

ARTIFICIAL 0 0 0 MOTHER

By

Tina V. Cabrera

Senior Editors' Note: *We originally published this 5 star story in Issue 3. Why are we publishing it again? Read it and see.*

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... If you had asked me to read Tina Cabrera's, "Artificial Mother," a year ago I would've still read this story, but would also have lost track of my thoughts. The themes of motherhood, science fiction, love, loss, the frightening plight of becoming a new parent, or the conceptions of what the future versus the past can look like would have been intriguing but mostly fallen on course, would-rather-drink ears.*

If you asked me six months ago, I would probably have put this story off before I read it out of fear for the comparisons to be made for the upcoming baby I was going to be having. The terrifying concept of artificial baby making without any of the human connection would have been enough for me to immediately start whispering into my partner's stomach so that this kid knew that I would love him without any hesitation and that the future of his own life would not be anything close to the existential crises fatherhood immediately brought on.

Fortunately, I read this story with a three-month-old in the next room and was more amenable, perhaps empathetic is the better choice of word, to the beauty that is contained in this story rather than the laser focused fear of the unknown.

Cabrera's subtlety creates a world in which science fiction and imagination cross together both harrowingly and caringly. In a world in which children no longer need parents, as all information is accessible through downloadable experiences, what is the import of the familial connection or, further still, the importance of these words that we wish to say to those we love?

Therein lays the craft of this story. All of the elements within have been combined under the warm blanket of care and wrap around and throughout this story. That what we do for our progeny at the unknown cost of our past, present, and future is done because our humanness will always have a connection to those that we love – that, even in our own artificiality, our natures keep us from devolving into the void.

There is a reason why Fleas on the Dog is publishing this story again. Because it is a damn fine story.

I would suggest that you read it as well.

Five Stars.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (*for the love of language...*)

Frustrated by the things she could no longer say, she thought to write instead. That's it. She would write in the hospital room and in her bedroom. The hand had the strength of bone and muscle, didn't it? Whereas the tongue was soft and weak. Tame her impatient mind by the force of a strong hand. Wouldn't typing be faster? Yes, but as she found with her first penned pages, there was nothing like the sensation of the hand gliding swiftly across paper like that of a pianist, nothing like the thrill of the hand-writer's high. From then on, with just three months left, she kept a journal of her thoughts addressed to the Un-Emerged.

When you try to imagine the birth, you imagine it more as a retrieval than a sudden appearance brought on by hours of maternal agony; unlike your birth and that of every other baby for thousands of generations, this one will not require hours of physical suffering. No element of surprise. Your baby will have evolved before your eyes, that is, if you visit regularly as suggested in the coming weeks.

Talk to the baby – that should be especially easy considering the baby is suspended like a lovely seahorse for anyone to see. Don't hold back, for she can hear you. Sing to her and then watch for a response. New Birth means greater transparency. Mimic a natural pregnancy if you hope to form a bond before arrival. *Arrival. Emergence.* Which word best describes New Birth birth? "Arrival" and "emergence" can be used interchangeably to denote the appearance of something new. Nothing can quite compare to observing close-up and personal your baby's growth from conception to emergence; that's right--you decide that you prefer the sound of the word "emerge" and all that it connotes. Traditional mothers claimed they *felt* their baby's growth within their bellies, but you can't help but balk at that sentiment. You get to witness your baby's transformation before your very eyes. That's right, she's *your baby* despite the

distance between her body and yours.

At first, you feel a bit self-conscious, cooing and cawing and making your best baby noises, even though there is no one else in the holding room but you and her. Just behind the biobag on the wall hangs a diagram of gestation from Week 1 to Week 28. Tiny as a pea, you are relieved to see that your baby is just the right size for Week 8. The perfect artificial pregnancy. No physical discomfort, unpleasantness, or ill effects; no nausea or vomiting. No pelvic pressure, no itchy, expanding belly.

