

# Poetry Collection

Zain Shahid

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was still a thing, then. To have timed your arrow  
a perfectly meant watching the air for a moment  
seem stitched throughout with a kind of  
timelessness. To have straddled at last, correctly,  
the storm of falling in love (and staying there) meant  
the smell of apples, victory, tangerines, and smoke  
all mixed together on the breath

of a stranger, half asleep still, just beginning to remember a bit,  
as he stirs beside you. I dreamed we were young again,  
he's mumbling, as if to someone whose name he's known  
long enough to have called it out more than once in anger  
and sex and fear equally. Somewhere happiness too,

right? All those hours spent trying to outstare the distance  
of what the days must come to,

and pretending a choice to it: now the shadow-script  
that willows and hazel trees mark the barn's western  
face with; now the wind-rippled field, like a lesser version—tamer,  
tameable—of the sea, for movement (same infinite  
pattern, and variation; randomness and intention; release;  
restraint—that kind of movement) ...

Dear saddle  
of gentleness. Dear moss, sweet moss that only  
the dark and wet and patience make possible. To sing a song  
of water, and not drown in it. And some calling that  
a good trick. And some calling it

mastery. That last flickering before nightfall. From beneath  
the low branches. I dreamed we were new again. Stars. Just a little  
past dusk.

## Then the War || *Carl Phillips*

2

They planted flowers because the house had many rooms  
and because they'd imagined a life in which  
cut flowers punctuate each room, as if each were a sentence

not just to be decorated but to be given some discipline,  
what the most memorable sentences—like people—always  
slightly resist... Spit of land; rags

of cloud-rack. Meanwhile,  
hawk's-nest, winter-nest, stamina as a form of faith, little  
cove that a life equals, what they meant, I think, by

what they called the soul, twilight taking hold  
deep in the marshweed, in the pachysandra, where the wind  
can't reach.

Then the war.  
Then the field, and the mounted police  
parading their proud-looking horses across it.

Then the next morning's fog, the groundsmen barely visible  
inside it, shadow-like, shade-like,  
grooming the field back to immaculateness.

Then the curtains billowing out from the lightless room  
toward the sea.  
Then the one without hair

stroked the one who had some. They closed their eyes.  
If gently, hard to say how gently.  
Then the war was nothing that still bewildered them, if it ever had.

What's meant to be wind emerges from what's  
presumably a god's mouth, as if people  
thought that way, once, as I have read they did,  
though I have never believed it. Yes,  
the stag inexplicably there, on a raft  
at sea, how the light catches in the runneled  
fur of a dog's underpaws as he steers  
across dream; yes, the gods and their  
signs, if you want, everywhere –

but the wind is the wind. the map makes  
the world seem like a human body  
when it's been stripped and you can finally  
see it for the world it is: plunderable –

almost, in places, as if asking for it –

who wouldn't want to lay waste to it  
the map suggests, suggest the hands  
that made the map, with the kind of  
grace that proves grace can  
be a sturdiness, too.

–

But the world is *not* like a human body  
Or the dark that, just past twilight,  
overtakes a canyon.

Or the shiver of sleigh bells on the collar  
of an invisible donkey, scratching itself  
in the dark,  
in the cold of it –

donkey bells...

Above me, the branches toss toward and away  
from each other  
the way privacy does with what ends up  
showing, despite ourselves, of  
who we are, inside.

Then they're branches again  
– hickory, I think.

– It's not too late then.

## The Uncle Poem || *Jackson Holbert*

5

avuncular  
trees  
or was it avuncular skyscrapers?  
yea it was the skyscrapers but  
I don't know man  
I remember it was tuesday  
the cars were doing their  
normal car shit some asshole  
was blasting Puccini  
out of his BMW and some other  
asshole was singing  
an opera as he walked  
down Main Street  
what else  
I saw my grandmother  
this wasn't anything crazy tho  
she's still alive and all that  
she lives in town she was  
driving her convertible  
very slow I waved at her but  
I'm not sure she recognized me  
no other family interactions to report

something about the day unsettled me tho  
in the worst way possible  
I knew I would be going home soon  
home to the hills where  
hill things happen  
but I had thrown that terror into the future  
like a baseball or a bag of trash  
and of course it is the future now but I'm  
not  
in the hills not yet  
so why were the skyscrapers  
avuncular to me  
me who had many uncles none  
of whom were skyscrapers  
I think I have a few less uncles  
now but it's hard to keep track  
big family and you know what  
they say uncles are like crab apples they  
wither  
maybe it was that it  
smelled like crab apples  
while I walked down Main Street

