Dadaism with a Blood Orange

Ella G. Bundy

Blood orange: a shade of orange linked to vitality, creativity, and the potential and desire for new beginnings. See also: raw material effortlessly transformed into art.

It's rotten. Petrified, really. The single remaining orange balances delicately over the moss-green bars of the food service shelves. It is a husk of its former self, skin wrinkled and collapsing, flesh turned hard and porous to the touch. Once an ample sphere laden with juice, now a solid hunk of clay left abandoned by a wandering artist.

Wren's mother had always loved oranges. Her youthful hands, smooth and unburdened, had prepared the fruits with painstaking care, separating peel from bounty with impeccable precision. Now, though, Wren grabs the orange with a gloved hand and tosses it into the trash bag at her feet. It hits the bottom with a thud. She tips her head, a fall of onyx hair sliding across tanned skin as her eyes lock on where it landed.

Throughout her childhood, each weekend spent at Mama's had been painted with the scent of oranges. She and her brother would sit out on the front steps, squishing clover mites into red smears on the concrete, while the wafting scent of Sicilian whole orange cake escaped from the screen door behind them. Falling leaves cascading over crinkling grass, chapped lips, stained fingers. Childish jostling, fierce competition, a race to reach the kitchen table first. How many times had she shoved her brother, Henry, launching with her sticky hands open in supplication for the first taste of dessert?

Mama always said that oranges were "little hearts," guarded but sweet. Wren feels like hers is the one at the bottom of the bag, heavy and cold.

The trembling in her bones is enough to break her reverie, her attention returning to the present. The kitchen's cooler hums

around her, frost clinging to the edges of the shelves as she rubs them clean. Her cloth–pink, thick–comes back draped in a cloak of dust, collected like a fur lining. Her reflection shows in the iron bars of the shelf's edges. Keychains dangling from the yellow belt at her hips, miniature stuffed elephant hanging from a carabiner, hair held back by a tropical bandana.

"Wren, you in here?"

She turns right as the heavy cooler door swings open, Jayce standing with his hip against the entryway. "Hey," she says, lowering her cloth. "Good Monday morning. How'd unloading the truck go?"

Jayce sucks his teeth. "What truck?"

Wren's brows furrow ever-so-slightly. "What truck…?" she repeats.

"Hasn't shown up yet," Jayce says. He steps into the cooler, red-gold hair trapped beneath a dark hair net as his head dips, and he peers into her trash bag. "You making a half-frozen fruit salad, hm?"

"I was trying to get rid of the bad produce to make room for the truck," Wren says. She heaves her cloth down at her soap bucket with more force than necessary, a collage of bubbles spurting into the air. For a brief moment, they look sparkling and magical. In the next moment, they are gone. "I'll give it another few minutes and then call and see what's going on," Wren says. She puts her hands on her hips, squeezing her eyes shut. "Ugh."

"If it's any consolation, it's supposed to be one of our busiest days all season," Jayce chirps. She opens her eyes to find him scratching a bit of mold off of one of the shelves, inspecting the build-up beneath his nail. "And we have nothing to serve!"

Her smile is strained as she brushes past him, knocking shoulders. "Shut up."

The cooler door is frigid beneath her fingertips as she pushes it open, holding it with her elbow as Jayce brushes past. The kitchen is large and warm, with a row of ovens in the back and sinks on either side. A prep station lies on either end of the space, one for cold foods and one for hot. The sound of fans whirring, the humidity seeping from the oven set to *steam*, and the ever-present reek of fryer oil is enough to loosen some of the tension from Wren's shoulders.

"I can call if you want me to," Jayce says from behind her. "Since you've been dealing with… you know. *Do* you want me to call?"

"No," Wren says. "Yes. No. Yes."

"Yes?"

"No." She rubs at her forehead for a minute, grimacing. "No, I'm the manager so I'm the one who should do it."

Jayce nods and drifts off, opening ovens to check their contents. Wren excuses herself and walks back to the office, kicking the door shut behind her. It's a stuffy thing, the office. Three desks crammed together against one wall, a towering array of shelf space behind them. Staplers and pens and dry-erase markers, paper-cutters and thermometers and mounds of missing-punch forms. Wren slings herself into her chair, bones releasing relieved sighs as her body relaxes into the leather.

Her desk is cluttered. A souvenir shot glass from Florida shaped like a pair of barely-clothed tits, a stuffed polar bear wearing Hufflepuff robes, a crocheted frog with buttons for eyes named Dostoevsky. She pushes the amphibian author aside and reaches for the phone, typing in the extension.

Right as a voice picks up, Jayce opens the door to the office.

