Kohle’ed

by

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Beautiful Women

linger
in blue drama.
We are precursors
to Icons, like animal piss
or wings tied
to millefiori paperweights.

We poach poor souls, we
are looking for sun,
needing some throughway
to glamor.
We are becoming
ourselves. We come
for rum and misery. We mint
our smiles into your palms, let
you in on how cracked our life
lines run. Men—
like you—
love to think of us
as petals,
as lap dances,
or, even as last beads
before the prayers end.
We’re just expecting
standing at the mirrors,
making faces face faces, if just
to find gladness.
We could douse ourselves

in lysol just to suck you off.
We promise to be civilized
with no end to charming behavior,

lace ribbons around your cock,
work to find a messy ending.
We’re only looking

to be loved. Loving
can be worship.
It can be immortality.

The siren’s reputation.
A pedestal to sit
and wash ourselves on.

We might fall down,
we might lick Night,
we might hold guns.
Ars poetica

The knot in my shoulder
nestles into dhukh—
grief and sorrow
somewhere
between larynx
and daughterhood.

I whisper a prayer
behind my teeth,
swallow it whole,
push its words
towards the burning
tendons. They melt
plea and ache
into your likeness.
Nightly Transgressions

I. On the arm of a rocking chair, I drove for hours, talking to my imaginary clients. Why did they leave Cameroon? Or DR? Qatar? Home? Pages and pages of child’s scribble, I wrote down their stories. Ma and I, at night alone, I read their lives aloud. She waited for me to turn six and bought me glasses at seven.

II. Thirteen years living under an open-door policy, I showered. Baba timed the minutes it took to shut off the water. Days on my period, I placed the towel on the shower door bar, hoped nothing red showed through the glass, and touched my skin, fancying how I would love it, were it on another body standing before me.

III. An open sky across from my bed, I went everywhere, the pillow behind my back, I watched for Old World film-i moments to teach me kissing. Daring to go further, I sat up in bed, lights off, naked, feeling myself, my dips and slits, separations between all the fingers and toes.
In the Name of God, *Bismillah*

The tutor’s fingers traced the letters of each word, teaching me to pronounce. *Meditate on the laam.*

I whispered after, unfocused, stretching *seen*

*Biss-milah,* His dark hands, lifelines etched into leather palms, palms stuffed with throbbing;

I read well and lacked not for a teacher,

but a disciplinarian:

a switch in hand, line by line I could have read.

He could have lashed it across my back, if I slipped.

There could have been a certain pleasure in feeling that sting;

but he caressed, pinching my nipples, lingering tightly on the syllables notated for elongated sounds,

*This is the moment you find God, you meditate here.*

He played me between index and thumb;

my undershirt could have been a young boy’s,

but the cotton was thin,

sheer to tease him.

Maybe I was so smart

that he touched to distract,

to test my discipline.

I washed in the shower,

turning red,

digging the nails of middle, ring, and pinky down my body,

the water beating red, too.

The skin curled under my nails nails dirtied.

I used a toothpick to push the skin out,

so the flesh bled.

I pressed lotion into my hands, stuffed them into socks.
Searching for 6236 Ayah.

\ \nI practice enunciation in the shower, 
water drops accumulating. 
    Dew on morning leaves: my skin.

I will memorize the surah, properly. 
    Stretching over iteration marks. Gutturals pulled 
    from the eternal self. 
I will memorize the Quran, properly. I will be 
    the pathway to Heaven 
    for Ma, Baba.

Iyyaka na'budu 
    wa iyyaka nasta’in. 
You alone 
    we worship, and to You alone 
    we pray for help.

On my skin, 
    sin drops 
    stay tact, 
I have rubbed myself clean. Watched 
    skin roll away: shaved chocolate, soft. 
In some fleck, I have felt 
    my heart 
    beat.

I have repented. I have swollen 
    finger marks dragged from neck to collar bone to shoulder, 
    down my arm.
This can be Hell:
clavicle and notch,
even there, the rind thinned.
     I see the bone glow.

\`
God, I feel *him* when the water stops: his prayer pressed
    in that place where I found a slit,
felt where I can be pinched,
where I can be bitten,
I can slide past his touch,
can push my fingers deep,
the tightness buttery,
unease.
Immigrant Kismet

Prior to prayer, I run a hand through my hair, pull, drop strands, close off the sink, turn on the faucet, I find my life is floating somewhere in these dancing curls, constellations, I search this map of spirals—With one pull, the water is drained.

Ma’s hair is forever frizzed because of factory work. There is nothing Bengali here, no history building mosques from shattered china, Greek columns and teas with the Razakar, avoiding brushfires at the ghaat. There’s not even the white sari with a lāla par hangs on the bathroom door hook. Everything here has been abandoned for this map pinpoint lost in Paterson. Everything here is sucked into plumbing’s pull, greed echoing itself up the drain. Bottom lip bit, I dig for the deepest points blood sprouts from. I find the quietest place to sit—the throbbing dip of missing tissue—that spot where a lost temple stands, where gods are just dead.
Lost Sajdah

I press my forehead to the rug,
elbows tucked in,
ankle bones touching one another.

My fingernails dig, individual fibers cling back.
The dust of God seizes

the tender skin beneath.
My four fingers—later—leave imprints deep,

frictioning across their own shoulders,
rubbing abluted skin to the floor.
To Molt the Seventh Skin

The matchmaker wanted to shave
the bridge of my nose down.
Pride wouldn’t be necessary
when making dhaal puri.
She wanted

to slough away my dusk,
so unclean,
as if I carried low-caste blood,
sweat of the women who worked the land.
The matchmaker furnished the room,
tied my hair strands to a bedpost;

my neck stretched elegantly.
We would pull the hair long. Morning time,
poise it into a bun, and me wrapped in pink,
nails plucked off, he would be assured I am docile.

—

Here I stand,
if not for forgiveness,
then for rumination: to linger on
that syllable,
that moment
when water is cut by the rock’s edge;
Water cleanses,
and in my cupped hands,
my prayer whispered,

Let it heal.

