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Pangaea

Nishat Manzoor Ahmed
Old Dominion University

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PANGAEA

by

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ABSTRACT

PANGAEA

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Old Dominion University, 2019
Director: Prof. Tim Seibles

Pangaea is a collection poems that revolves around themes of race, culture, identity, religion, faith, mental illness, death, and love. The themes in Pangaea aim to pinpoint the where all these ideas intersect in the body and the heart, each theme a continent on its own right coing together to make the overall landmass of human existence. In Pangaea, I am asking to find the root of urgency that drives one to love, to hate, to feel. This thesis is an attempt at unearthing that root.

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This thesis is dedicated to my friends who aren't here to read to this, to my friends who have made it this far, to my friends that appear in these poems, to my grandmother, to my brother, Rafat, to my parents for their sacrifices, to William Yarbrough for his deep loyalty and kindness, to Kelsey Wort for teaching me the many blooms through which love grows, and finally, to my life and universe, Camille Elizabeth Gay.

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FOREWORD

Kobitha

Poem in my home tongue

from the word *kobi*

meaning *flower*

and *mitha*

meaning *lie*

meaning it is a lie

that a flower

is just a flower

that anything is

the thing we say it is

that it can be so much more

that there is no other option

but to be more

The Pangaea Effect

The·Pan·gae·a·Ef·fect (ðə pan'dzi:ə r'fekt), *n.*, 1. The cycling process of the continents shifting together and apart over the lifetime of Earth. 2. The reference to any objects or bodies engaged in perpetual cycles of shifting distances and proximities. 3. How the oceans between these places are just bridges. 4. How these streams and rivers criss-cross the palms of this planet like fate lines. 5. Beyond space, beyond time, it happens again and again. 6. The stars are born: they blaze, they die. 7. All our bodies moving through the sky like white blood cells. 8. There is moonlight humming in the engine and I can see the ocean getting closer. 9. There is no such thing as death, just a silence. 10. Every life is our life; we just forget to remember. 11. We can leave nothing, take nothing. The choice is not ours. We simply continue.

SECTION 1: EARTH

Passage

At first the fear it may die, the young wren teeters at the tip of the branch, wings tilted side to side testing tides of the wind. The awkward curve of the feathers catch a jolted draft. Does it know its misjudged the flow? It takes a step forward leaving a foot suspended in air, another on the thin branch, its tiny body attempting to cheat physics, or death, but not both. Beak pointed skywards, eyes tracking clouds measuring the currents, it doesn't bother looking at the ground. To touch the earth means death. It retreats, adjusts, wings jutting out, back again. Then, with the next gust of wind throws its body off the tree into nothing, wings flapping, beak open, squawking. Tiny frame falling, plummeting towards the earth. I have to look away; I can't know how it ends.

*Brown Boy**After Angel Nafis & Jon Sands*

Brown Boy never knew
 he was a Brown Boy.
 Brown Boy grew up in a neighborhood full of
 brown boys who lived in a town full of white boys.
 White boys laughed at brown boys for their brown food and brown smells.
 Brown Boy never had many white boys over.
 Brown Boy never had many white friends.
 Brown Boy used to love watching them play while he was on the sidelines.
 Brown Boy used to love a lot of things,
 like being a brown boy,
 like coming home to *mamuni's* home-cooked *aloo bortha* and *chingri mas*,
 like trusting in Allah.

Brown boy used to be a Brown Boy but then Brown Boy
 watched a white town turn violent,
 watched two gray towers go down,
 watched a country call them white towers,
 watched a country ignore the brown bodies that also turned to black ash at the hands of
 men who saw no color at all.
 Brown Boy, at seven, learned that the only important color was white:
 Pure, clean, white.

Brown boy had to grow up sweeping glass from bricks in the window,
 Brown boy learned
 how to get spray paint off the doorway,
 how to say all the English words right.
 Brown boy got a new set of ears that didn't hear the slurs anymore.
 Brown boy stopped being a Brown Boy early on.

Brown Boy comes to college two hours southbound to get out of white town,
 picks smaller, whiter town in the middle of corn.
 Brown Boy starts dressing whiter—
 pants skinny, shirts slim fit, clean cut hair, trimmed beard, tortoise shell glasses—
 Brown boy hides everything he can under a white veil but
 the first thing people see on Brown Boy is skin.
 Brown boy light enough to be invited to parties,
 dark enough to be asked *how do you speak English so well?*
 Brown boy light enough for girls to think it's 'hot,'
 dark enough to still get shot for wearing a hoodie in the night.
 Brown Boy knows English better than white boy but
 Brown Boy still gets stopped in airports,
 still feels terrified south of the Mason-Dixon.

Brown Boy sees white boy take his family to Bombay Indian Grill,
Next night brown boy is silent when white boy calls him *foreigner*,
Tells him *go home*.
Brown Boy doesn't know where to go because

Muktijuddho

On the night of March 25th, 1971, Pakistan launched Operation Searchlight against East Pakistan. This militant genocide would be the catalyst for Bangladesh's Liberation War, known to the Bengalis as the Muktijuddho, granting them independence that winter.

The river feeding the village
wrought by my father's hands
dresses itself in crimson.

The sun of our flag bleeds
into the Padma. I avoid corpses
bobbing down the river while I bathe.

My family is a story underwater,
the river delta our veins, the banyan our skin.
I dream of tigers lusting

after mother's cattle from the brush.
Morning brings their bones and blood.
In my sleep I did not hear them cry.

Incident Exercise

Instructions: Match the incidents below that correspond to the age during which they happened.
 (Note: some boxes have more than one answer that corresponds.)

