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TWO TONGUES

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2012

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing/Poetry
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, FL

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Major Professor: Terry Thaxton

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ABSTRACT

Two Tongues is a collection of poems that explores the societal norms that mixes American and Middle Eastern cultures. The use of sensory language empowers the speaker of these poems to break the barrier between both cultures and mold them into one significant place—the individual. Within these poems lie the exploration of identity—both religiously and culturally—through the speaker’s family upbringing and her social settings, as well as the use of spoken language.

This collection attempts to convey the struggles of a bicultural background through use of pure metaphor and sound play where language—Arabic and English—is an essential element to the collection. Contained within these lyrical poems is the hope for acceptance, love, and humanity, and that all lands will unite as a common people. The speaker searches for self in each poem with an insatiable curiosity, one that will no longer fear expression.

for my parents, Mama and Baba
who taught me who I am

for my siblings
who are part of who I am

for my husband, Stewart
who believes in who I am

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I'm grateful to the editors of the following publications in which these poems first appeared in their current or earlier drafts:

Five2One: "Déjà vu in the First Degree"

Red Booth Review: "What I Leave Behind"

Spoon River Poetry Review: "Good Rest, Uncle" and "Names My Arab Mother Gives Me"

Sukoon: "Ebtesam, My Mother's Portrait" and "Two Tongues"

The Cape Rock: "Coventry Forest"

The Holler Box: "Jumper"

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I. STUCK IN THE WIND

I Begged for this New World

I'm not trying to run

with its crowds
to meet bums
in alleys and on doorsteps

where parks dot
with floral rainbows

leashed toddlers and dogs
in strollers I feel a pull

like being stuck
on a train that never stops

toward a home
my mother's jewels
can't buy I miss the bricks
my father used to build
our first roof

Want to grow somewhere
new plant my ripped-up roots
where gravel rounded into roads
like city weeds

want the sky

to close in
and buildings bring me
to rooftops
where I can stroke light

off star spines
and lick clouds

Somewhere to lose
my face shed old olive skin
and slip through holes

unremembered
I dream of falling

into car exhaust
outside my window
drift off with fumes

that carry me to new mouths
with accented tongues

to rediscover me
in new eyes
that could define me tangle
and rewind me

in my fragmented faith
bring back old strikes
to nerves
that will never settle never calm

We Grew in Trees

Kids roll out of bed with early calls,
forced through small haunted hallways.

Boys and girls slip into echoes that shake
their short walls, bite out words that break

skin, microscopic cuts across sad faces
that float to bathroom stalls—locked up

and leaned on for comfort. Little cowlicks
and ponytails burn their way

through tire swings wrapped around tree limbs—
cracks slowly hug each soft curve.

Slight voices sing louder with each push,
pulse their knees with rubber flight,

love letters molded from children
to draw lines around old eyes, lost. Words

crumple in the window, watching
retired rope cut its home into the wrinkled limb,

un-sung, like an old man on a single leg
who can't pump fast enough. Once, I caught the end

of a tire swing with no one on it, colors
fading from tiny corners of the world.

I feel days spent in the sandbox, days
in tree swings that forgot to call them back.

Coming Home

Could I be stripped of loose ends
and cobwebs
before you paint me pretty again? I smell

like broken grass, alarms that waft your clean air
with chimney smoke.
I lived like lost seaweed feeling for the shore

after a storm, until your brick house
bound my body
in one place—hard, shifted, faded from the sun

like my Chevy when I was sixteen—sickly green.
My hands reach out
like lumpy turtle skin escaping its shell, slow

and almost sure.

Pockets Filled with Roots

—these fingertips bruise dreams
like knuckles to lips; some so light,
even feathers dent
their bellies. I float away,

on wings lined
with gold

and rage.

I callous these palms
with chain-hitched hope, a lark's head
too tight around the neck.
I feel songs that tell me to bleed

for a boy who's struck me
with dirty diamonds,

rubies that buy me
heavier roots,
pearls that dress me,
slink on my hips and color
my bony collar. He gave me

jewels
I can swallow,
cold copper coins that warm me

when diamonds make dreams
with curled corners
like burning paper. Montages of fire

with nowhere to burn
cage themselves within steel walls,
beat such ire loose, pile enough

black dust to drip
to stone again

If I Could Paint Our Eyes

Sharks crash through pits of sand
and salt, where seas
collapse

your bones
and skin
to shells.

