A Field Guide to Trapped Animals

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A Field Guide
to Trapped Animals

poems by
Sally Wen Mao
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Copper Nickel (“The California Saw Shore”)
Night Train (“Moving In”, “The Ark Flounders”)
Gargoyle (“Love Pear”)
Another Chicago Magazine (“Mellivora Capensis”)
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Notes on the City of Sprinting Feet

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I
The California Saw Shore

has fucked me up, Doctor. It’s thinning
    my marrow. I’m drinking my own
    plasma through a straw –

it tastes like lily juice or fox
    milk; delicious, gutted, it ripens
    my face in the sun, my funny face.

The Hmong boys who visit my kitchen
    have sacrificed a chicken
    for me, tied it with red fate string,

stuffed its gizzards inside the lacunae
    of my head, Doctor, the glorious gaping lacunae
in my head.

In the horseshoe light of December,
not even the breathless high-velocity frisbees
    will get me. Trumpet vines of love

snare us all in freaky California, Doctor,
    with its pheasants and illusions,
    its swampy roots.

My paper gown buoys me for the bog,
    my body ate its last sigh.
Love Pear

Touch gave us the miracle of scourge.
The mouth is a loom agog with stupidity.

At the Beaux Arts Ball, you twisted my tendons when we danced. Yet I still went home with you.

That night, when you peeled my damask off, I craved skunk cake & visualized my favorite fairy tales - organs, ogres, orgies. Leviathan princes. Toes were chopped off & I imagined you holding an axe.

You touched me & it was barnacles sucking my brows. Helicopters sputtered what I meant to you. In the morning the Farmer’s Market paraded onto my street like wildflowers.

Asparagus wobbled on green feet & a little man with a bell knocked on the door three times.

Spearmint in our mouths, we waited & watched. Hunger lurked lionlike inside us both, yet neither of us wanted to kill. To soften our hunt, we used cookie crumb arrows. Not a single one pierced the pears.
Trespassing

The entrance to the concertina wheezes sawdust & the gargoyle laughs as we enter, a pair of orphans, our palms dripping like sticky teabags. We are here to collect our bombardier beetles & reclaim our old young skins packed with the silt-sunken kimonos & tuxedos in the trousseau upstairs. They say an empty hall does tricky things to your senses but my brother is a villain with vellum skin.

He could KO most bandits on wrist bones alone but in a light like this any strength may be distorted, any breathing felt.

We hunker in our haywire goldrush, fusillades fulminating all the corners we veer—until finally, we tear up the staircase in motherless moccasins, deflecting eidolons, guzzling open cans of bluefin, fingers fondling toy M-80s against our chests, the grandfather clock’s pendulum swinging until the last perished soldier boys ignite. We stop breathing.

Upstairs in the dank alcove hare’s fur sculptures glaze our hearts. Clutching our doilies and our hundreds of bugs, we crouch beside the trousseau flooded in hiccups. The key, my lips.

Under the organza of cinders, my brother finds his oldest skin, epidermis of impossible weight. I pull it back to find mine mottled, hyena-like. This is a story impossible to shed. Above the cobwebs I cry and I cry. I look like a freak in these ashes.
New York Diary


Midnight. Marzipan apples. We’re rifling through the garbage, starving again. Rivers catch fire, sequoias splinter, thumb-slice.

Have our lungs flown with summer tanagers? Children cough against the galleons. Scales grow from their tiny earlobes. Rumble of thunder & thimbles. There are landscapes for this kind of killing. Against our birthday cakes we are miniature as the burning candles.
Rogue Cadenza

Last month I vanquished a sticky mouth
in the sandpear orchard. Where your tongue
planted me, there bloomed blisters, blight.

When I tried to flee the thunder in the forest,
a stranger’s bullets cleft my French braid in two.
Whimpering, my mouth resisted croaking your name.

*

O chewy sundew,
O gargantuan sundial,
I’ve sailed to gangrene and back
on a vessel of molasses & malaises.
Eyes water softer than camelback,
Skin harden tougher than mastodon,
My body reeds over the sickly spark plugs
dizzied, bereft.

O mandarin mandolin,
O lively liver,
Disco ball, how it careens, floating
over the hazy river,
wild sparkle animal—I want the verb,
the verve, to protect us.
I want the dance to bamboo-leaf us
in this lopsided grace,
fish from our mouths
the heat, the light.

*

In the Seoul nightclub, dancers writhe & chew
honeydew cubes as the bass peels off dead
skin cells like banana peels.