Ages	Incidents	Answers
a. 7 yrs. old	1. "Get in the street and see what I'll do to you with my car."	
b. 8 yrs. old	2. "Do you speak English?"	
c. 12 yrs. old	3. "Step over to the booth please."	
d. 14 yrs. old	4. "Fuck you, sand nigger!"	
e. 16 yrs. old	5. "I bet your family supported 9/11."	
f. 17 yrs. old	6. "Go back home."	
g. 19 yrs. old	7. "You're cute for a brown guy."	
h. 20 yrs. old	8. "Can you speak Indian?"	
i. 21 yrs. old	9. "I don't want to be served by your kind."	
j. 23 yrs. old	10. "Are you sure you're not related to terrorists?"	

Thrush ('thrəʃ)

I.

n., in the eastern
half of the states, browned
feathers, throat like a flute—
ee-oh-lay flutters the song
through the bramble sailing
off every cinnamon leaf.
On the forest floor, thrush
foraging for invertebrate prey,
occasionally peering up,
scanning the sky, wings
splayed out like a crown, letting
the puff of white on its chest
gleam like a beacon.

II.

n., in the eastern
half of the mouth, too much
beer and wine on weekends,
too much trying to wash out
loneliness settling
like sores on the tongue.
Prodded by the teeth
like a sharp crown,
tongue begging for mercy,
teeth begging for the tongue
to speak, rather than drink,
yellowed, and rotting and angry,
thinking about when
they gleamed new and naked
like the first beams of light.

Cardinal as Metaphor for Body Crossing State Lines

I remember seeing my first cardinal. It was winter, actually, the first winter I had ever spent in my new home. Among the stark skeletons of the forest preserve, a cardinal flashed its red, fluttering between branches dusted with snow. A heartbeat still fighting to stay warm.

—

Most cardinals from the midwest are not migratory.
Most cardinals mate for life.
The cardinal holds title of *state bird* for the most states
(7 of them, to be precise),
all the way from the midwest
to the east coast – Illinois to Virginia.

—

There's a version of this story where the cardinal stays in Chicago beyond the equinox, and the winter plucks every fruit and every leaf and even every branch off the trees until there is nowhere the cardinal can hide from the snow.

—

My first winter in Virginia I did not see a single cardinal. I think they knew it was going to snow here, too. I think they knew this was a place where only silly birds come to die.

—

There's a version of this story where me and the bird are both in Chicago and not. It is March. It is still winter. Silly birds.

Amen

on the day
of my high school
best friend's funeral
I sit
in my bedroom

until the sun
is buried
by the horizon.
I want to
be angry

at god,
but I know
we are just renting
this space
on earth,

every star
a crack
in heaven's
floor,
death

the dust
that
flutters
its way
through.

There are Cemeteries that are Lonely

After Pablo Neruda

How often they call my name,
in the hum of my engine

waiting at a stoplight,
singing for me to press my toes

forward, inch the gas pedal lower
and lower until the nose of my car

teeters into traffic. I think of the empty
plots and how when it rains, the earth drinks

the water as if for the first time, drunk on spring
and solitude, how pockets in the dirt

fill like lungs and for a moment,
a hollow space feels like home.

This is why I avoid baths,
lukewarm water of my filth

burying me in a porcelain casket.
You're too young to think about death

my mother tells me, as if that cold mouth
would ask your age before kissing you.

The Heat Must Cut the Sweet

The summer you died grandma cut all our mangoes
to the rind, cubed them and tossed them in salt
and paprika. *The heat must cut the sweet* she'd say.
The juice dripped from lip to chin,
right down the middle like a yellow divider
on that country road. My thumb swept across the lanes
of my chin like your silver car, glinting
like a blade in July sun. It was a reckless summer,
heat the kind of heavy that made pavement look like water
in the distance. I heard they found your body a couple hundred yards from the wreckage,
limbs twisted, and shrapnel sprinkled over the shoulder.
I heard they found, in what was left of your backseat,
a basket packed with mangoes and two small jars:
one full of paprika, another with salt.

*Ghostbox**After Erika Meitner*

the first time we went we forgot
to make sure the body was still
in the box & I knew it was strange
how off the weight was
how we didn't struggle to carry
& I knew we should have checked
one more time because I bet we'd
find that casket hollow like bones
with the marrow sucked out how
grandma taught us to stick our
tongues right into the socket of the
goat's vertebrae & let the meat
melt away until all that remained
was that pocket of bone empty &
drained & then we'd put our lips to
that calcified reed to whistle songs
to the dead we'd laugh because of
how silly that seemed but now as I
hear the wind sidle through leaves
I know they could hear us.

The First Time You See a Dead Body Outside of a Coffin

is under the hazy pulse of street lamps
the light warps into splintered reds
and whites a product of the shattered glass and plastic
strewn across the concrete the body once nestled in the metal
ribs of its emergency carrier is now too like the glass
shattered and strewn blood leaking like a river
if you followed it far enough
it would only bring you back
to yourself because of course this body
of a stranger dead in the street could be you
what you are always looking for is a mirror
to prove your life is a performance up until
the moment your brain matter is smeared
against a curb on a busy street in suburbia
up until the man behind you honks because
he is too afraid to look again lest the figure
with a cracked skull and splayed arms on the road
looks a little too much like himself.

Crown Shyness in a Place Where We Might One Day Meet

here the trees won't touch
each other

the leaves and branches
together

look like islands the gaps
between

each tree's crown
like rivers

of light and the water floods
on the brush

below could there be
freedom

in sailing to the other side
of the sky

the place where trumpets blow
now and again

in the chest of tree trunks
a heartbeat

of music scraping the bark
of our bodies

All Our Bodies [I]

Your thumb skates
my lips as if my mouth

is a black hole.
My tongue, like gravity,

wants to pull all of you in.
There is no coming back

from what we are about to do.
Our mouths meet like meteors,

the debris of our hearts
ground into mute particles.