I don't know where  
that quote comes from probably  
someone famous but I remember my uncle  
saying it and it seems like a quote  
about your uncles dying but that uncle  
wasn't dying not yet he was  
very much alive and very much  
addicted to oxycodone  
but the consequences would be  
far in the future but I guess  
the future is now which means  
the consequences have already happened  
which makes perfect sense  
because that uncle died  
tho not of overdosing exactly he died  
of a heart attack induced by fireworks  
on the fourth of July one of three  
citizens to do so in the county that day I  
do not know what made hearts  
so angry on that particular fourth it was  
warm  
but when wasn't it



warm in the valley I wasn't  
 there when my uncle died I  
 had picked up overtime  
 at the call center because  
 I needed money to buy  
 some oxycodone  
 for myself  
 I was planning to buy it  
 off of him tho obviously that  
 would be impossible because he is dead and  
 altho it doesn't mean his pills are gone  
 it does mean it would be super uncool to  
 break into his trailer  
 and steal them I have  
 determined that he is the uncle I am  
 referring to when I said  
 the skyscrapers were avuncular  
 tho referring isn't the right word  
 I didn't intend to call them avuncular  
 I felt it and it wouldn't go away  
 like a dog bite

of each toe he was so country that his  
 countryness stretched  
 out from his body and into his car  
 maybe it's because he never  
 saw these skyscrapers that I  
 think of him tho that  
 is bullshit and I know it so why the fuck  
 could I not push the avuncular  
 skyscrapers out of my decidedly  
 non-avuncular brain  
 was it the windows? the  
 black paneling?  
 maybe it isn't the building at all  
 maybe it's the idea of the building  
 and tho I don't believe in ideas  
 I do believe in uncles  
 maybe it is that the building but what made  
 the skyscrapers  
 so avuncular my uncle had never been  
 to the city and possibly had never been  
 to any city he was country from his hair to  
 the tip

is so high it would take minutes to elevator  
 up  
 and maybe an hour to climb  
 which means by the top you would be in  
 the future the real future the future minutes  
 away not seconds a future farther than  
 a word is from another word and maybe  
 because I look  
 at the skyscraper from the top down  
 I think of those elevators in reverse  
 which means I think of the future in reverse  
 and if those elevators go enough  
 the future will reverse enough to be the past  
 like the real past  
 like a few months ago when my  
 uncle was breathing and taking  
 pills and feeling the high  
 come on like television static  
 turning into tv or like tv  
 turning into television static

Colonizers write about flowers.  
I tell you about children throwing rocks at Israeli tanks  
seconds before becoming daisies.  
I want to be like those poets who care about the moon.  
Palestinians don't see the moon from jail cells and prisons.  
It's so beautiful, the moon.  
They're so beautiful, the flowers.  
I pick flowers for my dead father when I'm sad.  
He watches Al Jazeera all day.  
I wish Jessica would stop texting me *Happy Ramadan*.  
I know I'm American because when I walk into a room something dies.  
Metaphors about death are for poets who think ghosts care about sound.  
When I die, I promise to haunt you forever.  
One day, I'll write about the flowers like we own them.

Pale hands I loved beside the Shalimar  
—Laurence Hope

Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell tonight?  
Whom else from rapture's road will you expel tonight?

Those "Fabrics of Cashmere—" "to make Me beautiful—" "Trinket"—to gem—"Me to adorn—How tell"—tonight?

I beg for haven: Prisons, let open your gates—  
A refugee from Belief seeks a cell tonight.

God's vintage loneliness has turned to vinegar—  
All the archangels—their wings frozen—fell tonight.

*Lord, cried out the idols, Don't let us be broken;  
Only we can convert the infidel tonight.*

Mughal ceilings, let your mirrored convexities  
multiply me at once under your spell tonight.

He's freed some fire from ice in pity for Heaven.  
He's left open—for God—the doors of Hell tonight.

In the heart's veined temple, all statues have been smashed.  
No priest in saffron's left to toll its knell tonight.

God, limit these punishments, there's still Judgment Day—  
I'm a mere sinner, I'm no infidel tonight.

Executioners near the woman at the window.  
Damn you, Elijah, I'll bless Jezebel tonight.

The hunt is over, and I hear the Call to Prayer  
fade into that of the wounded gazelle tonight.

My rivals for your love—you've invited them all?  
This is mere insult, this is no farewell tonight.