Your tides always eat me alive.

You grow crystals in your eyes that twist
like vines, your heart un-heaved and deep.
They explode yellow, green, and incessant indigo

by the ticking bombs of your lonely.

Bottomless, they eat my glass eyes,
shatter them into thousands of tiny grains
to become the shore.

What I Leave Behind

I hold thinning paper
in clammy hands,
lose my identity on it
by mistake. I crinkle
its abdomen—pressing
fingers—tightly rub in
self-doubt beneath my thumb.
I'll lose my name
if I press hard enough,
erase my prints off
the tips of my fingers,
like hair that's been washed
too many times, strands
fallen out and lost
on my shoulders or in
tumbled fabric. I'll keep
those loose ends as warnings,
curls that tickle sense
into me when tucked
between dryer sheets, bed sheets,
lying in sheets on my bedroom
floor. Those tumbleweeds
catch my cold toes
in the middle of the day,
the sun ripping down my blinds
as if to say *I'm here, I'm here.*
The mirror watches
my face get swallowed up
by the sun that sneaks
its light in behind the slow
clouds. My eyes grow wide,
my eyes grow wild, always
seeking whatever falls behind.

Skin Anatomy

You maulers, you fantastic analyses
of skeletons
whose stories digested us,

where fancies burn
our breasts, tongues,
hot muscles with fingernails

jagged with discontent—
We spit things, delicious.
Ladies, we grow gray flesh

beneath strong spineless skin—
twist from our molders, fist and mouth.
Say, horror, what wires track

you men? Your hopes convince us
of broken chains, but we store our bodies
in your hands, unspecial. Our eyes

scream hush—an attitude women
reflect on, melt to bone.

My Name is a Whisper

turn me
into dust particles
blown off old cribs
and wedding gowns stuck
in attic cracks

my organs scatter
around a room resettle
somewhere cold
i've become

a river
whose name
i can't pronounce and i flow

my sides scrape limp dirt
over mountainsides

move rocks
to strike sparks
off diamonds then round
like a clichéd blade

 i can't cut deeper
than a cucumber

ridges recede
into my thin body

hushed voices spread truth
like raspberry jam
over moldy bread slightly tart
with a growing city

of deadly things

Call Me Violence

We ride plastic getaways over gravel,
rifles spit from our palms. Our trucks
are Barbie pink,
her name scratched in yellow letters
across the side—

we stole them.

Escapees swarm exits, the sun-face still in place
between sky and shoulders
as our lives leak into the air.

We monster-truck
over writhing bodies, a parking lot funeral,

grind gum between

our teeth (off-white, speckled, brown spots
cake my un-rinsed roots). Scuffed wheels creak
between cars, weave
in and out of bad parking jobs and grocery carts—

we shoot through

sliding glass doors, bend bullets around children
who clutch their mother's pinky—
a scurry of mice—

around our whistled targets
and Tonka trucks. I hold the door

for a cripple on crutches,

his gray hair thins as the wind rips it out.
He smiles before he shuffles on—a ripple
in my still waters, a wrinkle
in my pressed blue blouse—and never looks back.
We drone through steamy pavement,

fly white flags
with empty barrels in our mouths.

Old Valentine

I'm a hard shove
without looking back,
 twisted and steady
over ripped up pavement
slashing at my heels.
My feet learn

to re-find you
pockets full of decades,
stamp collections
of lonely, sharp-tooth diaries
gnawing on pencil lead.

I am your fool, aged
as the universe digests us

as two halves to the same whole,
a crumpled cadence
behind convenient stores
and staircases.

Like a fish,
I can't breathe
without your lips teaching me
to bob,
 speaking
 in circles—no—
quadrilateral parallelograms
around a salsa dancer
who only knows how

to spin; you inhale

my brogue and turns.
I'd tell you to keep up,
to fix me in gears riding
my thighs. I'd ask you to dance,
if I knew you couldn't fall.

feet, flocks of free birds

falling
out of skies—new tallies
on a chalkboard
in a shambled class where kids
sometimes go
to die. Take our skies
with thieves on our planes,
our streets with broken cribs
under black tanks.

