

Popcorn Ceilings

I turn to static on my TV screen
for solitude in a light-filled household —
the florescent rays ignite my migraines
and now I'm too sensitive to sound

the air bubbles that pop against the
vapor of breath — the cracks that split
between saliva and silence — the anxiety
that spills over my mouth

I ask myself, *how can I transform the gloom
that has invaded the air?* — I turn to popcorn
ceilings and divide my focus to the texture of
century-old paint — how the rigid plaster
mimics sound-waves and my pulsating temples —
look, how easily it sticks to dust

each bump becomes a mark on the map of
my memories — each air bubble becomes
a thought that boils in the dark — each mark
a star — a diary entry — a photograph —
a love note — a potential suicide note with
lines crossing out forbidden words over
and over again and I track everything all at once
by pressing my fingerprints on my empty
white sheets — leaving imprints like leaves
in a journal — with no one to share but my
guardian angel

the one who catches my attempt at sleeping —
who lives beyond the ceiling of consciousness
who I will soon meet when I reach REM

Damn, If

I do the dishes right this time, expunge the excess earth from the white porcelain of the morn,
I don't have to sit in the back seat of the car — I control the radio on our way to school.

I do homework, pass my exams, eventually graduate with honors.
I don't know who to be when I grow up — I'm already grown.

I do what's needed, jump from 9 to 5 to pay bills, buy you new dishes & some Ajax.
I don't how to tell you I'm not going to law school but after 3 years of built-up anxiety

I do — let the steam whistle out like the mourning teapot — it holds so many secrets.
I don't think I can live here anymore, with you.

I do what I can to mend our relationship, with missed calls, \$300, and 'i love you' through teeth.
I don't know how to end this poem about you.

There's only so much I can do

I can push the craters of the Moon
farther into dark matter so that the
Sun will raise concern and unveil its
face to break the day and shed more light.

I can convince the winds to grace its
touch through our sails by tickling its
curiosity with my tales of the conference
of the birds — with the secrets they carry
and the gods they've met

while the birds themselves come to my beck
and call when I ask them for a favor — please raise
your wings in flight and trail the aroma of cherry
blossoms from east to west so that our sense
of smell will remain sweet — so that we can
experience a universal spring.

I can find the Earth's sage and burn the
incense to cleanse the breath so our speech
will be as pure as the Blue Lake — so that
our voices remain true every time we speak.

I can even hunt for the whitest fish
and skin its gills clean to quench your thirst
for the sea —

But I can't push the craters of the moon
without it sharing its location
I can't convince the wind
without studying the tales of the birds
and I can't observe the birds
without learning their language —
I can't find the Earth's sage
without failing to find it the first time
I can't hunt for fish
without their consent

If I Give Birth

to a generation of run-
on sentences, running
away from the scars of labor
with wire and red silk,
I will wrap a promise across
a newborn's finger —
the pressure from protection
will prick him —he won't stop crying
until the blood dries, until a scar is born,
this will be the the fruit of my labor that has ripen
and now called forbidden — you can't promise
a newborn protection, he is a product of the womb —
you can't reveal light to a newborn
he will eventually open his eyes to the world
when ready — you can't fly
with your wings wrapped
around a single finger,
when there's a generation you
need to catch up to

It doesn't have to be this way

the way the heavy scent of boiled turnips
creeps its way to sit in the living room,
humidifying the air, to soften skin
so that it can be easily peeled away —
a grandmother's at-home remedy to cure
a common cold — this is how we can learn
to breathe with our mouths again — to make
this room livable — not comfortable —
I never knew what home should smell like.
It doesn't always have to smell
like self-brewed medicine.

I always have to lower my gaze to avoid
conversation — at the coffee table we lay
out dinner — at the dinner table we lay
our day's worth — purses filled with breath
mints and bobby pins, magazines, expired
coupons, dead bouquets from lack of sun
and sweet speech, an army of empty plastic
water bottles — there was always chaos in
the kitchen that doesn't have to be.

And I didn't want to talk in the kitchen either
I'd rather talk to you about poetry, politics, or
family — but I talk too much — and you talk
too much — about money, men, and what to cook
for dinner — you say there's not enough saffron for
the white rice — there's never enough money in the
bank — I ask, *why do you weigh your values
on a golden scale that's delinquent in payments?*
you don't have to change the subject every time
I respond back — this is conversation
not conversion.

But all of our conversations end in death
one way or another you bring grim to the room —
you don't always have to avoid discussion about
the funeral — your mother was mine too — I would
call her ماما and she would lend me her milk
she would place her thumb in my mouth to ease
my teething — she would rock me back and forth
and teach me to find peace in sleeping —
the least we could have done was invite her daughters
to the funeral — you could have told me where you
buried her — you should have taught me my native
tongue so that I can speak to her through prayers.

But instead you turn on the TV news
and spit curses at the pale mannequins
behind the screen — the latest report
on another mass shooting — watching
brown shades turn to scarlett red —
Scarlett, like Gone With the Wind I say
that was ماما favorite movie — let's
watch the retelling of her story but
you continue to flip the channels until
the static burns my eyes — I rub them
hard and fast until a kaleidoscope effect
plays with my sight — I see the burning
fire touch the corners of her old photographs
I watch the embers fly up — find their place
in the night sky next to the stars —
your way of mourning doesn't have to
supersede mine.

All of my poems doesn't have to end in
mourning — I don't always have to write
in the dark — about you — you thought
I was sick for wanting to keep my bedroom
door closed — for pretending to sleep
because light gives me migraines — you
bring me a bag of sweet lemons and say
this is another one of Grandma's remedies
before you squeeze the nectar down my
throat to sweeten my bitter tongue —
you don't have to think of solitude as a disease.

Just because the bird stops singing after being
locked in a cage doesn't mean she's sick —
she forgot she had wings and could sing

you could have just let me go
you could have just opened the cage —
cupped the bird in your palms so she can
recognize what love smells like —
leaving a key back to you.

I'm a bird who has forgotten how to fly
something that should have been natural
and now I'm teaching myself
by falling.