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# Give Us This Day

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

GIVE US THIS DAY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Barbara Lisette Anderson

2013

To: Dean Kenneth Furton  
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Barbara Lisette Anderson, and entitled Give Us This Day, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Maneck Daruwala

---

Campbell McGrath

---

Denise Duhamel, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 6, 2013

The thesis of Barbara Lisette Anderson is approved.

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Dean Kenneth Furton  
College of Arts and Sciences

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Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi  
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2013

## DEDICATION

To my parents, Donald and Christina Anderson

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This collection is more than an academic achievement; it is a testament to faith, faith in the Creator, faith in oneself, and faith in creating something out of nothing. However it would not have been possible without the instruction, love, and support of so many individuals, some of which I will name here.

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Patrick, you will forever be my little brother. I will never forget the day you entered my life. It was a beautiful day.

Lastly, I want to thank my parents. Daddy, you have always believed in me. Your continual support of my writing means more than I can ever express. I hope to make you proud. Mama, you gave me the gift of life, I can never repay you. You taught me how to be brave and to always remember that love comes first.

Thank you.

## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

### GIVE US THIS DAY

by

Barbara Lisette Anderson

Florida International University, 2013

Miami, Florida

Professor Denise Duhamel, Major Professor

GIVE US THIS DAY is a collection of poetry grounded in the lyrical tradition that speaks to the conflicting need for structure and the inherent desire to be free. It focuses on those moments of rupture, when the structure, whether physical, emotional, psychological or political, is broken. The title poem sets the tone for the collection, capturing the idea that today is all one can truly know. Throughout the five sections of the collection, one comes to understand a complex family story, where right and wrong is blurred in the reality of existence. The sections, representing various parts of the day, are a parallel to the individual stories, speaking to the idea that a single day contains both times of light and darkness, similar to a life. The collection takes place in several cityscapes from Moscow to Delhi, Washington, D.C. to Miami. There are correlations drawn between familial settings and political unrest and tension. Often the political atmosphere is alluded to and drawn into context through the use of intimate personal vignettes. In contrast to the urban noise, there is pervasive natural imagery of gardens and tropical locales which mimic the physical life cycle, climaxing in the blossom.

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# I. TWILIGHT

## THE CHILDREN

They kept silent.

They were children.

They heard screams,  
imagined a dragon  
black and scaly,  
because they were children.

They dressed themselves,  
mismatched clothes,  
took bowls out of the cabinet  
and poured their cereal  
trying not to wake the dragon;  
for they were children.

When their mother cried,  
her black feathers folded  
into the slaps that sprouted them,  
her arms colored angel thin;  
they were children.

She screamed she was leaving,

threw a frying pan in the sink.

Watching the taillights fade,

they stood as children.

Grandmother took her

to the beach for a week.

Their father cleaned up everything

in the house that was broken

because of the children.

Women came who smelled

of acrylic nails and mints.

They ignored the questions;

they were only children.

## GREEN ARMY MEN

Jonathan flushed a sock down the toilet

when we were children.

I want to tell you, to begin with *Jonathan*.

You do not know of this sibling.

Jonathan is a secret. I keep his name captive

inside my throat, pushing the awkward

arms and legs of the letters down, down

like the green army men Patrick sent after the sock.

He dropped them into the swirling torrent,

one by one, minesweepers, radiomen, special ops,

soldiers armed with bayonets, machine guns,

sniper rifles, pistols, grenades, flame throwers, bazookas.

His chubby little legs stood watch, confident

the sock would emerge. We grew up believing soldiers

retrieved things, brought back captives, set people free.

Patrick assured us of victory. I could leave Jonathan out,

tell you Patrick flushed the sock;

the absence lingers like mist on a swamp, after the sun gives up.

I send plastic army men into the fog of consciousness,  
my brain picks off each memory with sniper precision.  
Tonight, all I have left are photographs I rescued,

to remember what was real—  
this image of eyes wide and laughing,  
hair still wet from the bath.

Jonathan is like the sock,  
gone from our lives forever.

## CHILDHOOD SHED

Paint weeps from warped boards,  
the right door hangs by a single hinge.

A tin gasoline can,  
with faded red scrolls,  
sits next to a bent hoe  
and rake, missing a few teeth.

The iron wheelbarrow kneels,  
covered in a film of red clay,  
handles cracked with splinters.

A sack of lime coughs  
into a cavern of coffee tins,  
full of rusted nails.

In the center,  
the rototiller stands,  
like an old man.

Lining the sides are wire fencing,  
cutters,  
hedge clippers,  
saw-tooth saws,  
and boots—  
creamy, squash-colored boots,  
work boots,

tired, worn-in boots,  
boots of my father.



## MARRIAGE

My father kicks the copper clumps,  
digging his heel into the rototiller,  
forcing its teeth deeper into the earth.

Removing the quartz, granite,  
he throws lime into the broken surface,  
neutralizing its acidity.

Dirt smudges his boots like lipstick—  
the clay is my mother.

## MOTHER'S DAY

We came home from mass.

The window in our parents' bedroom was open.

Dirt and mulch clung to the white comforter.

Daddy searched the house. It was quiet.

I went outside. I lost my earring in the car,

and then I saw your face, Jonathan,

a white oval framed by green leaves,

peering from the bush—

eyes flower blue and burning.

You had escaped juvenile detention.

I went cold, nerves cracking like ice cubes

dropped into sweet tea.

Last time the police assured us

you wouldn't get this far.

When they searched you for a weapon

they found the small cardboard sign.

