

CELESTIAL BODIES: A COLLECTION OF POEMS

A Thesis

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Master of English

by

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The Illegitimate Conception of a Poem

You worry about your poem's future:
You're not married to the idea
(some would call this illegitimacy)
since it wasn't yours in the first place.
Your husband sleeps in another room
now; he isn't willing to make last minute runs
for rich, salty, over-processed images
that aren't too sentimental but just
poignant enough. He's finished
carrying your burdens for you. The life
growing in your gut doesn't belong to him.

Now late August is a scorched tongue. You flip
thin disks of zucchini in a skillet
that rebels and sizzles with wafts
of frantic steam—cooking for three.
The dog laps sloppily from a bowl, not knowing
what it means to wake up one year
more tired than last. Will you feel
contractions soon? You wait for the sharp
tightening of thought, the natural birth,
what grows from lust, from
the easy intercourse of grief and joy.

Modern Translation

I wasn't born here.

I was a newbie, a transplant, a
welcome to the big world, little girl.

My tongue was a pocket dictionary
of too-short syllables and awkward synonyms.

You were Nairobi then:
Bangkok or Tokyo or Prague,

a remarkable language
framed by guttural blooms and sighs
I still don't understand.

But your hands are full of little words
that might mean something big,
and any translation will do.

First Father

Knees drawn to chin, curls swept behind a pink barrette,
I sit on the top stair by the back door. Pulling
at the soft edges of a Band Aid, I ask my mom
to play *Carol of the Bells* again. I want

to turn my ear to the opulence, to wear
its smooth chiming like a crown while I wait
for the coughing of his engine around the corner,
the nearby click of a closing door.

He'll walk in donning ink-stained jeans and black-
rimmed finger nails—Captain Morgan, the faint
aura of forgetting on his breath. He doesn't
come home until a few nights later, released

from the hospital after scaling a fence in a factory parking lot
on a dare, drunk. He made it to the top
but fell face first onto asphalt.
Now I crack open the bedroom door. He is there,

propped against pillows and stranded in the narrow sword of light
from the hallway. His face is a novel of stitches and gauze,
his form a ghost aching under sheets. He doesn't say much.
I'd like to think he raised a hand

to me, a small shadow of a thing dark and useless
at his side. I'd like to think he saw me through the sheath
of wrapped cotton, around the bulbous burgundy peaks
swelling at his temples and his nose.

I'd like to think. When I close the door
he isn't mine anymore.

First Bite

Here she is, dirt staining the crooks of her elbows, the grooves of books
she stacks to reach toothy tips of trees where crimson orbs of sweet fruit

hang and shine from brown-bark hooks among bright leaves, above clear brooks.
She reaches for the branch that shook with eagerness in the slightest breeze—

Now here she is with waxy flesh between her hands.
One look and hunger reprimands her—one bite in full

and tartness quenches tongue and teeth sinking into the ripe hollow of seeds.
She lifts the shine up to her lips, the deep red pull of where she is....

Boy in the Water

Echo's Poem

Afternoon and I am passing
by familiar trees on my way home.

A cold wind at my ears whips painfully
like a mother's protest.

Late-day light hovers. A crow releases
a single stinging caw from a bush.

Dry leaves applaud in ruffled air.

You don't see me—Silence, then
an echo pressed into a single note of sound.

I know I've found you when I spot
a face that could pacify the wind.

I, like the trees,
would bend at the knees just to see you.

Formidable

If anybody ever asks you about the wind,
say you know him well. Or perhaps,
he knows you well.

The wind gets around.
He lacks social graces and fingers
fine thighs of girls in summer.

His temper smells of salt;
his sneezes of freesia;
his breath of soil and pine.

On a good day he'll graze your cheek,
lightly brush your hair off your neck,
tell you you're beautiful.

But make him angry and he'll peel
back the roofs of barns, yank trees
free of their fingers to pummel

the ground with golden apples.
Make him angry and watch
his funneled eye

fan across foreheads and bellies
of continents. Watch slapping
waves bruise the hard shore.

When the wind is angry
even the sea looks
as if it could be pulled to its knees.

