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FRANCES NEGRÓN-MUNTANER

In New York, a heat-filled autumn night approaches.
It seems the birds have fled to the islands.

MANUEL RAMOS OTERO, INVITACIÓN AL POLVO (1991)

* Author’s Note: This text is a version of a story titled La patita fea, first written in 1998.
From the sky above, the pond was barely visible. A murky substance produced by decades of industrialization and pharmaceutical waste covered most of its once crystalline surface. The pond's water lilies and birds co-existed among floating diapers, beer bottles, and other objects discarded by a society taken with consumption. It was then, in this swan-dominated pond, in an age when time seemed to pass without fully passing, that a young swan named Delores spawned a daughter who was very, very ugly.

Over the years, the community came up with various hypotheses to explain the origin of such extreme ugliness. A few argued that Delores's daughter was the product of a biological mutation caused by the environmental crisis plaguing the pond. Others supported a conspiracy theory that blamed all the pond's evils on foreign customs and lifestyles. Most residents, however, attributed her ugliness to the alarming rise of broken homes without strong father figures.

In any case, it all began on a hot summer day, when tempers in the tropics often rise to a boiling point. The little one seemed in no hurry to break out of her enormous eggshell, perhaps foreseeing the daily vicissitudes that would pervade her life. Delores, although saddened by the inexplicable failure of all her other eggs, and exhausted from the long wait, pecked away at the shell with great enthusiasm to help her sluggish spawn come out. With her mother's encouragement, the cygnet took her first wobbly steps, falling flat on her rounder-than-normal behind. Despite the daughter's lack of grace, particularly for a swan of such distinguished lineage, Delores was so delighted at her newborn swan's affectionate disposition that she pecked her, fluffed up her baby feathers and gently pushed her forward so they could immediately meet the rest of the flock. Secure in her mother's devotion, the newborn swan followed Delores fully expecting the warm welcomes upon her arrival.

As the newborn swan and her mama walked through discarded mufflers, Superman lunch boxes, containers of Spic and Span disinfectant, the other animals could not contain their contempt. "Oyeme, that's the ugliest swan I've ever seen!" said a goose of Cuban origin named Gossy. "We never had any swans like that in Cuba." But Delores was so blinded by her motherly love she didn't hear the insults of the goose and continued on until she saw her neighbor Chiquita, an attractive young hen that could not help but hit on her beau's Cocky's famous genitalia: "Sweetheart," she told Delores, "are you sure that thing is yours? I mean, I'm sorry, but... I've known of cases in which swans have sat on eggs of geese, hens, and... even ducks. I have a cousin on the other side of the pond that specializes in such cases. If you'd like, I'll fetch him first thing." And the chatter continued.

Seeing all the commotion that greeted them wherever they turned, the naturally cheerful baby became sad as night thought that there must be something terribly wrong with her, and she asked, "Are they talking about me, Mami?"

Before Delores could assure her was as lovely as all the other swans, a loud cry came from across the pond. "But that's a monster!" declared Señora Sofía, the paternal grandmother, an old Galician swan sporting a blue bow. Having always objected to the indiscriminate philandering of her eldest son, the pond's incorrigible Puto, Señora Sofía was completely mortified. "I would have helped you prevent having this egg myself. I swear to you, Delores, we are a proud race, and we owe our stature to our extraordinary beauty. And what will her name be? I hope that you won't give her our regal name, Villaruz!"

...
Overwhelmed by all the insults, the little mutant looked around with tears in her dark bright eyes. She asked a second question, this time as mother and daughter contemplated a burning sun, which resembled the one in those old tourist postcards that the local government stopped printing, out of sheer embarrassment, “Is this all the world there is?” Delores, as stunned as her newborn over what had transpired back at the pond, replied, “No, my love, this is a very small piece of the world. Don’t worry. You’ll find your place.” The little one turned to hug her mother’s elegant black feet and stayed there. For the first time since laying this odd egg, Delores stopped to contemplate her only daughter, who, until the fatal moment of entering the pond, had seemed beautiful in her eyes. The mother looked away from the cygnet and sighed; she accepted life’s difficulties would increase for both of them. “In true swan fashion, my ex Puto hasn’t been back here since my other eggs didn’t hatch. And now that our only baby is ugly, I’m not even going to see his beak’s shadow again! Nor get any child support!”