Where were you when they played that last dream?
I clutched my red chest, this homunculus weight.
Despite my joy, I was shivering, shivering.
Escape from the Midnight Opera

The Metro was dim that evening but everyone navigated by shoe shine. The shiniest shoes belonged to a Dutch painter who smoked mint cloves & wore tassels on his wedding cap. We followed him up the steps of Chatelet, past the Musee d’Orsay with its cavalcade of stallions & elephants. We arrived at the Opera wearing nothing but gala masks & leotards because we were dismayed at the dress code: coattails, Spanish wood fans, swordfish gowns. Other people didn’t care enough to stare and were too busy wetting their kerchiefs with the complimentary purity water in vials next to the coat racks. It was hard for us to kiss as hundreds of scissor-tailed swallows whizzed by, catching the glass shards in the parlor. I almost swallowed one – it was yellow, ping pong ball-sized, with feathers spanning the length of a finger. Before the soprano started, we exited by fire escape. Climbing down the peach tree we entered a maze of kidneys. Smelled thyme in the air but all around the kidneys pulped & hissed. Perfume or piss: that was all we smelled in Paris.
Five Tension Points on the Soul

--in which it holds the body ransom

I.

The mud of mind is a mine. Every day we scour for diamonds. How this land irrigates questions. How this land pockets surprises. In summer it grows mushrooms, eyelets, heatweeds.

In the winter, it cracks open with ice, and out springs memory the morass, history the heavy furniture.

In the spring it twists with lovely aphasias desiring only harmony with the rest of soul.

Come fall, the huge charbroiled sky drapes this land in a fabric of forgetfulness.

II.

Below the chin, against Adam’s apple, the boy wore a choker to contain his larynx.

Even in the most desperate predicaments, the drought in his throat engulfed any sorrow, remorse.

Seventeen years old, & already he’s lost four older brothers, soldiers of Chiang Kai-shek’s National Government, all dead with one hack of a bayonet to the skull. Despite all that, this boy lived, mourning only behind padlocked doors. When they hung his father, he chewed slowly on his wrath, until it was nothing but a ball of burning saliva. All his life his throat contained a stain, & he drank only scalding water.
III.

Pity me; I am stone. I’ve walked a thousand years with a corpse shading my vision. Love has vanished;
in its place, rock: hard, fibrous, glazed inside the ribcage. My ache is ageless and acrobatic. Part the veins that cross my chest, Tigris and Euphrates, the intersection of lovers. This part’s greatest wish is to install spy cameras inside all other souls. Want wraps everything with a film of talc dust.

Slice open the stone and find bone, wax, cartilage. Pity me; I am muscle & skin.

IV.

This is known: hands touch. They cannot help touching. They are weak, searching vehicles that inadvertently slaughter one another, even when they mean to be tender. And tender they are, sometimes, when they crush summer raspberries, when they pick splinters out of a child’s wincing foot, when they clutch a ship railing dreamless, no flotsam of fear.

Everywhere detachable joints laugh & kid. Hands can be light as handkerchiefs when not attached to one body.

They may leave fingers in open places. They may tremble for strangers. They may roam the gun-metal coast for answers. Where are all the nice, shiny handlebars? The grip, the gasp, the good?
All souls are hopelessly fertile. All souls impregnate each other
like animals about to become extinct. Bison against bison, badger against badger: baking, buckling, lumbering hip to hip
against the stars. All souls are midwives. Babies sidle through the skies. Loss is felt like a wave, a push in the swing
from a sad giant. Animals everywhere belly-flop off the endangered list—into a place higher than this earth.

Can we escape our skins. Can we flee our limbs. Can we shake ourselves until we shed ourselves.

Please. Please. Please.
How I Survived the Stampede

While the fat impala limped behind,
I hopscotched off a cliff. How could I
stand it, your mouth open like that?

The cave rocks gutted me at the fall.
There was spring snow, and blood,
a necklace of it. To live I ate peaches,

used the skins for wounds. Ended up
somewhere so dark my pupils started
retching cinders. My tights so holey

they were spiderwebs. I left you for dead
because cave was so hot my ankles sweat
tiny beads of mercury, messy with soot

and the stickiness of cranberries. I went
spelunking - how could I not. Tooth to gut
I ached all over. Around me big-eared bats

navigated by sonar. While the ostriches
caterwauled & the avalanche subsumed
the carcasses of lions, I was writing you

love letters in cursive, each word treacle
like bee or azuki bean. The rumble above
an abominably beautiful bruise-sound.

My cuts dyed purple like sea snails. Wounded
like anything else: flint, black rhinoceros,
even the cheetahs who sprint ahead, gashes

glistening, not giving a fuck. Who hasn’t wished
the same for himself. Who can rip out her own
poultice. Me, not with these meteors in my socks.
The honey badger (*Mellivora Capensis*) is a creature who holds a reputation as the world’s most fearless creature (*Guinness Book of World Records*, 2002), for catching snakes, invading beehives, hunting porcupines, and fighting large predators without reluctance or restraint.

Honey-eater of the cape - body skunklike, maw of bones & soil: here is the honeycomb

where your heart surrenders. Here is the snakehole where your body lies waiting. Under the acacia

you caper, you dance. Under the hives you shiver, you prowl; oh puff adder, ibex, blood hook

& bees: what can the sand or teeth believe?

