

Demethylation

“FKB25,” the geneticist in bed next to me, says.

I have asked him the name of the gene he had been reading about, one that is said to pass down trauma, intergenerationally, even to offspring who did not witness or endure any. I can feel his flexible, Argentine toes clamp down around mine, his long arm—the one that peeks out of the end of his lab coat—arcs above his otherwise still body and comes towards me and my very unstill body, and his hand opens—the hand that spends its days in a self-assembling peptide scaffolding gel, one that can be injected into the body to regenerate tissue and bone, nerves and the myocardium—and grabs onto the underside of my waist. His touch disturbs me, but I allow it because I am grateful to him for other things. He understands what I mean when I tell him I can feel this demethylated gene inside me—this FKB25—something that I have that doesn’t accord with the experiences I’ve lived—a blueprint for a way of looking at the world that was based on escaping the Holocaust and having a neurotic mother. He tells me that this is what human existence is, learning to turn off codes based on life circumstances that are no longer relevant—a totalizing fear of loss, light sensitivity, a tail. It’s a feedback loop, he says, you have to tell your genes they aren’t helpful any more, coax them into shutting off for you, or else they convince you of what life is, instead of the opposite. I squeeze his hand and press the back of my body into the front of his and ask if we can put this gene in his peptide gel, or, even better, inject the gel into my sequence. He says we could, “Bichita,”—this is what he calls me, little bug, because he says I am a creature that can’t

drop the body—“but then you wouldn’t have a reason to go to England. Then you wouldn’t have a book to write anymore.”

My grandmother makes her usual clanging over the monitor, sounds of trying to escape her hospital bed, jostling its aluminum rails, sighs of exasperation, and the disoriented repetition of “Who did this to me? Where am I?” I worry that I will have to get up again and soothe her, that there will be another diaper mess, a worse one that will take hours to clean. I rest my head on his chest, allowing my limbs to release their weight down onto him, because I think that’s what he wants, and because I am trying, in the space between moments, to disappear up out of my grandmother’s house and into his hollow of rib.

He touches my hair and says it again, “Bichita, Oh Bichita.” He wants my body, the creature that I am, and I want his brain, the labyrinthine, Porteño associations that unfurl an invisible world on the border between sense and nonsense, that he somehow makes real in Petri dishes and so too, there in the bed, with talk of reversing my anachronistic FKB25.

Not Me

“Is this dying?” my grandmother said.

“I think this is living,” I said.

“Are you sure, dear?” she said.

I reached down to touch her right ankle—swollen because of congestive failure, because of more salt than her tired heart could metabolize—which extended out over the

edge of the daybed. Her left side was closer to me, but I was afraid to touch it, limp and contorted it had become, as though rotated-around in her socket. I sat in the hollow her bent knees made, stroking her slick thighs, both of us covered in her vomit.

“I’m sure, granny, ” I said.

We had been in the pantry, almost to the kitchen for lunch, when my grandmother collapsed down on top of me. She made feral, bleating sounds as she fell, and for a moment, went completely silent and still. I wondered if she was dead or about to die, and then out of the silence, she heaved. Scrambled eggs. Coffee with half-and-half. Toast with currant jelly. Lasix tabs. Her mother. Her grandmother. Our history. Her insides on my ripped jeans, gastric acid filling the pores of exposed knee. Me and my grandmother, our bodies indistinguishable, her amorphous deactivated one, my elastic lithe one, unified beneath the blanket of her vomit. I told the 911 operator I thought she’d had a stroke; now we were waiting for the EMTs to come.

“What’s happening to me?” she said.

“Everything’s fine, Granny, ” I said.

I had no idea if anything was or would be fine. The left side of her face was drooping asymmetrically and I worried that she’d become afraid, watching my reaction to its curiosity. I knew that this happened in strokes—one side, partial paralysis. I knew some cells in her brain had died and otherwise all I knew was that the original word for stroke was apoplexy—to strike down—as though part of her body was striking down other parts.

“Am I me?” my grandmother said.

“Yes, Granny,” I said, “you are you.”

“So that means I’m not you, right?”

I also knew that this sometimes happened—with strokes but also dementia—a loosening of the self-concept—the cell death and impaired synapses dismantling identity, making everything insecure. The outer world, the inner one.

“Yes,” I said, “that means you’re not me.”

“So that means if I die, only *I* die, right?”

The front screen door opened and two sets of heavy footsteps crossed over onto the tile. My grandmother reached for my hand and closed her old, decaying, unfit cells around my young vibrant ones and squeezed them, and for a moment, our two hands—her crooked fingers and my long piano ones; her lush olive skin and my pale, vein-visible skin—and the shared blood they contained, were one.

“That’s right, granny,” I said, squeezing back, “only you die.”