The skin smarting.
A crushed salt and turmeric bath,
the top layer lost,
I am still so dark.
My veil peeled back,
the muscles will give.
Fatherhood

You hold down Ma’s head by the bathroom cabinet, knifing her mouth open. America deludes you, so you imagine wealth can be found lining her teeth. *Open!*

I’ve caught you.

—

Divinity in pulling my hair strands taut, straightening the stubbornness running from kink to the tip of intellect, the pores slacking in strain, slumping go. The blood dripping from white root to black hair limp if only I had a slack mouth to lip *ji* to you.

—

I’m not a daughter, but a prowess, the memory of your incapacity.

—

Your whore in Chittagong you’d dreamt with of building flats in marshland, rubbing elbows with the elite, a different dress shirt for every teatime.

—

You are calmed by peeling back my eyelids, gazing into the lack of nerves aflutter. My face so thin, the pupils bulge toward you. They will devour, hungry to see everything. Baba, I hope you read the medical report: even the pores of my waterline are not weak enough for you to slip in.
You’d mapped the whip to my back, lashes tracing your failures; my lover bites through your old angers and leaves a poem to scream out. Your welts fall to the floor, the open window whispers a du’a to blow away the trail. So, how will you find a way to me?

Holding the hot pan to Rea’s feet, burning in a lifeline; it was just a poorly made cup of tea, you didn’t have to do this, her limp between sock and sole. But how is it that you've never dug into my face to feel the ligaments of my cheek give way to your nails? How is it that you haven’t knocked my jaw loose so I can’t talk back?

Baba, you told me the policy of the library: twenty-four books could be checked out at a time. You gave me two hours to pluck out books, magazines, DVDs, CDs. You marked which could be kept for only one week, which for three. You said books could take me anywhere.
Baba’s Illness

burns in the back of his diabetic knees. Burns his laughter. It strokes his hand at night, wakes him to say that I will be the one to break his fingers. So he paces the house, listening for his toes. Fatigue overpowers the azaan. He sits on the prayer mat, recites, *Terror cannot be heard through telephone lines*. Calmly, he rocks back and forth. His clairvoyance, that genius in his eyes, it says I am why the loitering men in front of Bangla Bazaar avoid him. Illness whispers to him: *any body can be smashed between a semi-and a freight-truck*. It shows him the ways flames could lick up my sides and crawl through my nostrils. Illness could find my eyes, too—it wraps a wick around my waist and waits.
Mothlight

To dip my achal in kerosene,
soak it,
  flick a lit match, to
watch the flames erupt in licks up
and kisses down my sides.

If this could be     I would be     calm.

In the act of brushing my
teeth, staring into the blue under
my eyes, notes, life in epochs,

my history. Here I stand,
water shut off. Bristles in still position.
Here, the vent sings stories long silenced.

Ma never tumbled down
; her face never pushed
itself  .

Here, the vent hums
the sensation of hearing you,
Baba, hiss *rapist*

to call yourself  .
The muffles of your teeth
gnashing, hands gripping:

  the vent gives me all through pillows
  and     . Here, the vent loosens her throat,
shows off how to change tone.

She pauses to show me how to pick up,
instead, a delicate brush and paint myself
smiling and poised. Vent,

she tells me to wrap myself in purple.
I will always be able to smash a face in, too,
while remaining so kind.

Remember? I with strength,
roared at my birth.
I loosen the face. My eyes were meant to be lined

in kohl. I taught to hold a teacup
delicately. I bred to flex my eyes.
I can anything. My body

made for contortions into passion,
and, I like a moth in the firelight.
The silk of achal craves

itself around my waist. I can feel it slip
between my legs and slide to the floor,
as if in accident.

, the pressure of hearing all,
I dance inhibition into
the light. I lie down on my back

and writhe, lip-
blues,
I stand here,
brush in hand,
the bristles scrape the stories out.
Family Portrait: the moment Baba loses

touch to reality. Blood sugar tests haven’t numbed his finger pads, but superstition has. *Too much laughter in the house brings death*, he chants on the tasbih.

When he touches the blinds—one we’ve kept shut for weeks—he feels there are men outside trying to come in; Ma, you’ve bought vitamin capsules in hope for progress, or regress to a mind less toxic, concentrated. We drink tea and listen to Hindi songs, the sound low: love in quick notes, sensitive voices, smiles arranged in propriety.

I broke the perfume bottles on the pavement. They overpowered the flowers; there’s no need to go outside. My hands smell glamorous, still.

You say you can imagine lip colors to match, stroke my hair. I could have been pretty.

Baba quivers in the rocking chair. He cannot remember the words that compose an apology.
Morning Tea

I have been told my father thugged
his way into the wedding night.
The family had declined
his proposal,

so he sat in the trees
and called out to passers-by
that she was indecent.
Her mother and sister

hastily settled. They went to Aarong,
submitted her resignation, and
in the last weeks, declined
all the sweets sent to the house—

a time of fear. She was unmarried,
yet. He threatened,
still. She’d entered womanhood
with a dead father,

grew to be smart,
was remembered with ardor;
so she came to Paterson.

She learned to clean fish;
her mother blew hope
on a cookbook, sent it priority mail.

She wept on the line to Bangladesh,
but the phone beeped, disconnected,
money had run out. She folded

away the silk and chiffon,
returned the wedding jewelry,
stopped asking him to shower before

bed. The last meal they shared,
twenty seven years after, he ate
every grain of rice, sucked the fish
head dry of cartilage,

his burp and triumph. This morning,
I am at the kitchen counter, slicing
lemon and ginger, honey and hot

water in the mug. I am standing
fervent. This tonic—
morning time—purges
all my unseemly charms,

leaves me refined,
smart. This dawn, I am
six years senior my mother
    when she was traded
    for reputation.
I am five shades darker.
    Three inches shorter.
    Fifteen pounds heavier.

