

CALLING

A

WOLF

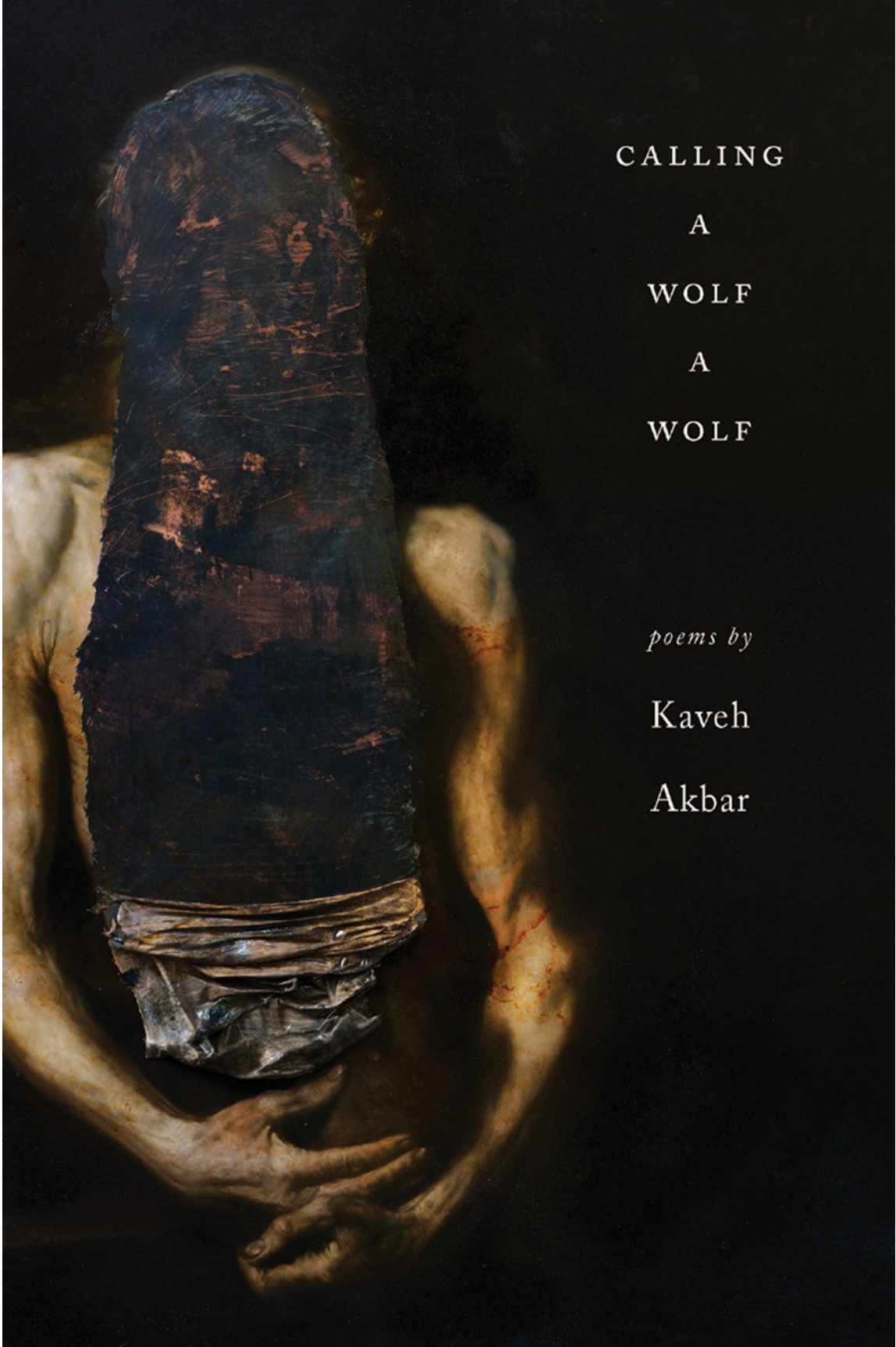
A

WOLF

poems by

Kaveh

Akbar



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NOTE TO THE READER

Alice James Books encourages you to calibrate your e-reader device settings using the line of characters below as a guide, which optimizes the line length and character size:

we are given at birth a pocket we fold into at death goodbye now
you mountain

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Narrative: “Do You Speak Persian?”

Nashville Review: “Portrait of the Alcoholic Three Weeks Sober”

New England Review: “No Is a Complete Sentence”

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Redivider: “Prayer”

Sixth Finch: “Stop Me If You’ve Heard This One Before”

Sonora Review: “Despite Their Size Children Are Easy to Remember They Watch You”

Spoon River Poetry Review: “Milk”

THRUSH: “Portrait of the Alcoholic with Moths and River”
Tin House: “Every Drunk Wants to Die Sober It’s How We Beat the Game,” “Against Dying,” “Against Hell”
TriQuarterly: “Unburnable the Cold is Flooding Our Lives”
Vinyl Poetry: “Rimrock”
Virginia Quarterly Review: “The New World,” “A Boy Steps into the Water”
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for Dan

SOOT

Sometimes God comes to earth disguised as rust,
chewing away a chain link fence or mariner's knife.

From up so close we must seem
clumsy and gloomless, like new lovers

undressing in front of each other
for the first time. Regarding loss, I'm afraid
to keep it in the story,
worried what I might bring back to life,

like the marble angel who woke to find
his innards scattered around his feet.

Blood from the belly tastes sweeter
than blood from anywhere else. We know this

but don't know why—the woman on TV
dabs a man's gutwound with her hijab
then draws the cloth to her lips, confused.
I keep dreaming I'm a creature pulling out my
claws

one by one to sell in a market stall next to stacks
of pomegranates and garden tools. It's predictable,

the logic of dreams. Long ago I lived in Heaven
because I wanted to. When I fell to earth

I knew the way—through the soot, into the leaves.

It still took years. Upon landing, the ground
embraced me sadly, with the gentleness
of someone delivering tragic news to a child.

I. TERMINAL

“All sins tend to be addictive, and the terminal point of addiction is
damnation.”

—W. H. AUDEN

WILD PEAR TREE

it's been January for months in both directions frost
over grass like pale fungus like
mothdust the branches of the pear tree are pickling
in ice white as the long white line running from me
to the smooth whales frozen in chunks of ocean
from their vast bobbing to the blackwhite
stars flowering into heaven the hungry cat gnaws
on a sliver of mirror and I have been chewing
out my stitches wondering which
warm names we should try singing
wild thyme cowslip blacksnake all the days
in a year line up at the door and I deflect each saying *no*
you will not be needed one by one they skulk off
into the cold the cat hates this place more than he loves
me he cannot remember the spring when I fed him
warm duck fat daily nor the kitchen vase filled with musky blue
roses nor the pear tree which was so eager to toss its fruit so sweet
it made us sleepy I stacked the pears on the mantle
until I ran out of room and began filling them into
the bathtub one evening I slid in as if into a mound
of jewels now ghost finches leave footprints
on our snowy windowsills the cat paces
through the night listening for their chirps our memories

have frosted over ages ago we guzzled
all the rosewater in the vase still we check for it
nightly I have forgotten even
the easy prayer I was supposed to use
in emergencies something something I was not
born here I was not born here I was not

DO YOU SPEAK PERSIAN?

Some days we can see Venus in midafternoon. Then at night, stars
separated by billions of miles, light traveling years

to die in the back of an eye.

Is there a vocabulary for this—one to make dailiness amplify
and not diminish wonder?

I have been so careless with the words I already have.

I don't remember how to say *home*
in my first language, or *lonely*, or *light*.

I remember only
delam barat tang shodeh, I miss you,

and *shab bekheir*, good night.

How is school going, Kaveh-joon?
Delam barat tang shodeh.

Are you still drinking?
Shab bekheir.

For so long every step I've taken
has been from one tongue to another.

To order the world:
I need, you need, he/she/it needs.

The rest, left to a hungry jackal
in the back of my brain.

Right now our moon looks like a pale cabbage rose.
Delam barat tang shodeh.

We are forever folding into the night.
Shab bekheir.