Your weight curves space-time.
In my arms, I carry you

from the couch to the door.
Everything is in slow motion.

In my room we burn
off each other's clothes.

We whirl through this space,
a dance of binary stars.

Love Poem for Fox

I have lain with you
in your den, brushed soft
red fur until my hand

melted into your body. I'm
with you, always, bounding
through meadows in which

you ensnare mice and lavender-
colored flowers. They applaud you,
dance and shiver in the wind.

Can I wear you always? Don you
on ankle and wrist? Let me carry
you as emblem, trophy, martyr-

reminder that in your cunning,
you did not have to steal my heart;
instead convinced me to give it to you.

*Have You Heard The One About The Boy Who Saw The Sky Reflected In The River And Wanted
It So Bad He Walked Into The Water?*

It's the kind of night the moon might kiss you.
Almost November, finally autumn in this goddamn town.

I have been looking for gold
but only find the foxing of leaves.

If winter is the season of death,
then autumn is the season of dying,

of falling, and I have been trying so hard to find my name
but all I've found is myself in my '99 Accord

crying to Julien Baker records. In every dream
I've ever had about driving, I'm always in the back seat.

What I can tell you about desire is this: it is a fruit
that is more seed than flesh. What I can tell you

about desire is this: I can hear the flowers and their elegies,
but don't know their language.

Transmissions from The Aftersleep No. 1

Assalamualaikum. Why have you come?

My grandfather welcomes me
with the traditional greeting.

Walaikumsalaam I say back,
I'm not exactly sure why.
To learn? I know little, and I'm afraid.

Here, on the other side of dreams
where the dead mill around,
my grandfather has been waiting.

His beard tessellated with shades
of gray looks the same
as in pictures I grew up with.

He gestures almost to himself,
a sign allowing questions.
Does it hurt?

*Of course it does. What thing would ever
want to leave the living?*
What happens after?

What are we to do while we are alive?
My grandfather pulls a book off a shelf.
This happens after, and many other things.

Life is just a catalogue of death.
Should I be scared?
Are you afraid of your next breath?

Naperville In June

In the inbetween, briefly
the wind finds hunger for skin; we sit
at the edge of the cul-de-sac

where we grew up playing
pick-up games of basketball &
football, staring at cracked asphalt

imagining a time when the tar was so fresh
it scuffed the new sneakers of our friends
who weren't dead yet from the overdoses

off pills and needles, or a car's hood
crumpled against a tree, or a tied rope,
or the train tracks, or their own hands.

Our hands grip the neck of warm bottles.
Why, it's just another month
where the sun sits on the throat

of the sky, a hot amulet in the city
where there are no seasons,
just the weeks where the streets

melt back to tar & the days
where the rain feeds the lake,
& the rivers, & the gullies,

& every creek is a mouth.
It's the first summer in a half decade
where somebody has died but we don't know

their name, & we don't have to
put on another suit to watch
a shovel pry open the earth.

The Heart is a Hive

"Once, I saw a bee drown in honey, and I understood." - Nikos Kazantakis

in which i am the bee
 love is the honey and
 you are the hand
 scooping me out
 the tongue licking my wings
 clean your mouth pushes
 air back in my lungs

sticky palms pressing skin
 in which your touch rewrites
 the code of my ribcage

every crack
 translated into a new note
 you speak my tongues
 your saliva is salve

and i will jump
 into the honey again and
 again if it means you
 are the one to pull me back out
 how salvation sounds
 like your voice

that kind of gold
 i have been hungry for
 would give up everything
 just to have it graze my body

At Virginia Scenic Overlook #2

Four states lie in our tailwind,
one more to cross before we touch

the coast and you call this place home
for the next two years. Atlantic air

piques the nose with salt;
the pollen here is foreign.

I am burying your love
in me; my heart, your garden,

in bloom with wildflowers:
asters and fire-wheels, bursting

edge to edge, pennyworts
and primroses. Among the racket

of trucks and children prodding
their parents for gas station slushies,

you kiss me and car horns trumpet,
voices become bells. You're the first real

morning; if light touching skin had a sound,
it would be my name on your tongue.

We climb back into your car,
head towards the hands of mountains.

The sun dips between their shoulders.
Everything, everywhere, a flourish of gold.

“Okay”

you're crying in the driver's seat after a party at your friends / & I'm crying in the passenger seat trying to make sense of your words / *why do you always have to bring up race?* / *why can't you just be calm about it?* / *If you're gonna yell at my friends we should stop going out* / & I can't understand why you're asking these questions / when you want me to be the father of your children / & I can't imagine what it's going to be like for our kids / if they end up looking like me / so for a moment / I stay quiet / stare at the moths outside / orbiting the streetlight like planets / & wish I could be as sure as them / to always know where the light is / & then I tell you / if you love me / I come first / & my body comes first / & my body & my skin have always had to come first because / for my whole life I was told / my body & my skin made me second rate / & if you love me / you have to love all of me / & if you love me / you have to be angry & you have to yell & you have to stand up to your white friends with me & you have to say *that's fucked up you'd say that* & you have to call them out / & I finish saying this to you in this muggy car / sitting in your apartment parking lot / & I am scared this is the end of love / at least / the end of ours / because what you say next will decide / whether I say *goodnight* beside you in bed / or say *goodbye*

After Two Years in Trinidad Studying Vedanta Philosophies, My Childhood Best Friend Returns Home

The only truth is “I exist,” Amar says to me from across the dining room table,
 his frame twenty pounds lighter than when he left,
because without it there is nothing else. ‘I am sad, I am happy,’ “I am” must and will come first.
 He explains Vedanta’s core is the search for undeniable truth and reality.