See, I sleep alone.
I am not Ma.
psychosis [syh-ko-sis]

noun, 1. a thought manifesting itself in a retiree as a leg tremor, electrifying his diabetic toes, sizzling up past his kneecaps as he sits at the breakfast table and hears a daughter make tea with too much cream and Equal: each time metal hits china in an imperfect swirl, he lingers closer to a saccharine layer building on his tongue, one which might kill him; 2. a condition in which a father eyes earring hooks slipped through a daughter’s lobes, counts the times the hoops caress her cheeks, and contemplates the seconds it may take for her eyeliner flicks to leap past her temples and lasso across his Adam’s apple; 3. a symptom found in an immigrant if he broods for too long too often over the brothers and male-cousins with whom he attended grade school, those who still live in the village: he may focus on why some of them were left tied to the trees as they frothed at the mouth three days out of the month; 4. a fear passed from Baba sitting in the psychiatric ward; he believes himself to have failed in life; in turn, I am plagued by wonder; will I be able to control my glances to conceal his paranoia lodged in my larynx?
Baba,

I ate two hard-boiled eggs for dinner. Since the dozen finished, I’ve switched to brie on toasted rye. There are pears browning in the fruit bowl. I imagine their bruises are the sweetest bites. I’d rather they ferment. I will throw their bodies away, lick the wine they leave behind. I won’t wash away the stickiness from my fingers, but drag it between my breasts.

Perfumed.

You told me, once, I am rotting.

Once, you told me I smelled like raw chicken thigh, a lighter flame floating beneath. The muscles don’t cook or char, but each a warmth, awkward gray. You told me because I skip dinner, while I sleep, the body breaks down. You told me before I die, I will become manure.

I haven’t slept in four days.
I worry falling apart.
I can fertilize your tomatoes.
Will you appear bedside, lift my shirt up, and grab my fat?
Will you ask me why I’m still here?

For dinner, I have only watched the pears.
Kohl’ed

Ma never realized
she needed to fight, armed with the kitchen knife,
just to continue dying
her hair mahogany.
So, I brought the shovel from the garage,
pinned Baba’s neck down
to the cool tiling.

—

It can be tomorrow. I want to have overdosed
on lightning, want to have laid in bed,
forgetting names of all the dolls I’ve never
held. I want to sleep so much, forgetting
what’s been forgotten. I want to have stumbled in the street,
staid, laughing at my younger selves. I have spent time,
instead, lining my eyes from the inner duct
back, kohl’ed, full circle.
They didn’t smile because all the sorrows were etched into their enamel. Baba’s lips closed loosely, tongue against his teeth held back the voices in his head. The angels dangled from every tower, not looking down at the Haram Sharif, but instead, hanging by their wings, hands holding legal pads and blue ink pens; God was going to receive the following report:

under eyes lined crepey.
her wrinkled hijab holding in holy heat.
his wiry beard in wiry strands,
a razor in a panjabi pocket glinting Saudi sun.
their hotel at the mouth of Baab-e-Haram, gate nine,
each has skipped every meal since arriving here.
they pray in the orthodox style
personal opinion: following religious protocol
has not provided relief to these two;
they are in Hell]

Beyond the photograph’s resin coating, Ma had stood at the hotel window, looking into the fealty money can buy, touched the windowsill, felt the vibration of one prayer racketing inside two million hearts. Her appeal to God slid through the people orbiting, their bodies pulsing, their veins echoed her own prayer, their walk driving her devotion closer to the meteorite within the Ka’aba. Its porosity could soak up her sorrows and hurl them to Space. She walked to the Ka’aba, hung to its black robes, lifted her feet, called to Gravity, Pull off the cover! Why do you hide God! She would have slit her ankles to see fresh blood—

—Ma came home, waited each month after to see old blood drip into the toilet bowl. And as the drops reached out into the water, spreading, she looked for Baba’s milky eyes.
Harem

I walk the street and, breathe in,
whisper La ilaha into my lungs,
there is no God; illalah, breathe out,
but God.

In every step, I meditate:
prayer cannot be swift, but licking one syllable into the next,
I feel my mouth enunciate,
caress my way to clarity.

My feet move too fast.

I rush to go nowhere.

I rush to go home to do nothing but
be under no man’s watch. Still
I listen for the chime of anklets, the clang of bangles;
how else do I know how far from home I am?

I want only to be encased in something beautiful,
for my eyes to move from one window to the next,
to see the flickering of buildings cut to the full moon,
deep in heat. But, across the river and in Manhattan,
I run through La ilaha. Jhumkas caress
the sides of my face, body in motion, they sway,
each touch against the cheeks measuring a new step.
I am breaking free. And I pray to remain desirable.

Inhale. Exhale. Illalah.
If I moderate my breath, inhale to deny, exhale to affirm,
my lungs will become accustomed to the sinner’s prayer.

Who, then, will hear me leave that something beautiful?
Who, then, will hear me stray so far away?
Skin

Spirits float the cosmos. They search for bodies to enter. You sought and found yours: flickers of a couple based in Paterson, New Jersey. They were a young wife with a pretty nose and a husband with an appetite for beef curry. You watched and waited. You stumbled, missed your star to her womb. Waiting for the next shoot to their home, you watched as she birthed an empty baby boy. This was supposed to be your body. He had no cry. She didn’t look at his face, but decided he would have been spirited had she held him in longer. You did reach her, eleven months later, the skeleton of a girl forming.

—

Your mother begged the doctors to let you stay in. You could stay with her, beat with her, share her breaths and joys. She would eat well, provide you with the right nutrients. The doctors gave her sedatives, slit her, cradled you out. This was the missed chance to have your heart echo hers. You gave a fierce shriek, but she didn’t hear. She’d already turned away. For forty days she stayed away. For forty days someone else held you, spoke into your ears Bangla, sent your navel stump to Bangladesh, planted a root to pull you somewhere. Your skin was shriveled and buried, while you learned just to breathe.

—

When the Arabic tutor asked, “What is this?” when he slid his thumb over that smooth skin, you wondered how it became wet with all your clothes on. You wondered if his thumb would smell like body. All parts of the body could be made to smell like soap or the food cooking on the stove. But behind the ears, under the arms, in the crook of
the elbows, behind the knees, between the toes…in this space without a name, only the scent of body ever stayed. He seemed starved, sifting through you, but only finding liquid.

