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In The Whispers of Flight

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**in the
Whispers of Flight**

Amanda Volel

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the Master of Fine Arts degree at Sarah Lawrence
College, May 2019

¿Por qué la cuerda, entonces, si el aire es tan sencillo?
¿Para qué la cadena, si existe el hierro por sí solo?

– Cesar Vallejo

“There is always a place where, if you listen closely in the night, you will hear a mother telling a story and at the end of the tale, she will ask you this question: 'Ou libéré?' Are you free, my daughter?"

— Edwidge Danticat

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Elegy for “Does Your House Have Lions?”

after Sonia Sanchez

One day I died, a regular day
death became my pulse
that was another death

I cast away salt
where I once rubbed
at the raw of my body
was a cawing, opened mouth
a cave of pink flesh unholyed
and separated from water like oil

I seldom go there
down the throat of death's singing
back to the song that belongs to deeper belly
without becoming a different animal
than what the morning has asked me to prepare

But I know, I can be a morning feeding on night
when night is bloated with men, hungry and fanged
I eat the seeds I've sown, still blinking
with light from the ground

I could tell you,
*Death was a strange cousin
that walked into my room
and took me by the throat
when the elder women were mixing coffee
in the kitchen and forgot to listen for silence*

I could tell you that when I first wrote that stanza,
It was in the second person

I could tell you,
I woke
And death was hiding in the closet above my head

But,
I woke to the night shedding its skin
to lay its body over my cold
to the sun's yellowest walls
and her room busy with angels
feeding me the breath in my name like soup

How days bundled become a life,
& I fight to carry this lilac
in my closed, soft hand

Singing is a warrior's secret craft
my joy dares to sip the warmth prepared for me
when it isn't, how I go deep in the water of my belly
like laughter

No woman lives a life without pain and disaster
so this poem is for you. Is for us
don't speak to us of living
We are the living,

who can spin death around the wrist
and see it's gold grip,
and know the jaws of our breath,
and know the jaws of the lions keeping our houses
to be mightier

We give our rotating bones
a new song,
every day we find a new name
life gives to us

nothing

But a kiss to each breath
and we give it,
an alter to praise
a piece of lilac to lay at life's large feet

Silence

is a closed, small mouth
a wet bird
a field of grass in the morning
wrapped in a tight blanket of dew
cotton mouthed
it is the nothing between us
but orchid skin
pressed down and lifted
into a naming ceremony
the story goes,
one night
the earth left her axis bed
and knelt over the white marble edge
one long arm dangling over
the black night bath.
she drew her knees back,
eucalyptus ghosting in her nose
& wet from the face
she walked his bare heart to the alter
found the humming street
and bought a Malta
with the collection plate

The Five Element Philosophy

after Afaa Weaver

Wood

Wait to push the orchid
from your dirty tongue

first, leave the poem
and go home

where time is measured
by blocks

& a young god's forearm
bare and bronzed in the park

finish the block, walk till your responsible for this home
where handball courts don't leave their posts
& the blue rubber ball is a July firecracker in the palm

the sprinklers by the swings are cement bouquets of water
and the jungle gym plays on the color of peaches

when I go there
the air is a simple syrup
of early memories

for Queens

Fire

I sit on the nape of home's neck
with dreams of small lifted arms
pointed away from the body

In both houses, I am a fracture
split like firewood
into two pieces of bark

In the music of tinder, a hook
needles in the direction of silence
and is between where the black lines
break the staff

Metal

I made love to a stranger in a closet
on the moon. the wind was howling on earth
a dark tune. The trees gathered to listen close.
During the storms, I hoped he wanted me
as much as I wanted you then. While the banana peel
blackened on top of my garbage pail, we breathed together
and, you were almost there.
Anyway, far above the chugging low-whistle
of an aboveground metal train is the moon
shining without proper skin.
It makes me think of your wet thighs.