YEKI BOOD YEKI NABOOD

every day someone finds what they need
in someone else

you tear into a body
and come out with a fistful of the exact
feathers you were looking for wondering
why anyone would want to swallow
so many perfect feathers

everyone

looks uglier naked or at least
I do my pillar of fuzz my damp
lettuce

I hoarded an entire decade
of bliss of brilliant dime-sized raptures
and this is what I have to show
for it a catastrophe of joints this
puddle I'm soaking in which came
from my crotch and never did
dry

the need
to comfort anyone else to pull
the sickle from their chest seems
unsummonable now as a childhood
pet as Farsi or tears

I used to slow
dance with my mother in our living
room spiritless as any prince I felt
the bark of her spine softening I became
an agile brute she became a stuffed
ox I hear this happens
all over the world

PORTRAIT OF THE ALCOHOLIC WITH HOME INVADER AND HOUSEFLY

It felt larger than it was, the knife
that pushed through my cheek.

Immediately I began leaking:
blood and saliva, soft as smoke. I had been asleep,

safe from sad news, dreaming
of my irradiated hairless mother

pulling a thorn from the eye of a dog.
I woke from that into a blade. Everything

seemed cast in lapis and spinning light,
like an ancient frieze in Damascus.

Listen to me, faithful silence: somehow
we've become strangers. Growing up

I kept a housefly tied to a string tied to a lamp.
I fed him wet Tic Tacs and idly assumed

he would outlive me. When he died

I opened myself to death, the way a fallen tree
opens itself to the wild. Now my blood
is drying on the pillow. Now the man
who held the knife is gone, elsewhere
and undiminished. I can hardly remember
anything about him. It can be difficult
telling the size of something
when it's right above you—the average
cumulus cloud weighing as much
as eighty elephants. The things I've thought I've loved
could sink an ocean liner, and likely would
if given the chance. From my window,
the blinking windmills seem
further away than ever before. My beard
has matted itself into a bloody poultice,
and a woman's voice on TV is begging for charity.
She says *please* and reads a phone number. Soon I will
mumble a few words in Arabic to settle back
into sleep. If morning arrives, I will wash my face.

RECOVERY

First, setting down the glass.

Then the knives.

Black resin seeps

into the carpet.

According to science,

I should be dead.

Lyptus table, unsteady

boat, drifts away.

Angostura, agave,

elderflower, rye—

the whole paradisa

bouquet spins apart.

Here, I am graceless.

No. Worse than that.

DRINKAWARE SELF-REPORT

—How many drinks do you have per week?

I drink what I drink lie where I lie I
deserve all the things I desire cocktail
chatter cymbals crashing green pills
which long ago stopped working
which I still carry to trade for
cigarettes or pitchers of Old Style it almost
feels like cheating

*—How often during the last year have you found that
you were not able to stop drinking once you had
started?*

I am an ugly boy but it's a pretty
day everywhere hard blue snow and old
men arguing the facts of a story they
weren't even born for they hate me I am
the only person here not grieving

*—How often during the last year have you had a
feeling of guilt or remorse after drinking?*

filthy with pride I am standing as ever before watch
me sing through the jaw of a mouse about
the old miracles a crimson robe floating
up from the Gobi

sand into prophet then back into sand

*—How often during the last year have you been
unable to recall what happened the night before
because you had been drinking?*

even the river is tired of its slimy brown water there is no end to
wanting pensioners walk around a mall ogling
watches they'll never buy one collapses
in front of the display case his skin
shimmers with sweat he looks
like a great carp

*—Have you or somebody else been injured as a result
of your drinking?*

under gold

light my

hands look

gold I

long to

be aes-

theti-

cized

to have

my bones

laced with

silver

my eyes

blooming

into

marguerites

CALLING A WOLF A WOLF (INPATIENT)

like the sky I've been too quiet everyone's forgotten I'm
here I've tried all the usual tricks pretending I've just been
made terrifying like a suddenly carnivorous horse like a rabid
hissing sapphire the medical response has been clear *sit*
patiently until invited to leave outside the lake is evaporating
dry blue like a galley proof a month ago they dragged up a
drowned tourist his bloatwhite belly filled with radishes and lamb
shank his entire digestive system was a tiny museum of
pleasure compared to him I am healthy and unremarkable here
I am reading a pharmaceutical brochure here I am dying at an
average pace envy is the only deadly sin that's no fun for the
sinner this makes sadness seem more like a tradition loyalty to
a parent's past I try to find small comforts purple clover
growing in the long grass a yellow spider on the windowsill I
am less horrible than I could be I've never set a house on
fire never thrown a firstborn off a bridge still my whole life I
answered every cry for help with a pour with a turning
away I've given this coldness many names thinking if it had a
name it would have a solution thinking if I called a wolf a wolf I
might dull its fangs I carried the coldness like a diamond for
years holding it close near as blood until one day I woke
and it was fully inside me both of us ruined and

unrecognizable two coins on a train track the train crushed into
one

STOP ME IF YOU'VE HEARD THIS ONE BEFORE

I can't even remember my name, I who remember
so much—football scores, magic tricks, deep love
so close to God it was practically religious.

When you fall asleep in that sort of love
you wake up with bruises on your neck. I don't
have drunks, sirs, I have adventures. Every day

my body follows me around asking
for things. I try to think louder, try
to be brilliant, wildly brilliant. We all want

the same thing (to walk in sincere wonder,
like the first man to hear a parrot speak), but we live
on an enormous flatness floating between

two oceans. Sometimes you just have to leave
whatever's real to you, you have to clomp
through fields and kick the caps off

all the toadstools. Sometimes
you have to march all the way to Galilee
or the literal foot of God himself before you realize

you've already passed the place where
you were supposed to die. I can no longer remember
the being afraid, only that it came to an end.

PORTRAIT OF THE ALCOHOLIC WITH WITHDRAWAL

everyone wants to know
 what I saw on the long walk
away from you

 I couldn't eat
and didn't sleep
 for an entire week

I can hardly picture any of it now
 save the fox I thought
was in the grass but wasn't

 I remember him quiet
as a telescope
 tiny as a Plutonian moon

everything else
 was wilding around us
the sky and the wind

 the riptides and
the rogue comet
 blasting toward earth

do you remember this

I introduced myself
by one of the names

I kept back then
the fox was so still

I could have called him anything

SOME BOYS AREN'T BORN THEY BUBBLE

some boys aren't born they bubble

up from the earth's crust land safely around
kitchen tables green globes of fruit already

in their mouths when they find themselves crying
they stop crying these boys moan
more than other boys they do as desire

demands when they dance their bodies plunge
into space and recover the music stays
in their breastbones they sing songs about

storms then dry their shoes on porches
these boys are so cold their pilot lights never light
they buy the best heat money can buy blue flames

swamp smoke they are desperate
to lick and be licked sometimes one will eat
all the food in a house or break every bone

in his jaw sometimes one will disappear into
himself
like a ram charging a mirror when this happens

they all feel it afterwards the others dream

of rain their pupils boil they light black candles

and pray the only prayer they know *oh lord*

spare this body set fire to another

HERITAGE

Reyhaneh Jabbari, a twenty-six-year-old Iranian woman, was hanged on October 25th, 2014 for killing a man who was attempting to rape her.

the body is a mosque borrowed from Heaven centuries of time
stain the glazed brick our skin rubs away like a chip
in the middle of an hourglass sometimes I am so ashamed

of my sentience how little it matters angels don't care about
humility
you shaved your head spent eleven days half-starved in solitary
and not a single divine trumpet wept into song now it's lonely all
over

I'm becoming more a vessel of memories than a person it's a
myth
that love lives in the heart it lives in the throat we push it out
when we speak when we gasp we take a little for ourselves

in books love can be war-ending a soldier drops his sword
to lie forking oysters into his enemy's mouth in life we hold love
up to the light
to marvel at its impotence you said in a letter to Sholeh

you weren't even killing the roaches in your cell that you would
take them up
by their antennae and flick them through the bars into a courtyard
where you could see men hammering long planks of cypress into
gallows

the same men who years before threw their rings in the mud who
watered them
five times daily who shot blackbirds off almond branches
and kissed the soil at the sight of sprouts then cursed each other
when the stalks

which should have licked their lips withered dryly at their
knees may God beat
us awake scourge our brains to life may we measure every
victory
by the momentary absence of pain there is no solace in
history this is a gift

we are given at birth a pocket we fold into at death goodbye
now you mountain
you armada of flowers you entire miserable decade in a lump in
my throat
despite all our endlessly rehearsed rituals of mercy it was you we
sent on

MILK

the geese are curving around the horizon drawing maps
a curve is a straight line broken at all its points so much
of being alive is breaking

the indestructible red beetles
are growing weaker they no longer delight in their collecting
bark bits of tobacco a chip of goat bone would you rather
have a day begin in silence and end in song or the opposite you
can't have both once I went silent for a week once I couldn't

walk for two months I lay in bed eating drugs rocking
into paleness even the bright flurry of finches outside dull I worry
sometimes there is no true wildness

I cannot be trusted to return
what I've been given I need to be taken care of paradise lies
at the feet of mothers I will believe you when you tell me your
dreams
please mother me kiss all my secret rashes I am awake and will be

PORTRAIT OF THE ALCOHOLIC WITH DOUBT AND KINGFISHER

You just don't know yet which parts
of yourself to value—
your spittle or its syrupy smell,

your irises or their mothish obsession
with light. Even the trap-caught fox
knew enough to chew away its leg,

delighting (if such a thing can be said)
at the relative softness of marrow.
Nature rewards this kind of courage—

a kingfisher shoots into a pond
and comes out with a stickleback.

