

e x t r e m a

or, antipodes

aroog khaliq

dedication

for Dr. Kaminski, Dr. Klayder, my liver-friends, and all who read my words with care.

yours always,

aroog

considerations

*hai aadmī bajā.e ʔhud ik mahshar-e-ʔhayāl
ham anjuman samajhte haiñ ʔhalvat hī kyuuñ na ho*

a man is no individual, rather he is a pandemonium of thoughts
i consider him a group even in his solitude
—mirza ghalib

*na pūchho ahd-e-ulfat kī bas ik ʔhvāb-e-pareshāñ thā
na dil ko raah par laa.e na dil kā mudda.ā samjhe*

do not inquire of the era of love, it was merely a scattered dream;
i did not tame my heart, nor did i understand its desires.
—faiz ahmed faiz

babble / dreams of dying

there are questions i can only ask in poetry

because if you take them literally i can smile,
guileless, none of your concern sticking to me

true story—one time i wrote poetic prose for class
repeated the line “i am nothing” for resonance
and ended up in the counselor’s, cornered by

two women determined to see me at the finish line
with neither blankness nor a crazed look nor grief
obscuring my vision as i sway, pulled by the wind

so when i ask you “do you sometimes dream of
what the side of a head looks like after it’s bashed
again and again against a brick wall?” answer simply

yes or no. grey matter or red blood. no clutching
your pearls, no calling my mother, no bullshit.
do you dream of dying, of stark raving madness?

i who flinched

at the bright golden light
now look upon the changing foliage,
hungering for a clearing in some forest
where i may lay and be subsumed,
becoming some worthwhile thing
that gives a life anew.

god knows if the snow
will fall tomorrow, if the melting will happen
invisibly in the sky, instead of there on the street,
no longer dirtying my car and my white sneakers.

i want to revert to
something older still, something so timeless
it cannot be destroyed. not ashes, but dirt.
not dust but detritus, seed, sapling,
a tree in the autumn, burning like fire.

pudding and pie / customer service

there are no poems today
don't come back tomorrow, either
we're doing maintenance, you know
up in the big house, the missus
wants us to clean out the pipes
make things shiny again

back again? look, pal, i can't just
check in the back. it doesn't work
like that. the missus needs her privacy
the pipes leaked and everything is wet
all her shiny things brought to
brutal ruination

god, you're shameless. i can get you
some prose, final offer. do you fight
like this with the guys at mcdonald's
when they say the ice cream machine
broke? no?

no means no, motherfucker. come by
here again and i'll tell the missus
and you'll get what you've asked for.
it's thankless work, keeping her
in the tower

keeping the tears at bay. but what
do you care? georgie peorgie bastard.
if it's a deluge you want, by all means.
here. *click*. the floor is yours. go. kiss.
make her cry.

stage manager aroog, who looks less like me and more like my college roommate, elbows her way into center stage. the other aroogs clamor and cluster closer breathing in tandem like one creature. soon the call will go up and one will trail

stage manager aroog, take center stage, and begin to perform. lovesick aroog hopes it's her turn, and her stupid doe-eyed face makes bully aroog come closer breathing huffily, violent pinches on her mind. luckily, no sight is unseen by

stage manager aroog. they twirl away as if their intention was to waltz all along, all smiles and no funny business. erudite aroog polishes her glasses in anticipation, breathing hitched only slightly, which girlboss aroog jeers at. it is a wonder that

stage manager aroog never breaks character and gives her a good swift punch; girlboss riles everyone up so quickly with her twisting words. "no one needs you, lovesick, breathing without crying takes up all your brain power. no, we need to get stuff done."

stage manager aroog knows this, rolling her eyes. it's her and manic aroog running it all: diligence and electricity. the big aroog in the sky is thinking of recalling manic aroog, but breathing gets so much harder when stage manager aroog ponders that thought.

the big aroog in the sky, as they call me, is a fragmented cubist nightmare, but they adore her all the same. the endless aroogs serenade and belly dance, juggle and joke, advise and comfort, while i wander their empty rooms in my mind,

touching the crisp edges of their perfectly-made beds, lifting the lids on their soup pots and adding a shake of chili flake, standing in front of their mirror, hoping for a glimpse of the real girl behind the googleplex of body doubles. i'll have to check first with

stage manager aroog, but i don't know if she exists at all.