* * *

The sun rises over elephant grasses. We are everywhere

Assassinating wind. We pray. Bee-trill

For prey, Against chest drum.

Humming viciously Snakes splinter

As gutted shrapnel. Our parched mouths. Birds flap wildly.

Open my jaw: raw the meat I swallow, Tender the mouths I bury.

Everywhere this viscous Rapture of stings.

* * *

A broken badger is not a sad thing. When the porcupine quills pierce her gullet she does not wince.
When she wanders through the fire factory
she does not flinch.
When the leopard eviscerates the antelope
she does not malinger.
When the shower of bullets rips through the woods
she does not hide.
When the snake whispers venom into her throat,
she does not whimper.
A broken badger is not a sad thing.

* * *

Spit me out, larger beast – find my paws
on your jaw on your hipbone on your feet
Find my breath in your beehive
Find my mouth on your pendulum
Find your pendulum knotted, gutted
Out of its socket like a blood-dipped
locket Find the waterbuck heaving
in the swamp Find gashes Find heat
Find skin molting but you won’t find me
Aquarium Poem #1

Where does sensation begin? In the bulbous gaze of two small boys, making faces at a monkey-faced eel.

They lick the aquarium tank with their mustard corndog tongues—monkfish, yellowtail, red snappers, the suppers they want to eat, alive in the tank. Beside them, a Korean girl holds out blue wrists, untangling her braids from her peridot brace. On her face, a somnambulatory grin, a paralysis of laughter. The boys divert their puckers to her, their small squashed fists drumming the tank. Hammerheads dart, barracuda snap—ire, quick ire—the boys hold their breaths as if breathlessness could melt their muscles, kiss them, drown. The girl turns to grin at them, lifting her wise hand: a salute. They are feral, not shamed; their blood, like red fern, will grow wild someday.
Beijing Zoo Hullabaloo

Dear Z,

Gu Gu the panda was not amused
when you climbed her fence that afternoon,
a funk-laced ecstasy guzzling your throat,
the beer & fish guts lunch you had all warm
inside your belly.

You didn’t know your love
was unrequited – when you tried to hug
her, she tackled you, ribboned the scars
on your shins, hissed hot heaving breath,

and as you wrenched back,
did you remember boyhood
at the Re-education camp – the perspiration
at your nape, the girls
who bared teeth at you, how their lips
from afar were silkworms
that wove labyrinths in your ribs?

Gu Gu bit both your legs, so you bit
back, her thick panda fur chafing
your face, teeth. Your pea-sized incisors
never reached her flesh, never drew
any blood, and there is no animal to pity –

not you, not Gu Gu, not the doctors
who applied tourniquets to your bleeding ankles,
not the zookeeper shaking her head,

not me, a stranger, who writes admiring
your brave inquiry into the vicissitudes of love.
At the hospital, the smile you bared was true –
your drunk spirit simmered still
despite how Gu Gu rejected you.
Mud

This is where I hang out
between a muck pond and a well,
where years before, gravediggers shoveled
out the skin & bones of a forest witch.

She weighed maybe eighty-two,
& having wallowed inside the well for two months,
wrote a hive of riddles on her slowly shrinking body.
Her skirt yawned with mayflies, snail shells,
pennies. In that darkness she dreamed
about toys, gongs, & concert halls

about September, its fantasia
of wind & half-digested crumbs, she dreamed
& thought: How gorgeous
is this taciturnity
when suddenly our silly little memories
fossilize. How we hobbled
in them, dumb & graceless.

It’s fall and I’m laughing with a ghost,
Saddened by silence, sighs & spittle
on my lips. I offer her my basket
of Sapporos & sandwiches. With mud
on my fingertips, I tear grass, plowing
white moss.

It’s September and friends are naming
their babies after months – July, August,
October. In the lily-wet earth, millipedes cry.
Against the sun’s pink eyelid,
an egret bends to drink the mud.
The Foundering Ark

Ask me whether the night ends
with grinning or grief & I’ll tell you a story
about the apocalypse:

some children playing double dutch
& foursquare along the I-90, patches of thorns
pecking their knee-high socks

some alligators crawling out of their swamps
into abandoned marble coliseums, old mariners

some lobsters snipping the dotted lines
between you & me—your tongue,
my tongue, our love a slaughtered fish head

some toads lying on their backs
burping the lyrics to sad dead love songs

everybody that day eating, kissing, eating, kissing
just like they’ve always wanted

& then the stasis,
tall and cool as
the light coming, giant bull of saliva
the meteors alive
    with interspecies loving

I’ll declare my infatuation
    with the paperbark tree
my embrace will not be shy

and you will finally tell
what you’ve always wanted to tell
the lovely wild antelope
for so long
Aquarium Poem #2

Behind the algae the sunfish looks as disfigured as ever
like a capsized submarine under the mantle of water.

