

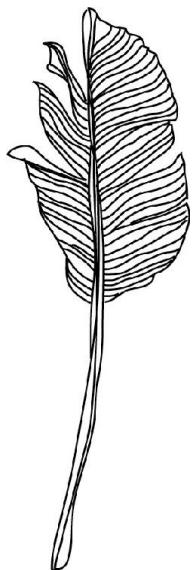
bees came for honey  
flowers giggled as they  
undressed themselves  
for the taking  
the sun smiled

*- the second birth*

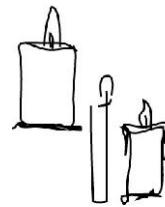
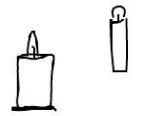


wilting

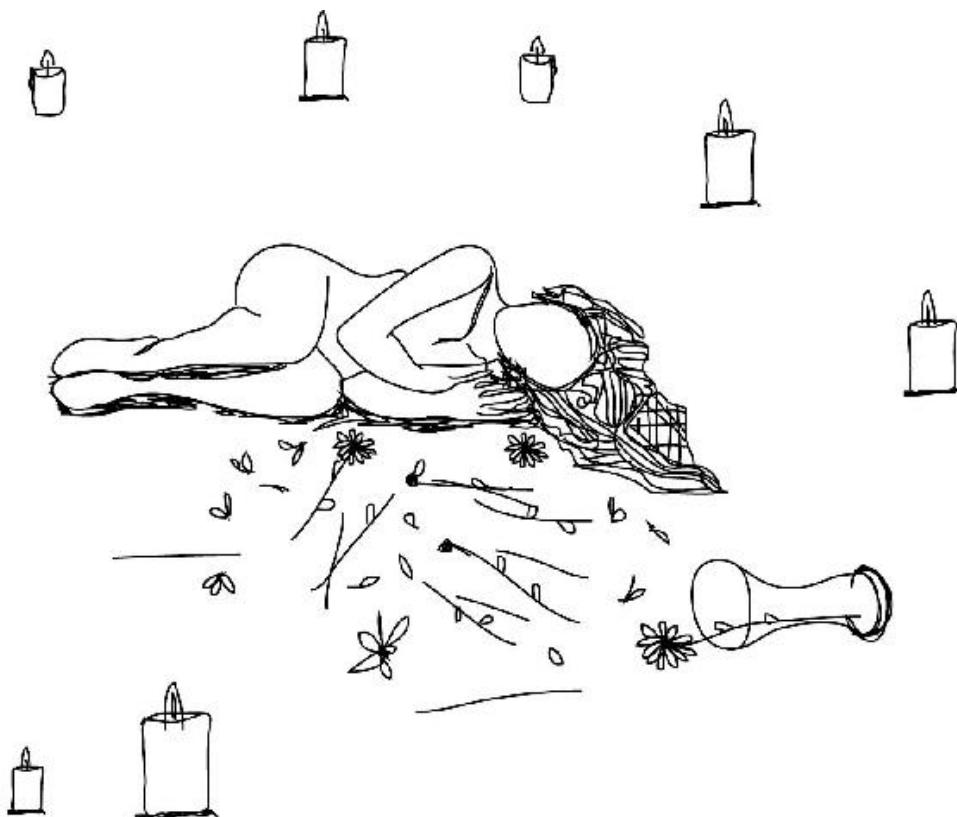
on the last day of love  
my heart cracked inside my body



i spent the entire night  
casting spells to bring you back



i reached for the last bouquet of flowers  
you gave me  
now wilting in their vase  
one  
by  
one  
i popped their heads off  
and ate them



i stuffed a towel at the foot of every door  
*leave* i told the air  
*i have no use for you*  
i drew every curtain in the house  
*go* i told the light  
*no one is coming in*  
*and no one is going out*

- cemetery

you left  
and i wanted you still  
yet i deserved someone  
who was willing to stay



i spend days in bed debilitated by loss  
i attempt to cry you back  
but the water is done  
and still you have not returned  
i pinch my belly till it bleeds  
have lost count of the days  
sun becomes moon and  
moon becomes sun and  
i become ghost  
a dozen different thoughts  
tear through me each second  
you must be on your way  
perhaps it's best if you're not  
i am okay  
no  
i am angry  
yes  
i hate you  
maybe  
i can't move on  
i will  
i forgive you  
i want to rip my hair out  
over and over and over again  
till my mind exhausts itself into a silence

yesterday  
the rain tried to imitate my hands  
by running down your body  
i ripped the sky apart for allowing it

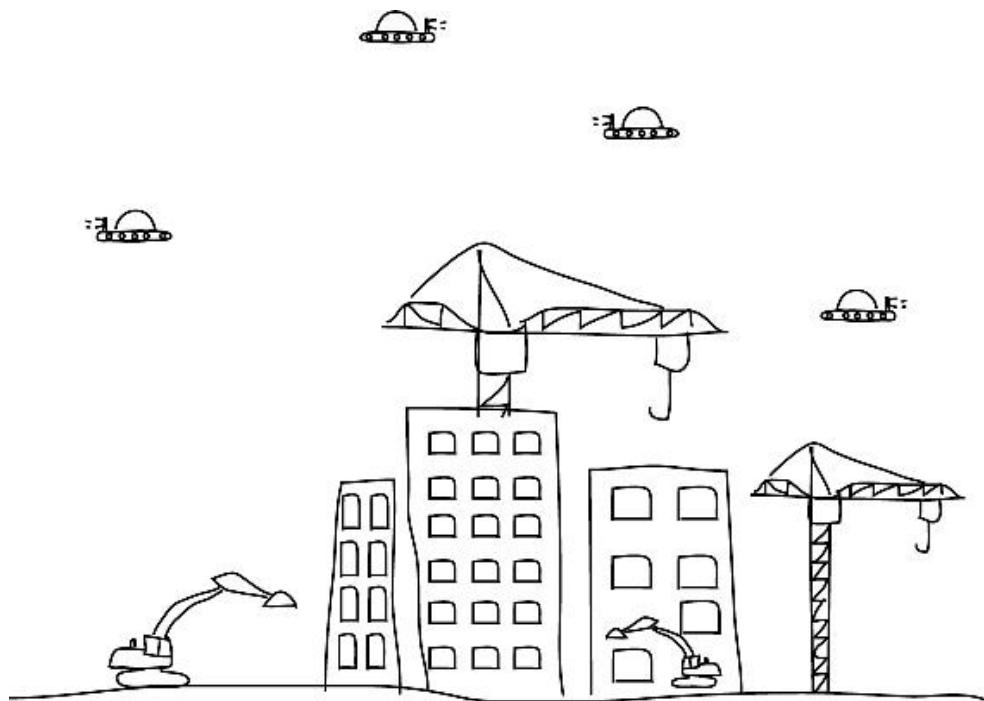
- *jealousy*



in order to fall asleep  
i have to imagine your body  
crooked behind mine  
spoon ladled into spoon  
till i can hear your breath  
i have to recite your name  
till you answer and  
we have a conversation  
only then  
can my mind  
drift off to sleep

- *pretend*

it isn't what we left behind  
that breaks me  
it's what we could've built  
had we stayed

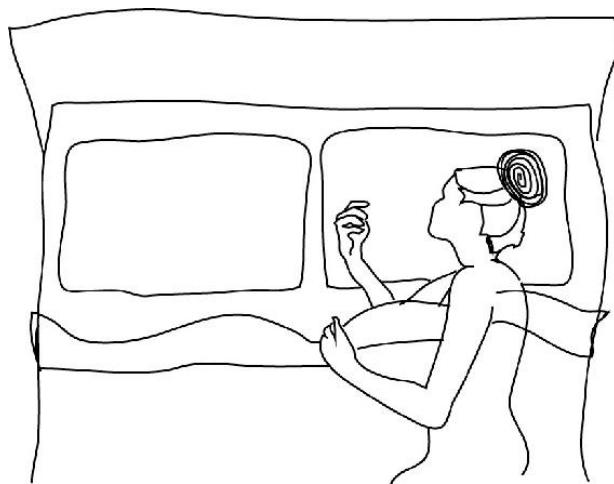


i can still see our construction hats lying  
exactly where we left them  
pylons unsure of what to guard  
bulldozers gazing out for our return  
the planks of wood stiff in their boxes  
yearning to be nailed up  
but neither of us goes back  
to tell them it is over  
in time  
the bricks will grow tired of waiting and crumble  
the cranes will droop their necks in sorrow  
the shovels will rust  
do you think flowers will grow here  
when you and i are off  
building something new  
with someone else

*- the construction site of our future*

i live for that first second in the morning  
when i am still half-conscious  
i hear the hummingbirds outside  
flirting with the flowers  
i hear the flowers giggling  
and the bees growing jealous  
when i turn over to wake you  
it starts all over again  
the panting  
the wailing  
the shock  
of realizing  
that you've left

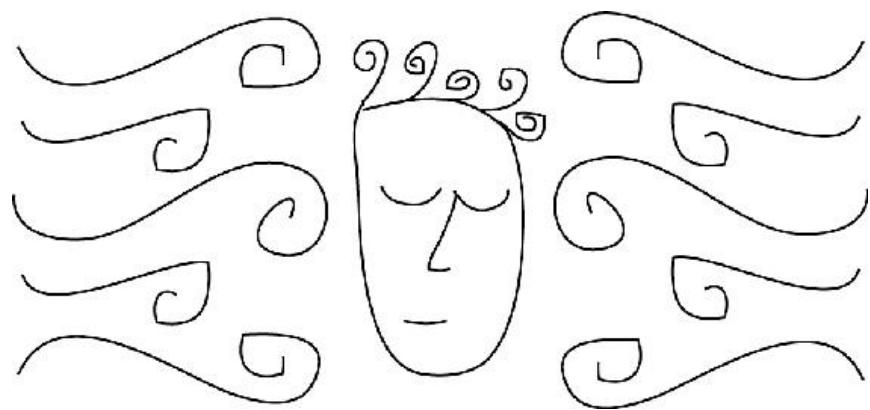
- *the first mornings without you*



the hummingbirds tell me  
you've changed your hair  
i tell them i don't care  
while listening to them  
describe every detail

- *hunger*

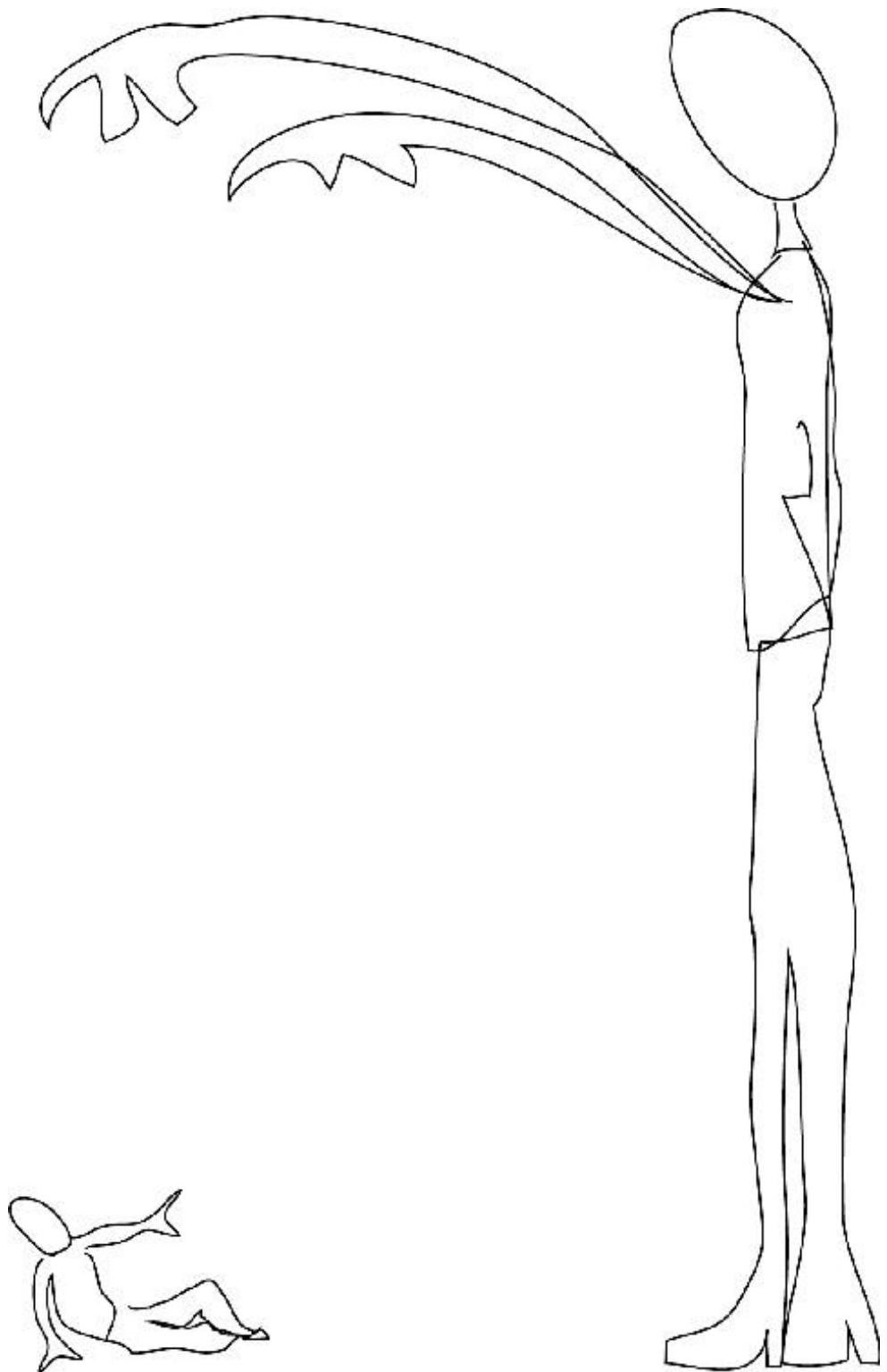
i envy the winds  
who still witness you



i could be anything  
in the world  
but i wanted to be his

i tried to leave many times but  
as soon as i got away  
my lungs buckled under the pressure  
panting for air i'd return  
perhaps this is why i let you  
skin me to the bone  
something  
was better than nothing  
having you touch me  
even if it was not kind  
was better than not having your hands at all  
i could take the abuse  
i could not take the absence  
i knew i was beating a dead thing  
but did it matter  
if the thing was dead  
when at the very least  
i had it

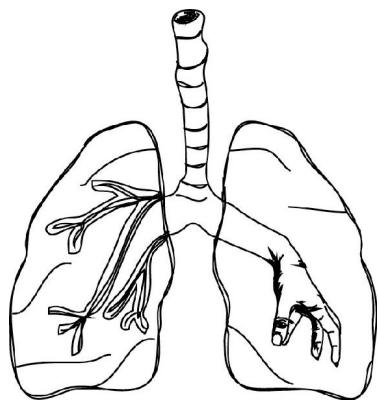
- *addiction*



you break women in like shoes

loving you was breathing  
but that breath disappearing  
before it filled my lungs

- *when it goes too soon*



## **what love looks like**

*what does love look like* the therapist asks  
one week after the breakup  
and i'm not sure how to answer her question  
except for the fact that i thought love  
looked so much like you

that's when it hit me  
and i realized how naive i had been  
to place an idea so beautiful on the image of a person  
as if anybody on this entire earth  
could encompass all love represented  
as if this emotion seven billion people tremble for  
would look like a five foot eleven  
medium-sized brown-skinned guy  
who likes eating frozen pizza for breakfast

*what does love look like* the therapist asks again  
this time interrupting my thoughts midsentence  
and at this point i'm about to get up  
and walk right out the door  
except i paid far too much money for this hour  
so instead i take a piercing look at her  
the way you look at someone  
when you're about to hand it to them  
lips pursed tightly preparing to launch into conversation  
eyes digging deeply into theirs  
searching for all the weak spots  
they have hidden somewhere  
hair being tucked behind the ears  
as if you have to physically prepare for a conversation  
on the philosophies or rather disappointments

of what love looks like

*well i tell her*

*i don't think love is him anymore*

if love was him

he would be here wouldn't he

if he was the one for me

wouldn't he be the one sitting across from me

if love was him it would have been simple

*i don't think love is him anymore* i repeat

*i think love never was*

i think i just wanted something

was ready to give myself to something

i believed was bigger than myself

and when i saw someone

who could probably fit the part

i made it very much my intention

to make him my counterpart

and i lost myself to him

he took and he took

wrapped me in the word *special*

until i was so convinced he had eyes only to see me

hands only to feel me

a body only to be with me

oh how he emptied me

*how does that make you feel*

interrupts the therapist

*well i said*

*it kind of makes me feel like shit*

maybe we're all looking at it wrong

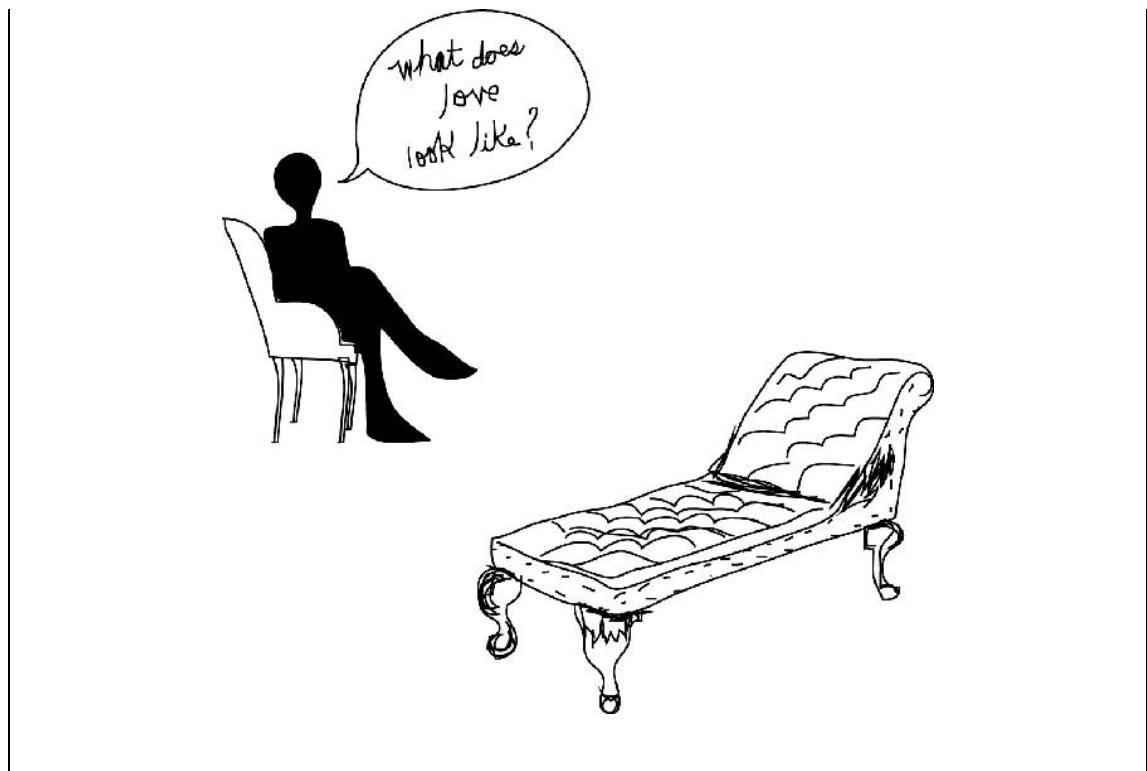
we think it's something to search for out there

something meant to crash into us

on our way out of an elevator

or slip into our chair at a cafe somewhere  
appear at the end of an aisle at the bookstore  
looking the right amount of sexy and intellectual  
but i think love starts *here*  
everything else is just desire and projection  
of all our wants needs and fantasies  
but those externalities could never work out  
if we didn't turn inward and learn  
how to love ourselves in order to love other people

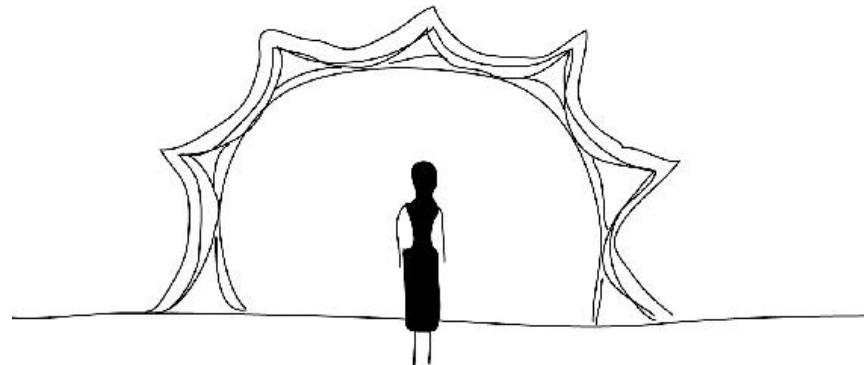
love does not look like a person  
love is our actions  
love is giving all we can  
even if it's just the bigger slice of cake  
love is understanding  
we have the power to hurt one another  
but we are going to do everything in our power  
to make sure we don't  
love is figuring out all the kind sweetness we deserve  
and when someone shows up  
saying they will provide it as you do  
but their actions seem to break you  
rather than build you  
love is knowing whom to choose



you cannot  
walk in and out of me  
like a revolving door  
i have too many miracles  
happening inside me  
to be your convenient option