ludo / woh khiladi, main anari¹

my dearest cousin got married in the styling of one of my lesser nightmares,
but like most things, she took it duck-like;
water off her back instead of tears, but i presume this like i must presume most things,
because when we meet we never talk
about men or feelings. these two topics i exhaust with my own friends,
and if i asked her, courteously,
she would wrinkle her nose. she is older, and i can't recall a boy crazy phase. now, i ache
to ask her impertinently,
how do you tolerate it? sleeping in the same bed as a man, speaking a language
you do not think in with him?
a few weeks ago, i asked, are you excited to get married? and she said,
what kind of stupid question is that.

it's early days, so cooking isn't her job yet. she'll go back to her cold country before
the early days end, and then what?
an ocean between man and wife. i think she'll prefer this—a man that exists in
the shadow of her wedding ring
and maybe some whatsapp messages. today i saw them playing ludo together online.
it's crude of me, but 3 days in,
i wouldn't have expected board games. but if i told her this she would laugh at me,
call me *so, so american.*
everything is crude with you people. sometimes, she might say, life is just a game,
and you play. i might ask,
what if you don't care to play? and she would laugh some more. *it's not a choice,*
aroog. you must play.

¹ she (is) the player, i (am) the novice

love / delusions

like the coyote skittering across 23rd street

i wonder if calling a thing two ways changes its nature

is ah-rouge the cai-yote, and arooj the cai-o-tee?
two ways of being, inscribed in one set of letters.

buy one, get one. id, miserly sibling of my face-blind mind,
transposes the planes and angles of your likeness

onto the man in my dreams. hollow avatar, i chant your name
because the love of my life is quicker to veil than to reveal

and i cannot sing what i do not know. you are the shadow
and somewhere else, there is the body. you make me miss

o-chem rules: resonance structures are just lines on paper.
the real thing is the hybrid, unknowable, unisolable,

true in its uncertainty. true because of its uncertainty.
true because we cannot hope to understand.

how the seasons kiss

i wonder how the seasons kiss.

does it feel like a sunbeam swallowed
by a cloud radiance becoming umbra
becoming radiance again and again,
a garden variety ouroboros

does it feel like a narcissus trembling
as snow pelts on the right
as rain falls on the left,
the separation its very own ecstasy

does it feel like your memory in my dreams
the phantom press of your lips
the phantom caress of your hands,
an electricity that crackles even after i

awaken?

should i envy how the seasons kiss?

does its passion outshine
my daydreams of reconciliation
my resentment of abandonment;
must i look away, lest i turn to ash?

does its magnificence drown
those golden evenings of entanglement
those candid mornings of cygnine chatter;
will the flood spare my mountain-top perch?

or is my every musing futile, stale,
the work of a poet trapped in amber
her every memory a beautiful
skeleton, its mouth open to scream, but never to

awaken?

claustrophobia

i was trapped in a dream of you
and even there, a veil was between us

could you feel it shimmering when i leaned in
and you grew more obscure?

my father hates the ²سهر², something about tinsel
and jasmine flowers suffocated him

i never understood how a veil could be anything but enticing,
and now i feel the same prodigal rage

let me part the strands, beloved
and see your face. that when we walk past one another

i know your likeness wholly, the way i know ballads
and the eternally cool, undented side of my bed.

² Seh-ra. Looks like [this](#).

an indecent proposal

i love the word ³تڑپ
restless longing, yearning, throbbing
the high drama of it all pleases my venus
she who compels me to turn and toss
in memoriam of some lush things
i can only stand to imagine. the throbbing
is disconcerting, but so is the real thing,
the closing space between us, the first jolt
of electricity that comes from skin touching skin.
all i can do is ³تڑپ, because anything more
would make my heart stop right in its bone cage,
and we only just met. how could i ask you
to reach in, and stroke it back to life?

³ Ta-dap.

in conversation

on sunday night when i roll the trash and recycling down the long driveway
the chill seeps in, and what i would give for you to jog by, out of breath,
the blood warming your cheeks somehow warming me through my sweater,
a moment of uncertainty where you pause longer than a quick hello's worth,
and then out spill spooled words, thrilled to uncoil in person,
here a joke and there a tease. i could complain about my writer's block,
you could ask me to write that one thing i joked about on that one post,
and i could laugh, and say, will you be my reader? will you listen to me?

but that door closed before either of us could step across the threshold.
i should have known that my fascination with the inch between us
was an omen of its own. the cold walk to the end of the driveway
will remain lonely. we will orbit each other for a little longer, and part,
and all that will remain is this poem, even if these pangs for more—
for more, from you—keep me up at night, bring the cold into my room
and under my blanket and comforter and into my bones, even as i know
the warmth of the blood in your cheeks is not mine, and even if it were,

it would never be enough.