We debate this for an hour, musing over if anything is real,
 even us, while my grandma brews some earl grey and sweetens it with honey.
 I reach for the steaming mug but stop short when Amar asks
did you hear about Jeremy? who was a high school friend, now gone

because he walked to the edge of his apartment balcony
 and kept walking, and yes, I have heard and I ask if he knew
 about Hannah’s passing, and suddenly we unearth an entire list
 of names to recite so we compile the dead from the last two years,

until finally it’s exhausted. And isn’t it strange to think that one day
 your entire life will be news traded in passing between two friends
 over tea, who will reach for their mugs,
 take a sip, and burn their tongues?

Observations Prior to Hurricane Florence

The sky over Virginia
looks as blue as it's ever been.
To think of these cities underwater
feels like a dream.

-

Tomorrow when I wake up,
everyone I love on the coast will be dead.

-

Of course, this isn't true,
but the best way to learn
how to cherish something precious
is to imagine it buried.

-

The creeks have already
swallowed the side streets.

-

There must be a silence
before the wind
and the rain, otherwise
we won't be listening.

SECTION 2: OCEAN

Inheritance

*“The empty chalkboard bears the ghostly trace of everything
ever written on it. Each soul has its genetics.”*

–Teju Cole, Blind Spot

I did not live
through the war;
I inherited blood.

My mouth screamed
for fear of being shut,
against those that make

my teeth a zipper
my lips a locked
latch. Everything away

from my body is still
my body.

My bones
wear the minerals

in Bengali silt, the banks
with bodies piled high
where no one came for us.

Some sick sun,
its light torched
a whole generation.

Some days I wake
tasting the curdled earth

turned red as *laal shak*,
bitter as *corrolla*,
my tongue reciting

prayers for the tongueless.
My mother tells me her dreams
about the wet season,

the pittering rain
on the tin roof
breathing through cracks

in the clay walls and wood doors.
With her finger she taps my forehead.
My skull sings too.

Aubade for Lineage Underground/Underwater

What I know of who I am
is that I do not know much.

Barisal is my parent's home province,
sprawling shorter than a pence on the map.

To name my grandparents is to name
every leaf of family history I can touch.

From the earth, the sky above my parents'
village is flooded with stars named after the dead.

From space, the tin roofs huddled by the river
are tombstones guarding the water.

Love Poem for Lost Continents

Always the drowning.
How do you ache?

Your absence on the map,
does it hurt?

Tell me, is remembering
an act of violence against

all you could never be a part of?
Did you know loss

would taste like skin
and water?

Did you know
even after the sea

tried to erase you
from the atlases, we

still found you? Love,
we still found you.

All Our Bodies [II]

my hands voyage towards your hips like the lost
do for home:
your thighs nestle like rocks around a cove
my tongue begs your maelstrom
your mouth rounds like a pool
we can be rain and sea and sky
you, less salt than sweet
only sailing your skin do i know
in your depths there are still mountains
i yearn for your ridges
rock me in tide of the pelvis
swell of the breast
your fingers curl and crest into a fist of a wave
and then both bodies exhale
their tension curbed
fingers return to chart me
charting you

Untitled

“You ever touch someone, and picked up the right word for the poem?” - Sonia Sanchez

Most days this language fails.
What’s the word for:

*when I look at you I am excited to be alive which is new
because I spent most of my life trying to die*

or

*when I look at you I am afraid of dying
because what if I can't find you in the next life?*

because I know the word isn't *love*.
What if you never know exactly

how I feel about you? Even after
the ring on the finger,

or the babies in the bedrooms,
or our bodies side by side

in a pocket of the earth?
I've heard there is a space

right before two people kiss
where everything we need to know

about love exists. Where the air in our lungs
builds the rest of the universe briefly.

Creation Myth

The night I put the moon on her finger,
every squirrel forgot where their nuts were hidden.

In the morning we named our daughters
after trees: Mahogany, Spruce, Willow, Ash

& our sons after the songs of cardinals & larks.
Her gold hair bronzed in the summer season,

hands always tending to a soft, needing cheek.
Is there deeper prayer than palm to skin?

Her fingers strummed the lines of clouds
& from them plucked rain like fruit,

each bead of water laid carefully
on the eager tongues of children.

Noah After The Flood

As if he built it in solitude,
the ark as lonely vessel.

As if the people didn't watch him
toil in the field beyond town.

As if he ever stopped with his hammer
to mourn the bodies he couldn't bury.

As if he didn't see them running
when he shut the door as the water came.

As if when the world drank, Noah didn't hear
the cries of the people slapping palms to sandalwood,

As if he didn't sit watching dark wine sloshing
as the ark careened on the waves.

As if he didn't think of the bodies
he couldn't carry.

Would he come to the ark's roof,
stare at the muddy oceans?

Would he see each man floating,
islands unto themselves?

