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## CONDITIONS: TWO

— Response by Shawn(ta) Smith-Cruz

### A Kind of Wistfulness: Reflecting on my Saturn Return

At twenty-seven years old, I began having periodic dreams of my belly gravitating from my center, or ripped open, or growing, or shrinking. My mother would be nearby, but stationary at my doorway, drowning in her own tears of disappointment, the moisture pulling her down like lava-quicksand, her arms reaching to my large or ripped or absent belly, the sound of a wailing newborn, the world growing dark around me. Sometimes there were flames. I'd wake retching in fetal position, cradling my center, panting, or grabbing my pillow to prevent a great fall. It was the first time I felt an intense emptiness, the presence of an absence. I learned later that these dreams happened most often during ovulation. Otherwise, I'd wake to the baby's cries, which stopped short once I looked down at the blood-soiled sheets.

One autumn evening at the slowdown of a Brooklyn Black-dyke-dinner-party, prompted by the loud gurgling sound of suds absorbed by the kitchen sink's drain, I shared my dreams with the few women left standing. "Oh girl, you're twenty-seven! You're entering your Saturn Return, that's all," the host soothed, then handed me a book. Apparently, these would be the most tumultuous years of my life until I hit thirty or thirty-one, but by thirty-two, it would all plateau. I became obsessed with the Saturn Return: started a blog (HerSaturnReturns.com), interviewed queer women of color turning thirty, wrote *Saturnistas: The Play*, and broke up with my girlfriend to marry my best friend, determined to have a child with someone I could trust.

The book placed in my hands during the dinner party was *Conditions: Five / The Black Women's Issue*. *Conditions* became a common reading of mine. The spine would jump out at me at LHA events, during lesbian-feminist house-sits, at dinner parties, or as the bookshelf banter of first dates. I learned that the text came at a time of both sparsity and new energy in lesbian publishing. By nature of its community-focused distribution and publication strategies, *Conditions* became a catalyst, or lifeline, or game changer for so many lesbians in their late twenties/early thirties (Saturn) experiences. I cannot resist but mention that when I was twenty-seven (in 2010), *Conditions: Five* would have been completing its Saturn Return at its thirty-one-year anniversary.

Yet, ten years after my intro to *Five*, I surveyed *Conditions: Two* for the first time for this special issue of *Sinister Wisdom*. It was easy for me to be reflective while reading. By its very existence it seems the community chose this journal to continue. The issue itself was about choice-making. The very nature of this being the second issue led my first response to *Two* to be subtle, suspending me in a kind of wistfulness. I was reminded of my Saturn choices as responses to tumult, but also for how they bound me to community, and the relationships I built. Each contribution sparked a memory from my Saturn journey.

The issue begins with Patricia Jones's "Mi Chinita Poem," which led me to recall my marriage. Jones's reference to her Cubana heritage within a foreign city landscape reminded me of my best friend and wife, Jaz, who is forever a Puerto Rican powerhouse riding the train from da Bronx. Jaz, whom I met when I was seventeen, was my rock for a solid ten years before I proposed. Jones begins her piece referencing the distances that being a part of a non-normative culture may lead to, that "the real american does not know what flan is" (7). I likely married Jaz because her cousin makes flan, and I knew that our daughter would know what flan is. She had it at three years old, and now

she still calls it cheesecake and thinks that it is a side that comes with pizza takeout.

Susan Kronenberg's "Seriphos" reminds me in her first line that "I was the foreigner" (13). Her piece led me to the moments spent with my actual real-life Brooklyn friends, Alexis and Zahra, neither of whom ever met each other, but it time was Kronenberg's 1975 acknowledgement of being someone "with no friends or relatives to see me off" (13), especially after I left Brooklyn to another state entirely, that I knew the friendships that I would take with me.

Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" reminded me of the tumult caused by aiming to merge my personal life with my professional. Her inclination toward pointing out that "I do not know where to begin" (25) represented the feeling at the center of my overcompensation in modeling Black lesbians and "the pain of their absence" (26). Often, the answer was extreme: either hyper-formality or performance art. This duality of existence led me to Michelle, my doppelganger who became a close friend and lover (I actually don't think that we look alike—but who decides?). In reading Smith, I see now that Michelle and I were like Sula and Nel in that my denial of the kind of love we shared was akin to the denial of my undergrad Black women's literature professor who practically failed me for implying a lesbian relationship in Morrison's text. Michelle was my *girl, girl, girl* and it wasn't until she found love elsewhere that I realized the kind of love she was open to sharing with me. That silence between Michelle and I, the inability of me to articulate our truth, is what broke us. That silence is present in Smith's essay. It is this loud silence, the presence of absence, that I find in common with Black lesbians—an inability to remark on emotion that centers our *own* hearts, leaning instead to the politicos. Our relationship was "inherently lesbian" (39), yes, I see that now, but I would go further to say that it was inherently Black lesbian, despite it not being that at all.

