

Image 001

When
 the chorus first
 wakes, it has nothing to
 share. Its members' lungs are full
 of electric wires and the shit stains
 that moths leave behind on wool and
 silk. They communicate by flickering their
 eyelids. No one can understand them. This
 will soon make them anxious, but in the
 moment of waking they don't mind.
 For now, they need their obscurity.

Without it, they would no lon-
 ger keep waking up.

It is very
 likely that none of us
 were crying, but because I was

crying, I imagine we all were. Was I crying? I felt so sure
 that the fluid that filled my new seromas had worked their way
 inward and traveled up my body from the inside until it reached my
 face, leaving it no choice but to leave my eyes. (That fluid spoke in the voice
 of a girl shut into a closet who is having a conversation with the backlit dust inside
 that closet. I was especially good at hearing that voice, because that small girl once was
 me.) I don't remember much of what I said to the other people who were there, but I know
 that two of them spoke to me as if their lips were two automatic doors perpetually closing shut.
 When I dream of this moment, it feels not unlike landing on a minor moon orbiting an alien
 planet. I think that I had come to this moon with the intent of planting a flag somewhere on its sur-
 face, but with every passing inhale I'm forgetting the allegiances I once had on Earth, and in any case
 whatever emblem I had once sewn into my flag has already begun to come apart in the new air. Truth
 be told, some of the fabric, which I'd woven during the long wait out of silk and wool, caught flame
 long before I got here; the emblem has long been mostly ashes. My new intention, I decide, is to find the
 smallest rocks and use them to build replicas of the few things I want to remember. Some buildings com-
 prise a skyline. Some skylines comprise a city. Some vertical lines comprise trees. Some trees comprise a
 forest. At some point I tell myself I am building a replenished world. It doesn't matter, I say, that no one
 can hear me. There is terribly little difference between crying and sweating anyway. It doesn't matter, I
 say, that my movements and my labors don't count for much, and that no one is watching when I pull
 my stitches, or that an almost-electric pain is keeping me from sleep. *Here! creep, / Wretch, under
 a comfort serves in a whirlwind:* I can't understand where the sounds are coming from. Is that a
 cricket? A fire inside a tree trunk? The beep of the machine that says I am, somehow, alive? Are
 the sliding doors opening at last? What sound does a stitch make when it opens? I am try-
 ing to be vigilant. I am trying to be someone who makes something that lasts. Over in
 the corner of this minor moon's horizon are some purple rocks. If I pile them just
 right, they look like violets. With enough patience, I can build a new world.
 Stop asking me about Earth. I am trying to forget what it means. I have
 already named the violets.
 Each and every one.

When They Ask *Is It True*, I Answer,

what more is there to learn about the moon?
Listen: you and I both know there's more I could share.

I could tell you about the first time I put pennies
in my mouth. I could tell you every time I grew

or sheared my hair. No, I know. What you want to know
is whether I wept. Whether I begged.

In a few days, the astronomers will tell us
what they've learned about the moon. You and I,

we're in this together, our nude breasts pressed
against our draftiest windows in the winter.

Say the moon has more silt than we imagined,
say it has a mountain, say baby lions roam

its crests in little feline space boots.
The things we're closest to aren't easy to name,

but that's no excuse. Deimos and Phobos, brothers.
Io: a round marble-in-the-cheek of a name.

Eukelade, too dim to photograph, too small:
still, we named her. Ours, though?

We named it "moon." Like Holly Golightly,
naming her cat "Cat." Have you put a name

on my child mouth? If you were asked to give
our moon a name right now, what would it be?

Whoever told us we have the right to learn anything
about the bodies for whom we never even imagined names?

But, as I'll never tire of reminding my students, *poiesis* comes from the Greek for *to make*, and one of the words that can be made from it is *autopoiesis*, which means *self-making*. In other words: things change. When the athletes hurtle down the gridiron, dodging all kinds of trouble, I scream. I can't help it. Despite the danger I know lies behind every flick of the wrist or juke of the knee or crack of a helmet, I know I love them, and I love what they have learned how to do. My father told me—often—that it wouldn't matter if he killed me in the night, because come morning, no one would care. *Little lamb*, I say to myself now, standing over the sink, washing the dishes we soiled, *what have you made of the chances you worked so hard to shape?*

What have you made of the chances you worked so hard to shape?
I have made butter chicken. I have made puff pastry from scratch. I made James Beard's Farmer Chicken. I made shallot pasta—yes, the infamous one. I've made towering cheesecakes, I've made all of Marcella Hazan's sauces, I've made saag paneer. I've made brownies. Blondies. Lavender chocolate chunk cookies. Roasted beets with goat cheese. This stanza is for you, my dear friend who pointed out that there's no food in my first book. It's true, I admit it: when I wrote that book, I'd been hungry—and not for food—for a long time. I didn't know how to whet an appetite because I didn't know appetites could need whetting. I had spent most of my life avoiding fullness, resenting the soft parts of me, while running my tongue along my sharpest tooth.

Parts of me, while running my tongue along my sharpest tooth, still crackle and shake. I confess I don't speak of air all that freely. Once I was describing the courses I teach and the ones I want to teach at a job interview, and one interviewer asked me, with a raised brow: *What about courses that aren't about trauma?*² I made something up about wanting to teach an Asian American lit course about food. There was some truth to what I said. I *have* asked myself often whether I think often enough about joy, whether I have a vocabulary for it the way I have one—or twelve—for grief and for pain. But here's what I wish I'd said:

*Parts of me still crackle and shake. Joy has its lutes,
its dances, its flower garlands, its sarangis, its milk baths.
I'm coming to you live from the bowels of hell.
It's rancid here. Take a seat. Welcome to class.*

from Nandanakānana

Nandanakānana is a Sanskrit name for a mythological, celestial, and paradisaical garden. This is an excerpt of a sonnet crown.