While Delores distracted herself with feminist thoughts, several male swans circled the little one as she swam with difficulty around the pond. “Too many birds ruin the meal,” commented Nico, a swan that despite his young age had big plans for himself. “This pond is overpopulated. There aren’t enough jobs for our impoverished swans, let alone for mutants like her. To these queer birds, I say, ‘Get out!’” Hearing this, the usually mute snow-white swans were ready to put their money where their beaks were: “Let’s go after the ugly one!” they yelled in unison. Delores, distressed by the savagery of her fellow guffaws. “No,” they said, their voices reaching an ear-piercing pitch, “she is so queer and ugly. She doesn’t look like a normal duckling, she’s more like a dykling. Ha!”

Before the mother had a chance to physically intercede, the swans’ pecking came to a sudden halt. They saw a huge garbage truck approaching the pond at full speed and they cowered behind the few remaining plants around the pool. They watched, in fear, as the humans emptied a shipment of containers covered with drawings of ominous-looking skeletons with toothy smiles into the water. Although as frightened as the other fowl by the outbreak of humans in their midst, Delores took advantage of all the commotion to grab her daughter by the neck and seek refuge in the community’s only spiritual center.

As for humans, he felt largely ambivalent toward them.

From behind a small, broken and rusty window, the pastor Luis Arcadio had spent the last few minutes observing the riled-up pond without daring to intervene. Despite the fact that he aimed to share his ministry with everyone, he had to acknowledge that it was the whitest among the swans that had contributed most generously to the cause of the abandoned bus, which he had little transformed into a spiritual refuge. As for humans, he felt ambivalent toward them. They certainly held the power to enact much cruelty and destruction; their hearts were not always in the right place. But they were also the ones who had most closely reached the Creator with their exquisite architecture and sacred...
books. Luis Arcadio had learned this well when he lived as the spoiled pet of a virtuous family. There, he had accepted that physical purification began from within, from the goodness of the soul, and that the putrefaction of the pond was in part a reflection of animal baseness, particularly among the most carnal of species, like ducks.

The opportunity to help this worried mother and her terrified offspring was, however, a great relief for his tortured conscience. He immediately welcomed them. “Please, come in...,” he said with that studied baritone he reserved for formal occasions. Delores followed the pastor’s gesture toward the artificial pool he used for baptisms and other rituals. Once they reached the circle, Luis Arcadio, the pastor without a true flock, washed the little one’s forehead with as much tenderness as he allowed himself in public. Afraid he would lose control over his emotions, the pastor did not complete the service. Before returning the newborn back to the mother, Luis Arcadio found just enough courage from beneath his feathers to add a different message to his usual pronouncements: “They call you the ugly dyckling, the queerest duck. But you have another name unknown to them. Remember that they are white and understand each other. Get out of their way.” It would be the first, but not the last time that the ugly dyckling would feel the infinite fear and sadness toward her life reflected on the face of another queer duck traveling incognito.

While the mother hoped that time would be kind to her daughter, life only got worse. Unlike other ugly swans that lose their resemblance to ducks as they matured, the ugly dyckling got uglier and uglier. Her neck remained stuck between species, too thick for a swan, too long for a duck. The way she walked was so queerly duckish, that she provoked both desire and hatred among birds. The pond’s overendowed Cocky, made it a habit to chase after her, his claws thirsting for her fully formed behind. Her extended family resented her, and prayed for her to be taken away by a butcher or a hungry beggar. In response to so much contempt, her mother, who had recently fallen ill but had not told anyone, began to worry about her ugly dyckling’s fate. “Now that you’re older, you can’t run away anymore. Find your own.”