—

You sold all your books, even the dinosaur dictionary, the illustrated encyclopedia of famous people, and all your books on queens. You’d sold even the one with Cleopatra. It revealed she wanted so much to be smooth that a servant girl plucked out all her underarm hair each day. She bathed in perfumed water and used her scent and skin to control all the Nile. There she drowned, there she must have left all her other secrets. Sold at a quarter each, the books brought in less than ten dollars. Your palms, dry from bidding each one farewell, now lay empty.

—

You watched as your father held the kitchen knife. His anger erupted, “Try to call your sister! I’ll hack you to pieces today.” Your mother stood by the door. She didn’t look to you, her mouth agape, her hands pillowy. How could muscle be so tender? You watched. Was this how movies were made? Wouldn’t the actors be given a script before shooting? Wouldn’t the knife be blunt? Else, wouldn’t skin be slit?

—

You sat in Chemistry class, knew full well the answer was carbon. None of the boys were correct. Your hand slid from your lap to the tabletop. You began to sweat, breathing quickly. You practiced in your mind what to say. Your skin reddened. You looked at the door out. The class rabbit
was forever shivering in his cage. The thought of sweat washing away the smell of soap still clinging to you: your hand slid back down to your lap.

—

You kissed your first boy in college, German and blond, pulled back, looked into his eyes, waited for his horns to appear, a smirk to surface. The floor didn’t gape open, no flames at the window. Instead, you regretted the stale cigarette feel he left on your tongue, his dirty socks leaving their smell on your bedsheets. You kept your bra and shirt on, his hand still skimmed your stomach skin.

—

You wrote a story. There was a woman, a man, a friend, an affair, drinks, arguments, reconciliation. You wrote it with fervor and intention. You read it aloud to an older writer, a much successful man, felt him lean towards the words as your turned from one page to the next. When you came across a cherished word, one that couldn’t be edited out, you said it softly. This could have been your chance to get published; you wanted the story to remain yours. When you finished, you inhaled, looked at the patterning of the table you sat at, then looked up. You wondered if there was any hope for these words. In turn, he remarked your skin smelled so much like his long lost wife.

—

You noted all the criticism. If you could rub away the texture of your face, chisel the nose just a bit (slim it just a tinge), pull up the droopy cheeks, massage away the lines running rings around your neck, soften the the glare of your pupils, carve away some of the unflattering chunks, stretch
the spine just for an extra inch (two at most), you could be pretty. Prettiness would create the loveliest voice. The loveliest voice the most lasting marriage. A lasting marriage would read well on the family tree. You could herd prestige back to the family. Everyone thought so. You were so bright. So, you sat in the doctor’s office, requested your face be corrected. The doctor obliged. But accidentally, he lit your it on fire, skin burned to scab, leaving you curious for what new fate you would find. The hope was after the fire, your skin would be lighter. But, you had so much collagen. When the scabs fell away, your skin reappeared as before, dark and unmarked. You healed so fully. You began to only look into your eyes in every mirror. In the periphery, blurred, you saw the flare of your nostrils, the dip between your collar bones, the glow on the gold of your arms.

—

There is no escape from my reflection. I look hard to find my pupils; my eyes are so dark. In the periphery I see the flare of my nostrils, the dip between my collar bones, the glow on the gold of my arms. My skin has held my body first, my mind next. This skin has soaked in the touch and thoughts of men I have known and will come to know. This skin has pulled my lips into a closed smile, helped me to be kind and loving, compassionate. It has endured my inability to speak up. This skin has listened as I have formulated sentences and protests to how it has been handled, but then accepted I have done nothing to save it from being touched. I have remained paralyzed. This skin has loved me as I have learned first I have a voice and learned next the words that suit it best, and now waits as I learn to use it. This skin does not hold the fingerprints of shame. It is not to be peeled off and hung in the back of some abandoned closet. Rather, I cherish it, embrace it, revel in all its strengths and
integrity. For all the disparagement, it has remained tightly wound around me, cradling the aftermath of each incident. And, it is this skin that searches out for the close of day, regenerates each morning. It remains so hopeful.
**Zaffre gnaw marks down Beauty’s sides**

make her glass case body gleam, youth firing
   through the tempered veins.
Man’s bites dent but cannot break her,
   his teeth incapable of releasing the molten spirits
swimming in her, those who made her
   to be this pliable.
   To drain her he needs a spider’s web of cracks

—

Love is that moment she holds the key to her own spine—
   the key that could disassemble her—
   with it he could flatten her,
   hold that spine to the light,
   read what’s been etched into her.
If he could sever her thumb,
it could slide into his mouth,
   leave an open palm with an idle key,
   an open wound to wrap his tongue around,
one he could draw hard upon.

—

He desires to shatter her palms,
   desires to toss them to the ground,
   desires to read the shards’ constellation of fates,
   desires to know if his is lost somewhere in her.

—

If she *would* have him,
   he wouldn’t have
   decades missing
   gratitude joy meat coffee memory.
He’s lived instead, the life of an indigestible ache.
His refuge the craters he’s bit into his cheeks.
He waits for the blood to coagulate crusty,
but his mouth remains wet.

—

She feels his presence near, her body bending warm
some time before
she’d traversed the spectrum of blue.
Gaye Holud

Sarangi sings, watches
the stars sit limp in the night.
Beauty sits, too, with her hands cupped.

Beauty’s tempered to withstand mehendi on her palms
and the stories of her aunts. She is molded to embody
carnal desires. The saddest is to forsake this body to him.

Sarangi’s song slips through her palms and fall as prayer
into his. Holud on to rubbed Beauty’s glass, radiant,
more opulent than jewels,
	than silk, she could hold the moon in place,

one palm pushed to the sky,
the other heel dug into the center of the world.
Paan shupari coloring everyone red, and here she sits

waiting to prepare married-life dinners.
She will wear a bloodstone necklace,
the bathroom cabinets will hold his fingerprints,

and they will hold her to the house,
carbon printing themselves on to her back,
snaking to her wrists, and sneaking up her neck.