At Week 12, you play your choice of music in place of pre-recorded lullabies that mimic the human heartbeat. This set-up is well intentioned but an obvious hold over from traditional pregnancies. With neither you nor the baby possessing one, you decide that to continue playing musical rhythms similar to the human heartbeat would be pointless if not deceiving. Still, you agree that music is the universal language no matter the advancements, and so you play a variety with rhythms, beats and melodies conveying a range of emotions, from melancholy to elation, resignation to confusion. You play your favorite albums on the antique record player that they permitted you to set up in the private hospital room, wishing to expose your baby to the musical richness of your childhood. You are quite pleased to see signs of excitement: the baby jolts, and like a betta fish gulping underwater, her mouth rounds into an O of pure joy.

In the ensuing weeks, you play music of various eras from before the Change: Wagner's Faust Overture; Billie Holiday's Essential Rare Collection; Mariya Takeuchi's Variety; Keith Jarrett's Koln Concert, circa 1975, the year your own mother was born. You close your eyes and imagine piano fingers liling across the keys with speed and

grace. Taking particular pleasure in exuberant bursts of “Ooh” and “Aah,” you lift the needle and set it down on to repeat that part, hoping the fetus will sense the joyous human energy. You and your twin got piano lessons at age six. You used to dream of becoming a solo pianist, while Sister immediately lost interest. Sister so often resisted similarity. This is how you remember it.

At one point, you think your precious baby--just look at how utterly miraculous the thing, she's yours, she's really yours!--your precious baby she looks bored, for she yawns and stretches her arms. Anything and everything she does excites you with a thrill for living that you have never felt before. Then your thrill turns into chill when you realize you cannot be certain that she is responding to the music. It could very well be the programmed simulations of a waking mother's movements, for whether naturally birthed or not, babies are often rocked to sleep this way. The baby does not need your body, and though you knew this going into it, if you still had a heart, you would have felt it drop just now. To change the mood, or rather your mood, you play something more exciting – Takeuchi's *Plastic Love*, the original version.

Don't hurry.

I'm sorry.

Don't worry.

I'm just playing games

I know that's plastic love

Dance to the plastic beat

Another morning comes

Remember how you got a kick out of annoying Sister by humming along to the tune, inserting words indiscriminately: *I'm not in plastic love. Da-da da plastic beat, I know that morning co-o-o-o-mes.* You never could be bothered to look up the actual lyrics, even though this was for you the best pop song in all the world. You were and still are fine without understanding every word, but Sister for her part found two translations of the Japanese lyrics and placed them side by side for critical analysis.

Don't mess up the program of love

Despite my sudden kisses and passionate looks

With your sudden kiss and fiery stare

Don't get upset with the program of this love

I cleverly plan every hello and goodbye

I've been dealt with hellos and goodbyes so

neatly

Because everything comes to an end

In due time, everything will end - Don't hurry!

Don't hurry!

Comparing the two versions, Sister insisted that the switching of the first two lines is of important significance. "Trivial you say?" she said in her slow, matter-of-fact tone. "I think not. The first version emphasizes that "you" not mess up love with your lust actions, whereas in the second, the speaker places responsibility on herself for failing to

inhibit her passion. The actor of the first version, then, is “you,” whereas the actor of the second is the speaker, “I” signified by “my.” Sister approached everything in life with her penchant for literary analysis, which always irritated you. Unlike you, she could not seem to compartmentalize. You both possessed a keen intellect, consistently performed at the highest level, top of your class, but you saw her inability to acclimate to changing circumstances as a character flaw. “Lighten up,” you told her, “Which translation accurately describes the songwriter’s intentions? Well, I don't care all that much.”