"Truck's here."

Wren drops the phone and gets to her feet, tucking the riot-

ous curls at her nape into the collar of her polo. “Okay. Unload it as quickly as you can so we can get some food prepped before opening.”

She heads back to the cooler and finishes dusting and de-molding the shelves, carrying her now-faded pink cloth and soap bucket out to one of the kitchen countertops. She sets it down alongside the cardboard boxes of produce brought from the truck. Fresh arcadia lettuce, grape tomatoes, cucumbers, red onions. And various fruits.

“Mornin,’ Wren.” The voice is sharp, too loud for the wavering morning air. Wren winces as she turns to find Sharon in the doorway to the kitchen, all thirty-two of the old woman’s teeth bared as she fights to get her hair pulled back into her claw clip. Her apron is tied so tight that it seems she is split into two, body billowing over the top of the fabric. Sharon’s piercing silver eyes land on the boxes, and she groans, cheeks already flushed and eyebrows drawn together. “I can’t prep all this shit alone. Rick went and screwed up the schedule again so we’re short-staffed. I’m sure you noticed.”

“Rick has a lot on his plate as co-manager,” Wren says, wringing her hands as she steps forward. She bites her lip as Sharon grabs a clipboard and pen, ready to begin narrating her complaints. “Sometimes scheduling gets me a bit miffed, but it happens. Today will be a good day.”

Sharon ignores her. “Where’s Jayce? He should be here. Another no call, no show, maybe. Anyone under thirty should just be immediately overlooked during the interview process.”

“Hey Sharon,” Jayce sing-songs as he enters the kitchen, the veins in his forearms near-bursting as he heaves a box onto the countertop. From the heavy clang that fills the air, Wren can assume that whatever is inside is frozen.

Sharon ignores him, too. “Wren, can you put your manager stuff on hold and help me prep some of the salads? We’re supposed to have a blood orange and burrata one today. Coriander seeds? I

think coriander seeds, too. I don't know where we keep those. Feels like we're just trying to find random shit and make it useful."

Wren glances down at the stuffed elephant attached to her belt. "Random shit can be fun."

"No," Sharon says. She scratches furiously on the clipboard.

"Waste of time, if you ask me."

"She didn't," Jayce says.

Wren coughs into her elbow to hide her grin and then reaches for one of the boxes, pulling an X-acto knife from her pocket and slicing through the tape. She pulls it open, revealing the various oranges cradled inside.

Dadaism: an art form that focuses more on spontaneity, chance, and everyday objects than on order and logic. For example: blood and orange juice in the sink.

Mama ended up obsessed with the mandarin cups in the nursing home, dull nails struggling to peel up the plastic at the edges. Wren had wiped tears as her brother Henry lifted forkful after forkful of slimy fruit to a greedy mouth. In her last days, Mama had insisted on covering her lips with layers of color, sometimes magenta or pink or red or once, a hideous purple color that reminded Wren of a bruise. She was beautiful, skin still untouched by wrinkles and hair still unkempt and dark. Frizzy curls framing a cherubic face.

Even when she didn't remember their names, Mama remembered oranges. She'd request a cup of them with every meal, and oftentimes the attendants would tell Wren that it's all she'd eat. Day in, day out. Oranges. Mama would talk about the orange cakes on clover mite days, about orange parfaits battling the heat of Paris streets, about orange chicken from the Chinese restaurant they'd gone to for Wren's graduation and the orange and avocado salsa she used to make every year as a New Year's Eve dish.

Now, Wren lifts one of the fruits from the box, her fingers careful as she twists it in her grip, eyeing the bright flesh. When she'd been six and recovering from a tonsil removal, every food tasted like sparklers were being lit against the inside of her throat. But then Mama brought an orange sherbet she promised would make all pain go away, and it did.

"We should sell orange sherbet," she says out loud.

Sharon ignores her. Jayce isn't around.

She sighs and picks through the oranges, swallowing past the sudden thickness in her throat as she brings an armful of fruits to one of the sinks. She twists the dial on the antimicrobial fluid and watches it splash over the oranges, seafoam green cascading over gamboge peels. The colors seem radiant, brought to life under the fluorescents.

"Are you going to stare at them all day or actually help with the salad prep?" Sharon's voice is grating, grinding down Wren's spine like two serrated blades drawn against one another.

Wren shuts off the antimicrobial fluid. "I'm still your manager, you know," she says as she snatches a paper towel and begins to briskly dry the fruit. "Even if I'm helping you."

"Are you?"