Starving mice will often eat their own tails

before ceding to hunger. The lesson:
it's never too late to become
a new thing, to rip the fur

from your face and dive
dimplefirst into the strange.

Some people don't even want to drink,
aren't tempted by the pools of liquor
all around them. This seems
a selfishness. God loves the hungry
more than the full. Faith is a story
about people totally unlike you
building concrete walls around their beds.
Behind each of their faces: a slowly dying
animal. Do you feel summoned?
Do you feel heaven closing itself
to you like a clamshell snapping shut?
Blessed are those who can distract themselves
and blessed are the distractions: a fuzzy purse
of bellyfat, a bit of mint growing wild
along a driveway, china plates piled high with food
so pale you pepper it just to see it's there.

DESUNT NONNULLA

as a child I wasn't so much foreign as I was very small my soul
still unsmogged by its station I walked learning
the names of things each new title a tiny seizure
of joy *paleontologist tarpaper marshmallow* I polished them
like trophies
eager in delight and color-blind though I still loved crayons
for their names *cerulean gunmetal* and *corn-*
flower more than making up for the hues I couldn't tell apart even
our great-grandparents saw different blues owing
to the rapid evolution of rods and cones now I resist
acknowledging the riches I've inherited hard bones and a mind
full
of names it's so much easier to catalog hunger to atomize
absence and carry each bit like ants taking home a meal

I am insatiable every grievance levied against me
amounts to ingratitude I need to be broken like an unruly mustang
like bitten skin supposedly people hymned before names their
mouths
were zeroes little pleasure portals for taking in grape
leaves cloudberry the fingers of lovers today words fly
in all directions I don't know how anyone does
anything I miss my mouth sipping coffee and spend

the day explaining the dribble to strangers who patiently
endure my argle-bargle before returning
to their appetites I am not a slow learner I am a quick forgetter
such erasing makes one voracious if you teach me something
beautiful I will name it quickly before it floats away

LEARNING TO PRAY

My father moved patiently
cupping his hands beneath his chin,
kneeling on a janamaz

then pressing his forehead to a
circle

of Karbala clay.

Occasionally
he'd glance over at my clumsy
mirroring,

my too-big Packers T-shirt
and pebble-red shorts,
and smile a little, despite himself.

Bending there with his whole form
marbled in light, he
looked like
a photograph of a famous ghost.

I ached to be so beautiful.
I hardly knew anything yet—
not the boiling point of water

or the capital of Iran,
not the five pillars of
Islam
or the Verse of the Sword—

I knew only that I wanted
to be like him,
that twilit stripe of father

mesmerizing as the bluewhite Iznik
tile
hanging in our kitchen,
worshipped
as the long faultless tongue of God.

PORTRAIT OF THE ALCOHOLIC THREE WEEKS SOBER

The first thing I ever saw die—a lamb that took ten long minutes. Instead of rolling into the grass, her blood pooled on the porch. My uncle stepped away from the puddle, called it *a good omen for the tomatoes* then lit a tiny black cigar. Years later I am still picking romas

out of my salads. The barbarism of eating anything seems almost unbearable. With drinking however I've always been prodigious. A garden bucket filled with cream would disappear, and seconds later I'd emerge patting my belly. I swear, I could conjure rain clouds

from piles of ash, guzzle down whole human bodies, the faces like goblets I'd drain then put back in the cupboard. So trust me now: when I say *thirst*, I mean defeated, abandoned-in-faith, lonely-as-the-slow-charge-into-a-bayonet *thirst*. Imagine being the sand forced to watch silt dance

in the Nile. Imagine being the oil boiling away an entire person. Today, I'm finding problems in areas where I didn't have areas before.

I'm grateful to be trusted with any of it: the bluebrown ocean undrinkable as a glass of scorpions, the omnipresent fragrant

honey and the bees that guard it. It just seems such a severe sort of
miraculousness. Even the terminal dryness of bone hides inside our
skin
plainly, like dust on a mirror. This can guide us forward
or not guide us at all. Maybe it's that *forward* seems too
chronological,
the way the future-perfect always sounds so cavalier
when someone tells me *some day this will all have been worth it*.

SUPPLICATION WITH RABBIT SKULL AND BOUQUET

take me by the elbow

can you see the bones left in my ear

our messiahs are blowing us kisses from
heaven

they speak in the continental longhand

the doubt between us hangs like a moon

there is no such thing as certainty

the spell cast in the night was just a hard
wind

your cup is still full of poison

whose blood is this on the bedsheets

not that cross

I'm thankful for your beaded carapace

I am a grown man

excuse the buttery light haloing my head

I lack money

can you help me with any of this

you have swallowed so much already

the fire under my bed is quiet as a fossil

I trust completely whatever's in your body

visit me at home where ghosts will watch
us from the closet

take me by force

can you see the boy's name cut in my bark

our messiahs are hopeless and modern

they speak only in our sleep

the doubt between us stickies our tongues

there is no such thing as sorcery

the spell cast on your cup was just a heap of words

your cup was never there at all

whose blood is this on the cross

not any cross you know

I'm thankful for your yellow pills

I am growing into my science

excuse the rabbit skull crunching in my teeth

I lack sexual preference

can you help me shrink back to a dainty mouthful

you have swallowed even my bouquet of corn and straw

the fire under my bed is simple as a bed

I trust completely whatever's in your pockets

visit me at home and pin your money to my skin

EXCITING THE CANVAS

That the moon causes tides
seems too witchy to be science.
The sea purging sheet iron,
jeans, a jewel-eyed
alabaster goat. Is that
why I'm here? Everyone
needs kudos, from newborns
to saviors. Nora, nearly three,
draws sunlight in golden bars,
not unlike an Impressionist painter.
I like to think of light this way,
dispensed in attaché cases
to illuminate as needed.
The famous poet said *write
by the light of your wounds.*
A drunk flies over his bicycle handlebars,
crumples by the side of the road.
Performed pain is still pain.
Some people born before the Model T
lived to see man walk on the moon.
To be strapped like that
to the masthead of history
would make me frantic.

At parties I'd shout
I'm frantic, and you? Like a fire,
hungry and resisting containment,
I'd pound at the windows, my
mouth full of hors d'oeuvres.
Outside—sweeping plains
of green flora and service stations.
Odd, for an apocalypse
to announce itself with such bounty.
I hear crickets chirp and think
of my weaker heart, the tiny one
sewn behind the one
that beats. It lives there
made entirely of watery pink light,
flapping at dawn like a baby's cheek.
It doesn't take much
to love a saint like me.
On a gravel road, the soft tissues
of my eye detect a snake curling
around a tree branch. Because I am here
each of these things has a name.

A BOY STEPS INTO THE WATER

and of course he's beautiful
goosebumps over his ribs
like tiny fists under a thin sheet the sheet
all mudwet and taste of walnut

and of course I'm afraid of him
of the way keeping him a secret will make him
inevitable I will do anything to avoid
getting carried away sleep nightly with coins

over my eyes set fire to an entire
zodiac mecca is a moth
chewing holes in a shirt I left
at a lover's house a body loudly

consumes days and awaits the slow
fibrillation of its heart a lightning rod
sits in silence until finally the storm
now the boy is scooping up minnows

and swallowing them like a heron
I'm done trying to make sense
of any of this no one will believe anything

that comes out a mouth like mine

WAKE ME UP WHEN IT'S MY BIRTHDAY

Brow-wrinkling beloveds—shhhh.