Symmetry

What can I call the almost-collision of two sides,
a semi sidling into my lane,
its flat white canvas
a steady blur growing as it nears?

Or the way you walk into the café
and sit next to me, close enough
that I could reach out and touch your arm
as though it were my own?

Upstart Galaxy Flirts With the Milky Way

*After a photo of the Magellanic Clouds
in National Geographic*

She wears two gauzy patches of light
and skirts the sky above the Patagonian Andes,
a comet at the luminous hollow of her throat.

Our Milky Way hovers at her threshold,
one foot gingerly beside hers, then two.
But her eyes carry light a hundred times

more massive than the sun,
and her gaze pierces his
complexion in lanky, eccentric orbits.

This intergalactic *pas de trois*
shatters the heart's composure.
She is hot and young, ready

to explode into freshly-minted
clusters of neon skins
and ruby beams. She carries

supernova charm like a rose-
tinted shock wave blasting
outward, hanging from her frame

like a splendid dream.

Blooming

Can I be a blade
of grass, a brittle
leaf shadowed
by brilliant sun
in the smallest
places?

Can I be an orchid
when you think
of me, velvety
red and reaching
green-blooded
fingers to catch you?

Virgin

There is a certain rapture
in the roils of hunger.

It is mine: the only thing
mine on the inside

& I put it there.

No barbequed chicken or thick
Italian rolls: no sticky dollops
of mayonnaise or margarine: no
musceled butterfly pastry as my god.

Isn't it bright?

In truth, food is only a man
whose body I cannot touch.

Viajou Na Maionese

:to live in a dream world

My mother says hair grows with the moon: in cycles,
ordered frenzies pulled steadily like sea tides.

My father says it doesn't matter whether the moon
is full and bright: the sea, he says, will wave its own way.

What about the oceans in our heads?—
Cool, crystalline seas so blue

you'd have to cup the water in your hands
to realize it's just a mirror of the sky?

Immature Fruit

Black cherry skin,
 drunk on its own blood,
is always a pit-full darker
 than its oxblood flesh,
its midnight jam,
 its sugar-waking wine
on the inside, its god-
 bred succulence barely
sweet enough to eat.

After My Father's Funeral, We Stargaze

*She was the still point—or what looked like one—
in the heavens, which some call the sky. Now grief's
the polestar that I set my compass by.*

-Melissa Range

December: where smoke turns to ice
in our lungs, small crystals
shaped like horses, sea shells, guns.

Envious cold, cunning in white.
My mother points at a star, the zenith
infinite sentences above us—that wreckage

of light—her nearly numb fingers
an occult to the cursive
I've always called my own.

The Sun is a Modest Star

but you'd never know it
by the way it splits the sky in half
twice a day and punctuates night,
yes, even night,
by reflecting off the moon.

Nobody really thinks about the sun,
not like astronomers
who have no choice but to think
about the sun and its daintier
counterparts, the stars
and yes, sometimes
even the moon.

*

Artists think
more about the moon than the sun
because its light is not its own,

no, it too belongs to the sun, and
even the small beads of light
glinting off the water
in the brimming pig trough
are miniscule suns floating.

*

You could forget the sun
is only a star. It isn't the earth
or the solid placement of things
or the heavy questions orbiting
inside of you. It isn't
the novel or the poem or
the birthday or the first girl
you kissed. It isn't the reason
to believe one man and not another

and it isn't even impossible
like loving a stranger
or even yourself

or knowing what happens
when the world turns off
the lamp beside her bed.

Sin Dolor

I

Some people think God is *sin dolor*: the painless one.
Some people think he is a supernova two millennia old,
a cannibalizing nebula: the great holiday ornament in the sky.
Some believe he is within time and some believe he is without.
John Lennon only believes in himself.

II

Yesterday Jesus showed up in a woman's x-ray
and her x-ray showed up on national news.
This blew her faith out of the water.

It would be like Jesus, wouldn't it, to show up on an x-ray
or a cornflake or coppery water stains on the bathroom wall.

III

My mother's greatest fear is loneliness.
My father didn't believe in loneliness.
My greatest fear is falling, but
mermaids don't fall: they just sink back into the sea.