Water

What keeps you
in the world
yet running to sleep

I see you, waiting on the street
belonging to it, as you gather your groceries

then at home, bleeding as you bleed
the cherry from the pit
after one bite

do you believe that a pit
can swell back to a plum

or in a merciless god
that hides from eye contact

a dandelion with a head full of fuzz
wakes in shock by the sun

the sun is blowing its hair back
with a few, early breaths

give her back to the earth softly
alive and with her eyes closed
as if waiting for the wish in your hands

Earth

One morning, I wake
to a white dove at my window
before I even lift my head
from yesterday's sheets

The bird offers a memory in her beak
but I drink a glass of water instead

Quenched, I wrap my arms
around the neck
of morning's twilight

Whisper to her
"please don't come yet"
as a loud dog barks across the street
waking everyone unaware of him

Medical History

after Nicole Sealey

I inherited sleeplessness from both sides of a river
Think my speech fluttered first in its rapid water

home is my body, built from spilling
& home will be whatever water I feed my mother

I slip the silence between my teeth
or row it back into a silk, clear-dark stream

I listen for tomorrow, asking her to speak
I think, I am opening my mouth for hands

lost memory returns like a spell over the body
till its gone out through the mouth like a small, early bird

one day, the wind will take everything of me
and it will feel like the air has asked

home is my body, built from spilling
& home will be whatever water I feed my mother

& home will be whatever water I feed my mother
home is my body, built from spilling

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one day, the wind will take everything of me

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& home will be whatever water I feed my mother
home is my body, built from spilling

Think my speech fluttered first in its rapid water
I inherited sleeplessness from both sides of a river

Father Country

I dream of dark French waters in my dream

the rest of the world is sunken
half under the blue and wet

from the middle of the water
I needle deeper into the black
my feet feel a hand might touch me
from somewhere in the water
& I'm a little afraid of it so I swim up

A man says
I like your body

In this dream, the man stands on a roof
beside me saying, she almost died
the second year I loved her
what again was her name?

I am beneath the shade
with an old jealous love on my mind
a young man with a heart carrying dead
women finally settles his rage
& tries to take my wet hands
but I am already dancing in the water

I come to a perfect Miranda house
& walk through wide windows
leaving the nameless man to his running car

my family is there, waiting for me
& emerges from rooms swollen with light

There is so much sun in this house
I won't age & we celebrate to nothing but air

I close my eyes, returning to the chairs
and the dark jealous
and the sweat

Blue Cento

I have watched

My mother circle

Shedding blue tassels over the land

This is how we do it here.

Body of skin, of moss of milk, eager and firm

And eyes aware of several kinds of dark

I bend to your eyes

I am the desperate one, the word without echoes

What I mean is one day

I watched the shadow play

& what I remember most are the light

grafted paradise. A mouthful of snow

Our entwined shape a word in the dark

How his perfect body rained in pieces on my skin

A sound like the spilling of sand

These days I feel out of touch with lightning

But It's still beautiful to hear the heart

Think of all the times

Impossibility's patron

Says

Remember

Says

If it's the sun, it can know us

What I mean is

Each day I begin

An inelegant death – a caught

long river in red twilight

& one day

The water walks barefoot down the wet streets

Who calls? What silence filled with echoes?

I am the desperate one, the word without echoes

& In my desert of a land

you are the afternoon

one whole note full of sand

the final rose

in all Ghost forest & Turpentine sky

bathed in jasmine. Blue

Dance with me

When everything goes to hell

When everything *goes*

He still said I would stand

My rocker and I on winter's voice

Like splats of orange paint against the tall black night

Girl. There is nothing small about you

Sister, bathed jasmine. Blue.

Like cloud around a mountaintop, the moon

stumbled on the lost language of Eden

Her arms found strength

How could a lamb do any damn such thing?

I think about the meaning of blood

Like drumming rain, insisting his presence

And find you there

And yeah... this is a love poem

Insisting what the body can continue on in spite of

Death has always laid a few of it's cards on the table

No matter how young or old you are

From here on,

The light leads me

From two mouthfuls of silence

Suddenly I know why my love is a clenched fist

Why I can only love like this

Dance with me

Like drumming rain rose from his warm bed

To hear the unbounded night
We pass over heavy shadows
Overhearing each other's love sighs
Those were the days
I grew my own garden
And I said God
I want to inherit the tiger part of her
Like a ream of stars

Dance with me
& my soul dances wounded with curls of fire
My spine, my hair a black
yard of violet velvet
with eyes aware of several kinds of dark
yet leaning in the afternoons,
I throw my sad nets into your oceanic eyes.