Tonight, if she could just please have a moment to herself
to touch and know her new skin
feel the waves of blood beneath. If she could just

embrace her prowess and take herself herself If she could

just not sit through this moment, her palms open,
Aunt dangling a gold chain over them.
Vertical swing means baby boy, horizontal means a daughter.

She chuckles. She wasn’t built for bearing. Beauty hopes her tongue might slip away with his hand.

She would hum Saringi’s sad notes. She would suck her teeth, earrings clinking against skin to spine to spine. She would caress him,

a kiss on his mouth to see if he knew the lyrics to tongue into the roof of her mouth.
The First Anniversary

Beauty left the front door light on,
anticipating Man
to walk through
a reception of moths.

Man hears thunder tripping down the stairs.
It’s just a dance of footfalls
on the wooden floor. There is no star
anise in the spice closet, so he ransacks
all the ornaments she drowns herself in,
grips those delicately molded wrists. She’s waiting
to be held to the ground, licks his nails, dares
him to press her ears to the grass, his sigh
somewhere near the core

of the earth. He crumbles
dirt, lets it fall down her spine,
flowering at the balls of her feet.

This puts him at ease.
She pushes her face against his,
focuses on being wet, takes his hand to show

Beauty licks the lava pockmarking his skin,
licks until it warms into magma,
until it flows down her thin-coat throat.

He peels her coating back
digs into her glass threads,
careful not to break anything,
feels each one strain
until she shudders back to cool.
Ma, Quotidian

She taps around the
orbital bone
lymphatic drainage
grooms her brows to
have the perfect tilt
mystique slyly twined
    a black skirt
    her legs can
wrap around too
ghazals can be drunk
mid-day
sweaty hands running
over his tee    drying
lifeline sweats and
apprehensions the
bump on his back
filling with feeling
akin to rage    she
files her nails
knowing    his
body collects
memories times
when his mother beat
him as prologue
to a father’s touch
exhausting
this collected anger
crackling to release
itself when she’s
naked see how much
she can withstand
while dinner cools at
the table dessert
burns in the oven.
Man to Beauty

Because Beauty cannot bear a child,
Man brings a daughter home.

    Beauty musters up all the blessings she can, brings them up from her toes
and blows them onto the child’s temples.
    He will teach Devi to be independent; Beauty will teach her
to be lonely—beauties have no equals.

Goddess hips do not coax out children; rather, the womb is meant to hold
incantations that have echoed from Himalaya into viscera.
The guile of lemon-and-musk perfume,
    bells braided into her hair, each thought a tilt of the head,
a new dance step.

Man sifts through Beauty
to find a prayer for himself,
    and repeats it with every heart beat; a way for release from this
seven-runged life.
    He can’t bear Beauty in every manifestation.
He places his forehead where Beauty’s body had lain just moments ago.
    He kisses every inch of the sheets. There
are no apples and mishti to leave
    at her altar. He clinches her each mehendi-
dyed toe. A plea to let go of his past.
Of all her names, another must be Benevolence.
Beauty to Devi

Yes, I already know this: to be engorged by flames isn’t the sound of rage roaring in a subway station tunnel. It isn’t the feeling of strokes up your achal. Sweat down your back, or quicker heart beats, nor stomps down the route to destination.

I know. It comes quiet.
So, so beautiful. But then, so are you.

Burning consumes everything.

It is the act of sitting quietly and simpering, the act of making sure there are no mascara clumps in the third coat, your almond eyes more divined.

Burning is commonplace itself. Even you, Devi, will feel its constant trail down your side. You will feel it nip and kiss under your clothes. Let the glow set you apart. The glamour gleaming in a scorched glaze. Hips will sway to exhibit the devoured skin, charred eyes crackling shut, the throbbing of dreams that are pushed down the sink, the vents of the home collect secrets, tears tied and gagged and
tickled: there wait the ashes of nerves and spirit.

The pleasure of it all ruminates in the kohl that’s left behind. You and I, we will dance in a circle to our own snapping fingers, inking it around our new eyes, waiting to devour.

At the close, once again, you will look as I brush on my concealer. And again I will smudge the lip liner, hoping to give a soft line to my smile. You will have and hold and smell my pearl necklace. You see, death lingers a remnant of perfume.
Desire

Ma’s shower genie, slick
against tile, cool pulls her
nipples taut. They could razor

Ma’s palms, trace a new fate,
interrupt tonight. But he waits,
breathing, in bed.

Slick, Ma slips into his crook,
feels prêta stilled behind her ear,
breaths giving direction.
Glass house

cleaned.
Front yard’s glass
trimmed. Smut
wiped off
the window’s panes.
Re-painted the door red,
a gold knocker/ peephole
combination to look in on
Beauty—made of glass—
slipping off
her bra strap,
lilac underwear,
those scratch marks
moving along her mirrored
spine,
the smell of saffron stuck
between rib grooves.
The kitchen made
of glass, too. Glass vases,
tulips,
the bamboo plant
pebbled stagnant,
spices vibrating
through the glass.
See?
So much glass.
See:
a hammer smashed
all the crystal cabinet knobs.

See: the highway outside,

there was the sky sign blinking to the glass house, an arrow blinking

“Glass House,” blinking.

——

Beauty shatters every hall.
Pelts those bamboo pebbles, for years. Lets life float up into recessed lighting.

She leaves.
Stands at the foot of a lemon tree planted in the clear ground.

At the root, recites,

Signs, leave me to myself.

Eye blink seconds will erode the straight razor edges of memory.
Devi

I cannot touch the holy books, a prayer rug, step to the altar, or, smell
the mangos left out on the rooftop to dry. The cleansed women will make
aachar, spice it with cinnamon sticks and whole cloves. But when
the gods know I am bleeding.

I may be left outside to sleep on a reed mat.

Though the temple may be mine, I will be plucked
and left to tarnish in the sun, an apple tumbling away,
pistachios crumbling out of dusty sweets.

When I was young, Beauty told me
I am not to pray during this time.

I become sacred. She taught me to take gram flour,
raw turmeric, and cow’s milk cream. Take the mixture,
and apply it to my face. When the bathtub is left holud,
I will radiate beauty.