We're their high
smoked off their beating sticks,
cuts melted into bones

like damaged laws. Mix us all
together, drink away
this world—our last
glass of silence—

another war on the rocks

Tomorrow, I'll Walk into the Sun

I shade mountains, turn light
to star crumbs
to peel away the heat.

Your eyes undress the sky,
grow into pools overflowed with brown leaves
and dead spiders.

I pretend to wear earth stones
like milky opals, sapphires like the sea,

until you carve your way back to me,
stroke my night back

to un-wake me. Break on me
like a stretching sun,

rattle bones like maracas
in your fist, spit words
like sprinkler heads to water my pride
with clay and mud.

Your sun is hot,
but I can't look away.

Being Sylvia

—*After Ariel by Sylvia Plath*

Draw out my breaths
like thick powder on the air,
shape eyes to look back—

wild and heavy like honey
that's spun into gold.
Hair tangles around my ears

and sits around my neck
like a fist. What if I poked holes
in my shirts to air out my soul?

Peek out from tattered fabric
and sing carnival tunes
in the dead of night?

How would my insides sound,
how would they ring in the ears
that always look away?

What if I sang of my father
and let his small words on little feet
carry me home? I could dance, then.

Slow. Turns on my sides
like my own solar system, a starry caricature
of my thick hips for those lost

to follow home. I'll leave
bread crumbs for children
and hope I can bear my own.

Let them live in forests and cry
for their mother's milk. Let them raise me
amongst rocks in the woods.

I wait for my body to hit the ground.
I hold my eyes open to keep them watching.

I hold, and I hold, and my face turns blue,
and my eyes shut tightly to keep myself
grounded, planted here in Mama's backyard
with her birds—

I fell from Heaven,

I'll tell them.

Gypsy

What I'm looking for is not out there, it is in me.
—Helen Keller

Mine aren't hands
that fit here, that soothe me
in this fiery cage,

where I walk
through desert walls

and feel heat heavy
on my body, a thread
of blisters like henna—

this desert prints me
with sores, wet and red

as ink for art. Sand dunes
loom as hostage walls,
while shadows spread

when the sun falls
through its coin slot

to the west.
I argue the rays
to stay, the hollow

sky
too wide

for woe to echo home.
I'm stuck in the wind—
moon pulls heat

off my seething skin.
I feel in all directions

for something
to hold me
here.

II. BETWEEN TWO DESERTS

Phases: Root, Blossom, Wing

I.

My parents lay between ripples of rage
in the absence of their roots. Algae and sinking

seaweed blanket egos higher than *al-Khalil*.
Their eyes move out of stone, hard and deep.

I watch Mama kiss sea salt off Baba's weathered lips,
flavor on top of nature on top of *turn off the lights*

before she can scratch out her face and ask
for a new one. Then he carves her out of wood

with a pair of safety scissors, her smile chopped
into sharp corners when she looks at me. Now,

wrinkles play board games around her eyes. Shadows
fill her cracks like foundation until the sun washes her

with orange and yellow creams the morning after.

II.

I find a blue blossom growing on my skin,
its leaves an itch I can't reach. The blooms

peel away as I bathe my floral breasts.
I glow red, my cheeks like stuck rose petals.

I rock on pillows—pale. Dreams heave onto the floor.
Police sirens and trains coo me to sleep. I imagine

people behind me propped on walls like paintings—
like Mama's wide eyes the first time I say *fuck*,

while Baba snores against the breeze through the open window.
I scratch out their faces, ask for new ones—something different

to decorate my shrunken halls. God's pencil breaks
before He can finish—my parents now old smudges

on paper—His sharpener lost in Michelangelo's drawer.

III.

I fly naked into shame, my spine slipping out
when I get stuck at the window. I am the bandit

keeping Mama's heart in plastic Tupperware, Baba's mind
in pieces tucked in a box towards the back of my closet.

I press my face to the mesh screen, beaten, printed,
until I scratch it out to ask for something else, curled in a spineless

cocoon. I am painted wings. My face falls into seasons,
into reasons for wearing wings as armor, an identity lost

to my beetle brothers, *flutter*, *flit*. I chain their lives shut
so Mama can't feel words, Baba can't think them,

until I go far enough away to bring back their world
on a paper plate, coated with sugar, softened with sweet berries,

their hunger sated by my hands, fingers licked clean.