And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee—  
God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight.

i don't know when love became elusive  
what i know, is that no one i know has it  
my fathers arms around my mothers neck  
fruit too ripe to eat, a door half way open  
when your name is a just a hand i can never hold  
everything i have ever believed in, becomes magic.

i think of lovers as trees, growing to and  
from one another searching for the same light,  
my mothers laughter in a dark room,  
a photograph greying under my touch,  
this is all i know how to do, carry loss around until  
i begin to resemble every bad memory,  
every terrible fear,  
every nightmare anyone has ever had.

i ask did you ever love me?  
you say of course, of course so quickly  
that you sound like someone else  
i ask are you made of steel? are you made of iron?  
you cry on the phone, my stomach hurts

i let you leave, i need someone who knows how to stay.

You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.  
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.

And this I dreamt, and this I dream,  
And some time this I will dream again,  
And all will be repeated, all be re-embodied,  
You will dream everything I have seen in dream.

To one side from ourselves, to one side from the world  
Wave follows wave to break on the shore,  
On each wave is a star, a person, a bird,  
Dreams, reality, death - on wave after wave.

No need for a date: I was, I am, and I will be,  
Life is a wonder of wonders, and to wonder  
I dedicate myself, on my knees, like an orphan,  
Alone - among mirrors - fenced in by reflections:  
Cities and seas, iridescent, intensified.  
A mother in tears takes a child on her lap.

I will wake you up early  
even though I know you like to stay through the credits.

I will leave pennies in your pockets,  
postage stamps of superheroes  
in between the pages of your books,  
sugar packets on your kitchen counter.  
I will Hansel and Gretel you home.

I talk through movies.  
Even ones I have never seen before.

I will love you with too many commas,  
but never any asterisks.

There will be more sweat than you are used to.  
More skin.  
More words than are necessary.

My hair in the shower drain,  
my smell on your sweaters,  
bobby pins all over the window sills.

I make the best sandwiches you've ever tasted.  
You'll be in charge of napkins.

I can't do a pull-up.  
But I'm great at excuses.

I count broken umbrellas after every thunderstorm,  
and I fall asleep repeating the words thank you.

I will wake you up early  
with my heavy heartbeat.  
You will say, *Can't we just sleep in*, and I will say,  
*No, trust me. You don't want to miss a thing.*

Cuando nací  
me pusieron dos lágrimas  
en los ojos  
para que pudiera ver  
el tamaño del dolor de mi gente.

When I was born  
they put two tears  
in my eyes  
so that I could see  
the amount of pain in my people.



No te amo como si fueras rosa de sal, topacio  
o flecha de claveles que propagan el fuego:  
te amo como se aman ciertas cosas oscuras,  
secretamente, entre la sombra y el alma.

Te amo como la planta que no florece y lleva  
dentro de sí, escondida, la luz de aquellas flores,  
y gracias a tu amor vive oscuro en mi cuerpo  
el apretado aroma que ascendió de la tierra.

Te amo sin saber cómo, ni cuándo, ni de dónde,  
te amo directamente sin problemas ni orgullo:  
así te amo porque no sé amar de otra manera,

sino así de este modo en que no soy ni eres,  
tan cerca que tu mano sobre mi pecho es mía,  
tan cerca que se cierran tus ojos con mi sueño.

I don't love you as if you were a rose of salt, topaz,  
or arrow of carnations that propagate fire:  
I love you as one loves certain obscure things,  
secretly, between the shadow and the soul.

I love you as the plant that doesn't bloom but carries  
the light of those flowers, hidden, within itself,  
and thanks to your love the tight aroma that arose  
from the earth lives dimly in my body.

I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where,  
I love you directly without problems or pride:  
I love you like this because I don't know any other way to love,

except in this form in which I am not nor are you,  
so close that your hand upon my chest is mine,  
so close that your eyes close with my dreams

## Self-Portrait With a Yellow Dress || *Safia Elhillo*

15

i believe that sometimes                      we do not die

i will not believe that to be housed in a body  
that is black              is to be dressed always  
in black for the funeral                      we live forever

our mouths open & a song falls out              thick  
with a saxophone's syrup                      & all our dead  
in the ground make this land ours                      & all  
our missing fathers make us everything's child

today i did not dress for a funeral              today i wear  
the yellow dress              & laugh with all my teeth  
today my lost ones are not lost to me              they live  
in the wind that gathers my skirt

today this is my country              today i say their names  
& the all holes left behind                      shaped like blackgirls  
& blackboys              are lit up by hundreds of faraway stars

today i woke up & was not dead              & tomorrow  
might be different but tomorrow              does not yet exist  
so i hold my mother's hand & kiss                      the brown valley  
between each knuckle              my brother opens his mouth  
to laugh & the light pours in              through the gap in his teeth  
& no one will ever again say my eyes are too serious

i press my body to a man that i find beautiful              & sway  
to a song that knows us                      i live forever  
with my feet in my grandmother's lap

