

Sixfold Spring

22 Karat

In 1968, when French students hurled bricks
in Paris streets and Dr. King was shot,
when Black athletes raised their fists
at the Olympics and Apollo 8 orbited the moon,
my pious Greek grandmother gave me
two Egyptian gold bangles
symbol of my new womanhood
soft bracelets now dented and rippled.

In Alexandria the muezzin
in the tiny neighborhood mosque
would make the call to prayer
across the street so narrow
it seemed like he was in the apartment
personally inviting us:
hayya 'ala s salah hayya 'ala s salah
حيَّ على الصلاة حيَّ على الصلاة
my grandmother would sing along
humming as she chopped onions and parsley.

“Female assist! Female assist!”
Now whenever I go through airport security
TSA agents touch me from crotch to fingernails,
bracelets on my wrist for generations:
“You should get these cut off –”
as I stand on the small humiliation of bare feet.
“Should I get the bolt cutters, hah hah?”
The bracelets set off the metal detector every time.
”Would you like to be searched in a private room?”
No! I want everyone in the airport to see me being patted and poked
by latex-clad hands, plus the bonus explosive residue swipe.
Ornament becomes flashpoint post-9/11.

The tiny chime of two gold cymbals
on my right wrist bone was my theme song.
Come to salvation, come to salvation –
they rang true.
hayya 'ala l-falah hayya 'ala l-falah
حيَّ على الفلاح حيَّ على الفلاح
Sometimes what you love too much can be a shackle.

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Chiaroscuro

Crickets tuning and re-tuning
Rooster finally quiet, hens subdued
Fireflies off-ing and on-ing at the window
Synagogue down the hill empty,
Family asleep downstairs
Toddler among toothy monsters
Baby swimming amniotic laps
Peepers in the ravine intoning moon and muck
Darkest trees laden with scintillations.
In my heart, all the sin and betrayal one could hope for.
Tender skeleton across my shoulders, bones twinkling.
Regret so deep, so bleak,
it might just become the lantern I require.

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Before and After

(For My Mother)

(A trio of duplexes* * form invented by poet Jericho Brown)

I. They Came for You

My brother told me you spoke as you were dying: “Our options are limited.”
“They came to me, they finally came to me – that’s a good thing, right?” you asked.

Visions come to those who concentrate. I remember when I was nine, telling you
I had felt God as I played my recorder outside. I remember your face

when I told you my melody drew our neighbor out of her house to listen.
Now I know you felt pity, not disbelief. You wished it to be true for me.

I believe it was pity. Or wistfulness. Because you had tasted sacrifice.
Time came for the return. Hardest of all was washing your diminishing body,

Tending you like you were my child, skin transformed into leathery perfection,
surrendered to tender truth of waiting. You had chosen to trade your gift,

ransoming one long dream for another. Your very bones bent to the task.
I knew you loved my hands on you and shrank from the hands of the caretaker.

I sponged what was left of love and despair. You yearned to glimpse them as dread dissolved.
“They have finally come,” you whispered. “I have no complaint about the warmth.”

II. Deception

I remember blue-legged crabs and palettes of sea stars from the Salish Sea.
You loved to take us to Rosario Beach and the bridge over Deception Pass.

Now in salty fog we walk the bridge over the Pass, high above the strait
leading to Skagit Bay. Captains used to think it went through to the other side.

Explorers thought they could reach the other side of the world through that narrow neck.
Not a surprise then, that we choose that spot to scatter your glittering ashes.

We choose this place to dance your ashes on a bridge between two islands. This seems right.
It is dusk. Salt breezes carry them past our tears and off through the strait

into the dark other-world. We squint straight through salt into the glowering clouds and blink,
as far below, two otters raise their heads out of the swell to find you.

You would have thrilled to see otters toss in waves, glints sprinkling their heads.

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Dipping in tide pools as children, all icy fingers and briny kelp, we couldn't

imagine, ignorant of death's tide and ashes in icy straits. Life persists with blue crabs, waving anemones, pastel sea stars, and you a beacon lost at sea.

III. Red Wallet

What I regret about your death is that you couldn't know what happened after,
As when the pair of bald eagles flew right over us, heading out to fish.

They tore so close we heard their wings in perfect control gashing the air to ribbons.
When you lay preparing, you advised sweetly, "Don't think about me too much."

Like an oracle speaking the secret, you cautioned, "Don't think about me too much."
We found your red wallet bulging with cash you insisted you might need

for the nurses. We blew all that cash on a giddy meal in your honor.
You would have relished the feast: crab and oysters, hot bread melting the butter.

Clouds purpled the night sky as we supped on crab and oysters. I tried not to think
about you. Green tea arrived with a brewing timer; we laughed incredulously,

thinking only you had ever timed tea. Timer ticking. Wallet emptied out.
We walked the rain-garnished street, marveling at hunting eagles rapt in flight.

Memory swirls and brews. It provides for us; it spends on us endlessly.
What I mourn most is the unknowing before grief. How much is too much?

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Accident on Route 80 after the Dodge Poetry Festival

A man lies atop the barrier dividing east from west
on the cold cement slab between towards and away.
Traffic backs up to the Delaware Water Gap
where currents still echo Lenape lyrics.
Waiting cars and trucks idle in lines between lines
like words arranged improperly on a long scroll.
Our heads buzz ...*chained to the heart of the Angel...*
with ...*I thought the soul an airy thing...* poems.

Poetry can go anywhere – past the enjambed
traffic through the ear to appease the man's body
as he vibrates with a tremendous humming.

What if all people trapped in their cars,
all heartsick people who have collided
could heal others by composing poems on the spot?

We could blast from our pale land into a lush one.
We could become singing winged creatures
chant closed all wounds
carry water and turn back desolation
resolve doubts with the dead
dissolve our own foul habits
just like that.

There would be no more accidents.
All would be watered, fed, sheltered, composted by
poetry, black ink publishing vast page after page.

We cram for death in the gap between now and when.
Where to place the exclamation mark,
the human dot lingering at the line?

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Jury Selection

*Here he is – what all women know and fear.
Low breaths and rustles cloud the courtroom
as the judge reads the charges:*

Sexual assault. Battery. Abduction.

*“Is there any experience that would bias you in this case?
If so please approach the bench.”
Memory and sweat flash at the words.*

Lindsay had left her bathroom window open for air;
After the rape, he took the scanty bills and change
from the Film Society cash box. She never talked about it again.
Afterwards she started dating and wearing make-up
for the first time. I couldn't understand why.

The Frenchman in the Cinematheque permitted his clammy hand
to creep over and over into my lap during “Les Enfants du Paradis”
– me furious, silently pushing away over and over –
he smirking as the lights came up and left from the far aisle
elegantly disguised in his pin-striped blue suit.

The man in the car stopped in the middle of the intersection
fly unzipped watching middle school children cross
like a cat stalking sparrows
and thirteen-year-old me hurried across
trying not to stare at what pulsed in his hand.

*Women are excused one by one as they whisper
to the judge and stream from the courtroom.*

He broke down Peggy's door.
She gave him more or less what he wanted
in exchange for not being beaten.
She said, “He was a big man
and could easily have hurt me.” I didn't understand
how she felt she had controlled the situation,
how one offense could be traded for another.

*I asked to be excused because two friends had been raped,
and I was dismissed. I wanted to be excused
for not having thought of them in years.
I want to be excused for being an object, not objecting.*