That same night, saddened to leave her mother, the ugly dyckling flew to see her long-lost father. After Delores’ failure to produce healthy eggs, he had settled down with a new mate. This, in spite of the rumor that he was also somewhat of a queer bird himself because he had the habit of waking up early every Friday with green feathers on his crest. Much to her disappointment, as she had hoped to partake in a dramatic reconciliation with her father, Puto acted as he always had throughout the course of his oh-so-comfortable life. He washed his feathers of her. “Don’t complicate your life, my girl. Take flight,” he remarked with a frank, Solomon-like attitude. He walked his daughter away from his lair so he could resume whatever business he had left behind in the bushes. The dyckling said good-bye and wandered for a few minutes in a daze. Her vision blurry, as she looked up at the starry sky, she could not help but ask once more: “Is this all the world there is?” But this time, she would seek the answer on her own.

The ugly dyckling fled east, to the dark side of the pond where other queer ducks and strange birds were rumored to live.
The ugly dyckling fled east, to the dark side of the pond where other queer ducks and strange birds were rumored to live. There she found a crazy duck that spoke out to whomever would listen. The dyckling discovered that she was part of a controversial urban phenomenon: the queer duck community. She learned that queer ducks are tolerated in some pond environments, but not all of them. Some are successful in entertainment and in the arts. Yet, most forward-looking swans and ducks prefer the company of straight birds to that of queer ducks, even if the stalking and ridiculing of any type of duck threatens the freedom of all.

Although the dyckling could never manage to sleep given the great gatherings that lasted through the night on the pond's gay side, she adapted immediately to her new environs. Between the drinks that waiters imaginatively concocted from abandoned substances and the party-goers who joyously drank them, she first heard the stories necessary for her animal survival. "In the natural world," explained a very respected elder named Mildew, "seasonal migrations are defined by the movement from north to south, from cold weather to warm weather." But in the unusual pond where the ugly dyckling was born, this logic did not apply.

"Over the last four decades," Mildew continued, "queer birds alike had moved en masse in the reverse direction of natural migration: from warm weather to cold weather." It was then that the ugly dyckling heard about those residing far from the archipelago, those who preferred snow to their warm water and smog to the still green mountains that surrounded the pond's landscape. These old ducks told her about thousands of fellow birds who migrated annually to the north, particularly the northeast. They also informed her that despite the fact that its waters contained all conceivable affection, her pond of birth was sometimes a dangerous place for many queer ducks: "Don't fool yourself. The further you are, the closer you will be to being a fond memory."

The ugly dyckling didn't want to believe Mildew but she had no choice. Just as the elder had finished her presentation, a gang of the whitest of swans broke into the bar, taking random shots at any duck in the place. With the wise one's words ringing in her ears, the ugly dyckling took flight before a broken bottle could find her. After days of flying, she arrived at a distant pond surrounded by grand brick buildings covered in ivy. There she found some strange ducks with long, round beaks resembling wooden spoons. Although somewhat cold and standoffish, the strange ducks came out to greet her: "You have a funny color and an even funnier accent. Where on earth did you come from?" The dyckling didn't quite understand the drawl of these ducks, but she understood their question and responded "Pororico," the name of her now faraway pond. The ducks nodded, "Oh, yes, we visited that pond many years ago...before the last dump. It was lovely." One of the kinder seeming northern ducks, with prematurely graying feathers and round Trotsky-esque glasses added timidly: "I was there when oil began to reach the shore and later come down as rain the pond. It could have wiped us all out."

The ugly dyckling would have liked to know more about this controversial event which occurred only a few months before her birth, but the climate of the conversation changed from cozy hearth to polar ice as the other queer ducks disapprovingly regarded the dyckling's instant conquest. The most influential of the group stealthily took over and shamelessly ended the exchange.