When they installed a great white shark here,
it trembled in the tank for thirty hours
before murdering its tankmates, two tiger sharks.
That morning the schoolchildren saw the blood,
a wineskin swirl, a Chinese ribbon dance. Drowsy,
they did not catch how huge the catfish were, how bright
the moon jellyfish. One girl had a nightmare
about the octopus with no eyes, but the memory
of the red silk drifting calmed her back to sleep.
A Field Guide to Trapped Animals

* The polar bear question: miles and miles of sparseness, 
one box of fever heat.

The curse here lies in acreage—endless 
snowscape, Aurora Borealis, all this wind 
glistening breathlessly.

The absence is clear in the glaciers. 
When a polar bear finds another polar bear, they bundle 
for fifteen hours, lock-in breath and hide, 
hold each other, hide 
in each other’s wild blue heat-lanterns, 
nostrils singing.

* 

“My black cat doesn’t know 
he will die one day”

—Claribel Alegria

The kittens play on ancient gramophones 
as their mother explain birthrights. Piano, milk, 
Crumpets: this is the Siamese-American 
Dream. No cat deserves to wander the streets, 
shadows of chimneys slicing the lamplight.

No cat deserves to smell the clam chowder 
wafting in the piers, hunger lapping from brain 
to tailbone; No cat deserves to rake at mosquito 
screens, begging for bone, meat, sugar—no cat 
deserves to die alone among the leering toms.

* 

When their prayers went unanswered, 
the mantises spat into sinks filled with empty 
chrysalises. No more praying, 
19 
they agreed in unison, mouths swelling 
with acrid pulp of prayer. Most suffered 
from paralysis induced by pantomimining dead
leaves. Some still believe they are dead leaves.

* The cowbirds applied for an internship with the peacocks and got rejected. They waited two months and applied again, only to be referred to the quetzals, who never responded. In the end, only the lorikeets replied, but refused to hire them after learning about their criminal history—that part about cowbird mating season, kidnapping and killing babies and all.

* Kakapo, night parrot, ancient sliver of sea glass, flightless, nearly extinct, oldest bird in the world: Out here on this island, there are no predators. No feral yowls, snatching claws, shiver of milk and mammal skin.

The “parrot owl” burrows in leaves, plumage the color of fog above trees, nicknamed Sirroco, after a hot wind in North Africa. Ninety five others look like it,

on this planet, all living in New Zealand—Mist rising from lagoon, burning eucalyptus.

* Past bedtime the kittens sneak up the attic stairs to see the city view: nightscape, shadowless chimneys; tomcats that crackle their throats to roaring violas; endless, endless chowder washing the streets with its congealed moon. The kittens look at each other and sigh, realizing they would not be able to keep their promises. They’ll taste the sea no matter what.
III
Nocturne

In frostbite season,
I gather my recollections
of darkness (that sticky-sweet syrup)

inside these molten jars
of dreams. Midnight is silent
and years stalk by, identical

like blindfolded men walking
across the room. Their white shadows
lacerate my darkness

into little patterned bruises,
that stream in a colorful blindness.
Been lost since summer,

inside fools gold mines,
stalactites drizzling jazz rains.
Hibernation is hallucination.

I drink the water of dead-salmon creeks,
& wait for the flicker of apparitions
whose deaths I still deny.
Memoir of Twenty Seasons


in winter where I lived
    solstice steam rose
from frozen ovens
while my mother and I waited for America
to arrive at the doorstep
our almond house cool
as the dread I felt

my father’s face dissolved
into a hand puppet
    & mother sang songs
of his absence, sat on the
bamboo mat and dipped her hands
into buckets of bull’s blood.

“blood washes away destiny,”
she said as she chopped the dried
chili peppers
    with a Chinese cleaver.
I saw my face in it.

    every day I wandered
in silkworm slippers,
the smell of rags and onions
in the kitchen.
    at night I dreamt deep
of Shanghai and America,
the Forbidden City citadels,
drank bottles of legend:
subterranean dynasties, wine
smuggled across the Yellow River,
concubines who turned to jade.

I flew across the Atlantic on an eagle
with vomit bags and dirty reed sandals
I didn’t recognize my father at the airport;
his face became a laughing
moonstone.

when we arrived, was it blear
I felt? that white
house, those walls,
matched the lukewarm
blizzards of my youth
China’s funeral color
I wanted to smudge it all with crayons
and fireworks of dried
chrysanthemums.

my bed stretched like miles of oil spill;
mother’s whisper cloth and black ballet
slippers slipped
sometimes I drowned in my sleep.
we only owned rotten
furniture, with faint beeswax smell
my father bought it at yard sales,
he thought he was expert artifact-hunter.

our curtains, a cabaret red
“charcoal and rosebuds” would
decribe it. Between them I watched Boston
the most geometric city I’d ever seen
cut jewels of dove-gray.

an Indian brass lamp lit
our broom closet
I couldn’t find any skeletons
at night I ate cherries under the sheets
my mother screamed when she thought
they were bloodstains.
1994.