Ebtesam, My Mother's Portrait

Your eyes search for the star sewn
into the farthest corner of God's blanket

—its lacework woven with cancer
and sliding skin. Your spine is bent

under Baba's weight, the man who stole you
from the east. I look like you: teeth sitting

crooked, sharp, between lips plastered
down at the edges, but I crave your smile

with whimpers so brash I call them
laughter. You, with your hair wrapped

in scarves and pins to hide something
that marks beauty. You with your gorilla

paws for feet, cross-legged on the couch
like a lady-in-waiting. Waiting.

Is it a grave for your captor
that you seek? A bed of peace lined

with rocks and weeds, a plate over
his face to catch the drowning dirt—

this failing man who stole you
from the east? His heart, a beating drum

of a puppeteer who plays music so wild
my dancing hips can't hold its pace.

Baba can't hold it still. Your face wears
questions like body armor—unasked, undressed.

You're a woman routing your children
with cherub hands, your soul on fire

with the pages of a book creased
and spine bent. Like your back beneath

your lover's weight, the prince

who stole you from the flaming east.

Mama's Hijab

I watched
her dress
for work

early mornings
emanated
coffee beans
and aroma
candles
My eyes
followed her
hands—
wrapped

colored scarves
around
her head

pin them
in place
just above
her right ear—
reds, yellows,
greens, oranges—
they lit
her olive face
like a flame

She'd walk
out the front
door, eyes clear,

back straight:
a peacock
that stood,
each color
erect in her
unruffled
feathers—
a bird
I can never be

Baba Wrinkles His Life

through shrunken brain cells,
collision creations
of infinite
 run-ons, words that curve
around one eyeball and into
 pictures.

circles of faces
round
 his skull, shape
it to fit

romantic
elegies—
 these soft sounds,
his personal explosions. Heated hands
mold pain out of riddled
parts; jigsaws
 juggle into cracks,
pounce
into his other eye and carve away
 colors.

a light bulb burns out.
shadows play
 in his head,

voices too close. panic slips
into pillows,
 one life ripped down
a dotted line, pieces
now soggy and bent.

Chemo, Round Two

This time, you bled
through the port inside your chest,
between your right shoulder
and breast, a lump that fed you time
which was smooth going in,
or so you said.

Later, it burned
your body.

The liquid loosened each strand
of hair and let them fall like turning leaves
of autumn. It ate your hunger
so food tasted like burnt coal
after cooled in the grill, turned
your bones into rubber bands

so when you stood,
your legs would snap

beneath you, and you'd fall.
You bled through the port
inside your chest, all of it thinned
and bright like a new crayon
waxing the front of your shirt.
Three wet rags—cold—to catch

all the dirty blood
I couldn't put back.

Names My Arab Mother Gives Me

She calls me *Teresa*
after the Mother because I feed
stray cats in our backyard,

because I let my father curse me
after he blesses my hands

for helping his swollen feet
into socks. She says I'm a *hanooneh*,
that my words are gentle on alligator skin,

the same words that get turned
onto their backs with their short legs

in the air like roaches reaching
for the broom bristles that try
to stick them. I carry kisses

on both cheeks from strangers, lipstick
bruises, dimples not deep enough

to accessorize my olive face.
She calls me *nur ayunha*
though I dimmed that light

when it used to grow in the sharp
corners of her cocoa powder eyes.

If I could, I'd climb trees and jump
from the tops onto the moon, borrow
some shine and drip it like dew

to soften my mama's eyes.
I would dig for a little extra to keep

locked up in my dresser drawer—
leftover moonshine—the kind
that wets our tongues from the sky.

Then she'll call me a *raj'al*,
a woman-man that works herself

into the world instead of lying

beneath the weight of the sun, to bloom
like heavy honeysuckle grown

from the ground, with only the wind
to dance with her—her waltz missing

steps in her swoons—as the moon
dances, and often trembles,
with the high and low tides of summer.

He Gave Me a Star

I am broken frost.

Behind me, cross-legged and cool, heat sighs
from his face *you shine, shine, shine*
—his exhale beneath
dark novae and lightning

on my neck like moth wings.

