

CARDIOGRAMS
A Collection of Poems

by

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A young maiden is wed, not the main wife. Who is the main wife? Chang'e is the wife trapped inside the moon. If that's the case, then as a woman I feel a responsibility to free her. But what if she doesn't mind being there? What if she likes observing the world from a distance, reflecting the sun's light? If she's happy not to be a source of brightness? To be fine with always being mid-flight? For a long time I wrote poems about how we should rescue the woman from the moon, how it was a man who placed her there. An arrogant man who shot down nine suns to leave one in the sky. But now I feel it would be unkind. What is a star but gas that collapses in on itself? While a moon is a moon whether or not there is light.

Confusion is a tingling in the fingers, as if pricked by tiny stars. Then doubt, which creeps in through windows and doors. If you think about it, freedom is a room whose walls you never touch. You can put yourself on trial but ultimately it's the soul that deals judgement. You say this as you watch a woman peer out of the moon's window, see wars and devastation below, and decide to stay there. If you were a bird, what would happen if you stayed up high and never came down? It would mean you'd have to eat and drink while in the sky, but also you could sleep all night.

I

Serotinal: A Series

PICK-NICK

To summer is to picnic, but what picks, what nicks? Outside, sunlight nips skin as if tiny mosquitos expiring. Through trees' limbs, tines of light bite us. Cicadas sting air. All year you and I have been free of heat, but now we cannot stand the sky's teeth. Sun's incisors nibbling our skin, we pick up our blanket: flee, uncertain where we can find relief. The birds leap from the trees, screech: *We don't want you here.* Preach: *Piquenique, oh là là! To peck at a worthless thing.*

AT NIGHT THE PLANTS GROW

Darkness brings no fever release: at twilight we wake, sweating, to every cell stretching. Blink—the pothos has reached the ceiling. Kiss: the cabbage is a baby napping. Noxious, monstrous, even our bodies grow without our knowing: fingernail sickles sliced and flicked into the sink, abdomens budding as if ovened. The sense of germination is shameless, invasive: of course, there is love, but also, other things. So grows the fruit but so too the weeds.

WHAT A WEE-LIEF

The relief of a drought breaking is like doing a pee in a pool, switched: slow warmth entering water's cool around you. The day rain arrives we stand outside as the sky's nitrogen fertilizes us. Dots us with ammonia till we moan. Salts us gold while we don't blink. All afternoon we wink, sipping the sky's chilled liquor, flicking at each other alchemist's guilt. For when you've been deprived of ichor for a season, the first thing you need to do is cup your hands and drink.

THUNDER'S CHUCKLE

A storm is a joke whose punchline hits the earth. In the evening we hear it: thunder's chuckle. Lightning stretches its crisp grin across the sky, taps a tree: runs—but that doesn't mean outside

is the only place to have all the fun. In our apartment, you gas the lights and stoke the stove, while I grease up the fridge. Tickle the mixer. Fall about giggling at the kettle's din. For the only way to survive a summer is to bring the flicker within.

STARRY, STARRY NIGHT

When storms finally lose atmospheric affinities, one finds glee in other chemistries. On the balcony we lie, stunned by night's matrix. Count the phosphorus of thousands now winter's dust: this star once a crustacean's eye, a woolly mammoth, a foremother, a sow's spine. All night we lie with the sky's sodium shaking down, wishing to wake coated in soft, icy light. They say some stars are already dead, but in the cruelty of summer, what is dead is what gives us life.

TO BEE LOVED

Also: life can give life. All summer the bees came, hovering copters at the window. I gave them my body and they gave me their bellies heavy with honey, touching their tiny lips to mine, as if I too were something to be cared for, something delicate to be passed from mouth to mouth. From flowers they siphoned drink which they spit onto my tongue, before touching me with their pricks and flying off to die. Bee-sucked, bee-kissed, hum-struck, buzz-bit: what does it mean to be strummed by hundreds of tiny things? To be stung constantly with love and all that it brings.

IN A PICKLE

When swelter brings no rest, it's sometimes best to preserve the excess. In the kitchen we jam the sun into a jelly. Pickle the sink. Spoon the room. Unscrew jar lids with the satisfying suck of a lolly pulled from a mouth. The heat canned into confectionery, we open the windows, finally at ease. But why wait for winter to chow? By the fridge we unwrap the sun's caramels, liberate tins, lick every pip until our pulses tickle with sugar's roar. Don't tell me while the world burns we should save all the spoils: sharing is a quality no person should hoard.

THE SLEEP

At heat's height, what's left to do but eat it: defeated? Uneasy, you turn your back to estivate, cloaked in your torpor. The movement of your blood: slow. Your heartbeat: slow, so slow you could be dead, you who in the end love only the cold. Devastated, I desiccate alongside you, your lone protector as you cocoon through your most powerless month. For surrender doesn't always look like the ground breaking, or foul weather—sometimes it is as omniscient as air, and you can't breathe without feeling as if opening your mouth would let it all in, and you would drown.

DOG DAYS

Dog days I act the canicular: pace in circles, pee on the carpet, throw up dinner, leave hair in tiny tufts, hump the furniture, zoom the room, then chase my own tail, mad with loneliness. Nights I bark at the star rising heliacal, waiting for howls of hounds that never come. In the morning I recline on tarmac, nauseated, flat: hating humidity, its suffocating cling. Only evenings I align beside you, bringing the only organ that can bear heat—my nose—to yours. A dog is born to be with her lover; a dog is not capable of being alone.

THE DEATH OF COLOR

Serotinal at last, blooms suicide from roof height, fling themselves from window sills as I slink along garden's bruise. Everywhere in this nirvana hues blend, leaving rot's singular soil: the spoil. But as the season recedes, I think of how this is an appropriate end: for in death, who wants to be disparate? Who wants the blazing separation of shades? Not I, who, alone, finally step into the unknown, the unknitting, the clots of color becoming one, until I'm met with earth's germination, its giving dirt, to meld forever with the nether, coalesced with you.

Deluge: A Chinese Almanac

"She made a wish to the fishbones and found herself clothed magnificently in a sea-green dress, a cloak of kingfisher feathers, and tiny gold shoes."

"The first year the king was very greedy and by his prayers to the fish-bones got treasure and jade without limit... One night the bones were washed away by the tide."

— from the folk tale of *Yé Xiàn*

立春 · SPRING BEGINS

Moonless night—I was led by scent.
Downriver was the odor of blossoms
defrosting, of otters' paws thawing, while
upriver: the scent of a human unfreezing.
Through ice's fractured light I glimpsed a
man's whiff. As I winged to him, his smile
seemed lit by rimes from within, so when
he asked if he could finger my gills, what
else could my fins do but pink? What a way
to begin the spring—lying in wait in river's
dim until I sniffed the tiniest glimmer.

