

SAFIA ELHILLO

ALL MEAT HAS A SHELF LIFE OUR BODIES ARE NO EXCEPTION

in loving him i marry a shining new set of fears i wake before him
in the ashen light of morning & listen for his breathing touch him
to feel that he is warm full & humming with blood
has not died in the night

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i spend my days in pleasure & saffron the color of light
the color of someone else's life i cannot trust it & waste the most
luminous of its minutes thinking that maybe i have died
& i miss him as i am touching him as i am spooning honey the color
of our borrowed lives into a cup

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i slice a mango picked at the apex of its life i feel the color
of its insides i feel ripe & bursting with my own living
its frothing its insistence i know i am tempting fate
inviting it to cut me open while the meat inside is brightest

QUR'AN REDUX

five times a day i recite a prayer
transported by a fatherless prophet

an illiterate prophet that is our miracle
the perfect rhyme the miracle is language

& some i know by heart i learned the verses as a girl
& like a girl my citadel is shame meant only

to be mnemonic a way to learn my prayers to fit them
into my mouth my eroded imperfect mouth

unfit for the miracle of my first language
doorway through which the world enters me

& leaves behind its silt pollutes my first tongue
verily with hardship comes ease verily verily

mouth as a prison mouth another home that cannot hold
prophetless mouth mouth without a miracle ameen

ASR, NEW YORK CITY

he leaves & i bruise shallow dark filled
with blood beneath the skin's weak border

i wanted to be good a girl who could count
among her victories rising every day from bed

still i wake in the bloom of late afternoon's light
from a dream weighted by his faraway & blurring face

hair fulvous & shot with amber in the sun the wound
an unlocking door & in the dream we had a daughter

we named for an island in the dream he is not himself
in the dream he does not leave & this is the reddest of its fictions

ISHA, NEW YORK CITY

i leave for days to sit inside the translucent skin
at his wrists & the smoke we sent twisting
into the flat black night

he has gone & i file down to my raw pink beginning
i give my name back to the dead woman
i descend a line of blood & find others
who belong only to our own dark & copper taste

i should want to survive long enough to outlive
my particular beauties i should want to survive
long enough to forget ever wanting to be touched

TINCTURE

dried hibiscus swelling back to life in the amber
pot of tea before me in the translucent red i still imagine

when doctors whisper about my blood its missing
the dirty water trickling through my body & making me

quietly disappear

& today i want to like smoke unspooling itself
or in the ocean suspended like my rotting heart

inside my own liquid chest i want to disappear
like so many girls before me color of night

& camouflaged by its shadows color of forgotten names
language of lost words lost girls to disappear

is my inheritance & i citizen my own absence
pledge allegiance to the aperture i pray to leave behind

SWIM / DISSOLVE

it was the age of dark bodies offering themselves
to the water the oldest way there is to die
to join the history of bones tessellating the sea floor

shipwreck fallen lung raft gone missing in the night

where i'm from a child belongs to somebody
& washes ashore
where i'm from a child belongs to somebody
& soaks into the pavement

& neither land has a word for the haunting inside me
this mounting by spirits the ghost stranger with my face
the child i've never met splayed out like a starfish
outlined on a sidewalk on the ocean floor

EDELWEISS

it might be true

enough bad love will make you

[go quiet]

you'd rest your head in my broken lap
& think i'd stayed alive only
to meet you

you taught
me all the lonely colors
copper & lapis & purple

they chewed off all my fingers

answer me

anyway now i only
go through the motions
unbraid my hair to let the new man
sleep with it draped across his shoulder

boil water for bloodshot pots of tea
& sit watching him happen to me
through the smoke

AS A CHILD I DECIDED I DID NOT WANT TO BE YOUNG

my mother whisper-cried into the phone at night
across the line my father's voice chewed her leathered heart

& i could not leave in search of quiet
i did not know how buses were boarded

or how taxis were hailed or which fires
made food & which made danger

i would sleep impatient for adulthood
& its crisp promise of competence

today i am maybe partway there if only twenty-six
but again i burn my knuckle on the roof of the oven

again i miss the bus forget my keys lose my wallet
pick at a loose thread on my blouse until it unravels to a proper wound

*MY MOTHER MEANT TO NAME ME YASMEEN
THEN A WOMAN NAMED SAFIA DIED*

but what would be my name without my ancient & purpling grief
& what if the ocean sealed its wound could i be

were i not fluent in all the sounds of ripping a body can make

what i mean is as a child i could not bear the acrid smell of metal

could not touch even a doorknob with an uncovered hand the doctor
studies a vial of my blood & everywhere everywhere everywhere

everywhere everywhere everywhere everywhere the smell

what i mean is in a paralleling life where the blood does not wilt inside me
an alternate girl named for a flower hair brushed & clean of knots

opens her mouth & everything it pours names the language
mine & mine & mine & mine & mine & mine & mine

& if i had a language what would it do

to the shape of my mouth & if i had a country
what could have been my name

LOVE POEM

for you i'd make a song fit into the gap in your teeth
if housed in your mouth my name sheds all its vinegar
sheds every moment it was spoken with shame & if
you want i'll say i was never trespassed & if you want
i'll be glistening & new i close my eyes & inside they
are red in the sunlight i say your name in
future tense i say your name in my first tongue
for you i'd never die