*why can't you say it loudly? you glow pink in the night in your room, under the sheets, groping clumsily for a
release. what would never be enough is not the passing love of an avatar, but the idea that until you find
your divine garment, you must wander naked and helpless and tormented. self-flagellation and
self-pleasuring should not be the same shape in your mind, but if you must possess and possess and
possess until his constricting capillaries are your own, do not pretend the cold in your room is a surprise,
narrow thing.*

narrow as i am, obsessed as i am with cold that sneaks through pores
and tunnels through dermal layers and fat and spongy bone and marrow,

what can you suggest, bold one, that i do not imagine already?
a different hand between my legs is not a knife or a wound,

but perhaps it is snake oil. oh, he could warm me up, he could turn me
pink and red and rust as the sky lightens and the moon slivers,

but the problem is not the skin, it is marrow. i know he cannot be owned,
hell, look how i flinch from you! even you cannot own me; this repulses you,
it titillates me. so long as i can play tug of war with you, unspool
my thoughts and cross stitch a decorative pillow for you to burn,

the cold retreats. stand by my side so i do not wander, naked,
helpless, tormented. leave me unclothed, but be my shield.

caricature study

we have a complicated relationship, jane and i.
i could not live without her; her brand is my own
mark of cain, damning me to this maidenhood
where maidenhead rules like jupiter. but jane
is dead and gone, and the layer of software that
triggers a near-swoon when a man says my name
tenderly could as easily be blamed on the brontes
or heyer, but enough about those bitches. jane,
i only have eyes for you. what have you done to me?

the therapeutic mood strikes me randomly, bolts
of lightning raising each hair on my nape. in the
backseat of my best friend's car, whipping down
dark roads, the confessions come in threes, each
of us going in concentric circles. jane, i want to
love. i want to be loved. you've broken me, and i
hate you for it. my eyes close with dreams of a
caricature of the man i encounter. if he was more
like this or that. if he was perfect. if only. if only.

once, in a class about your work, my friends called
me a marianne, and how that stung me. we all want
to be an elinor: a wise martyr, rewarded for her kind
patience. but it's true. i don't know patience when
i draw the cards day after day, when each lesson Allah
throws curves into my path. if anything, ghosting and
rejection make the heart grow feral. the dull red flames
turn blue. i burn with the endless whys and what ifs,
an open wound of need. *come back*, i want to yell,

i'll be good this time. there will be no coquettery,
no leaving on read, no flouncing away. no emotional
guerilla warfare. i will speak in a plain jane way,
i will ask and not lure. but it's always too late, and
all that effort for a willoughby is beneath me, right?
i wish i was your character, and you could take care
of me. write me a nice, clean ending, polish my manners.
send me my captain and wave us away, white kerchief
in your hand. jane, come back. fix what you wrote me into.

cupid's chokehold

how did it come to this? *loosen your grip, asshole, i don't want marks. the hijab isn't on all the time, you know.*
once i was so ripe with love i was nearly rotten,
but i'm starting to think it was a stray arrow, that
violent burn of infatuation, titania stooping to a
donkey-headed fool, but at least she got a kiss
out of the charade. *ouch. this is going to bruise.*

at some point the lovely 90s alt rock and crooning
faded into white noise, the world lost its pearly sheen
and two hands brushing became another stray touch
to smooth away with aloe-scented hand sanitizer. the
words still get to me. *you're so—i like—you make me feel.*
those romance novel and movie gestures, a room the
color of my beloved's eyes. i don't sleep there anymore.

i'm working on myself. seriously, the virgin soil is spoilt
with the heavy metal sign: MEN AT WORK. really it's one
man and me, sifting through all the cotton candy plugging
my gyri. *attachment—pattern—projection.* strange how the
fingers couldn't finish the job. trachea collapsing like wet
clay. instead it's all these stray pieces and me in the forest,
orienteering, trying not to give up and run all the way home.

i deleted the wedding pinterest board. 800 pins into the
ether. don't ask me what color a bridal dress ought to be.
white or red, it's not my business, is it? i feel like a wraith
among flesh and blood humans, laughing with their heart-
shaped mouths, marching into some pink light i'm blinded
to now. it's not my time yet, but what if the time never comes?
my rabbit heart looks at the pocket watch, dismayed.