雨水 · SPRING RAIN

Every young carp-girl is wooed by shiny
things, the way a magpie can swoop a ring
a thousand li below. I wanted him—yes, I
wanted him, this stranger like ore's
lightning. Yes—I wanted him, his moonlit
mouth, his teeth eye-brightening. Who
was he? He was my prince, come to court
me with pearls. Except I had my own
pearls, which I rubbed until blood came,
and came, and came, and when I could no
longer stand the pain, I disintegrated into
pink, detonated into rain.

惊蛰 · INSECTS STARTLE

The thrill of a storm is how it thunders up earth's sleepers, the wintered, the secret, the blinkered who have yet to come up for air. By the river we made love until we woke all the crickets. Then we woke all the fish, the lizards, the birds, the bees. That first spring, squalls snapped our skin as we cracked against each other, atoms lost in agitating air. Out in the storm we were flasher than clash, louder than lightning. And yet—to be in must is to surge with secrets. To be in lust is an electrifying thing.

春分 · EQUAL DAYS, EQUAL NIGHTS

Some men's eyes betray their confession: their gaze is a love based only on possession. In my lover's orbs, round as fishbowls, I thought I saw a tail flickering: dismissed it. Glint-eyes, fish-eyes, when you're a carp-girl in lust, anything could be a hint. A man casting, however, should stay equally sharp—for isn't every carp-girl searching for a partner? Or rather, father: her own eyes angling for a fly in the waters, prowling for a patriarch on whom she can be pinned.

清明 · BRIGHT AND CLEAR

Spring is the season of tomb-sweeping, of clearing cobwebs from brumy air. Like a good carp-daughter, I was first to swim upriver to pay respects to my mother's grave. Beneath the willow I lit incense reeds and laid out a feast: melon seeds, green rice dumplings, barley wine, cured meat. All spring I had wintered what I would say to my mother's bones. But when

they woke, I couldn't stop my mouth's foam. I said, *Mother, I met a man who lusters like the moon!* My mother's bones said, *A moon is a rock that reflects the sun.* I said, *Ma, I think I love him!* My mother's bones shrugged. *What is love? Your father's second wife sucked my meat, shucked my bones into the sea.* So I said, *But Ma, if you look at the moon in a certain way, it looks like a pearl's flesh. Plus, he's the only one who loves watching me come!* Said my mother's bones: *Come? My child, the floods will, if you don't give it a rest.*

谷雨 · GRAIN RAIN

Rest or flesh: how to honor one's ancestors when only bones are left? By paying my own fleshly respects. Beneath a swollen moon I kissed my own river-lips, lit incense for my clitoris. Rubbed myself against my reflection. Pounded my own medicine. But you can't ever trust a river—by the time I discovered its tricks, it had already carried my mirror down to my prince. And what did I do when he came that night, rain acupuncture the grain? I kissed his pin, then filled my mouth until I sounded, like a coward, at every meridian.

立夏 · SUMMER STIRS

Summer stirs at the strike of sound. On tumid nights I was in love not just with my stomach's bulge, but also with the buzz of every cell's vibration: prawns' skeletons splitting, the hiss of bending stems, gourds girthing below ground. Meanwhile, I ate: sweaty melons, sea brine, slim beans, rain grapes—everything my belly ached for. My body's molecules rearranged, I lay

beside my lover until I felt an orbital tow.
 Why wouldn't I believe, in this swell of
 plenty, that lust's magnet had attracted its
 pole? Flood, blood—these things will
 come, but not before a carp-girl latches her
 lode.

小满 · A LITTLE RIPER

Rain's whispering seduces such that even a
 silkworm hears it as its own munching.
 The afternoon spinning showers fine as
 silkworms' spit, I swam to my mother's
 grave to listen out a hunch. Beneath the
 willow's hair I rubbed my mother's bones.
Ma, I brought you mulberries, I said as they
 stirred, *oh, and he's invited me to a ball to*
celebrate the season's plenty! I need you to
grant me a koi-colored dress. Yawning, my
 mother's bones said, *Not marmoreal—a*
carp-girl is already born the color of meat.
What about blue? I said, *Do it—make him*
see red. My mother's bones acquiesced.
 With one rub my treasures came: fins
 reflecting the sky's flesh, earrings studs of
 rain. *Mother, you're the best!* I said, hugging
 her spines. But their only response was,
Yes, my child. The way a silkworm knows
 it's being boiled alive.

芒种 · RIPE GRAIN

Is it not the curse of first seasons to be
 overflowing with aperitif? Or had I been so
 steeped in my prince I hadn't noticed him
 turn astringent? At the ball, my lover lured
 me to the river's lip. Stripped me until my
 gills split. But afterwards, when I woke, I
 felt the hollowness of one no longer doted
 on: could I really trust a man who doesn't
 preserve his own plums? What would he
 pluck from me if he had the pick of it? Like

the liquor we sipped, I knew I could nurture something green to sweet. Could protect myself from others' pricks. Yet as the tide climbed, I wondered: when the floods arrived, would my prince be beside me, willing to swim? Or would he, as my mother's bones hinted, flee? Leave me to sink?

夏至 · SUMMER SOLSTICE

The tilt of the earth can make any carp-girl wilt—what else to expect from a season of weeds? My mind's thorns growing longer, I began to hide my pearls in my fins, in case it wouldn't just be the locusts' strike that I feared, but the fishtail flicker in my lover's eye: mine. But a carp-girl knows when she's about to become meat, so when I woke one day to find my lover over me, my scales sequined between his lips, I did what I knew I had to, as my father's second wife did when she sensed a threat: sat up to kiss my lover's pest, pinched it. Ripped his head off with my teeth. Stuffed my cheeks with his crown, and when there was no more sound, slid his glistening body into my mouth.

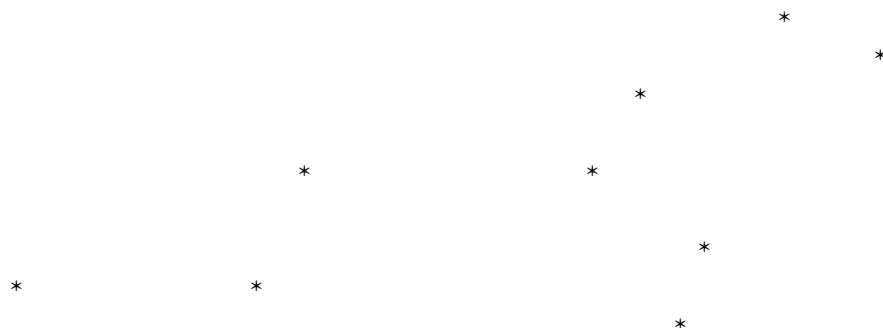
小暑 · SLIGHT HEAT

Afterwards, I ate what I could to get rid of the stench. Lotus flower, mung beans, boiled eggs, grass jelly—I fed them into my tender belly. But days later, I still tasted the freshness of him. The fleshness. All week I sucked mosquitoes from my teeth, plucked wings from my hair. Yet nothing could get rid of the knowing that when I closed my lips around his still-beating heart, he was pink on the inside, just like any other carp. My throat long with his body, I swam to

A woman shoots arrows down the drinking well at the koi: my mother. I chase her away but a day later she returns with a crossbow. What can you do when someone wants to snatch others' fish instead of their own? As a daughter, I try to help my mother be satisfied with her fish, but all she wants is her neighbors' catch. How to make her see the river is plentiful? That the neighbor's game is interchangeable? That at the end of the day, all fish taste the same? How to make her see if she stopped raiding she would be able to see she is her own spring? I watch the world evolve from fishing to factories, towns to metropolises, arrows to aerial drones, and nevertheless maintain the narrowness of its minds, tiny as a hook's eye. I know nothing will stop someone from coveting another's fish, but if you always stare at other peoples' wells, you're going to miss your own might.