&                      i live forever by the water  
with the sun spilled over me              remember me this way  
& when they come for me                      play the song i love  
into the space i leave behind

here is a country where old men  
gather in the capital and  
speak their language filled with  
stones  
their syllables are chips of bone  
they speak of lifting up a creed  
while cold and still there under  
their tongue is somebody else's child  
or mine  
bones and stones  
our ears bleed  
red and white and blue

## Monet Refuses the Operation || *Lisel Mueller*

17

Doctor, you say there are no haloes  
around the streetlights in Paris  
and what I see is an aberration  
caused by old age, an affliction.  
I tell you it has taken me all my life  
to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels,  
to soften and blur and finally banish  
the edges you regret I don't see,  
to learn that the line I called the horizon  
does not exist and sky and water,  
so long apart, are the same state of being.  
Fifty-four years before I could see  
Rouen cathedral is built  
of parallel shafts of sun,  
and now you want to restore  
my youthful errors: fixed  
notions of top and bottom,  
the illusion of three-dimensional space,  
wisteria separate  
from the bridge it covers.  
What can I say to convince you  
the Houses of Parliament dissolve  
night after night to become

the fluid dream of the Thames?  
I will not return to a universe  
of objects that don't know each other,  
as if islands were not the lost children  
of one great continent. The world  
is flux, and light becomes what it touches,  
becomes water, lilies on water,  
above and below water,  
becomes lilac and mauve and yellow  
and white and cerulean lamps,  
small fists passing sunlight  
so quickly to one another  
that it would take long, streaming hair  
inside my brush to catch it.  
To paint the speed of light!  
Our weighted shapes, these verticals,  
burn to mix with air  
and change our bones, skin, clothes  
to gases. Doctor,  
if only you could see  
how heaven pulls earth into its arms  
and how infinitely the heart expands  
to claim this world, blue vapor without end.

## You Took the Last Bus Home by Brian Bilston || *Brian Bilston*

18

you took

the last bus home

don't know how

you got it through the door

you're always doing amazing stuff

like the time

you caught that train

I've been thinking about the way, when you walk  
down a crowded aisle, people pull in their legs  
to let you by. Or how strangers still say "bless you"  
when someone sneezes, a leftover  
from the Bubonic plague. "Don't die," we are saying.  
And sometimes, when you spill lemons  
from your grocery bag, someone else will help you  
pick them up. Mostly, we don't want to harm each other.  
We want to be handed our cup of coffee hot,  
and to say thank you to the person handing it. To smile  
at them and for them to smile back. For the waitress  
to call us honey when she sets down the bowl of clam chowder,  
and for the driver in the red pick-up truck to let us pass.  
We have so little of each other, now. So far  
from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange.  
What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these  
fleeting temples we make together when we say, "Here,  
have my seat," "Go ahead—you first," "I like your hat."

That time

I thought I could not  
go any closer to grief  
without dying  
I went closer,  
and I did not die.  
Surely God  
had His hands in this,  
as well as friends.  
Still, I was bent  
and my laughter,  
as the poet said,  
was nowhere to be found.  
Then said my friend Daniel  
(brave even among lions),  
“It’s not the weight you carry  
but how you carry it –  
books, bricks, grief –

it’s all in the way  
you embrace it, balance it, carry it  
when you cannot and would not,  
put it down.”  
So I went practicing.  
Have you noticed?  
Have you heard  
the laughter  
that comes, now and again,  
out of my startled mouth?  
How I linger  
to admire, admire, admire  
the things of this world  
that are kind, and maybe  
also troubled –  
roses in the wind,  
the sea geese on the steep waves,  
a love  
to which there is no reply?

## Standing at The Mirror, Hate Is Replaced with Forgive || *Brandon Melendez*

21

& while I wait for my eyes to relearn open I [forgive] myself for the slow rise the deep ache in  
the crane of my neck from bowing down inside myself  
I [forgive] the surrender the swollen knee the bruise on my rib shape & shade of an August  
sunrise I [forgive] the fence I could swear was the horizon or at least

a way out I [forgive] myself for imagining a way out is a place I could visit like a corner café  
or ex-lover's thigh I [forgive] myself for loving  
those who have harmed me for cooking them dinner & burning the rice forgetting to add pepper  
or make myself a plate I [forgive] myself for staying I [forgive]

myself for staying until I left my skin another blanket on the bed until the sound of a door  
opening turned each room into a reason to leave I counted each second  
alone as a tiny victory until I lost count which is the only victory that matters please let healing  
be not a season but the body that still belongs to me & every day