IV

Religion is a business that depends on the failure of science.
I don't want to prove anything or be proven.
I don't want to sleep. I want to keep swimming,
to keep thinking about the countless ways to say
mountain, woman, broken, love.

Origin

Sometimes a town
speaks as though she were alive.

A town, however, doesn't speak
in words but in the way she carries you

from one end of road to another:
In her paved veins, traffic-clogged arteries,

nosebleed fingers reaching ground up.
Her face may be freckled with lakes

or raked clean by combines in autumn
but she never loses her side of a stare down

with the flaxen mackerel sky.
A town won't tell you whether to stay

or leave, and kicking the dirt
won't help. You'd better not wait.

A town can't name herself but
she can name you.

Think of the one you came from.
Think of her eyes, her lips and tongue.

You are one of her teeth.

After “Countess P—’s Advice for New Girls” by Natasha Trethewey

*See yourself through his eyes—
your neck stretched long and slender, your back
arched—the awkward poses he might capture
in stone...*

As a general rule of thumb, wait
for permission to come undone. Don’t think
you can just take your shoes off at the front door
or call your mother the moment
a man’s hand lingers too long at your back.

You will learn to say yes when he asks for too much.
You will learn to let him unlace your spine
one notch at a time because he cares for you;
he says so, and you must believe him.

You will learn to wear an empty stomach like a star,
each tumbling ache a strand of sapphires,
your gemstone navel bright with hunger.
He will feed you grapefruit, whiskey, three solid
meals of flattery to keep you full, and you will
learn to believe that, too.

Finally, when he gives you permission, if he does,
do so gently, like a dandelion releasing one pale
frond at a time. Don’t kick your shoes across the room,
wail into the phone, or binge on leftover potatoes and pie,
and for the love of God, don’t mess up your hair.

The Morning After

I

I understand the apple seeds in their sweet
hollow, the hard, brown petals hidden
under skin—how the flowering of their trees
is an evening dress pulled quietly off a body in the dark.

II

I understand the draw of ship to harbor, the easy
drift of sail through wind. Even metal and wood,
in smooth glide over tireless water,
know the unlikelihood of perfect fit—

how one boat pulls into a slip
and eases itself over miniature waves
the way a woman could slide herself onto a man
and rock in steady unison with the sea.

Ukulele Music

Rufus Wainwright and Captain Morgan should never marry. Think about it:
You've got this guy who, let's be honest, sounds a bit nasal when he sings,
and although he can play the piano with considerable skill, you probably shouldn't
trust him to sing at your wedding or dress your husband or walk your dog.
That honey-bright voice might cut you to the core, sure—but don't let it fool you.

Your lover will sing, too. His twenty-dollar rum will write you a song
about your curly hair and cherry cheeks. Soon enough you'll be on your fourth mai tai
singing show tunes in leather pants from the rooftop of his apartment complex.
And look at that: the city loves you. It loves every inch of your cropped blonde,
your silver bangles, your moonwashed skin, your under-toned torso doubling over to blow
the boy with calloused fingers who wears Lennon on his chest and smells of citrus and beer.

To be clear, you are a star, right here, right now.
Don't let the soon-rising sticky yolk of sun fool you.
Just remember how stellar you are when the boy disappears
and all you have left is a song in your head spun from the ukulele he always played.

Prose

for Sunshine

Please, tell me more stories. I am drunk
and your fingers feather the soft crooks
of my elbows like they grew there,
like they were somehow my wings.

Please, keep my mind off the spinning world.
Sing me a song. Take me to childhood
where you and your sister sat in the back seat
and reached for your Polish mother's withered
milk-cold hand.

Did she love you this much?
Please be my cigarette tongue, my un-wake.
Decorate my face with embers.

Letter to an Optimist

You don't need to know
how to change the oil
in your car
or how to tell
when a light bulb
is about to blow.

You don't need to know
when Dickinson was born
or how Plath died
or why their innermost
secrets were published
in books.

You don't need to know
how to make small talk
or how to laugh
at any joke. You don't need
to know how to uncork
a bottle of wine
or how to fix your hair
reflected in the microwave.