December fights his fingers
for my hair, twisted in knots,
threads torn off corners
of deep-rooted picnic blankets.

Shadows take cover beneath dancing leaves

like curtains lifted off the cold lake,
moonlight wrapping us like new bed sheets
in the grass. It takes me
sixteen years, shaped from clay

and a broken rib,

to buckle Orion's belt
with my eyes
before my fighter hides
behind a glowing crown—my lover's face

held by the cracking sun.

You're Not the First Man

with dimpled cheeks burned
between palms. Fingers stroke
these lace panties, curious crawls like spilled
love letters on crumpled

paper in red ink and stifled sighs.
You are my lipstick smeared

on a cloudy wine glass, a discolor
of culture in a wedding hall.
You, my Christmas lights
in June, burned out rainbows beneath

this no-moon, no nightlight home, like scribbled
crayons outside bold

cartoon lines and parodies.
You're the search for socks to warm
my feet walking down this aisle that forks
its tongue, swallowing us whole,

like fire hair smoldered
in rock-a-bye rains and smoke—

where the earth sneezed
jewels from its jutted nose, splashed
sand and dust to sunlight, like cut
crannies in jagged

ruby stones, our lava hearts.
I've bloomed to a bent jersey lily, raced

frozen flowers for bulbous bells, late
against sleepy Amaryllis and snowflakes
like firefly flames
on winter wings you cannot cage.

If You Ask for my Hand

this is no young lover's tale
if you can't sniff

moonlight off my neck

without tongue lashes
from Mama's foreign mouth.

her voice designs sandstorms

that sing to open sky.
her words are wild—

streams that break dams,

dare her to move—
turn to fire in her mouth.

her scorn spills like oil

in the breeze. my face
spatters with slick

humility, the dark spots

burning. yearning,
i make up stories about you.

i use her oil on my canvas,

paint her portraits
of mouths and muscle—

all the men you will be—

and hide them in a cupboard.
we sing these tales as treaties,

if only to collect

our softly-ringing bells
in a single mason jar.

I Married Kentucky

Arabs huddled around you like wobbling
stars, your breath a bourbon fog that blurred
their faces. Your bluegrass eyes hid

behind your thick-rimmed glasses the only mask
you remembered to wear. Tempered by your light
skin, you backed into a corner as my Middle East

furrowed their brows—exclamations quiet,
eyes unblinking with punctuation.
Alcohol escaped your pores like rain

through a cracked ceiling. Between calla lilies
and my ivory lace, music strummed
from overseas; your son and I were heat—

his tuxedo an ink blot, my lace a yellow stain—
and you were our hurricane. You leaned
in dark corners, watched darker men pray

for calm, palms open up to catch the falling
leaves of our poise, as if our pride your son
and I could be raked up and bagged come winter.

When His Skin Colors

for Stewart

He carries a red on him because the sun
can't stop staring, so deep that it hangs

in his hair, his cheeks. When the rain comes,
his eyes hold all the blue the sky lets go—they grow,

and they glow. They pave tunnels through darkness,
underground railroads for sunshine to swim through,

like its warmth has been holding its breath
behind blue lips and monkey cheeks. He carries a red

on him—a tomato juice or an itchy mosquito bite.
Carrot-colored curls in his scratchy beard. His skin

is a rainbow after the heavy rain, where colors go
to hide, sink in and sleep, when the sun starts to rise—

something gold always stuck between his ribs.

We are Water and Stone

Your tides slip from the beach
like your body from sheets, smooth
on the rough glass beneath
my bare feet. I press rocks

into pebbles, skip the surface
from small hands. I linger
 above your ripples, watch you

beneath the wooden pier bent with cracks.
Waves draw lines around my eyes.
You come in with the wind to wash
shoulders of castles, my shoulders

empty of pride and structure. And after,
we eat the sun. Spicy, like pepper flakes
 but not as red. Dark comes

and we grab the gravel that swims
beneath the car—take me as far
as the low clouds where we can sit
on old playgrounds and come down

slides in the night. The moon turns
its glow on the jetty face, your water
 electric like tavern lights.

Where does she go after she cradles
the tide in her arms, us—the babes
of beaches—crawling from the soft sand?
Let us carry light from the city,

out broken windows slammed shut
the night before. Let's bring back her light
 to the open mouths of stars.