*Please. I want to see my Mom.*

## TURTLE OF CHINATOWN

*Washington, D.C.*

Every night he curls over the grates,

steam rises in the damp air.

Asphalt glistens silver and white—

headlights stare with vacant gaze.

A gloved hand holds my fingers captive.

In my head, he is a turtle,

fingers clutch his shell,

a garbage bag of black plastic.

Streetlights soften the exposed head.

Exhaust bathes him by the hour.

A siren wails, the big red tongue

swallowing city notes.

His eyes roll open, wobbling

like the loose wheel on my tricycle.

*Hello Mister Turtle.*

Mommy's heels tap the sidewalk.

We cross, to the next breathing street.

## REFRIGERATOR

Blue light glows in darkness,  
a haven for cold chicken lying in a glass container,  
the peach with one bite taken.

Everything sealed in plastic,  
bodies laid out for inspection.

Each dish holds secrets,  
preserved for a later time.

Technology lets us leave food unfinished  
promising that we can return.

Would Eve have placed the apple  
on a glass shelf, wrapped it in plastic?

Holding it up her children,  
two bites removed,  
to preserve her sin, to remember?

## MORNING GLORY

My palm stings;  
red blooms on your cheek.

You stare at me,  
then return to analyze the white wall.

I stare at my hand;  
soapy bubbles spill over the wooden floor.

Every morning  
you urinate on wooden boards.

The case worker refuses  
to dirty her manicured hands.

I lean in closer.

You sit there.

I close my eyes—  
open them, and see you naked.

## PLAYING

Mommy twirls us in the air, higher, higher  
until we laugh, our laughter hits like silent darts.

She reaches for plates, twirling them,  
until everything is shattered.

We erase our faces, our skin white paper  
onto which she colors fury,

pulling us by the hair, the way Patrick pulls his toy train  
across the faded linoleum, flowers once blooming red.

She is a doll whose eyes grow red and wild,  
gears twirling, sparking

fingers, elbows, legs thrashing;  
we cannot find the key to wind her down.

\*

We are having spaghetti for dinner.  
Aren't you excited? We nod, wanting to be excited with her,



though we cannot remember the last night  
we have eaten something else.

A tilt-a-whirl, she sees our cuts, not remembering  
she gives kisses, only to hit us tomorrow.

## GIVE US THIS DAY

The kitchen had a Saturn glow in the dark morning,

with the curtains still drawn in the dining room.

We sat at our places at the table.

We knew boundaries like the grain of the wooden chairs,

circles within circles—

holding our tongues in our mouths,

our words in our throats,

the way the Russian doll hides her babies inside her.

Our mother made breakfast:

soft boiled eggs, smokies, and tater tots—

eucharists of forgiveness.

She measured out the neon orange powder,

pouring boiling water into white mugs.

We swallowed,

letting the hot liquid burn little cuts

left in the throat from crying.

## PROLOGUE

*Moscow, 1994*

Warm yellow glow, from an old light fixture softens  
faded green wallpaper— torn, exposing raw plaster.  
Tatiana sold her plastic smile for greenbacks,  
pulled like candy from pockets. Foreigners paid well.  
She took the stairs to an apartment on the top floor.  
You left your baby again. Stupid женщина, whining about ребёнок.  
Black glinted into the night, the woman retreated.  
Tatiana stole the glock from one of her clients.  
Jonathan was sleeping. He used to cry. She liked silence.  
Her clients liked her baby. Sometimes, if they asked she'd leave them alone;  
They always left a few bills on the floor.

## II. NOON

JONATHAN

I pause when people ask about my siblings.

Sometimes I say I have two;

it is easier to say one.

Will you stop being my brother

when you disappear

from our Lockheed medical cards?

Or did you stop being my brother

when our parents relinquished

their rights to the state?

How do I erase your face

from the family album?

When those that remember,

knew of you, ask, I look away.

I wish you had died.

Death is explainable.

You screamed in the bedroom next to me

for most of our childhood.

If there were no photographs,

if your name did not appear

next to Patrick's on the insurance card,

I could deny your existence.

What happens when Daddy

stops paying the child support?

When Virginia releases you into the world?

I picture you, then stop.

Some days I have two.

## DOSVEDANYA

When the shovel severs roots,  
when bones become ice,  
when stars abandon the dark

and the night, deeper than foreign seas,  
is hollow, when sheets are cold  
and the dawn falls silent,

when the sound of heels  
on the asphalt echoes horns,  
when the orchestra swells,

when fear escapes from the closed door,  
window bare under moonlight, vulnerable,  
and the trees fall still,

I see myself in the glass building,  
staring into my eyes' reflection, pools of Jupiter,  
spinning in a distant galaxy,

I reach out to touch this girl, to bring her back;  
she shivers, pulling her trench coat closer,

and walks beyond my reach.



## SELF PORTRAIT

In streaming windowpanes,  
overlaid with your transparent  
face, you judge yourself;

pointed shoes  
never pierced the snapshot  
taken at some cocktail party

long ago.

I want that  
information—

can't have it  
and this makes me  
angry. I use my anger

to build a bridge,  
on which people may dance.

Dancing on a bridge

I see my face  
reflected not in the water,

but the worn stone floor;

I shall keep to

myself.

CLASSIFIED

*District of Columbia*

At the Kennedy Center, I used to wander off  
and sit under the trees in their marble planters,  
dreaming of brick houses with white furniture;  
there I lived with smiling parents.

