

Immigration

English is my
second language
poetry is my first
the slipping soul language
seldom spoken with fluency
the art of insatiability
the way words climb and clamor in corners
catch sparkles of sunlight riding specks of dust
starlit remnants
lick snowflakes off the face of a stranger

we are all immigrants to language
born into the mute space between
silence and everything
born into the tongue held mystery of imagination
still frame
black and white
then color
then sound
then meaning
laughter and delight when mouth corners
turn upward
don't tell me you weren't born a poet
when you lifted infant fist to cloudy skies
spread fingers towards yellow sun
moved your body towards warmth

no stranger to the way words whip
wind wild around world-weary laugh lines
the wrinkles of a smile
build a fire in the dancing eyes of a stranger

so universal is poetry that
I spoke the language without hesitation in the
slums of Negombo and the outskirts of
Valencia
in a tiny tavern in Colorado
with unmistakable sensuality in
Mercado Veintiocho
to my newborn son as he
gazed up
a stranger
and wrote our mother tongue
with his suckling lips
straight onto the shallows of my beating heart

Scales & Teeth

break it down to the cellular level
everything has scales
everything has teeth

my housemate all flesh and muscle
peels the sunburnt skin off his left arm
with a smile
he has biked hundreds of miles during The Virus
as he would have before
as he will after

you have to really like yourself to be okay alone

a girl I knew in childhood sends me updates
from Chicago
of what The Virus feels like
chest heavy
scream at the back of her throat
impossible to breathe impossible to sleep
and I think
I have had this before

from the edges of New Mexico a friend
wraps his face in a grease stained bandanna
and drives across the desert
wind whipping sand across ruddy cheeks
as he would have before
as he will after

break it down to the cellular level
evolution demands change
and tradition demands the same

did you know the suicide rate spiked during
the Great Depression he asks
scooping another day's rations of
brown rice into querying mouth
eyebrows raised
it is? which one?

I slice mushrooms into a steaming pan
watch the fungus bend and warp
between lonely fingers
notice the scales and the membranes
notice the bite
notice the teeth

Stranged

a few years ago before we were so worried about
Russian intelligence taking our identities and
deep faking our decisions
before we had forgotten the definition of
Presidential
or redefined it at least
there was an online game where
you'd upload a selfie and the app
would generate your face
opposite gender
and no matter how many selfies
I tried to upload
or angles I tried to get right
there was never a fabricated face
that looked as much like male me
as my brother already

so when I say I see myself in him
fast talk and foolish hands
charismatic criminal
caution to the wind
what I mean is I was there when he learned
to ride a bike

what I mean is we have the same cheekbones
sloping nose
mine imperfectly feminine
his perfectly masculine
the same set jaw
chin
lines beside eyes
lies upon lies
tattooed arms and
traumatic backgrounds

when I say he's magnetic what I mean is
don't you like me?
aren't I enough?

I'll never forget his face set in stoic
suspense and self deception
minutes before my protection order was granted
and I'll never forget what it feels like
to be afraid of a brother
because I have been now
twice

I do not revel in his estrangement
because there is nothing strange
about his features
his lies
his manipulations
his compelling energy and
the passion with which he speaks and believes himself to be
nothing strange about the
darkness he holds in his gut
questions he asks about his worth
self doubt and I are well acquainted
too
and I've wondered at the wrath my own
wellspring of energy can wire and deliver when my worth is challenged

don't you like me?
aren't I enough?

we've both looked down at the bottom
of the same empty bottle
and we've both seen the same eyes
lines
lies

when I say I love him deeply
what I mean is
I held his newborn body against my chest
and felt nothing but pride
how can someone so familiar
be both exactly you
and a stranger
too

Editing a Love Poem

edit: do not
rely on metaphor
as no one wants to read about how

your love is like a tree trunk
standing against
come what may
wind whipping leaves off at spring limb
roots uncovered by bulldozer blade
or carved into with knives or blood or
the Hope of Next Year

love is flipping a coin
and letting you call it

love is the Mekong River
transboundary
mostly mud and suffering
weaving tributaries through
farmlands and fertile lands and dry lands
and hours where you will not see another soul
and hours so crowded and clamoring
you'll feel at one with the heartbeat of everything
uniquely held in the hull of the watercraft
brave enough to traverse her murky waters
love is the flood and love is the
vessel that withstands it

and nobody wants to hear about
how love is a rock skipping across
a smooth pond
mountain lake
clouds reflecting on split surface
because nobody wants to hear about
the ripples
and the waves
and the ways
that love skips years or months or moments
is lost underwater
comes up for air
spends moments or months or years
holding a breath
drowns fully
resurrects
or sinks to the bottom of the sea
because love is lost, too, and often

edit: do not rely on simile
because nobody wants to hear about
the ways that

love is the long sigh after a deep sleep
no
love is the deep sleep
no
love is never falling asleep because
love is in being fully awake
fully visible
fully seeing and fully seen
but love is blind
and love sometimes goes for days without lifting her face to meet your gaze
and love sometimes cries her eyes out in loneliness while you're
in the room where love takes place
because love takes up space
and love has boundaries
and love is boundless
and love is the lines between two destinations
but love isn't a destination and doesn't follow road rules
or roadways
or waylays or alleys or getting from A to B
because love isn't a binary

love is the wind laugh on the tail of a kite string
love is no strings attached
freedom to dance and cartwheel
love is a rope swing in a tall tree
love is the noose around the neck of possibility
and love is the very essence of possibility
come what may