After Abel's Death, the Raven Comes to Me

by the windowsill / that corvus croon echoing again / and again / and again like the old stories
said / *thrice the caw opens death's jaw* / so it has come for me / I dream in whatever season I
want / the air comes to me / still sinister / some omen in the form of graceless snow / it's only
July / I kissed my lover once / I bled strawberry juice / I don't care if it's summer / I wrap myself
in cloth / and more cloth and maybe / a little shame and more cloth / can we sweat it out / the
large stuff? / the heavy years? / a forewarned solstice / December's come recklessly / I must
maim myself / for I have already / maimed the brother / of my blood / oh / what have I done? /
oh brother / how I have loved thee / oh brother / tell me how love / makes a monster of us all /
may these dark wings / forgive me / may my teeth fall / to the earth like seeds / I want to return
the rust / to the stars where particles come from / molt this shell casing my skin / calcium cocoon
/ I am going to die one day / if I do / don't tell me what happens next / if I don't / go ahead, spoil
the ending

Below Vesuvius

The bones of Pompeii
hide near the flesh of Naples,
even in death somehow rendered living
by the blood of people cycling in and out
of ruin—buildings and bodies

embalmed by the black dust.
The shells of life so out of place
in the thriving metropolis wedged
against thickets of fig trees and pine.
The caldera's cracked maw

yawns, smoke and magma curdle
in its throat. Near the drop of the rocky lip, a man below,
his feet balanced between earth
and death—one little breath
of air is all it would take to send him—

It's only the two of us. I can't help
but think how easy it'd be to slink over, nudge him
into emptiness. No one else knowing
except me. This man alive only
like a city preserved in the ash of my memory.

From Across the Room, God Speaks in a Whisper I Cannot Make Out

I carry my grief like a planet in upturned palms,
hope some heaven is there to take the offering,
like a boy unsure if his father will still love him after his mistakes.

I wear the weather in my knee,
pressing to the floor, kneeling to a maker,
this doubt the kind of loam

fear grows in. The body,
a seed hollowed by silence.
Some days my heart does not beat

but is beaten. Some days
my heart does not beat
but hums when I pass

a man prostrate on the sidewalk,
spine bent in a birthright of divine humility.

Guilt Apocrypha

My grandmother says *assalaamualaikum*
when I pick up, waits a breath for me to respond

walaikum as-salaam in a hushed tone
as I navigate the crowded Wal-mart produce section,

side-stepping two boys cradling caramel apples
to their mother, begging, only to be told *that ain't real fruit*.

My grandmother boasts the *murghi* and *biryaani* she's made
as Eid approaches, asks me if I am going to mosque.

When I say no, she stresses me to pray more, speak more Arabic—
When we go, say 'Allah hafiz' so Allah is in our goodbye.

Allah hafiz, she pronounces, waiting again, urging me to practice.
As I reach for some unripe mangos, she says *hello?* I bite my lip

until she hangs up,
unable to say that this is not my god,

not like this,
not with salvation hanging like fruit above my head.

Transmissions from The Aftersleep No. 2

The book my grandfather opens is empty.
He points to a page, also empty, and says
Read this. I can't see anything.

Of course you cannot, it is the language of death.
Closing the book, he returns it
to the shelf with no other books.

How do I learn to speak it?
How did you learn to speak our tongue?
Listening to mom, and dad, and grandma.

So how will you learn this language?
Listening? Listening to death? How do you do that?
How? How can you stop? How can you ever stop?

Distance as Metaphor for Devastation

the splitting of something
so small – an atom
was enough to level a city

tell me there are bridges
over rivulets and canyons
the heart aches to cross

how the words *i miss you*
move like the flap of cardinal wings
from the coast to the navel

of a country – the width of a room
is enough to keep the breast
hollow – the body a melon

excavated to the rind of its bones
more bitter than sweet
when *goodbye* is all i ever taste

Depression with Mute Button

It chisels holes
 into my bones, plays through
 the hollow— a hymnal to my grief

Every morning on repeat my brain tells me:

don't get out of bed,
 don't get out of bed,

stick that fork
 in your wrist, stick that fork
 in a socket

hold your breath
 never stop
 drive to a stoplight
 never stop

I once tried to drown myself
 in the bathtub while

my brother and friends laughed in the next room.

Some people might say it was for the attention.

Let me say
 it was definitely for the attention

because no one else can hear
 this song rattling in my skull,
 a chorus of droning wasps,
 and their stingers stabbing my temples.

It makes me remember the afternoons
 I charted constellations
 into my thighs with thumbtacks
 wishing on scars.

Dear God

Please, when I die
let it be in color,
let it be loud.
Please don't let me fade.
All I want is to be remembered
as something worth remembering.
Let me be a firework
going off in a quiet corner
of Naperville,
let it be October,
a time no one expects,
somewhere in late afternoon,
some time not quite night,
bursting so loud the children
in the park, had it not been
for my death lighting up
the autumnal dusk, might mistake
my passing as gunshot.
Please god let them miss me;
let them look for me,
even if I live a life that's quiet,
just another star as a freckle
of salt on the dark skin
of night's palm. Let me go
in some way violent: a supernova
of life and dust. Let me end in so much light
not even a black hole could swallow me.

At a Funeral the Summer I was Eight

You told me we bury
bodies like seeds
that bloom into daisies
long after. But what now

before you're lowered into cold, dead earth?
What happens when you die in Chicago's winter?
Where sparrows and grackles shiver
in silence, and light—shrouded and mangled

in the morning mist—dodges everything
save for the hyacinth and baby's breath on your casket.
The imam mutters something in Arabic but I can't understand
him or why god needed you as a flower so soon. Shovels ring

like rusted bells. Tears rim our eyes like crowns of ice.
What could be colder in our bodies than the grief we can't make space for?

