

Our Love Angers God

but with you, the way you wail, the way you writhe a Salem's waltz
on your mother's couch and in projector rooms of college campuses,
I can hear your heart pulling from your breasts when you breathe
hot into my ears, eyes closed to feel my spirit blend with yours.
You wail those three dangerous words with your sweat on my chin,
my eyes lost in raw and charcoal-colored thighs,
the salt-rose wet, the sweet maple, ginger root, honeysuckle,
the pleasant dull lulling the winced hums of pat and quaff;
calabash and oil palm, the lugged skin-flap soured by moist
but syrup to the tongue;
strawberry seeds on my sweetheart's other lips,
a couplet of light kisses, a gesture of *Come Here's* in the clenched warmth,
the notion of abundance appraised to holy animation,
the song of her rising and meeting God.
There is power in this.
Not because of my own pleasure, but she looks to be ablaze
in the Holy Ghost and Fire and says
I Love You in every language of the speaking tongues.
Castrate me clean and drown me in this moment if her holy screams
are wrong.
There is no sin in this.

Now a Stranger's

strangers came from the mountain to see holy men
through a summer the color of marigolds
from uglified urban bungalows or suburban sprawls
from the rough home or the easy places
from a storm or a river

 a parade of sunlight in the distant tree lines
 and the wind shared a walk of no purpose
 honey-thick and restlessly chiming like fire bells

the strangers passed a dead poet
scribbling on a drop leaf table covered in doobby cloth
joy breaking over their faces
with tighter jaws grinning

 they've come to see her
now all she does is sex and cry

there was once an excited valley here
exploding with beds of exotic blooms
long-necked trees writing on the sky
always ever-blue always ridden by wind-charged birds
an open house for local wildlife
and a sun-filled stream ever-bending
and its clear abundance singing

I saw the girl's soul as a ghost in the body of flowers
faceless and inharmonic
like something almost being said

 she turned and escaped with the strangers
 to try them all herself

I wanted to speak god's name
but would she answer back?

I just wanted to say,

“I love you, you’re wanted,
there’s no reason to die this way.”

She walked with no purpose like the wind.
the clouds were getting mighty low
the orange evening drooped over the once
snow-clothed mountain peaks

Lord, help the strangers of the night
don’t take her to that place

God, help her and be still

my beating heart

for her nights like these will only last a season

and she’ll return

my poetry my girl

like boomerang

the thing that came back to me

I took a beeline back to a barren glade

to wallow in this saddened storm-worn

mid-summer evening

the whole hideous wetness of the rain-scented shrubbery

riding the stirs of the wind and

carrying a cold draft into my inner room

there’s a red rose there in the blackened grass

like the wrist’s trickle against the ride of a blade

the journey of blood to the smoke-stained fingers

wetting the earth and giving God his sorrow back

This red rose alone

I take it and hold it and like it

my last pretense to hope

Mango Voodoo Lovechild Whatever

This her, I'll name her *Hop*, because she is shy and giddy and only flaunts her vibrant colors when we speak. And only We. School girl. Lost girl. Confused girl. "It's situational," she says. We live in a library and exchange articles and turn to keyboard warriors at night. I don't know why I like her. She's just magic to me. We write and drink in libraries midday. Hop, my midday drinking situational lover. We once overdosed on injera, young green onions, red peppers, and roasted garlic chips that I wasn't too fond of, and she taught me the art of pincer-pinching teff to get the yummy mustard greens, spring peas with little lentils, beans and tibbs, at a seedy Ethiopian eatery on Osage where she rambled, "Yeah, but can Water Moccasins or Glass Snake or Black Boar Moana on a Banana—or whatever his face is—can he James Brown shuffle like Hammer? Tell FAFSA not to kill the children."

Hop here is my friend. Hop here is consensually my lover when she is drunk like this. On a rainy day, she peels a piece of blue note from a library book with *Mango Voodoo Lovechild Whatever* written in dainty script, but she means to say, "It's raining a bitch so go grab us some." The dark fruit over a Belgian style brew always excites the best in us—or her. Me, preferring the heady lagers when I mess with the stuff. I return to her in the second floor aft where all the ungodly things are done, where the lights go off earlier and there's a wide couch and a very small window and a good earshot glimpse to the stairs to the 1st and 3rd floors.

She glows when she sees me with *Lovechild*. We drink and write cheap, sad poetry, with sin-happy, funky, noxious malts, fruity amber ethers while deliciously tipple. I wonder aloud, "What are we, Hop?" She answers comfortably drunkenly, "A pair of dumb-fucked loud dripping maniacs over suicide lover letters" and she covers up a giggly, beer-burp with a stupid kiss she'd recount with tomorrow's hangover pangs, probably remedied with the leftover old-fashioned Rodenbach guzzler. (They say it does the trick. Never tried it personally.)