Hoping to one-up your twin, you rolled your eyes. “The gist,” you insisted, “is this: ‘Don’t hurry me up to fall in love because I’ve been hurt so badly.’ It doesn’t really matter who said what. Get to the big picture, to the heart of it straightaway. If you really want to get technical (and just then, you had to work hard to suppress your impatience), the phrases “program of love,” and “plastic love” both connote a sense of the fake. The speaker has learned her lesson; she wishes for love as an automatic performance, as cold and distant as she has become.” You don't stop there. You're on a roll:

Every guy that asks me out ironically looks just like him

For some reason my memories run wild

"She must have fell fast and hard for 'him' in the heat of passion, and just as hard and fast, the romance crashed and burned. Her memories of him have made her cautious.

Don't hurry, don't make the same mistake, besides

Never take loving someone like me serious

Love is just a game, I just want to have fun

"Very good, very good!" Sister mocked. "See, if you take the time to break things down, then you can understand anything!"

With her coaxing, you just participated with Sister in sucking the life out of your favorite song. Music, like all art is highly subjective, and what this song means for you won't be the same as what it means for others. What does it mean to you, Baby? you say, returning to the present. Your Baby's eyes are closed. Caught up in a reverie of memories, you forgot to observe her reactions. But that's okay. This isn't the last time you will play one or another version of Plastic Love.

On your next visit, you post clever quotes about motherhood all over the plain white walls to help keep your spirits up:

"[Motherhood is] the biggest gamble in the world. It is the glorious life force. It's huge and scary – it's an act of infinite optimism." –Gilda Radner

"When you are a mother, you are never really alone in your thoughts. A mother always has to think twice, once for herself and once for her child." –Sophia Loren

You find the latter especially relevant, holding up despite having been articulated so many decades ago. You haven't been a mother for very long, but like a long-distance

lover, your thoughts are consumed with your prospective descendent and you long for the moments when you can be together.

You wait until Week 16 to speak intelligible human language. Early language development still begins before birth as far as you know, and as with music, babies remember certain sounds such as vowels from their mother's language. Hi there, baby. How are you? You over there, me over here. Even with the reassurance that the baby can hear and react to all sounds – inside and out – you can't help but think it all pointless; for even if the child may someday remember it, speaking as a way of communicating will soon be rendered obsolete by the ability of Trans-humans to communicate wirelessly.

Within you, an internal battle ensues. The more you speak to the baby, the more impatient you become. Just like the restlessness of your younger days. Only now, it feels visceral, physiological. Your tongue cannot keep up with the rush of thoughts and memories. So you spew un-sentences instead: *When Tommy met Annabelle gale storm umbrella. Sister marathon sweat breath* and feel guilty all the more. Does it really matter whether or not you speak in complete sentences or in fragments? The point of talking to the baby – *your baby* – is to soothe it by the sound of your voice, isn't it? The way that the sound of music soothes whether or not the words make any sense? Yet, you find yourself wanting to slow down and enunciate each and every word, as Sister used to do. With her propensity for details, Sister was more like Father and his skill of storytelling.

Frustrated by the things she could no longer say, she thought to write instead. That's

it. She would write in the hospital room and in her bedroom. The hand had the strength of bone and muscle, didn't it? Whereas the tongue was soft and weak. Tame her impatient mind by the force of a strong hand. Wouldn't typing be faster? Yes, but as she found with her first penned pages, there was nothing like the sensation of the hand gliding swiftly across paper like that of a pianist, nothing like the thrill of the hand-writer's high. From then on, with just three months left, she kept a journal of her thoughts addressed to the Un-Emerged.

Week 17. I would be feeling signs of the quickening by now. Like Mother. Look! she said to Father, look one them is kicking! He felt the kick on the palm of his hand just then and relished the moment. Will you be kicking soon?

Dearest, should I tell you a story about me and Em? By the time you read this, you already know your roots. You know that you originated unconventionally, untraditionally, from my skin and from his nanobot sperm. Writing that just now reminds me of just how unreal all of this still seems. Maybe Em has told you his story. More likely he hasn't had to. You can communicate from one brain to another instantly, so why wouldn't you? As for me, you may have already plugged in, and so you will have perceived that we shared a close kinship, have sensed the wide bandwidth of pleasant emotions. When I had to choose, I chose him and he was all in. I will no longer linger in this narrative. Rather, I will tell you the story of your grandparents, two very special biological human beings whom you sadly, will never meet.