She ironed my best clothes. She massaged my scalp
and coated each strand with a concoction of
cococonut, jasmine, and almond oils. She lathered my lashes
in castor, said, You are
so special. You hold
all the world, in your palms, all the strength.
You are capable of even murder.
Questions Unasked

Without an umbrella, rain water strikes the face, tears imperceptible Lipstick colors over the next meal to lose those five pounds

The tinge of pulling each hair from the chin is karma for inconsequential sins, even those must be punished

A clean apartment floor takes away time to tend bruised and bright flesh

A bamboo mindset keeps a pretty smile on the bend’s mouth Fear grows in the grooves of teeth and knees, seeps in, spreads through the body, remains contained, changing blood’s color Sex is for a man to devour and drink during the
49

days the mosque is out of reach

Bleach finds every desire quietly lining the esophagus

Tears are expensive

A kiss is equivalent to compassion

No, a kiss is not equivalent to compassion

Never an equal to love

A song can be salve to a hand not willing to go outside

Salt and pepper overpower argument at the table Hearts are unreliable, useless for decisions

Childbirth is essential in the first year of marriage

Television only company for three hours out of the night

Dhaal two days old no longer edible

And, marriage lonely.
Questions Answered

Spring grows outside
my hundredth story
window.

I see it boxed—one pane
to the next—blue ombré,
light to light.

The clouds drifting silhouettes,
wisping out
in reach for dying stars.
I pick at the hairs
on my arm,
count freckles, pinch—
index
and thumb—
my brow, pull
for the longest strand’s
white root,
its tulip head.

Other people walk
on a footpath which waits
to open hole
and pull them in.
They go
anywhere with the cement slab’s
potential
to stand and lick up
their legs.

I know eyelashes dig through
every tear
to tongue sodium,
and I know
gravity is depraved.
Below my window—
there is the street farmer’s market—
bulbs standing tall,
jutting past naiveté.
I sit here—
breath held back—
and think of ways
the winds may blow.
Toenail clippings
could be used
as moss
to pack flowers.
They could gorge nostrils, soak
toxins.
They could embalm me
with sunlight and the street’s
gasoline air,
could turn me
into speckled eggs.
Roommate,

Fly—stuck in a vase
vase empty
only rose stalks
stalks a forest
  you don’t know
  how to fly through burned petals

Do you remember
  the way green curled around my meanness
    when the lighter held the flame too long
    sap rose to the tips
    salve for the leaf veins
    you smashed yourself against the floor of the glass
    Did you think you could dive into the granite beyond
    kill yourself with honor

Relax, darling
I can’t kill you, either
  I’ll just
  tap the glass sides
  make you dance
    a frenzied love dance
    this dizzy city of you and I
    I spice fish and slice the garlic cloves
on the counter next to you    I will pray
the cooked smell reaches you

  I will leave the dinner plate for you
you can tell me
if the buzzing tastes how dinner looks
from this civilized vase—
dance to the whimsy of men outside these walls
I paint myself
    the color of those dead roses

Mourning fly,
looking for touches soft
soft softness
    I brush and hydrate
    so I can be as soft
I am with you
synchronized
    our hearts palpitate
    into one
    in tenderness
Won’t you want me, too?
Ma Says,

Do not get sentimental.
I am an outsider.

This is not your place.
I am not an American.

You have no voice.
This is not my place.

You have nowhere to go.
I have no America.

You have no Bangladesh.
And, I have no hijab.

How can you be in media?
But, I live here.

You’re a baby bird.
I won’t break.

You’ll become too hard.
If that’s how I survive

Who will have you?
Those who I let.
I Can Tell No One

To break my daughter free. Too much what she feels contained in her dancing hands. Veil-less laughter grating my ears. Her arms so long. In every picture she is combing the sky. Soothing her saddest star. Her fresh smile. The sari wrapping itself around her thinness.

When she comes home one morning, I tell her I’d wished she died the night before. Her body smashed between a semi- and a freight-truck. Rather her body ash than show her longing. Rather that I feel her hair caked in blood. When she tries to explain the dog-hungry man, his touch and later his calm, my scalp crawls with all the little live hairs.

Her future: a husband and screams through the telephone line. This can be pleasure. Yet, fingernails digging into keypad numbers, boring my eardrum: she’ll just be like her mother. There is haven. But the map was lost some time ago.

I pushed her into this life. The remorse I feel for being alive. Her too bright eyes. Blue dreams lacing around pupils. I can find no way to crawl out of her stare. My daughter is boundless and stretches to appear in everything I look to. Her bright flesh spots easily. Every clean window still shows a fingerprint of hers.
Notes to You

Darling, pain is distress.
Distress is trouble.
Trouble is consumption.
Consumption is decay.
And, decay is six feet deep.

—

Is it that pain reminds me of mortality? Or, is it that pain makes me feel powerful? Is it that I can flick it on to another? Or, is it that I do not whimper beneath it? Which am I? God? Or pawn? Though, God has died before, too. He is stuck in rebirths: the stretch and yawn from womb to standing upright to cowering once more, bones in the cycle of frailty. I suppose, then, from ache and pain comes reincarnation. In this case, does nirvana happen at the slip of paralysis?

—

I cut my hand, the crook between my thumb and pointer fingers, while opening a package from you. I am anemic. The blood would not stop for some days. You berated me. I should have gotten stitches. I should have forced myself shut. There was an interesting conditioning in this way: this way to keep me closed. The box held shoes, pointy-toed, maroon, four-inch stilts. I slipped them on. With each step, the stings from my toes up to my knees seemed emblematic of your love for me. I smiled. There was nothing to say. I never wore these outside, but shuffled around in the apartment building to scuff the bottoms. You would come to think these were my favorite shoes.

—
I burned my arm so beautifully: a perfect crescent, like the first day of Muḥarram. I thought I would pray on the rug, ask dinner be perfect, weep into cupped hands, be ever gracious for any magnanimity; you yelled at me for being so careless. The wok sat on the stove, steaming, but looking so cold. You watched as I cut the tomatoes for the curry. I felt feverish. You waited for my knife to slip. When I finished chopping, you poured yourself a reward of tequila. This: a moment of relief.