D.C. has her public face—  
manicured lawns on the mall,  
a flawless alabaster complexion,  
cocktail dresses of palest pink in April bloom.

Below the calm surface of the reflecting pool  
lies a quiet world, where freedoms die,  
weapons bought and sold,  
and men wear the badge of silence.

I walk through the National Gallery of Art,  
the cool spacious arches, imagining my wedding  
reception being held in these halls, I close my eyes,  
hearing the sound of satin against a marble floor.

A man tries to sell me a rose, the last of a dozen—

to help the homeless. I wonder how many twelfth  
roses one can sell in a day. I take the metro home.  
My daddy once told me no one trusts a spy.

I do not know what my father does.  
He knows airports he says he hasn't been to.  
The last time I reached for his badge  
to see his picture, he slapped my hand.

Sometimes I find him staring at his coffee.  
A framed thank you from the government  
sits behind white dress shirts in my parents' closet.

ISHMAEL

She sits on a hardwood floor,  
spine rigid against the  
plaster wall. The house is still—  
tomblike. She reads  
to prevent spirits from  
entering the dining room.

He stands silent, looking  
out the front window.

Every now and then  
he shifts on black boots,  
handcuffs clink, like the  
spurs of Paul Revere.

She reads another chapter,  
another chase, on the high seas  
in pursuit of the white whale—  
a suicidal mission. Her vocal cords  
numbed by the flexing muscles  
she intones language to move  
beyond cracked lips.

A white sphere swims through  
the dark. It lights the  
front yard. There is a man  
under the oak tree. She remembers  
fashioning little people  
out of the veined leaves, drinking from  
acorn tops. The figure  
stands silent like a sentinel,  
or a sniper out for prey.

The policeman shifts his weight  
to his left foot, his dominant side.  
His name is Caruso,  
eyes a soft brown.  
She knows his midnight shadow.

The microwaves beeps a mournful  
tune. It is 1:13 am.  
The Earl Grey has gone cold. She can't  
stop the language, the story  
of a hunter and a hunted. She doesn't  
like Moby Dick.

She doesn't like Jonathan. She doesn't  
like not knowing if he is out there  
and when he will show up, she hates  
the waiting – the life of being the hunted.  
But tonight she is not the hunted,  
tonight, she and Officer Caruso,  
and the detective outside are the shipmen—  
Call me Ishmael.

## SHEERS OF GOLD

The tree outside the window is unfolding  
with new leaves. Sheer gold curtains reach  
through the glass to trace waxy green veins.

Christ casts his golden gaze  
from the crucifix by the door  
to the gold framed photographs—  
eyes absent of sparkle.

Warmth spills onto the wood floor,  
highlighting poems,  
spinning a golden dress,  
hiding the bruises of the little girl  
crouching behind a Virginia hedge  
filling the black and white life with light.



BOSTON

*To Sarah*

Arms open, she casts tiny leaves like poems;  
Sarah frees them from a disgraceful fall,  
whispering her song. Through the catacombs  
of cobblestone paths I follow her call.  
She is the sister of my heart, not blood.  
Smoke rises, a helix, from chimneys;  
as though even our DNA's tangled.  
Flying into Logan I saw the trees.  
Seeing Sarah, we hug, our breath blooms gold.  
This weekend Boston and Miami meet.  
I carry my luggage the way we hold  
our past, sweaters, scarves, layered secrets-deep.  
Walking home through Davis Square, lights glisten;  
Anointed in Dior, we both are christened.  
  
Anointed in Dior, we both are christened,  
as we spray our wrists in the morning light.  
I sweep on mascara as I listen  
for church bells, waking the frost from the night,  
calling for their echo to reassure  
the forlorn a lover is still near.

I steal Sarah's boots and scarf, haute couture.  
We walk to her therapist in the cold clear,  
smoke dancing from the red brick chimneys,  
past row houses with black doors, gold knockers.  
Lunch is hamburgers at Mister Bartley's,  
followed by a visit to Grolier's,  
old books remind me of a childhood shed.  
Sarah is home; she is the voice in my head.

Sarah is home. She is the voice in my head  
when reading *Vogue* and drinking a latte,  
while joking with my therapist instead  
of twirling down alleyways of dark days  
from memories of the past that I cut  
from family albums to clear the mind.  
Walking through Harvard Square, under chestnut  
trees as they drop their crimson leaves unsigned  
on brick walks, trod on by our riding boots,  
Harvard insignias, J. Crew, past pearls.  
I hear a nymph play on a golden lute  
as notes tango in the branches, swirling  
through the cinnamon air, leaves pirouette  
I question if I should be a poet.

I question if I should be a poet,  
as I meet engineers, theorists, dancers,  
till language wraps its cashmere warmth closer.  
Still fear, wearing strong cologne, casts its net.  
Downtown historic and contemporary,  
Brick, steel, glass, and iron blend seamlessly—  
We pass by Marc Jacobs on Newberry,  
try on dresses at Anthropologie.  
Eating crepes for dinner in Davis Square,  
apples, grapes, and brie sing on my lips,  
paint roses on our cheeks as we stare  
into the twinkling lights hung on tree tips.  
The fear of failing rises in my chest.  
I reach for my sister in the darkness.

I reach for my sister in the darkness  
to reassure myself she is still there.  
My family dies in my dreams. It's stress  
the psychologist tells me as I share  
more of the past, trying to let it go.  
I needed to come to Boston to see  
Sarah, to be loved and to stop the flow

of tears I hold in my eyes. I set free  
the words from my past, frozen in my core.  
I release the anger in the Charles,  
I give back those years—leave them on the shore.  
Twining the stars in my hair like laurels,  
I know these are the half minutes I keep  
tied with silk bows. I bury seconds deep.