There was nothing extraordinary about the night that Val met Annabelle in

Swansea, Wales. Caught in her very first gale storm, Annabelle sprung open her umbrella, useless against the powerful winds. She held the inside-out umbrella over their heads as they ran into the campus flat together. It was the small things that moved him: her upturned nose, the glow about her as she tripped over the threshold. Later in the haven of his dorm room, he wept neither tears of joy nor of sadness, but an array of emotions combined. So caught up in the reverie of her, he had not even noticed the seconds slip into minutes, the way I imagine time for you bears no significance. There he sat soaked down to his skin, anticipating when they might meet again.

Anabelle, on the other hand, had not thought much of their meeting; in fact, for her it was neither chance nor fate that brought them together, but a sort of good-natured defiance. The wind gusts would not get the better of her, just as no challenge ever had. Don't tell your father, she said. It took me awhile to warm up. After all, your father was like me just an American. Truly, I expected to meet someone more exotic during my study abroad. It was his consistent efforts to win me over that won me over, she said, in her abridged version.

Father had been hyper-sensitive. The opposite of Mother, who couldn't be bothered with the time and energy it took to attend to intensity of feeling. He told – *not just any story* – but those uniquely his. He narrated with such vividness and feeling that brought his story alive in my mind's eye. He story-told to both me and Sister, your aunt, who would have passed Father's stories down to her own children just as I am doing now, had she survived. It hurts – my hand, for I have never written this fast before; but I command, the biological part that refuses to give ground to the nano-bots

that infiltrate my mind and expand it exponentially.

Week 20. Sorry to wake you. I've learned that in my absence you started to sleep and wake on regular cycles. It has been three weeks. I took a "baby moon." Silly right? It's not like I've done anything particularly strenuous or stressful with this "pregnancy." But again, in imitation of a traditional one and as one last hurrah before...I'm sorry. I didn't do any "baby" things, such as getting your baby room ready. I didn't even go out of town. I stayed in mostly, once in a while venturing out to the Virtual Theater. I can't seem to stay away from those few public venues that remind me of Mother Father Sister. Though they've changed drastically, the old movie house bars and eateries-turned virtual reality domes preserve remnants of the past. Thanks to the few left like myself who've retained biological human-ness, posters of 20th century classics like Planet of the Apes, Star Wars, and early 21st century ones like Blade Runner 2040 still ornament the walls, pay homage.

I'm supposed to be feeling pretty good at this point because the risk for miscarriage or premature labor would have passed by now. In lieu of a natural pregnancy, how do I feel? I miss you when we are apart. I am sorry you don't get the advantage of close proximity, to respond to a hand rubbing the belly, or to be lulled to sleep from Mother's activity. But the advantage is that negative feelings, like the blues, do not directly impact you. With you inside that biobag and me outside, we are forced to bond from a remove. Of course, that doesn't mean we cannot bond at all. Trading one kind of blindness for another, or if you like, the heightening of one sense over another. I can't feel you but I can see you with my own eyes.

Your intelligence will surpass even Em's – certainly mine. He chose a total mind upload, and soon, his mind will interface with yours. Call it foolish, but I wanted to retain what I could of this biological body, though limited and cumbersome by comparison to the new and improved 2 and 3.0's. Oh, there I go, writing about Em and me again, even though I said that I wouldn't. There is so much you will learn, quickly and effortlessly, when you emerge.

Your skin is wrinkled and transparent, like the skin of someone who has sat in the bath too long. You may or may not get to experience the unique conditions of having human skin for long; it depends on your choice of embodiment. Your hair appears feathery and fine, the color of dark chocolate like mine. What have you, or will you inherit from Em? First, his intellect. Second, genes completely free of disease. As for physical traits, I cannot say, for Em is constantly altering his physical manifestation, his embodiment. He loves the plasticity.