What I do to my body is nobody's
business. Practice ignoring whatever
you're able: the names I forget,
my mistimed erections, teeth marks I leave
in your gold. It's amazing what you can find
if you just dissect everything. Once

I pulled a glowing crystal from my beard
and buried it in the earth. The next day

I went to the spot and dug up a silver trumpet
I still haven't learned to play. Jealousy,

sexual or otherwise, begins with touch—
tears fall on a stone and the stone suddenly
wants eyes; a countess is fished from the ocean
and her pearls slip quiet into the captain's
pocket. Take it all out on me. Or, take it up
with my maker, who is right now
stiff with guilt sitting in heaven, chain-
chewing whitening gum. In the first
language, the word for *bridge* translates
to *death by water*. The iron law of congestion:
traffic expands to flood any available

space. Keep a soul open and it's bound
to fill up with scum. It's all I can do to quiver
in and out of my jeans each day, to keep
my fingers out of the wrong mouths.
A man creates the most joy in the abstract,
when you can remove his actual body,
its shear carapace and bleeding gums. Cut it
away, the entire boring envelope, and marvel
at what remains: a pulsing vacuum bag
stuffed with rubies and bone spurs, a pink
lighthouse only barely heavier than its light.

II. HUNGER

“The evidence of a successful miracle is the return of hunger.”

—FANNY HOWE

WHAT SEEMS LIKE JOY

how much history is enough history before we can agree
to flee our daycares to wash everything away and start over
leaving laptops to be lost in the wet along with housecats and
Christ's
own mother even a lobster climbs away from its shell a few
times a life but every time I open my eyes I find
I am still inside myself each epiphany dull and familiar
oh now I am barefoot oh now I am lighting the wrong end
of a cigarette I just want to be shaken new like a flag whipping
away its dust want to pull out each of my teeth
and replace them with jewels I'm told what seems like joy
is often joy that the soul lives in the throat plinking
like a copper bell I've been so young for so many years
it's all starting to jumble together joy jewelizing copper
its plink a throat sometimes I feel beautiful and near dying
like a feather on an arrow shot through a neck other times
I feel tasked only with my own soreness like a scab on the roof
of a mouth my father believed in gardens delighting
at burying each thing in its potential for growth some years
the soil was so hard the water seeped down slower than the green
seeped up still he'd say *if you're not happy in your own yard
you won't be happy anywhere* I've never had a yard but I've had
apartments

where water pipes burst above my head where I've scrubbed
a lover's blood from the kitchen tile such cleaning
takes so much time you expect there to be confetti at the end
what we'll need in the next life toothpaste party hats
and animal bones every day people charge out of this world
squealing good-bye human behavior! so long acres
of germless chrome! it seems gaudy for them to be so cavalier
with their bliss while I'm still here lurching into my labor
hanging by my hair from the roof of a chapel churchlight
 thickening
around me or wandering into the woods to pull apart
 eggshells emptying
them in the dirt then sewing them back together to dry in the sun

BEST SHADOWS

You love when I'm like this, coated
with ranch dressing and rum. Look under

the bandages—an entire saint! Here's
what I own: a blackened coin and yes

for an answer. The countdown to the next major miracle
is on. Till then, I'll manage less and less. Did you rejoice

when you left? If you spin around quickly enough,
it's almost like being drunk. This has to do

with the liquids in your skull. I never told you
about the tiny beetle I saw crawl out of your ear, afraid

you wouldn't sleep in my bed again if you knew.
I wish you were here so I could bend a mirror

around your face, pour you back into you. Ah,
there goes another wish. Minute to minute I'm fine—

right lung, left lung, blink—but the late hours
get so long. One of the best shadows I cast is the one

that ripples over water. There is so much ink
in our river now; it's swallowing up all the green.

Do you know how hard it is to dig a new river?
To be the single tongue in a sack full of teeth?

Sometimes I get the feeling you're never coming back.

PORTRAIT OF THE ALCOHOLIC WITH MOTHS AND RIVER

some moths don't even have mouthparts using
only stored caterpillar energy
their lives are measured in days scissoring
tributaries for every you there
are a hundred moths luxuriously
dying their spirits spoiled by excess

what you lack and the punishment for your
lacking are the same paling tulips gray-
ing fingernails a body nearly stops
then doesn't I have seen it a man slips
beneath a blanket emerges clutching
himself saying this is mine I found it

rivers often do the same thing claiming
whatever they pour into cathedrals
gardens snakeholes do you see how afraid
I am for you all men are drawn to the
black water moonless the quiet drums a
name it's not yours it's not mine listen

to make life first you need a dying star

this seems important with you so close to
collapsing yourself the mute swan's final
burst of song I know you've tried this before
when they asked where it hurt you motioned in
a circle to the ground under your feet

RIMROCK

Without the benefit of fantasy
I can't promise I'll be of any use.

Left to the real world I tend
to swell up like roots in the rain,

tend to get all lost in hymns
and astrology charts. Lately

I've been steaming away, thin
as cigarette paper, cleaning up

the squirrels that keep dying in my yard.
Each cascade of fur feels like a little tuft

of my own death. Am I being dramatic?
Mostly I want to be letters—not

their sounds, but their shapes
on a page. It must be exhilarating

to be a symbol for everything at once:
the bone caught in a child's windpipe,

the venom hiding in a snake's jaw.
I used to be so afraid of nature.

Peering up at a rush of rimrock
I imagined how unashamed it would be

to crush even me, a tiny stuttering boy
with glasses. I pictured myself

reduced to a warm globe of blood
and yearned to become sturdy in my end-

lessness, to grow heavy and terrible
as molten iron poured down a throat. Still,

I don't know the rules. If I go looking
for grace and find it, what will grace

yield? Broken ribs, probably, flakes
of rust, an X marked in an atlas which itself

has been lost for ages. Oh, but I do
know what I am: moonstruck, stiff

as wet bamboo. I remember someone
once sang here, once strung together

a garland of near-holy moments.
It's serious business, this living.

As long as the earth continues
its stony breathing, I will breathe.

When it stops, I will shatter back
into gravity. Into quartz.

PRAYER

again I am thinking of self-love filled with self-love the
stomach
of the girl who ate only hair was filled with hair they cut
it out when she died it formed a mold of her stomach reducing
a life to its most grotesque artifact my gurgling internal devotion
to myself a jaw half-formed there are words
I will not say the muscle of my face smeared
with clay I am more than the worry I make I choose
my words carefully we now know some angels are more
terrifying
than others our enemies are replaceable the stones behind their
teeth
glow in moonlight compared to even a small star
the moon is tiny it is not God but the flower behind God I treasure

BESIDES, LITTLE GOAT, YOU CAN'T JUST GO ASKING FOR MERCY

Besides, little goat, you can't just go asking for mercy.

With a body like that, it's easy to forget

about the spirit—the sun unfolding over your coat, your throat
too elegant for prayer. I like it fine, this daily struggle

to not die, to not drink or smoke or snort anything
that might return me to combustibility. Historical problem:

it's harder than you'd think to burn even what's flammable.

Once, I charged into your body and invented breath. Or,

I stumbled into your mouth and found you breathing. When I left,
I left a lozenge of molten ore on your tongue. Stony grain-pounder,

sleepy pattern-locator, do this: cover your wings, trust
the earth, spread your genes. Nothing here is owned. The ladder

you're looking for starts not on the ground but several feet below it.