You don't need to recall
the texture of his sweater
or his heavy
rum-laced breath,
and you don't need
to remember
how warm his hands felt
under your shirt.

You only need to know
that when the tree outside
holds sunlight
in cupped leaves,
it isn't promising you
anything.

I wake up late the morning after taking her body from my own

and the dog
breathing steadily
in slats of ten a.m.
sunlight on the floor
is my Buddha,
my Bible,
my patronage of air
and blood thumping
prayer-like
through a body
too much like mine,
so close to sleep

Barn Cat

Cat licks fur from her coat—movements
spun in pearlish light—and lingers
under motes carrying yesterday's breath.

Cat is a whore for temptation and sleeps
among battered rims of tires and trees
and woven songs of whippoorwills

before noon. Cat ignores the nearby rooster
strutting in grandeur, rust-red feathers
happening from his breast,

and the peacock sifting his cerulean
fan for the grey hen who sleeps
under the far corner of the barn.

Cat only moves for the sound of her own breath
when it becomes too heavy, for the feel of her tail
flicking at an aimless fly in the air.

Don't Let Them Call You Skinny

Love fed fat soon turns to boredom.

-Ovid

Do you remember that May cicadas came out
before due, whirring flagrantly at tips
of grass blades while mosquitoes
waltzed across our salty skin?

My mother's pigs stood starry-eyed, waiting for scraps.
Cotton clung to our legs as we drank
red wine and ate French bread and guacamole
on my porch before you went back to Richmond,
left my granola heart crunchy, undone.

We never could talk, though, and some time later
I thought I'd marry the earth-eyed boy
who spoke with a lisp and poured coffee for tips.
I thought, *I'll be a muscadine:*
thick-skinned, improving with age.
I taught my own goddamn self how to ride a bike.

When you came back, I'd left town for good,
still hungry. Now the pigs are drunk again
on avocado skins. We ate as much of each other
as we could, you and I,

but I couldn't forget you, Sunshine.
Not you with your horse-voiced tonsillitis,
not you with your ukulele fingers, not you
with your pale frame hanging over mine like a shadow
blown into form by Carolina's finest cabernet.

In Some Other Life

In some other life I am an afternoon of lovemaking
followed by peach ice cream.

You never get tired of me.

In some other life you forget to pack your cups, shirts, books.

You forget to meet her.

You forget to leave.

In some other life I am this park bench: unmoved by weather.

I'm a little damp, but standing just the same. I always know what to do.

Now what else is there but to leer at the boy with coconut hair
walking his mastiff on the clean-clipped green?

He doesn't look like you.

In some other life he is a miracle and I am the sick child.

The living rag. Sweep the floor clean.

Strawberry Jam

The first boy I loved
spread my heart
like strawberry jam
over toast one morning
and ate it for breakfast.

But it grew back
as a bold apple.
Smooth, waxy pulse.
A palm full.

The one who loves me now
doesn't like apples,
couldn't taste it
even if he tried.

A Poet's Guide to a Perfect Evening Out

Step One. Don't look in the mirror too long
& don't find too many things to change.
Don't become an undoing; don't let self get in
the way. Your dress is fine; adjust accordingly.

Step Two. Decide what it means to go the extra mile.
Does this one call for a thoughtful batch of cookies?—
An extra bloom of perfume you save for quote-unquote
special occasions? Again, don't let self get in the way.
Your assumptions are fine; adjust accordingly.

Step Three. Arrive early enough to stake out your prospects
from a safe distance. Notice the exterior:
Careless street-front advertising, garishness
(or alternately, subtlety) of the open sign,
whatever shade of light is apparent from the sidewalk.
Don't be too shallow. Sometimes
you first have to step inside.

Step Four. A hug may be appropriate. Be the first
to ease up. You don't want to appear too eager, too grave.
Accept compliments. Order a drink to relax, & single out
the steepest items on the menu. (You want to avoid these.
You are, after all, an artist—you understand the necessity
of a penny & are thus unaffected by presumptuous ploys
to inspire unmerited awe, particularly when it comes to food.
You are strawberry jam & crackers, not foie gras.)