I remember to buy bread to hide the keys beneath the window succulent or walk along the road  
dreaming of anything other than traffic is a day I get closer  
to a future made better by how I live through it I [forgive] myself for failing today for falling back  
into bed & drawing the blinds give me time

I'll get up I promise I know it doesn't matter where I go every direction is forward I just have to get  
there I take a step & step naked into the shower the water  
so cold I forget to breathe my body yearns to follow the pearls falling through the metal grate  
to become not quite a ghost but a shadow just out of frame I say no  
I [forgive] I [forgive] myself with my body right in front of me



## What You Missed That Day You Were Absent from Fourth Grade || *Brad Aaron Modlin* 22

Mrs. Nelson explained how to stand still and listen  
to the wind, how to find meaning in pumping gas,

how peeling potatoes can be a form of prayer. She took  
questions on how not to feel lost in the dark

After lunch she distributed worksheets  
that covered ways to remember your grandfather's

voice. Then the class discussed falling asleep  
without feeling you had forgotten to do something else—

something important—and how to believe  
the house you wake in is your home. This prompted

Mrs. Nelson to draw a chalkboard diagram detailing  
how to chant the Psalms during cigarette breaks,

and how not to squirm for sound when your own thoughts  
are all you hear; also, that you have enough.

The English lesson was that I am  
is a complete sentence.

And just before the afternoon bell, she made the math equation  
look easy. The one that proves that hundreds of questions,

and feeling cold, and all those nights spent looking  
for whatever it was you lost, and one person  
add up to something.

i've tried so hard to be good  
looking at all these good years  
good to people  
good to you  
true and blue to my ideals  
good mama. do you hear me? so motherfuckin' good!  
good cook  
good mother  
good sister  
good friend  
good love  
remember everybody's birthdays and send cards  
and call every now and then or drop a line to let them know  
i care  
good mornings  
good nights  
try to please and help and aid and  
good mama  
be responsible to god the father my country and help my  
poor enslaved people  
good mama. so fuckin' good. out good all the rest  
oh so damnable good  
good to death

Dear dirt, I am sorry I slighted you,  
I thought that you were only the background  
for the leading characters—the plants  
and animals and human animals.  
It's as if I had loved only the stars  
and not the sky which gave them space  
in which to shine. Subtle, various,  
sensitive, you are the skin of our terrain,  
you're our democracy. When I understood  
I had never honored you as a living  
equal, I was ashamed of myself,  
as if I had not recognized  
a character who looked so different from me,  
but now I can see us all, made of the  
same basic materials—  
cousins of that first exploding from nothing—  
in our intricate equation together. O dirt,  
help us find ways to serve your life,  
you who have brought us forth, and fed us,  
and who at the end will take us in  
and rotate with us, and wobble, and orbit.

## My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears || *Mohja Kahf* 25

My grandmother puts her feet in the sink  
of the bathroom at Sears  
to wash them in the ritual washing for prayer,  
*wudu*,  
because she has to pray in the store or miss  
the mandatory prayer time for Muslims  
She does it with great poise, balancing  
herself with one plump matronly arm  
against the automated hot-air hand dryer,  
after having removed her support knee-highs  
and laid them aside, folded in thirds,  
and given me her purse and her packages to hold  
so she can accomplish this august ritual  
and get back to the ritual of shopping for housewares

Respectable Sears matrons shake their heads and frown  
as they notice what my grandmother is doing,  
an affront to American porcelain,  
a contamination of American Standards  
by something foreign and unhygienic  
requiring civic action and possible use of disinfectant spray  
They fluster about and flutter their hands and I can see  
a clash of civilizations brewing in the Sears bathroom

My grandmother, though she speaks no English,  
catches their meaning and her look in the mirror says,  
*I have washed my feet over Iznik tile in Istanbul  
with water from the world's ancient irrigation systems  
I have washed my feet in the bathhouses of Damascus  
over painted bowls imported from China  
among the best families of Aleppo  
And if you Americans knew anything  
about civilization and cleanliness,  
you'd make wider washbins, anyway*  
My grandmother knows one culture—the right one,

as do these matrons of the Middle West. For them,  
my grandmother might as well have been squatting  
in the mud over a rusty tin in vaguely tropical squalor,  
Mexican or Middle Eastern, it doesn't matter which,  
when she lifts her well-groomed foot and puts it over the edge.  
"You can't do that," one of the women protests,  
turning to me, "Tell her she can't do that."  
"We wash our feet five times a day,"  
my grandmother declares hotly in Arabic.  
"My feet are cleaner than their sink.  
Worried about their sink, are they? I  
should worry about my feet!"  
My grandmother nudges me, "Go on, tell them."