Are you? Wren had asked the same question to the nurses and doctors only months ago. *Are you helping her*? A woman of only forty-seven years shouldn't be forgetting her place in a movie, let alone her name or the faces of her children. The early onset dementia had been the crack in the foundation of Mama's marriage–a husband who didn't want to risk the possible danger of a forgetful woman, a mother determined to stay present for her kids. *Are you helping*?

Childish jostling, fierce competition, a race to reach the kitchen table. How many times had Wren shoved Henry to the ground only to find the table empty? Mama sitting at her desk, fid-

dling with the mouse in front of her computer, eyes glassy? Smoke rising from the oven. Burnt orange filling the air. Henry crying fat tears when he realized there was no dessert.

Wren brings the oranges over to a cutting board and lifts one of the heavy knives from its place, magnetically attached to the pristine white wall. She pierces the orange with ease, the citrusy scent immediately overtaking any lingering hint of charred ruminations.

"I'm gonna go take my break," Jayce says. He'd appeared beside her when she'd been reminiscing.

She jolts slightly, the keys at her belt jangling. "Okay. Thank you for your help so far."

"No prob. I'm going to avoid the wicked witch and go the long way to the break room," Jayce says, eyes gliding over to where Sharon is bent in front of one of the cabinets, grumbling as she inspects the contents. "Need anything while I'm gone?"

"Carissa should be here soon and then we'll have double management," Wren says. "I've got it until then. Go on break!"

"Consider me broken!"

She forces a chuckle as he disappears, continuing to slice the oranges. They separate easily, falling into chunks that she swipes to the edge of the cutting board, refusing to lose her rhythm.

Chop, chop, chop.

The first time Mama forgot who Wren was, it was when she came to visit the nursing home with a painting tucked beneath her arm. Art school was taking nearly all her time, but Mama was more important than any assignment. So she brought in her paints and set up to work on her still life–oranges. Mandarin orange cups on the edge of a rectangular bed tray, plastic peeled back and juice clinging thickly to the sides. Segments of the cup like segments of the fruit.

Chop, chop, chop.

Chop.

Chop.

Chop.

"Fuck," Wren hisses. Then: "Shit, I didn't mean to curse."

She drops the knife and pulls her glove off, inspecting the sliced flesh of her pointer finger. A narrow strip has been cut clean off, weeping flesh already welling up with crimson tears. She groans and turns on the faucet, extending her hand towards it.

The blood drips down onto a dirty cutting board left by last night's closers and Wren pauses. Scarlet liquid pouring over a sandpaper surface. The color is bright, vibrant. She swallows and bends down, dragging a fingertip through the blood diluted by the water stream.

Then she moves the cutting board out of the water, her blood dripping down it. Her nail seems to glide through it as she uses the blood like paint, curving it into the arch of a jawbone.

Mama forgot most things. Names, places, people. She never forgot the oranges. She also never forgot that Wren loves art.

On the day before she forgot forever, she watched from propped in her bed as Wren mindlessly traced patterns on her denim-clad thigh. The cooking channel buzzed monotonously above her head—she'd thought Mama was asleep. But she wasn't. Instead, she cleared her throat and pulled a coloring book from behind her pillow.

For you, Mama had said. *I don't quite remember who you are right now, but I've been keeping this for you.*

Now Wren sketches the silhouette of her mother's sleeping face in the cutting board blood. She holds her hand low, squeezes her skin and milks the blood from her finger until it rains down over her canvas. Her work is crude, elementary. Eyes, nose, lips. Cheek-

bones. The curve of a neck. The slope of two shoulders. A cascade of water-thinned, blood-drawn hair.

Wren's eyes prick. She leans back to admire her artwork. Mama stares back at her, tranquil, the dirt from the cutting board all washed back so the clean space surrounds her head like the iconographic halo of a saint.

The oranges lie forgotten. In the sink, her mother is alive.

"Wren!" Carissa materializes from nowhere, peering down at the flesh wound on Wren's finger. Her messy brown hair is pulled back into a haphazard bun, her work clothes absent and her leopard-print parka still zipped up. It's clear she was just checking on everyone, not yet having settled in. "You're hurt," Carissa says. She turns the sink pressure up without looking, washing all of the blood away.

"No," Wren says, watching the evidence of her grief swirl the drain before disappearing into its depths. The scent of citrus stings her nose. "No, I think I'm healing."

"I don't think that's how quick that works," Carissa replies, her back already turned. Sharon is striding towards them with a clipboard and purpose, and Clarissa's small shoulders square up like a soldier preparing for battle.

Wren looks back to the oranges sitting beside the sink. She might get back to painting today. She might bake a cake to bring to a mom who doesn't know her name. She might even send a piece over to Henry's–if she remembers to.