Dear Shaitan

There is a granny smith apple rotting in my center console, but tomorrow I will eat it despite how its once sour juices are now rancid because my grandmother told me at six years old the devil is allowed to eat whatever we throw in the garbage. I remember picking off every sliver of flesh from my mother's oil seared catfish until only its pale skeleton remained, hoping that perhaps the devil would choke and die and I wouldn't have to feel as guilty about the Choco Brownie Extreme Blizzard I couldn't finish the night before. And dear *Shaitan*, was that your first time having Dairy Queen or were all the other Muslim boys in America just as wasteful as me? And dear *Shaitan*, when I stopped reading Quran did you stop getting to eat? Or was that the beginning of your buffet? And when I started drinking to deal with my dead friends and to try and keep my live ones from remembering, did you laugh when I said sorry to god as I curled over a toilet, vomit in the water and on my mouth? And dear *Shaitan*, did you always have me? Waste and all? Body and all? And dear *Shaitan*, do you have a special spoon you use when the guilty brown boys bring you America's favorite frozen treat? And dear *Shaitan*, if I came to your house after a night of good eating, would I find you sprawled on the couch, using fish bones to pick food out of your teeth?

Our Bodies: Three-Fourths

Let all the water on earth
rain back into the sky.

Let me wake up to an ocean

above me. Let there only be
salt left in the summer
sprinkled over the city, a snow

of brine. Let me put my tongue
to your every wound like
salve. The only difference between

seawater and our blood is the color
of blush in our bodies,
how deep its doubt runs in our veins.

Are you not parched? All that's left
is the spit in your mouth, the hours
of sand on the shore unwashed.

With no water left to drink,
if I drowned in you
could I call it healing?

If we tried hard enough
could we undo the loneliness
we have been tending all our lives?

Do you think if all the water on earth
receded back into the heavens
would our bodies make the journey, too?

Pride Apocrypha

Oh lord it is Friday and I am indeed in love,
and lord it is Friday; I am not at mosque.
Tonight I am going to drink wine and kiss
my lover, and perhaps we will make love with our fingers

bare of any metal, and Sunday will come and I won't go to church.
Oh lord the sun is dancing on my skin. It tastes like mangos.
As I walk from my office to my car,
I will catch every drifting dandelion seed in my hand,

put them on my tongue so I can remember what it was like
to be both from heaven and from earth, before I was ever afraid
of death and before my mother used to call me after having dreams
about me dying. Oh lord I can hear your angels plucking their guitar strings

and they are singing everything but our names.
I think if we let them sing long enough they will forget every word
they've ever learned until there's only the sounds of music
and lungs trying to remember themselves.

Honey in Four Ways

honey pot/make it stop/stir the ladle/
in my brain/so i stay/somewhat stable/
i can tell/there's a hell/creeping, waiting for/
when the sun goes down.

honey bee/taste your sting/on my finger/
barb to tongue/wings in lungs/pollen lingers/
oh it's fine/if my twine/comes unraveled/
when the sun goes down.

honeycomb/take me home/you'll be the last thing/
on my mind/if i die/in this half sleep/
i might slip/from the grip/of this body/
when the sun goes down.

honey cup/fill me up/with your high sea/
amber pool/come to cool/the drought in me/
sloshing waves/sipping waist/skin in glass/
until the sun comes up.

Gorged

*“Kill three million of them, and the rest will eat out of our hands”
— Yayha Khan before initiating Operation Searchlight.*

*“I wouldn't put out a statement praising it, but we're not going to condemn it either”
— Richard Nixon in regards to Operation Searchlight.*

So what could I have known about the bridges?

How beneath them Bengali dreams swam like carp,
fat-bellied and scaled, lips hovering over every sliver

of bread in the murky water. Above us on the stone
the conquerors toss their bits to them. It's all just spectacle.
If the future could be built by wishes

we'd have carved a kingdom out of this want.

Over the years our dreams grew gorged,
the bridge not enough, the people, the bread

not enough. So they started on the stone,
lust the slow work of erosion.

The bridge, no longer supported, could have survived

if not for the people buckling down on it with their weight.

And the carp knew, waited for the crumbling, stone and people;
and they ate and they ate and they ate.

Chimera

I reach for home
across two continents,
my wrists the rivers
Mississippi and Jamuna,

my mouth the Bengal
bay, body of water,
large as the country
it was named after,

my heart, half Atlantic
half Indian, slow
draining into tributaries,
my hands wanting so badly

to bridge home
and home-tongue.
How does a single cell
become the full body?

How do the catfish
and the *ilish* both know
to swim upstream?

My two-tongued mouth:
one always asking
questions, one
always answering.

[...]

there are days where
the love feels so great
there is no earth
large enough to hold it

there are nights where
the love feels so small
i mistake salt grains
for stars

there are pockets
of the heart
still waiting
to be heard

there is a hunger
we fear so deeply
we keep it
sleeping

the language we use
shapes the way
love moves
around us

most days
i am afraid
i have misplaced
my tongue

love makes the body
a field that must
be burned
so it can grow again

i imagined a future
without you
and it touched my heart
like death

i have seen heaven
and it looks
like
this

i have seen hell
and it looks
like
this

SECTION 3: SKY

How Could This Be a Time for Music?

It was a Thursday night & I was driving with my windows down because it was summer in Virginia & my air conditioning was busted. This is important because if my windows were up I wouldn't have heard him. I saw him—alone in the middle of the local high school's baseball field, illuminated by the massive flood lights overhead—playing slick jazz through a trumpet so rusted, every maroon scab pincer the light. This is important because it is not often you see a homeless man playing Coltrane in an empty diamond. It was so beautiful I stopped my car in the middle of the street because there was no room to pull over but I couldn't stop listening, couldn't stop watching his dark, cracked hands maneuver each valve with a tenderness that made me miss my mother. & I could tell the man behind me in the pick-up was upset but his windows weren't down. This is important because I think if his windows were down he wouldn't worry about where he was, or where he needed to be, I think he too, after hearing this song, would wish that every street corner on earth had a body lit up like a god coaxing a trumpet to speak heaven's tongue. & he wasn't looking out of his windows at the man in the baseball diamond, but at me. & how often have I been that man, glaring into someone's rearview mirror unaware that around me, grace was unraveling each thread in the sky to let the music come in.

