed a couple of posters when she points to one at her end of the rack.

My mother will buy me a Lichtenstein, but I will not have the right to choose it.

"Here it is," she says, pointing to the dotted image of a blond, blue-eyed, red-lipped girl sitting naked in front of a vanity, gazing emptily into the mirror.

Somewhat blindly, I take the poster with me to the various apartments I inhabit, not thinking too much about what it conveys. I don't think about Tita Tita's refrain: "Cada uno sabe donde amarra su caballo." Better to know the company you keep.

Here's what I don't ask myself: why can I only see the girl's face through her reflection in the mirror? Why the red dots on her cheek? Is she blushing? Is somebody watching? Has a precious moment of intimacy been transformed into a performance?

It is only eight years later, once I marry – and my husband questions the choice – when I begin to think about what the image means. Was I supposed to be that girl, I wonder, the one absorbed in the mirror's reflection? To define oneself through the lens of others – is this the way I've been taught to live?

V.

(20 points)

When it comes to the Ace of Spades, the truth is in the eye of the beholder. A symbol of war in the Tarot and a tool used to dig graves in the literal sense of the word, the spade has

long been associated with death. And yet, despite its deep connections to the dark side, history has offered the Ace of Spades new meaning. In the Second World War, helmets marked with the spade were seen as signifying good luck. In the Vietnam War, the Ace of Spades was a morale-booster for American soldiers who often carried the "Death Card" inside their helmets and used it to cover the eyes of enemy soldiers killed in battle, a tactic they believed helped ward off the Vietnamese.

Here's my last memory of rebirth: My husband and I have been married for seven years. We have a daughter and we have a home, which we decorate with the paintings and posters we've collected throughout our lives, together and apart. The Lichtenstein is stored in the garage.

My mother presents us with another gift to hang. After a 20-year hiatus, she's started to paint again, and we have the honor of owning the first-ever "Loli," her self-donned grandmother nickname. Too modest to sign the front of the painting, she scribbles "Loli" on the back along with the painting's title: "Desilución." Spanish for disillusionment.

That afternoon, I see my daughter standing in front of the painting with her chin pointed upwards and a face so perplexed that her two eyebrows are almost touching.

"The girl is sad," she says, shifting her head back and forth between the painting and me. "Why is she sad?"

Disillusionment stares back at us. A lavender-clad ballerina sits by a set of dark steps, her tutu perfectly plush, her toes perfectly en pointe. Her unpinned brown hair pours over her lanky arms, where her head is buried. Although we cannot see her face, we know that she is weeping.

That night, my husband and I discuss moving the painting to a more discrete location.

I am eight months pregnant with my son when my parents travel to Europe. They return to their home in Panama seven days before the birth. My father calls.

"Your mother had a lot of pain in her leg during our trip." he says, "She was practically on meds the whole time. They did an MRI yesterday and discovered a spinal cyst…and…a small tumor. We don't know what it is yet. They have to do more tests. I'm sorry, hijita, but she won't get to Miami in time for the birth."

My son is three months old when three surgeons at John Hopkins Hospital pierce through my mother's back. They scrape away two cysts clung to bone and remove a small tumor. Because her spine has suffered trauma, they decide to perform a lumbar fusion.

"Your mother is very lucky," my father says after the operation. "The cysts are common, but the tumor is rare and almost impossible to discover until it's too late. The pain from the cysts is the reason we discovered it. Otherwise, in ten years' time, it would have wrapped itself around her spine. By the time she'd started to notice anything, it would have already begun to cripple her."

Today, Disillusionment is the first thing you see when you walk into our home. My husband and I moved it to the front entrance because it's the area least frequented by the children. At least that's what we tell ourselves.

"*El que pega primero pega por delante*," Tita Tita used to say. The first to hit strikes hardest.

When my mother comes to visit, she stands in front of the ballerina, pointing out its imperfections.

"I should really bring my brush next time," she says. "That way I can finally fix this hand. The angle is all wrong."

When she leaves, I take her place in front of the painting. My chest fills with heat, and my hands grow cold. I caress the ballerina's disheveled hair, the only part of her that's exposed.

Am I my mother's ballerina?

Other days, I glance at the painting and all I see oil on canvas, a blur

of lavender as faded as the memory of the maniacal clown on my grandmother's wall. Other days, the ballerina is as far detached from reality as the tumor that almost crippled my mother.

Today, Disillusionment is my Ace of Spades: a will to live, or, the door at which death knocks. It is my grandfather's heaving breaths, cold breeze flowing through open window. It is a fake suicide note, an embarrassing home video. It is waves on paper, scalpel on skin. It is the subconscious strokes of a soiled brush. Today, Disillusionment is a chance to reshuffle: good fortune brought by broken mirror.