*- not your hobby*

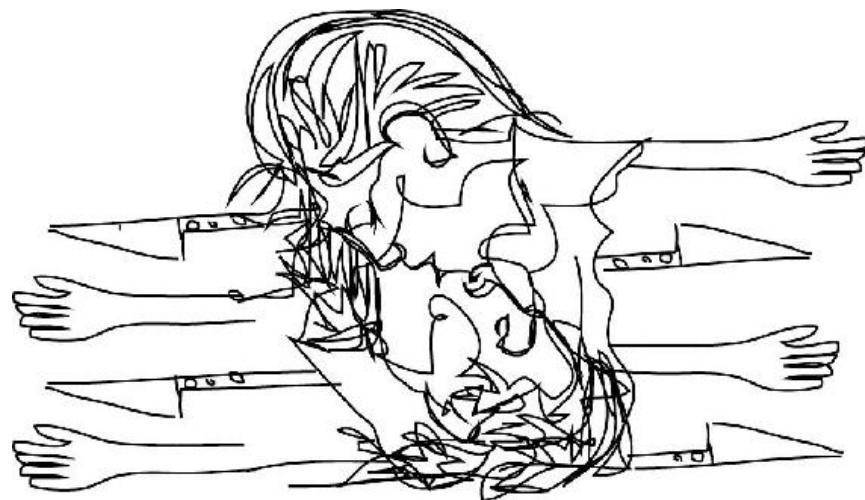
you took the sun with you  
when you left



i remained committed  
long after you were gone  
i could not lift my eyes  
to meet eyes with someone else  
looking felt like betrayal  
what excuse would i have  
when you came back  
and asked where my hands had been

- *loyal*

when you plunged the knife into me  
you also began bleeding  
my wound became your wound  
didn't you know  
love is a double-edged knife  
you will suffer the way you make me suffer



i think my body knew you would not stay



i long  
for you  
but you long  
for someone else  
i deny the one  
who wants me  
cause i want someone else

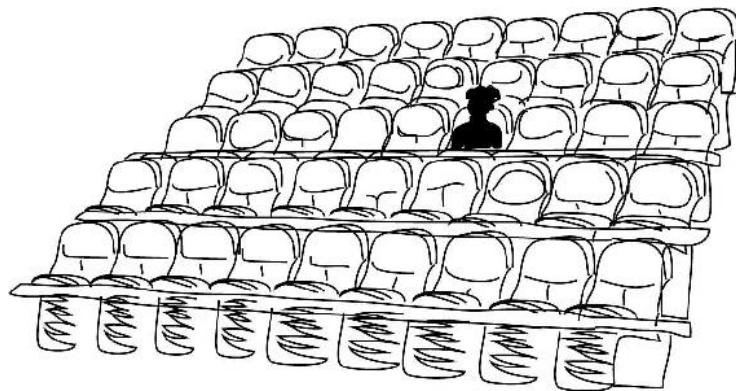
- *the human condition*



i wonder if i am  
beautiful enough for you  
or if i am beautiful at all  
i change what i am wearing  
five times before i see you  
wondering which pair of jeans will make  
my body more tempting to undress  
tell me  
is there anything i can do  
to make you think  
*her*

*she is so striking*  
*she makes my body forget it has knees*  
write it in a letter and address it  
to all the insecure parts of me  
your voice alone drives me to tears  
yours telling me i am beautiful  
yours telling me i am enough

you're everywhere  
except right here  
and it hurts



show me a picture  
i want to see the face of the woman  
who made you forget the one you had at home  
what day was it and  
what excuse did you feed me  
i used to thank the universe  
for bringing you to me  
did you enter her right as  
i asked the almighty  
to grant you all you wanted  
did you find it in her  
did you come crawling out of her  
with what you couldn't in me

what draws you to her  
tell me what you like  
so i can practice



your absence is a missing limb

## **questions**

there is a list of questions  
i want to ask but never will  
there is a list of questions  
i go through in my head  
every time i'm alone  
and my mind can't stop itself from searching for you  
there is a list of questions i want to ask  
so if you're listening somewhere  
here i am asking them

what do you think happens  
to the love that's left behind  
when two lovers leave  
how blue do you think it gets  
before it passes away  
does it pass away  
or does it still exist somewhere  
waiting for us to come back  
when we lied to ourselves by  
calling this unconditional and left  
which one of us hurt more  
i shattered into a million little pieces  
and those pieces shattered into a million more  
crumbled into dust till  
there was nothing left of me but the silence

tell me how love  
how did the grieving feel for you  
how did the mourning hurt  
how did you peel your eyes open after every blink  
knowing i'd never be there staring back

it must be hard to live with *what ifs*  
there must always be this constant dull aching  
in the pit of your stomach  
trust me  
i feel it too  
how in the world did we get here  
how did we live through it  
and how are we still living

how many months did it take  
before you stopped thinking of me  
or are you still thinking of me  
cause if you are  
then maybe i am too  
thinking of you  
thinking of me  
with me  
in me  
around me  
everywhere  
you and me and us

do you still touch yourself to thoughts of me  
do you still imagine my naked naked tiny tiny body  
pressed into yours  
do you still imagine the curve of my spine and  
how you wanted to rip it out of me  
cause the way it dipped into my  
perfectly rounded bottom  
drove you crazy

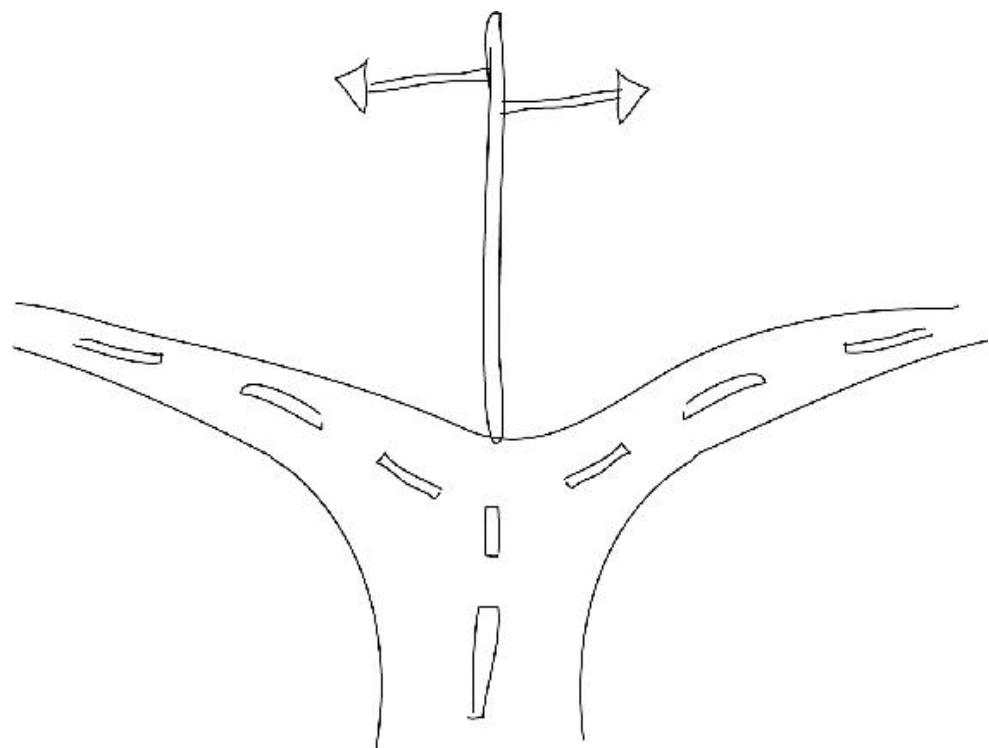
baby  
sugar baby  
sweet baby  
ever since we left  
how many times did you pretend

it was my hand stroking you  
how many times did you search for me in your fantasies  
and end up crying instead of coming  
don't you lie to me  
i can tell when you're lying  
cause there's always that little bit of  
arrogance in your response

are you angry with me  
are you okay  
and would you tell me if you're not  
and if we ever see each other again  
do you think you'd reach out and hold me  
like you said you would  
the last time we spoke and  
you talked of the next time we would  
or do you think we'd just look  
shake in our skin as we pine to  
absorb as much as we can of each other  
cause by this time we've probably got  
someone else waiting at home  
we were good together weren't we  
and is it wrong that i'm asking you these questions  
tell me love  
that you have been  
looking for these answers too

you call to tell me you miss me  
i turn to face the front door of the house  
waiting for a knock  
days later you call to say you need me  
but still aren't here  
the dandelions on the lawn  
are rolling their eyes in disappointment  
the grass has declared you yesterday's news  
what do i care  
if you love me  
or miss me  
or need me  
when you aren't doing anything about it  
if i'm not the love of your life  
i'll be the greatest loss instead

where do we go from here my love  
when it's over and i'm standing between us  
whose side do i run to  
when every nerve in my body is pulsing for you  
when my mouth waters at the thought  
when you are pulling me in just by standing there  
how do i turn around and choose myself



day by day i realize  
everything i miss about you  
was never there in the first place

*- the person i fell in love with was a mirage*

they leave  
and act like it never happened  
they come back  
and act like they never left

- *ghosts*

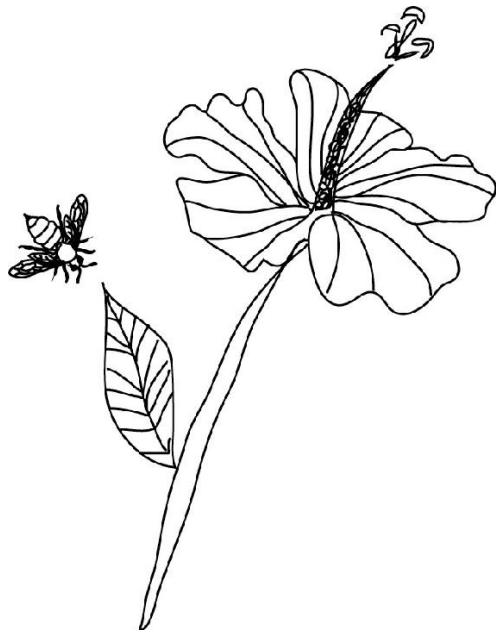


i tried to find it  
but there was no answer  
at the end of the last conversation

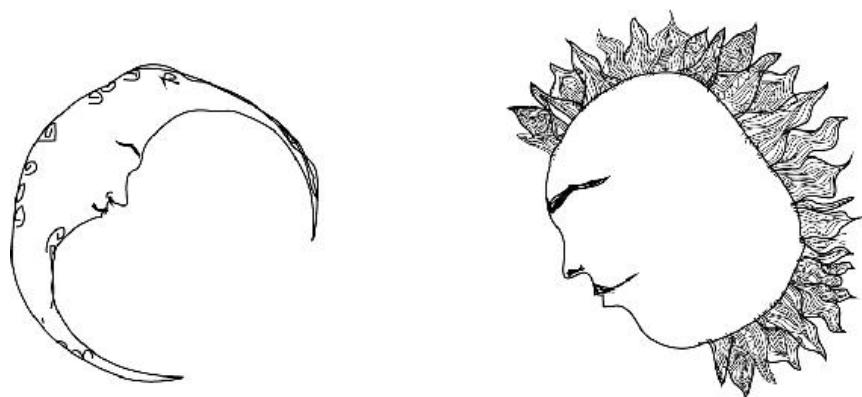
- *closure*

you ask  
if we can still be friends  
i explain how a honeybee  
does not dream of kissing  
the mouth of a flower  
and then settle for its leaves

- *i don't need more friends*



why is it  
that when the story ends  
we begin to feel all of it



*rise*  
said the moon  
and the new day came  
*the show must go on* said the sun  
life does not stop for anybody  
it drags you by the legs  
whether you want to move forward or not  
that is the gift  
life will force you to forget how you long for them  
your skin will shed till there is not  
a single part of you left they've touched  
your eyes finally just your eyes  
not the eyes which held them  
you will make it to the end  
of what is only the beginning  
go on  
open the door to the rest of it

- *time*



falling

i notice everything i do not have  
and decide it is beautiful

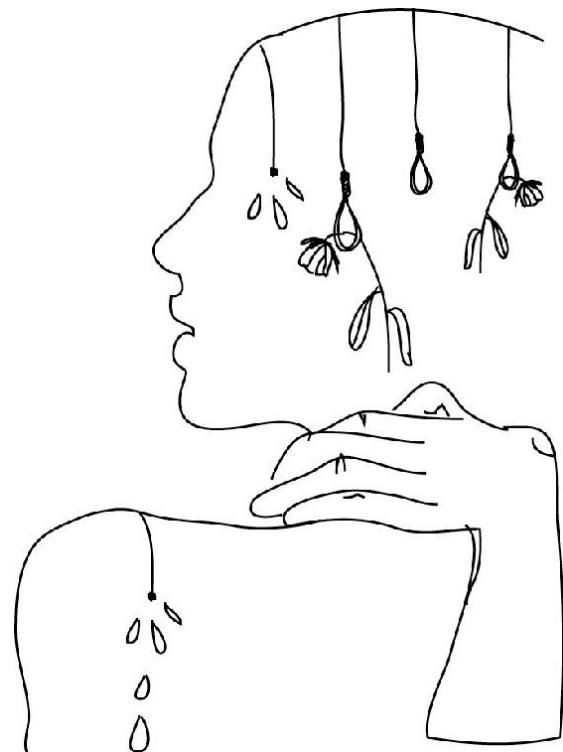


i hardened under the last loss. it took something human out of me. i used to be so deeply emotional i'd crumble on demand. but now the water has made its exit. of course i care about the ones around me. i'm just struggling to show it. a wall is getting in the way. i used to dream of being so strong nothing could shake me. now. i am. so strong. that nothing shakes me. and all i dream is to soften.

- *numbness*

yesterday  
when i woke up  
the sun fell to the ground and rolled away  
flowers beheaded themselves  
all that's left alive here is me  
and i barely feel like living

*- depression is a shadow living inside me*



*why are you so unkind to me  
my body cries*

*cause you don't look like them  
i tell her*

you are waiting for someone  
who is not coming back  
meaning  
you are living your life  
hoping that someone will realize  
they can't live theirs without you

*- realizations don't work like that*

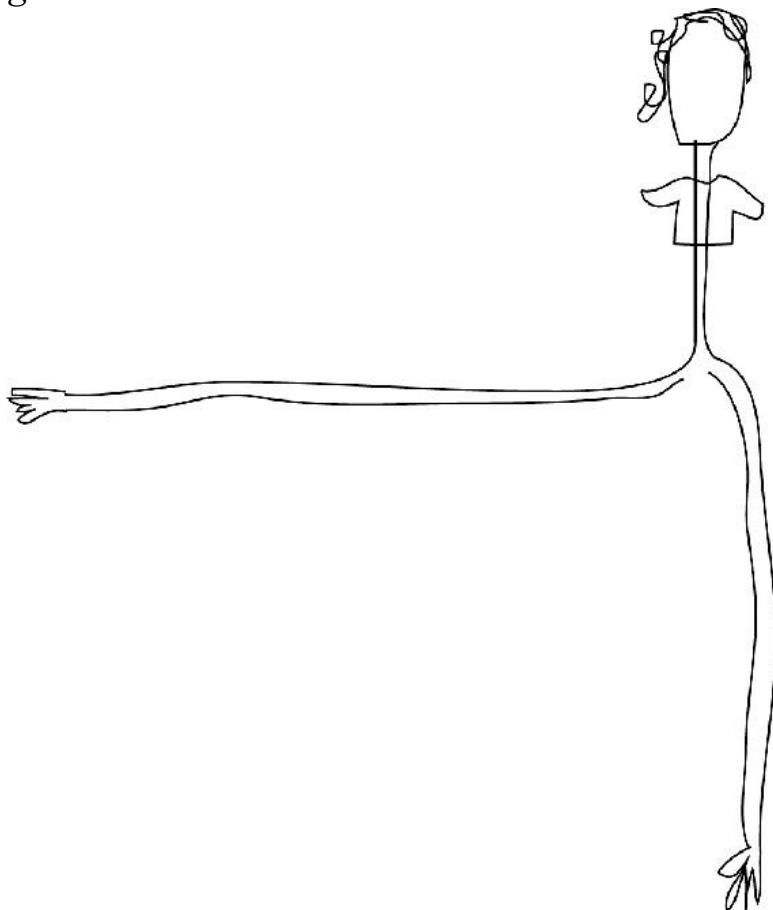


a lot of times  
we are angry at other people  
for not doing what  
we should have done for ourselves

- *responsibility*

why  
did you leave a door  
hanging  
open between my legs  
were you lazy  
did you forget  
or did you purposely leave me unfinished

*- conversations with god*

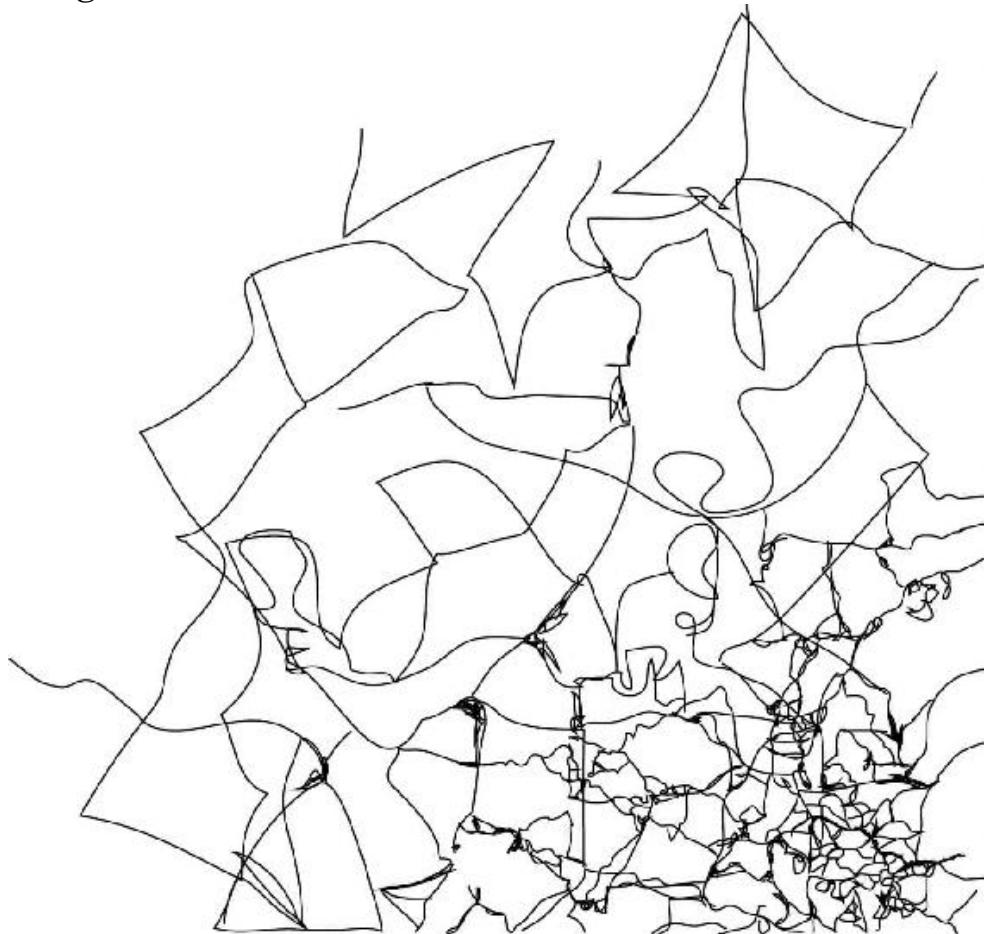


they did not tell me it would hurt like this  
no one warned me  
about the heartbreak we experience with friends  
*where are the albums* i thought  
there were no songs sung for it  
i could not find the ballads  
or read the books dedicated to writing the grief  
we fall into when friends leave  
it is the type of heartache that  
does not hit you like a tsunami  
it is a slow cancer  
the kind that does not show up for months  
has no visible signs  
is an ache here  
a headache there  
but manageable  
cancer or tsunami  
it all ends the same  
a friend or a lover  
a loss is a loss is a loss

- *the underrated heartache*

i hear a thousand kind words about me  
and it makes no difference  
yet i hear one insult  
and all confidence shatters

*- focusing on the negative*



## **home**

it began as a typical thursday from what i recall  
sunlight kissed my eyelids good morning  
i remember it exactly  
climbing out of bed  
making coffee to the sound of children playing outside  
putting music on  
loading the dishwasher  
i remember placing flowers in a vase  
in the middle of the kitchen table  
only when my apartment was spotless  
did i step into the bathtub  
wash yesterday out of my hair  
i decorated myself  
like the walls of my home were decorated  
with frames bookshelves photos  
i hung a necklace around my neck  
hooked earrings in  
applied lipstick like paint  
swept my hair back—just your typical thursday

we ended up at a get-together with friends  
at the end you asked if i needed a ride home and  
i said yes cause our dads worked at the same company  
and you'd been to my place for dinner many times

but i should have known  
when you began to confuse  
kind conversation with flirtation  
when you told me to let my hair down  
when instead of driving me home  
toward the bright intersection

of lights and life—you took a left  
to the road that led nowhere  
i asked where we were going  
you asked if i was afraid  
my voice threw itself over the edge of my throat  
landed at the bottom of my belly and hid for months  
all the different parts in me  
turned the lights off  
shut the blinds  
locked the doors  
while i hid at the back of some  
upstairs closet of my mind as  
someone broke the windows—you  
kicked the front door in—you  
took everything  
and then someone took me  
—it was you.

who dove into me with a fork and a knife  
eyes glinting with starvation  
like you hadn't eaten in weeks  
i was a hundred and ten pounds of fresh meat  
you skinned and gutted with your fingers  
like you were scraping the inside of a cantaloupe clean  
as i screamed for my mother  
you nailed my wrists to the ground  
turned my breasts into bruised fruit