the glass is cracked. the second hand stutters, moves,
stutters again. no one is coming to wind it. i have to fix
it with my own two hands, instead of laying them flat on
my bosom as i sleep, waiting for a wake-up kiss. *why did
you stop? come on, give me a poison apple. then we can
go another round. yes, you can be mean.* but i hate apples.
i don't have it in me to change my mind. what, after this?

a grand shearing. a princess becoming a lamb, curtain
of hair scattered on the floor since no one cares for a climb.
i don't know if i can make this work. once i find all the pieces
and fill the gaps with gold, it'll be a waiting game again. who
am i kidding? it's still a waiting game. my periphery throbs
for the sight of an armored man on his horse, with room for
one more on that fine steed. i just want to ride into the sunset,

broken and bruised, as i am. it would be easier to love and
be loved, then settle into this task, my loupe in hand
as i examine the scratched gems one by one. a long day's
work, made more satisfying by a warm body next to me
as i drift into a dreamland, my anchor nearby. how could i
hold myself? i'd even take your hands around my neck instead.
keep squeezing, i'll tell you when to stop. don't you believe me?

theories / dreams

interpretations

sometimes i wonder—

*—i stop, look upon my cool-faced friend for some kind of permission.
she nods, a charming snaggletooth peeking out of her half-smile, so i
continue.*

last night i dreamt i was a marvelous violent thing. a queen as white as she was hungry, like a bone and something that cannot stop devouring flesh until it reaches the bone.

go on.

and in that dream i told many knights to come forward, and i let each of them cast their own hungry gazes on me. there was one with a cup peeking out of his rucksack and his gaze was the softest, as if he was already satiated.

and then?

i told them that the first one to bring me back a fresh kill, a grand one, would have me. it was a punishment because i knew i could not be had. i watched the small knight of cups as he wept all the way to his steed.

doesn't sound like you were yourself.

exactly. that's what i thought when i woke up, coiled in sheets. sweaty. i would never think the first to maim would be the most valorous or honorable. definitely not the most loving.

definitely not.

i hope she picked the weeping one, even though he came back last, and could only bear to kill a mouse.

i thought you woke up before she chose.

i did—

—but i know her. she's inside of me somewhere.

“get out of your head, if you really want it.”

blindfold on.

a woman sits before me, golden, shining, veiled such that the air whistling out of her lips moves the silk back and forth, like a touch by my own hands. it could be erotic, if it wasn't a hostage situation.

ask something.

my mouth isn't covered, my eyes are. behind the white cloth i see eight swords, feel the steel stinging against my back, slowly scraping. i almost want it to slice, that she could heal me. touch me.

mouse-like. frozen.

*she does not wriggle, sits arched, hungry, leaning into a touch that will never arrive.
if i trapped her in a tower, her hair would grow long. committed to the narrative
and nothing else, she would starve for lack of sense to scrounge for bread and water.
i am no magician,*

so i watch.

*her mouth trembles, as if the words will soon fall. diamonds or toads, she cannot decide.
silence is poison, driving her to dystonia. slow twitches like orgasms by an invisible hand.
pity is at the bottom of my reserve, i keep it close to my chest. if she wants it, she must think,
speak, beg.*

fear melts.

my arms are unbound now, or perhaps they were always free. fingers raise goosebumps in their wake as i touch the blindfold i want to rip it away, but then her veil would remain. i should ask her—

now i shake,

*the movement of her hands on the white silk somehow translated onto my own skin,
under the veil, the mantle, the priestly robes. now i lean towards her, into an invisible caress.
a lesson becomes strange torture when the student goes rogue, uses fingers over tongue.
more. more.*

never mind.

no further questions after i heard her breath hitch, the agitated rustle of silks. there is no knight here, no need to be saved. off goes my blindfold, up i stand, and then my hand on hers, travelling together up to the veil, slow, electric, hungry. i saw—

—and i imploded.