Andy, the babysitter’s son
introduced me to *Mighty Morphin’
*Power Rangers*,
taught me how to punch someone.
I loved him because he was tough
with beetle black eyes, a swelled, darting tongue.
he kissed me wetly on both cheeks.

I hated his mother
she wore cadmium lipstick
her mouth a dried volcano.

every day after school
we played games
he was a Ninja Turtle
I was a mermaid

we both lived in the sea.
1995

I once sailed across the Boston Tea Party
a thousand jellyfish swarmed
beneath spinach water.
Down Commonwealth street
my redheaded friend Isis lived
by the house of JFK
with its blue frame and sad porticos

my mother left my father’s room
the night a fire broke out in our kitchen
she left again after he pressed his fist
against her ear, his heartbreak
as loud
as the banging of my own heart:
the sound of something hunted;

and ran I did, to the cellars, where books
washed my every bone in fog;
every day Isis and I read in the empty library
field guides to insects, birds, marine animals
mysterious as love
& nights I slept at her house, listening
to the singing of African parakeets.
California, sunshiny, bright
but I didn’t care.
who cared
about its orange groves, its dry
molasses sun, its crying winters?
against all the pretty seascape
my parents skinned each other, tightening
their hands over wounds, cupping
my mouth, & I thought they turned
into androids, my mother’s blue teeth
open, agape, my father’s taut bronze neck
shuddering, shuddering; I wanted out
of that house, of that schoolyard
where the kids called me by the names
of their exterminated rats; chingchong,
chingchong, they sang & sang,
until I couldn’t bear it.
when the little girl across the street
broke my bicycle & said
she wanted the tree to fall on me
so it would crack my bones
& stop my heartbeat,
I only wished to kick her in the face
my dirt-smeared Nikes
running a tornado across her angelic
cheeks, swallowing her whole
& whirling her off to Oklahoma.

my father’s new girl shared my mother’s name:
Hong, Chinese for crimson. I raided
her closet, & how her clothes were beautiful:
charmeuse, taffeta, crushed velvet, the fabrics of royalty.
I draped them across my eleven-year-old thighs,
mesmerized, defeated.

what, then, was innocence?
innocence was summer heat
that dissipated with mosquitoes
in the dustpan. innocence a crescent wound
scratched into a scar.
Black Carp / Rainbow Carp

On nights my mother insists we sleep
the same bed, I resent how her breath
invades mine, how her voice funnels into my ear,
how she kneads the hollows of my eyes;
on the flea-bitten mattress we’d share
this genealogy
of pain—secrets staled over time; cancers
that died in my mother’s body, seeping
into my own gooseflesh. The desultory
winter cures us of long silences.

She has stopped telling me her girlhood tales
of collecting gumwrappers
& balancing tin buckets of muckwater to the valley,
but I remember every story. In the glossless countryside,
the only pleasure she had was staring
into the clear pond where black carp swam;
dipping her hand in until it swelled with cold.

Some nights when I’m on this bed with her,
I dream about horses and rainbow carp.
Each carp swarms huge as a child
polka-dotted with scarlet fever, tomato sauce
stains. They stretch & crowd the lake
inside my lungs. Above the water my mother
plays a baby grand piano covered in snow.

A sonata. A discordant wish.
I dive in, wake up to her snoring,
an affirmation of love—how difficult
when outside the traffic bumbles, a cesspool
of ambulance music. Streetlights polish her skin
to bitter thistle, & if I bent to cup my own grief
she would invade it with one riff, one arch
of shoulder blade, one whisper, coo, throb.
Yoko

In the American schoolyard, they chant their favorite rhymes again:

*My mom is Chinese,*
*my dad is Japanese,*
*look what they did to me!*

They wedge their eyes up and down into paisleys, yins & yangs, and suddenly you are reminded of preschool in Hunan, China, where the only face you remember is Sheng Yoko, a half-Japanese classmate. She was lovely & homesick as a bunting,

and you had always secretly envied the robin’s egg beads on her hair-ties. The one time you shared a bed with her at noontime nap, her hair smelled like skim milk and sweet porridge, her pajamas hand-washed, cleaner than yours. You stayed awake wondering how it’d be to live in her house. Would it smell like her? Or like apples and chives? Did she hear crickets before her eyelids drooped at night?

Then or now, no matter how lovely their snow-covered gardens, how colorful their origami paper, their watersilk costumes, nobody in your family liked the Japanese. You were unsullied by history—you wanted to touch everyone. You didn’t know how history flawed people, cultures, how it coats pure landscapes with frictionless red. Your family told you to stay away from her but that didn’t stop you from complimenting her hand-painted pencil box, her pearl-toothed comb, smiling at her in those narrow spaces between unuttered secrets and compulsive glances, where memory can easily erase. You were not her friend. In this playground you don’t remember ever smiling.

Yoko was a pretty girl and though you did not know her, you miss her so much.
Three Knives

For Anna Tang

In 2007, Tang, a friend, turned herself in after stabbing an MIT student in his dorm room seven times. She had snuck in with three knives in her backpack.