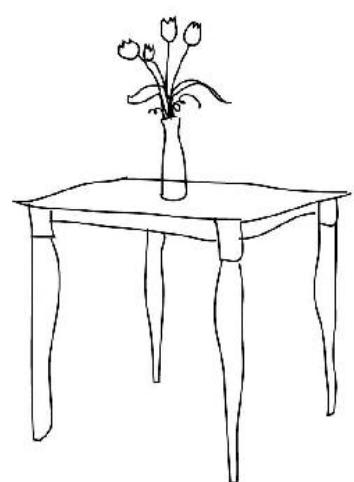
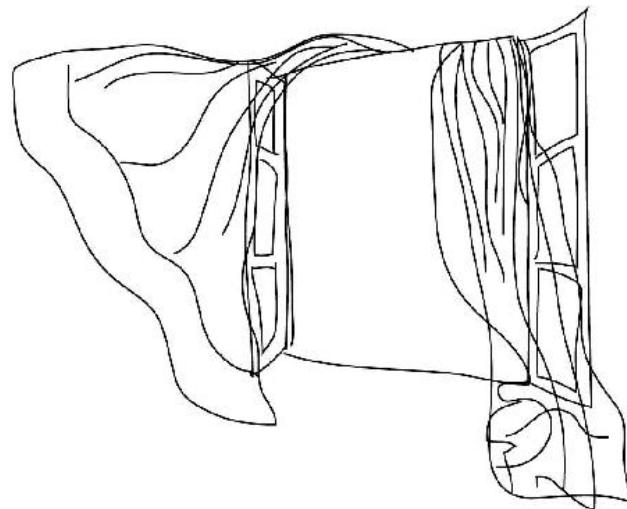
this home is empty now  
no gas  
no electricity  
no running water  
the food is rotten  
from head to foot i am layered in dust  
fruit flies. webs. bugs.  
someone call the plumber

my stomach is backed up—i've been vomiting since  
call the electrician  
my eyes won't light up  
call the cleaners to wash me up and hang me to dry

when you broke into my home  
it never felt like mine again  
i can't even let a lover in without getting sick  
i lose sleep after the first date  
lose my appetite  
become more bone and less skin  
forget to breathe  
every night my bedroom becomes a psych ward  
where panic attacks turn men  
into doctors to keep me calm  
every lover who touches me—feels like you  
their fingers—you  
mouths—you  
until they're not the ones  
on top of me anymore—it's you

and i am so tired  
of doing things your way  
—it isn't working  
i've spent years trying to figure out  
how i could have stopped it  
but the sun can't stop the storm from coming  
the tree can't stop the ax  
i can't blame myself for having a hole  
the size of your manhood in my chest anymore  
it's too heavy to carry your guilt—i'm setting it down  
i'm tired of decorating this place with your shame  
as if it belongs to me  
it's too much to walk around with  
what your hands have done  
if it's not my hands that have done it

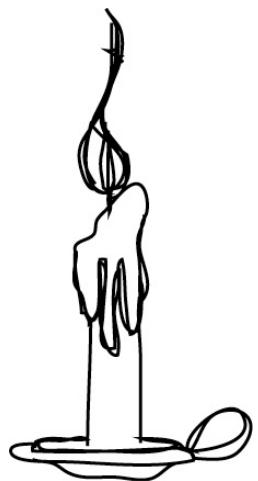
the truth comes to me suddenly—after years of rain  
the truth comes like sunlight  
pouring through an open window  
it takes a long time to get here  
but it all comes full circle  
it takes a broken person to come searching  
for meaning between my legs  
it takes a complete. whole. perfectly designed  
person to survive it  
it takes monsters to steal souls  
and fighters to reclaim them  
this home is what i came into this world with  
was the first home  
will be the last home  
you can't take it  
there is no space for you  
no welcome mat  
no extra bedrooms  
i'm opening all the windows  
airing it out  
putting flowers in a vase  
in the middle of the kitchen table  
lighting a candle  
loading the dishwasher with all of my thoughts  
until they're spotless  
scrubbing the countertops  
and then  
i plan to step into the bathtub  
wash yesterday out of my hair  
decorate my body in gold  
put music on  
sit back  
put my feet up  
and enjoy  
this typical thursday afternoon



when snow falls  
i long for grass  
when grass grows  
i walk all over it  
when leaves change color  
i beg for flowers  
when flowers bloom  
i pick them

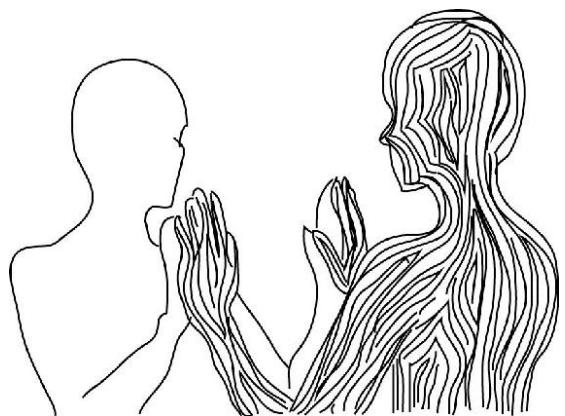
- *unappreciative*

tell them i was the  
warmest place you knew  
and you turned me cold



at home that night  
i filled the bathtub with scorching water  
tossed in spearmint from the garden  
two tablespoons almond oil  
some milk  
and honey  
a pinch of salt  
rose petals from the neighbor's lawn  
i soaked myself in the mixture  
desperate to wash the dirty off  
the first hour  
i picked pine needles from my hair  
counted them one two three  
lined them up on their backs  
the second hour  
i wept  
a howling escaped me  
who knew girl could become beast  
during the third hour  
i found bits of him on bits of me  
the sweat was not mine  
the white between my legs  
not mine  
the bite marks  
not mine  
the smell  
not mine  
the blood  
mine  
the fourth hour i prayed

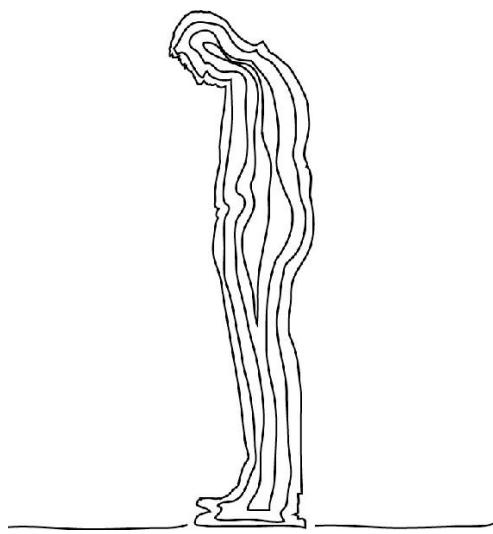
it felt like you threw me  
so far from myself  
i've been trying to find my way back ever since



i reduced my body to aesthetics  
forgot the work it did to keep me alive  
with every beat and breath  
declared it a grand failure for not looking like theirs  
searched everywhere for a miracle  
foolish enough to not realize  
i was already living in one

the irony of loneliness  
is we all feel it  
at the same time

- *together*



my girlhood was too much hair  
thin limbs coated in velvet  
it was neighborhood tradition  
for the other young girls and i  
to frequent basement salons on a weekly basis  
run by women in a house  
who were my mother's age  
had my mother's skin  
but looked nothing like my simple mother  
they had brown skin with  
yellow hair meant for white skin  
streaks like zebras  
slits for eyebrows  
i looked at my own caterpillars with shame  
and dreamt mine would be that thin

i sit timidly in the makeshift waiting area  
hoping a friend from school would not drop by  
a bollywood music video is playing on a tiny  
television screen in the corner  
someone is getting their legs waxed or hair dyed

when the auntie calls me in  
i walk into the room  
and make small talk  
she leaves for a moment  
while i undress my lower half  
i slide my pants and underwear off  
lie down on the spa bed and wait  
when she returns she positions my legs  
like an open butterfly  
soles of feet together  
knees pointing in opposite directions  
first the disinfectant wipe  
then the cold jelly  
*how is school and what are you studying* she asks

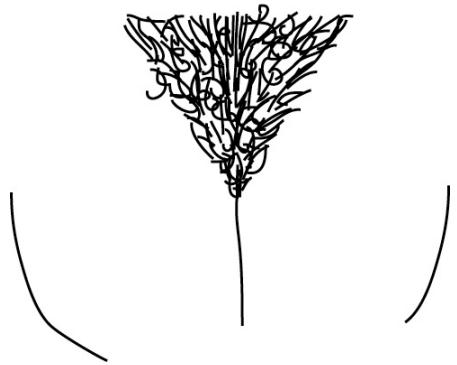
turns the laser on  
places the head of the machine on my pubic bone  
and just like that it begins  
the hair follicles around  
my clitoris begin burning  
with each zap  
i wince  
shivering with pain

why do i do this  
why do i punish my body  
for being exactly as it's meant to be  
i stop myself halfway through the regret  
when i think of him and how  
i'm too embarrassed to show him  
unless it's clean

i bite down on my lip  
and ask if we're almost finished

- *basement aesthetician*

¤



we have been dying  
since we got here  
and forgot to enjoy the view

- *live fully*

you were mine  
and my life was full  
you are no longer mine  
and my life  
is full

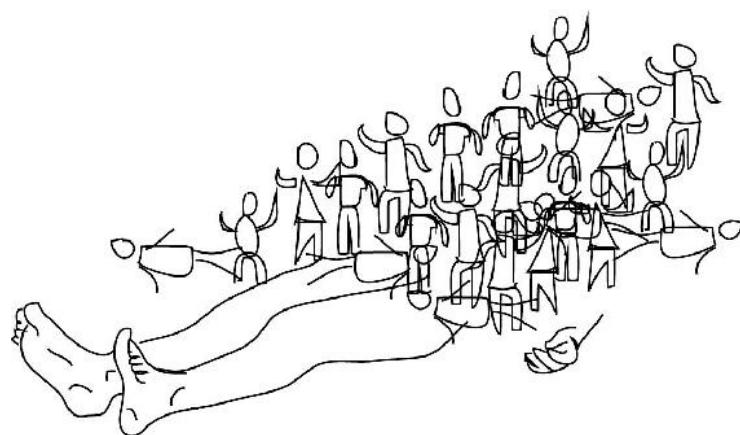


my eyes  
make mirrors out of  
every reflective surface they pass  
searching for something beautiful looking back  
my ears fish for compliments and praise  
but no matter how far they go looking  
nothing is enough for me  
i go to clinics and department stores  
for pretty potions and new techniques  
i've tried the lasers  
i've tried the facials  
i've tried the blades and expensive creams  
for a hopeful minute they fill me  
make me glow from cheek to cheek  
but as soon as i feel beautiful  
their magic disappears suddenly  
where am i supposed to find it  
i am willing to pay any price  
for a beauty that makes heads turn  
every moment day and night

*- a never-ending search*

this place makes me  
the kind of exhausted that has  
nothing to do with sleep  
and everything to do with  
the people around me

- *introvert*

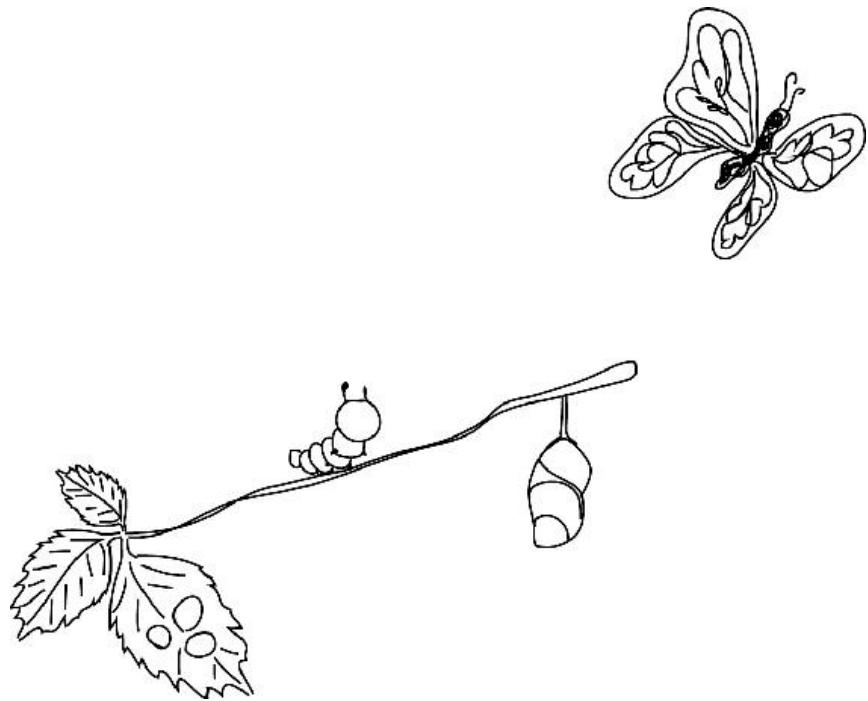


you must see no worth in yourself  
if you find me worth less  
after you've touched me  
as if your hands on my body  
magnify you  
and reduce me to nothing

- *worth is not something we transfer*

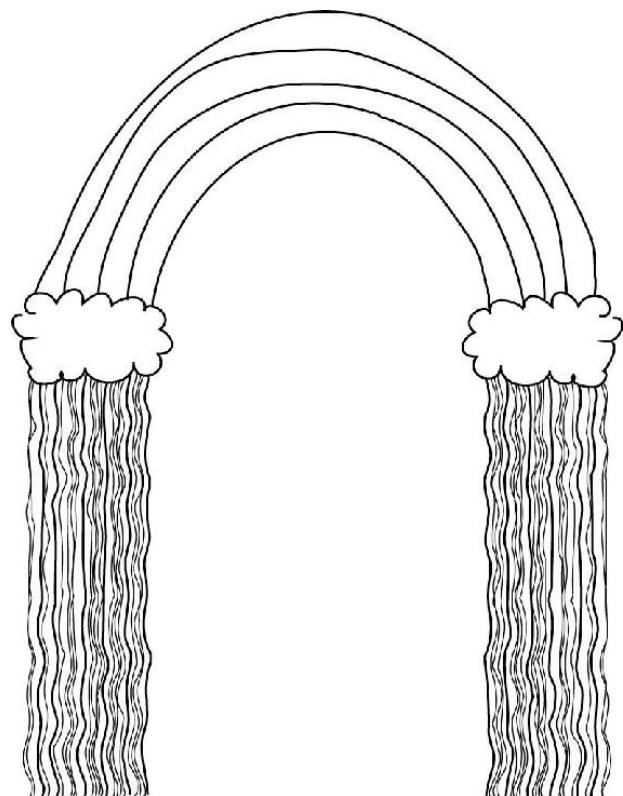
you do not just wake up and become the butterfly

- *growth is a process*



i am having a difficult time right now  
comparing myself to other people  
i am stretching myself thin trying to be them  
making fun of my face like my father  
calling it ugly  
starving out this premature double chin before it  
melts into my shoulders like candle wax  
fixing the bags under my eyes that carry the rape  
bookmarking surgical procedures for my nose  
there is so much that needs tending to  
can you point me in the right direction  
i want to take this body off  
which way back to the womb

like the rainbow  
after the rain  
joy will reveal itself  
after sorrow

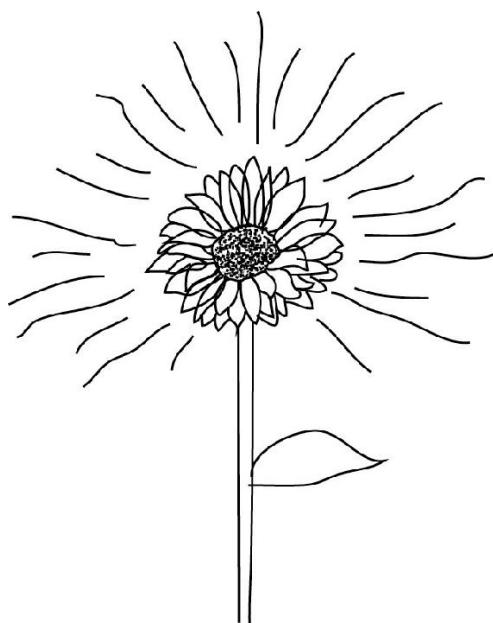


*no* was a bad word in my home  
*no* was met with the lash  
erased from our vocabulary  
beaten out of our backs  
till we became well-behaved kids  
who obediently nodded *yes* to everything  
when he climbed on top of me  
every part of my body wanted to reject it  
but i couldn't say *no* to save my life  
when i tried to scream  
all that escaped me was silence  
i heard *no* pounding her fist  
on the roof of my mouth  
begging to let her out  
but i had not put up the exit sign  
never built the emergency staircase  
there was no trapdoor for *no* to escape from  
i want to ask all the  
parents and guardians a question  
what use was obedience then  
when there were hands  
that were not mine inside me

*- how can i verbalize consent as an adult if i was  
never taught to as a child*

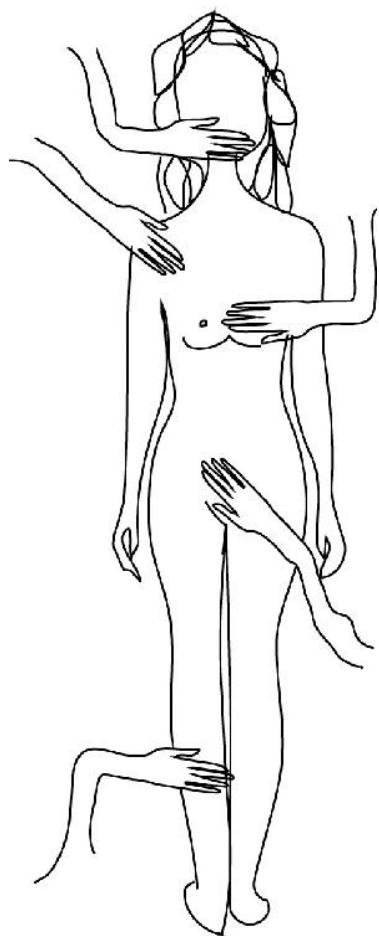
despite knowing  
they won't be here for long  
they still choose to live  
their brightest lives

- *sunflowers*



when you find her  
tell her not a day goes by  
when i do not think of her  
that girl who thinks you are  
everything she asked for  
when you bounce her off the walls  
and she cries  
tell her i cry with her too  
the sound of drywall crunching into itself  
as it's beaten with her head  
also lives in my ears  
tell her to run to me  
i have already unscrewed  
my front door off its frame  
opened all the windows  
inside there is a warm bath running  
she does not need your kind of love  
i am proof she will get out  
and find her way back to herself  
if i could survive you  
so will she

parts of my body still ache  
from the first time they were touched



## **the art of growing**

i felt beautiful until the age of twelve  
when my body began to ripen like new fruit  
and suddenly  
the men looked at my newborn hips with salivating lips  
the boys didn't want to play tag at recess  
they wanted to touch all the new  
and unfamiliar parts of me  
the parts i didn't know how to wear  
didn't know how to carry  
and tried to bury in my rib cage

*boobs*

they said  
and i hated that word  
hated that i was embarrassed to say it  
that even though it was referring to my body  
it didn't belong to me  
it belonged to them  
and they repeated it like  
they were meditating upon it

*boobs*

he said

*let me see yours*

there is nothing worth seeing here but guilt and shame  
i try to rot into the earth below my feet  
but i am still standing one foot across  
from his hooked fingers  
and when he charges to feast on my half moons  
i bite into his forearm and decide *i hate this body*  
i must have done something terrible to deserve it

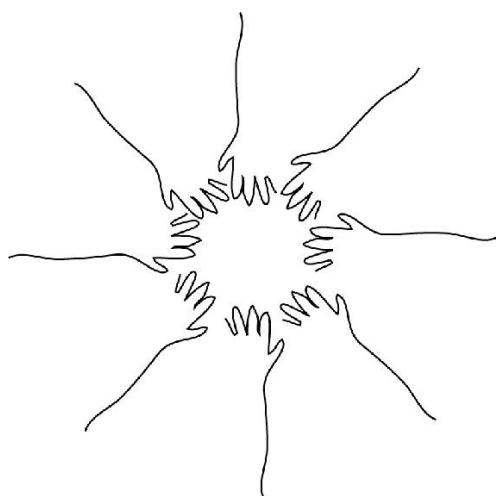
when i go home i tell my mother  
*the men outside are starving*  
she tells me  
i must not dress with my breasts hanging  
said *the boys will get hungry if they see fruit*  
says i should sit with my legs closed  
like a woman oughta  
or the men will get angry and fight  
said i can avoid all this trouble  
if i just learn to act like a lady  
but the problem is  
that doesn't even make sense  
i can't wrap my head around the fact  
that i have to convince half the world's population  
my body is not their bed  
i am busy learning the consequences of womanhood  
when i should be learning science and math instead  
i like cartwheels and gymnastics so i can't imagine  
walking around with my thighs pressed together  
like they're hiding a secret  
as if the acceptance of my own body parts  
will invite thoughts of lust in their heads  
i will not subject myself to their ideology  
cause slut shaming is rape culture  
virgin praising is rape culture  
i am not a mannequin in the window  
of your favorite shop  
you can't dress me up or  
throw me out when i am worn  
you are not a cannibal  
your actions are not my responsibility  
you will control yourself

the next time i go to school  
and the boys hoot at my backside  
i push them down

foot over their necks  
and defiantly say  
*boobs*  
and the look in their eyes is priceless

when the world comes crashing at your feet  
it's okay to let others  
help pick up the pieces  
if we're present to take part in your happiness  
when your circumstances are great  
we are more than capable  
of sharing your pain

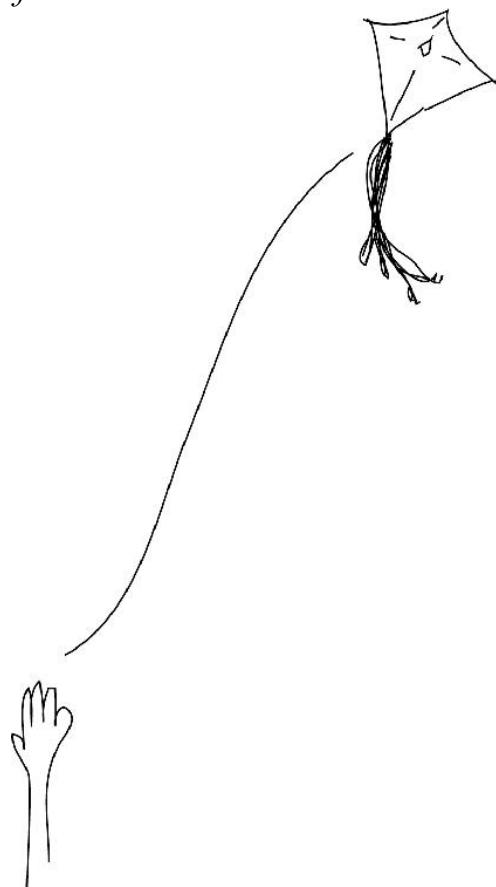
- *community*



i do not weep  
because i'm unhappy  
i weep because i have everything  
yet i am unhappy

let it go  
let it leave  
let it happen  
nothing  
in this world  
was promised or  
belonged to you anyway