papercut

the damnedest thing is that the cards don't go away when the box closes
when the day ends not even when the heart stutters and accelerates and
the brain synapses into danger headlong. one day i see behind the veil of
intuition action the next day words and rumination and every time the logic
the branching the zeroes and ones fill the sky like smoke i reach towards
the wrong one. like picking at a scab i never use the right amount of force
or maybe i do and it is not enough so i use a little more a little more a little
and there comes the blood gushing forth like water. are you satisfied now?
what will i fucking draw tomorrow and how will i misread it lofty and arrogant
everything i hate about him trickling into myself. i know what you're telling me
i know it and i heed it but then in the ever-shortening space between heart
beats i veer left hard like a car crashing like a cartoon splat against a wall.
how long will it be like this. submission to the fast thing inside me its hands
never leaving my chain leash throat its bloodshot eyes full of glee as it eggs
me onto the next mistake for the thrill of the heart giving out almost. a little
more it thinks. a little more and then she will fall off the cliffside once and for
all. i tired of the attempts. guide me by the hand do not let me loose for a
moment or i will falter look back turn to salt and sand and feeble womanhood.
do the damn thing. win or kill. i cannot win when there are two choices and
if there are not two i will make them so. i am a knife cleaving cleaving
watch the blood gush forth glorious spraying natural wonder. endless.

off script

in liminal moments—right before my eyes close, right before they open—
i see lovers' shades, haunting me long after the fork appeared and they
went their way. the shepherd's crook jerked me away eventually, but
in that lingering/malingering i cast a curse on my own body. *a princess
and her cup, floating in the breaking waters of love, never to swim and
never to drink. a prince and his sword, balanced on a chariot of light,
sure that the promised land is there, right there, a little farther out.* split
in two, torn between love and its grandiosity, the desire to walk into open
sea even if my pockets are heavy with stones. even if the love is not
love at all, but a new way to practice the fine art of mutilation. even if
the body is tender, untouched, bored of my own hands. even if the light
in my heart when i see his name on the screen grows farther and farther
apart, until it all felt like a dream. that once i was one girl and i almost
loved who you could be to me. that once i could bear to show you my
tender skin and ask for one, two, three wounds. now, the prince is too
hurried, too harried. the princess too lovelorn. i don't need royals, i need
an exorcist. i need my eyes to close without the photo negative imprints
of ghostly men, reaching out to offer what the real thing did not want to.

but then, the cards do not lie, only poke. only scratch. grab me by the chin
and twist me towards the mirror. it's all written in the reflection: the royal
impatience, the greed and the gluttony and above all, the frantic lust for
a good, sweet thing that only comes slowly. there is no white horse, and
what would you do with a prince, anyway? could you love his smooth hands,
his imperiousness, his imperial majesty? take off the crown. take off the
gossamer and the silks and get a god fucking damn haircut. what good did
these ringlets do? what good did these doc martens do? running headlong into
a hologram obscuring flesh and blood: of course you would collide. of course
your nose would run with rivers of blood. we have a show to run, and you
never know your lines. you never wait for your cue. slow down, focus on
the divine backing track, watch the spirits lift when you remember the
earthly sacraments, the warmth of the unselfish love you bathe in morning,
noon, and night. brush up on your latin, finish the exorcism, and we can
see about filling that cup with pomegranate juice. the sword will have to go.

*a prince falling on his sword. a princess finding an unlikely rouge on her cheeks.
close his eyes, throw the sword into a lake. take off the costume, find the curtain.
the stage manager will let you know when it's your cue. until then, run your lines.*

the sun and the hierophant

i can't see the veils anymore, not even in my periphery, where they always fluttered.
the flower garlands faded away and so did all the golden tunes and the dancers.
then went the scent of jasmine and the rich cold kulfi with the buttery green pistachios.
i'd say it's all been plunged into darkness, but not that kind. the one that raises hackles;
it is primordial, primeval, above and below moralizing and humanizing and covering.

a darkness that just is.

a darkness that shimmers and begets pearls of light.

the pearls trimming the wedding gown roll out of my mind today, as good as marbles.
you know the beloved's face was always slippery. i looked in the mirror and of course i
did not see him, but today i did not see even myself, just my beauty spot: one dark pixel.
the shehnai is unsung. the henna stain does not penetrate. the jalebi does not glisten.
yet my hands still hovered above the cards, and out of the darkness, i drew:

seize and shatter

i know by the images gathering like stormclouds that the cataclysm is coming:

a thousand houses each lawn greener than the next a thousand men inside
 rooms full of blood mouths wide open jaws unhinged popping
hungry serrated teeth beckoning patiently
 don't turn the key their beards are black blue black blue

and the sky was red. i wept and the sky wept and lightning
 cleft a tree. i close my eyes and hear the snapping
branches a neck jaws of course girl-bones.
 aboard i watched current ripping the lake's center.

the world, briefly golden. a shroud muffling the sun, the stars. an unkind darkness

descends cloaks consumes terminates?

the waiting room / purgatory

let me put it this way

siren song, swan song, the strange tune raising hairs on my arms, on my nape. it is the only sound i hear, the only waves piercing the fog, cutting through the cocoon-cum-shroud but failing to draw blood.