Tied with silk bows, I bury seconds deep  
in the clouds until they powder cold white  
like beignets in sugar, from sweetness weep.

Brunch is done up in spicy southern bites.

We browse through wool and rhinestones at J. Crew,  
sift through sales at Banana Republic.

As the cashier wraps the skirt in tissue  
my stomach clenches, I start to panic.

The merry-go-round is drunk with questions:

*Why am I anxious? Is it Miami?*

*Will the nausea stop? Is it OCD?*

I stumble into Copley to breathe,  
bending over, my head against my knee—  
in, out, focus on the breaths, *Hail Mary*,

in, out, focus on the breaths. *Hail Mary*  
*full of grace*... Sarah follows me inside  
the marbled Boston Public Library  
to the bathroom. A place where I can hide—  
a childhood safe place, a locking door.  
I wipe sweat from my forehead, hug my sides,  
breath in then out, counting cinderblocks for  
eternity, until it subsides.  
She hands me a cracker, a Eucharist  
a broken host. I shake. I look at her.  
I breathe out; my stomach uncurls its fist  
I reach for Sarah, reach for my sister.  
We will be okay under the gold dome;  
arms open, we cast tiny leaves like poems.

## CHOREOGRAPHY

Calf muscles flex into a  
smooth bulb—  
green shoots sprouting along the  
tendons as toes flex, and the  
torso rises up.

Vertebrae arch in a  
subtle curve as arms  
wide arcs through space.  
An opaque white slip flutters  
As toes rotate the body  
three hundred and sixty degrees—  
triceps quiver as fingers  
cling to a rope, the

torso twisting, changing its  
orientation  
from due north to south. The  
brain numbs the nerves throbbing in  
the left shoulder. Pray.

Everything stills as noise grows

like an approaching  
train—and then it is  
quiet. I unwrap each toe  
removing blood soaked

cotton. I hold the bruised flesh  
rubbing circles in  
the broken skin. Tea simmers  
over a blue flame. Ginger peach—  
reach for the remote

CSI Miami,  
drown out the pain with gunshots  
trapped in a plastic reality—  
We will find him.  
Jonathan is out

on the streets since Sunday. My  
cell is silent. I  
want it to ring, to hear  
He has been apprehended.  
You are safe.

I flex my calf muscle once  
more, point my toes,  
my tea splashes in the teacup.  
A bottle shatters in  
the alley.



### III. DUSK

## MAGNOLIAS

Petals cling to ebony boughs like the woman at the perfume counter  
in Macy's, clouds of vanilla, strawberry, and patchouli.

Bruised tongues kiss the earth in extravagance. Veined remains  
crushed on broken sidewalks under linen flats and leather

soles pushed into drains where they bob  
like sails off a navy coast. I swallow each petal's sultry breath, holding it near  
my breasts—a mouth against the nipple.

## VIRGINIA

Everything is prickly today. The air is hot. The cool pool of shade shrinks until it clings to the trunk of the tree. Exposed under the sun's naked gaze, a woman lies in a plastic lawn chair. Her hand falls like a palm branch, shielding her eyes.

Shadows fall deep, past her forehead, spilling into her cheekbone. Her children are restless. They bang the sandy dirt with shovels; plastic pails match the birds of paradise. Cheeks a bright red, the older one screams, yanks the pail from his sister. Her face tightens, a jellyfish withdrawing its tentacles, and then a clear sharp wail. "Maammaa."

The woman moans, turning her back to the dust streaked children. Behind her eyelids is a room. In this room there are paintings filling the walls. Drawing closer she realizes they are photographs. A refrigerator stands, a white rectangle, a door into a world of cool air and quiet humming. The kitchen looks familiar, as if she lived there once.

She steps back. Moving to the next photograph, the black and white composition makes the scenes look fake, as if lifted from her mother's photo album. The linoleum pattern reminds her of Moroccan, or is it Spanish, tile. They made a stop in Madrid, on their way to India. Her little sister needed sandals. Her father bought them, red leather. She wanted sandals too, but hers weren't broken.

"Maammaa." Her eyes fly open. She glares at the dirty face in front of her. Eyes burn black soot. "What?" "Mama, he took my pail." The little girl points to the boy chugging

his dump truck across the dirt, the industrialist proud of his current creation. “Leave me alone,” her words slap their red cheeks.

The little girl stares, eyes blink. She retreats. Into her garden where the sun is never hot. And the breeze knows when to rustle through the tall oaks. The black gate to the building clangs shut. Her brother has gone off with the pail. She twists the leaves, then shreds them, splitting the veins with her nails.

She looks back to her mother, the dress furors over her shoulders. Anger pleats the floral cotton. The flowers strain against the grain, as if they want to bloom in mutiny to this life. This grassy space in front of the house, choking out the miserable blades, climbing over the brick, even the windows are trapped in the dense foliage and furious red blooms. Like hell flames flickering, the wide open mouths of poppies wink their pure black hearts. Everything is prickly today.