O ancient powers of air and this wide world,
For much more willingly I mention air,
This our old conquest, than remember hell
Our hated habitation

—John Milton, *Paradise Regained*, I.44-47

What makes a garden?
Playing in it must be a song on the subject
of impertinence, and of a body's insistence on bliss,
despite the traces left on that same body by
those who previously rehearsed incursions
on it. I think that this is what the word *loam* should mean.
My garden lives in the shape my husband makes on a bed.
That means that my garden lives on our bed.
That means that somewhere in our bed must be dirt,
and worms, and the roots of some seedling,
a dead body or two. Me, I know where the bodies
are buried. When your sleep shuffles off you
and I tell you the dead spent the night with us,
you hold my hand and ask: *Are you alright?*

You hold my hand and ask: *Are you alright?*
It took me so long to believe my nightmares deserved
that question. Lately, it's occurred to me that my new anxiety
about whether a topic is worthy of a poem might in fact
just be my old anxiety about whether I am worth
consideration in the smaller moments, and whether
my happiness is noteworthy, as in, worthy of writing down,
as in, when I first fell in love with watching football
as a child and realized I'll never be able to make my body
as worthy of description as those athletes have. Maybe I'm
nothing to write home about, but who writes home about
anything that matters to them anyway? When I imagined
the home I would make, I had in mind a fortress.
I imagined myself the master of arms.

I imagined myself the master of arms.

O

Stars are not the end, but the
beginning.

A bird is to its throat as a promise is
to its sharp edge.

I wanted to make for you a
sun-shower. Instead I have made for
you a mortal thing.

Writing is knowing how to cut.

There is a space in my body that did
not exist when I began this book. It
is a window. When I next speak, I
will do so through that window.

Please leave the window unlatched.

When I next speak, it will be with
changed lips.

I wonder what their color will be.

*Finally, she enlarges the figure to a grand
scale, and cuts off its head.*

O Spirit

It takes work for a woman to welcome a fist
With her body. Fists are larger than the spaces

They make for themselves in a chest, or the holes
Into which we welcome them with longing.

Asking whether I wish for one now because I knew
Them well as a child is like asking if a volcano

Expels lava because, when a small mountain
Cloistered within seawaters, its first experience

Of heat was unbidden. The question
Requires a certain old knowledge of safety to ask.

*What does it mean that the first time you saw a cock
It was raised in menace from a boil of shared blood,*

The question says. *Tell me the origin story of pain,
And tell me what happens to pain as it ages,*

*And tell me how the ocean-bottom dirt you grew
From tastes. Volcanoes understand differences*

In kinds and in chords. The origin story of pain
Is abjection, foisted. Not a single stream of lava

Is like one that has come before or will come since.
All my lips make treacherous lights float in midair.

The B-Sides of the *Golden Records*, Track Three: “Some Flowers That Have Died”

The Cry violet, or the *Viola cryana*. Its purple blooms drew the fingers of lovers and of botanists. It grew in the kinds of rocks we have that are made of skeletons of marine organisms, like mollusks, which are small tender muscles housed in curved shells. We said we needed the rocks for our own homes. They died.

The unnamed flowers in The Rolling Stones song “Dead Flowers.” They grew from the sadness and grief of the singers. They spilled out of Mick Jagger’s and Keith Richards’s mailboxes every morning. They were born singed and curled. They died before the guitars were first plucked.

The daisies, or the *Bellis perennis*, that sheath Brigitte Bardot’s chest in *Plucking the Daisies*. They began to die when they were first cut, kept dying as the costume designer sewed them into a bralette, and starved while touching her nipples and the cleft between her breasts. In dying, they taught me about some of my hungers.

The Maui hau kuahiwi, or *Hibiscadelphus wilderianus*, of the family of mallows. The murderers came to the island on ships launched from colder seas. Soon, little was left of the lava or the rocks that lava cools into, and nothing was left of the flowers. In the future, there will be a way to conjure the ghosts of these flowers’ smells.

Here are some things that we can do to live in the space of those absences. We can go to the lab where the scientists create the scents of some dead flowers, and we can go to the installations the artists made with those scientists so that many can stand together and feel time and space blossoming.

We can also imagine. We look at photographs—like “Tree with daffodils” and “Flying insect with flowers,” which we’re sending to you—and watercolor within and outside of their lines to see them in another color, with another shape of petal or an extra stamen. We can dream ourselves into the most plentiful rocks and soils.

The trouble is that the human imagination, we’ve learned, can kill more easily than it can resurrect.

The B-Sides of the *Golden Records*, Track Five: “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder”

Before you begin, please be aware that this track does not end.

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Find a large, unframed mirror. Or, if you don't have mirrors, find something like one: smooth, flat, and reflective, with superstitions silvered in.

Beat it with the most vulnerable part of your body. If you are having trouble deciding what to use, ask yourself: what would you least want me to touch?

Continue until the mirror breaks. Then, continue until it breaks many times. Continue until you can tell that your body part is badly hurt. **Keep going.**

When you regain consciousness, resume.

On the sixth day, stop. Search for the brightest, clearest light you can imagine. The light should at first feel welcome, and joyous. Then, as you realize that it is slightly more garish than you would like and moreover that it never fades, it riddles your body with a ringing.

Carry each fragment, shard, and piece into this light. Do not clean the parts. Arrange them into a shape resembling the original shape of the mirror.

If you are not already naked, become naked now.

Lie on the fragments. Try not to add more injuries to your body.

Feel the light reflect into heat. As you blister, consider the way that on Earth, every night, in the absence of sunlight, tree branches move up and down so that the water inside of the trees keeps moving, creating a kind of heartbeat that is surer than any you will ever know.