You are the afternoon
Our entwined shape a word in the dark
Hand over hand, steering into the
dust we leave behind
You there in the sun
made the wall of shadow draw back

Few recognize that love is

a city connecting rooftops
is water for sky, in unbounded night
Is writing on a fire escape
As sunsets break over Bushwick
If cruelty exists, or if it is only love's threadbare
I love you still among these cold things
Even though the earth holds on until it breaks
Winter has spring,
Dark butterfly, sweet and definitive
Let's start with the air
The biggest stars look at me with your eyes
Hour of nostalgia, hour of happiness, hour of loneliness
Like a ream of stars
Have water for sky
We can do it in time

[Blue Cento is entirely comprised of lines by Tarfia Faizullah, Nikki Giovanni,
Sarah Howe, Li-Young Lee, Pablo Neruda, Ishle Yi Park & Lucia Perillo]

Sunday

How often we gasp.
Go shopping.
Do laundry.
Then make love
with our bones.
Our crying bones.

Wear My Jewelry

The ghosts wear all of my jewelry
and call me a fraud, a liar

Here is my corrective behavior
dressed as a woman
trying to get home
maybe, your home

Can I sit here a while
and become my pieces?

I'm not afraid to tell you
that they never left

Soft moments come home again
with sharp edges and the rough ones
are the most honest, standing at least in plain sight

Have you seen the world lately
and its starved spine weighed with anxiety

Well, I'm still out there
walking along I-95 with a beat heart
holding it outside my body like a tray

trying to keep the cup from spilling over
and cannot stop for the demons behind me

I woke up craving the darkness

Does anyone have a lighter?
Does anyone know my real name?

I've gotten lost in the hallways of my mind
stood behind addiction's coat
so shy but ready to dance

Dearest A

after Children of the Sea by Edwidge Danticat

Will this be an honest poem, A?
because its addressed direct to you?

will it hold the story I've yet to flesh
out like a caught star first cradled?

there, in the heart of the ink
knowing it might never reach you?

I've had a feeling for a while, that love in the Caribbean
has been reborn in our blood this way

cradling its sweat
its permanent rest

in the lips or the eye-lines
of someone else's math

the ocean has our blood in its veins
or knows its mineral smell, different than coral

the blood has been ink and breath
has been love letters signed with a last kiss

has reached through dreams
to close death's black eyes

and let a man write to his love
again on land

can you see the tree she sits under?
the bark pressed into her brown back
like one child against another?

how tilted is her chin, A?
would you say she's waiting?
or is she already sitting with what's gone from her?
when the black butterfly flies low in confirmation
she runs from it. like her knowing. clutching something
in her hands with palms of sand

& don't we know just how she remembers him, A?
through her fingertips, saying them the name of a ghost
and the ghost reaches back through a colony of body

& isn't that the tongue memory travels on?
come back to take her hand from the water
or through a water-pain body to a window
where light is pulling on night's hem

do you believe that in our blood is a calling?
that such stillness could wear an altar's voice?
I do, A. the way a banyan carries the no-sound sweetness
like ants, like mild wind

I think most victories are won
waiting to be revealed

and when my knee rests
in the softened by wet
hand of a love with low nails

I remember the names of my ghosts
and sing the verses through his mouth
with my own, old wind

A Fog of Bone and Skin

I woke up in a crave of your mouth
the impression of your body
a fog of bone and skin
the ache is south
I woke up in a crave of your skin
wanting to syrup the scent
the ache drinks my breath like slow gin
I wake up in the other arm of the city
in a crave of your fog

Your Kind

to Grandma H

Where do small echoes go

to land?

to rest

in the end?

I imagine your hand alive
on the arm of every god, you walk
as the great reminder of kindness

as we descend, slow
like seasons towards a home
or slower than that
like rain water into
a nursing river
or slower than that

to think that you once kept me
like a small lung yet to flutter
in the continent of your body
is beyond me
I have never birthed a body
of my own carrying like that

I say the first name you kept for me often
In losing you to this earth, I became two women
and neither surrender

The Darkness, an Old Friend

The darkness is an old friend
who betrayed me by turning
into a butcher's knife

my life walks around in halves
(I hope the morning doesn't crush my chest)

I knew the waves were on their way
(I feel my ancestors closer by these days)