Plastic Love. I love that song so much. Exactly how many times I've listened I cannot recount, but it replays in my mind randomly, different lines at different times. Oh – listen to the haunting sounds of almost every song on the album. You don't need to understand the Japanese language to be moved. Before Sister forced translation on me, I was transfixed by the entirety, like standing from a distance and absorbing the whole of a painting, as opposed to standing close and examining each brush stroke. Hard to explain in words what in a song moves one. Sister was not as inspired; for her, the literal meaning of the words overpowered the aesthetic effect of musical melody. For her, such talk of love and broken hearts was too prosaic. Not that she did not enjoy

music. If she did, she didn't say. I can only go by memory, which is lucid now and pristine. Oh the thrill of it, to suddenly remember all the things connected to those I love the most, like waking up remembering all of last night's dream.

Just to annoy Sister, I amped up the volume of *Plastic Love* even more, just like I'm doing now. I want to make sure the music breaks through the barrier of the plastic bag where you reside. *Plastic love. Plastic love.*

I just re-watched the classic "Being John Malkovich," the premise being much like experience-beaming. I haven't tried it myself, for I find no need. I relish my memories of real-life connection to those closest to me. I'm sure you will relish experience-beaming the way kids in my day were addicted to video games. I can't say I can blame you. To literally have access to anyone's sensory experience, including mine. You will be so addicted to the phenomena, fully realizing what it's like to be someone else through virtual reality. To make up for the absence of a real childhood, you will spend your credits on Parent-Child Adventures at Disneyland, Disneyworld, all the now nearly extinct theme parks. Just saying this now sends chills through me. You'll be able to experience that feeling too, artificially.

Week 21. Valencia, born 1969, had a twin named Lulu. They were born the year the first humans walked on the moon. Before the Internet, smart phones, and virtual reality video games, they had the outdoors to explore – Indian clay, marbles, and tadpoles. For the 5th grade book float contest, they re-created a scene from Winnie the Pooh and won first place. Lulu molded and baked figures out of playdough. Val found the shoebox

and cut out construction paper. Lulu designed the float but shared the prize money with her twin brother anyway, a whole five dollars which bought them a Beverly Cleary book, stickers, and a Mad Lib based on their favorite Saturday morning cartoon, Scooby doo. Aunt Lulu lived with us after her husband died. Within a year of Father's death, she died too. Not surprising for siblings as close as those two. Theo Van Gogh died 6 months after Vincent Van Gogh, my favorite artist of all time. Though the cause of death was said to be syphilis, more likely he died inconsolable, separated forever from the one closest to his heart.

Why did I choose to have a child now, so much later in life? On the other end of the spectrum, why not wait? With the prospect of eternity, time ought to be a luxury and endeavors ought to lose their sense of urgency. Yet, as an In-Between, I felt more than ever that it was either now or never to finally have a child of my own. Maybe because it is still hard for me after all these years to fully embrace a life without fear of sickness or death. Mother died at 50, Father at my age, 55, and sister at 30, not long before bio technology triumphed over the deadliest diseases. I lived the first few decades of my life pre-Singularity, lived to see those closest to me die premature deaths. Shock turned into anger, then anger into grief, grief into fear, which led to the decision of a hysterectomy. Mother died of uterine cancer. With a 50/50 chance of acquiring the same cancer, I did not want to gamble on my life. I had always wanted a child, but I told myself I could adopt. This was when cancer was still the number one killer. How was I to know the cure was just around the corner?

I tried to ease the loss by adopting pets. But I felt something was still missing. A

friend told me that as much as she loved her kitties, it could not come close to the sensation of having her own baby. Though by artificial means – you are still my offspring. I almost couldn't believe it possible, but here you are, developing before my eyes.

When I had my womb removed, I thought I had lost my chance to conceive permanently. But just when I thought I'd made peace with it... here we are. I didn't deserve it, but I got a second chance.