I’m imagining myself in your room, darkness sawing me in half.

Wellesley’s winter whittles hearts into sapwood. Your desk flutters with calculus notes, pencils, blank sketchbooks.

Glance—the mail-order crossbow under your bedpost. Three buck knives in your backpack. Outside, cathedrals & junipers erase the sound from my head. Inside their dorms, girls touch themselves, joints jolted against pillows, shuddering & bursting like suicidal birds.

Pinioned to the silence, they whimper, evaporate, left with nothing, only ire (desire).

I am in your white dress walking towards the door. Cold marbles roll in my mouth. Wind, an arbor of snow apples.

Not a single footprint mottles the frost. I feel your bi-valved heart rap my ribcage, alien & alive: a snowshoe hare.

Your bloody jacket breathes over my gooseflesh. I tread the snow, unable to return.
Sincerity

There are many things that shouldn’t scare:
Orion, teeth, discolored yogurt, tar, cantaloupes,
my philosophy professor’s hooked nose, bulldog ants,
losing my virginity;
but being afraid

is the only urgency
today, when outside the lattice
ambulances swish by
from dawn to dusk, sweeping
seeds from skinned branches. Today, when outside the door there’s a festival
of hurt: heavy tongues, light tongues, tongues crossing skin, tongues without mercy. Today, when upon the fire escape, a couple kiss,
lung to heaving lung,
hands clasping, squeezing,
then inexplicably letting go.

Today, when my eyeballs bounce like rubber balls in my sockets,
when a smile broke open my paper cocoon, when something bit
my clavicle, I stopped to cup a heartbeat, and, craning
my neck, discovered a beady-eyed mink.
The Spring of Terrible Fevers

"oh you who are young, consider how quickly the body deranges itself..."
-D.A. Powell

I.
In February, a fortuneteller ran her fingers over my palms & said, dear, you’re cursed. let me help you

fix yourself. When I recoiled, the season began: a slow, beating bicycle.

II.
That spring I learned about Ginsberg’s foreign lover—the one from Shanghai who pan-fried their suppers on winter nights.

Later they’d lie on the cot like a pair of hatchets.
The ginger & chives he tossed into the wok, he tasted on his lover’s breath.

III.
In March I caught a horrible disease, my windpipe catching fire. For twelve nights I retched into the sink, cast in a spell of bloodless quivering, this heat-filled dreaming about somebody’s faraway music, prophetic between heart/liver/tourniquet.

IV.
That spring I learned about Chairman Mao’s propensity for virgins. He called each girl mei mei, & coated their bodies with plum jelly.

Their cries kept his skin ruddy like Buddha’s. To each ear he crooned metaphors of fruit: pears.peaches.avocados.apples.

V.
In April, my fingers cold as chess pieces, I salvaged heat, miserly, hopeful. Sick boys & girls marched beside me, asking:

When to touch?
Where to navigate? Why this roiling
inside the blood?

VI.
That spring I learned about flesh, its riverbeds of silt. I ate spicy gooseberries to still this oxytocin – the chemical of trust. Next to me, an androgynous boy played the piano, smiling with cold olives in his mouth. And I tried hard to calcify.

VII.
In May, the windows opened, washing our bodies of thirst. His teeth-scrape, his shhh left me barren, spiritless. I kissed him goodbye on the stone rotunda, follicles stinging, skin molting like a lizard’s, & how I wanted to run.
Climb the stairs.
Drop your suitcase.
Inhale: must, musk,
pear cores, apricot pits,
apple blossoms.
Touch: porous walls,
damaged fruit & fruit
bats. Open: curtains
of moon jellyfish,
their tentacles soft,
stinging, singing.

Lie on the flat
bed. Suck in
your flat stomach,
flat chest. Feel your body
flatten. Shut your eyes,
see through eyelids
a great scarlet mesa,
of blood sand rushing
down your windpipe,
shoving you back
into your raw,
unsheltered self.

Pretend the music
is distant, dissonant.
Hoard it, make love
to it; let it snag your lip,
kiss you, ruffle your hair.
It will kill the desire
in your throat.
It will murmur love
has a diabolical color,
pale yellow, like golden
poison frogs.

When evening settles
& the cooking smells
from neighbors’ kitchens
fade away with your hunger,
your past lovers will climb
into bed with you. Do not
sing into their mouths. Do
not let them ravish, ravage.
En Sommeil, Rêvant

I.

That bakery over there ferments souls.  
In my dreams, clusters of dough swell 
into limbs, faces, heartbeats.  
Human pastries, crisp palm oil tears, 
sitting in their china tombs.  
I eat them, one by one, 
eat them with the relish of summer 
honeycombs still viscous 
in a webwork of light.