Eating the Moon and Other Small Possibilities

Last night I dreamt I was so beautiful
not even the sun could stop me

from plucking the moon off its branch,
a ripe peach in my palm,

moondust sticking on my lips as I bit into it.
I sucked on its pit while watching

the oceans on earth shiver into space,
the way pollen lifts off shaken branches in April.

-

It took me a while to find you but finally I did.
Sitting on the edge of Saturn's rings,

herding its satellites and comets into a mason jar,
you shook it once before handing it to me.

We watched moons and rock
burst into an infinite dandelion.

-

In the morning I was just me again,
my body just my body,

but you were still next to me,
rendered marble and limestone in young light.

You kissed me and tasted like the cobbler
your mother made the night I met her.

Your blue eyes locked with mine, planets in a dance,
before shifting your small frame from your side

to mine, your thick, dirty blonde hair sweeping
worlds away behind you. The heat from our bodies

begged sweat from our skin. Our fingers tangled
into knots of ivory and chestnut.

Snapshots of the Body as a Bomb

September 12th, 2001: the cop
at my elementary school says, *I'm sorry*
I can't let you in. He means to say
You are brown, and dangerous.

*

My lungs holler to god the first time
I kiss you, barefoot and drenched in Chicago summer,
scream *thank you.* Your body curving into mine,
marble against copper.

*

At a stop sign the cop exits his vehicle,
hand on his hip, on his gun, I cork my throat,
thrust my hands out the window. He says
Is this your car? He means to say *Give me a reason to shoot.*

*

By this hour even night noises have gone
to sleep. I press a palm to my chest,
count the thumps, and wait for either
the eyes to shut or the heart to miss a beat.

*

Two weeks following the election,
a patron says *I don't want to be served*
by your kind. Says *I want to speak to the manager*
Surprise: I am the manager.

*

In sleep you whisper my name, hand squeezing
my shoulder, your voice soft as your sheets.
Even in the dark your skin glows, unlike mine—
just a thread in the fabric of night.

*

At seven I hunch over in a tub, nails
scrubbing until skin gives,

think I've finally struck gold, go look
in the mirror: still brown, now bleeding.

*

The curtain pulls back to the sold out pit.
No one expects a face like mine
center stage. My drummer hits the first beat of the kick drum.
My mouth opens every lung in the room.

*

TSA selects me for the fourth time this month,
motions me to a booth. The agent says
take off your clothes. He means to say *take off your skin*.
I stand there naked, weeping.

Hemayet

A wreath of geese crown the thumbprint of the sun.
 The light seems sharper and dimmer against the canvas of snowfall.
 I want to know you so I pack a fistful into my beard,
 trying to paint my black hair white and gray. For a moment it feels like remembering,
 the cold shocking the skin underneath. What little I have of you is this:

your name, *Hemayet*, which I know as my brother's name before yours.
 And even then I wonder if that really is yours, as your father died before you were two,
 your mother by the time you were six. Was it granted to you by your parents?
 Or your school teacher whose son you tutored in exchange for food and home?
 Or your spiritual teacher who, for nine years, versed you in the ways of Allah?
 Even in death, do you sometimes have trouble remembering?

Your face, whose stern, tender eyes kept vigil
 in my *chachu's* Chicago apartment, that face I see in my all dreams,
 your figure draped in white cloth. Some nights in the mirror,
 I see the ghost of you in myself and I reach for my cheek.

Your voice, which if I ever could hear you speak,
 I would imagine sounded like that of the cab driver
 who, too, was from Bangladesh and, upon hearing I was a poet,
 began to sing to me Tagore's poems in our mother tongue.

And I wonder how often you sang those poems too,
 or if you sang them at all, or if your tongue spent more time
 singing *surrabs* than songs, and I wonder if you'd agree with me
 when I say poems are prayers and when I touch the page
 I am trying to plead with god, and most of all I wonder if you'd be proud of me

for making it this far, or if because I am no longer a servant of Allah,
 I serve no purpose to you. But that must be my own insecurity
 muddling the truth because on the phone when I ask my father
 to tell me your story he says *all he ever did was preach tolerance and love*,

and when I tell him I've been seeing you in my dreams and in cab drivers
 he starts crying but moves away from the speaker hoping I can't hear.
 Between breaths my father says this is normal, that you have so much power
 you are a man who is mortal and is not. And we both sit with this, the static
 buzzing in our ears before he says *you have his blood*.

Ode to the Mothers We Could Never Be

"Who are you / when you wake up, / just before you remember?" - Kelsey Wort

Do you remember the night when you were young
and lying with your mother? How from deep sleep
she woke to say *I was a kingdom once*
only to fall asleep again?

Does the silence that followed scare you?
Crickets and floorboards and stars
muted by the weight of words.
In your mother's sapphire dreams,

she is remembering a time before you knew her name,
and she knew yours.

-

I remember my mother crying as we sat
in the parking lot. *It doesn't matter*
who you marry as long as you love them,
as long as they'll call me 'mom.'

At twelve that scared me, her trembling frame
and strange gasping between breaths while around us
people shuffled along the blacktop with their bags.
What could I have said to her then

to stop her shaking?
What did I know about love?