—

I bit through my lip one night, feeling the tissue puff up around my teeth digging in. I was quieting to let you finish. My bottom lip was angry and throbbed. The blinds were left open, the moon shone through. It turned everything in the bedroom blue. I heard the bathroom fan running and forgot the way my lip rose up in alarm. I shut my eyes and went over the steps of how to breathe.

—

I imagine four brick walls built, a room just for me. The walls could be so close to one another, I would be forced to keep my arms firmly against myself. The roof of the room could skim my crown. The last brick placed could be the one to put my face away. Imagine, the builder seeing only my eyes before placing that last brick. Would he feel my stare as he built the little room? Would he take in shallow breaths not to steal my remaining few? What would it be to stand and suffocate?
The shower’s heat feels heavy with whimpers and pleas and hisses I have heard coming from my mother and father’s room. I become frantic in the stall, but there is no fourth wall here. I have, here, a white curtain. It waves in and out, following the stream of water and steam. I train myself not to flinch, but allow for the memories to pelt me. I turn up the heat, let my skin beat red. I remain standing. This is my discipline.

Promises are made out of pain. They are a consequence of the fear something will not come to fruition. Disappointment is perhaps the deepest pain. Promises are the salve for disappointment. Promises push a person to continue living, the hope that something will come tomorrow. My father told me promises are a sin. He has never made promises. He reminds me he is man and will fail. He reminds me he is man and will die. I will be left with empty words. Promises then would be left lies, which are, in turn, sinful. In this way, I expect nothing from men. You understand this, don’t you? I have never asked for anything. But I have promised myself happiness.

I have always hoped.

And so, I had been thrown to the ground. I imagined if my ribs were to be kicked in, shattered, my lungs punctured, I would be buried alive or sent to the hospital. In either way, I could find an alley, slip into mehendi-dipped finger tips, rose petal attar behind my ears, nauch-girl anklets, and ghazals. I could dance within four walls and a sky ceiling.
I, too, could be at leisure. I could talk. I could keep my eyes open. Instead, I opened my eyes just then, saw the feet of the furniture, felt the carpet fibers on my cheek, the open windows to the January sky. If I said nothing, made no motions, things would come to an end. He would tire. I would live. This day became paralyzed. I found my own prowess. Became my own home’s god.

—

I have nothing to protest. I watch everyone play their moves, their thrashes to survive. To remind myself I am woman, I exercise to exhaustion, I look forward to the fear my bones may cave in under the weights of what I push. I crave to feel my lungs burn, my heart pump to the point of explosion. I scream myself raw to know my throat is just a system of muscle and vessel.

—

You are big. You are strong. You claim yourself my protector. You shake me, hear my brain rattle within its case. You pull my face to you, force me to look in a mirror, and show me what you see. You yell into my ears of how you know what’s best for me. You put me on the bottom end of lifting a sofa up the stairs. You grab my hand, push it to sign the contracts you need. Darling, you can place me between two brick walls and fill my mouth with dirt. Don’t you see? I already know you capable of all this. I am bored already.
You and I

Your presence hangs: a sopping shirt,  
     dripping on  
     bathroom tiles.  
I may be electrocuted by the blow dryer. I’ve washed your boxers,  
     left them folded on the unmade bed.

A body pulsing, its memory  
digging into these sheets,  
     fingerprints on condensed glass,  
     I’m searching,  
     replaying the door-click-shutting, your jacket-coat swish, repressing a cough.

The toothbrush near the sink, frayed,  
a dirty mug cleaned at the kitchen sink, a shadow running past doorways,  
     I want the wind’s hand to slip through your hair,  
     caress your smell,  
     rip each strand from the pore in hope to find that blood does drip:  
     this in loving.

I dream of ridges to get stuck in:  
     like the vibrations of vocal cords  
     humming on the train  
     the song for you.

The feel of patent leather against sore heels and a back:  
this too can be loving.  
Bit deep, my bloody lips  
smear forgiveness across your chin.
Saffron Prayer

Try and shackle me
put, every wall mirrored,
snake in cinnamon, ginger,
red dye through pane slits.
To suffocate
in all their fragrant guises

of you, I imagine
your fingers, my silken cuffs,
threaded bare.
I have

shrieked into my throat
to hold my own force; I have
felt the echoes clink down.

    I’ve swallowed
carafes of fury, waited for
the wetness of anguish

to dissolve my glass muscles.
You’ve touched this neck,

marveled at how simple it would be
to kiss, to encircle, to wrap

your fingers,  hear that snap
    of glass

fracturing. A perfect right angle.
    You have contested
the possibility of my body snaked
around you,

contested my tongue’s ability to roll,
    to give, made of glass.

You have, too,
tapped across my spine,
relished in how similar

it sounds to a fresh deck of cards.
I’ve drained myself to find myself

just dust in aqua blue, the same shade
a summer oranges’ mold.
I scalpels outlines
of veins on my arms,
tattoo channels,
crown them with crystal scabs, delight

    in the tinge pinch as I cut,
feeling for my body to give.
Baba,

I’m no man’s bride. I run through the day just to stop, to see myself wrapped in a sari, my eyes lined into goddess gazes. My pout, too scornful to be desired. You don’t take pictures with me, but have pointed out the sin my hips grin through. Besharam.

My forehead ornamented with teeps of sweat above the brows. There was a time, I wore these jewels and overalls and raked leaves in the autumn yard. I had measured how your knees bent for efficiency; you walked to the neighbors’ for whisky. I stayed cold. And, at sunset you’d come to count the bags I’d filled.

There was a time I’d stuffed the bathroom door keyhole. I’d shut the door, sat on the toilet, pulled out the wadded paper, peeped through. Ma was standing, talking with only her hands. You were out of shot. She never did raise her voice. But what was it that drove her to stretch her arms so wide that her collar bones stuck out? She looked so hungry.