THIRSTINESS IS NOT EQUAL DIVISION

I swear to God I swear at God I won't
mention what He does to me I lack nothing I need
unless you count everything I want I'm meant
to be spreading tenderness over the earth like seeds
like worms instead I've been shoveling coal
into burning houses fanning the ash hold your
applause hold the horns curling out from my skull
which are getting so long now and so sharp if you think
of evolution as ancestral advice then a baby's eyelids
drooping from fruitsugar could mean this world
is too sweet to bear awake give me an orgy of sleep
give me sleep from every angle for years I stood
in the semeny ginko staring at my hands believing
in afterlives thinking one day I'd wake into
a new kind of body like a fish suddenly
breathing air through its eyes it's easy to give life
as a gift pull a fisherman from frozen water or
put a puppy in a Christmas box but it's harder
to remember stillness is also a prize consider
the composer's fever and the aria it delivered
or the beggar who woke to find a jewel
in his palm once I saw a girl's death mask smoothed
by the kisses her father gave it nightly once

I cut open my thigh on a razor wire fence and filled
the wound with Kleenex somehow it healed leaving
only a long white scar the penalties for my disregard
have always been oversoft deterring nothing
I've made it clear I am not to be trusted with a body
always leaving mine bloodless as ice with just a needle
of breath left in its lungs sometimes when I run
I run like a beautiful man in straight lines clean
as spidersilk sometimes if I'm silent for long enough
even the wild around me stops moving

LONG PIG

I came to speak about luck but I fear dismantling what is already simple so I will say only that if you are fortunate enough to have a body you shouldn't leave it lying wet on the floor where anyone could shred it to bits it is worth treating well see also the perfect pine replica of my breastbone which fell off the wall shattering

across

the tile see also the sixteen-celled fetus half-mine lost in the plumbing

of an apartment we lovingly called the Trash Castle say something or say

nothing the options are always the same and often so are the results

some birds have feathers but can't fly and even they cherish their flesh bathing it in sand or snow every animal longs to be bare

to chew through its fur and melt directly into weather like dry ice there is

a moment of startle when a thing really sees itself for the first time a shock of *hey me it's me you* in this way we are all each other's mascots

equal and opposite in my dreams I am a cannibal eating long pig in a strange unmappable country it seeps into my living I stay a throb

of hunger and brainstem if you move even a little I will take you in
my mouth

BEING IN THIS WORLD MAKES ME FEEL LIKE A TIME TRAVELER

visiting a past self. Being anywhere makes me thirsty.
When I wake, I ask God to slide into my head quickly before I do.
As a boy, I spit a peach pit onto my father's prayer rug and
immediately

it turned into a locust. Its charge: devour the vast fields of my
ignorance.

The Prophet Muhammad described a full stomach as containing
one-third food, one-third liquid, and one-third air.

For years, I kept a two-fists-long beard and opened my mouth only
to push air out.

One day I stopped in a lobby for cocktails and hors d'oeuvres
and ever since, the life of this world has seemed still. Every night,

the moon unpeels itself without affectation. It's exhausting,
remaining

humble amidst the vicissitudes of fortune. It's difficult
to be anything at all with the whole world right here for the having.

AGAINST DYING

if the body is just a parable
about the body if breath
is a leash to hold the mind
then staying alive should be
easier than it is most sick
things become dead things
at twenty-four my liver was
already covered in fatty
rot my mother filled a tiny
coffin with picture frames
I spent the year drinking
from test tubes weeping
wherever I went somehow
it happened wellness crept
into me like a roach nibbling
through an eardrum for
a time the half minutes
of fire in my brainstem
made me want to pull out
my spine but even those
have become bearable so
how shall I live now
in the unexpected present

I spent so long in a lover's
quarrel with my flesh
the peace seems overcautious
too-polite I say
stop being cold or *make*
that blue bluer and it does
we speak to each other
in this code where every word
means *obey* I sit under
a poplar tree with a thermos
of chamomile feeling
useless as an oath against
dying I put a sugar cube
on my tongue and
swallow it like a pill

PORTRAIT OF THE ALCOHOLIC WITH RELAPSE FANTASY

You're in a car and crying and amazed
at how bad it feels to do bad things. Then

you're in a hotel bathroom with blood
on your undershirt and the smell of a too-

chlorinated pool outside. You know
one hundred ways to pray to the gods

rippling beneath that water. Confess, tangle,
pass through. Once your room is dark

they come inside, dripping wet. When you show
them the burnt place on your arm,

they show you the bands of flesh cut
from their thighs. You suck their tongues,

trace the blisters under their wings. It's so lucky,
this living forever all at once. When you turn

on the lights, you're inconsolably

glad. You could stop this whenever, but why?

ORCHIDS ARE SPROUTING FROM THE FLOORBOARDS

Orchids are sprouting from the floorboards.
Orchids are gushing out from the faucets.
The cat mews orchids from his mouth.
His whiskers are also orchids.
The grass is sprouting orchids.
It is becoming mostly orchids.
The trees are filled with orchids.
The tire swing is twirling with orchids.
The sunlight on the wet cement is a white orchid.
The car's tires leave a trail of orchids.
A bouquet of orchids lifts from its tailpipe.
Teenagers are texting each other pictures
of orchids on their phones, which are also orchids.
Old men in orchid penny loafers
furiously trade orchids.
Mothers fill bottles with warm orchids
to feed their infants, who are orchids themselves.
Their coos are a kind of orchid.
The clouds are all orchids.
They are raining orchids.
The walls are all orchids,
the teapot is an orchid,
the blank easel is an orchid,

and this cold is an orchid. Oh,
Lydia, we miss you terribly.

THE NEW WORLD

Do I have to talk about fear?
So much has already been said
about hidden spiders, compass needles
lodged in the soft of an eye.

The soul is a thirsty
antelope nervously lapping up
water from a pool
in the hunter's backyard.

Or so I've been told. Sometimes
when I listen to old Persian music
I get so sad I can actually smell rosewater.
This is a Real Thing That Happens.

If home is the question,
the honest answers must all be elegant
forgeries. Must be sprinkled
with sumac. Droughts occur

constantly under God's holy watch.
His response? He yawns
immortally on his throne,

fans himself with an elephant ear.

*The lion was so exhausted and numb
that a person might've thought
they could
kiss it.*

The calculus of desperation yields
everything in miniature. I fell in love
with the volume of an earlobe
rotated around the axis of a spine.

*My dear,
how did you
end up
like this?*

Withhold the accident. Withhold
the tiny aches. Withhold the body's
capacity for desiccation, for ineffable
grief. There are no new worlds left to dream.

There is no new world.

AGAINST HELL

With sensitive enough instruments even uprooting a shrub
becomes a seismic event. So much of living is about
understanding
scale—a tiny crystal dropped in a river turns the entire river

red. The hands that folded me into my body
were not punishing me
nor could they ever be punished, while the hands of the
idol sculptor
were cut off and tossed to the dogs. This is proof
of something,

but what? Maybe that retribution has grown vulgar, with sin now
inevitable as summer sweat. Most days I try hard to act
human, to breathe
like a human and speak with the same flat language, but often

my kindness is clumsy—I stop a stranger to tie
his shoe and
end up kissing his knees. I believe in luck and am
barely troubled
by its volatility. I remember too well the knife
held to my gut, the beehive

I once spat at for hours without getting stung. The charm of this
particular dilemma: faith begins where knowing ends. The
undertaker

spills his midday latte on a corpse, a chariot wheel flies off

and kills a slave, and nobody asks for a refund.

The unexpected

happens, then what? The next thing. I feel most like a
person when

I am forcing something to be silent, holding a
rat underwater or twining

shut the jaw of a lamb before it's roasted on the spit. It's only natural
to smell

smoke and feel hungry, to lean into the confusion of tongues.

If I am

to be punished for any of this, it will be thousands of years too late.

PALMYRA

after Khaled al-Asaad

bonepole bonepole since you died
there's been dying everywhere
do you see it slivered where you are
between a crown and a tongue the question still
more god or less I am all tangled
in the smoke you left the swampy herbs
the paper crows horror leans in and brings
its own light this life so often inadequately
lit your skin peels away your bones soften
your rich unbecoming a kind of apology

when you were alive your cheekbones
dropped shadows across your jaw I saw a picture
I want to dive into that darkness smell
the rosewater the sand irreplaceable
jewel how much of the map did you leave
unfinished there were so many spiders
your mouth a moonless system
of caves filling with dust
the dust thickened to tar

your mouth opened and tar spilled out

UNBURNABLE THE COLD IS FLOODING OUR LIVES

the prophets are alive but unrecognizable to us
as calligraphy to a mouse for a time they dragged

long oar strokes across the sky now they sit
in graveyards drinking coffee forking soapy cottage cheese

into their mouths my hungry is different than their hungry
I envy their discipline but not enough to do anything about it

I blame my culture I blame everyone but myself
intent arrives like a call to prayer and is as easy to dismiss