Standing between the door and the mirror, I can see  
at multiple angles, my grandmother and the other shoppers,  
all of them decent and goodhearted women, diligent  
in cleanliness, grooming, and decorum  
Even now my grandmother, not to be rushed,  
is delicately drying her pumps with tissues from her purse  
For my grandmother always wears well-turned pumps  
that match her purse, I think in case someone  
from one of the best families of Aleppo  
should run into her—here, in front of the Kenmore display

I smile at the midwestern women  
as if my grandmother has just said something lovely about them  
and shrug at my grandmother as if they  
had just apologized through me  
No one is fooled, but I

hold the door open for everyone  
and we all emerge on the sales floor  
and lose ourselves in the great common ground  
of housewares on markdown.

Stay, I said  
to the cut flowers.  
They bowed  
their heads lower.

Stay, I said to the spider,  
who fled.

Stay, leaf.  
It reddened,  
embarrassed for me and itself.

Stay, I said to my body.  
It sat as a dog does,  
obedient for a moment,  
soon starting to tremble.

Stay, to the earth  
of riverine valley meadows,  
of fossiled escarpments,  
of limestone and sandstone.  
It looked back  
with a changing expression, in silence.

Stay, I said to my loves.  
Each answered,  
*Always.*

As soon as you begin to ask the question, Who loves me?  
you are completely screwed, because  
the next question is How Much?

and then it is hundreds of hours later,  
and you are still hunched over  
your flowcharts and abacus,

trying to decide if you have gotten enough.  
This is the loneliest job in the world:  
to be an accountant of the heart.

It is late at night. You are by yourself,  
and all around you, you can hear  
the sounds of people moving

in and out of love,  
pushing the turnstiles, putting  
their coins in the slots,

paying the price which is asked,  
which constantly changes.  
No one knows why.  
*Always.*

May we raise children  
who love the unloved  
things—the dandelion, the  
worms and spiderlings.  
Children who sense  
the rose needs the thorn

& run into rainswept days  
the same way they  
turn towards sun. . .

And when they're grown &  
someone has to speak for those  
who have no voice

may they draw upon that  
wilder bond, those days of  
tending tender things

and be the ones.



And when they bombed other people's houses, we

protested

but not enough, we opposed them but not

enough. I was

in my bed, around my bed America

was falling: invisible house by invisible house by invisible house.

I took a chair outside and watched the sun.

In the sixth month

of a disastrous reign in the house of money

in the street of money in the city of money in the country of money,  
our great country of money, we (forgive us)

lived happily during the war.

When you are ill you weigh more.  
Your head sinks into the pillow,  
Your bed curves in the middle,  
Your body drops like a meteorite.  
“He’s so heavy,” say the relatives,  
They turn you on the other side  
And nod meaningfully. “He weighs like the dead.”

The earth feels its prey  
And concentrates upon you  
Its colossal force of attraction.  
The iron in you hungers to go down.  
The gold in you hungers to go down.  
The gravitation of the whole world has its eyes on you  
And pulls you down with unseen ropes.

You look like the bell the peasants  
Take down before their exodus, burying it very deep,  
Marvelling at the sight of the bell digging its grave,  
Eagerly biting the dust.

You are all lead  
And unto yourself  
You have become exceedingly all-important,  
Surrounded by endless mystery.

When I die  
when my coffin  
is being taken out  
you must never think  
i am missing this world

don't shed any tears  
don't lament or  
feel sorry  
i'm not falling  
into a monster's abyss

when you see  
my corpse is being carried  
don't cry for my leaving  
i'm not leaving  
i'm arriving at eternal love

when you leave me  
in the grave  
don't say goodbye  
remember a grave is  
only a curtain  
for the paradise behind

you'll only see me  
descending into a grave  
now watch me rise  
how can there be an end  
when the sun sets or  
the moon goes down

it looks like the end  
it seems like a sunset  
but in reality it is a dawn  
when the grave locks you up  
that is when your soul is freed

have you ever seen  
a seed fallen to earth  
not rise with a new life  
why should you doubt the rise of a seed  
named human

have you ever seen  
a bucket lowered into a well  
coming back empty  
why lament for a soul  
when it can come back  
like Joseph from the well

when for the last time  
you close your mouth  
your words and soul  
will belong to the world of  
no place no time