let me put it this way: the blood is the thing, like the fruity aftertaste in a vanilla latte. you'd think it's the add-on, the plug-in, but it's the operating system that needs patching. when i'm feeling generous, i call myself a juggler instead of a jester. look how the knives obey centripetal motion, look how the fire arcs, look how the skin remains unblemished, even as it cries out in the nighttime for that heady reminder: visceral, open pain.

let me put it this way: the local anaesthetic works too well. i am slipping under. i used to think the only thing that could get me to take the pink and white capsules (*and i recline, swallowing with the ease of a praetor being fed grapes by soft-handed handmaidens*) was the electric flooding of my veins with bee venom. the bees and i flew out of the collapsing apiary. then, the exhaustion: gorging on ibuprofen like halloween candies, relaxing muscles so taut i thought, in a lucid moment, *i will tear apart at every seam, at every striation*. the bees have abandoned me, and my fleeting wings the only torn thing. i am not flying anymore; it's all smoke and haze.

let me put it this way: i am lost, but cannot bear to lose. shine your pen light in my eyes, tap the stethoscope on my knee, ask me your skin-crawling questions, trap me on the glass slide. i am a drop of blood, a butterfly's wing, a siren's song, a swan's song. one frantic hummingbird beat of my olympic heart. do what you will, but do not look away, because in my monk's silence i finally taught myself those repugnant words: i need you. help me.

doctor, doctor / should have eaten more apples

i imagine it like this:

good morning, doctor. i am unwell. don't make me explain.
can you just look at the numbers on your chart, lean close,
look into my eyes, and scry? anything else, and i'll cry.
i want to make *you* cry. no assurances. some days,
i don't want to get better. it's why a journey of 40 minutes
took 6 years. lots of wandering lost in the desert, lots of
chats with the Almighty, but no talk back/back talk.
i'm not a heretic!

good afternoon, doctor. i am crazy. don't make me explain.
let's skip to the part with the pink and white pills. will you
hold my hand while i recalibrate? you're taking an arm
and a leg, so it's the least you can do. it's rotten work,
hand-holding. no one else i can bear to ask, even though
their yeses to my unasked question sing like a choir of angels
in my head. no, i'm not hearing voices, damn you.
it's a metaphor!

good evening, doctor. i am scared. don't make me explain.
it's cold and the sky is the ashen color that passes for darkness
in winter. did i tell you it's my favorite season, even though i
never defrost my windshield on time? even though i could
freeze to death? i'm wearing all my layers. i'm trying so very
fucking hard. i don't think it's enough. i think one day it will
blindsided me, and the Big Crunch will happen to my own body.

(why do i think of an unserene death as suffocation?
you have to give me the scientific answer. Allah's direct
answers come after the tunnel; He is the light at the end.
i can't wait that long, doctor doctor. hurry, hurry. i need
an answer or else, eternally,

i will imagine it like this.)

jung is not my psychiatrist

of course nothing is that easy, but it does sting.
all that courage, all that build-up, for something
lousier than an afterthought orgasm: anticlimax.

my homework is to track the self, but all i know
is peering into the cold dark, seeing the shadow,
coveting its luxurious pitfalls, its roomy chaos.

the self is not entirely a bore. i've seen her back,
each glimpse leaving me breathlessly berserk
with a need i, the maiden, could not predict.

i long for union, anima and animus holding a chador
over the shadow and the self as they look in a mirror,
the first meeting of eyes better than a caress.

how will i free her? she is crushed between persona and
shadow, between performance and pain. this is her end,
fate's warbling, subwoofer voice tells me. a strangling.

perhaps there is no extraction at all. is the unity
a bacchanal, each of us taking a turn, brevity
keeping some sense of composure?

i limit myself in imagining the world as extrema, so
i will be good and keep it qualitative; binaries must go
off into the sunset without me. look, my pen is poised—

today i felt. today i ate, and drank, and kept it down.
the metaphors fall apart—

*hey, have you heard?
the queen with no crown swims more readily, and
does not drown.*

fine print morpheus (also not my psychiatrist)

now if you take the green pill—seafoam really—it could go two ways.
you could feel happy again! or you could feel so happy and so fast
it would be like standing in a black hole for one holy moment before
the gravity came in and tore you to atoms and dust.

actually, it could
go another way. it could pull you clear in the other direction, right down
into the cold dark place where hades lives. he's a dilf, i'll give you that,
but the wife doesn't like to share. monogamists, huh?