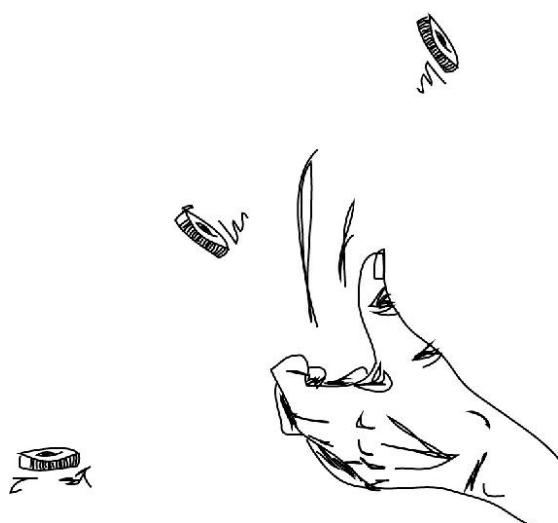
*- all you own is yourself*



wish pure love and soft peace  
upon the ones  
who've been unkind to you  
and keep moving forward

*- this will free you both*

yes  
it is possible  
to hate and love someone  
at the same time  
i do it to myself  
every day



somewhere along the way  
i lost the self-love  
and became my greatest enemy  
i thought i'd seen the devil before  
in the uncles who touched us as children  
the mobs that burned our city to the ground  
but i'd never seen someone as hungry  
for my flesh as i was  
i peeled my skin off just to feel awake  
wore it inside out  
sprinkled it with salt to punish myself  
turmoil clotted my nerves  
my blood curdled  
i even tried to bury myself alive  
but the dirt recoiled  
*you have already rotted* it said  
*there is nothing left for me to do*

- *self-hate*

the way you speak of yourself  
the way you degrade yourself  
into smallness  
is abuse

- *self-harm*



when i hit the rock bottom  
that exists after the rock bottom  
and no rope or hand appeared  
i wondered  
what if nothing wants me  
because i do not want me

*- i am both the poison and the antidote*

first

i went for my words

the *i can'ts.* *i won'ts.* *i am not good enoughs.*

i lined them up and shot them dead

then i went for my thoughts

invisible and everywhere

there was no time to gather them one by one

i had to wash them out

i wove a linen cloth out of my hair

soaked it in a bowl of mint and lemon water

carried it in my mouth as i climbed

up my braid to the back of my head

down on my knees i began to wipe my mind clean

it took twenty-one days

my knees bruised but

i did not care

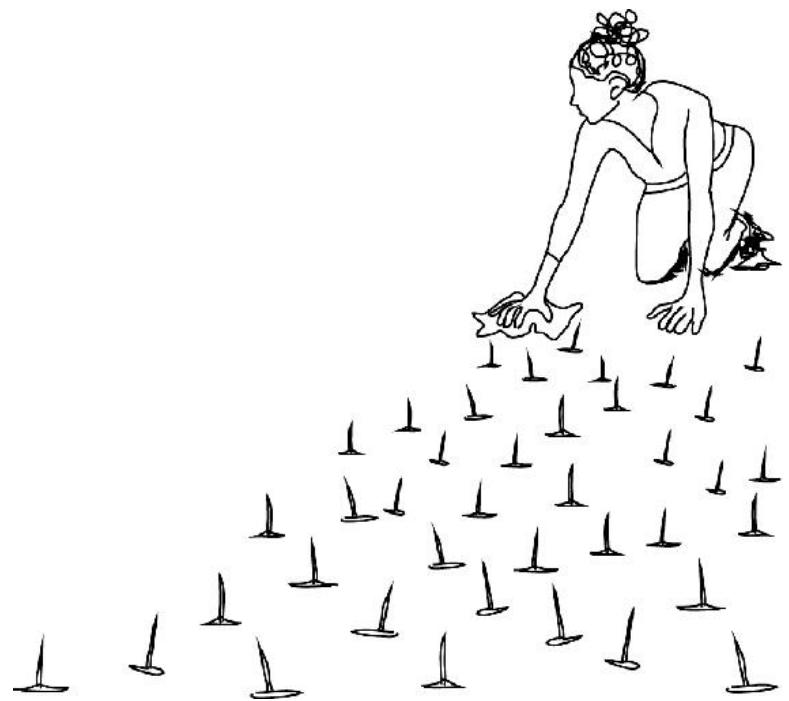
i was not given the breath

in my lungs to choke it out

i would scrub the self-hate off the bone

till it exposed love

- *self-love*



i have survived far too much to go quietly  
let a meteor take me  
call the thunder for backup  
my death will be grand  
the land will crack  
the sun will eat itself

- *the day i leave*

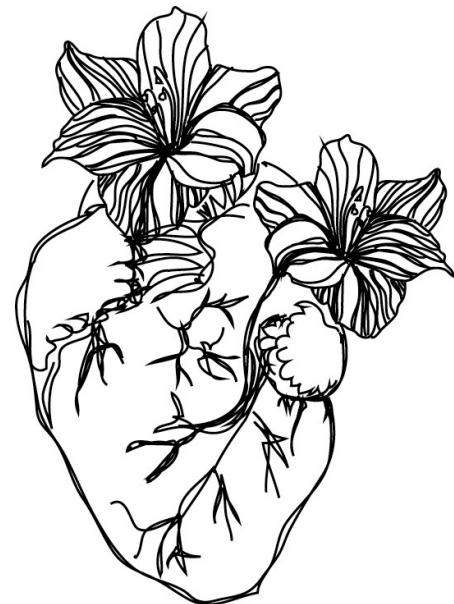
i want to honeymoon myself



if i am the longest relationship  
of my life  
isn't it time to  
nurture intimacy  
and love  
with the person  
i lie in bed with each night

- *acceptance*

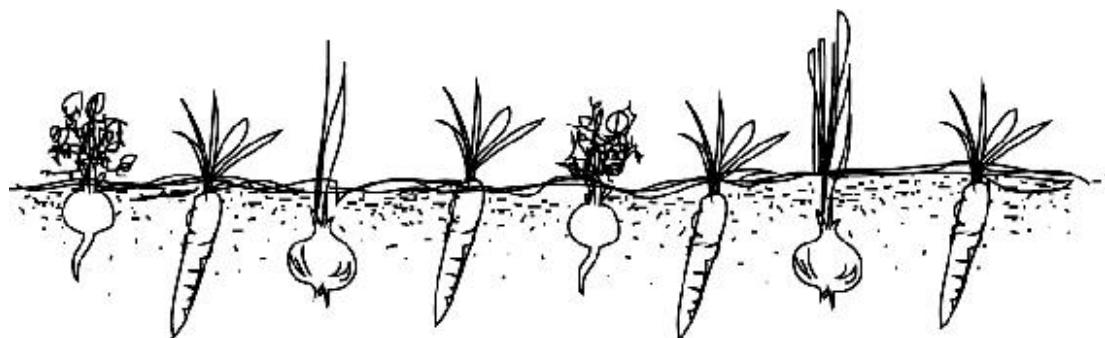
what is stronger  
than the human heart  
which shatters over and over  
and still lives



i woke up thinking the work was done  
i would not have to practice today  
how naive to think healing was that easy  
when there is no end point  
no finish line to cross  
healing is everyday work

you have so much  
but are always hungry for more  
stop looking up at everything you don't have  
and look around at everything you do

- *where the satisfaction lives*

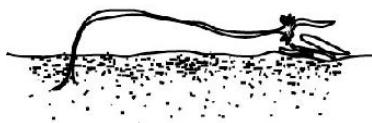
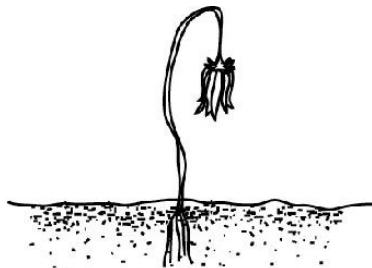


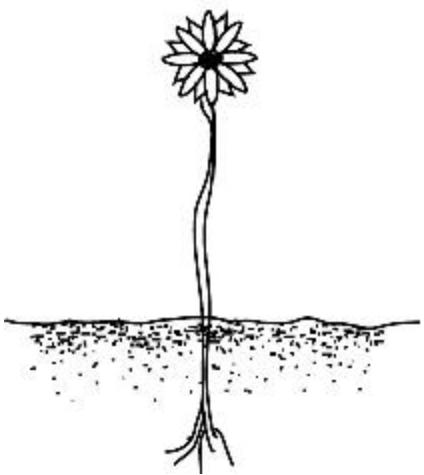
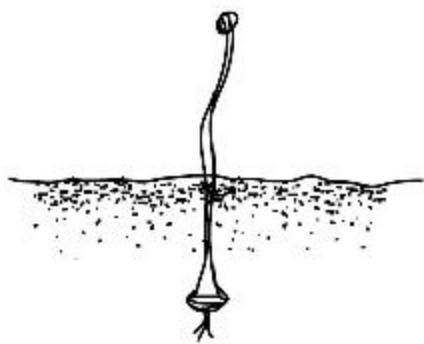
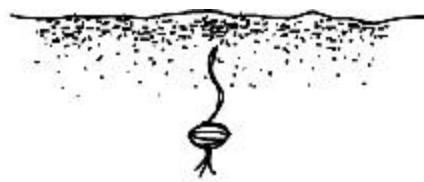
you can imitate a light like mine  
but you cannot become it

and here you are living  
despite it all



*this is the recipe of life*  
said my mother  
as she held me in her arms as i wept  
*think of those flowers you plant*  
*in the garden each year*  
*they will teach you*  
*that people too*  
*must wilt*  
*fall*  
*root*  
*rise*  
*in order to bloom*

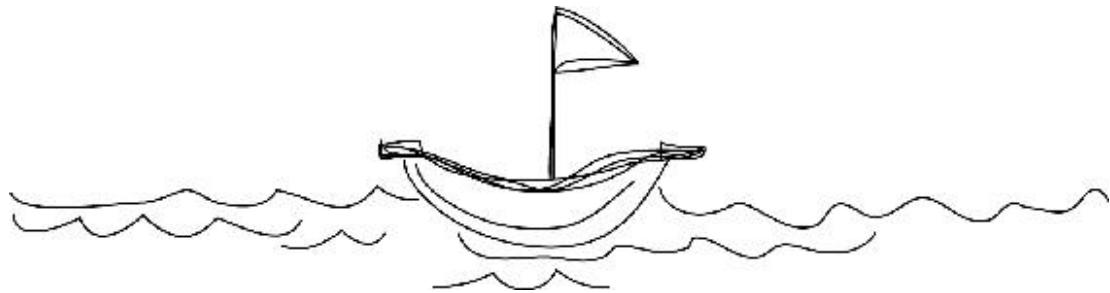




rooting

they have no idea what it is like  
to lose home at the risk of  
never finding home again  
to have your entire life  
split between two lands and  
become the bridge between two countries

- *immigrant*

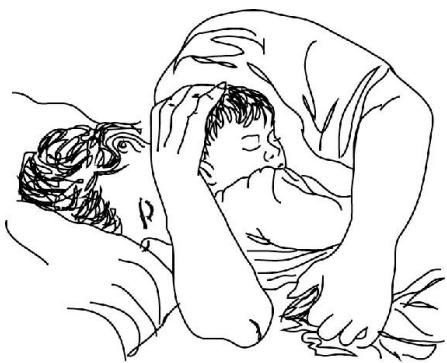


*look at what they've done  
the earth cried to the moon  
they've turned me into one entire bruise*

*- green and blue*

you are an open wound  
and we are standing  
in a pool of your blood

- *refugee camp*



when it came to listening  
my mother taught me silence  
*if you are drowning their voice with yours  
how will you hear them* she asked

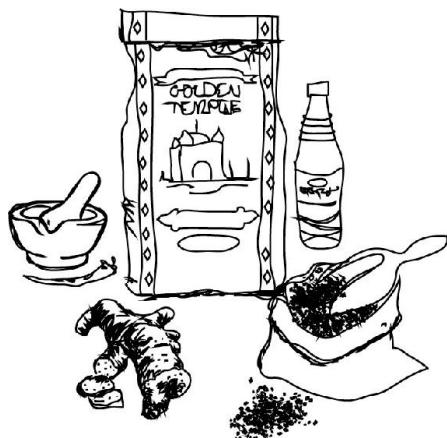
when it came to speaking  
she said *do it with commitment*  
*every word you say*  
*is your own responsibility*

when it came to being  
she said *be tender and tough at once*  
*you need to be vulnerable to live fully*  
*but rough enough to survive it all*

when it came to choosing  
she asked me to be thankful  
for the choices i had that  
she never had the privilege of making

- *lessons from mumma*

leaving her country  
was not easy for my mother  
i still catch her searching for it  
in foreign films  
and the international food aisle



i wonder where she hid him. her brother who had died only a year before. as she sat in a costume of red silk and gold on her wedding day. she tells me it was the saddest day of her life. how she had not finished mourning yet. a year was not enough. there was no way to grieve that quick. it felt like a blink. a breath. before the news of his loss had sunk in the decor was already hung up. the guests had started strolling in. the small talk. the rush. all mirrored his funeral too much. it felt as though his body had just been carried away for the cremation when my father and his family arrived for the wedding celebrations.

- *amrik singh (1959–1990)*

i am sorry this world  
could not keep you safe  
may your journey home  
be a soft and peaceful one

- *rest in peace*

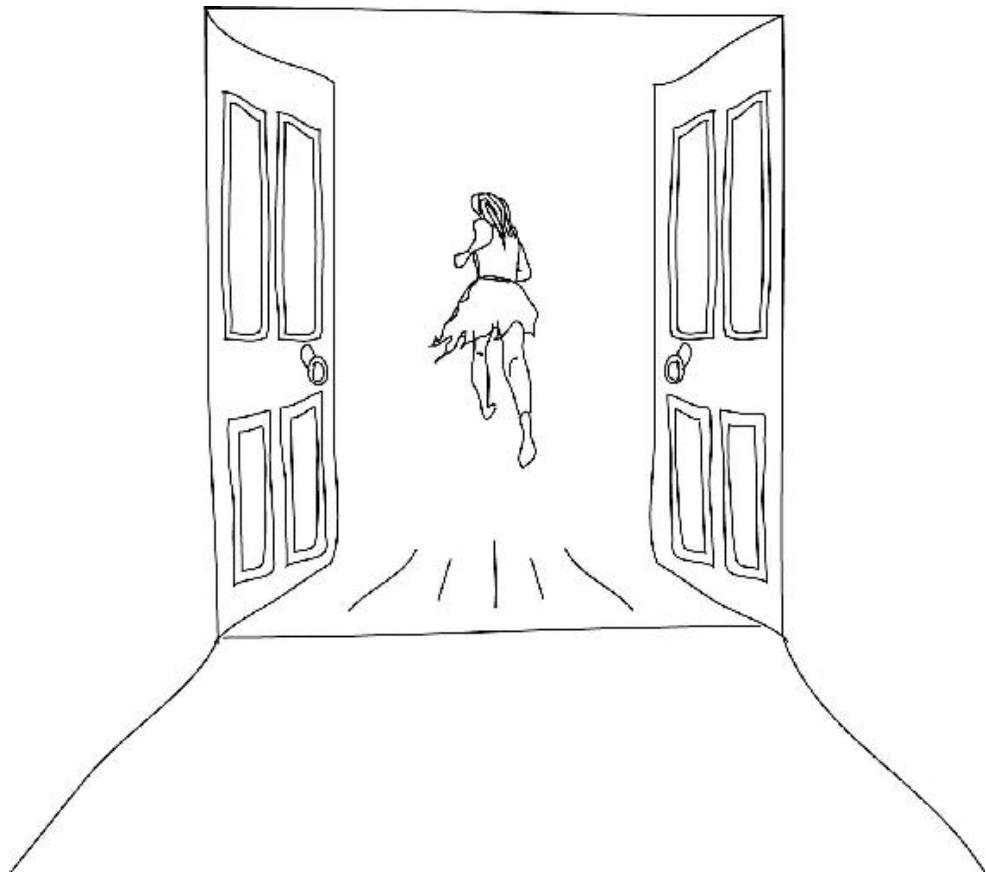


your legs buckle like a tired horse running for safety  
drag them by the hips and move faster  
you do not have the privilege to rest  
in a country that wants to spit you out  
you have to keep  
going and going  
and going  
till you reach the water  
hand over everything in your name  
for a ticket onto the boat  
next to a hundred others like you  
packed like sardines  
you tell the woman beside you  
*this boat is not strong enough to carry*  
*this much sorrow to a shore*  
*what does it matter* she says  
*if drowning is easier than staying*  
how many people has this water drunk up  
is it all one long cemetery  
bodies buried without a country  
perhaps the sea is your country  
perhaps the boat sinks  
because it is the only place that will take you

- *boat*

*what if we get to their doors  
and they slam them shut i ask*

*what are doors she says  
when we've escaped the belly of the beast*

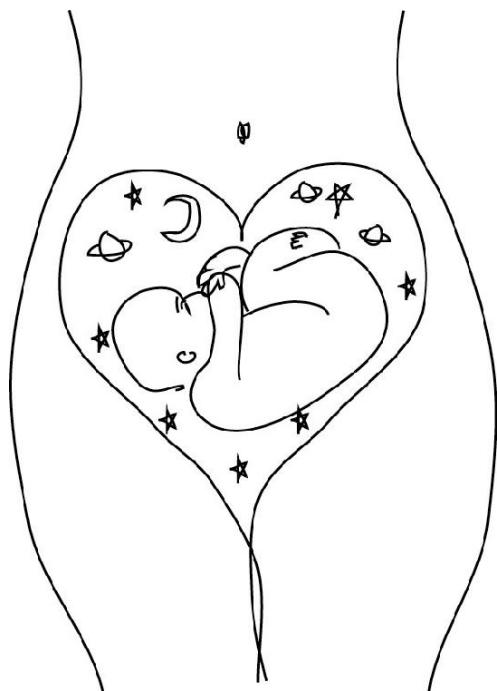


borders  
are man-made  
they only divide us physically  
don't let them make us  
turn on each other

- *we are not enemies*

after the surgery  
she tells me  
how bizarre it is  
that they just took out  
the first home of her children

- *hysterectomy february 2016*

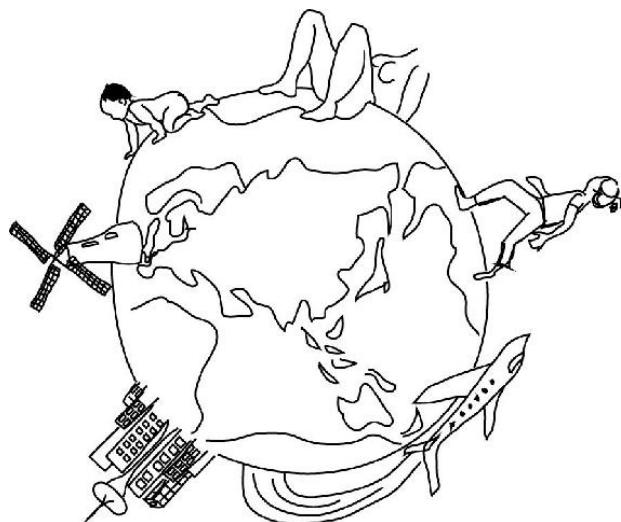


bombs brought entire cities  
down to their knees today  
refugees boarded boats knowing  
their feet may never touch land again  
police shot people dead for the color of their skin  
last month i visited an orphanage of  
abandoned babies left on the curbside like waste  
later at the hospital i watched a mother  
lose both her child and her mind  
somewhere a lover died  
how can i refuse to believe  
my life is anything short of a miracle  
if amidst all this chaos  
i was given this life

- *circumstances*

perhaps we are all immigrants  
trading one home for another  
first we leave the womb for air  
then the suburbs for the filthy city  
in search of a better life

some of us just happen to leave entire countries



my god  
is not waiting inside a church  
or sitting above the temple's steps  
my god  
is the refugee's breath as she's running  
is living in the starving child's belly  
is the heartbeat of the protest  
my god  
does not rest between pages  
written by holy men  
my god  
lives between the sweaty thighs  
of women's bodies sold for money  
was last seen washing the homeless man's feet  
my god  
is not as unreachable as  
they'd like you to think  
my god is beating inside us infinitely

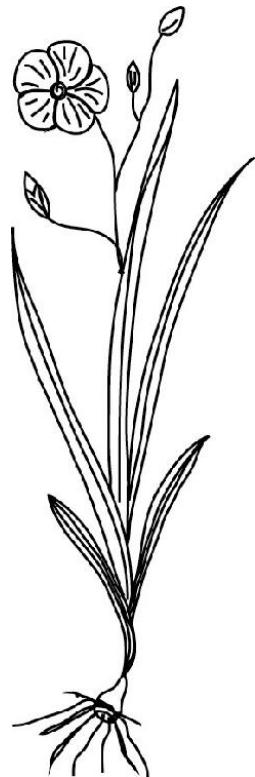
## **advice i would've given my mother on her wedding day**