Step Five. Then again, he is paying. Be prepared to accept
further invitation should you choose to indulge.
A back-up excuse may be necessary; again, adjust accordingly.
By this point you are far less self aware
depending on the slurring of your speech or the fine blush
of your cheeks. In any event, be kind:
Thank him for a lovely evening & accept
a goodnight kiss should it present itself.

Step Six. Let him know you've arrived home safely.
It is, after all, 12:16 a.m. & you haven't gone home
with him. Consideration.

Step Seven. Don't look in the mirror too long
& don't find too many things to change.
Don't become an undoing; don't let self get in
the way. Your dress is fine; remove accordingly.
Wash off remaining lipstick and brush your teeth.

It is tomorrow. It is time to learn
how to write about someone you do not love.

Foreign Tongue

According to the dictionary,
you are a real woman.

Don't believe me?
Imagine parting the split
to let your pink lips prove it.

Imagine reading yourself,
letting your petal-soft
nipples harden into Braille
under your own fingertips.

Imagine the warmth that blooms
at your core and courses
like thrilling wind through your limbs.

Darling, you've done it again—
you have mastered the art of
who would want me now.

You've lost your own language
to a foreign tongue,

and you, silent critic,
are only a body without a head.

I Stalk Beauty

like a bone-valleyed cat tracks mice:
famished:

clung to sequined sheath dresses and bottle
red,

because color is everything and my clumped
mascara

won't kindle his fire anymore.

I hunt beauty in the backwoods
of every drug store, my wallet a loaded
rifle

ready to strike aimed to kill

hunting like I'm hungry for my own skin.

My mouth is a cave
and maybe beauty is in there somewhere,

but God,

if only I could break myself open like a star,
have you paint a new girl out of me, tell me
in your real voice that you made me like you meant to.

Waitress

Picture this: you go to that diner
where your family eats
at least once a week,
the one with soda-sticky

red and white booths where you
always order a bacon grilled cheese,
and there's this blonde girl
with plum-full lips, pale

gold twisted and looped messily
on her crown. She's got black
bangles jangling up and down
the length of her forearm.

Her shoulders round inward
over the little pad where she scrawls
things like *lg choc shake, cb no mayo*
before sliding it into the stained

ivory apron around her waist
next to straws and extra napkins.

She's twenty or so: taut,
milk-skinned, eyes still lit
by a few extra pennies
and some man's roving hands.

Her face carries weight
you don't understand. You almost
begin to feel sorry for her.
But when light catches the gold

ring swinging on the chain
hanging between her breasts,
she's only the girl your father
would fuck while your mother made dinner

and you sat on the stairs by the back door
waiting for him to come home.

After Frank Bidart's "Love Incarnate"

*When I recall that at the fourth hour
of the night, watched by shining stars,
LOVE at last became incarnate,
the memory is horror.*

You wake to a frenzy of greys: our sky: layered
and rolling among muted blues and sleepy,
soiled whites. You roll back your eyes

into the dark bend of pleasure: the house
a blend of quiet, except for the second
hand on the clock: a soft *pong pong* as it ticks
past seven: that simple measure: as if it's tired of time.

Last night you wanted to stay: keys, DVDs, bottle
caps and packs of gum scattered on the coffee table:
a constellation: a constant distraction.

Now, you stop a palm midair: recall
our restless hands: the small joys they make
when filled with another's form.

You frame your own memory of shirts
on the floor: small galaxies descended:
a syzygy of cotton and silk: both of us
wanting: both of us giving: both of us
wrong.

Twenty-First Century Atomic Goddess

I want three
meals a day
that hold me
over, unaware of how they look
on my thighs.

I want the eyes
of a million men
peeled open
for pixelated screens
while their wives freeze
leftover chicken breasts
before brushing their teeth
on a Tuesday night.

I want to be New Orleans
right before
the sun gets swallowed
by an empurpled sky
and the city's sorcery scares
all its children
out of their cookies and milk.

I want chlorophyll blood &
twenty-twenty vision—
but I only want to see
by feel by wind by the height
of water budding upward from the bottom.