## Do not love half lovers, Do not entertain half friends || *Kahlil Gibran*

33

Do not love half lovers  
Do not entertain half friends  
Do not indulge in works of the half talented  
Do not live half a life  
and do not die a half death  
If you choose silence, then be silent  
When you speak, do so until you are finished  
Do not silence yourself to say something  
And do not speak to be silent  
If you accept, then express it bluntly  
Do not mask it  
If you refuse then be clear about it  
for an ambiguous refusal is but a weak acceptance  
Do not accept half a solution  
Do not believe half truths  
Do not dream half a dream  
Do not fantasize about half hopes  
Half a drink will not quench your thirst  
Half a meal will not satiate your hunger

Half the way will get you no where  
Half an idea will bear you no results  
Your other half is not the one you love  
It is you in another time yet in the same space  
It is you when you are not  
Half a life is a life you didn't live,  
A word you have not said  
A smile you postponed  
A love you have not had  
A friendship you did not know  
To reach and not arrive  
Work and not work  
Attend only to be absent  
What makes you a stranger to them closest to you  
and they strangers to you  
The half is a mere moment of inability  
but you are able for you are not half a being  
You are a whole that exists to live a life  
not half a life

When I am dead and over me bright April  
Shakes out her rain-drenched hair,  
Tho' you should lean above me broken-hearted,  
I shall not care.

I shall have peace, as leafy trees are peaceful  
When rain bends down the bough,  
And I shall be more silent and cold-hearted  
Than you are now.

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?  
— Only the monstrous anger of the guns.  
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle  
Can patter out their hasty orisons.  
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;  
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—  
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;  
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?  
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes  
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.  
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;  
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,  
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Isn't the moon dark too,  
most of the time?

And doesn't the white page  
seem unfinished

without the dark stain  
of alphabets?

When God demanded light,  
he didn't banish darkness.

Instead he invented  
ebony and crows

and that small mole  
on your left cheekbone.

Or did you mean to ask  
"Why are you sad so often?"

Ask the moon.  
Ask what it has witnessed.

I don't know whose side you're on,  
But I am here for the people  
Who work in grocery stores that glow in the morning  
And close down for deep cleaning at night  
Right up the street and in cities I mispronounce,  
In towns too tiny for my big black  
Car to quit, and in every wide corner  
Of Kansas where going to school means  
At least one field trip  
To a slaughterhouse. I want so little: another leather bound  
Book, a gimlet with a lavender gin, bread  
So good when I taste it I can tell you  
How it's made. I'd like us to rethink  
What it is to be a nation. I'm in a mood about America  
Today. I have PTSD  
About the Lord. God save the people who work

In grocery stores. They know a bit of glamour  
Is a lot of glamour. They know how much  
It costs for the eldest of us to eat. Save  
My loves and not my sentences. Before I see them,  
I draw a mole near my left dimple,  
Add flair to the smile they can't see  
Behind my mask. I grin or lie or maybe  
I wear the mouth of a beast. I eat wild animals  
While some of us grow up knowing  
What gnocchi is. The people who work at the grocery don't care.  
They say, *Thank you*. They say, *Sorry*,  
*We don't sell motor oil anymore* with a grief so thick  
You could touch it. Go on. Touch it.  
It is early. It is late. They have washed their hands.  
They have washed their hands for you.  
And they take the bus home.



I've been thinking about the way, when you walk  
down a crowded aisle, people pull in their legs  
to let you by. Or how strangers still say "bless you"  
when someone sneezes, a leftover  
from the Bubonic plague. "Don't die," we are saying.  
And sometimes, when you spill lemons  
from your grocery bag, someone else will help you  
pick them up. Mostly, we don't want to harm each other.  
We want to be handed our cup of coffee hot,  
and to say thank you to the person handing it. To smile  
at them and for them to smile back. For the waitress  
to call us honey when she sets down the bowl of clam chowder,  
and for the driver in the red pick-up truck to let us pass.  
We have so little of each other, now. So far  
from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange.  
What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these  
fleeting temples we make together when we say, "Here,  
have my seat," "Go ahead—you first," "I like your hat."

## Tu Risa || *Pablo Neruda*

39

Quítame el pan si quieres,  
quítame el aire, pero  
no me quites tu risa.

No me quites la rosa,  
la lanza que desgranas,  
el agua que de pronto  
estalla en tu alegría,  
la repentina ola  
de planta que te nace.

Mi lucha es dura y vuelvo  
con los ojos cansados  
a veces de haber visto  
la tierra que no cambia,  
pero al entrar tu risa  
sube al cielo buscándome  
y abre para mí todas  
las puertas de la vida.

Amor mío, en la hora  
más oscura desgrana  
tu risa, y si de pronto  
ves que mi sangre mancha  
las piedras de la calle,  
ríe, porque tu risa

será para mis manos  
como una espada fresca.