if we look
for the silver lining on this one, you might instead feel stupid numb,
no, not like you said you've felt for months. what do you think we are,
amateurs? no, this is a chemically altered numb, sweetie. nothing can
cut through, not even a hand between the legs. yep, not even silicone.
so what do you say?

do you want to sink, or float, or drown as slow as honey?
a second opinion? well, i know a guy who knows a guy who knows a gal,
but it's not a question of how good they are, it's about your pocket depth.
oh. you'll try a vitamin D supplement instead? well, go on,

fetch!

what a girl wants

trapped inside somewhere is a madness that each session scratches at. i pick up the phone and put it down for months at a time, knowing i need the ring, the kind old face in disbelief at how much poison i store inside (enough to make a KGB agent blush). i need to remember the words again, the tune that helps me know myself as a body kneeling in a solid realm not a shadow thing, atoms distended and floating, swarming, like bees and smoke. smoke and darkness.

the words are: attachment. boundaries.

mood swings. i went for a second opinion and the words are: not sure. more data. prozac? prozac. prozac. open wide or go for a third opinion, but look: the pockets are empty. it is better like this, the madness free to breathe and develop its pudding skin, my quarks and gluons shuddering like the winter body in the first rays of spring breeze and sunlight. let it grow, coalesce. i tire of the process, the journey. let me be, leave me here to die or to someday supernova, bright and blazing and an end to the times.

in ghalib's world (raindrops make pearls)

come here, pearl-seller, and cup your hands together. i will make you rich
beyond your wildest dreams. have you seen all together so many tears

steeped neither in misery nor in grief? the ladies can rest easy, no twitch
of discomfort. their nooses are made ethically, see? no pains, no fears

just the strange velvet darkness, progenitor of tears and beauty and your
kids' college tuition. i see you're hesitant. would you like it to hurt? to form

from blood? what is another wound to me? in fact, i want to see more.
prepare the katar, split me open, watch the pearls erupt from the storm.

my boyfriend, karl marx

we are driving back from the psychiatrist's office, because in dreamland there is no plague or pandemic, no zoom sessions with the blue glare of a second tab catching in the light of our glasses because no one cares anymore. you might suppose that in dreamland, there is no mental illness, but that's silly. grow up. i asked karl if we could stop for an iced coffee, and he got a little surly. he said:

commodification silk worms alienation a broken fingered pianist
darling, i say. it is an espresso shot and some milk. today i am sad, or some
-thing like it, i can't tell between all this fog. and now you want to talk about
use values subsumption exploitation exploitation revolution?
i told you already, i'm not your ex. i don't like masturbating to the economy.

now, pull into the drive through and don't pout. it's not starbucks, at least!
we are driving back from the psychiatrist's office, his hand on the gearshift
(because in dreamland there are still manual cars) and sometimes my thigh.
he asks: surplus values gold cost inevitable devaluation?
i hum, an eager sip of liquid bronze getting in the way of my articulation.

this \$5 drink is equivalent to coats and linen and also prozac, my own gold.
how many drinks for a pill, karl? i reply. and how many pills for a kingdom, for
ten seconds of peace, for a dream, for a utopia? the abstraction always makes
him shudder. in the evening we fight, hoarsely, hungrily, about the revolution.
it won't come, i tell him. he says: proletarier aller länder vereinigt euch!

and i roll my eyes. i may have taken Spanish in high school, but even i know
that song. even in dreamland, i explain, the revolution hasn't come. if i snuck
a peek out of my open eyes to confirm the status of the real world, he would
evaporate back into bone and particles of red linen thread. but i don't need to
wake up, i tell him. i know where it's all headed. another long sip. and another.

this is all there will ever be. your hand leeching the warmth from my thigh,
my sweating plastic coffee cup leeching the warmth from my hand, on the
way back from the psychiatrist. here's your revolution, karl: upping the dose
again and again, or trying a new pill. blue. red. green. pink. white. blue. you
couldn't have predicted this, darling. over and over again, self-immolation

or one more sweet dream.

wiretapping the divine landline

conversations with the fractal God

*o you who does not worry, o you who does not want
let me cry on your divine shoulder, where the tears will not stain*

i was about to ask you why the mother daughter bond seems like a suicide pact, but i generalize. i protest too much— or maybe not enough. it kills me to see her weep for an anxiety that blooms as she speaks, turning from smoke to fire to consumption. and then i begin to cower—i never grew out of the stage where every story she tells becomes my reality. we drive each other mad, and how awful that it is an act of love.