Oh dear *Amelia, Annabelle, Simone, or Veronica* – you get to decide, for one name cannot encompass all that you are or all that you will be. Sadness engulfs the most of me, having nothing of course to do with you, but all to do with the irrevocable past. Why them, not me? I smoked, while Sister never did. Yet she was the one who died of lung cancer, likely from secondhand smoke. Started in her lungs and spread like wildfire to her brain. If only she had lived to see – she could have had her mind freed from the brain consumed with disease, and uploaded to another substrate. That's what Em did; he chose Body 3.0, not because of the threat of disease, but because of its plasticity. *Plastic love*. Not only is my memory precise and pristine, so is my ability now to predict with certainty; based on where we have been, I know where we are going.

[Circa 2060, Age 5]

You are precocious. No public schooling, for all you need is available through inter-neuronal connection. In your wisdom, you will have chosen to outweigh your biological characteristics with the nonbiological so that the latter will outweigh the

former. You'd rather interface with the Interconnected Mesh rather than bother with face-to-face contact.

[Age 20]

You are a completely software-based human now, for why wouldn't you? With nonbiological intelligence billions of times more powerful, and with the essential promise of immortality, why wouldn't you? The Singularitarians have argued all along that nonbiological intelligence is still human, derived from a combination of human and machine civilization. Is software-based *human* an accurate description?

[Circa Pre-and Post-Birth]

When you emerge, you won't need Mother's milk; all the better since I have none to give. You'll learn to walk very early on. Between Sister and me, she was the late bloomer. I learned to walk at two, while she did at three. I got my period at 13, she at 14. Late to life milestones, early to death. Started getting headaches every day and slept most hours of the day until sleep became permanent. Just two years after her death, they found the cure to cancer. I tried to console myself that the naysayers are right, that with death no longer a threat, life has lost some meaning, if not all. How can you appreciate life without its opposite? How can there be positive without negative, Ying without Yang, darkness without light. You need contraries, opposites to make complete. None of this is consoling, for I still miss Sister Father Mother. Especially Sister, bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh.

You'll have no reason to bask in memory, to respond with feeling. For even if I chose to live eternally, you and I—this parent-child relationship—will have become obsolete.

Already as I speak, Mother is unnecessary for you to thrive. If any biological humans are left, they may or may not be the storytelling animals they once were. If they are, they prefer the storytelling power of virtual reality. Already you have grown impatient with slow, language-based communication. My storytelling, primitive by comparison.

I have sent out the entire flow of my sensory experience onto the Web that you can access by simply plugging into virtually. So why bother leaving you this diary? Why when you can think and feel all I've thought and felt instantaneously? Because I need you to know the story of your ancestry, the stories of those you'll never get to plug into – Mother, Father, Sister. I wish I wish for you to learn and understand your heritage in the manner of a biological human. Consider experience beams as supplementary to the richness of first-person connection. For true, some things cannot be expressed with words. But do this for me and for Mother Father and Sister's memory, as you read please, close your eyes and form images in your mind, rather than having them formed for you. Like the superior sound of a vinyl record, this is the real thing. I tell you stories from the heart I once had. I hope my stories touch you to the soul as Mother's and Father's touched mine.

Since I can remember, Sister looked for ways to make herself different. When I grew my hair out, she cut hers every month. When we shopped for clothes, she said You choose first, then when I picked out multi-colored attire, she ran to the black rack. One thing she could not forego even if she tried was our shared love for running, addiction to the runner's high. We trained together for our first triathlon and finished at the same time, hands on thighs, flushed faces, sweat pouring down our faces, panting. She felt

my heartbeat and I felt hers. Our hearts beat rapidly, eyes fluttered, then we embraced.