I want a red dress
that makes me too pretty
and a star-studded carpet
from my driveway
to the kitchen
where paparazzi wielding
time-stoppers yell
Over here! Darling! Look at me!

Modern-Day Rita

*Nevertheless, the camera's rendering of reality must always
hide more than it discloses.*

-Susan Sontag

I think of how this could happen to me.

I think of how I could be a ritual, a vice.
(But never an addiction, no.)

I think, maybe, you could dog-ear me,
fold me over, stuff me under the bed.

You could click me away,
rename me something innocent—
Weekly Budget, Photos of France—
save me for later.

Roll me up with the New York Times.
Buy me with cereal and a six pack.

Call me the green eyes, the razor blade,
the fire-headed frenzy on page eight.

Clementine, Digital Odalisque

I

2:24 a.m. and she is alive
somewhere, maybe there in her room

among a concave of blankets, a sheath
of strawberry hair. His breath catches

at the sight of her nipples open
in front of him, pointing him back

toward himself, a small black rose
emblazoned in the hollow

of her left hipbone. Immortalized,
she looks him in the eye, pink lips parted

in an almost-smile, one eyebrow
raised as if to ask him what he really meant,

as if she heard him inhale a sharp torrent
of dark air, as if her own hands felt him grow.

II

You'll learn to recognize her as dusk,
the twilight night, the cherry tree silhouette

glazing across your husband's face in the five
a.m. forest of barely-there limbs and dimly-placed

kisses on the spine. She is alive
somewhere on this strange terrain.

But you are the muscadine girl, remember:
the one nobody can touch.

This Morning a Clump of Hair Fell Out and Formed a Treble Clef on the Shower Floor

Billie, on what might be NPR,
sings *blue moon, now I'm no longer
alone*

—the song that eased my father
into his perpetual sleep

& I nearly nick my knuckle
on the cutting board between
strawberries & sherbet-soft
melon wedges.

I turn her off. In the heavy present
quiet, the fissured cantaloupes
on the counter are skulls
in rough-hewn burlap skin.

The Impostor

I've been one since birth. I can't remember quite that far, though, because it was staged that way. Sesame Street was the first to tell me so: I didn't look a thing like them. Where was my round number, my front stoop, my A-B-C? Where was my apple-a-day to keep the boogeyman from my bed?

The boogeyman told me I was beautiful. Of course, I didn't believe him. My Slavic nose and lanky legs told me not to. *But they're not mine!* I'd later yell in the quiet of my own room, his shadow under my eyelids while I slept. And when he told me these things I could only look at him, my tongue finding its silence too lonely and pressing its buds among the jagged ridges of my braces. I could only ever look at the button that hung like a loose tooth from his shirt.

Later I learned the boogeyman actually had bluebell eyes and a kind heart. He was sincere in his affection, and indeed may not have been a boogeyman at all. I felt a little guilty, but then I remembered I wasn't my own, and instead I turned twenty-one and let the god of smoke finger his way up my spine. The very moon could've thrown an apple at me and I wouldn't have cared.

He became my own pornography. He became my hunger at the end of the day, immortalized in pixels and photographs. He became the daffodil. I wanted to dig him up. I wanted to plant him in the backyard under the tall pine where the dog would piss on him four times a day. But then I learned he wasn't a flower at all—no, he was a common stinkhorn, *phallus impudicus*. Sour, spore-laden, a born fungus.

Later yet I met a man who was neither monster nor god—just a man: thick-skinned, eyes bound by botanical growth. But he was a good man who understood most of me. I married him. I grew my own apple. The boogeyman-turned-boy said, *I wish it were me*.

I wish it were me. I wish I were he. I wish she were me. I just wish it—like the woman in the mini-dress whinnying about equal rights. But hell, she doesn't know, and I don't either. We all just want to look pretty.

Think of What It Means, This Word “Beautiful”

And what: a smooth forehead, a blue iris,
one warm hand draped across another’s knee?

What could it be?—

A pond like a pock mark bitten into Earth’s cheek,

caterwaul of guinea hens streaking
across the yard on fast little feet,

the quiet bellow of a cow lowing
down the length of a field?

Maybe just a morning glory among dead leaves,
bright and trumpeting violet into the air.