1. you are allowed to say *no*
2. years ago his father beat the language of love  
out of your husband's back  
he will never know how to say it  
but his actions prove he loves you
3. go with him  
when he enters your body and goes to that place  
sex is not dirty
4. no matter how many times his family brings it up  
do not have the abortion just because i'm a girl  
lock the relatives out and swallow the key  
he will not hate you
5. take your journals and paintings  
across the ocean when you leave  
these will remind you who you are  
when you get lost amid new cities  
they will also remind your children  
you had an entire life before them
6. when your husbands are off  
working at the factories  
make friends with all the other  
lonely women in the apartment complex  
this loneliness will cut a person in half  
you will need each other to stay alive
7. your husband and children will take from your plate  
we will emotionally and mentally starve you  
all of it is wrong  
don't let us convince you that

sacrificing yourself is  
how you must show love

8. when your mother dies  
fly back for the funeral  
money comes and goes  
a mother is once in a lifetime
9. you are allowed to spend  
a couple dollars on a coffee  
i know there was a time when  
we could not afford it  
but we are okay now. breathe.
10. you can't speak english fluently  
or operate a computer or cell phone  
we did that to you. it is not your fault.  
you are not any less than the  
other mothers with their  
flashy phones and designer clothing  
we confined you to the four walls of this home  
and worked you to the bone  
you have not been your own property for decades
11. there was no rule book for how  
to be the first woman in your lineage  
to raise a family on a strange land by yourself
12. you are the person i look up to most
13. when i am about to shatter  
i think of your strength  
and harden
14. i think you are a magician
15. i want to fill the rest of your life with ease

16. you are the hero of heroes  
the god of gods

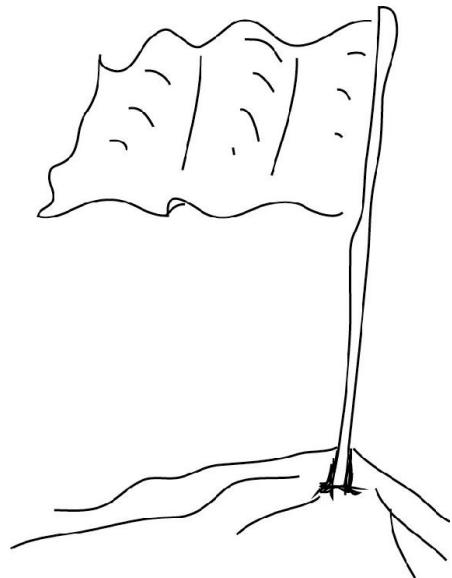


in a dream  
i saw my mother  
with the love of her life  
and no children  
it was the happiest i'd ever seen her

- *what if*

you split the world  
into pieces and  
called them countries  
declared ownership on  
what never belonged to you  
and left the rest with nothing

- *colonize*



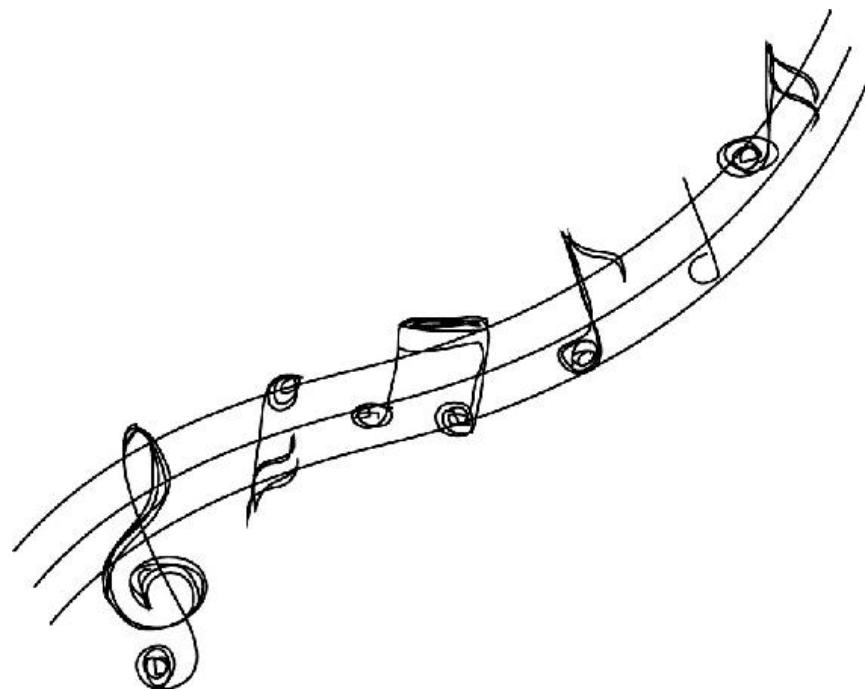
my parents never sat us down in the evenings to share stories of their younger days. one was always working. the other too tired. perhaps being an immigrant does that to you.

the cold terrain of the north engulfed them. their bodies were hard at work paying in blood and sweat for their citizenship. perhaps the weight of the new world was too much. and the pain and sorrow of the old was better left buried.

i do wish i had unburied it though. i wish i'd pried their silence apart like a closed envelope. i wish i'd found a small opening at its very edge. pushed a finger inside and gently torn it open. they had an entire life before me which i am a stranger to. it would be my greatest regret to see them leave this place before i even got to know them.

my voice  
is the offspring  
of two countries colliding  
what is there to be ashamed of  
if english  
and my mother tongue  
made love  
my voice  
is her father's words  
and mother's accent  
what does it matter if  
my mouth carries two worlds

- *accent*



for years they were separated by oceans  
left with nothing but little photographs of each other  
smaller than passport-size photos  
hers was tucked into a golden locket  
his slipped inside his wallet  
at the end of the day  
when their worlds went quiet  
studying them was their only intimacy

this was a time long before computers  
when families in that part of the world  
had not seen a telephone or laid their  
almond eyes on a colored television screen  
long before you and i

as the wheels of the plane touched tarmac  
she wondered if this was the place  
had she boarded the right flight  
should've asked the air hostess twice  
like her husband suggested

walking into baggage claim  
her heart beat so heavy  
she thought it might fall out  
eyes darting in every direction  
searching for what to do next when  
suddenly  
right there  
in the flesh  
he stood  
not a mirage—a man  
first came relief  
then bewilderment  
they'd imagined this reunion for years  
had rehearsed their lines  
but her mouth seemed to forget

she felt a kick in her stomach  
when she saw the shadows circling his eyes  
and shoulders carrying an invisible weight  
it looked like the life had been drained out of him

where was the person she had wed  
she wondered  
reaching for the golden locket  
the one with the photo of the man  
her husband did not look like anymore

*- the new world had drained him*



what if  
there isn't enough time  
to give her what she deserves  
do you think  
if i begged the sky hard enough  
my mother's soul would  
return to me as my daughter  
so i can give her  
the comfort she gave me  
my whole life

i want to go back in time and sit beside her. document her in a home movie so my eyes can spend the rest of their lives witnessing a miracle. the one whose life i never think of before mine. i want to know what she laughed about with friends. in the village within houses of mud and brick.

surrounded by acres of mustard plant and sugarcane. i want to sit with the teenage version of my mother. ask about her dreams. become her pleated braid. the black kohl caressing her eyelids. the flour neatly packed into her fingertips. a page in her schoolbooks. even to be a single thread of her cotton dress would be the greatest gift.

*- to witness a miracle*



## **1790**

he takes the newborn girl from his wife  
carries her to the neighboring room  
cradles her head with his left hand  
and gently snaps her neck with his right

## **1890**

*a wet towel to wrap her in*

*grains of rice and*

*sand in the nose*

a mother shares the trick with her daughter-in-law

*i had to do it* she says

*as did my mother*

*and her mother before her*

## **1990**

a newspaper article reads

*a hundred baby girls were found buried*

*behind a doctor's house in a neighboring village*

the wife wonders if that's where he took her

she imagines her daughter becoming the soil

fertilizing the roots that feed this country

## **1998**

oceans away in a toronto basement

a doctor performs an illegal abortion

on an indian woman who already has a daughter

*one is burden enough* she says

## **2006**

*it's easier than you think* my aunties tell my mother

they know a family

who've done it three times

they know a clinic. they could get mumma the number.

the doctor even prescribes pills that guarantee a boy.

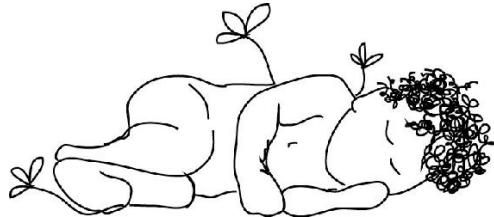
*they worked for the woman down the street* they say

*now she has three sons*

**2012**

twelve hospitals in the toronto area  
refuse to reveal a baby's gender to expecting families  
until the thirtieth week of pregnancy  
all twelve hospitals are located in areas with high south asian immigrant populations

*- female infanticide | female feticide*

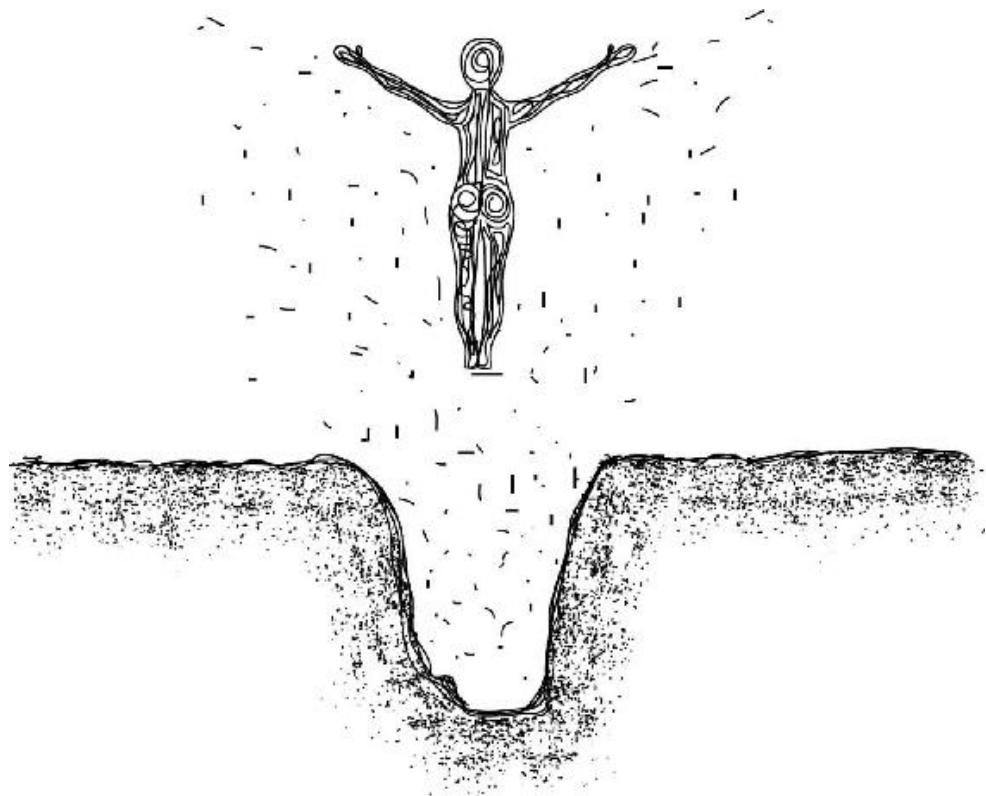


remember the body  
of your community  
breathe in the people  
who sewed you whole  
it is you who became yourself  
but those before you  
are a part of your fabric

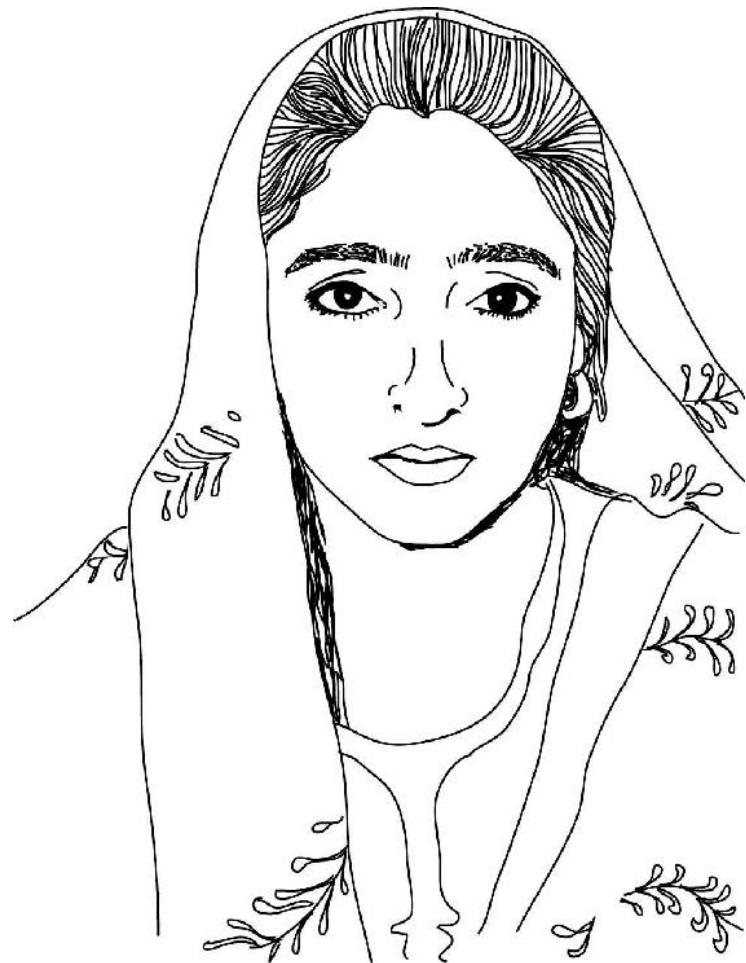
*- honor the roots*

when they buried me alive  
i dug my way  
out of the ground  
with palm and fist  
i howled so loud  
the earth rose in fear and  
the dirt began to levitate  
my whole life has been an uprising  
one burial after another

*- i will find my way out of you just fine*



my mother sacrificed her dreams  
so i could dream



## **broken english**

i think about the way my father  
pulled the family out of poverty  
without knowing what a vowel was  
and my mother raised four children  
without being able to construct  
a perfect sentence in english  
a discombobulated couple  
who landed in the new world with hopes  
that left the bitter taste of rejection in their mouths  
no family  
no friends  
just man and wife  
two university degrees that meant nothing  
one mother tongue that was broken now  
one swollen belly with a baby inside  
a father worrying about jobs and rent  
cause no matter what this baby was coming  
and they thought to themselves for a split second  
*was it worth it to put all of our money  
into the dream of a country  
that is swallowing us whole*

papa looks at his woman's eyes  
and sees loneliness living where the iris was  
wants to give her a home in a country that looks at her  
with the word *visitor* wrapped around its tongue  
on their wedding day  
she left an entire village to be his wife  
now she left an entire country to be a warrior  
and when the winter came  
they had nothing but the heat of their own bodies

to keep the coldness out

like two brackets they faced one another  
to hold the dearest parts of them—their children—close  
they turned a suitcase full of clothes into a life  
and regular paychecks  
to make sure the children of immigrants  
wouldn't hate them for being the children of immigrants  
they worked too hard  
you can tell by their hands  
their eyes are begging for sleep  
but our mouths were begging to be fed  
and that is the most artistic thing i have ever seen  
it is poetry to these ears  
that have never heard what passion sounds like  
and my mouth is full of *likes* and *ums* when  
i look at their masterpiece  
cause there are no words in the english language  
that can articulate that kind of beauty  
i can't compact their existence into twenty-six letters and call it  
a description  
i tried once  
but the adjectives needed to describe them  
don't even exist  
so instead i ended up with pages and pages  
full of words followed by commas and  
more words and more commas  
only to realize there are some things  
in the world so infinite  
they could never use a full stop  
  
so how dare you mock your mother  
when she opens her mouth and  
broken english spills out  
don't be ashamed of the fact that  
she split through countries to be here

so you wouldn't have to cross a shoreline  
her accent is thick like honey  
hold it with your life  
it's the only thing she has left of home  
don't you stomp on that richness  
instead hang it up on the walls of museums  
next to dali and van gogh  
her life is brilliant and tragic  
kiss the side of her tender cheek  
she already knows what it feels like  
to have an entire nation laugh when she speaks  
she is more than our punctuation and language  
we might be able to paint pictures and write stories  
but she made an entire world for herself

how is that for art

rising

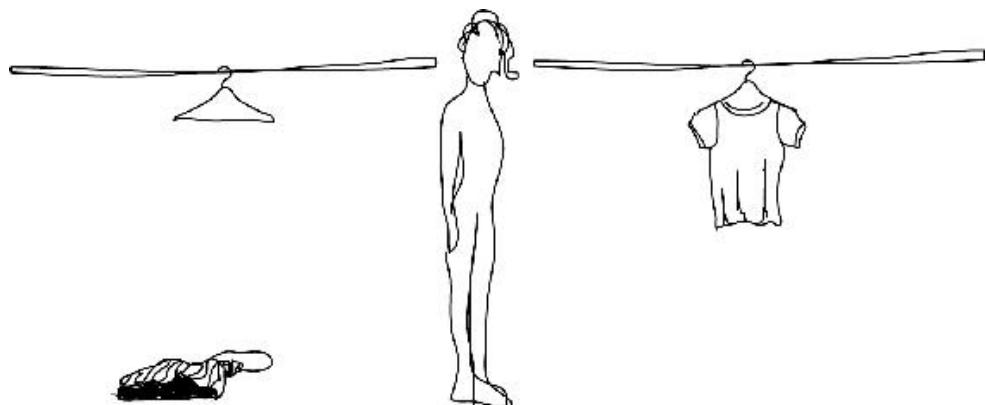
on the first day of love  
you wrapped me in the word *special*



you must remember it too  
how the rest of the city slept  
while we sat awakened for the first time  
we hadn't touched yet  
but we managed to travel in and out  
of each other with our words  
our limbs dizzying with enough electricity  
to form half a sun  
we drank nothing that night  
but i was intoxicated  
i went home and thought  
*are we soul mates*

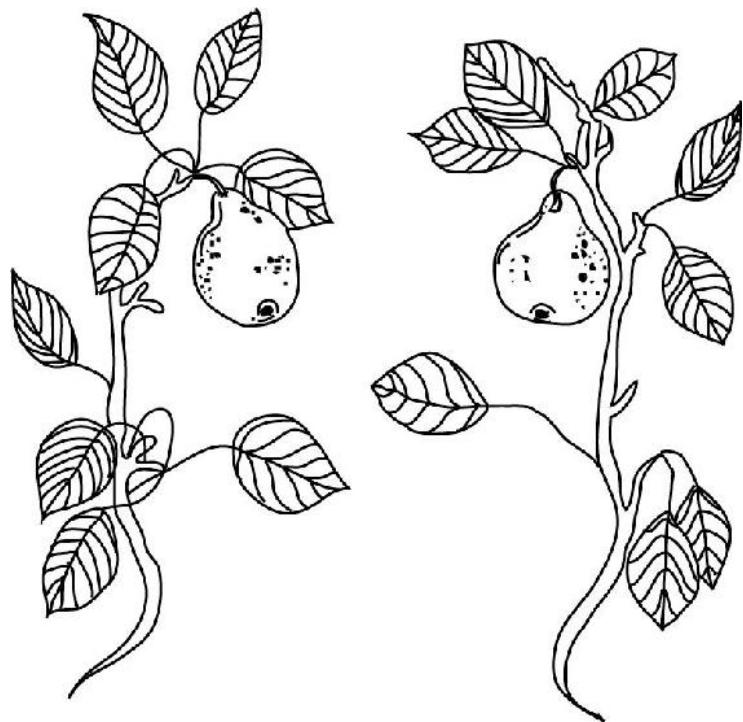
i feel apprehensive  
cause falling into you  
means falling out of him and  
i had not prepared for that

*- forward*



how do i welcome in kindness  
when i have only practiced  
spreading my legs for the terrifying  
what am i to do with you  
if my idea of love is violence  
but you are sweet  
if your concept of passion is eye contact  
but mine is rage  
how can i call this intimacy  
if i crave sharp edges  
but your edges aren't even edges  
they are soft landings  
how do i teach myself  
to accept a healthy love  
if all i've ever known is pain

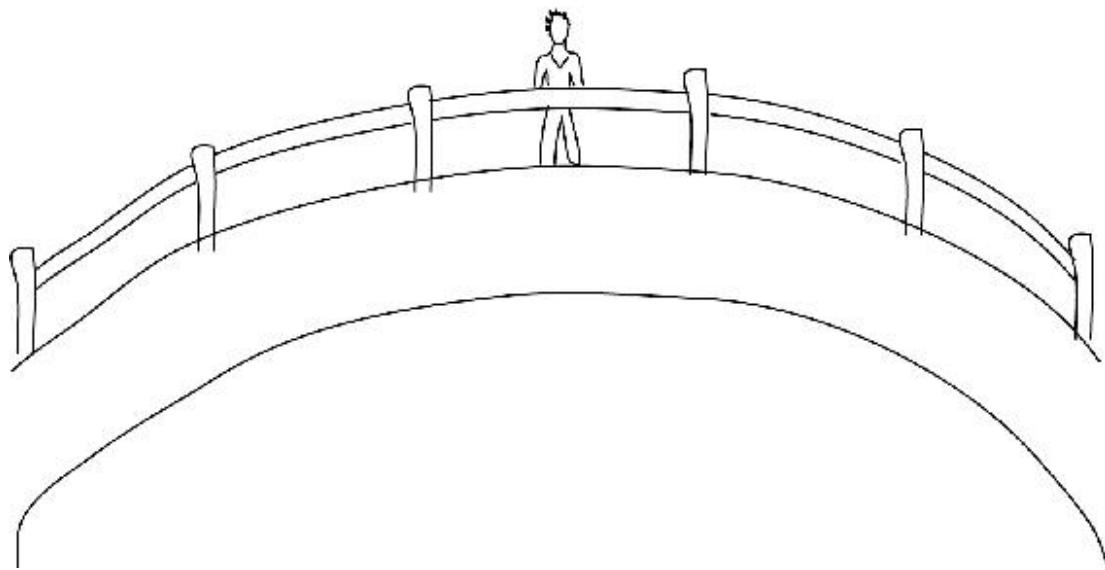
i will welcome  
a partner  
who is my equal



never feel guilty for starting again

the middle place is strange  
the part between them and the next  
is an awakening from how you saw to  
how you will see  
this is where their charm wears off  
where they are no longer  
the god you made them out to be  
when the pedestal you carved out of your  
bone and teeth no longer serves them  
they are unmasked and made mortal again