Boulders

Crushing on my head are boulders made of lies and dust from all of us.
—New Found Glory, “Boulders”

I sit in the center of the couch,
listening to the dust fall
and feel for the lampshade next to me.

My thighs sink like sarsens,
my stomach, a box of stones—all break me
through the deep middle crack,

grounded. My face floats in the heavy night
where the stars can't reach,
dances around my head in front of me.

I hover on the sighs
that slip from the ceiling, like feathers
on still breath where clocks

don't tick and sound is only a memory
I keep trying to forget. Memory
like a small voice inside a snow globe.

Like your voice
when your mouth moves too far away.
Time slows and speaks to me

while you sleep, floorboards kissing
callouses on its tired feet.
I'm tired of watching the wind

break open our windows, of sweeping our lives
beneath rugs with dead bugs
and their detached limbs. I'm tired of sleeping

when you're awake, like strangers
that walk all the same roads, strangers smiling
on the slow train ride home.

I am the Axis

Olive trees and *zam zam* water
live in me like garden spiders

that sleep in the leaves, and I teeter
to the east with dark cascades of waves

down my spine; long lashes sweep
my high cheeks. Then I fall back

to the western waves—a current
where both sides of the world meet

—the pull between two deserts
that have begun to drown together.

III. BREATHING FORGOTTEN SOUNDS

How We Deconstruct

We try to catch our words
but they slip between
clutched fingers like butter,
 dumbbells that hit
 our kitchen floor,

dance around our feet.

Then our walls peel,
crumble to asylum cells:

this brain
 a traffic signal,
screams
 in slow motion.

We know no taste, our tongues
test us for failure. Mouths—
caves of rotted crystals.

Our home,
a dry fire hydrant,

teases burning buildings.
We are unsaved
and broken, wicked
by my hands.

We paint wet eyes
with yellow oils, hold back
 on blue
 and fire. Flash me
a warning as lightning shakes
our leaves. Wave me an end,
 like sunflowers
 in this sunken sky.

Hang the Words

on popcorn ceilings
and lay with dust over unread journals,

a love affair
with old photos

sleeping on their faces. It sounds
louder than it should when *what-ifs* wail
through the cracks,

flying fucks float
into air vents and out to other rooms—
there is no breath in here.

There is no fear.

My mind spins webs
into captions
over my bedroom door,

broken letters
chewed sounds

into titles of moods and days
when my walls might sprout tongues,
and learn to sing.

We are a Decade

I.

We were fifteen when we exchanged
stories of boys and oceans—
which we liked better,

throaty sounds from their mouths
or the itch of salt water and sea glass.
In the end, the wind wiped our bodies

of both.

II.

Somehow, we made it to our twenties.
Our days became soft wind we wished for
but never felt on our skin. This glitch

between us pulls your face apart, sends
my hands to tie off the ends
and throw you over the ledge,

sinking.

III.

Our feet wore the same shoes,
filled the same steps. We jumped rope
and pressed pedals and danced

with boys who had beards because now
they were men, no matter how much their love
reminded us

of the slipping tide.

IV.

We took cover in your Jeep
when our worlds wove new paths,
the shade soft on our cheeks.

You step now into the ocean

forging shallow prints. I wait for you
to surface, our heels to fall up sand dunes

together. I don't see you running
beside me. I can't hear you reaching out.

Déjà vu in the First Degree

I heard once that the world
will end like the count
on a small hand
before a wish blown

off burning candles. I kept spells
on my middle finger,
the ticking

of a cheap watch
tucked in my wrist
before the battery
 wound down.

Like rings sketched as timers
inside tree trunks, soldier trunks
flown home from war—
if the bombs don't go off,
where will the angry men go?

The heartbeat clock gives
me heartburn, stomach acids slosh
like fizzed fireworks

as gravity un-grips my heels.
I collect sunsets
by heating up
my brown breath,
glass skies shielded by fluffy hope.

My lungs melt,
old fumes finger
my nostrils as a tease beneath clouds

that can never hold rain again.

We Feel Fine

when someone runs,
tornadoes land
in their footprints
across drying beaches,
the world

ends

in dust instead of magma.
These whirlwinds spin out
under mountains,
lift rocks to clouds,
bring leaves to mud.