Rumi said the two most important things in life were beauty
and bewilderment this is likely a mistranslation

after thirty years in America my father now dreams in English
says he misses the dead relatives he used to be able to visit in sleep

how many times are you allowed to lose the same beloveds
before you stop believing they're gone

some migrant birds build their nests over rivers
to push them into the water when they leave this seems

almost warm a good harm the addictions
that were killing me fastest were the ones I loved best

turning the chisel toward myself I found my body
was still the size of my body still unarmored as wet bread

one way to live a life is to spend each moment asking
forgiveness for the last it seems to me the significance

of remorse would deflate with each performance better
to sink a little into the earth and quietly watch life unfold

violent as a bullring the carpenter's house will always be
the last to be built sometimes a mind is ready to leave

the world before its body sometimes paradise happens
too early and leaves us shuddering in its wake

I am glad I still exist glad for cats and moss
and Turkish indigo and yet to be light upon the earth

to be steel bent around an endless black to once again
be God's own tuning fork and yet and yet

PORTRAIT OF THE ALCOHOLIC FROZEN IN BLOCK OF ICE

for Max

what we mean when we say immortal bruised
 and bluefleshed loathsome as glass pulled
from a child's mouth of course freezing is terrible

 but what's worse is this silence everything
 quiet
 as a bowl of fruit hardening under lava sometimes
 I think about my father's farm sizzling and
 biosecure

his ten thousand ducks all laying dead white eggs for
 fun I imagine their beaks tugging out my hair carrying
 away
each tuft to soften their tiny beds years ago I would blow

 empty winebags up into pillows combing
 baby powder through my hair I hiccupped
 through the night and in the morning I drank
 milk

to vomit myself well what was it the skinny
 boy said as he shuffled politely off the gangplank?
something something adore me to sleep it's a long drive

 into manhood but such a short walk out I
 spent so long
shocking myself with my own
carelessness misnaming
 lovers and tripping over the homeless until
 finally

the world crushed me to ice the way a fever crushes you
 to sleep a body transacts then expires ghoulish
as a raven's foot heavy and wet as rained-on fur dear single-

 breasted archer of my dreams I heartily endorse
 your grief!
it's hard to remember your ribs connect to your
backbone
 until the chill in your chest reaches around for
 your spine

NEITHER NOW NOR NEVER

None of my friends want to talk
about heaven. How there is this eternity
and the one for those
more clerical with their faith.
I spend hours each week
saying *I can't hear you*
into a phone and courting the affections
of neighborhood cats, yet
somehow never find time to burn the thigh
of an ox or a stack of twenties. Thought,

penetrate my cloud of unknowing.
I remain a hungry child
and the idea of a land flowing with milk
and honey makes me excited,
but I do wonder what gets left out—
least favorite songs on favorite albums,
an uncle's conquered metastasis,
or the girl whose climaxes gave way to panic,
whose sobs awakened the feeling of prayer in me.
May they be there too, O Lord.
With each second passing over me
may that heaven grow and grow.

**EVERYTHING THAT MOVES IS ALIVE AND A THREAT—
A REMINDER**

Everything that moves is alive and a threat—a reminder
to be as still as possible. Devastation occurs

whether we're paying attention or not. The options: repair
a world or build a new one. Like the belled cat's

frustrated hunt, my offer to improve myself
was ruined by the sound it made. How do I look today,

better or worse than a medium-priced edible
arrangement? I am sealing all my faults with platinum

so they'll gleam like the barrel of a laser gun. Astronomy: the
luminosity

of Venus reminds me to wear orange in the woods. Nobody

ever pays me enough attention. I've spent my whole adult life
in a country where only my parents can pronounce my name.

Please, spare me your attempts; I'm a victim of my own
invention. The desire to help others is a kind of symmetry,

an eccentricity of our species like blushing, gold teeth, and life
after children. I don't worry myself with what my doctor said

before he burst into flames. I just eat his wet blue pills,
stay emotionless as a fig. Muscle memory: a heart

calls for you by name. Come to bed with me, you honest thing—
let's break into science. I'll pluck you from my mouth

like an apple seed, weep with you over other people's lost pets.
The strangeness between us opens like a pinhole on the ocean floor:

in floods a fishing boat, a Chinese seabird, an entire galaxy
of starfish. We are learning so much so quickly. The sun

is dying. The atom is reducible. The god-harnesses
we thought we came with were just our tiny lungs.

WHAT USE IS KNOWING ANYTHING IF NO ONE IS AROUND

What use is knowing anything if no one is around to watch you know it? Plants reinvent sugar daily and hardly anyone applauds. Once as a boy I sat in a corner covering my ears, singing Qur'anic verse

after Qur'anic verse. Each syllable was perfect, but only the lonely rumble in my head gave praise. This is why we put mirrors in birdcages, why we turn on lamps

to double our shadows. I love my body more than other bodies. When I sleep next to a man, he becomes an extension of my own brilliance. Or rather, he becomes an echo of my own anticlimax. I was delivered

from dying like a gift card sent in lieu of a pound of flesh. My escape was mundane, voidable. Now I feed faith to faith, suffer human noise, complain about this or that heartache. The spirit lives in between

the parts of a name. It is vulnerable only to silence and forgetting. I am vulnerable to hammers, fire, and any number of poisons. The dream, then: to erupt

into a sturdier form, like a wild lotus bursting into

its tantrum of blades. There has always been a swarm
of hungry ghosts orbiting my body—even now,
I can feel them plotting in their luminous diamonds

of fog, each eyeing a rib or a thighbone. They are
arranging their plans like worms preparing
to rise through the soil. They are ready to die
with their kind, dry and stiff above the wet earth.

NO IS A COMPLETE SENTENCE

The body happens
and we consequence up.

When I said I'd eat even
your baby fat, what I meant

was collect your meat
and deliver it to me, I'm tired

of chewing the same bones
day in and day out. Look me

in the eyes and stop being sad—
they just discovered the skull

of a mammoth in a pumpkin patch
a few miles from here.

As a boy I had a filling punched
out of my mouth. I found it

the next day in a tuft of onion grass
and tried to bite it back into my tooth.

The mammoth was a dumb beast,
all low forehead and too-close

eyes. The real world doesn't care
about our spiritual conditions,

just asks that we be well
enough to smile at its clamor.

What can I do for you,
little vermin? Little casket

of gold? Milk splashes
into a bowl and coronates

itself with a crown of droplets.
I too have been trying to exalt

my own body, but there is no switch
to flip for this. I fumble toward grace

like a vine searching for a wall.
Any drunk can tell you willpower's

useless, but that doesn't stop us
from trusting it—the drowning

man surfaces three times
before sinking completely. Are you

going to finish that tongue, my love?
I'll chew it up for you, spit it

down your throat. No blame
lies with the weak, with the steam

curling off the pot of hemlock
tea. God can always see us,

but he can especially see us now. You owe
me nothing anymore, you still-

twitching vein pulled from a neck,
you wiseblood, you wise new blood.

III. IRONS

“If love were in the flesh I would burn it out with hot irons and be at
peace.”

—KAHLIL GIBRAN

PORTRAIT OF THE ALCOHOLIC FLOATING IN SPACE WITH SEVERED UMBILICUS

in Fort Wayne I *drank the seniors* Old Milwaukee
Old Crow in Indianapolis I stopped now I regret
every drink I never took all around coffee grounds
and eggshells this sweating a mouthful
of lime as a boy I stole a mint green bra
from a laundromat I took it home to try on
while my parents slept filled its cups with the smallest
turnips in our pantry the underwire grew
into me like a strangler fig my blood roiled then
as now back on earth frogspit is dripping
down wild aloe spikes salmon are bullying
their way upstream there is a pond I leapt into once
with a lonely blonde boy when we scampered out one of us
was in love I could not be held responsible
for desire he could not be held at all I wonder
where he is now if he looked up he might see
me a sparkling I always hoped that when I died
I would know why my brother will be so sad he will tell
his daughter I was better than I was he will leave out
my crueldrunk nights the wet mattresses my driving alone
into cornfields unsure whether I'd drive out I wish
he were here now he could be here this cave

is big enough for everyone look at all the diamonds

AN APOLOGY

Lord, I meant to be helpless, sex-
less as a comma, quiet as
cotton floating on a pond. Instead,
I charged into desire like a
tiger sprinting off the edge of
the world. My ancestors shot bones
out of cannons and built homes where
they landed. This is to say, I
was born the king of nothing, pulled
out from nothing like a carrot
slipped from soil. I am still learning
the local law: don't hurt something
that can smile, don't hold any grief
except your own. My first time—brown
arms, purple lips, lush as a gun—
we slumped into each others' thighs.
She said *duset daram, mano
tanha bezar*—I love you, leave
me alone. See? There I go scab-
picking again. You should just hang
me in a museum. I'll pose
as a nasty historical
fact, wave at cameras, lecture

only in the rhetoric of
a victim. As a boy I tore out
the one hundred and nine pages
about Hell in my first Qur'an.
Bountiful bloomscattering Lord,
I could feel you behind my eyes
and under my tongue, shocking me
nightly like an old battery.
What did I need with Hell? Now that
I've sucked you wrinkly like a thumb,
I can barely be bothered to
check in. Will I ever even know
when my work is done? I'm almost
ready to show you the mess I've made.