"Hey, back off! It's the same to us. You can stay here or leave. As long as you don't steal any of our mates or..."
interfere with how we run the pond you can eat our crumbs.” Upon hearing this, the dyckling felt a newfound shame. She remembered the priest’s prophesy, “They are white and understand each other.” This time, she would not test the waters or wait to be baptized by fire. The ugly one, simply, flew off and sought a different pond.

Flying south, the dyckling happened to come across friendlier if somewhat eccentric ducks. These “radicals” lived throughout the year on an island called Mannahatta that thought of itself as the world’s queer duck capital. “Wow, you’re so smart and interesting, I rather fancy you,” said Barbarita, a duck in black feathers from head to toe that also had roots in the tropics. “What’s your name?” “I don’t know,” said the ugly dyckling wishing she would stop asking. “Strange,” said Barbarita, “but it doesn’t matter. I’ll show you around.” From then on, Barbarita and the ugly dyckling became inseparable, gathering branches together, taking long walks along the pond, and engaging in frequent arguments about the dyckly life and the big world beyond.

But just as the dyckling daydreamed of how it would feel to kiss Barbarita, a messenger-pigeon arrived with urgent news. “Your mother is probably dead.” “What do you mean, probably dead?” cried the ugly dyckling. Although the pigeon did not mean to be indifferent to the dyckling’s feelings, the courier spoke fast and matter-of-factly as she had so many other messages to relay.

Delores has been ill with flu-like symptoms for some time: blotchy feathers, reduced egg production, respiratory distress.” Feeling sympathetic stomach pains, the dyckling asked: “Where can I find my mother?” Already a few feet away, the veteran messenger responded stoically: “Around the pond. If she’s still alive.” With sorrow in her heart, the ugly dyckling flew to Barbarita’s nest and they both sat quietly side by side until dawn broke. In the early glow of morning, Barbarita softly pecked the ugly dyckling in the neck and looked into her little eyes, “If you want, I’ll come with you.” But the ugly dyckling feared Barbarita. And she was even more afraid that Barbarita would see her through the pond’s ugly gaze. “Everything will be fine,” the ugly dyckling assured her friend that she ever had, “No worries. I’ll be back soon.” Terrified but determined to pay her last respects, the ugly dyckling took a few steps forward and felt her cold feet slowly leave the ground. For a few seconds she became suspended in the air, her wings outstretched for what seemed to be miles besides her, striking in their perfection. As she was gaining in altitude, the ugly dyckling heard a harsh crackle followed by loud pop that echoed faintly through the morning. Realizing she was unharmed, the ugly dyckling continued her journey.

This was how, after many years of living among all kinds of ducks and other fowl up north, the ugly dyckling traveled to the periphery of her home pond in search of her mother. Attacked by the small bacteria of nostalgia, she dreamt of the pond of her youth despite all the suffering it had imposed; of her brave mother and her weak father, who crumbled before social pressure; and of the void inside her that was now emptying forth. She thought that perhaps now, after seeing more of the world, her feathers would be sufficiently thick to shrug off pain and saliva. But the ugly dyckling was overcome by questions. How to return? How to return and stay away from the stain of memory without her mother’s love and protection? For the first time since her childhood, she longed for a hollow tree trunk, wishing she could hide there. But she overcame this desire and instead picked out her most appropriate armored feathers for
transvestite traveling. She packed black ribbons to elongate her neck and dyes that would bring out the darkness of her eyes and the grayness in her feet. She took into account everything she had ever learned from queer duck shows in all the ponds she had visited and from some dycklings that always surprise male swans, as they hide their genus well. If not at peace, at least she would be safe during her visit.

Approaching the pond for the first time, the dyckling wished to see if anything had changed since her long absence. She passed by her mother’s old neighbor Chiquita, whose main preoccupation since her most recent pairing was to remain watchful of her new mate’s nomadic eyes. “Who could that be? I hope my Rover doesn’t see her.” The dyckling discovered how smoothly she could blend into the swan population with the right accessories. Swans and ducks are very similar, as are roosters and ganders, and ponds and swamps. But she also discovered the small ways in which they differed. The ugly dyckling adorned herself as they did, yet kept the memories of her ugliness in her suitcase, for a rainy day.