I see them on my face in the mirror
Wondering about whose nose I got
or which part of the sea my eyes

Etymology of My Name

A is a bell
tower
is a vein
in the heart
is a broken
chain
my name
was stolen
but is root
not omen
each letter is
a different species of bird

Little Country, Big Nation

*I have children and family
I would like to take care of
But if this comes in the fight
let this come...*

-Yves Volel

Volel as a word lifts the Tongue.
i've lived in the US for 23 years
there's still a lot to learn
about this word, my name

In 2017, i hailed a yellow cab in Manhattan
through the raining night
there i heard the little country
under the cab driver's tongue
and asked him, *Are you Haitian?*

We speak in English and he tells me
He knows of my name
That my name lives in the Haiti he keeps inside him

And he gives me back
to New York with our eyes shinning

In 1965, a million Haitians fled
with a million guns pointed to their backs

In 1986, there was a protest at the police headquarters in Port Au Prince
civilians, reporters and journalists stood together
in the thick air other bodies make

i am a ghost to my motherlands
i know that

i am not supposed to be writing this
and i am not supposed to be here

when i meet a man who lifts my name to his lips
and whose feet have seen my grandmother's soil
i want to ask him if he knows Yves

do the corners of the country ever whisper of how he died
is there a word in Kreyol that crowns ageless children

is it what we call sunset in English

i wanted to ask him,
if anyone saw Yves's eyes from behind his glasses

or did he pull the Colt .45 from his waist
refusing to leave the world before lifting the birds from the trees

can souls ever be released
through the chamber smoke of the gun

I would have asked him
if Yves found Hispaniola

did he wake up
by the sound of a mighty river
was it a stream of sweet milk
did he find his god

Honey Bee in my Brain

you sweeten the tombstones
the rested and the walking
you visit the wet, quiet fields

& the fine haired grass keeps
a smile & your name
in its threads

The morning enters
through my ears
tolling open my eyes
& I leave you in the wet, wet quiet

I am a bare skinned animal
whose memory has a swelling belly

The Day New York Went Dark

The Brooklyn bridge swelled with
thousands of feet shuffling
forward in a New York march
as a little girl, I walked firm
holding my mother's right hand
proud that the gravel too witnessed this exodus
fresh and absent of blood

No grand waves of wine
or staff
but a city of certain folk and our Achilles buildings

The whole city shouted across boroughs into highways

"Do you need water?"
"Can I use your phone?"

I saw a mother and thought
if she wasn't a stranger, she'd be my aunt.

At the end of the bridge, night met us all
dark bodies moving through the city's molasses
listening for the voice of our families
almost close enough to hear the chains move
from our doors and smell the arroz

My mother looked down at me that day
as the sun fell toward its line and said
we can't walk anymore to get home
so look for a car with a car seat in the back
a woman first, and then a man
that'll be the man that won't hurt us
the car seat means he has a family

My mother and I walked through an underpass with dim lighting
that felt of human bodies nobody seemed to know

When we came to a street swollen with headlights,
I focused hard on their faces
looking for a mother
then looking for a father
and caught sight of a blurred, empty car seat

Poem after Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird, Frida Kahlo

Begin in the eyes
the spoon clicking
against the brim

& begin again in the depth
of its dark language

her eyes are a mother now
picking the dirt and wings
from beneath the hood of tiny nails

the birds can be seen flying in a circle
above the corn husks

When the first black baby fell
she heard the cries through the trees
in the forest

where the green cries grow

they both live forever

If They Come for Me

with Fatimah Asghar

If I die in the night
assume the night by morning

if caged by an AK 47
with the lamb of God beside me
will you sing my song for my mother?

Little girls huddle in dress socks and baby breath
but what American doom will threaten to blow
open another chest before the congregation

soul to keep beneath the floorboards of a church
or legacy to live nameless on the hymnal line

45 is talking through gums, spit, cum and dentures
I had a dream once that all my teeth fell out
So when he asked a smile of me
I couldn't show him anything but silent darkness

to cease the day, they would crack my body open
and the sky would still be black

Can redemption record my last name?
Will my body make it to the river?