THE STRAW IS TOO LONG, THE AXE IS TOO DULL

a skull floats up from the pond and makes a sound like a gull
shriek to warn me I have stood here too long when it dies
back into the water it leaves silence all around and reedstems

like boiled femurs leaning away such provocation
is needed to pull a man open to expose his earthmeat
anyone can understand a skull even the seeds in my pocket

are cracking awake I can feel the long scar around my neck
glowing the dock underneath my feet
melting into rust god in his inestimable wisdom is on the side

of the big battalions instead of my one gashable
body he would
have preferred fifty now my shoes are soaking through
now the math seems obvious blue water plus
yellow sun equals

green plants it's almost too simple to speak I am inconsolable I
need

pondfoam and boxed wine in a coffee mug or soothing
saffron and bay leaves I need to be poured dry instead of this slow

seeping it hurts to even think about the leak in my
brain

where brackish water trickles in and memory trickles out
with what do I mend a hole like that answer
me with what

MY KINGDOM FOR A MURMUR OF FANFARE

It's common to live properly, to pretend
 you don't feel heat or grief: wave nightly

at Miss Fugue and Mister Goggles before diving
 into your nightcap, before reading yourself

a bedtime story or watching your beloved sink
 to the bottom of a lake and noting his absence

in your log. The next day you drop his clothes off
 at Goodwill like a sack of mail from a warplane

then hobble back to your hovel like a knight moving
 only in L's. It is comfortable to be alive this way,

especially now, but it makes you so vulnerable to shock—
 you ignore the mortgage and find a falconer's glove

in your yard, whole hand still inside. Or you arrive home
 after a long day to discover your children have grown

suddenly hideous and unlovable. What I'm trying
 to say is I think it's okay to accelerate around

corners, to grunt back at the mailman and swallow all
your laundry quarters. So much of everything is dumb

baffle: water puts out fire, my diseases can become
your diseases, and two hounds will fight over a feather

because feathers are strange. All I want is to finally
take off my cowboy hat and show you my jeweled

horns. If we slow dance I will ask you not to tug
on them, but secretly I will want that very much.

EVERY DRUNK WANTS TO DIE SOBER IT'S HOW WE BEAT THE GAME

Hazrat Ali son-in-law of the prophet was martyred by a poisoned
sword
while saying his evening prayers his final words *I am successful* I
am
successful I want to carve it in my forehead I've been cut into before
it barely hurt I found my body to be hard and bloodless as
glass still for effect I tore my shirt to tourniquets let me now be
calm for one fucking second let me be open to revision eternity
looms
in the corner like a home invader saying *don't mind me I'm just here
to watch you nap*
if you throw prayer beads at a ghost they will cut through him soft
as a sabre through silk I finally have answers to the questions I
taught
my mother not to ask but now she won't ask them as a child I was
so tiny
and sweet she would tuck me in saying *moosh bokhoradet* a mouse
should eat you I melted away that sweet like sugar in water like
once-fresh
honey dripping down a thigh today I lean on habit and rarely
unstrap
my muzzle it's hard to speak of something so gauche as ambition

while the whole wheezing mosaic chips away but let it be known
I do hope one day to be free of this body's dry wood if living
proves

anything it's that such astonishment is possible the kite loosed
from its string outpaces its shadow an olive tree explodes
into the sky dazzling even the night I don't understand the words
I babble in home movies from Tehran but I assume
they were lovely I have always been a tangle of tongue and pretty
want in Islam there are prayers to return almost anything even
prayers to return faith I have been going through book after book
pushing

the sounds through my teeth I will keep making these noises
as long as deemed necessary until there is nothing left of me to
forgive

TASSIOPEIA

the rainwater here is full of phosphorous if you drink too much
your kidneys fail everything has limits my grandfather fixed
watches

for half a century until cataracts thick as figskin took his eyes we
tell
this kind of story to stay humble consider the carnival geek
choking

on chicken blood consider the dazzling fortress of copper sucked
back
into the earth the soldiers tumbling into the split were bad seeds

they never did sprout the best part of God is the math of God
you can count the pearls leading from here to him sometimes

faith feels too far away to be of any use a distant moon built
from the prophets' holy bones other times it's so near

I can hold it between my teeth I am as good as my word which
is to say

I'm keyless as the language of twins the womb is a clammy pulp

of shredded tongues where we choose our obsessions I came out
hot as a punched jaw my head a beautiful blushing

pistachio to reach me now you will have to figure out
my birthname a hint it rhymes with *Tassiopeia*

do you understand what I'm saying I confess I have been trying
to seduce you I'm not the fat egg I claimed to be I'm sorry for
that

and for all the tears the delicate emotions should have felt more
hypothetical I have mastered this grammar and little more

PORTRAIT OF THE ALCOHOLIC WITH CRAVING

I've lost the unspendable coin I wore around
my neck that protected me from you, leaving it
bodyhot in the sheets of a tiny bed in Vermont. If you
could be anything in the world

you would. Just last week they found the glass eye
of a saint buried in a mountain. I don't remember
which saint or what mountain, only
how they said the eye felt warm

in their palms. Do you like
your new home, tucked
away between brainfolds? To hold you
always seemed as unlikely

as catching the wind in an envelope. Now
you are loudest before bed, humming like a child
put in a corner. I don't mind
much; I have never been a strong sleeper, and often

the tune is halfway lovely. Besides, if I ask you to leave
you won't. My hands love you more
than me, wanting only to feed you and feed you.

Tonight I outrank them

but wisely you have prepared for famine.
I am trying to learn from all this.

It was you who taught me that if a man
stands in silence for long enough

eventually only the silence remains. Still,
my desire to please you is absolute.
Remember the cold night we spent
spinning on my lawn?

I wore only basketball shorts
and a pair of broken sandals.

I tied my hair back and
laid out a hammer, some rope,

a knife. What I was building was a church.

You were the preacher and I the congregation,
and I the stage and I the cross and I the choir.

I drank all the wine and we sang until morning.

FUGU

the liver of a blowfish is said to
be the tastiest part it's also the
most toxic an ounce enough to kill ten
men I have avoided it completely
which is not to say I've been unreckless
as a boy I saw a wolf in the shade

of a yew tree I stared it stared at my
staring I whispered *banam-e-khudah*
it bolted it could have shredded me like
a paper kite in a storm I used to
believe my father's umbrella caused the
rain he was so powerful nobody
has turned out to be as powerful as
I believed my father to be least of
all my father with his insulin and
heart medication now he can't even
eat the fruit he grows which doesn't stop him
from growing it he dries it sends boxes
of pressed quince apple cherry peach pear plum

that I struggle to love other men is
a lie I've uttered with confidence at

certain convenient moments in my life
I can't imagine anything less true
now with the dizzying sweet fruit still stuck
in my teeth my gums and tongue tinted green
a quiet question answering itself

RIVER OF MILK

bear with me it wasn't long ago I was brainless
lazily pulling fireflies into my teeth chewing them

into pure light so much of me then was nothing
I could have fit into a sugar cube my body burned

like a barnful of feathers nothing was on fire
but fire was on everything the wild mustard

the rotting porch chair a box of birth records eventually
even scorched earth goes green though beneath it

the dead might still luxuriate in their rage my ancestor
was a dervish saint said to control a thick river of dark milk

under his town his people believed
he could have spared them a drought they ripped him to pieces

like eagles tearing apart a snake immediately they were filled
with remorse instead of burying him they buried a bag

of goat bones and azalea my hair still carries that scent
my eyes black milk and a snake's flicking tongue

does this confuse you there are so many ways to be deceived
a butcher's thumb pressed into the scale a strange blue dress

in a bathtub the slowly lengthening night I apologize
I never aimed at eloquence I told my mother I wouldn't live

through the year then waited for a disaster sitting cheerfully
on cinder blocks pulled from a drained pond tossing

peanuts to squirrels this is not the story she tells hers filled
with happy myths fizzy pistons and plummy ghosts

it's true I suppose you grow to love the creatures you create
some of them come out with pupils swirling others with teeth

GOD

I am ready for you to come back. Whether in a train full of dying
criminals or on the gleaming saddle of a locust, you are
needed again.