Sometimes I’m one of those bread people 
when sorrow loses its savor 
and as I’m being eaten 
the scent of hurt, hunger, heat, 
& happiness 
still shifts my crumbs like Saharan dunes 
what’s left of me 
as I slant my gingerbread smile 
spreads like the Aurora over Tinsel Town.

Part of me wishes to be swallowed 
& savored. Is that 
So impossible? 
I find myself every day chasing bread men 
down lion’s mouths 
& tunnels, attics, alleyways; 
chandeliers quiver with my footsteps.

II.

In some dreams I dig 
my excavated body from the banks 
of the Tigris 
my other lives like cinders 
surround me:

I was a handsome man in Spain 
whose bullet wound became a ruby 
a handmaid of Cleopatra 
who washed her Queen’s feet 
in rose hip water 
a Bengal tiger in captivity 
that never roared once in its life.
Yes, once I was a bacterium
swarmed with millions of comrades
to infect a child’s sugarplum bruise
blacked out with the first white blood cell.

I swear there’s a war going on everywhere
but when you’re a bacterium
at least you’re never lonely.

III.

Dreams are ridiculous. Nightmares
make tons more sense. I fall down
staircases, drainpipes, storm gutters
cross-legged, Buddha style,
screaming my head off.
I’m an Armenian peasant
digging for cockroaches to skewer.
I chase the boy I never had
kiss his carbon monoxide eyes
and dissolve.

The most beautiful eagles rape me
in naked eye sun
until I shrivel into a raisin.
These give me reason to scream in my sleep
to scream is all I’d like to do
“I want to love
to live, to drink...
why do you all not see?”

when I wake
unscathed
my voice falls back asleep.

38
Cloud Study

After watching Chungking Express,
I weep into a plate of tomato ketchup
& eggs, then open a can of pineapples
with a Dec 1st expiration date. Sleet pours
over the window as trains rattle
along the chain-linked fence. I throw a bottle
into the mist, while hapless cats
fuck under a chandelier of maple seeds.
Wandering out, I look up at the clouds.
I ask them where they’re going, and they tell me:
Join us, they say, but I cannot. This blister
of rotting leaves in my palms hasn’t healed yet.
The clouds tell me to get on a train.
I’m always waiting for impossible trains.
I walk past the Children’s Blind Hospital,
the Natural History Museum. It’s December 2nd,
& my love, my love has expired.
Where I Stood Stranded

CALTRAIN STATION, SAN FRANCISCO, AUGUST 2006

I sew my body to the brick wall
read the notice: Last train Sunday, 9:35PM.
It’s 10:37. Two trains lie next to each other on a bed of rotten tracks
like a married couple in the crematorium.
A man in a peacock blue coat
tells a stranger and me that we are beautiful.

I say, thanks for the reminder. I’d forgotten about that. Beauty.

The woman cranes her neck, frowns at him
fingering her copy of Laughable Loves
its dust jacket torn, yellowish.

A homeless boy offers me an issue of Street Sheet.
This week’s cover has an article about the symmetry of sleep,
how all about the city, eyes are opening to the blistering stars.

ANGUK STATION, SEOUL, JULY 2007

As I wait for my last meeting with friends at Anguk Station,
I wonder if lifetimes could be spent marveling at the exquisite emptiness
left when a train whips past—
that hollow, hair-flaring roar, how it opens the ground and swallows me—backpack boots and all.

Outside the station bakeries, no one sniffs quietly.
Everyone inhales with the thunder of a lumberjack.
Shoes run forever to catch the motion they want.
The oolong tea never cools. I gawk for hours into its vitreous smolder.

Three more trains pass by. Each one carried a different-smelling wind.
Paprika, tar, antler dust. Traces of cantaloupe rind.
I am chagrined; my cowboy boots do not match.
Everywhere suitcases hobble down stairwells like injured fugitives.

MAIN STATION, KYOTO, JUNE 2007
As I wait for the rain to let down,
I meet a girl from Hiroshima
who speaks impressive Mandarin. We exchange words, wounds, windows
but not names. She tells me how the rain never stops
this season in Kyoto. Hours before, I left my umbrella at a dumpling stand.
Nothing short of tragedy in a place like this.

This morning, five umbrellas floated down the reservoir.

I have miles and miles to walk, but nowhere to end up.
If I start walking now, all my follicles might burst clean bubbles, cocoons, frog eggs.
The rain might clack open the valves inside my ribs and then my heart might never stop drinking, drinking, drinking.
For My Brussels Burglar

Clawing through my backpack  
on the crowded tram going north,  
you found my bag of toiletries.  
Did it entice you? Did you smile?  
Did you dream that, beyond the zipper,  
there would be cash, passports, sparkling plastic?  
No, asshole, you got my cheap glasses.  
Cloth earrings, contact lens solution,  
blue vials of shampoo from Hotel de Beaune.  
Now I’m in Bruges with no soap.  
You must be walking in the Markt,  
your ugly jacket troll with rain,  
your toothpaste the only thing you saved  
because your gums have bled all morning.  
How much licorice have you stolen  
from children? Maybe you are eating Turkish  
pizzas under the awning of the lace shops,  
trying not to look the ladies in the eye.  
Maybe the old men selling gourds & harps  
spit at you once they see your face.  
Maybe you could explain why the ocean  
has ridges, why the music  
plays so softly here, why you need to rob  
me of vision when the myopia you possess  
manifests in your hands.  
I wander in the square squinting at horses.  
You are in your closet crushing daddy longlegs.  
All around you, the moat of trinkets:  
fanny packs filled with crumbs,  
crusty 2-megapixel cameras, wallets  
with photographs of people you won’t know.
View from the Yellow Crane Pagoda
Wuhan, 1992

1.