i think i am her weakness. i think she thinks this, too, but i convince myself that i cannot explain this to her, even though the word catharsis rolled off her tongue smooth as salt this afternoon. i think when you admit you'll do anything to make someone happy, your resolve is tested brutally. is that intentional, or am i projecting onto You? at the end of every conversation i know that we say You are on our side. but how many of us can win, if we all pray to You? i know it's not enlightened of me to ask, but i can't help it. i love You the only way i know how—selfishly.

the constant push and pull, the crux that i see and that we are crucified on in, is the desire to keep one another from sliding into victimhood. i am the ram and then she is, and all we see is the blade. sorry for bringing Abraham, may You bless him, into this, but it is the closest we in our idyll plastic world get to such visceral misery. You have never brought us to an altar, it is always a human hand leading and tugging women like so much cattle. i read once that being a woman is the most Gothic experience of all. it felt so true my mouth filled with the taste of blood—the blood that fed Greek ghosts. the blood making Adam one step closer to human, one step farther from dust.

*tears and divine light become a water prism, each color its own wound.
fractal God, help me See unflinchingly again*

hey Allah, it's me

it's a good thing You can hear me over the blasting Punjabi song and the whipping wind and the occasional honk (because i missed the memo that 5 over the speed limit is the new speed limit). does it annoy You that we just jump into prayer? or is it silly to ask how Your day went, since it's not exactly something You could tell, or i could understand? it's the thought that counts, probably. love you.

i feel closest to you like this, the ground immaterial beneath me and the sky opening in every direction. it is a chill and a shiver all at once, a feeling i can't reach very often when i prostrate or lift my hands up on the prayer rug, but when i do, it turns my legs to jello. the halal kind, obviously. do You remember when i crossed over from claustrophobia to freedom? i don't.

i'm forgetful lately. i know, once, that sitting behind the wheel felt like a game of russian roulette, and no pounding music could drive out the thought of one quick smash into oblivion. not very good of me, huh? we don't even have a void, just a wait until it's time to account. one time i tipped the delivery guy from Jade Garden \$20, but my math has gotten better.

not to be a horse girl, but i think the only think that could make the long drive under Your eye better would be experiencing horsepower the way it was intended. or even more primally. just corded muscle releasing tension in frantic gallops, hooves kicking up dust and clods of the dead wheat-colored grass. a stallion must love You better than any of us could. so wild,

so free, so fast. it's what i love about the dreamy autopilot period while commuting somewhere. thank you, implicit memory, for doing your thing and letting me float out of the driver's seat, out of the Toyota, off the highway and up into the sky, vacillating between hot air balloon or lost birthday balloons. two twos. another year i didn't expect.

it's a good thing i have You, and this invisible golden thread pulling me straight up. not as retro as a puppet/puppeteer; perhaps a divine landline. 24/7 i call and You pick up, no dial tone, just a seamless click and talk talk talk. no talk backs, no take backs, no well-meaning advice and no suffocating worry. ah, You know how i love a chat. You know.

again

where does all the disillusionment go? sorry to abandon pleasantries
but i'm having the wasps hatching in my teeth feeling again, and i need
to know. am i going to carry this again and again and into the grave or
the sea? if i learned to swim do you think i would stop dreaming of
drowning?

the theorists are nutty but i like them. i like to laugh and wish we could
meet and i could show them You, the ways that i know You. a single
purple bloom among the dead brown grass and wood chips and leaf
rot. puffy clouds on a technicolor blue sky, stretching on ad infinitum.
how

could it be chance! how could it be a mistake! even on the worst
days You keep me alive. dialectic God, there is good and bad
and synthesis. some days the flow takes me upstream, others
downstream. the tides have the moon and the sun has the stars.
will

i find my complement, will i create from this flesh something
magnificent? something that will by turns love and terrify me,
another being to cherish without question. oh, You are my own
constant, my center, my light. if You wanted a monk, then there
i

would be, kneeling, praising You until my mouth went dry. no
other muse compares. no other savior compares. each poem
is an ode to you, somehow someway somewhere. do You like
my macaroni drawings? do You like me? why do You let me
live?

where does the bruising go, after? surely the skin heals on top,
but inside, the impression and the tension burrow. it shifts inside
me like a parasite. i can see it beneath the brown and bronze,
i need it gone. i'm ready for the ride to stop. i'm ready to try
again.