The earth is a giant chessboard where the dark squares get all the
rain.

On this one the wet is driving people mad—the bankers all
baying

in the woods while their markets fail, a florist chewing up flowers
to spit mouthfuls here and there as his daughter's lungs seize
shut

from the pollen. There is a flat logic to neglect. Sweet nothings sour
in the air while the ocean hoots itself to sleep. I live on the
skull

of a giant burning brain, the earth's core. Sometimes I can feel it
pulsing

through the dirt, though even this you ignore. The mind
wants what it wants:

daily newspapers, snapping turtles, a pound of flesh. The work I've
been doing
is a kind of erasing. I dump my ashtray into a bucket of paint
and coat myself

in the gray slick, rolling around on the carpets of rich strangers
while they applaud and sip their scotch. A body can cause
almost anything

to happen. Remember when you breathed through my mouth, your
breath
becoming mine? Remember when you sang for me and I fell
to the floor,

turning into a thousand mice? Whatever it was we were practicing
cannot happen without you. I thought I saw you last year,
bark wrapped

around your thighs, lurching toward the shore at dawn. It was only
mist
and dumb want. They say even longing has its limits: in a
bucket, an eel

will simply stop swimming long before it starves. Wounded wolves
will pad
away from their pack to die lonely and cold. Do you not
know how scary

it can get here? The talons that dropped me left long scars around

my neck that still burn in the wind. I was promised epiphany,
earth-

honey, and a flood of milk, but I will settle for anything that brings
you now,

you still-hungry mongrel, you glut of bone, you, scentless as
gold.

**DESPITE THEIR SIZE CHILDREN ARE EASY TO
REMEMBER THEY WATCH YOU**

despite their size children are easy to remember they watch you
watching them the square root of your gaze don't forget
how hard it is being young mindless and spitting up blood
rolled out a doorless cage all iris no white estranged from sense
mirror neurons double the pain they see here is what I have lost
clean teeth

god's grammar olives cedar salt temptation rarely warns you
a useful model unpredictable as an arrow through the spine
its flight path its feathery hole who among us hasn't wished to
burst

from our bodies ripe berries crushed under a tongue for some
to live well is easy a flea leaps and is unshocked by its flight
for others it's harder and hardly seems worth doing the
better a life

the more sadness it leaves I do only what comes naturally obey
my gut

pray at takeoffs never landings mostly I look forward to sleep
my body shelved hallucinating tangled wood almond
blossoms wind near a river that smells like river it's lovely
because it's simple just say yes and step into the consequence

WAYS TO HARM A THING

Throw scissors at it.

Fill it with straw

and set it on fire, or set it
off for the colonies with only
some books and dinner-
plates and a stuffed bear
named Friend Bear for me
to lose in New Jersey.

Did I say *me*? Things
have been getting
less and less hypothetical
since I unhitched myself
from your bedpost. Everyone
I love is too modern
to be caught
grieving. In order
to be consumed
first you need to be consumable,
but there is not a single
part of you I could fit
in my mouth. In a dream
I pull back your foreskin
and reveal a fat vase

stuffed with crow
feathers. This seems a faithful
translation of the real thing. Another
way to harm something is to
melt its fusebox,
make it learn to live
in the dark. I still want
to suck the bones out
from your hands,
plant them like the seeds
we found in an antique
textbook, though those
never sprouted and may not
have even been seeds.
When I was a sailor I found
a sunken ziggurat, spent
weeks diving through room
after room discovering
this or that sacred
shroud. One way to bury
something is to bury it
forever. When I was water
you poured me out
over the dirt.

PERSONAL INVENTORY: FEARLESS (TEMPORIS FILA)

“I know scarcely one feature by which man can be distinguished from apes, if it be not that all the apes have a gap between their fangs and their other teeth.”

—CAROLUS LINNÆUS

A gap, then,
a slot for fare.

I used my arms to learn *two*,
my fingers to learn *ten*.

My grandfather kept an atlas so old
there was a blank spot in the middle of Africa.

I knew a girl who knew every bird’s Latin name.

I kissed her near a polluted river
and would have been fine
dying right there,

but nature makes no such jumps.
One thing,

then the next. America
is filled with wooden churches
in which I have never been baptized.

I try not to think of God as a debt to luck
but for years I consumed nothing
that did not harm me
and still I lived, witless

as a bird flying over state lines.
I would be more grateful
if being alive hadn't seemed so effortless,

the way I'd appreciate gravity more
if I'd had trouble floating in my teens.

Still, I apologize.

My straight white teeth have yellowed
and I can't tell a crow from a blackbird.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry.
This may be me at my best.

SO OFTEN THE BODY BECOMES A DISTRACTION

So often the body becomes a distraction—
delicate husk, inconvenient hair,
the bizarre need to recharge. I've heard
you die young if you don't sleep, but if you do
you'll just snooze through your extra time.
Like the headless grasshopper and his still-
twitching legs, I'm learning how much of myself
I don't actually need. It exists, a world without
this dumb neck. My whole form is mostly
skeleton and loose meat; that I've managed
anything at all seems cause for praise. Some say
there is life after the body, mysterious
as a tooth melting out an ice cube. A year ago
I blew the drugs out of my nose and immediately,
I was overwhelmed by the smell of semen
and gingerbread. Now I listen for the sighs
of people who love me, each agitation I create
a reminder that I am less than constant
in my grace. Will I ever be a great man? Will I
ever be one of the guys? Tarre be tockmesh mire,
Kavehi be babash. The leek looks like its seed,
and little Kaveh looks like his father. See how
I am all rosejuice and wonderdrunk? See how

my throat is filling with salt? Boil me. Divide
me. Wrap me in paper and return me to earth. One day
I will crack open underneath the field mushrooms.
One day I will wake up in someone else's bones.

I WON'T LIE THIS PLAGUE OF GRATITUDE

I won't lie this plague of gratitude

is hard to bear I was comfortable
in my native pessimism not this spun-
sugar fantasy last night I made actual

cake there were no worms in the flour no
bloody whirls in the eggs afterwards the minor
holiday below my waistband remained festive
as ever when I touched two breasts each one

was my favorite not long ago I was hard to even
hug like ribbons of cartilage cut
from a lamb I dressed in shredded roses
and pistachio shells I drank an entire language

and flung tar at whatever moved
until the world cut me open like a tube of paint
until it crushed me between its fingers
like a hornet none of it was graceful

I had to learn to love people one at a time
singing *hey diddle diddle will you suffer me*
a little how could they say no

how could they say anything I kept

biting their tongues I kept clicking
my heels now I am cheery
and Germanic like a drawer full
of strudel I always wanted to be a saint

but I thought I'd be one of the miserable
ones sainted by pain burnt alive inside
a brazen bull instead I weep openly at obnoxious
beauty cello music comes in

from blocks away and I lose it completely
there is a word for these fits of incomprehensible
delight I said it last night
when my mouth was full of cake

PORTRAIT OF THE ALCOHOLIC STRANDED ALONE ON A DESERT ISLAND

I live in the gulf
between what I've been given
and what I've received.

Each morning, I dig into the sand
and bury something I love.
Nothing decomposes.

It might sound ungrateful to say
I expected poetry, but I did—

palm forests and clouds above them
arranged like Dutch still lifes,
musically-colored fauna lounging
in perpetual near-smiles.

Instead, these tumors under the surf.

Wildness: to appear
where you are unexpected.

My favorite drugs are far from here.

Our father, who art in Heaven—always
just stepped out, while Earth,
the mother, everywhere around.

It all just means so intensely: bones
on the beach, calls from the bushes,
the scent of edible flowers
floating in from the horizon.

I hold my breath.

The boat I am building
will never be done.

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