Li Po stood here, a mile away
from the river that guzzled him whole,
bidding farewell to his friend Meng,
both dizzy drunk with grape wine,
chewing kumquats, tamarinds, blood dates.
Under the leaking roof they embraced
for a long time, hovering over Wuhan
beards blackening like calligraphy brushes,
& it must have been lonely
without this gigantic city grind;
to exchange parting words,
a cloud of blossoms, only this.

2.

My parents stood here, cloaked in clouds
before they left for Shanghai,
when they were still young, terrified
newlyweds, the night lightning
showers cleaved the electricity
off this city of eight million.

My mother’s silver skirt snagged in a hook
as she tiptoed up the stairs. How coy
they were still, digging pockets for radishes,
unable to touch in the dark. How brave

they were, to love a city so
lightless & blue, as this.

3.

My cousin and I stood here, blue
with our first heartbreaks: mine, netted

on the rocks of Monterey; hers, cast out
into the fulvous Yangtze. Hands clasped,
we felt each others’ blood beat/pump, 
facing the hospital where we were born, 
two years apart, our bodies swathed 
in birthmarks – on our backs, diamond-shaped 
Mongolian spots. Mine vanished 
when I left Hubei for Massachusetts 
years ago, when I lost that blind & tender heat 
of my cousin’s hands clutching mine.

4.

I stand here late June, hands wet 
with wild pollen, coughing eulogies 
for Wuhan – the city I return to – why, 
when I crave you, do you turn away? 
As I leave, young boys dangle over 
railings, their shoes & eyes little shards. 
In the shop, I pick up a Chinese arithmetic 
book for my youngest cousin, who holds 
the abacus like a rattle. For my mother, 
a volume of T’ang Dynasty poems 
she memorized as a child in Beijing, 
& grew up to forget.
Leaving Amsterdam

The taxis from Schiphol carry pall-bearers, their suitcases indenting the sand. Smell of hash mixed with bananas mixed with winter: you grow homesick. Houses on Singel run along your veins. You silk-screen them on atlases. The eye of a Rembrandt etching penciled in notebook. Studio Art 101 sleeps for hours beneath the haildrum as you collect bandages of each lover’s scab blood, unhusking them, flower by flower, lip by lip.

November glue-trap. Suicidal swans slip into alleyways, secreting lime & ashes.

December: ambush of snowflakes on sunflowers. Bike tires shriek the noise of nightingales against shale. This is the ugliness you leave: a cutting board pasted to a bridge. Jacquard & crinoline on van Gogh’s almond blossoms. Blood, resin, bits of celadon.

At sunset, abandon yourself in the orchard of bicycles. Leave your bike unlocked against the gate of the Rijksmuseum.

In the morning it will flip over, gutted, as turtledoves, as bodies wrecked with Caravaggio light.
Notes on the City of Sprinting Feet
--after Bei Dao

LIFE
Find it in the fire escapes,
the gnawed knuckles, the rye bread.
Find it tiptoeing past the sleeping sunflowers.

LOVE
The night is an orgy of cuts & splintered
toes. Paper planes whiz in every direction.

FREEDOM
Inside the honey jar, the last living lightning bug
lariats the rim of the universe.

BOY
Crack open a fresh apple core,
& find in there a wriggling baby.
This baby will grow into a worm into a boy into a
caterpillar.

YOUTH
How is it that winter turns something wild like water
into a limpid ornament that hangs from a rooftop?

ART
Cosmological jazz!—the missing kites all clap inside the
trees.

PEOPLE
Look close enough; see how palpable each face really is.

FATE
The piñata tied to an oak
looks to the east, where the sun sets, subliming the sky.
The flutes that hide around it come out to play.

FAITH
An ornamental ostrich egg has sat all its life
in a museum of porcelain.
Tonight’s the night the screaming cat music
breaks the glass and sets it free.
PEACE
A dozen children ride their bicycles over a poppy field. Simulacra their babysitter kisses the crowns of their heads. A red ball never stops bouncing against the sky.

MOTHERLAND
Strange how the motherland is motherless. It cannot suckle its own earth.

LIFE
Find it sifting through crocodile silt waters. Find it tangled in the drowned lotus root. Find it spoon-feeding its child death with milk.