Our center remains
untouched—by men with arms,
women with hearts, babies with eyes
that never look away.
Now we run,

away from children
with unblinking souls.
Their lives

are lights,
lighting nights,
cities wheeze,
born between bed sheets
and 3 A.M. sitcoms,
a place where dreams are

fucked.

Soaked, new paths
are lost beneath tsunamis
of thumbprints, a trail
of breadcrumbs and splinters
off the roots our fathers buried

for us.

We feed off their stories,
huntsmen scavenged

for food, murder. Mothers
only bore us to hear our names
resound between birds
in case our feet found
new ground beyond
our front yard bushes. We scour
paved pipelines through sewer streets

like colonizing mafias—our new
great depressions.

Our closets haunted
with derogatory degrees that slide
off tacks in their backs,
we smile when the frames
scrape paint off the walls,

our skeletons
dressing in the dark.
White light on faces built
with president paper, buy me

lungs
to keep them burning,
 brains
 to keep them burning,

 lead me
 to bridges
 that I keep burning.

There's an end
to this movement, this monster
bred in our wombs.
There's an end to us leaving,
our roots digging deeper,

our branches
barely scrape
the cloud-ghosts and begging stars.

I Move the Flowers and the Rain

Tripped on a crushed
flower this morning,

its petals cracked
like an old windmill,

the flat stem became
the pavement. I leaned

over its corpse—
my shadow cooling

its twisted body—and felt
something putrid pierce

my nose like skinny needles.
I sat next to it, waited for ants

to pick it apart and build
something new. Carry death

on their backs to their home
in crumbs. The flower

could dance if I let it,
pluck its roots to cradle

in my lined palm. Plant
its dying petals like seeds.

Feed it like a pet, some life
I claim as mine, shared skin.

Or leave death to water it,
crunched beneath my boot,

showered with past souls
ripped from ground like weeds.

Home Movies with the Dead

let me crush sound
in my palms,

watch tire swings,
sliding glass doors
rush air inside,
then out the kitchen window.

unveil what it is to grin
under cloudy mobiles.

my hands ask me

what look can coat love
with a heavy blanket?
ask me why
this world trips and spins,

gears on a crooked axis.

fingerprints on the sun,
this identity on fire
with clicks of my tongue—
words wedged through
cracked lips.

death is a series
of paper cuts. leak
my laughter out empty ears,
listen with my fist.

When They Found Mohammed Abu Khieder

*I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought,
but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones.*

—Albert Einstein

They found his body burned with holes
that emptied his young insides. Sixteen,

though burnt skin aged his name.

Charred from flames that choked him
with dancing fingers, the people prayed.

It wasn't the fire's fault.

But I thought, how did the forest
not build the blaze? Weeds, vines, wood?

How did its red-soaked leaves

not get stuck in its hate, his smoking skin?
Jerusalem's trees grew too tall, raced

for hazy sky, when his body entered at *fajr*.

People saw him dragged into the car, searched
the broken ground, calling *Mohammed*, prophet-like,

as if they follow him now to war.

Good Rest, Uncle

“*Inna lillahi wa inna ilaihi raji’oon.*”
To Him we belong and to Him we shall return.
—*Surah Al-Baqara 2:156*

I climbed the fence that cradled your body in the ground—
softened by sprinklers that watered your sleeping skin—
beneath the brown and yellow grass, beneath the stone

that bears your final name (our name) that strung
your middle life with my beginning one. The links
jerked holes in my jeans when I mounted it between my legs.

Had I not tried for the other side, would you have felt
the glow of my sad eyes? Looking through to you
with only words too shy for the light? I heard my father speak

into cameras about hatred-heated gun barrels in gas stations,
like the one you worked at in the city. The owner bought the stone
with your final name on it, slipped off his guilt of your face broken

into pieces by a bullet. Had I not opened my hands to our sky
in hope to catch the falling goodness—*duaa* piling in the curves
of my palms to sprinkle like flowering seeds over your bed

in the damp dirt—had I not spoken the words would you have felt
The Opening and your end, the first *surah* when you were born,
the last as you mold to the mud, missing parts from a grave—

you who wandered so long ago astray, *walad’daalleen*...

Coventry Forest

Grandmother's skin cracked
with dark spots, stuck beside themselves

like broken roads.