For Now, We Gaze

after sonnet fifteen & more essentially,
aracelis girmay's *from* the black maria

if I could keep you forever
in the wet feet of this earth, I would not

for now, the hands of time are not pressing
down our shoulders. for now, we gaze

and gaze at the stars for their ivory
secrets without the city sound of sirens

tonight, I prayed for something with your hand
in my hand, as a blue bird landed waiting

you are alive and it sends flickering calls
to the callery pears in Syosset (or everywhere)

I gave you green tonight, a silver carp
smoked in lime and spice from the earth

and what a gift it is to be a passenger
a dying yellow thing alive

we remain perfect for a moment
then like everything else, unfurl

for now, for now the hands of time
are not pressing down our shoulders
for now, we gaze

and gaze at the stars for their laughing secrets
without the hunting sirens

like tall pride, like marigold wheat
my hands are waiting for the wet
skin of your mortal, numbered mornings

like red maple for spring,
I leave letters in the brief air

& when I see men like raising plants
I consider a balanced blade, tipping flesh

& think of the long history of war this earth
has caught with crying hands

forever is war and with it came your loved living
beneath the honey locust trees

as time takes from you
I wrap you up again in white cloth

in a poem
I touch the bark
and know its breathing
has its own name
kept and kept by heaven

Memorial Process

for Grandma H

I begin a line and see my grandmother's hands again
The soft snow of them, the bone of her branches
dried in pulled skin over blessed blood

The secrets buried in the back of her throat
are a long fingered fury in my hands

her stillness remembers my breath
and beckons me still & sweet out of a red river

I've landed from the kitchen
with knives still in my hand
I set them down with my teeth

My grandmother is a Glass prism on the table
Her eyes, a blue flame

Elements Poem

i taste metal
on my tongue

in my blood, a silver
rope threads my years

there lives screaming thunder
by a window, where a basin was kept

to catch the broken sky in its mouth
neighbor to a guitar in Spanish Harlem

How she sang the years loose
with her bolts and strings

i smell water on my tongue
and let a lake spill through my mouth
clicking like thin cotton against wet rocks

The Two Fridas (1939)

I went looking for a woman who could counsel me
on how to hold hands with my shed skin

oh, the broken bodies I climbed out of
our wheezing lungs and sliced hearts
the old country tradition of sacrifice laced up to the neck
and blood behind the cheeks

what are the scissors in your hand for, Frida
did you cut out their names
or did you let them soak in the wood

when you come to sit beside yourself
are you ever already waiting

I admit, I want to be more like you, Frida
free and not looking away
from the chaos
I thought lost
in muted burning

it means you recognize me
and I recognize myself as a witness

I thought, maybe myself and I
could find each other on a bench
press our knees together
and lean in around the arteries, fat with names

Frida, can you teach me to mother myself
to watch over my plum climbing
her voice staining everything she owns
and her small hands, reaching for a mouth

Photo of Self as Love

Natural things have their own secret science.
In a kitchen, the cast iron skillet
slicks with oil and flame,
on its chest sits a smoking tomato
onion, salt and coriander
I say *I am love, I am love, I am love*
and it makes a meal

Ojo Infinito

time walks up
to the house of poetry
opens the door and collapses

This poem is already not what I say
it is. A cold cup of tea
on my father's wooden table

Once he said, "How's the food?"
and I swallowed grains of black rice
that stick together. Some grains
like small cloves of banana

It strikes me the way old faces
show up inside new sand
or the way my red pillow that night
held the scent of them under my tongue

I hold them in my mouth
like bad love's water-pain
secrets in the dark

&

I dedicate my looking to a cup of cold tea

&

I think when I give my eyes
to the soil, I will still be
staring through the branches

After Down Melancholy's Rapids

We stole the stillness
& breathed it
into the morning

I laid inside my life
like a tomb of water
& woke up with prayer
crumbs covering my mouth

I tried to hide them from you
as you waded through the night
changing into day

Your eyes took a swim inside mine
and I am glad to have held you

Their Eyes Were Watching God

after Zora Neale Hurston

for many

While we're here I'll admit,
I've cried into the chest of the New York skyline
alone with the bodega
below on the corner with neon signs
and a cat who always comes back
hungry, orange and surviving

the skyline pulled an old memory from me
in a prayer that kissed each building
head to chest like a blessing
on every head in the city.