Speaking of silences, Elly Bulkin's "An interview with Adrienne Rich Part II" begins with, "You keep getting back to the silence

about loving women" (53). It took years of monthly meetings with my Black lesbian writing group of three, my two comrades Tara and Olivia and me, before I realized how deeply I loved them both. We recited each other's work out loud and embraced Rich's dream of a common language. "It was the power of the poem" (53) in Olivia's Brooklyn flat that brought me whole at her kitchen table, where we lavishly poured wine and smoked cigarettes past the curtain and instigated "the fact that there's no language to pull out, in some way" (56) that could ever describe a friendship like ours. Years later I would stand before Tara and Olivia's friends and family, my six-month-old in front-row in Jaz's arms, officiating them as partners for life. That night we danced and danced, and Olivia whispered in my ear, under the strength of the music, that she was finally pregnant.

At some point, I did end up leaving Brooklyn during my Saturn; I moved to the Bronx, which is still in NYC, but for us New Yorkers, it may as well have been across the Atlantic. I grew nostalgic for Brooklyn. Forgetting my brother's or cousin's murder from gun violence, instead I replayed moments of lesbian love. Melanie Kaye's "Amazons" resurrected the unending image of Brooklyn dykes as "they came astride grey horses dappled with sun" (67). One girlfriend of mine, Arianne, was quite Amazonian. Her love will forever be a gif on loop of an opening palm revealing the head of a stemless pink peony, pushing its center to my nose.

My post-Saturn choices led me to Connecticut, a commuter state that leans on New York City. And the reasons that brought me here are what had me anchored to Irena Klepfisz's "Women Without Children/Women Without Families/Women Alone." Isn't it true that at "the center of my bleakest fantasy is the shopping-bag lady" (72)? When recalling the many relationships that have curated my movements, there are that, like Klepfisz, both paralyzed me and led me forward: my mother and my daughter—for their love and estrangement.

I should say that there is nothing glamorous about mothering. It was the ancestral pull that led me to want to be pregnant, but the child-raising is isolating, fear-filled, and relates to nothing I've ever known. The lesbian community, for all of its poetry and community-building and talk of love, does not prepare you for C-sections, nursing, and worse, the lifetime of detachment. There was nothing in lesbian-feminist writing that discussed the true trauma of weaning, the ripping away of a child, or that mothering is actually the measured art of slow separation—myself from community, and my daughter and me from each other.

Or, I should say, there was nothing alluding to this in my reading until now.

Georgette Cerrutti's "Between Mother and Me" made the case so clearly that "I have lost a lot of it but" (86) my mother has more loss than me. One of my earliest memories of my mom, "when I was twelve" (87), we rushed out of the car from my dad's Ethiopian Orthodox church, and instead of the usual "we're home" yell across the house, we walked in slowly. My dad, with his pointer finger to his lips, used his toes to enter silently, and we mimicked. From the back room came the sound of a voice singing a Diana Ross ballad, and there she was, back-flat on a bed, eyes closed, headphones, tape deck, feet tapping, arms pressuring the air, the most free I'd ever seen her, our giggles "not loud enough" (88). My dad finally approached, yelling, "Judy, you can sing!" My mom nearly fell off the bed. She stopped singing. We stopped laughing. "Even now I am afraid of a certain quiet" (88).

It is the fear of the shopping-bag lady—becoming despised and useless to society, someone "on a subway . . . oblivious to the other people in the car, while an invisible circle seems to form around her. No one will come near her, no one will sit close to her, no one will risk being touched by her" (73). That fictional image Klepfisz was able to capture was likely at the center of my Saturn tumult. The woman I dared not become was wrapped in the timeline of needing to do something before I was too old, and knowing that

there could be no happy accidents. It all had to be planned—a donor sought, infertility coverage secured, ovulation tracked, papers signed. The choice to wed my best friend and conceive was the answer to my dreams, a flight away from the flames, and a call to the voice of a crying child who was waiting for me to birth her.

Now at thirty-seven my daughter is here, though the community has gone, replaced with mostly memories, and a feeling: akin to a kind of wistfulness.

**Shawn(ta) Smith-Cruz** co-edited the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) and MichFest issues of *Sinister Wisdom*. She is a librarian, writer, mother, daughter, and granddaughter to Garifuna and Jamaican women. A volunteer co-coordinator at LHA, she is a recipient of the 2020 WGSS Award for Significant Achievement in Women's & Gender Studies in Librarianship from the Association of College and Research Libraries, and a 2020 nominee for the Pushcart Prize for "What the Trees Said" in *Sinister Wisdom 118*. Shawn teaches graduate library students at Pratt School of Information, is the Associate Dean for Teaching, Learning, and Engagement at NYU Division of Libraries, and wishes she had more time to write lesbian fiction and play hide-and-seek with her little miracle, Joey.