edit: nobody wants to read about the ways that love is
impatient
unkind
envious
boastful
dishonorable
self-seeking
record-keeping
failing
never enough

but love is a battle cry
not a victory march
and love only hurts because when loves isn't there
there's a ripped open
blood-letting

wound left in its absence
love is the bandaid
love is the bullet
love is the brainwash
and the memory
and the loss of the memory
and the damage done
and the healing
and love is the nurse that comes into the room
tears in her eyes
and tells you "six weeks"
love is the reality that we are all so very temporary that we must cling to the ways
that love
reimagines our lives
rebirths our promise
restarts our engines

edit: don't rely on anecdote

but love is going out in the snow
zero degrees
scraping ice off a windshield
turning a key
shoveling a walkway
programming the coffee pot late at night
and waking up early to say goodbye

and sometimes love says goodbye because
sometimes love is a tree trunk
weathering a storm
and sometimes love is a cradle
made from a tree trunk that fell in a storm

edit: maybe just don't
try to write about love

No Coronation

I have heard that creation is meant to be soft and light and
I argue that from conception to crowning there is no celebration
no coronation
just arrival shit soaked and bloody
splitting the body of delivery in two

there is no light pink and blue no cotton softness
in the push and pull of humanity rending and tending a life into a harsh world

you are not old yet my son says standing taller than my shoulders
bearing down bearing him bearing the weight of what if
but I've watched youth flee me from the day my navel stretched
and skin tore at eighteen
from the day his lifetime ago when I stood at an altar all Romeo and Juliet
and altered a forever I didn't know would elude me didn't know would confuse me didn't know what
forever would mean

so when I tell my sons that I hope they love hard their first love and learn much
and give consensually unendingly excitedly
but do not keep her what I mean is love is meant to be freely given and freely seen that there is little
passion in passing by one another in the night when trying to build alternate lives that love is sometimes
as temporary as a sunrise or as long as the finality of the horizon that there is possibility in every daylight
there is patience in every long night there is no forcing forever
no want or try will ensure safety so

I hope my motherhood is a roadmap they lose
a trail they abandon a myth they tell as a cautionary tale
that they build glass houses and live in freedom that when the world says fight or flee they scream other
better f words paint their faces with the memories of Amistad reconcile an Armistice become the
resistance
name their daughter Courage and fortify with only feathers for flight

I hope their love is soft and round and full and when it comes to opposition I hope sometimes it bends
gently and sometimes it remains resolute
I hope they know there's no failure in the way water trickles downhill and leaves traces picks up pebbles
rearranges
that love is the great reconstruction

motherhood has shaped my womanhood like mother earth's spreading hips the movement of tectonic
plates the force of a mountain the rush of the ocean against the lava rent shore I hope they pray to nature
and fold their hands and bodies to her alone that they recover remnants of the skin of the soles of my feet
the skin of my soul the skin of my teeth from the places I should have laid to rest or paused to learn or
dared to imagine

I hope they see motherhood not as a battleground but as a mystery all spread legs and wonder deep
drenched in the very smear of being human

there is no softness in creation
let there be light
we have been bloody our whole lives

imagine stars colliding imagine sparks lighting imaging a pelican pecking tears of blood from her own
breast imagine feeding your child flesh of your flesh and the constant question
is it enough
was I enough
will they be enough
will they sacrifice Romeo and Juliet at the altar of youth
build a shrine from their bones make bricks from their ashes and smear blood around the doorframe
make a pact with the gods for freedom forever

what if forever has already failed their future their hazel eyes their hazy view their mother on fire their
gods under siege how can I hand them this future and ask them to thank me

my sons make me pancakes and I offer an apology for the ways I
have mothered wrong or unwell or without belief I tell them there is meant to be a mystery and a epiphany
in every act of parenting every act of possibility every time a mother births a child from blood and spit and
bone and shit and knows she will not live to see if they make it
if she was enough
if they are enough
If they love madder and live wilder than any mother has if they build bridges out of backgrounds that do
not make sense and dare to climb the fiery side of a volcano just to watch everything they know melt
because creation is not soft but it is in a flash of the brightest light that

a phoenix rises

I hope they dismantle the very privilege they are born to knock down the statues of patriarchal pride see
the lines on the flesh of my side realize the myth is true

I mother because I am selfless and I mother because I am selfish too

no coronation

I hope they lay down every crown set aside the accolades show up to the earthquake with soft eyes and
working hands I hope they see that humanity has stretch marks down her side that wounds will never fully
heal but that scars can be traced like constellations if you do the work of imagination that it is high time for
them to be quiet and soft and round in a hard and square world but it is about time for them to show up to
link arms to create safety in a shit soaked bloody world and I hope when I see
their shrines and their doorsteps
strands of my hair wrap inside the bird's nest next to the stoop
that I trip on my own wishbone cemented in their sidewalk
that they paint a wall of constellations in their living room and that
everything is hazel
everything is clear
it is all an arrival

I never wanted to be a mother but I have been split and saved by their youth and imagination and I hope it
is enough these few fleeting days of hard won celebration or recognition I imagine my sons
handing me their sons
I will never raise but have already shaped and

I am all softness and the curtain will rend the garden will need tended and there is room at the altar for
this kind of forever because as a mother I know now what forever can mean what forever can be what
forever can choose to see even when it is so far in the distance so bloody and torn

so world weary and battled so
worn so fiery and full so bright light
shrouded in mystery

it's hard to believe
it is enough