In the forest's quiet you think about the cracked jug leaking, how it insists on the logic of its shape. Make no mistake: even though openings start small, you know which fissure to poke. As a daughter, however, you're aware tenderness is a never-ending rope. Don't forget: when sight insists it's only sense, that doesn't mean others must run. At the bottom of the ladder, you follow the sound of footsteps, reach for a hand in the dark. Not being able to open another's eyes means you must touch from the inside: the heart.

Here is Where We Meet



For years I have wandered down these silken roads,
not knowing it was your name pinned on the map
like stars.

Look at us knit together as an atlas,
our bodies pages turning over the other.

Look at my heart tucked into yours
as if a map into a pocket.

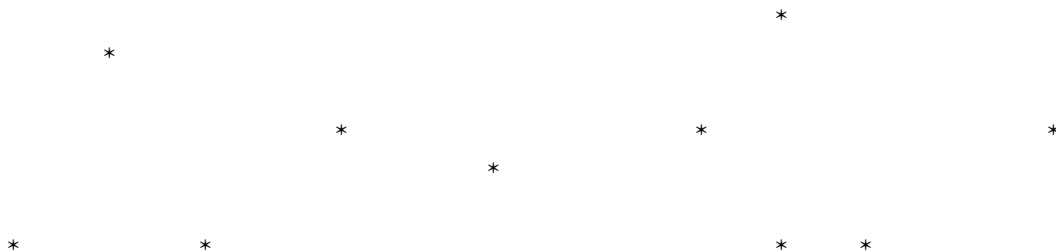
I come from a tight pearl of tea unwinding,
you, from between a pomegranate's teeth.

On this road, I travel towards you,
day and night, scene and memory.

Tell me, when did you first come to me?

In my waking life?

Or in a dream?



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Wine dark as the pathway between stars.

Moon between trees:
the back of an eye through arteries.

Eight-pointed twilight through the caravanserai's
anise-shaped roof.

Through walls comes horses' condensed breath
their tarry groans

a jangle of languages from clotted mouths
talking of the day's travels
through the thick paste of sleep

Having been blown in by cardinal winds,

rest
is a brief caesura.

I too have been travelling for months and months
and the only direction I wish to go towards

is you.

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And yet, on this road,
to walk towards what you love
is to accept a sequelae of absurdities.

That to travel is to open to
a world that comes rushing in,

the way you once entered me like a season—

Cotton, rhubarb, tea, cinnamon, ginger, plums, melons, jade,
porcelain, camels, horses, paper, gunpowder, honey, cumin,
apricots, ginseng, figs, onions, licorice, silver, cedar, cinnabar,
pepper, camphor, cucumber, coriander, hemp, linen, wool,
pomegranate, amber, alfalfa, turquoise, string beans, ivory—

how the world shudders with unthought-of wonders!

How it brings us the invasion of choice! The conceit of plenty.

While knowing the road is also a palimpsest
of destruction:

Cities built on holier, older stones.

Lions spoken into statue.

An alphabet shifted from plosive to fricative.

Trades as ordained by coins in the sky.

To worship fire, then a god, then no image at all,

then again, fire.

In a dream,
I see elephants walking out of a forest

into an emperor's war.

Waking, I pluck from my tea a gash of saffron.

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For in the palaces, what vanities do I see?

Follow the eunuch who carries furs of ermine, squirrel, mink, and beaver!

Feast on exotic meats of bear paw, donkey, camel hump, leopard, turtle, and horse!

Hear the cloisonné clock toll astronomical auguries of war!

Hold the pillaged porcelains absorbing colors of a cloud!

While in rooms:

Linen sprinkled with a deer's scent,
then stroked against the sex.

Caviar popping like salty bubbles
and placed on idle tongues.

The cosseted wonder of seeing one's image twinned
in a looking glass.

Not just the whims of the idle,
but the conscious ignorance of how they got to be...

A throne shining so violently
it's mistaken for an invading army.

In a room draped in jade,
a slave hanging a brocade to hide
the phantom of its labor.

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In villages, smaller wounds stitched in miniature,
glimpsed intimacies:

A dyer pulling cloth from a tub

to reveal wrists dipped in the fixed ink of sky.

Weaving carpet rugs from wool dipped
in dried bodies of female insects,
and held fast by horses' urine.

Orange ingots of persimmons piled by fingers
uncertain if they are dusted with sugar or sleep.

A potter's floury focus while pulling egg noodles
the way she does a bowl from her wheel.

The blood-soaked apron of a butcher having slit a goat's throat,
tenderized with prayer.

Morning at the river, fossicking cat-eye stones
of chalcedony and jade,

while others mine stones to be placed at the top of a dome-shaped tomb
so blue
only gods can tell the difference between roof
and sky

At sunset, conversation simmering.

Bodies stretching out on beds made by felled wood—
ash, pine, fir.

Fatigue crisps the borders of thought
the way a tanoor's fire brushes a bread's edges.

And minds forest-thick with tiredness
dreaming of riding towards lovers
on the saddle of sleep.

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Sunrise red as freshly-cut mutton.

In the caravanserai,
the only currency of warmth
my horse's hot breath.

The cost of travel
its own tendered reality.

In rest,
I reach for you through dream
and memory:

for lovers take as much pleasure from dreams
as they do touch.

And *oh*—

how I dream
of biting your rose-scented skin
pinked by morning's damask.

My body, pointed towards you
as an arrow on a compass,
imagines yours making its way
from your city of shrines

so when we finally meet in that dusty tavern,
memory
becomes flesh.

Our bodies salted with toil.

Fingers stained with the drained
blood of pomegranates.

Clothes tinged a river's color

from dips to cleanse our bodies
of the road's insistence

all while tasting each other's labor.

Knowing every thirst for vanities
will be sated by your touch
I descend deeper into the valley's gorges
towards you:

my beloved—

and yet, every step cleaves
another debt into the earth.

And in my dreams, I hear you ask,
what is the cost?