As she lay dying she said, “No more pain, no more pain,” I held her right hand and pumped the Morphine accordingly. Consoling me rather than the other way around, as she had in her own way when we were children, when I feared death more than anything. Disenchanted with magical thinking, I came to understand quite early that the reason Road Runner kept returning even after falling off a cliff over and over again was because cartoons were moveable drawings. When our bunny froze to death in a rainstorm after we forgot her in the backyard, I knew she wasn’t coming back. Sister made a stuffed snake and gave it as a gift offering, taking the blame. Never mind that I was not fond of snakes. It was her way of saying it was going to be okay.

Her heartbeat slowed as mine raced. Each beat like a tiny hammer in my chest. Sometimes I still feel for a pulse when caught up in memory. I should have lay dying too, should have felt my heart slow to a stop in perfect synchrony with hers. Now I have no heart, but I still have my breath. I chose to keep my lungs. I had been a coward by having my heart removed, but I would not let them touch my lungs, no. I would keep the lungs in tribute to Sister, and maybe, just maybe, I would develop my just desserts.

Baby girl, if you’ve placed me deep, deep, in your mind file, how often, if ever, do I emerge in memory? Does the thought of me make you feel sad, angry, or a combination of feelings? Do you then choose to file me back, far back, and like a dream that quickly fades upon waking – will I fade away for you? Will you still be able to dream even

though you will no longer need sleep? Do you dream? If not, plug in. Connect to a dream of a dream. I will be frank, no hiding anything from you, for all this I am writing right now is not part of the flow of experiences I already sent into the worldwide archive. For true, I desire death, and desire – as long as it is unfulfilled, is a form of dream – elusive, just out of reach.

Oh beloved, if you are reading my words, then I have not burned my diary as I was often wont to do. Optimism won over pessimism and through the fog of doubt, I see a spark of me in you, just a glimpse. I chose calendar time, limitation, the Old-World Ways, Death as a way of Life. Whatever form you have chosen, you have, you will, thrive. I know this. I know the world had to change, I just couldn't change with it.

.....

I'm just playing games

I know that's plastic love

Dance to the plastic beat

Another morning comes

Because everything comes to an end

Don't hurry! Mind racing. Story slipping-slipping. Never pregnant. Anticipation. Nesting instinct *I'm sorry* never kicked in. Should have baby-proofed room for You. *I'm sorry*. Ought to have cleared out clutter: letters, photos, greeting cards. Concert tickets,

sheet music, drawings and doodles. For you. This shirt salvaged like so many things from the good years. Soon forge immortal clothes replace any and all reminders of fragility, mortality. Words like these immortal too, emblazoned in your perfect memory. *Play play play beat beat beat beat I'm just playing games I'm not I'm not playing games playing play play play I know that's plastic I I know I know that's plastic love -tic love -tic love* What is Mother? *Don't mess up You I Don't worry* Mother instructs. *Plas-tic lo-o-o-o-ve. Never take loving someone like me seriously Love is just a game* Mother Woman of few words. *Woman cold as ice.* Words—heavy, burdensome. Dreams remembered in fragments. Wake half cognizant of dreams. Will you, do you dream?

Another morning *co-o-o-mes.*

Touch of a hand *plastic* brushed against brow and cheek *plastic* sitting by fire lilt of voice sight unfiltered without crutch of *plastic* technology *plastic* through veil of transformation— *plastic*— I see you in me.

AUTHOR BIO: Tina V. Cabrera lives, writes, and makes art in the PNW. She earned her MFA in Fiction from SDSU (San Diego State University) and has published fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, and hybrid works in print and online in journals such as *Pleiades*, *Eclectica*, *Hobart*, *Quickly*, *Crack the Spine*, *Big Bridge Magazine* and *Fleas on the Dog*. Her debut collection, *Giving Up the Ghost (and other Hauntings)*, was published on March 1, 2020. Her creative nonfiction memoir *The Former Things Have Passed Away* was long-listed for the 2020 Steel Toe Prose Book Prize. Her second book, a speculative fiction collection, *ThEM (and Others Lost)* will be published in 2022. Visit her writerly blog at <http://tvcannyuncanny.com/>