## BURIAL

Upon hearing the rain tap my window this morning I didn't say to myself

There is the sound of restlessness

Nor there is the dew being washed from the wild rose

Nor there is the grass emerald in life

For all living vines and flora deepen their color after the rains,

Nor there is the oak's trunk stained a dark grey

Nor there is the sky rent open, torn like a silk slip

Nor there are green strawberries refusing to blush

Nor there are the robin's eggs in the fallen nest—

I weep not because we are to be separated by this wet dirt

Nor because the flowers will wilt and die

Nor because you braided lessons in my hair like laurels, a crown shining into the future

from which I shall pluck my destiny

Nor because your words linger like stars in the early morning

Nor because the world seems blank and empty, a vase filled only with water,

Nor because the cold rain is the only thing I feel as I stare beyond the priest at the woods  
on the edge of the cemetery

Nor because the single doe on the edge of those woods, too, is all alone

Love, like water, pools under my heels in the grass—weeping, saturating the swollen  
earth.

## PAINTING THE SUN

*Delhi, 1969-71*

The market booths are like make believe houses  
constructed from saris draped over chairs.

G.I. Joe promises  
forever to Barbie, wearing a sari.

Sitting under the glistening sun  
the kite snatches her sandwich.  
Carrots bathe in iodine,  
shriveling already wrinkled skin.

She holds her breath  
to play kabaddi.  
She will not forfeit, just as she  
holds her breath as they weave

among cows, bicycles.

It is a city of red mouth, red teeth, red sun.

She paints life in flowers and suns;  
women paint their hands with henna.

Russians and Americans

in embassies side by side,  
leave shredded documents to cradle  
brown eggs in the market.

## HOLI

### *Delhi, India*

Amber, Amethyst, Aureolin, Byzantine, Byzantium, Carmine, Coquelicot, Cadmium Red, Carmine Pink, Cerise, Cerulean, Chartreuse, Cinnabar, Citrine, Copper, Cyan, Dandelion, Emerald, Eggplant, Fandango, Ferrari Red, Flame, Flamingo Pink, Gold, Goldenrod, Halaya Ube, Hara, Hollywood Cerise, Honeydew, Isabelline, Jade, Jonquil, Kelly Green, Lapis lazuli, Lemon Chiffon, Linen, Laurel, Magnolia, Malachite, Mango, Melon, Mint, Moccasin, Nile, Olivine, Orchid, Papaya Whip, Pale Plum, Paris Green, Pear, Pearl, Peridot, Persian green, Persimmon, Poppy, Rose, Quartz, Rosebud, Rose Bon Bon, Rose Gold, Rose Madder, Rosemary, Rosewood, Ruby, Saffron, Sangria, Sapphire, Sunglow, Tangelo, Tangerine, Tiffany Blue, Ultramarine, Vanilla, and Vermillion, Wine, Watermelon, Yellow, Xanthic, Zaffre and Zahari.

### *On*

Americans, Aunts, Army Men, Beggars, Bicycles, Boys, Bracelets, Brothers, Buses, Cabinet Ministers, Camels, Canes, Carts, Cottons, Cousins, Chauffeurs, Chickens, Children, Dancers, Dhotis, Dignitaries, Drivers, Dogs, Dupattas, Earrings, Embassies, Europeans, Eyebrows, Eyelashes, Fathers, Forearms, Foreheads, Gentlemen, Girls, Grandfathers, Grandmothers, Hair, Hats, Heads, Infants, Jamavars, Kurtas, Ladies, Lychees, Lips, Lorries, Men, Mopeds, Mothers, Nannies, Noses, Ox-carts, Pants, Pilots, Punjabis, Pushcarts, Quintes, Roosters, Sandals, Saris, Sisters, Shawls, Silks, Tailors, Turbans, Uncles, Veils, Women, Wheelbarrows, Xavior, Yeshwanth and Zaris.



## SILK SCARVES

My mother's scarves, folded in triangles,  
tucked in worn tissue. Whispers  
float out when she slips  
vintage prints around her neck.  
The orange and teal in painted swirls  
were her mother's,  
and two are from the years she spent in India.  
Her body sculpted its  
own waves—hips, breasts. She passes a scarf  
to me—and I take the sheer square,  
imagining the ways I will wear it.  
I carry my lineage with me.

CHRISTINA

For My Mother

She sat on an elephant  
and told me it was dirty.

She rode a camel; he spat  
in her face. Her red jelly

sandals from the States  
melted on heated Delhi

streets. Men, women, and children  
mobbed her. Brown hands touched her

white blonde hair. The bazaar was a  
blur of saris, sweaty bodies, and

spiced heat waves of curry.

Fatima, her Pakistani friend,

found blood in her underwear at lunch;

Fatima never came back to school.

She went to Fatima's wedding.

She walked by the Temple of Vishnu.

She saw the Taj Mahal;

a boy floated dead in the Ganges.

Her India hangs in a dark

closet, a silk sari woven with gold

thread. Her India is the last time

her father came home to hold her.

## LULLABY OF HYDERABAD

*Andhra Pradesh, India*

I wish you days as long as the final sunbeams that slip into sleep  
as bright as every tile and cloud, sweet as a lychee, the small tender  
globe you hold on your tongue, the way the world holds you in its palm.

I wish you laughter, small sapphires, to nestle in the smallest corner,  
the way your eyes shine, a bright flame.

I wish you peace and the stillness of stars  
as the sun sweeps the tree tops gold, when the faith of roses bathe the house,  
and the deep orange which glows inside hanging fruit  
waits to be picked, when ripe with purpose.

I wish you love that fills yours days and nights like the city streets,  
so wherever you turn it is there, soaring with you, the child on a swing,  
above the tallest buildings, carrying you like the breeze.

I wish you compassion, a heart as clear as a freshly washed glass.