I come to softness that can be walked barefoot. The sky in every direction, smiling. I’d always been cradled between you and Ma. Even during conception, I was the third spirit. You felt me, didn’t you?
Unmasking Prowess

I take care to tap in eye cream. There will be no velvety circles competing with night black flicks stretching desire from pupils to temples. My elliptical eyes lined in kohl; in bed, I toss, anticipating the chink of bangles, the feel of glass breaking, ragas etched into my skin. I wait for sheets to snake up my legs, for nupurs to drag me deep into bed, to take me past the heat of a lover, past the moon full and gnostic charts mapping my string of encounters.

This I know, the silliness of hunger.
Hunger

When you hand cuff me, I slip out, hollow bones. Milk was for the growing boys. You mold my ribs into 7-bhori bangles. You bought pearls. The jewelry shop cut the extras off, She must be so tiny. She cut off one pearl more, a choker, a smile, She won’t get fat. You search for pores along my cheeks to slip each extra pearl into, Their sheen matches your glow. You found shock therapy, too, to tighten the laugh line, wake up those muscles, so they can feel when the necklace tightens.

---

A slight shortness of breath in my A-Line skirt as I smile and talk to the V.P. at a work party, I haven’t sipped the drink in my hand, when I swallow I feel your tightness around my neck. The four-post bed at home, you can barely touch your toes without clenching your teeth. I turn the wince into convulsion, I slip out from under you, bite your ear, imbed my words into your drums, lick them sealed shut, the teethmarks red. Find there my poems. I’ll devour you whole and cleave your inside, war torn, frantic.
I had hoped

a kiss might force in
fluorescent light,
could be jammed
down the throat,

left to fade into blinks
towards the heart.
The woman carries
a talwar to shape

flickers into origami
memories. Some hope,
some penchant

for precision,
I am diligent,
self-sustaining,

knowing fathers,
neighbors,
lovers will be
brisk,
tight,
searching
for comfort:
a place to find

something soft,
someone warmer
than themselves.

Men’s wills:
for pillaging the spaces
between fingers,
scratching bedsheets
to collect skin shed,
leaving the bathroom faucet on,

in hope. My man looks
to pull out the air
lining my nostrils

for the feel of familiarity/
I bend metal,
unsheathed,
bra unhooked, wreck
cupboards full of ratchets,
pick out his priciest wrench,
push down on each bolt

in the house.
I let the oven cool,
dinner having burned.

I pluck out every strain
left in me.
Nostalgia. Set

the champagne flutes
in my kiln/ Of heat
and happiness.

The yaw/ The hollow
at the stem spilling
their anticipation.
Battle of Uhud

I learned fury from Hind—
    Hind who gave the Abyssinian
silver and silk worth his weight, his height,
so he would kill.

She shouted blood must have blood,
pointed out Hamza, the lionhead. The Abyssinian
    threw the spear;

Hamza’s heart punctured with one swift throw.
She threw herself to the bloody ground, consumed
with the memory of Hamza’s killing
her father, her brother.

Hind, lightened from the feel of his failed armor,
    Hind in cornflower blue,
Hind with a ferocity beyond plausibility,
    Hind, knowing the desert soaks in sin,
Hind, she slit open Hamza, anticipating
the taste of blood
to be something like that of baharat,
so she held back every tear,
drinking to relieve herself.

—

When Ma held back every tear,
muffled the voices of all her splinters and pains,
I gripped my father’s heart, dug in to feel it beat.

I could bite it, taste the seven illnesses
that morphed him into iniquity. And, I
could slice my own nail beds off,
mix my blood with his, blood for blood.
Grief can harden over years,
can rot into stone,
    can sharpen and pelt itself at the very part of a woman
    a father might have adored in his little girl.

A grieving adult-daughter
can be something raucous and strange.

She is—able enough to leave a man
standing in the basement alone,
the sound of her car
roaring up his right foot,
blasting his knee—that daughter
he once looked so brightly at.
The First Marriage

must not have left much impact on your appetite. Two months after the divorce has been settled, you are going village to village offering a blue passport to a next wife. You called Ma a whore: it wasn’t that she slept with other men for money, but that she slept with you for the sake of birthing two daughters and claiming the respectable title of “wife.” We were just unabated inconveniences from your whore.

Your new wife: is she some woman in a lonely village? Perhaps with an extra toe or a squinty left eye? Is she unappealing and past the prime age of twenty-two? Are you marrying her with the promise of Amrika?

I would warn her. Her father might brag that his daughter has a blue passport; he might smile when he won’t be able to see her. He’ll relish in the torture of imagining of her new happinesses. If I could explain to her—

Know, I will love her ferociously. I am collecting my own sweat and fury. I am concocting creams and massage styles. Push her, Baba, push her into the door knob of the bedroom door. Let her feel its lock bruise her navel. I am here.
Ārōgya, healing.

Because I no longer pray, I shower twice a day. I’ve left seventy-two strands on the shower wall, my concession in thirty seven hairs, all curled into corkscrews. Thirty five kinked into loneliness. I’ve run my hands over the counters to catch crumbs, the toaster remains unplugged, there are water stains on the tea kettle, and, I’ve thrown away twelve socks smelling of detergent I no longer use. There are four thousand four hundred hadiths, but Rumi has left seventy thousand verses, and I’ve broken all the champagne flutes on the bathroom floor, sprinkled sugandhi to make them glisten, and have unfolded the rehal: the process to unhinge dhukh lodged between an anticipation and my lungs. I dress myself with calligraphy and sit, but the book rest’s wooden hands are empty, no couplets for recitation, lovers’ or the faithful’s. There is a basil plant on the windowsill just to have someone breathe with me.

Delicate leaves grow on apartment air and censored sun. Veins thin. Just to co-exist. We two share space with dead roses. Their dignity on the kitchen table, the crisp they make when petals are fingered. I comb a few heads in hope to see them fall to dust. Their elegance. How they hold long gone blossoms. The television runs mute, not to disturb our threesome.
Dervish Kiss

At the mouth
we find ourselves calm,
whirling. We harry
past ligament,
marrow, thought:
touch leaves us
ablaze. We find release
at the mouth.