-

In the morning did you call for her
afraid she wouldn't recognize you,
too entranced by a life that was hers
and hers alone? But she knows love

and all its tender graces: the mornings
pouring milk into a bowl before you woke,
the afternoons she'd call you on her lunch break,
the evenings where her hands julienned carrots for dinner.

In her arm's lush coral, she soothes your whimpers.
I could never forget you. You are mine, little wren.

-
The night my mother learned I was suicidal
she combed my hair with her fingers how I liked
when I was little. *Have I been a bad mother?*
she asked, lying beside me. *How can you be so sad?*

I didn't say *no* like a good son, though it was the truth.
Instead I feigned sleep, listened to the sound of her breathing
and her fingers undoing tangles in my dark curls.
In the morning it is just me, her spot in my bed empty.

Down the hall I crack open her door
to finally speak, but find her deep in sleep.

June Song

“How could anything bad ever happen to you?/You make a fool of death with your beauty,/and for a moment/I forget to worry.” - Florence + The Machine, Hunger

There is a line
that runs from you

to me, taut like a kite string
in emerald sky and whenever you tug it,

know my weight before you, every ounce of me
pulling back. If we ever die then I am sure we'll have another

line in the next life and another in the life after that, until
every string intertwines like sinew and tendon;

we'll make beautiful bodies out of each other. We pirouette
on the dancefloor like flowers peacocking their petals while death fumes

at a table, drunk on chardonnay. He can't have us.
There is rosewater in your hair and the birds in the rafters hum June.

When god made summer, he sang you and the sun in a single breath.
This, and all the light around us, sits warm in our bellies.

Last Love Letter to Saturn

On September 15th, 2017, NASA space orbiter and probe, Cassini-Huygens, began the Grand Finale phase of its mission, intentionally plummeting towards and burning up in Saturn's atmosphere in response to exhausted fuel levels.

I am in your arms. Time may stop
and start, I don't notice.

This is love.
I spent a third of my life

finding you; the rest is history
man will speak of long after

your dazzling charms, your auring
hair tousled by your gales, have me.

More than a decade I ached for you
to touch me. I welcome the heat,

straddled by you, muscles shimmering,
bones made of comet and crushing.

Maybe our children will rollick
over your moons, glimmer in light

that dressed my skin.
Maybe we can run to Andromeda.

I no longer have to imagine;
I pull from your tongue all possibility.

Here, passing through your glowing rings,
my next mark will be your mouth.

Charon Over the Concrete

These days the rain
 takes no notice—
drowning some,
 parching others;

my umbrella a taxi
 for moths and other
small beings, my body
 a ferry over the river

that was once a sidewalk,
 flooded with milkweeds
and asters uprooted
 from the eroding soil.

I wiggle my hand
 in the wet fabric
until the cool metal
 of a quarter grazes my thumb,

checking my pockets
 to make sure I have enough
to bring these shells
 to the next life.

Field Guide for Dreams

my father's father died shortly after i met him i was a year old his pillowy gray beard
 all i remember every person seen in a dream living or dead is dead the first time i heard
 my grandfather's voice was at seven a cassette tape of him praying my father played it
 on the anniversary of his death it was the only day of the year i saw him cry
 clocks do not work in dreams books cannot be read because of this the dead can touch us
 their hands reaching across lifetimes to cup our faces their lips folding secrets into our skin
 the bangla i speak and the bangla my grandfather speaks two different tongues i dreamt in
 black and white until i was nine my grandfather's name is Hemayet no recollection of origin
 no last name he built our village with his bare hands in the last sleep where he comes i ask him
what is it like to die? and he says *it is like dreaming*

Destruction Myth

I fear that my most tender days
were behind me long before I met you.
But here I am, compelled to put honey
in my coffee, for you have made even the most bitter
of stone fruit sweet. And it is by no mistake honey
I put in here, for honey is the only substance on earth
that, alone, could sustain a body
starved of everything else.
And I know that at the end of days
when the rice paddies of Bangladesh to the fields of soybeans
and corn in Illinois have all been razed by locusts or flames,
we will climb every tree to find what little is left
to subsist on. From the homes of bees
we will shake everything into our throats,
wings, stingers, honey and all; and with our swollen tongues
we will recite the words *waaax* and *hiiive* and *coomb*
elongated and bloated as if it were the first time
we had found a language for our hurt and desire.
And finally, after all the world is ash and our sky
is no longer sullied by man's polluted light, every star
there ever was shall burn above us, hungry and gold.
And under the shimmering cosmic pollen
of forever's first spring, you will ask *will you have me?*
and I will say yes, and yes again,
until god's fingers snuff every mote of light.

Morning After First Snow

Crepe myrtle
stripped by December's
hand, warbled song
hanging in its skeleton

until that
too freezes, falls
to dawn's muted
canvas of snow.

Cardinal out
of place, hopping
branch to branch
like the last
heart-
 beat on earth.

You and I are Supercontinents (The Pangaea Effect)

We stretch like sea currents, try
to pull the continents back together.

Pangaea, Rodinia, Nuna
Ur, Vaalbara

It doesn't matter what we call it,
simply that we call it.

-

Kiss me
without your glasses.
Will you see me
in the right light then?

-

You deserve an island
& all I have given you
is the sea.

-

If the muscle forgets it is tense,
tension's release will turn it back
to water.

If the heart forgets what it meant,
will the mention of the heart fill its hallways
with salt?

-

If anything,
 if everything,
I am always drifting
back to you.

-

Kiss me again with both
your hands on my cheeks.
I don't need my glasses:

You are the aperture
for all light.

VITA

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