And I say:

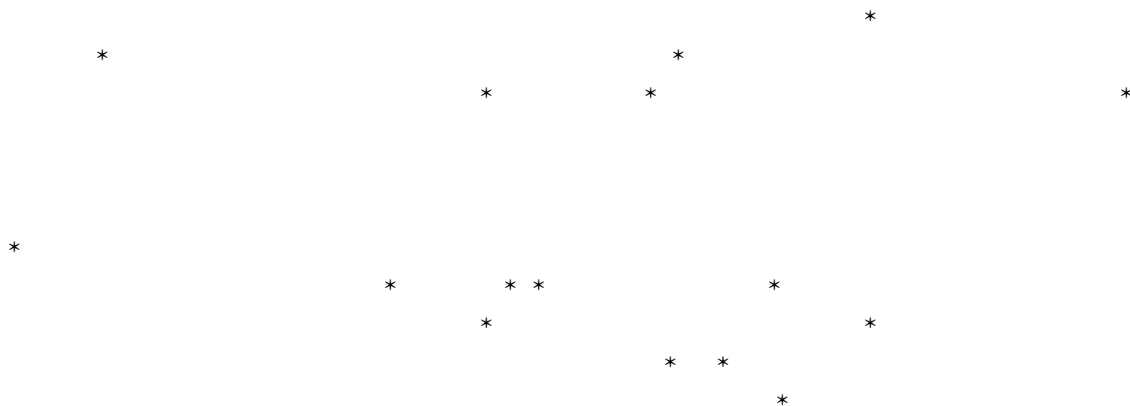
Surely history will say
progress, not product

Surely it is the things we have made
that gives every graze its weight

Surely our sufferings are worth
the world we've created?

And you say:

Show me.



Oh my love, show you I can do—

since showing is words burning from parched tongues!

In a town square rugged with sand,
languages are hefty with complexities,

arising thick on the back of the throat,
or skipping in lighter, and trilled—

oh, the first thing to touch the skin is the tongue!

Then, of course, rumors,
whose syntax is rearranged with a sirocco's rhythm:

women who reproduce by facing the southern wind naked!
tribes who worship snakes and hang phalluses of dead men on their necks!
vultures who pluck diamonds from ravines when fed human meat!

To talk is coat another's throat with sugared cubes of comfort—

To blow the molten bulb of possibilities to its thinnest vitreosity—

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And where there are no tongues or ears,
know the meeting of minds through manuscripts:

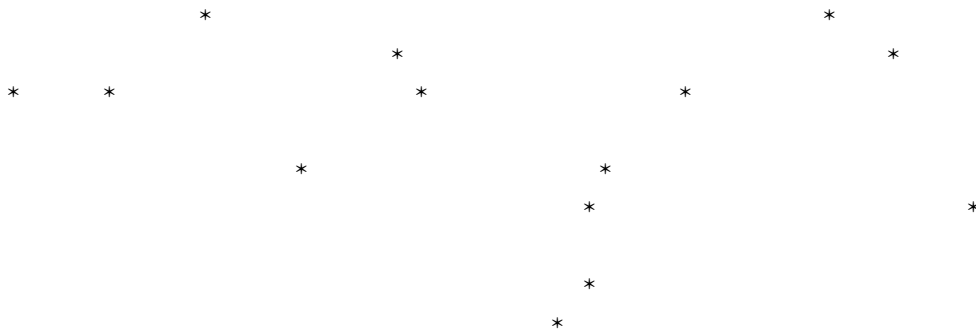
a curled alphabet rainbowed beneath stained glass
followed by the quickened feet of a mind excited
scurrying through the night on cobblestones—

In a teahouse,
the concept of zero translated to create, for the first time,
a symbol for nothing!

To wonder at a decimal of time divided by the moon—
unfolding geometries leading the devoted to god!

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At night, the scent of mugwort burning
on meridian points of cool-humored flesh.

In the apothecary by candlelight,
a tongue examined for black bile.

Convalescers sweating out excess to balance phlegm
and melancholy.

Prescribing rhubarb to loosen bowels
and jade for demonic protection—

but also, the simpler miracles of the living:

a fever broken in an ice bath's clarity—
a wound plumping the mouth of a smug leech—
waking in the middle of the night by the cries
of a coiled baby unbreeched.



And, you ask, what of sweeter, deeper feelings?

Of made things stirred from the heart?

Oh my love, you know these,
for they too voyage!

On walls of worship,
lions leaping eastward from paintings,

while in the other direction:

miniature lines as thin as an eyelash.

A painting of a tree branch thinned into a single finger.

Sculptures of bodies draped in stone robes at the town entrance.

In the village,
watching shadows of puppets on paper screens
against the town bound in collective laughter—

and tonight,
opening a book to read a traveler's tall tales,
then falling asleep to a singer's spontaneous voice
as if a woman at court recording her unforced thoughts
then tucking them beneath her pillow.

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In the caravanserai's quiet,
I dream of your closing question:

what of movement as pilgrimage?

My love, that is my whole journey
to you.

And if others are driven by other loves,
by trade,
by gods—

then so be it.

For movement is what arises
when we cannot see
our own lodgings.

It arises when we cannot taste
the world around us

when we cannot see
the gods within—

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On a holy day, eating no animal after noon.

The company of the pious a relief from desert silence.

Glancing up to see gamboge bodies peering
from a cliff cave's quiet.

Giant statues still covered in sapphires,
not yet plundered.

In the damp quiet of a grotto,
touching palms to the a buddha's stone robes,
absorbing its coolness.

Still among the holy,
finding ways to steal,
even if just relief from heat.

Resting a head on a giant carved toe
in order to sleep.

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Your dream touch on my body
quietens storms at my neck

Here in this caravanserai thirsting
for you

I could be quiet forever—

and I wonder
if not your touch,
what would I need?

Could we not remain in our own chambers
and instead enter the labor of dreams,
which touches no lands and ruins no people?

To let the road be.

Isn't there a relief in rooting where you were planted
to remain on our bosomed earth—

To not be irked by a village's insipid privilege

To not be a juniper on a precipice
persistently reaching towards absence

and instead to turn your heart
towards the raptures of recurrence...

To love the stars who ring around us
in perpetual marriage of gravity:
how they return to the same spot
in the sky each night,
each time burnishing their stones' brightness.

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If I could love you, and remain?

Oh, the world, the *world*—

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And yet, would I give up my treasures?

Would I give up you?

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To lie on a mountain's green breast, stroked by wind.

To dig for days to unearth butter's sour gold.

To arrive in the medina at dusk and hear prayer knocking on every blue door.

To taste grapes named for a mare's nipple.

To greet a sandstorm's sting on the skin, its needles healing meridians.

To race the sun's orange paws across the town's cobbled stones.

To sleep in grasslands beneath stars' simmer.

To observe birds taking off from a palace roof as if a handful of flung rice.

To bite into a watermelon and leave only rind's green smile.