## THE SWING

There is a garden with a wooden swing.  
Walls surround the measured paths, ivy creeps  
towards the heavens; it is the small green leaves  
that cluster like cherry blossoms in spring  
sheltering the spray of roses wild  
and free, the gentle nature of the moss,  
the crumbling brick, even the stones know loss,  
their cries fill the air beckoning the child.  
A girl comes running, sunbeams force open  
each convent of blossom, the vines clinging  
to the branches, like acrobats in trees  
even the grass under her feet brightens.  
She spills laughter climbing onto the swing—  
up, up, up she sets the garden free.

#### IV. NIGHT

1969

*Lompoc, California*

She did not want oceans between them.

She heard the whispers. Watched them  
as they reapplied their lipstick when he entered the room.

He was young, blonde, and bronzed.

She let him go alone to Vietnam— but India wasn't a war zone.

It would be like Taiwan, or the Philippines.

They had been happy then.

Each night her husband would be in bed beside her.

India was the solution.

Though it was a non-family deployment,

she got his orders changed.

2009

I gather buttercups,  
holding them under your chin,  
until a yellow glow simmers  
like sands of Kuwait. I breathe  
into the heat for you to know I wait,  
sending my breath, silk parachutes,  
to land upon your chest.

I pluck a star fruit to slice for breakfast,  
feeding you one gold sliver at a time—  
a constellation blooms.

I weave flowers in our hair, earth children  
running through moonlit soybean fields  
until our footsteps tangle like ribbon.



## OCTOPUS

I wonder if octopi hold each other more  
since they have more arms with which to hold  
and why do humans have only two arms  
when I want to hold you so much more?  
In holding you I am holding me,  
holding our rhythmic breaths.  
Our arms ache not from holding  
but from what it is we have to hold.

## THE ATTENDANTS

Music trembles as tuxedos twirl bridesmaids.

To want you is to think 3000 thoughts,  
each one a marble scattered across tile.

Language exists in pure emotion.

Until released it soars to the heavens  
the way a child stares on a street corner  
releasing a balloon, sending a wish.

Eyelids open

my body calling for a café con leche.

I think of the Brazilian fields,  
men plucking beans still green  
the way I plucked the moonflower last night  
to hold time to my heart.

This morning it is wilted.

Calves ache from dancing,

I think of all that is broken within us.

Fractures shoot stars through bones,  
reminding us that we heal and forget our bruises.

Thoughts grow an English garden.

I wander down,

to see where the end will take me.

Can we communicate through the hedge?

I hope you too find the exit

and wait for me

so I can think about beginning

again.

## ORCHIDS

Small open mouths part

in host-like blossoms.

This is my body.

## GREENHOUSE

Tender green shoots curl toward light,  
as an infant's finger reaches for the breast.

Out of the black dirt we yearn for water,  
to be baptized in the promise of thirst.

Wild strawberries, sea urchins of the land,  
swim in my palms. I offer these as kisses.

In the sunlight we find arms, fingers, freckles.  
I taste air as your hands encircle my waist.

I trace dreams in your jawline,  
you slide your hands behind my back,

reaching for my shoulder blades  
to uncover wings. You whisper into my earlobe

like a farmer planting seeds.

I kneel next to you on the stone floor and pray for us.

## FRAGMENTS

### I.

You leave your imprint, like rippled sand  
on my pillow.

Like a mollusk in its shell, I curl  
against the wall to feel your curve,  
remember your hand around my waist,  
pulling me close, kissing my eyelids.

Your morning beard nuzzles my forehead,  
tiny hooks,  
I lift my mouth.

### II.

You light a match;  
I hold the wooden sliver  
until it burns,  
hover it over a wick until that too burns.  
Our knees press the cold stone.  
A lone orchid hangs from a bough  
on the Spanish monastery gate.

III.

You push me up against the kitchen wall  
to tell me something. I forget  
your eyes,  
they are so close.

IV.

Your fingers crawl  
like little sea urchins over my back,  
a coral reef,  
exploring, probing.

V.

I measure out the coffee  
one spoon plus one  
equals two,  
while you shower—  
the steam mists the glass carafe.

VI.

I point to tiny scarlet lips  
on a thorny green throne,  
bougainvillea.  
I tell you its name.

VII.

You tell me I am a flamingo.



## SOUL MATES

### *EPR Paradox*

You spin up  
as I spin down.  
Our ring-around-the-rosy  
goes left to right,  
right to left—  
simultaneously.  
The pion decays  
leaving us to reach,  
both to the heavens  
and earth,  
spinning like children,  
until the world blurs  
into a stream of sheer silk,  
water colored with dye.  
Scientists divorce our play,  
forcing me to choose  
up or down;  
waves collapse,  
like tired oceans,  
too weary to enter sandcastles.  
I spin towards the earth,

down through the troposphere,  
crystallized water.

Until losing me,  
you spin up  
into to the heavens,  
pushing open galactical doors  
into a realm  
lit by spatial expressways  
during rush hour.

We meet again  
in the center  
of the seesaw.

I leave a kiss  
on your cheek,  
as light zips by  
in a red Ferrari.

## KISSING YOU

You flicker your tongue, a lizard,  
darting into the cave of my mouth.

Our tongues rustle like palm branches  
through the breath we hold,

lips keeping out the world, a sanctuary  
I let you in to explore the mountains

of my teeth and valley of my tongue.