I say, "I want you," or "I want you like the light-filled water slamming the riverbed near the Thika Falls you rave about." She's always raving on about something: the price of schooling, the misrepresentation of her queer and brown folk. Him. The *cute* street squirrels springing from cans and stealing our food in sprawling parks. The happy flowers in Nairobi exploding in her mother's garden rolling all the way to the tunnel. Him. My white-peopling and mansplaining to mix well with the cool cats in uppity coffee shops. Today's rain from the moody cloud bursts and the fleeing light doing the sun-kissed trick for her. Him. But all I seem to hear is Her. Every time.

Hop's saddest of smiles. I see it. I know it. And like it. We do it anyways, sin-happy again, libidinous, sweetly obscene, racket-silent, ale-wet longing, a struggle to unbuckle and lock on-and-off to the sounds of elevators and feet and *Maybe we shouldn't do this* and *Stop* but *Why are you stopping?* then, the ball-dropper: *Fuck me dumb like my husband is watching*.

A wet peck for the mole on my cheek to say she is *Sorry* but *Not really, though*. The mystery look like *Don't tell nobody* and *I swear to God, dude*. A dip in body and a dip in moral, and the look again: *I swear to God. I mean it*. Her lower breasts jingling on my trembling knees. The mango lick. The long double kiss. My voodoo scented huff-and-puffs. *Shut up so we don't get caught!* Her jaw drooping bubbles onto the glassy chair.

. . . I've shot the breeze too long. I'm sorry. I just feel so happy here. Like those Nairobi blooms. Like that air is silk. Like those streams ran by rainbows of koi. Like those bubblegum bushes of the moors booming with fedoras and chelsea. I'm done. But in a nutshell, Hop had shown me things. A universe that she owns. I befriended her who I let drink the smoke from the belly of my throat, who spat those same spirits back to the thin eddies of the wind and chased them with her lips, who told me of some evergreen valleys in Kenya; their beautiful pink lotuses and golden sunflowers, wasps as big as wilder beasts and the sweetest pawpaw (*your toes will curl into Kente cloth*), her large home with plenty of pets and children running wild, this place she called *Nyumbani*, this place we call *Home*, and her husband who loves her more than the world and a little less than me.

summer like i love you

Speak to me again in Neruda.
Where a butterfly lands on the petals of your lips.
From spring or the plum-flushed creepers.
To that summer day, deep terracotta kisses
tapping the whiffs of shea butter in the rose,
the lavender, the smoke of sunlight in the summerhouse.
These moments are full of secrets and song,
the wind leaving a young girl
into the dead sound of a poet.
The amalgamation of solid spirits
and the soul takes off its clothes,
like the naked shivering of the wind,
like this is foreign to you,
like sweat and smiles,
like I love you.

Something so small
—a moment out to a thousand—
to let me dress your perfect bareness in bluebells,
and honeysuckle, and sweet-smelling verbs,
to lay your body on a bed of wisteria blooms
to see what the Lord has made with the bearings
of the First Garden.
Thank you.
And thank you to the dance of eyes a teenager had
and went on down the university rotunda without a word,
and thank you to the evening empty of people,
and thank you to the skirt worn
and to the room in green-eyed solitude,
and to the train too late,
and to you, for saying *Yes*,
like you shared this dark room's thrill,
like that delicious moan tossed on your screams,
like I could lose everything for this,
like you were worth losing everything for,
like I love you.

Gone.
She is another's. She is another's.
Her memory is made of shadows from
the half-moon's beam,
the gap-toothed grin like my mother's,
her silly dance at random, a still river,
the seventeen cherry blossoms inviting me to peaches
(the ones from our late lunch on the
perennial-fed mezzanine last June),
a metaphor for joy, newly discovered colors,
the light of the First Day

—and there was light, and she was good.
Gone. But *always* is a place,
a place we promised when she once shared
the smile of the water polished by the moon,
as cool as the moon,
and where her hair always seemed to carry
a small flower like a noondream,
like a ring,
like I love you.

I think God was unaware of how to make her
as she was made of everything;
the lake's drift, the spring's perfume coddling
the green poppies, the bedazzled track
of a yellow dwarf star,
wildfires and waterfalls,
the indigenous eminence of the First Peoples,
this dream of winter,
blue night resting
over the once sun-soaked treetops.
Nevertheless, in all this, she is another's.
She is another's.
Like forever isn't real, like the butterfly's kiss,
like the patient monochromatic night
and the teal entrance of new dawn,
like the sun is waiting for her,
an April hurried,
like summer,
like how I loved you.

coffee with kalani

She'll try to give you a serious, ambitious soul, this girl.

I want to talk trouble with the world with her.

Kalani, I'll call her: U Penn Girl.

It's true.

