

Poetry Collection

Zain Shahid

Contents

Archery	1
Then the War	2
Entire Known World So Far	3
Of the Shining Underlife	4
The Uncle Poem	5
Fuck Your Lecture on Craft, My People Are Dying	7
Tonight	8
The Unbearable Weight of Staying	9
Wild Geese	10
And this I dreamt, and this I dream	11
Love Poem 137	12
Dos Lágrimas	13
Sonneto XVII	14
Self-Portrait With a Yellow Dress	15
Stones and Bones	16
Monet Refuses the Operation	17
You Took the Last Bus Home by Brian Bilston	18
Small Kindnesses	38
Heavy	20
Standing at The Mirror, Hate Is Replaced with Forgive	21
What You Missed That Day You Were Absent from Fourth Grade	22
Good Mama	23
Ode to Dirt	24
My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears	25

The Promise	27
The Loneliest Job in the World	28
May we raise children who love the unloved things	29
We Lived Happily During the War	30
Descent	31
When I Die	32
Do not love half lovers, Do not entertain half friends	33
I shall not care	34
Anthem for Doomed Youth	35
Why Are Your Poems so Dark?	36
Say Thank You Say I'm Sorry	37
Small Kindnesses	38
Tu Risa	39
Lord Knows	40
A Poem for Indigo	41
Y Porqué	43
Scheherazade (Crush)	44
This Is Why People Burning Down Fast Food Joints and Whatnot	45
Stationery	46
I am Me, Myself	47
My mother texts me instructions to cook silken tofu	48

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.

This Is Why People Burning Down Fast Food Joints and Whatnot || *Jacqueline Allen Trimble*

45

Q. How do others sin against you?

A. By cursing me—telling lies about me—or striking me.

Q. What must you do to those who thus sin against you?

A. I must forgive them

See, I learned my catechism well.

Learned to offer my cloak and coat, my cheek

again and again as the skin was splayed

from my body. I can quote

Martin Luther King Jr. with ease,

praise the Americana of his martyrdom,

the sweet, unselfish beauty of that bullet's velocity.

Shall I sing "We Shall Overcome" while

I swing? I have wanted so long

to believe in justice, to think of each blow

as recompense for my wickedness.

How can I continue?

How can I continue?

How can I continue

to take and eat this image

of myself, choke on the eloquence

of my dissent, speak love fluently

to someone with his knee

on my neck, his bullet in my child?

The moon did not become the sun.
It just fell on the desert
in great sheets, reams
of silver handmade by you.

The night is your cottage industry now,
the day is your brisk emporium.

The world is full of paper.
Write to me.

I know who I am
I am here now
but I may be gone in an instant
even if I am no longer here I am me, myself
but in truth I do not have to be me

I am a plant at least a little
I may be a fish more or less
I am also an ore with a dull sheen
though I don't know its name

and of course I am almost you

Because I cannot disappear after being forgotten
I am a rhythm in a refrain
I am a subtle wave and a particle
having arrived, if I may be so conceited,
riding on your heart's beating rhythm
from the light years of distance

I know who I am

so I know who you are
even if I don't know your name
even if there is no census record
I am crowding out into you

Feeling happy being wet in rain
feeling at home with the starry sky
cackling at crude jokes
I am me
beyond the tautology of "I am me"

Do you have white pepper? She asks. *Spring onions? Corn starch?* No. Yes, a sprig. No.
Do you have sesame oil?

First, you must sauté some prawns, she says.
It will compliment the texture of the tofu. I don't have prawns, I say, will bacon do? She pauses.

Maybe it is easier if I give you a call.

Cut it into cubes and put it into the pot, her voice rings through the phone. *How was your day?*

It was fine. How big should I make them?

You know I'm proud of you? she says.

For what? I laugh. I can't even make tofu.

For trying, she says. *For not giving up. You can cut them roughly - just don't make them too small.*

In my mother is a dream unfulfilled. Perhaps that is true of most mothers.
In her is an outpouring of love. I want to give her something so I try to be good.

It is 10pm when we say goodnight. Thank you for the recipe I say - I mean, thank you for raising me. *Don't forget to wash your dishes,* she replies.

Sometimes life is simple, I think. I am happy.

I have a mother.

She calls me and teaches me how to cook tofu.