Junto al mar en otoño,  
tu risa debe alzar  
su cascada de espuma,  
y en primavera, amor,  
quiero tu risa como  
la flor que yo esperaba,  
la flor azul, la rosa  
de mi patria sonora.

Ríete de la noche,  
del día, de la luna,  
ríete de las calles  
torcidas de la isla,  
ríete de este torpe  
muchacho que te quiere,  
pero cuando yo abro  
los ojos y los cierro,  
cuando mis pasos van,  
cuando vuelven mis pasos,  
niégame el pan, el aire,  
la luz, la primavera,  
pero tu risa nunca  
porque me moriría.

It gets messy underneath the veil  
when the strength it takes to be  
can zap the moisture from your skin,  
and all you want is to be held to the  
breast of a beautiful being and never let go  
while the beautiful people sing,  
I hope your new soul remains pure!  
And lord knows what we lose  
once we believe we are clean, how purity  
breeds atrocity like terriers in heat,  
why, like a flock of pigeons circling  
a rooftop, lord, we know not why we do.  
And lord knows we're heavy with  
the weight of time, and that too many  
times, we died before we began,  
that every prayer is a vanity, every  
god oblivious to our cries.

What else now but to speak plainly:  
*Lord, we curse this devilful motherfucker to the  
ground. Let us march on cities until they  
crumble, blasting Miles Smiles as loud  
as the speakers will bear, to tell them  
how even in that moment,  
which would feel to them so dark and  
unrelenting,  
there could be infinite beauty  
if they would allow themselves to feel it.*

For nothing more than the Love of my people  
I fight  
staying my path  
honoring the ancestors  
dragging the children to freedom with the passion of the Christ  
because even as a child You freed my mind  
and I Love Your imperfections  
    the way You colored outside the lines  
though Your artwork didn't win any prizes  
as an adult Your heart's work saves lives  
and touches souls unknown even to You  
and it pleases God to see You do what You do  
because the truth isn't always what's said  
but in the hand's work  
and no matter what comes and goes  
He will be edified through man's work  
and You  
You've done a lion's share  
tending the fields and feeding His sheep until Your hands hurt  
what more can we ask for?  
from the time they leave it in the morning

'til after the Sun cries  
and Your knees hit the floor  
and I beseech thee  
take a few moments of time to teach these others  
who only pretend and fall short  
because their work wasn't from the heart  
they were monetarily motivated from the start  
but from the moment that I opened my eyes  
    there You were right where You've always been  
with me looking for the truth so hard  
making it hard to find it  
but here You stand  
and I'll believe in You from now until judgment call  
I pray that I'll have from now until then to figure out a title to give  
You  
because You are more than a friend  
I'm prepared to be the same to You from now until the end  
perpetually moving through life cycles until my life cycle ends  
these might be my last days  
this poem might be my last peace  
so I've got to speak my peace  
because this piece could very well be my eulogy

in the back of my mind thoughts of You cascade down like waterfalls  
 as water falls against glass  
 and drops from my lash  
 becomes streams on my cheeks  
 and puddles in my palms  
 for the celestial being You are

I give alms to Him  
 and pray that I receive ilm forthright  
 and on that night become Your generations' protector  
 and hear the voice of God saying  
 "Protect Her as I protect you"

"Sanctify Her so that men may see My Love through you"

"And Wali, believe"

"My voice Kanika has already told you to just breathe"

so as long as I have breath

Love I will never leave

I understand that many men may have said things like this before  
 but from now until the last beat of my heart  
 every night I'll walk through Your door saying

Baby

I'm home

no hay nadie  
    prisa  
    la idea que tenemos  
        tengo  
        tendré que hacer  
            ser  
algo más que el hombre sentado  
        reposado  
        inquieto en la esquina de la cafetería pensando  
                    digiriendo  
                    *porqué*  
            hay *mucho* que  
            *puede ser* que  
                tiene  
                tengo  
                tendrá qué hacer   -   ser -

Péndon.  
Estaba perdido.  
La cuenta por favor.

Tell me about the dream where we pull the bodies out of the lake  
and dress them in warm clothes again.  
How it was late, and no one could sleep, the horses running  
until they forget that they are horses.  
It's not like a tree where the roots have to end somewhere,  
it's more like a song on a policeman's radio,  
how we rolled up the carpet so we could dance, and the days  
were bright red, and every time we kissed there was another apple  
to slice into pieces.  
Look at the light through the windowpane. That means it's noon, that means  
we're inconsolable.  
Tell me how all this, and love too, will ruin us.  
These, our bodies, possessed by light.  
Tell me we'll never get used to it.