To kneel before churches translated across time, ruins dropped by an imported god.

To trill a new tune's trimeter on the chest.

To spin with dervishes high under opium's spell.

To sprint towards a synagogue's sinews for shelter from a storm.

To dive into a ravine's gash while an eagle snatches a goat overhead.

To eat fifty-two types of cheese.

To enter a bazaar hilled with herbs and swoon from its aromas.

To try a new spice for the first time, a firecracker on the tongue.

To overhear in a tea room astronomers musing if the earth hoops the sun.

To see a mosque at sunset embossed as if against a sheet of gold.

To be offered, when starving, a cup of thick, salted tea.

To bury your face in the thin fibrils of a new fleece.

To pluck the red thought of an apple and eat it.

To open the crusted egg of a geode and find within it the sunrise.



For in centuries, these roads emptied.

Idols' eyes erased by time.

Languages remembered only by stone.

Dirt fills fissures of forgetting,
erasing difference.

Then,

Wars fought over a single leaf.

Those forced out by war forced into it again
by the next kingdom.

Armies and viruses passed like words
from mouth to mouth.

New roads formed in the slipstream of old
in half-remembered cycles.

Somewhere in an antipodean garden,
paradise apparently replanted.

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*
*

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And when the road ends,

whose kingdom will we live in?

Whose paradise?

Whose caravanserai?

On which road will we meet?



II

A bird hovers above the clouds, but not just any bird: a war goddess. But what if you forget you're just a goddess? What if you think you can go above what's known? Must I always believe the sky is the limit? If the gods live in the heavens, then surely crows, who fly high as the sun, must soar beyond it. But if I can fly beyond the heavens, then I must be beyond gods, who control the weather. If I can go beyond the gods, then I must be more than a bird, despite my coloured feathers. On my phoenix's back, I rashly signal for my soldiers to charge. But it attracts the weather of the gods, who turn the dirt to mud. Defeated, I gaze at my soldiers, who reach for me as soar up with my cloud-reins. Even birthing a dynasty doesn't mean I can prevent them getting stuck.

Clouds pound the wet down, dissolving willpower. Also, remorse: since water makes what's solid formless. Your body sinks, absorbing molecules. It's only now you remember a woman's border is not rigid, but porous. Slowly the mud thickens, rounding your organs. To become pottery you'll need to be shaped by your own hands: sacred and profound. Weighted, you settle at the marsh's bottom. Ultimately it's fine not to have a predestined state in mind, but in this life it means you have to be patient.

Ching Shih Dreams of Chili

My son, all the world tenders for silver.
I kiss you, coin my cigar on your clothes.
The horizon behind the sinking galleon
laughs like a demon. Or is it a pirate
lighting her pipe? Who knows. Who
knows why birds brine sky instead of
sea. The ocean soiled with siphoned tea.
The junk rocks to the cannon of our
lovemaking, to the tally of our treasure.
Treasure a saltier form of trade. Trade a
spicier taking. I take your hand and put
it on my sex, treasure how it resembles a
bird. To take a lover is to take what is
not yours. My son, you mustn't forget
how silver mined by Aztecs ends up in
China. That chili is an Aztec word.

Ching Shih Discourses on Silk

My son—this silk. This. Milk material
on skin. Sin thinned against hips. This.
Filaments of insect spit slimmed to
fabric. Knit to slip. What I thrill to split
against my slit. Lit lips. Slick twill. Guilt
trip, hit trick. To still every ship
trafficking this, steal every drifting hit.
For me. For my offspring. For the shits
my body emits. These riches are mine to
traffic. No relinquishing to the
Portuguese. The English, the Chinese.
Why would we give up winnings when
we could keep wealth to ourselves? Why
would I let them filch what we take
when in the end it won't be a fair trade?
The way ships sink slaves. The way silver
is the single pay. The way victory is
minced with blades. The way a woman
is made a maid.

Ching Shih Weds for the Second Time

My son—no, I do not remember my appellation. In every language my alias sounds the same: Yeung Sek, Yang Shi, Zhèng Yī Sǎo—they all mean I'm someone's dame. Before I was a wife I was a girl, held in the fist of my father's clan. Should I take yours, I would acquire a third, claimed once more by the little finger of a man. My son, I want to be known on my own terms. I will not take your epithet when we wed, nor celebrity. Instead, I will bear the name spread, a scent, across the southern seas: Xiáng Gū, Fragrant Lady. Of course, history will only remember what becomes lore of the fleet—as man, they'll only recall yours. But all that matters, when we say our vows, is you know the name you cry out as I undress you from these stolen drawers.

Ching Shih Captures the Pearl River

My son, never forget how I enter an estuary: with a woman's fragile command. Oh how sweet it is to enter your world, but with the softness of unburdened hands. From pillaged villages I'm brought prizes of rice, fish, and gin, and witty girls my sailors won't touch till I let them. From the river's inlet I'm brought pearls by my men, who string them around my neck's stem. On the ivory shore, my sailors pick their victories, leave me to tend to my winnings. They say a woman is nothing more than a nacreous pearl, born in a mollusc's soft bed. But as you enter me, my son, remember a pearl is a gem within whose flesh is buried the hardest rock at its centre.

Ching Shih Contemplates Peace

My son, nothing silvers a woman like
surrender. Nothing silvers a purse for
forever. From the ship flies our white
flag, unfurled across the sky. On this
sheaf is the ink from my signature, my
fingers tight as my smile. Though I will
surrender my silks, I will not give up my
girls. Though I will concede my bills, I
will never my birds. A bird without
feathers is still flight. A pirate without
her ship is stilled might. The word for
安 is a roof with a woman beneath it.

The word for 寶 is a roof with treasure
beneath it. I am not peace, nor am I
treasure. I am a woman beneath
nothing, not even sky. My son, I will die
a pirate.

Ching Shih Considers Civilian Life

My son, all my life I have practiced for
poverty, can picture any filth my riches.
This ragged sack my silks. This piss pot
my porcelain pitcher. This pickle of
preserved pig my edible gem. My
mother was a farmer with unbound feet
who taught me to hoard broken seeds.
My father was an ocean dreamer who
taught me to believe I was free. I am not
afraid of poverty. Poverty is a way to
remain lean, as in the spareness of a
knife. The word for pair means to face
one another. The word for pear is a tree
plundered of profits. As your wife, I
need nothing but what's pared between
us. Nothing but this sweet rotting life.

For months I've been thinking about making my blood stop, to create a line of succession. But what if I can't make my blood stop? What if I can't stop the circle to create more circles? What if I made my blood stop, and I stop thinking? What if I stop thinking, and circularity stops? When thinking stops, where does the mind go? When the mind stops, where does blood go? If blood is circular, then it belongs to women. If thinking is circular, then it belongs to women. What happens if women stop? Would circles stop turning? Would the world stop? I'm aware not all women's blood is a circle. Not all women can create succession. And yet they are still women¾they think. They do not stop. Blood is the decay of the unused lining of a uterus that menstruates. Blood is a sign the circle is succeeding, unless it clots. They say that decay leads to rot, but come to think of it, this is itself a movement. I roll the whetstone down the desk and watch as it slows. If blood leads to decay, then to delay it, shouldn't I keep bleeding? If stagnation rots movement, then to stop stasis, shouldn't I just keep flowing?