Despite all her efforts, the rainy day came sooner than she had thought. On a cloudy morning, when rays of light barely pierced through the clouds to illuminate her figure, the ugly dyckling dressed up and began to approach small groups of birds inquiring about her mother. She noticed, however, that the minute that she got near, they would move away. Fearing that she had been discovered, the ugly dyckling walked away toward the pond but before she could reach its edge, an angry Nico yelled out an old militant slogan: “Away with duck and foreigner scum.”

The ugly dyckling frantically tried to get her ribbon back but the swans circled her, daring her to take it from them. The swans would likely continued taunting her if not for El Cotorrito, a day-glo green parrot with a loose tongue, flying over and frantically repeating “It’s bye, bye for you. It’s bye, bye, birdy for you.” Disturbed by the ominous message, the ugly dyckling broke through the circle and followed the parrot’s lead. She saw several enormous trucks driving in the direction of the pond. She thought that perhaps the humans had taken positive action against the pollution after all. In less than a minute, El Cotorrito the dyck-ling realized that the sound she heard was of another nature altogether.

A truck as big as a building made a complete stop at the pond’s jagged edge. Terrified, the birds ran as fast as they could away from the pond, abandoning the sick and the old. In a matter of seconds, the truck’s discolored back opened like a gaping mouth, and proceeded to vomit hundreds of copies of glossy magazines with titles like National Geographic, TV Guide, and People. The ugly dyckling stared in disbelief at the unfolding attack until she saw a swan, too sick to run away from the human debris. Instinctively, she took a step to assist the swan but then she hesitated. Why should she risk her life for a swan, even if it was sick or ill? Hadn’t they tormented her mercilessly since she was barely out of her shell? They were white and understood each other the pastor had said; she should never get involved in their games. But then she saw something that deeply disturbed her: that sickly white swan about to be flattened by the hostile drivers was none other than her own mother.

Projecting the upcoming tragedy in her retina like a slow-motion film, the ugly dyckling let out a anguished scream as she ran to shield her mother.
from the approaching threat. Her difficult life had served her well: She knew how to run fast, dodge moving objects, and hide away until the powerful and mighty had passed. She got there just in time, covering the mother’s trembling body with her brawny wings. The clueless drivers, who had not really noticed the birds but heard a loud cry, stopped the truck to see what all the commotion was about. When they didn’t see anything moving on the pond, the men cheerfully went back to their trucks and continued their work until the entire pond was coated with magazine covers, multi-colored water lilies under the late afternoon sun.

After the drivers completed their long day’s work, the ugly dyckling stuck her strong neck above the wreckage and shook the paper scraps off her. She looked down at Delores’ face, ashen and pale, and began to peck at her mother’s feathers as she had done with her as a cygnet just out of the shell. Impressed by the scene, the birds that slowly emerged from the bushes, including Nico, did not dare to disturb them. The ugly dyckling continued holding her mother, for hours, until she heard a familiar crackle and pop, but this time it was closer and louder, as if the hunters from up north had finally caught her.

Realizing that life was coming around full circle and she had to take one last stand, the ugly dyckling looked straight at the hunters in open defiance of the inevitable carnage.

Her heroic pose did not last long: The ugly dyckling had to quickly wrap her wings around herself and her mother to shield their eyes. As she looked, dozens of blinding lights went on one by one until she could no longer see.

“There she is! There she is,” said one of the humans fast approaching with several other humans in tow. “This was the beauty that I was telling you about. I’ve been following her for days. What do you think?” “Wow,” said another of the humans. “Never seen anything quite like it. Rare beauty, indeed. That’s what she is.” When the humans' eyes adjusted again to the light of their own, the ugly dyckling saw that these hunters did not have guns but some other kind of instrument with a long and hollow tube.