I find my mother
and mother myself here
and it isn't a hard pill to swallow
it's a rooftop

But I'd rather start again
by telling you that some winds carry the parakeets' song
in a high-pitched sun through my abuelita's kitchen window

And that there's something about the summer's cool air
in Queens that I think about when people talk
of the harsh smell they find this city to be.

Here as it were, I caught fireflies in the 90's into the 2000's
with cupped palms, playing peek-a-boo with fireflies' yellow-near-green lights
& how their small bodies shown the brightest closed off

Back then, I let my joy slip on the brink of nights
and fly above my head with the fireflies
to somewhere unknown but forward and up, trust
I sang songs for black girl like all black girls did
belonging to soul-food
someone's baby
and the summer had a scent that knew too

Like the rest of us here,
I memorized the song of Mister Softee's ice cream trucks
I would wait at the window to hear its caw
while the truck drove through the side streets of summer vacation

You remember those icees?
of superhero animal faces with Zorro bandanas
And bubble gums eyes that would stain the skin around our mouths and cheeks
Before any of us knew that death was around here walking

every morning, I wipe the sweat from the bathroom mirror
and don't break gaze for some good strong seconds
as if to say, me and you is ready
for whatever war outside is today

I've spent years exhaling
trying to let something loose fall out.

& I have no solutions this afternoon
but the two boiled eggs I ate to feed my hunger

When my head dips, my chest is still watching god
remembering that mint green cover
and that bold black lettering that calls me in
to be the kind of person who walks the earth
in a life that shares words with God.

Babe

Babe is a funny word in my mouth
so, I put it in this poem
to constantly unravel
my tongue more defiant
than its hard, heavy bees
knocking itself in the morning
against my bedroom furniture
as if here to find me a fraud
yielding softness
that couldn't fit in my mouth.

Once, I heard my kid sister
sing "Babe" to my father
and her mother laughed
at this word her daughter
picked up off the floor
of her affection for him

and I think now
of the words I picked up
off the floor of my father's rage
Rage now sleeping in a sold house
a broken door, a shattered glass

a shattered

a shattered

oh, don't words sink
like wind sinks
not warmly
but trembles the body
even after it leaves
and removes the choice
of peaceful stillness

What do you say?
are we as tongues at the mouth
of the gods?

some prefer to lie down in taste
some sing for the wine of the lung

The other day
I took my friend's hands in my hands
and we breathed together
as my body shook

mothered by skies.

Pack Light

after Eryka Badu

I went looking for a woman to counsel me
& thought that *if I could*
I'd alchemy every one of my ghosts
into a foldable light
Pack it behind my jeans and shirts,
because darkness can't scream once its transformed?

the Q88 is the adopted child of the city
swallowing New York's pollution and smoke
& I get to see everything from the aquarium glass

The drivers on the road
have faces screwed up
hot from phone calls
or the last interview
on the Breakfast Club

This morning, I put all my darkness
in a brown paper bag before leaving
I walked the blocks to my stop
& let what I left behind
live on my shoulders

When I look up
there they are
in everything's air
making it crisp
making me late

I believe a professor
when she says time is a shapeless lie
I look out the window and realize as big as this city is
it's small

The doors of the bus open
and in pours the wind
It opens my hand
takes out my black peppered bag
and rests it on the salted floor of the bus

I gather my things
pull at the yellow wire string
inhaling the separation

between myself and what warms me
the neon letters
the older women holding gold cashless dollars
& our daily exoduses home

The Night Sky Already Knows It

I waited to see if you'd come around
and the night sky came first
became a close friend

Night spoke
from my living room couch
of that distant star
With the phantom light

Around the bend
Around the bend

The leaves were whispering your name
so I'd never forget the aroma of a steel chain

& as the addict sleeps on the sanctuary
steps of other bodies
I could not stop waiting for you

Isn't it enough that darkness melts, once a day
that the sea's chest dances for the waiting
sky-body that never descends

After Duke Ellington's "In A Sentimental Mood"

I am the honey in agony
licked it with a gold, drunk tongue
till the mouths began to scat
where flickering like streetlights wonder of flame
a mirror is fogged by the shower
sounds of percussion
what are the notes of your yearning?