I saw a star caught dangling like dandruff in her locs
the first time our eyes locked, back in March of 2016 when she asked,

“Does this Coffee chick know you write like this?”
with a tear as fat as the March moon eavesdropping
from a milky-gray sky above some Spruce shop's lanai.

I shyly blush a blood-rust red in the ears,
pleasantly peeved, worn from that question
from other potential lovers—the third since she left.

That Coffee chick whose face once reminded me of the
sunbaked rosebuds grazing in the pot of Kalani's studio panes,
or the sliver of silver light leaning in from the quarter-colored clouds
gathering in the west of the complex,

or pain, simple, black-eyed, soul-torn pain.

It is now April of the same year and the rain's tapping
patted the roof of her Altima outside the coffee joint on 36th and Market,
and she asks “What are we?”

It's my birthday brunch and I deserve silence as a gift.

She gives it.

Then the night brought the last breath of rain
and we celebrate under covers, no lovemaking tonight,
just tunes and fumes, the spring moon with us,
silence with us, as thick as damp smoke,
the smoke from the joint we share, and no words were shared,
same smoke briefly echoed a whiff of soot
and leaf-burning Columbian green,

a clue of sadness.

I am 23.

It is May.

On the same day, I publish a small piece about the Coffee chick,
this gray-scaled spooker from the frightened child's closet,
this breathtaking penny-piece in a crop top
reeking my skin with the scent of unbearable loneliness,
the yet-woken peace an apparent mask,
with thin, reddening, restless eyes
—signs of recent weeping—
Kalani slaps me seconds after the second read and lukewarm quarrel.

The piece was about a lost girl whose wickedness doomed her,
who carried cutthroat shadows like the phantoms I usher
taught to sleep angry in blood-woken snakeroot groves,
who kills all happy things and dismisses murder as self-love
by some half-ass life lived aimlessly and her
descent into shabbiness and overworked promiscuity.

I called it “How To Be Single” and thought it was dope.
Kalani thinks, “For fuck's sake,”
then says, “For fuck's sake.”

I knew it was coming,
so, I stared at the brown-brick east wall of the loft,
timeworn with some hidden wisdom in them,
to the night table and her computer on top,
to the painting of a river, stone and moss-pocked,
light-splattered, rippled and aggravated by a downpour of blue wind,
—anything—
and then back to Kalani, so brown and sad,
once with a child-like joy's disillusionment,

now the weary looker, a standing chill foreign and hot,
and she is crying.
Tear-drenched and impossibly pink,
she hits me,
hard enough that I briefly remembered how normal pain felt.

“It’s been three months,” she croaked,
and “You’re a good writer. . . I like you and want you. . .
You won’t stop writing about her. . . You won’t even touch me. . .
Even when I ask you to,”
and “I’m tired of reading about this bitch.
I’m tired of waiting for you.”
I’m tired.

It is July and the early heat-caked morning twisted its shoulders
and strutted its stuff to lay waste to the summer night’s strange cool.
The burning mist slicks the flat-faced fronts of the Lombard homes.
A kid kicks dust under a gum tree to bury a toy, early to play.
Seen waves like hats haloes car tops
occasionally blotted by a cloud’s soon-after print,
a dead leaf once and a while finding footing on a hood or roof.
I smoke in the café’s terrace, sun-cooked, summer-watching,
daydreaming of things she would say,
if she would hit me again after months of nothingness.
When she arrives, we smile.

“I read ‘coffee with kalani,’” Kalani said. “It was pretty cool.”
We briefly speak.
She has a lover now and I’m happy for her,
I really am.
“Don’t let her ruin you,” she pleads after coffee.
“It’s been months. Don’t wait for her, she isn’t waiting for you—
her friend even told you.

Move on, okay? You're young.

You're a good man maybe fifty years ago, but nowadays you're a fool."

We laughed.

I kissed her with apology.

I kissed her cheek goodbye.

I haven't heard from her since.

A month after and hot Karla of the local Pyro Garden
brings brews to the court for me and the boys.

Last round and they're calling it quits
with their ritualistic tail-tracking the dodgy bar.

They slap me hard on the back—
mostly passionately, but also out of pity,

like a stray dog,

dirty and hopeless—

like petting my lonely.

I denied two twenty-somethings who were half-naked,
half-drunk, and pseudo-beautiful—

for Coffee, for Kalani. . .

I decide to linger back and have a few more rounds,

envy the hammered, happy-plastered faces,

their simple talk, their stranger kindness,

enjoy this sadness in a glass,

enjoy this facade of simplicity flooding ghosts of a sadder man—

a thin-lipped, colorless fellow sitting like me a few seats down,

sitting like me, like me—

enjoy this leery place of drunk, blackened walls,

adobe-fringed and aged, toppled by keepsake,

enjoy this meta-hipster junky groove,

this electric space,

and people-watch for four a.m. writer plot.

Alone. Of course, alone.