Climbing to the heights, twirling

on mountaintops until the horizon blurs  
in a sea of green and blue and I am falling,

falling into cologne laden waves,

sinking into your skin,

past your bones, slipping

through the hole from your missing rib

until deep inside you I am held,

and our mouths come up for air  
like divers breaking the ocean's surface.

## OPERATION PALM TREE

*Miami Beach, Florida*

I roll through white sheets, the sun  
lifting the covers, singing to my eyelids. I hear  
her waking shadows from dreams. The sun  
sparkles on the marble countertop, glinting sunbeams  
into creamy white blossoms by the sink.  
I blink my eyes at the mirror and reach for a sundress.  
I am late for work again. I slip a pair of sunglasses  
in my purse, next to my wallet. I slide into flats  
to dance down the tile steps on tiptoes. My flats  
shine obsidian patent leather in the sunlight.  
My dress skims my knees; sunglasses on, I see  
the blue sky feathering each green palm; I can smell the sea.

I roll the windows down, the breeze from the sea  
welcomes the 8 a.m. traffic with its exhaust. The sun  
catches my gold bracelet, freeing beads like seeds,  
planting Hail Marys, shells buried in sand by the sea.  
I close my eyes, to see this morning in mind—hear  
the sounds of horns, engines, a whisper of sea.  
Then I open them wide, so wide. I want to see  
everything at once—palm trees, branches sinking

under the weight of coconuts, I too want to sink  
into all of this, to be a part of the land and the sea.  
Feet begin to dance inside my flats  
to the pulse of the red lights, green lights, yellow. My flats

are like a ballerina's. It is too hot for anything but flats.

I leave the shelter of the parking garage for the sun.

Walking under the sun's smoldering glare, my hair flat  
on my neck, the humidity pushing her damp hand flat  
against my throat. I thirst for reprieve from the sun.

The path stretches, glittering white. Miami is flat.

Sometimes it seems one could walk through this flat  
land forever, an endless stream of palm trees, and hear  
the sound of the sea but never reach the seaside.

I can see the ocean from my job; it is so flat.

It's another day in the office. In my cotton dress I sink  
into my chair, letting artificial breezes sink

their long touch deep into my vertebrae, sinking  
like raindrops in the desert. I lay my hands flat  
on the desk, tapping fingers, dreaming of sinking  
in a pool so calm it's silver. Piercing the surface, I sink  
into the watery depths, swimming through to the sea,

my hands sculpting the water until I see the bottom of the sea.

My body floats on the surface. I want to sink,  
to sink to the unexplored sea floor, where the sun  
loses my translucent skin, loses the stars, where sun  
is absent. I stare at the LCD screen. I dive, sinking  
deep into a concerto of hours, away from work, I hear  
an orchestra play, hear the movement, and I tremble here,

under the water, in the air, on the land. I hear  
the sea calling me, as I sit, cream sinking  
into black coffee, Cuban coffee, I hear  
the sound of heat, stillness, like one hears  
the sea in the shell of the conch. This flat  
land reminds me of the desert sometimes, but here  
it is different. My eyes and lips feel and hear  
Miami rumba. Back and forth, the tides of the sea  
turn away only to slip back up the sand, to see  
me standing on the shore at dusk. I wait here,  
wait, because the orchids are listless in the sun,  
because I too am listless, listless from the sun.

Limbs curl under white sheets in the absence of sun.

I rock myself to sleep listening to the whisper I hear,

the whisper of the lullaby of dark spaces, sinking  
beneath the mangrove swamps as night presses flat  
against the palm of the breathing sea.



## EL TAXI DE FLORES

A taxi cab sits  
in the warm darkness of night,  
trunk full of flowers.

Lemon roses wilt,  
stems crowding white plastic pails,  
Pope goes to Cuba.

She soliloquies  
to the one only she can see.  
Even her shadow shrinks.

The “Open” light flickers,  
couples murmur over Cuervo  
as the glasses sweat.

Hugged by a chain fence  
the sandy lot has purpose.  
A woman squats down.

A lone streetlight glows  
the cab encircled in light,

floral offering.

## LOVE

I don't know how to keep love from walking out the door, so I build a house with no doors so it cannot enter. When it slips through the cracks in the window, I fill them in so love cannot escape.

I nail love to the wall, like a tapestry. I stop the drain so it cannot swirl down the pipes in the lemon bubbles.

## V. DAWN

PATRICK SERGEI

For My Brother

You curl in my arms  
as a rain drop  
clings to the curve  
of the frond.

Holding your tiny hands,  
I feed you  
a bottle of juice.  
At three you cannot chew.

Fed soup and kasha in Russia,  
moments of loneliness  
mark your thumbs,  
like rings in a tree.

Sucking your middle  
fingers, a duet of comfort,  
you play a symphony;  
I sing the words.

I wipe sorrow

lingering like soot  
from your pupils—  
unearth the fire  
inside your small body.

## THE BATHROOM

*Fairfax, Virginia*

Sheltered by smooth white porcelain  
Patrick 's eyes were deep with terror,  
his child face corpse-pale.

Retribution of being found  
lurked deeper than the fear of being found.  
Ceramic tile squares chilled our bones.

Frail against the onslaught  
house beams shuddered—  
as the kitchen door weakened under Jonathan's assault.

Our minds tracked the footfalls.  
Dining Room. Living Room. Hallway.  
Bedroom—we waited.

Sirens arrived minutes later.  
The police found us hiding.

We slept in foreign beds  
learning how to breathe again.