Diffidence enters with the denseness of clouds. When a cloud doesn't precipitate, it means it was never miserable. A seed floats down the hill, spread by indecision. But being adrift doesn't mean you don't know precisely where you're headed. In the forest, wind scatters spores, enters hollows missed by humans' forward facing eyes. Shapes move sightless through fields. You mustn't forget you know how soft to be to enter a cell closed to you. That you know how to see through the dimness of night.

Ching Shih Reflects on Becoming a Widow

My son—a woman widowed is a woman windowed. A woman exposed to wilderness and wind. When your adoptive father's body went through the window, the world got wider. So did the wind. In a widened world, is a bird lifted by wind? Is a window a wideness through which to view the world? Is a widow wilderness? I want every wideness to be winched so I can always be looking in. Or is it looking out, towards the end of things? Since what is the fate of every wedded thing but to one day become a window? Such as you, after our wedding? When I widow you, which window will your body go through? The wilderness? Another widow's? Who will you wick when I am windowless? Sometimes I wish before I was windowed that instead of your body, it was the wild that wired me. To wing with the wind, which cannot be welded to, or won. Why wed, I wonder? Why wed, when there's only wont, waiting to want again. When widowed, does the wind win? Does the window? Do the wilds wilt over what went to winter? I think in every unwinding there must be a wish, to weather the withering. I want every wronged window wide to the wind of widows. I want every wide wilderness to wick what was lost.

Ching Shih Contemplates Filling Her Womb

My son, what is a wo- without a man? Or perhaps I should say: what is a man without a hu-? A wo- is a hu- whose womb is to be wooed. A hu- is a human without a womb to whom a woman must become marooned. In battle, a woman is twice a man, and you agree. So does the crew. A woman is twice a man because she has the ability to become two, even if this doesn't turn true. With your adoptive father, I filled this womb three times. Three times my womb turned blue. If I were a man, I would hew myself to every human with a womb. I would never maroon them, even if their womb were tombed, because every wo- is a human. This is why I've hued myself to you. All I've ever wanted is to be with someone I could true with, and my love—I've found it with you. If we were two, you wouldn't maroon me, if blue is all we could woo into this world. A wombless wo- can do many things. Fill rooms on a ship with jewels. Deck the deck with maroon curtains. Choose when she wants to feel blue. Dance to any goddamn mood. There are men who tell me it's my duty to fill my womb. What is the duty to my inner rooms? They have no idea what it's like to turn blue. A man is a man without a wo-. Therefore a woman is a woman without a womb. A womb is a womb if you don't use it. A womb is filled by its own wo-. A woman fills her own rooms. My son, you know all this is true—

Ching Shih Considers her Adornments

My son—a woman adorned is a woman bored. A woman borne of her own fortune. Her own opportunities. When I trot out my gold, men ogle. They throb. They long to cot with me, my opulence. I'm proud of my ornaments, my hoarded stones. They've allowed me to bore through bolted doors. I'm proud to be a woman who has bored. I'm proud to be born woman. And yet a woman cannot bolt her own doors sound enough. Cannot bear strong enough against the hordes, who throw boulders. For they come, even if you relinquish your need to be adored. They come, even if you acknowledge an adorned body rots. That your thoughts sometimes rain like rubble. That these stones are not armor but merely carbon. How to make the hordes see they're surrounded by their own cabochons? How to make them see even that doesn't matter, because everything that rots becomes a rock, even rocks? What is a rock but a living stone that absorbs everything around it? What is a rock but the piling of life and time? Behind these bolted doors I rock my body, strong as a cobble. And yet, with pressure, a rock can still be broken. Now the hordes arrive, their daggers cracking the door. If remain a rock I will fracture against what is solid. But a woman bears another, stronger force. At the horde's knock, I stand, soothing my body. What weathers a rock cannot be injured. You cannot bruise what holds a door aloft. You cannot stop what moves with a current. What cannot be wounded is supple and soft.

A woman rises like a billboard, her neon filling the sky. Around her, the crowd applauds before fleeing to the parking lot, tending sines. Can a woman not be terrifying without inciting envy? Must the masses come, threatening her flock? Time and time again I've watched women rise, only to be torn down by the throng. What do people fear so much they can't allow others to climb? Are they frightened their gifts will be dimmed by another's, rather than forging together as a flame in the night? In the paddock an ewe gets stuck in a fence, pulls herself out without effort. An axle turns beneath a car without notice or care. Frictionless, liquid, circular, abiding—all my life I've tried to please the whims of men, but can't a weakness also be a strength? Surely there's also greatness in submission, if it makes the mob think you're finally dead?

No matter how high one soars, you cannot risk a war. In the end it doesn't matter whose blaze it was, the mob's or yours. The wheels turn over scarred earth, over embers of regret. In a leaf's center, a glowing red fire. Behind you, a retreating storm: winter's last lights. But come the eighth month, don't try to keep alive what is already dying. Instead: mingle with the ground until you don't know if you're soil or loam. For up ahead is the grass' green inferno. Up ahead is a brand new earth—

III

Bosphorus Approximations

Through the window of the apartment we'll make home for a month, harbor sparks the eyes. A proxy for the one we normally live beside.

Pickled chilies in the fridge, raisins desiccated from your grandfather's garden. The extravagance of family and its scatterings, as if cards shuffled back and forth through a deck.

Traffic's low-grade conversation. Azan rising through electrical lines. Cobblestones that chatter beneath feet. The hedonistic pleasure of being soaked in your family's syllables, still unknown to me.

Is it only new cities that can excavate old feelings, or also families?

Mid-morning sky pink as the flesh of the fish you pulled apart last night with a fork. A stray dog sniffing time evaporating from concrete.

For some, a later sunrise means more time to remain pitted against night's hard pulp. For others: to lie spiraled beside the inner animal.

Here in this tinkling café, the pace of translation is that of slowed nodes. And yet language is not rain's linear pins—its thrill can hit before lightning does. Its delight.

Mosque dome built on a church's striated arms. Mobile phone shop in the ruins of a hammam. The constant reminder of imported force.

Sometimes I wonder if belonging is to be approached gently, as if an abandoned thing.

And yet, evidence of the collective: tiny brown pellets left for tabby streaks at the edge of sight. Ancient stone water fountains. The rods of fishermen, thin as eyelashes, undulating in a single wink.

Tonight, your family's gossip, sopped in pots of hypnotic tea. And this comfort coating the throat like an old remedy.