I know all their wordless names
the saxophone sings it for me
while it matters
while it still swells the air
the air now a molasses of walking

the forgetting and forgotten
have leapt into my skin thinking
I must be an accompanying ghost

I've played in great living rooms
laid naked on the piano
of your problems and listened
till it coated the walls

I rise in your throat
will you let me sing?
in that sax gold dress
where the midnight melts
& heavy rests
on long notes
that sing on

Don't Be Afraid to Begin Again

for *Bhanu Khapil*

- 1 What does it mean to send a poem
 to the ears of the gods
- in a corner of my mind, I knelt to both knees
 looking to the moon for a lamp
- I sat an orange on the shoulders
 of the window like you told me
 tore it jagged in half by my palms
 and watched the flesh drip sweet
- I asked the gods to give me a new word
 that is only its roots
 & watched the sun
 become two feverish skies
 bleeding from its knees
- as the fruit began to ripen in the window
 morning's mouth pried herself open
 to the light of the cave
 and goes on whispering
 everywhere she's been
- 2 I call them cherries as I was taught
 and it promises me a pit
 I know what I call the night too
 by how many times I slept inside her womb
- the night births me
 each time she shudders her lids

Cartagena

My gold necklace slicks around my collar bone like a finger
& I open the wooden shades stained by the sun.

I walk in the strong, waving air of a port while Black people pass in my excitement. We move together through a day where the earth is breathing through a closed mouth, smirking. It is very warm. The city has been painted for praise, in pink salmon walls, in *limoncillo* green.

Somehow, the corridors of cobblestone open to more air, more thriving colored wall, more plazas. where there is music singing into the eyes of yesterday, and people are dancing exuberant and sure of their tomorrows.

I wear a red bracelet, in its threads the haunting suspicion of kindness, from a stranger waiting to see a good smile. It is still red – almost five years after steaming showers, of thrown wrists and moving.

In this city, I am supposed. Rooted in Cartagena and together we become a location breathing. Somehow there, I am closer to my surviving blood than ever, furthest from home.

Here I am more their child and less of my own imagined solitary making. My steel ring coils around my finger keeping me in the beat of slow living? So I can be a better walk through this town. Sure I make it there.

People walk by with their carts of ice and mango fruit and though they call me a wanderer, some stop and recognize I can be traced and the motion is a circular tracing. Think now of taking a finger to the inside of a gold hoop. There. Home.

On Gazing at the Moon

I saw the moon swimming
in a stream of clouds

The moon dipped
through its waves unlike a fish
or a bird diving toward open grass
with a pearl in its mouth
obvious but not severe –

Spot the moon from her behind-light
a smoke river in the sky
a silk moss to the eyes

my eyes touch everything but each other
they are flawed between night vision
& the full moon hangs
indifferently

The full moon comes back to me
She looks warm tonight

Her open mouth waits
for my warmth

My Mother, My New York

I was born to the borough of your body
Our chord, my first cave
of train. Then, you lent me every inch of your life
& I travelled spirit to bone
feeding old memories back to the earth
each borough a grain of gravel and smoke

my mother and I are each other's ghosts
I mean we are both ghosts of city smoke
& lost all our teeth here, to the mortal of our bodies
& we learned to hear the earth
when the city belts the loudest. We descend into the caves
letting the wind make a blur of us.
Traveler, home makes us a lover of bone
We inhale New York, the aroma of life

fighting for its life
the sweat frozen like tongues on the metal poles
the buildings: open mouths of smoke
making ghosts of air on every shop. I bone
my death against my lover's body
and our breath caves
into the earth

we flesh like the earth. Taught to cup the rain
and mouth the snow of our lives.
New York says each day's morning is a cave
of thresholds and I hold the sunrise of smoke
in my body, my hands cup the bones

& the islands come to claim my bones
Every New Yorker births a traveler
a piece of star for the earth

In NY, a hairdresser calls my mom and her restless body
electrica, and I eat the word. My life blinks at them
points for the city map. The city map is a womb of smoke,
a tomb of homes, a cave

of ash initials forgotten on brick walls. Caves of thunder
give the buildings their age. We their electricity of Bone.
When I die, I will miss the smell of garlic and smoke
When I am the Earth, I will grandchildren my breath to New York
Here goes my life. Grand central will hold my gaze.

Harlem will remember my body

Before I die, I will earth a borough
and bring its body home

Body, I live with this city
watching it stich eternities to the silk of the earth