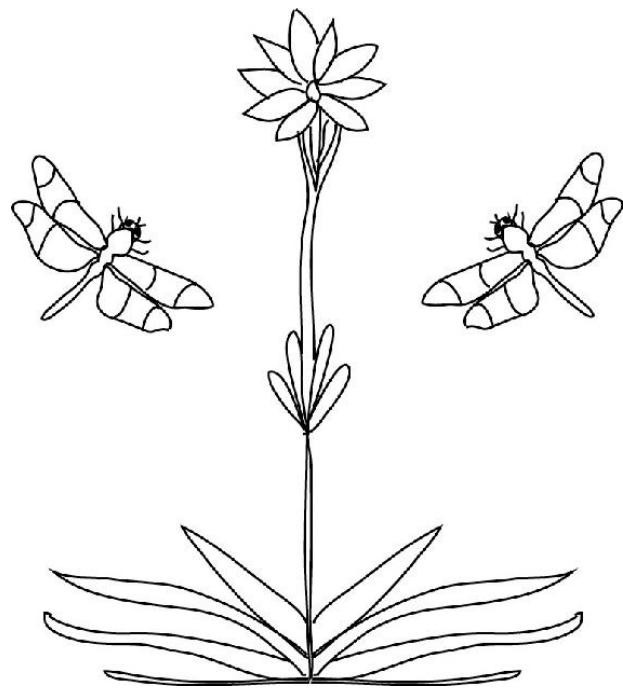
- *the middle place*



when you start loving someone new  
you laugh at the indecisiveness of love  
remember when you were sure  
the last one was *the one*  
and now here you are  
redefining *the one* all over again

- *a fresh love is a gift*

i do not need the kind of love  
that is draining  
i want someone  
who energizes me

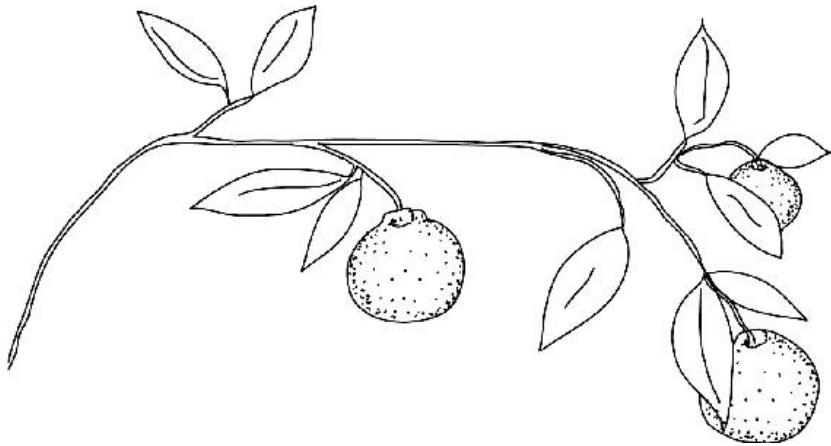


i am trying to not  
make you pay for their mistakes  
i am trying to teach myself  
you are not responsible  
for the wound  
how can i punish you  
for what you have not done  
you wear my emotions  
like a decorated army vest  
you are not cold or  
savage or hungry  
you are medicinal  
you are not them

he makes sure to look right at me  
as he places his electric fingers on my skin  
*how does that feel* he asks  
commanding my attention  
responding is out of the question  
i quiver with anticipation  
excited and terrified for what's to come  
he smiles  
knows this is what satisfaction looks like  
i am a switchboard  
he is the circuits  
my hips move with his—rhythmic  
my voice isn't my own when i moan—it is music  
like fingers on a violin string  
he sparks enough electricity within me to power a city  
when we finish i look right at him  
and tell him  
*that was magic*

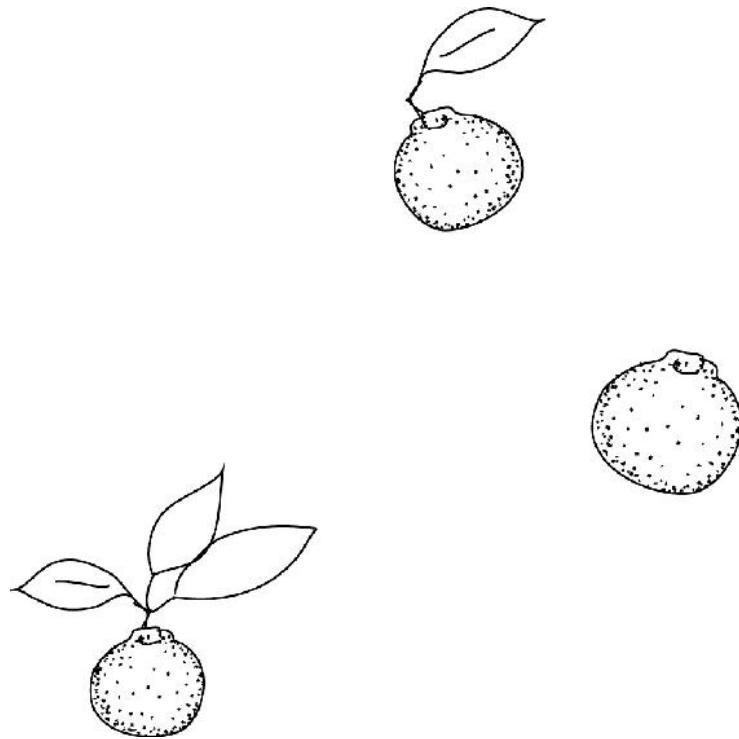


when i walked into the coffee shop and saw you. my body did not react like it had the first time. i waited for my heart to abandon me. for my legs to freeze up. to fall to the ground crying at your sight. nothing happened. there was no connection or movement inside when we locked eyes. you looked like a regular guy with your regular clothes and regular coffee. nothing profound about you. i don't give myself enough credit. my body must have cleansed itself of you long ago. must have gotten tired of me behaving like i'd lost the best thing to have happened. and wrung the insecurities out while i was busy wallowing in pity. that day i had no makeup on. my hair was all over the place. i was wearing my brother's old t-shirt and pajama pants. yet i felt like a gleaming siren. a mermaid. i did a little dance in the car while driving home. even though we were both under the same roof of that coffee shop. i was still solar systems away from you.



the orange trees refused to blossom  
unless we bloomed first  
when we met  
they wept tangerines  
can't you tell  
the earth has waited its whole life for this

- *celebration*



why am i always running in circles  
between wanting you to want me  
and when you want me  
deciding it is too emotionally naked  
for me to live with  
why do i make loving me so difficult  
as if you should never have to witness  
the ghosts i have tucked under my breast  
i used to be more open  
when it came to matters like this my love

*- if only we'd met when i was that willing*

i could not contain myself any longer  
i ran to the ocean  
in the middle of the night  
and confessed my love for you to the water  
as i finished telling her  
the salt in her body became sugar



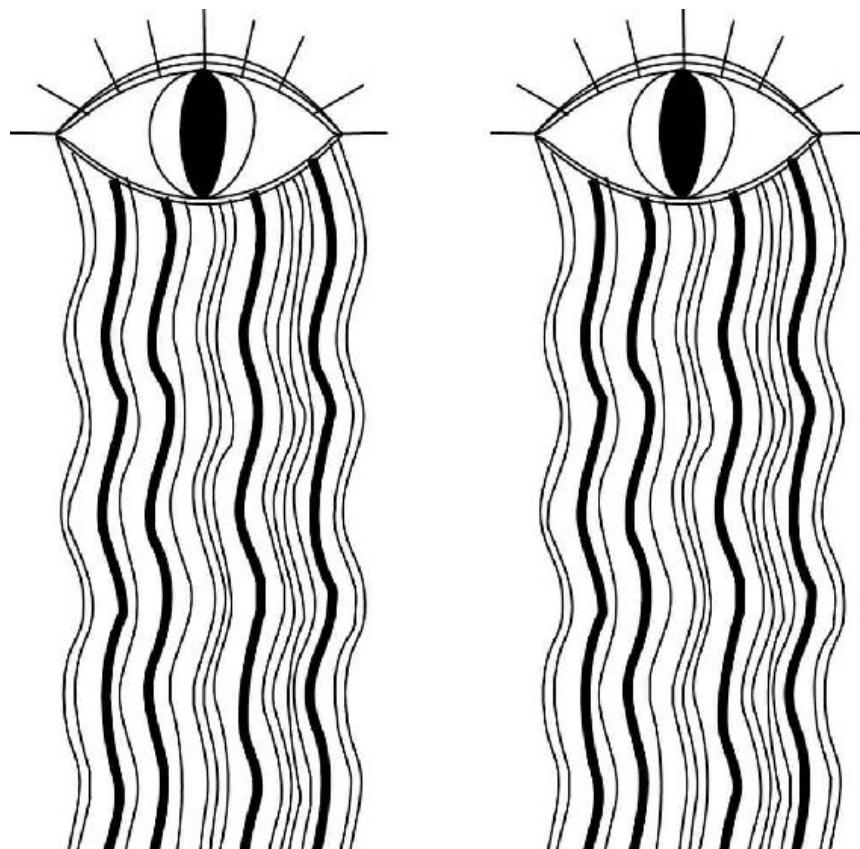
(ode to sobha singh's *sohni mahiwal*)

i say *maybe this is a mistake. maybe we need more than love to make this work.*

you place your lips on mine. when our faces are buzzing with the ecstasy of kissing you say *tell me that isn't right.* and as much as i'd like to think with my head. my racing heart is all that makes sense. there. right there is the answer you're looking for. in my loss of breath. my lack of words. my silence. my inability to speak means you've filled my stomach with so many butterflies that even if this is a mistake. it could only be right to be this wrong with you.

a  
man  
who cries

- *a gift*



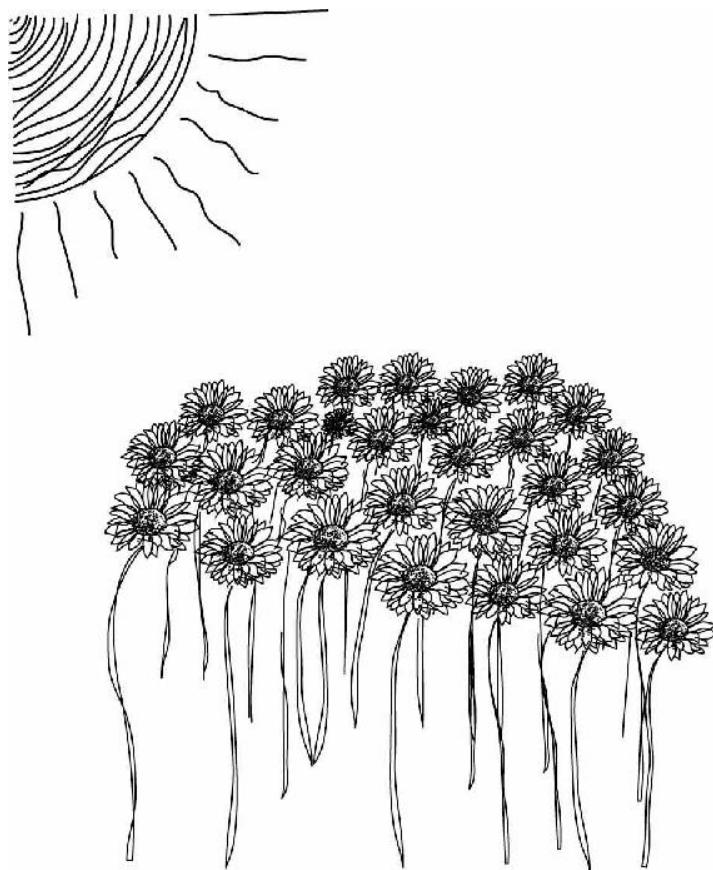
if i'm going to share my life with a partner  
it would be foolish not to ask myself  
twenty years from now  
is this person going to be  
someone i still laugh with  
or am i just distracted by their charm  
do i see us evolving into  
new people by the decade  
or does the growing ever come to a pause  
i don't want to be distracted  
by the looks or the money  
i want to know if they pull  
the best or the worst out of me  
deep at the core are our values the same  
in thirty years will we still  
jump into bed like we're twenty  
can i picture us in old age  
conquering the world  
like we've got young blood  
running in our veins

- *checklist*

*what is it with you and sunflowers* he asks

i point to the field of yellow outside  
*sunflowers worship the sun* i tell him  
*only when it arrives do they rise*  
*when the sun leaves*  
*they bow their heads in mourning*  
*that is what the sun does to those flowers*  
*it's what you do to me*

*- the sun and her flowers*

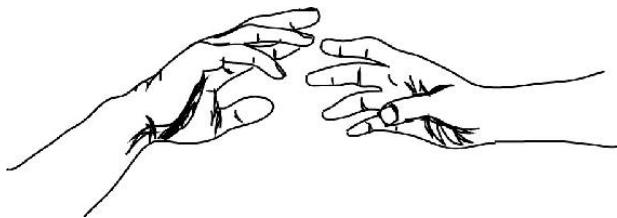


sometimes  
i stop myself from  
saying the words out loud  
as if leaving my mouth too often  
might wear them down

*- i love you*

the most important conversations  
we'll have are with our fingers  
when yours nervously graze mine  
for the first time during dinner  
they'll tighten with fear  
when you ask to see me again next week  
but as soon as i say yes  
they'll stretch out in ease  
when they grasp one another  
while we're beneath the sheets  
the two of us will pretend  
we're not weak in the knees  
when i get angry  
they'll pulse with bitter cries  
but when they tremble for forgiveness  
you'll see what apologies look like  
and when one of us is dying  
on a hospital bed at eighty-five  
your fingers will grip mine  
to say things words can't describe

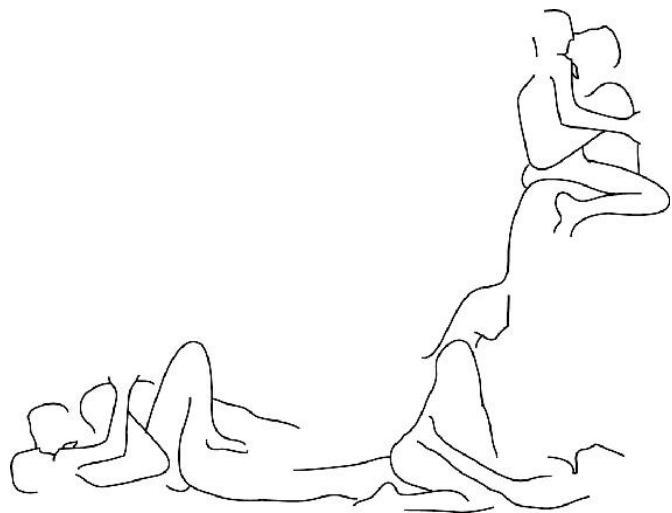
- *fingers*



this morning  
i told the flowers  
what i'd do for you  
and they blossomed

there is no place  
i end and you begin  
when your body  
is in my body  
we are one person

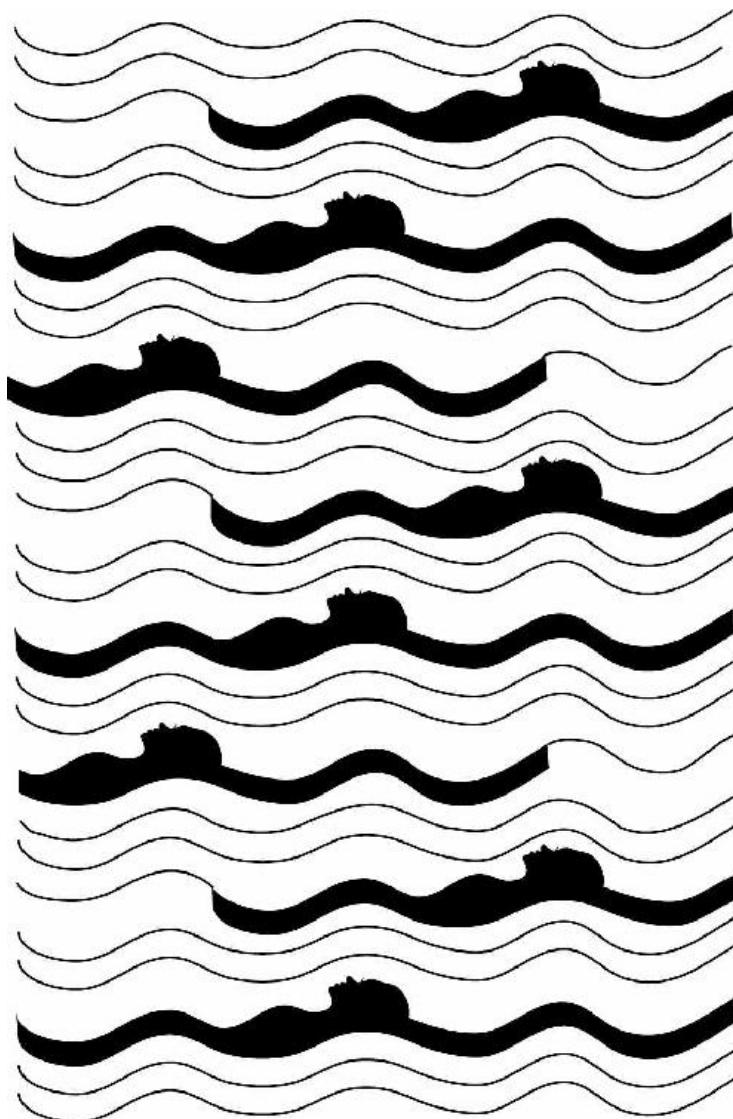
- *sex*



if i had to walk to get to you  
it would take eight hundred and twenty-six hours  
on bad days i think about it  
what i might do if the apocalypse comes  
and the planes stop flying  
there is so much time to think  
so much empty space wanting to be consumed  
but no intimacy around to consume it  
it feels like being stuck at a train station  
waiting and waiting and waiting  
for the one with your name on it  
when the moon rises on this coast  
but the sun still burns shamelessly on yours  
i crumble knowing even our skies are different  
we have been together so long  
but have we really been together if  
your touch has not held me long enough  
to imprint itself on my skin  
i try my hardest to stay present  
but without you here  
everything at its best  
is only mediocre

*- long distance*

i am  
made of water  
of course i am emotional



they should feel like home  
a place that grounds your life  
where you go to take the day off

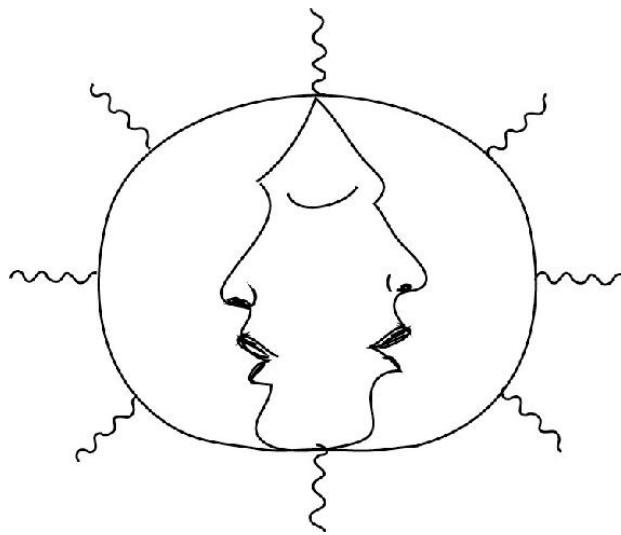
- *the one*

the moon is responsible  
for pulling tides  
out of still water  
darling  
i am the still water  
and you are the moon



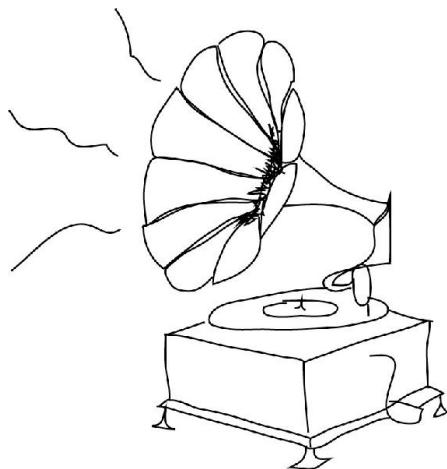
the right one does not  
stand in your way  
they make space for you  
to step forward

when you are  
full  
and i am  
full  
we are two suns



your voice does to me  
what autumn does to trees  
you call to say hello  
and my clothes fall naturally

together we are an endless conversation

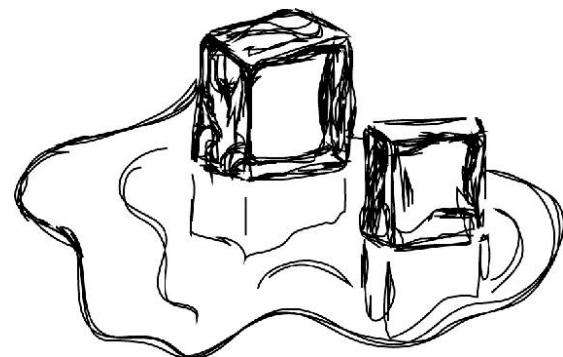


when death  
takes my hand  
i will hold you with the other  
and promise to find you  
in every lifetime

- *commitment*

it was as though  
someone had slid ice cubes  
down the back of my shirt

- *orgasm*

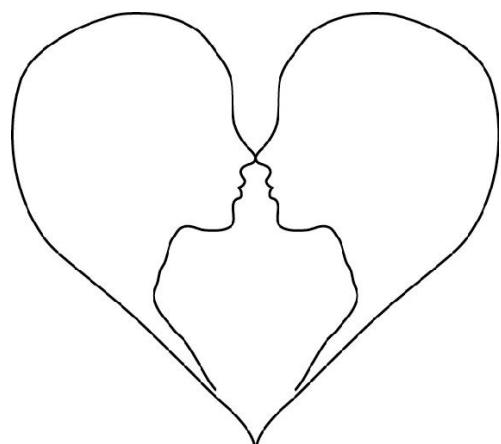


you have  
been  
inside me  
before

*- another lifetime*

god must have kneaded you and i  
from the same dough  
rolled us out as one on the baking sheet  
must have suddenly realized  
how unfair it was  
to put that much magic in one person  
and sadly split that dough in two  
how else is it that  
when i look in the mirror  
i am looking at you  
when you breathe  
my own lungs fill with air  
that we just met but we  
have known each other our whole lives  
if we were not made as one to begin with