I told her she should cut them out.

She traced them on her arms, painted trees
that stood high over houses, branches low over roads.
Gray stones laid trails to her front door
where she rocked
within the sun

—watched it leak through leaves
into summer evenings. Weeds drowned
beneath overflowing sewer drains.
Rain reeked of dying roses,

and I tried to save them all.

BismAllah, I breathed

at night, when I heard train whistles blow
by the small lake rotted with dead fish—

I hid beneath bed sheets, beneath the cold window
and heavy moon that stole the sky.
Grandmother became the sun.

She tried to live forever, swung from trees
with Spanish moss, dying the day her swagger
dripped off her hips. Tulips flooded
her casket with the sweet stink of grass, burning
as we sat in rows

guarding our dead.

Together, We're Sisters

It's winter in December, but Chicago's sky

won't open its mouth. We were hoping for cottonmouth
so flurries would fall, spin to the ground past our heads.

One of us sits next to her husband, eyes locked

on television Christmas, two sets of hands
turning circles on each other. Both stuck in the middle

of their families, middle man and woman, but first together.

Another one of us hunches over cream-filled cookies
and a glass of milk, dunking sweets and rocking back in her chair.

She's twenty-two this year, the table her only anchor.

The last of us moves her eyes across the room, over subtle secrets
between lovers on the far couch, to the television snowflakes

and back, to the ceiling for strength and away.

She crosses her legs beneath her and watches two other versions
of herself rest wide-eyed and soft, chests rising and falling

with quiet life, movement under skin that colors us all.

Our Jerusalem

At least the breeze lets us bring
our bottles to the patio, its harsh

strands of hair melt through
copper pine trees. We snap up

these stairs, our steps crush
down with feet driven

like GI Joes and old stories that dent
our hands on steering wheels.

The sun falls asleep behind
the lake, our murky moat.

We watch the lake explode
from the window ledge, colors

transparent in its mist;
waterfalls crash on Jimi's guitar.

Boobs jog in a circle,
silver trash filters streets,

and bums take shits
in city sewers. These chairs,

our home, rip chains from the floor
and fall. Our backs stand sharp;

hands raise bridges to build
these rusty walls, our burning castle.

Open Casket after a Car Crash

Only peace struggles across their faces,
only dreams the dead can conjure,

like wearing nightmares in scowls
as papier-mâché masks,

stuck in a dark tunnel, stuck
on a train filled with flickering lights

meant for souls to ride with to the end.
I told myself to look away, to the others

floating. Look out to the crowd swimming
beside one another in passing currents,

waves washing a sinking face
in an effort to wake the dreamer up.

“Inna lillahi wa inna ilaihi raji’oon.”
To Him we belong and to Him we shall return.
—*Surah Al-Baqara 2:156*

There is a stillness after you

as if the moon stopped the pull of waves
to shore—the sand slips, the air asleep.

In this life, you were the core, the pit
of heat that kept us warm, where ashes

flicked in us deep. That morning, our brothers
and sisters prayed to the east with sweets

and pastries awaiting their mouths. Their fasts
were fasted and *duaa* demanded as your stillness

spread over us like a fog. Our bodies—the carriers
of old worlds—and eyes could only hold the sky.

Your stillness filled our pores with chants
and blessings—*kul sana wa inta salem:*

may every year now find you in new peace.
It’s the elder soul you lifted to angels

before the world could close its large doors,
slipped like a whisper from your fingertips

with words that sang to home—
ahlan wa sahan, ahlan wa sahan—

as your open arms calmed our shaken bodies,
“you are most welcome, you are most welcome.”

Two Tongues

Yesterday I didn't understand
a word—Arabic sounds crackled
in my ears like foil in a microwave.

Its letters wet
with rounded lips,

accented with Mama's native breath.
Rubbed raw by ancestors reclaiming
their skin, my identity shook

when I felt my name
could be replaced.

Cultured seeds had been caught
on foreign wind, spread over new land
and waters. American air soaked

my cautious lungs,
like breathing forgotten sounds

was illegal in this place. Mama translated
palpable Palestinian tongue
into English. My split mouth knew

the taste
of each vernacular spice,

flavors coating the ridges of my teeth.
She paused to ask if I finally understood
but I had burned both tongues.

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