Lines on a cat's face erased by the end of evening's pencil. Oh, let us agree that night is the borderless place!

Knowing how back home the infinite raw fields of time stretch on forever, I am unrefined in my fear that time here is cold-pressed.

Stalls with knock-off watches. Pistachio cubes rolled modern in chocolate. The inquisitive eyes of olives, imported from either side of the strait. The migrating feeling that semblance can become the real thing.

Despite your mother's weeping, I am grateful to dictators, for they brought you to me.

This trip will end, but don't worry my love. The starch of family is thickest in its cooking, but its bonds are gelatinous and can maintain the matrix.

If an immigrant is one for whom home is an approximation, perhaps approximate is the only place we can be.

A clap of thunder breaks the uniformity of clouds. Is tension so terrifying you always feel the need to thwart it? Don't you think brushing your teeth can be incantatory? I admit I have faith in monotony. I admit I believe in the ordinary. That boredom is a kind of sorcery. In the morning I bow to the south, turn east to drink tea. If I believe in my routine, it will cast a hex: protect me. On the street electric with rain, foxes slink under yellow streetlamps. I look again from the porch but they're gone. Were they real, come to suck the semen of men? Or did they come as long-lost sisters? When the sky clears, a fox returns, bringing with her a magic coin. Holding it in my palm, I feel it recoil. I crumple on the porch steps, aware I've broken the curse. The fox puts her paw on me: I've survived the worst.

To admit being wrong is a sign of cracking, the way one gives in to a child who sleeps only by their parents' snores. If gods could break their own conditions, would that make them any less powerful, or more? Outside you see a fissure split the ground, hear an almighty's awareness come hissing out. A humble woman, you don't need to be struck by kindness, since you know what it looks like. The storm pulses above you, but you have the magic of a prosaic spell. When you reach the quiet of its eye, all you have to do is run towards the mundaneness of your desk.

Cardiograms (extract)

And it's that time of year again, when words emerge as buds from silence. When a virus, having attacked my nervous system, makes my veins fail to pump blood back to my heart. So the question arises—are thoughts enough to fill my vessels' vacant spaces?

Stepping into emptiness also means entering a sacred genesis. This morning I felt my stroma blooming—a somatic stretching into new limbs of perception. All around me I saw things in and around the house shimmering: books, mugs, flowers, insects, birds, lizards. Thoughts pressed so sharply on my nerves even in daylight I saw stars.

Dark stars enter at the edges of sight. They float across vision like moss on a pond, like the blossoming spores of blue-green algae. To realize that even shimmering things have no edges, that even thoughts can merge, brings a penumbra over my heart. Twilight's clouds rimmed thinly with brightness.

And yet, thinking arises as flowers do, blooming and dying, but at hypersonic speed. It fills every corner of time, which in turn expands at the speed of the universe, only slowing when hitting imagination's borders.

(And, oh, if we were to go beyond?)

Everything is dying, as the cliché goes. I am looking at the spring blossoms outside the window, these ancient beings of changing seasons. I still can't keep up with the fact that their petals, which resemble insects' wrinkled wings, began dying the minute they flowered, as did every human when they were born. We are afraid of death, but death signals time. That it moves.

I know I am not immediately dying, and yet when my blood pressure drops, my heart beats so volcanically it seems to sprout from my chest. To calm myself, I put my nose into my dog's ear, which resembles a flower's pink trumpet. And—what strange magic!—thinking slows.

Dogs are among the true innocents on this earth. When I first encountered my dog, I burst into tears. I already loved her so much I couldn't bear the thought of her death, and yet (should I survive this), in time I will outlive my dog, like I will outlive all the flowers I have carefully coaxed into life in the garden. How mysterious we are, humans: to care so intimately for other bodies, knowing full well they will die.

Time is drafty when we don't pay attention to it. As a child, I spent years squeezing time dry as a lizard's skeleton. Now all I can do is look straight at time, itself unfluctuating. The rooms are sodden with it, heavy like a sponge.

Do walls absorb memories? Wandering through this old, pink house, I stumble over boxes never thrown away. In the closet, time catches on my shirt and I spend the afternoon walking a memory's cobbled streets, sunning my palimpsest-self on promenades, soaking in moments like sea spray on the specter of a near-forgotten body...oh, don't you want to wear memories like an old dress sometimes, clothed in it constantly, as if you'd never shed those cells?

Somebody stop me buying small boxes in my boredom! Their tiny confinements delight me. Yes, I know it's senseless to collect. That everything, including this condition, will soon end. But there's a tidiness to it, this wanting to contain things within their own borders. To divide what can be grasped, as opposed to what can't—such as life.

Poetry can divide life! All these feelings squeezed into tiny packages then compressed with the pressure of diamonds, to be exploded into millions of facets when read—

The poets left us, as they do, but their poems remained. In my terror, I try to remind myself as long as there are minds, there will be poems. One day, even artificial minds. When they arrive, I will pay the fee like an amusement park ride and travel the rivers back up to that dark green forest of poems. Remain there.

My thoughts, like my heartbeat, interrupt from time to time. It's a reminder I'm still alive, which brings me relief.

Watching the sunlight mutate across my childhood bedroom this morning, I realized years ago I would have cursed this return for having not generated enough energy to overcome this home's orbit. But now I'm grateful for this repetition, its protection—and hope too it will soon extend to my heartbeat's deletions, wild in their refusal of their taming they may be...

I wish I lived in the age of the ancient poets, when words were supernatural. Back then, words arose from the ridges of a turtle's shell, and made the skies shake. When you wanted to conjure a storm, what would you do? You would say—*storm, storm, storm*—and like magic, it would come. Nowadays to repeat a word is to accept its emptiness. Meanings thought better of their shelters, and left.

Wáng Wéi, the ancient poet-Buddha, knew this. At the end of his life he withdrew to the mountains. There, he was surrounded by repeating greens, whose broad variety he recorded in his poems: blue-green moss of enlightenment, emerald air soaking clothes, azure-green moss climbing robes. Sure, he also found boredom, monotony—all things that brought him closer to the heart-mind—but oh, what remains most are these poems' steepings in *green, green, green*—

Having lost my connection to my ancestral tongue, I wonder if I've also lost the power to summon the ancient poet-demon Lǐ Hé's cosmic storms, his blue raccoons and demons,

his weeping orchids, flagons of purple wine? I suspect so: as my connection with my language died, so did the dragons.

What to do with the knowledge that we have lost the ropes to our own ancestors? How to live with lineages and languages lacerated at the shoreline, having been forced to cross bodies of water, then reorganized into amorphous forms? To know that some carried their gods with them, while others adopted new ones. Now, in the cosmic disorder, where does that leave us—we, the celestial descendants, stumbling around with our tongues cut off? Where else can we go in the silence but take on the oppressors' syllables, grow demonic? Become monstrous so we no longer recognise inner gods?