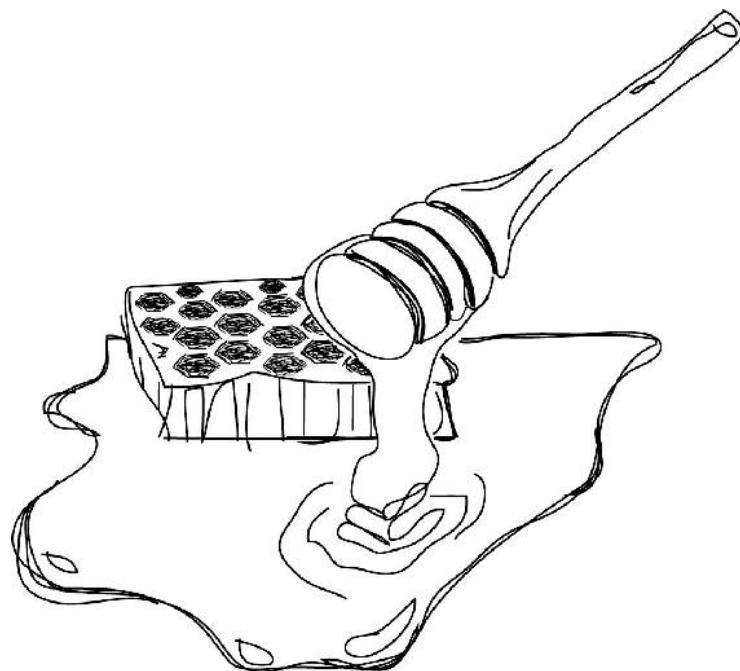
*- our souls are mirrors*



to be  
two legs  
on one body

*- a relationship*

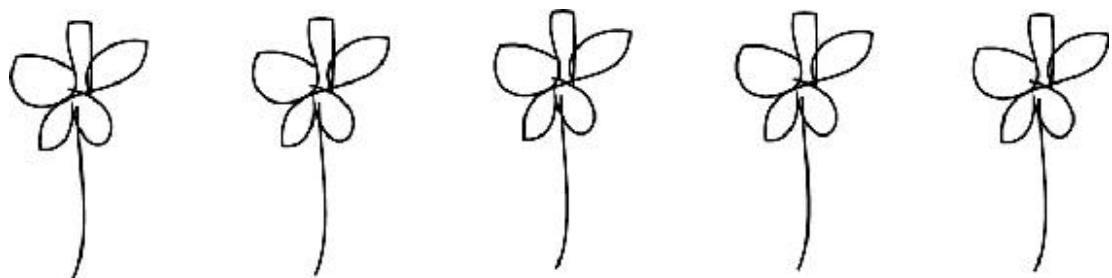
you must have a  
honeycomb  
for a heart  
how else  
could a man  
be this sweet



if you got any more beautiful  
the sun would leave its place  
and come for you

- *the chase*

it has been one of the greatest and most difficult years of my life. i learned everything is temporary. moments. feelings. people. flowers. i learned love is about giving. everything. and letting it hurt. i learned vulnerability is always the right choice because it is easy to be cold in a world that makes it so very difficult to remain soft. i learned all things come in twos. life and death. pain and joy. salt and sugar. me and you. it is the balance of the universe. it has been the year of hurting so bad but living so good. making friends out of strangers. making strangers out of friends. learning mint chocolate chip ice cream will fix just about everything. and for the pains it can't there will always be my mother's arms. we must learn to focus on warm energy. always. soak our limbs in it and become better lovers to the world. for if we can't learn to be kind to each other how will we ever learn to be kind to the most desperate parts of ourselves.



blooming

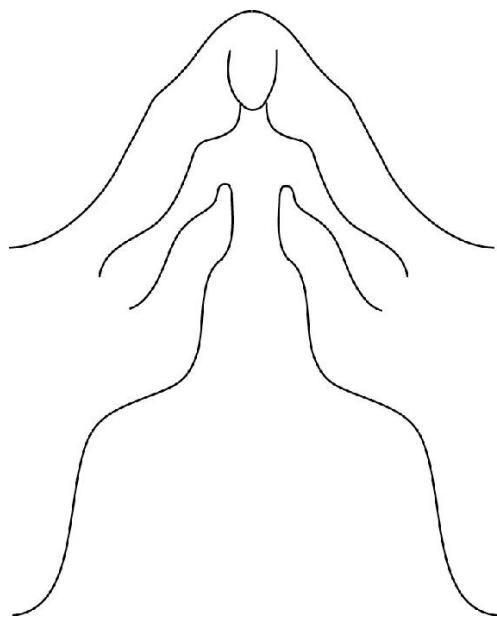
the universe took its time on you  
crafted you to offer the world  
something different from everyone else  
when you doubt  
how you were created  
you doubt an energy greater than us both

- *irreplaceable*



when the first woman spread her legs  
to let the first man in  
what did he see  
when she led him down the hallway  
toward the sacred room  
what sat waiting  
what shook him so deeply  
that all confidence shattered  
from then on  
the first man  
watched the first woman  
every night and day  
built a cage to keep her in  
so she could sin no more  
he set fire to her books  
called her witch  
and shouted whore  
until the evening came  
when his tired eyes betrayed him  
the first woman noticed it  
as he unwillingly fell asleep  
the quiet humming  
the drumming  
a knocking between her legs  
a doorbell  
a voice  
a pulse  
asking her to open up  
and off her hand went running  
down the hall  
toward the sacred room  
she found  
god  
the magician's wand  
the snake's tongue  
sitting inside her smiling

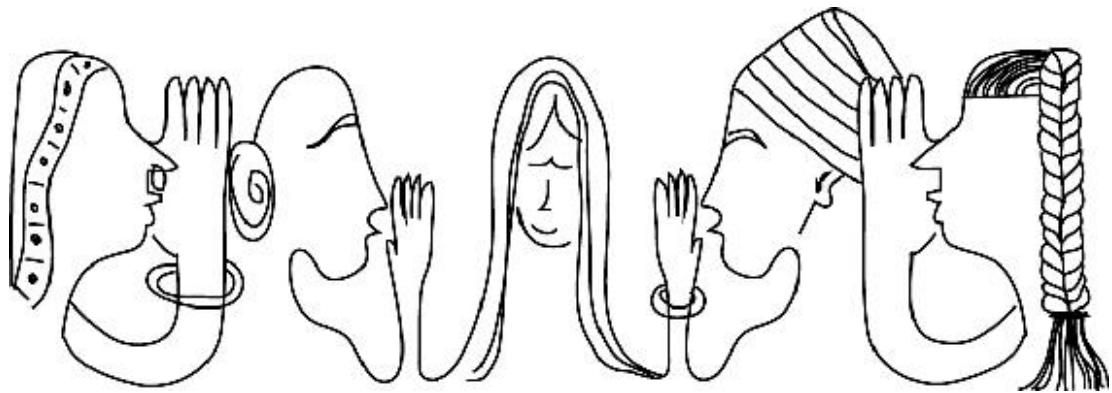
*- when the first woman drew magic with her fingers*



i will no longer  
compare my path to others

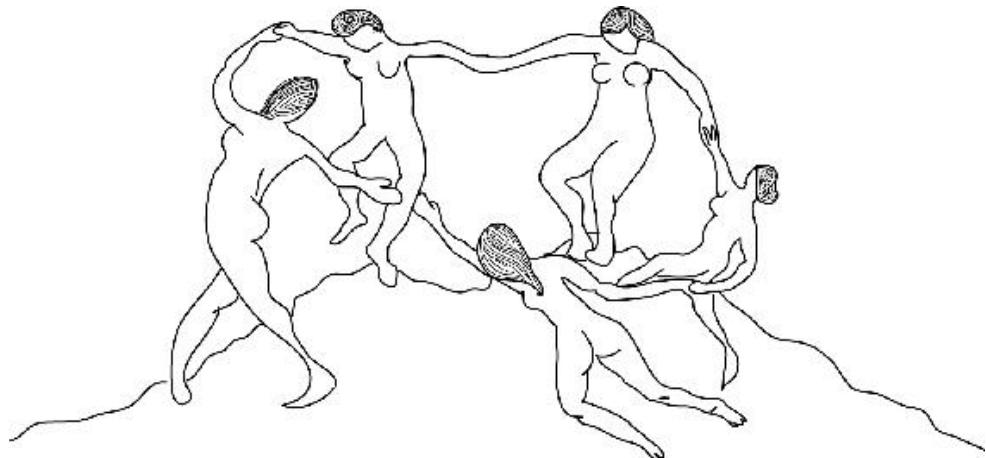
*- i refuse to do a disservice to my life*

i am the product of all the ancestors getting together  
and deciding these stories need to be told



many tried  
but failed to catch me  
i am the ghost of ghosts  
everywhere and nowhere  
i am magic tricks  
within magic within magic  
none have figured out  
i am a world wrapped in worlds  
folded in suns and moons  
you can try but  
you won't get those hands on me

upon my birth  
my mother said  
*there is god in you*  
*can you feel her dancing*



(ode to matisse's *dance*)

as a father of three daughters  
it would have been normal  
for him to push marriage on us  
this has been the narrative for  
the women in my culture for hundreds of years  
instead he pushed education  
knowing it would set us free  
in a world that wanted to contain us  
he made sure that we learned  
to walk independently

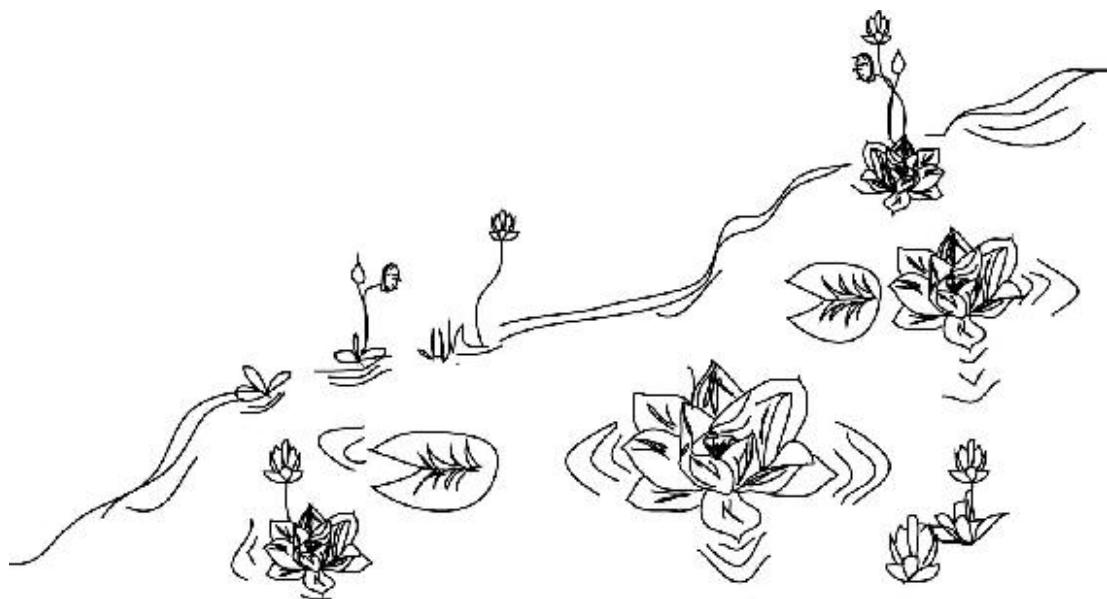
there are far too many mouths here  
but not enough of them are worth  
what you're offering  
give yourself to a few  
and to those few  
give heavily

*- invest in the right people*



i am of the earth  
and to the earth i shall return once more  
life and death are old friends  
and i am the conversation between them  
i am their late-night chatter  
their laughter and tears  
what is there to be afraid of  
if i am the gift they give to each other  
this place never belonged to me anyway  
i have always been theirs

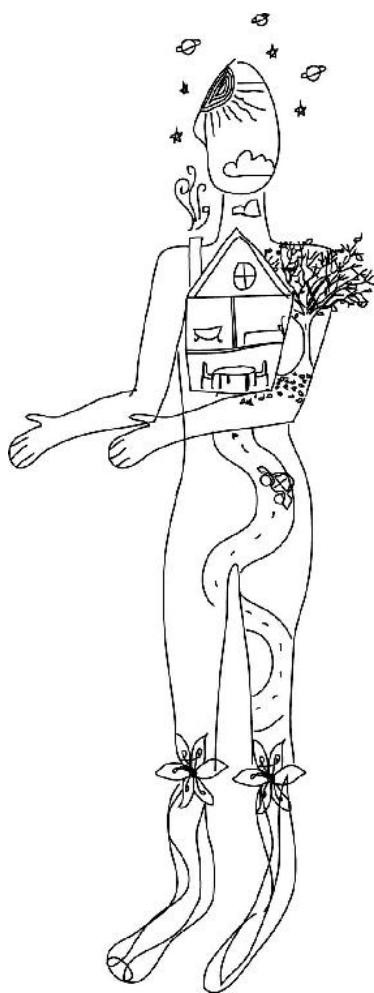
to hate  
is an easy lazy thing  
but to love  
takes strength  
everyone has  
but not all are  
willing to practice



beautiful brown girl  
your thick hair is a mink coat not all can afford  
beautiful brown girl  
you hate the hyperpigmentation  
but your skin can't help  
carrying as much sun as possible  
you are a magnet for the light  
unibrow—the bridging of two worlds  
vagina—so much darker than the rest of you  
cause it is trying to hide a gold mine  
you will have dark circles too early  
—appreciate the halos  
beautiful brown girl  
you pull god out of their bellies

look down at your body  
whisper  
*there is no home like you*

- *thank you*



learning to not envy  
someone else's blessings  
is what grace looks like

i am the first woman in my lineage with freedom of choice. to craft her future whichever way i choose. say what is on my mind when i want to. without the whip of the lash. there are hundreds of firsts i am thankful for. that my mother and her mother and her mother did not have the privilege of feeling. what an honor. to be the first woman in the family who gets to taste her desires. no wonder i am starving to fill up on this life. i have generations of bellies to eat for. the grandmothers must be howling with laughter. huddled around a mud stove in the afterlife. sipping on steaming glasses of milky masala chai. how wild it must be for them to see one of their own living so boldly.



(ode to amrita sher-gil's *village scene* 1938)

trust your body  
it reacts to right and wrong  
better than your mind does

- *it is speaking to you*

i stand  
on the sacrifices  
of a million women before me  
thinking  
*what can i do*  
*to make this mountain taller*  
*so the women after me*  
*can see farther*

- *legacy*



when i go from this place  
dress the porch with garlands  
as you would for a wedding my dear  
pull the people from their homes  
and dance in the streets  
when death arrives  
like a bride at the aisle  
send me off in my brightest clothing  
serve ice cream with rose petals to our guests  
there's no reason to cry my dear  
i have waited my whole life  
for such a beauty to take  
my breath away  
when i go  
let it be a celebration  
for i have been here  
i have lived  
i have won at this game called life

- *funeral*

it was when i stopped searching for home within others  
and lifted the foundations of home within myself  
i found there were no roots more intimate  
than those between a mind and body  
that have decided to be whole

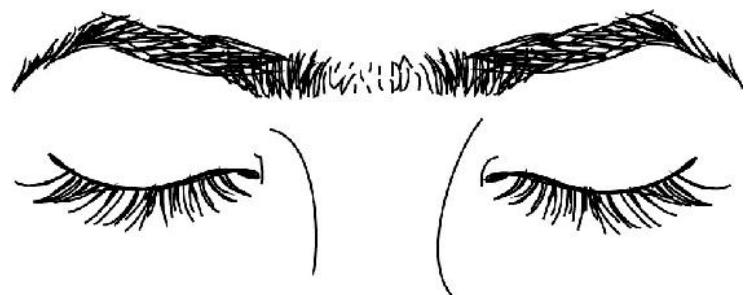


what good am i  
if i do not fill the plates  
of the ones who fed me  
but fill the plates of strangers

- *family*

even if they've been separated  
they'll end up together  
you can't keep lovers apart  
no matter how much  
i pluck and pull them  
my eyebrows always  
find their way  
back to each other

- *unibrow*



a child and an elder sat across from each other at a table  
a cup of milk and tea before them  
the elder asked the child  
if she was enjoying her life  
the child answered yes  
life was good but  
she couldn't wait to grow up  
and do grown-up things  
then the child asked the elder the same question  
he too said life was good  
but he'd give anything to go back to an age  
where moving and dreaming were still possibilities  
they both took a sip from their cups  
but the child's milk had curdled  
the elder's tea had grown bitter  
there were tears running from their eyes

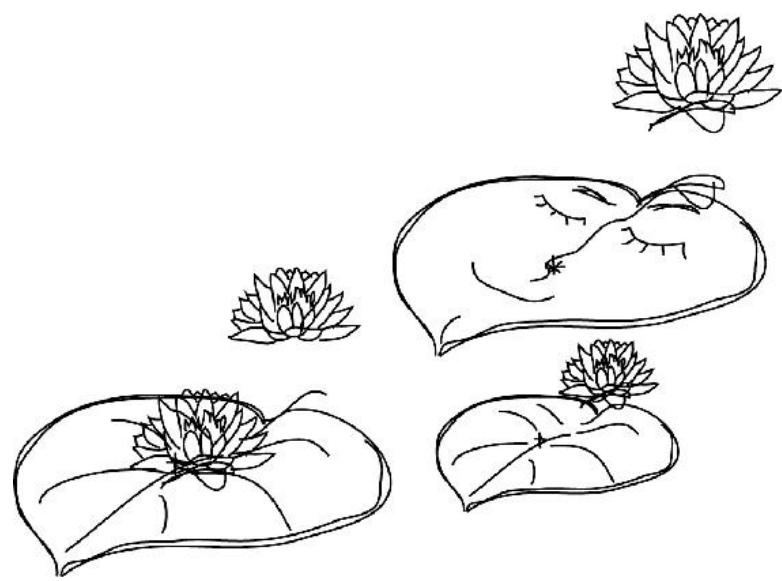
the day you have everything  
i hope you remember  
when you had nothing



she is not a porn category  
or the type you look for  
on a friday night  
she is not needy or easy or weak

- *daddy issues is not a punch line*

i long to be a lily pad

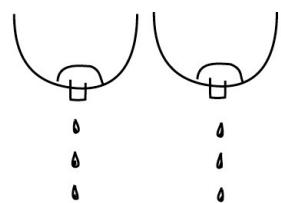


i made change after change  
on the road to perfection  
but when i finally felt beautiful enough  
their definition of beauty  
suddenly changed

what if there is no finish line  
and in an attempt to keep up  
i lose the gifts i was born with  
for a beauty so insecure  
it can't commit to itself

- *the lies they sell*

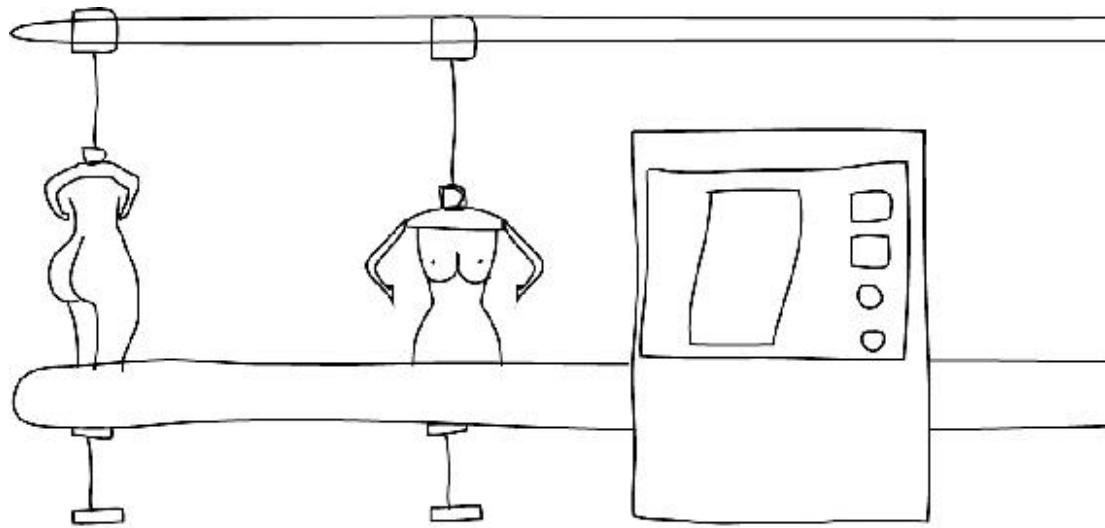
you want to keep  
the blood and the milk hidden  
as if the womb and breast  
never fed you