## SIBLINGS

*Homs, Syria*

A child hides under the metal framed bed,  
rockets crash like cymbals, fireworks of a death parade.  
His hands cannot keep fear from filtering through his ears.  
He holds his baby sister. Their parents are out.  
Another blast, he feels the world falling,  
ancient cities crumbling under oppression.  
Freedom is a pile of dirt, blood, and flesh.  
Orange glows through the cracked glass,  
air holding its acrid smell.  
She whimpers, opening her lips, a rose.  
He wets his shirt, rolls it, offering, she sucks in makeshift comfort.



## ATONEMENT

*Cherepovets, Russia*

Heartbeats stampede her lungs,  
gasping, fear rends her frame in half,  
a shearing of silk  
on a seamstresses' table.  
Her breasts empty of milk.  
She wants a family for you,  
a crib; your fingers cling.  
The sterile sink makes even your ribs  
look fragile. She wipes the blood  
from your face; Dosvedanya.

## ABSOLUTION

*Moscow, Russia*

I am a guest in a foreign motherland.

Silver foil flakes fall,

granting absolution. My hand freezes

over the golden knockers, on double doors

dreams have never opened.

My white coat lets the Kremlin

slip brittle fingers into my ribs,

I step back into the slushy street.

The orphanage stands a sentinel of warning.

I walk to the nearest playground,

a slide rusted, one swing lolls like a drunken girl.

I sit in the other.

The neighborhood is hushed this morning,

the air rushes into my lungs

burning roses in the ventricles,

faster, higher, snow firing rounds.

The spent bullets weep.

Two children laugh

echoing like chimes, skid and slip,  
in their plastic shoes over frozen streets.

The market sells diapers and cucumbers,  
chickens and loaves of bread,  
dolls imported from Barcelona,  
shawls of blooming gardens, piles of Levi's.

In my mind she drags him up the tenant stairs,  
the halls are grimy, light bulbs glare  
into shadows. His little feet trip;  
she doesn't stop.

They are both gone now.  
My memory plays a scratched film reel.

I whisper his name into the dark,  
willing the sound to travel into a past  
where he cries in a cold flat.

*Jonathan.*

## PAPER BOATS

*Milan, Italy*

Unaware of President Mubarak's departure,  
I watch a little girl,  
pigtails furl like sails over her navy blue coat.

Her brother is sailing a paper boat—  
she wants one too.

I watch this maiden voyage  
set sail on the waters dominated  
by six-year-old males.

Giving her a fallen twig  
her father helps her propel her boat from the safety  
of the fountain's edge.

The boat is stubborn, hesitant  
to leave the shelter of the stonewall.  
She pushes it into the open shallows.

## TAHIR SQUARE

*Cairo, Egypt*

Another day to  
believe in  
change, revolution to  
die for one's country—  
effervescent petals  
fall  
golden into a spray of bullets  
humming like seagulls  
into the ears of infants.

Justice stands on the capitol dome  
kissing harshly the morning  
light, she had supported  
Murabak a follower of Sadat unlike  
Nassar, what would revolution bring?

Open the pores of your skin  
perfumed in blood  
quickly bleeding  
red. You were  
shot in the riot. I

try to

undress

your body.

Zip the bag.

ELENA

*Odessa, Ukraine*

She faces the cerulean  
dome beyond a  
chapel, a fragmented landscape.

Maiden waves blaze a  
scythe—the name is

death. Chant in unison,  
supple willow girl. Lurk  
in vines. The wind  
strikes armless

postures. Golden grass  
stares into bodiless

faces. Monks lift hands, pray.

She is too late to  
cross the world's vernal  
clouds.

LE 7 HEURE

*Fez, Morroco*

Early morning sun glints off the copper pail  
left under the clothesline.  
The muezzin trills lyric notes.

Slipping up stairs,  
I reach this other world-  
the world of women.

Over terra cotta roofs,  
rippling like a stallion's thigh,  
and tiles blue and white—

*Vierge Marie*, the city

Is one in grace.

The sea meets the roof,

stars littering the floor.

*Ishma'allah*, the breeze twists

silk jelebas drying on the line.



## LEATHER SANDALS

*Bogotá, Colombia*

I slip on my leather sandals,  
thin straps wrapped around my feet  
to dance on dusty streets, filled with exhaust  
from coughing cars and tired Vespas, on  
crowded sidewalks, pushing pedestrians.  
I slip in my leather sandals  
arms flailing to gain balance. Holding on  
to a cart full of cantaloupes. I live  
to dance on dusty streets, filled with exhaust  
saturating my lungs with urban pollution.  
When I put them on for the first time,  
slipping on my leather sandals  
I admired my fawn-painted toenails.  
I ran down the stairs and waved goodbye  
to dance on dusty streets, filled with exhaust

from my boyfriend's ancient Corvette. Marco

loves his car, almost more than me, but then

I slipped on my leather sandals

to dance on dusty streets until I was exhausted.

WORLD, I SAY YOU DO NOT KNOW ME

Abu Dhabi, you do not burn the way the sunlight brands fire in my hair

Lima, you do not sense my mouth hovering over warm roses.

Paris, you do not own the Louvre I paint with my gaze.

Delhi, you do not feel your heat wrapped around my shoulders

Berlin, you do not know the layers of family secrets.

Rome, you do not taste the prayer held inside a lemon.

Lisbon, you do not reflect my eyes' sparkle like sunlight glinting off windows

Madrid, you do not hold my mouth holding your Spanish tongue.

Johannesburg, you do not care I fight against darkness.

Moscow, you do not see the tears as I weep for my brother.

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