Once they tired of shooting, the humans came down to the pond and caressed the ugly dyckling with their big hands. One of them then gently took the mother from the dyckling’s arms, and carried her as a bundle of disheveled feathers into a distant vehicle. The dyckling resisted this kidnapping as much as she could, screaming and pecking wildly at the humans’ legs, but to no avail. The humans confidently got into their SUVs and drove away, leaving the ugly dyckling behind on the foul dirt road. Crying, the ugly dyckling knew that she had once more failed her mother, being the ugly dyckling that she was. With sweat-soaked feathers, she fled to the pond’s east side for the night.

The next day, the entire pond was afire with activity. Alert and in his element, Nico was screaming orders to the other birds to push as much of the wet glossy paper to the pond’s edges, and to gather some food for the flock. As the day progressed, the swans, geese and ducks were seen flying overhead, while Nico was still yelling orders to the other birds.
cleaning up the pond could not help but notice that some of the magazines featured a familiar-looking bird in the cover. The fowl tried to make sense of the scribbled words under the photo, but since none of them knew how to read, they looked and looked at the images until they became bored and decided to return to work. Before swimming away, however, El Cotorrito flew over the pond as he was prone to do, and gave them a clue: "Rare Beauty, rare beauty, indeed. That's what she is. Rare beauty, rare beauty." The confused birds did not know what to make of El Cotorrito's words yet they understood completely when they saw the ugly duckling looking for something to eat before beginning her long journey back. "It's her! It's her!" said Señora Sofía, "I think I'm going to faint!" A nervous Puto ran to Señora Sofía's aid, bringing her special smelling salts so she wouldn't hit the ground but the animals remained skeptical about the royal swan's conclusion. "Can't be!"

"But it is," said Delores, making a grand entrance like a movie star, her neck long and white, her black legs perfectly hydrated, her face radiant with pride. "And you will soon be thankful to her. Her picture have spawned a worldwide movement against pollution." As if leading a parade, Delores walked toward her daughter. Behind her, a long line of different kinds of trucks, without gaping mouths that heaved stitched up paper, streamed by imitating the mother's waddle. Out of these boxy trucks, came humans with rubber gloves and hoses and signs with big black letters that said, "Bird sanctuary. No dumping.

While the crew worked in cleaning up the pond, mother and daughter spent long hours sharing stories about the time that they had lived apart, about how the humans nursed Delores back to health, and about all the ponds that the ugly duckling had visited in her travels. Delores encouraged the ugly duckling to stay home for good, and she thought about it long and hard. True the pond was cleaner and the birds more accepting. Even Nico and Puto came by to inquire how mother and daughter were now that they knew how famous the ugly duckling was. But she missed her other home and she was eager to return with some sadness and happiness. Bringing the ugly duckling's chin up, the mother kissed her daughter's forehead and smiled, "Come and see me again soon, mi amor."

After leaving her mother's nest, the ugly duckling was startled to see the most gorgeous duck that she had ever seen, coolly standing under a tree. "Hey, there," said the duck. The ugly duckling could not believe it. "Barbarita! How did you find me?" Barbarita came out of the tree's shadow and invited her for a walk around the pond, like they used to do at home. "Come, Come, I was born not far from here. I was born not far from here.

That night, Barbarita again asked her name, so she could verbal ruffle the duckling's feathers. In spite of the anxiety that the question provoked in her, the ugly duckling felt again the pleasure of another bird simply asking her name, without assuming it. So she finally told Barbarita the name that everyone knew her by, the "ugly duckling," even if she no longer felt defined by it. Barbarita laughed when she heard the name. Pointing to the black and white signs that now showed the ugly duckling's silhouette everywhere around the ponds, Barbarita could not help but object, "You aren't an ugly duckling anymore! You're a hot chicky!" With that, Barbarita leaned in to kiss her mate. And as they both started the journey home, the ugly duckling could not help but laugh with joy, her cries heard throughout the land, "Quack, quack, quack."