¤

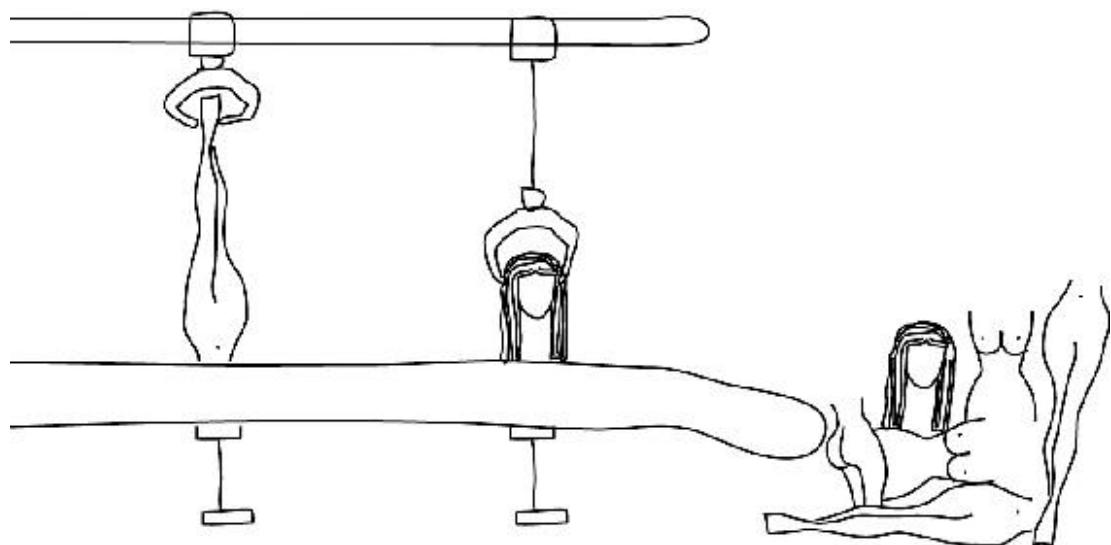


it is a trillion-dollar industry that would collapse  
if we believed we were beautiful enough already



their concept of beauty  
is manufactured  
i am not

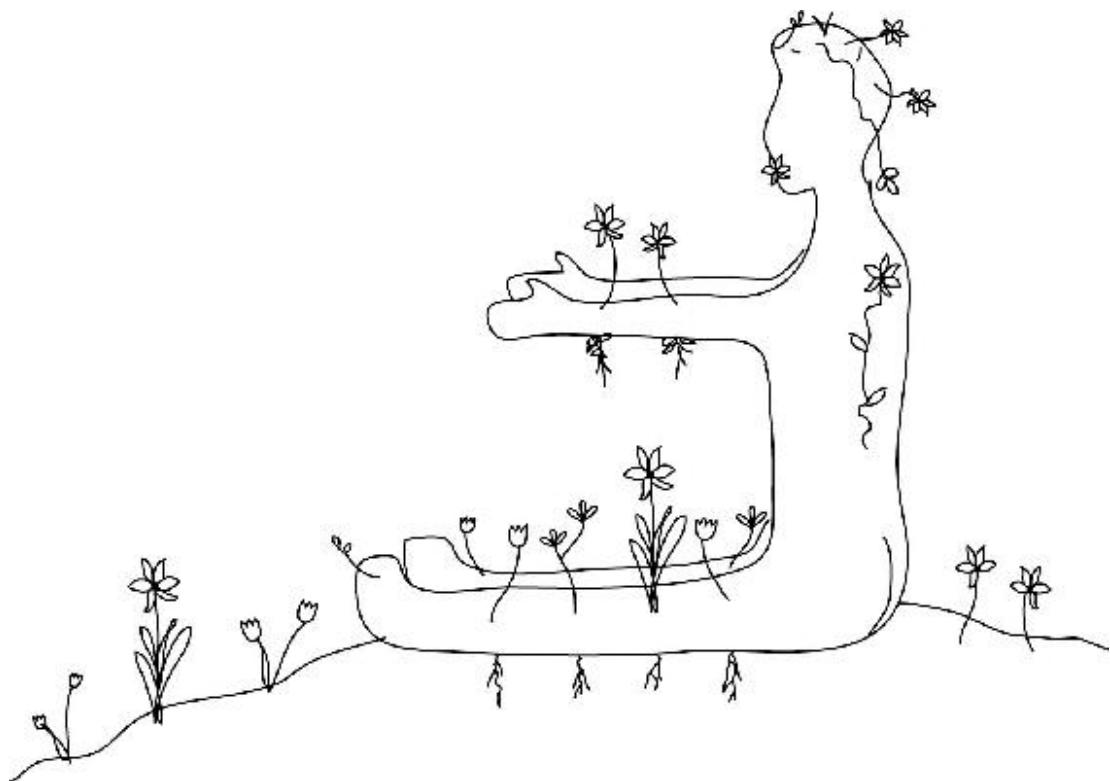
- *human*



how do i shake this envy  
when i see you doing well  
sister how do i love myself enough to know  
your accomplishments are not my failures

*- we are not each other's competition*

it is a blessing  
to be the color of earth  
do you know how often  
flowers confuse me for home

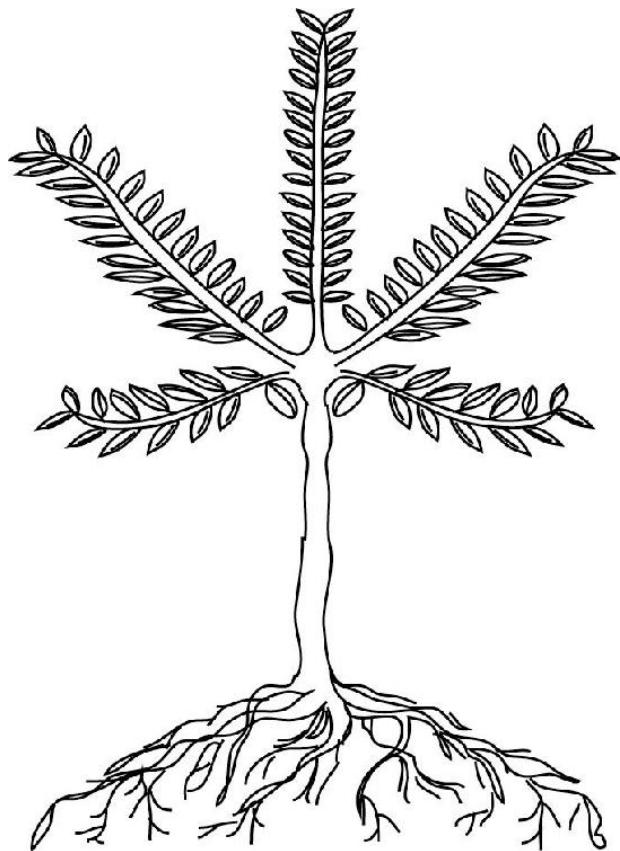


we need more love  
not from men  
but from ourselves  
and each other

- *medicine*

you are a mirror  
if you continue to starve yourself of love  
you'll only meet people who'll starve you too  
if you soak yourself in love  
the universe will hand you those  
who'll love you too

*- a simple math*

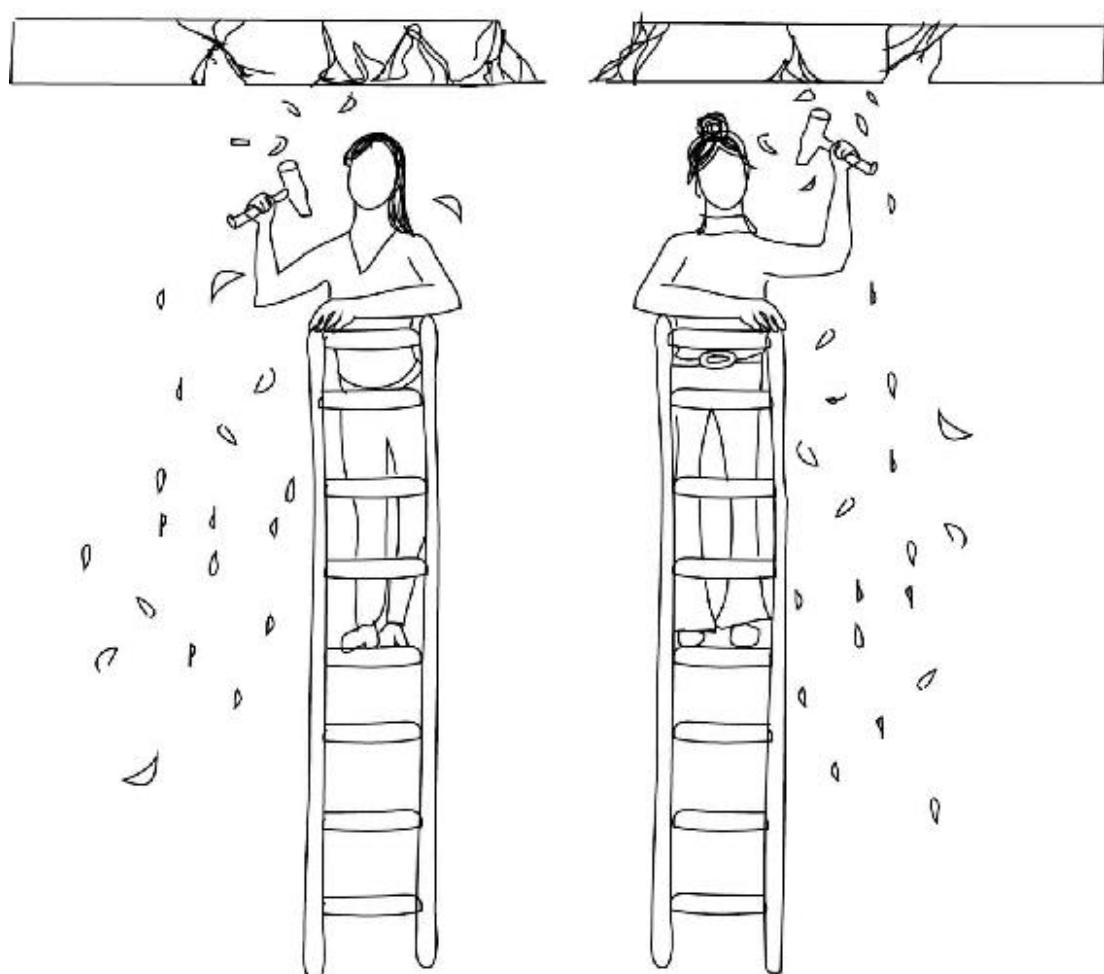


how much  
or how little  
clothing she has on  
has nothing to do with how free she is

*- covered | uncovered*

there are mountains growing  
beneath our feet  
that cannot be contained  
all we've endured  
has prepared us for this  
bring your hammers and fists  
we have a glass ceiling to shatter

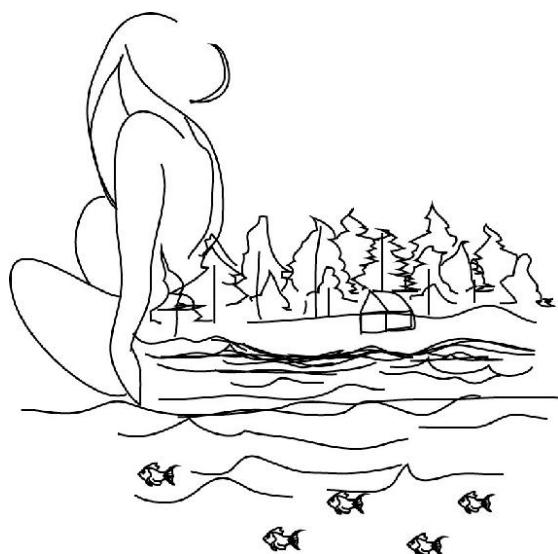
- *let's leave this place roofless*



it isn't blood that makes you my sister  
it's how you understand my heart  
as though you carry it  
in your body

*what is the greatest lesson a woman should learn*

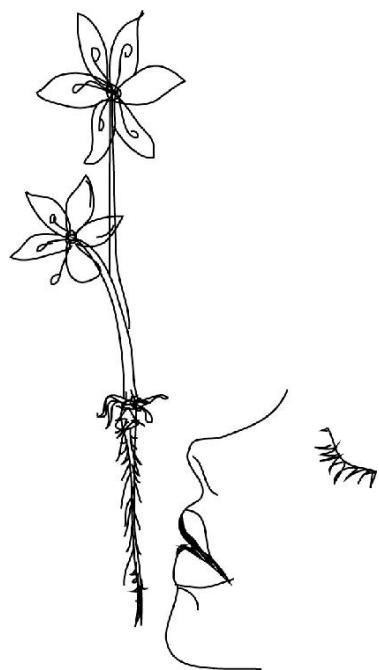
that since day one  
she's already had everything she needs within herself  
it's the world that convinced her she did not



they convinced me  
i only had a few good years left  
before i was replaced by a girl younger than me  
as though men yield power with age  
but women grow into irrelevance  
they can keep their lies  
for i have just gotten started  
i feel as though i just left the womb  
my twenties are the warm-up  
for what i'm really about to do  
wait till you see me in my thirties  
now that will be a proper introduction  
to the nasty. wild. woman in me.  
how can i leave before the party's started  
rehearsals begin at forty  
i ripen with age  
i do not come with an expiration date  
and now  
for the main event  
curtains up at fifty  
let's begin the show

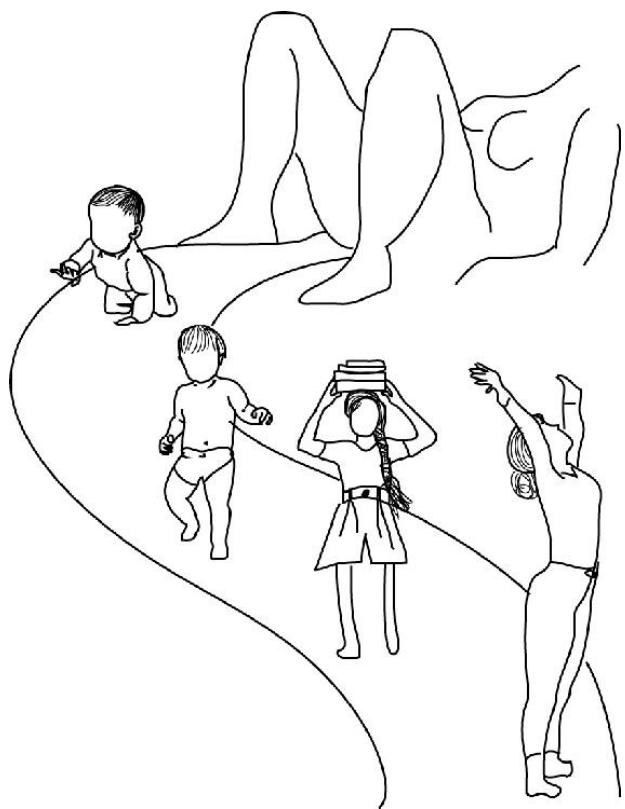
- *timeless*

to heal  
you have to  
get to the root  
of the wound  
and kiss it all the way up



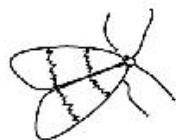
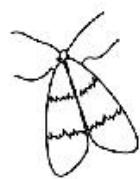
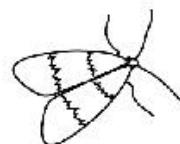
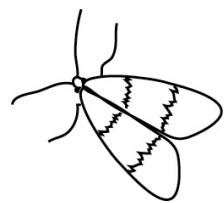
they threw us in a pit to end each other  
so they wouldn't have to  
starved us of space so long  
we had to eat each other up to stay alive  
look up look up look up  
to catch them looking down at us  
how can we compete with each other  
when the real monster is too big  
to take down alone

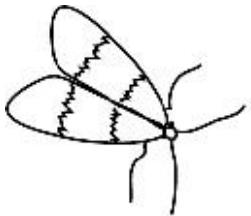
when my daughter is living in my belly  
i will speak to her like  
she's already changed the world  
she will walk out of me on a red carpet  
fully equipped with the knowledge  
that she's capable of  
anything she sets her mind to



(ode to raymond douillet's *a short tour and farewell*)

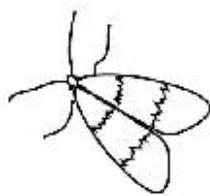
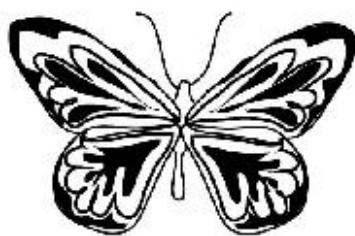
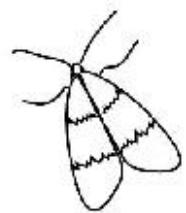
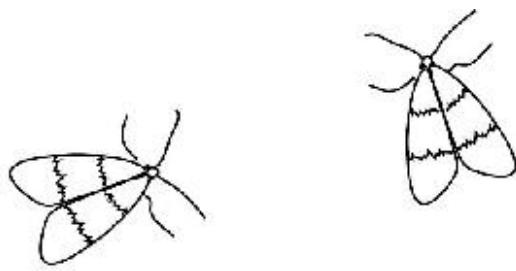
now  
is not the time  
to be quiet  
or make room for you  
when we have had no room at all  
now  
is our time  
to be mouthy  
get as loud as we need  
to be heard





representation  
is vital  
otherwise the butterfly  
surrounded by a group of moths  
unable to see itself  
will keep trying to become the moth

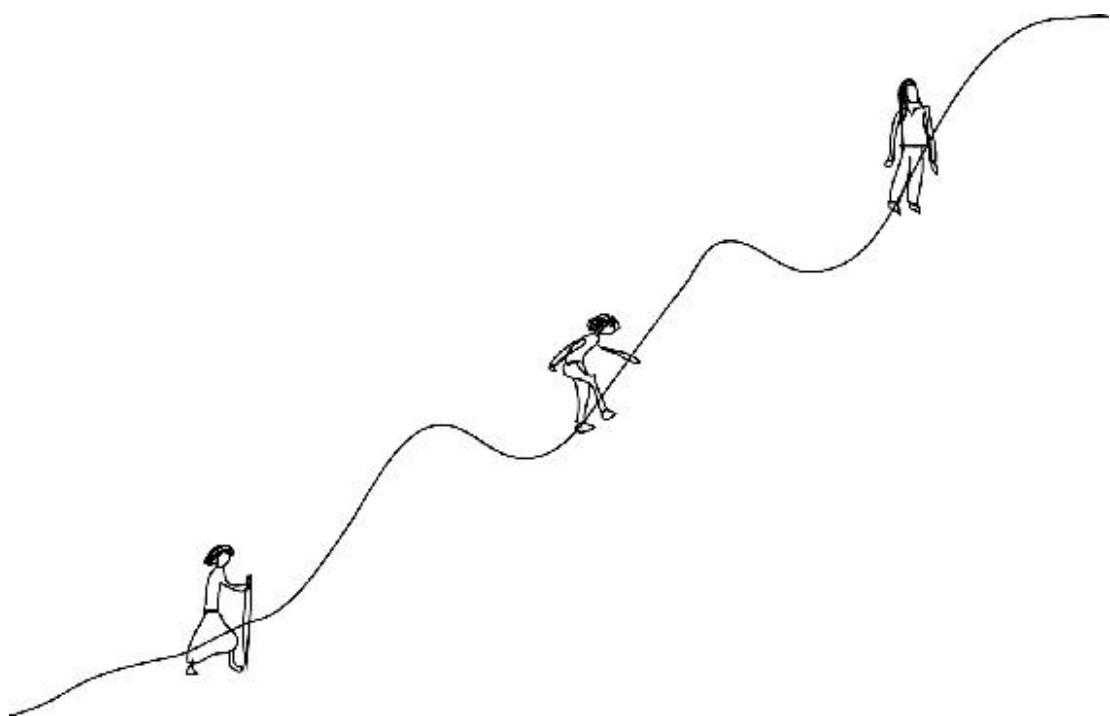
*- representation*



take the compliment  
do not shy away from  
another thing that belongs to you

our work should equip  
the next generation of women  
to outdo us in every field  
this is the legacy we'll leave behind

- *progress*

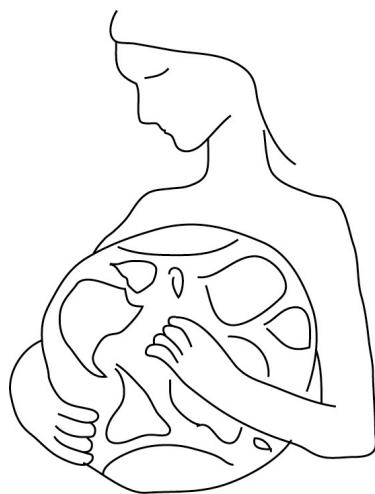


the road to changing the world  
is never-ending

*- pace yourself*

the necessity to protect you overcame me  
i love you too much  
to remain quiet as you weep  
watch me rise to kiss the poison out of you  
i will resist the temptation  
of my tired feet  
and keep marching  
with tomorrow in one hand  
and a fist in the other  
i will carry you to freedom

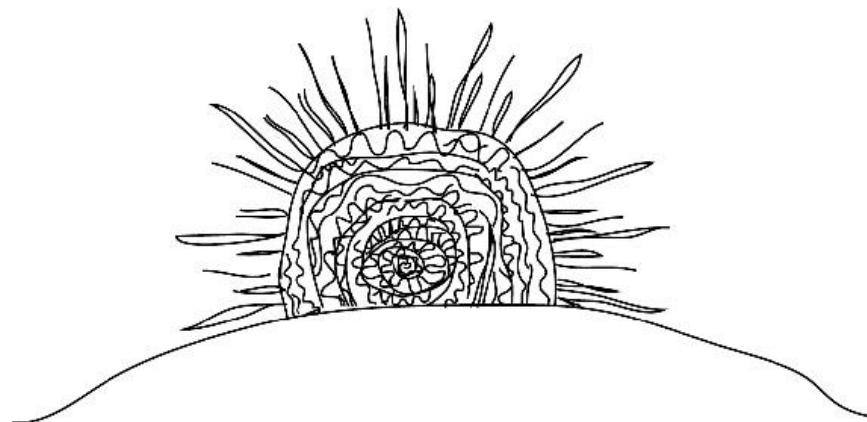
- *love letter to the world*



have your eyes ever fallen upon a beast like me  
i have the spine of a mulberry tree  
the neck of a sunflower  
sometimes i am the desert  
at times the rain forest  
but always the wild  
my belly brims over the waistband of my pants  
each strand of hair frizzing out like a lifeline  
it took a long time to become  
such a sweet rebellion  
back then i refused to water my roots  
till i realized  
if i am the only one  
who can be the wilderness  
then let me be the wilderness  
the tree trunk cannot become the branch  
the jungle cannot become the garden  
so why should i

*- it is so full here in myself*

many try  
but cannot tell the difference  
between a marigold and my skin  
both of them are an orange sun  
blinding the ones who have not learned to love the light



if you have never  
stood with the oppressed  
there is still time

- *lift them*

there is  
nothing left  
to worry about  
the sun and her flowers are here.