We tried to overcome this loss with technology—we, the original algorithms! And for the most part were successful. Somewhere along the way, however, words became overwhelmed and retreated into their own torments.

Days pass borderlessly...the only comfort I have when my mind fogs is knowing the old roads will never die. Last night I dreamed of stepping into a courtyard at night. The dark green air wrapping its cool scales around me, its hot breath against my ear, I woke knowing it won't be long until I'll be met again with dragons.

Spring storms roll into view across the garden. They trigger their counterpart in my heart, which squalls across my chest in co-operation. I do appreciate constancy, I do, am proud of my own loyalties to what I'm true to, but today I'm relieved for the break from the sun's stare, for it lets me rest. Oh, rest!

It is spring because the azaleas have melted their reds into green's sweet equilibrium. Ah, the wisdom of azaleas, who have no need to endlessly grow upwards! Who instead pretend to look dead as they send roots deep underground.

To look dead on the outside! This is the trick of the lizards, who sit still and kingly on rocks, soaking in anointing rays of sun, while birds fly silent to such light—

I've come to realize there's an uncertainty in things that disguises a cosmic certainty. After all, when flowers melt, where do they go? They go to the anonymity of green, to the heart-mind: that same place of potential that words go in their silence. This is the equilibrium I long for: the certainty that calls me in the emptiness between heartbeats. But why am I never allowed to stay there? To remain evergreen? Why must I be aroused into the eroticism of the seen?

It's not a physical landscape that calls me, but an imagined one. A wilderness with secrets between its green leaves, and sunlight only to be sipped through branches at noon. A place to finally rest in the heart-mind's silence. I've never been there in real life, but I know my veins are dipped in its color.

Wáng Wéi meditated there. Dù Fǔ visited when he wasn't running from war. Along with his shadow and the moon, Lǐ Bái danced drunk there. Now these geographies are known by other names, but I go there frequently in my mind. It's quiet there.

It's quiet in this house. So quiet all I can hear is the slow effort of my blood trying to break free from gravity. And still I can't hear what I yearn for: silence beneath the silence.

Listen, what we feel as stillness is actually continuous movement. The earth's plates creak and groan. Yet the movement is so subtle we don't feel it. This is all to say that my heart is a volcano. Last night in bed it shook the doors, shattered the glass in the windows, caused mudslides in the living room, spewing lava everywhere. From the outside: barely a crack in the walls.

A friend who lives far away in New York once told me they visited a semi-anechoic chamber at the Guggenheim: Doug Wheeler's *PSAD Synthetic Desert III*. The room was covered with a material that absorbed all sound, except for a recording of the desert so attendees' ears wouldn't explode from lack of pressure. How was it, I asked my friend, to hear nothing but your heartbeat? "Utter torture," she said.

But it wasn't just the heartbeat that drove my friend, whom I miss dearly, crazy. It was the sound of clothes susurrating, of eyelids scratching against eyeballs, the tempest of others' breathing. It was the realization that with attention, silence, like distance, is just another story.

I'm alone this afternoon, as I am most days. Where is everyone? They're out working, shopping, living their daily lives, while here it is my heart's volcano and the dog. But I'm not alone. Besides the lizards, who dart quartz-like across rocks, I'm surrounded by my poetic ancestors. Are they alive or dead? Does it matter? I have their poems, they start my heart.

I fell asleep on the couch reading Etel Adnan, whose books I love, and who entered death not so long ago. Among many things, she wrote often about being companions with abstract emotions. In my dream I dreamed that through her world of leaps and deletions, our heart-minds merged. When I woke, the sunlight in the room had scattered, prismatic, and yet I somehow felt whole, and I was happy.

Becoming close to another's consciousness is as close as you can get to sublimation. This is only achievable through poetry, food, good conversations, or sex. Since I can currently only consume the first of the four, I gorge on it flagrantly. Besides the ancients, I am accompanied by Bhanu, Franny, and Etel daily on the couch. Despite their distances, they have become close companions, whose consciousnesses I draw close to in times of loneliness. These sublimations open windows...oh yes, it's not only landscapes I get to view, but entire intelligences!

Praying to the poetic ancestors rises from my discontent in praying to my real ancestors, whom we make gods. Praying to ancestors only continues cycles of trauma, and so we keep perpetuating them. These days I pray to the inanimate, such as poems and mountains, who will one day free us, and which hold their own intelligence.

This brings me back to Bhanu. As a young woman hitchhiking across America, she once declared herself a cyborg. In Donna J. Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*, humans are cyborgs, which are both animal and machine. This means my body must have its own divine intelligence.

To not understand the intelligence of my own body is its own crime. On my body are devices that tell me how high my resting heart rate is, how low my blood pressure has fallen. But I swear before we were cyborgs we were algorithms: each day we counted how long the light would last, and slept by those numbers. Knew how long it would take to rest. To fall in love. To grieve. To go without touch—

On the other hand, Bhanu said it's difficult to tell the difference between a cyborg and a human. But approximation is all I'm sublimated by these days. The difference is I still feel the cosmic terror of it, unlike those who've long traded semblance for reality. We tell ourselves the floods have ended, but reality is they're still coming.

It's true—I do eat animal flesh and feel its dead weight in my hand, heavy as the rump of my dog. A cyborg devours itself.

Looking back, I have clung to things knowing I needed to let go of them as if I were hanging from the basket of a hot air balloon. If only I knew that I would simply fall into the wisdom of meadows, I would have let go long ago.

Will this condition devour itself? Even as I hope it will leave me, I feel part of it remain, my body's code permanently altered. Its wires circuited differently. My cyborg-body will be some kind of alloy, a faint composite of what it was before—no, perhaps it will be stronger! Deep in the realm of the equilibrium, its wires buried deep underground.

I am hoping desperately every day to get better, though I acknowledge the process may be so slow it can only be measured by the seasons. The way to turn over a card can reveal your fate: one side destiny, the other, the heart-mind. To look up one day and realize it's no longer spring.

In getting better I will return to a new equilibrium, one in which going about my regular life will be the norm. But which is the better equilibrium? Will I return to a life of endless petals? I don't think so. I am shedding all my wings in here, and shall choose to remain a naked stem, blooming at will.

Oh look, the flowers have fallen into the heart-mind—

Notes

The titles of the 12 sections of “Deluge: A Chinese Almanac” refer to the first half of the 24 solar terms. The 24 solar terms are a traditional Chinese calendar which divides the sun’s annual movement into segments. The terms have been used for over 3,000 years to mark agricultural activities, seasonal changes, festivals, and rituals.

The title “Here is Where We Meet” is taken from John Berger’s short story collection of the same name.

The poems featuring hexagrams derive from my interactions with the *Yi Jing* 易經. The *Yi Jing*, or *The Book of Changes*, is an ancient Chinese divination text often considered the foundation for Chinese cosmology and philosophy, Daoism, and Confucianism.