

★ *In Vitro: On Longing and Transformation*

Isabel Zapata

Robin Myers, Translator

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Mexican poet Isabel Zapata probes the enduring mysteries of pregnancy and birth in *In Vitro*, a memoir in fragments that travels from fertility treatment through to the early weeks of pandemic-time motherhood.

“I want to shatter the vow of silence that isolates the painful parts of motherhood,” Zapata writes. Her yearning to become a mother was “a wound” that required extraordinary and expensive measures; “I seek my fortune in a petri dish.” It was a gendered, judgmental process: doctors’ automatic assumption was that her hormonal problem was to blame and their infertility had nothing to do with her partner.

The clinical language of a gynecological history—late menstruation, polycystic ovary syndrome, eighteen years on the pill, and infertility—and the embryo transfer process contrasts with Zapata’s mystical thinking. Giving over to whimsy, she imagines potential babies’ personalities and addresses her future child. Zapata even considered the possibility that her mother’s ghost might be reincarnated in her daughter.

The book’s microessays integrate family stories, history, and artistic explorations: Zapata’s mother intuited her own pregnancies within a day of conception because her toothpaste tasted different. The first in vitro baby was born in 1978, and there have been 8–10 million since. In 2015, Mexican artist Paola Livas memorialized her egg donation in an exhibit about the ghost children that could have been hers. Zapata imagines a fetus as a jellyfish and delivery as a tsunami.

Zapata’s daughter Aurelia’s birth is covered late in the book. After the “exercise in patience” that IVF and pregnancy represented, the birth, recounted via impressionistic memories, is more of an “exercise in hallucination.” Just six weeks later, Mexico recorded its first COVID-19 death. That hint of global menace puts Zapata’s discrete medical struggle into perspective.

A resolute account of a personal metamorphosis, *In Vitro* alchemizes tender experiences into enchanting vignettes.

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