SELF-PORTRAITS OF THE BYELINGUAL IMMIGRANT

A Master’s Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Sujash Purna

May 2021
 SELF-PORTRAITS OF THE BYELINGUAL IMMIGRANT

English

Missouri State University, May 2021

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The following poems chronicle the journey of a contemporary Bangladeshi-immigrant poet living in the United States of America. Divided in three sections, the poems serve as self-portraits that peek into the complex psycholinguistics of the immigrant writing in a second language. The poet offers sketches of different aspects of his immigrant life through self portraits. While mostly autobiographical, the collection offers poems that serve as commentary on the socio-economic reality of workaholic American life. Through exploring the self as a bilingual poet, the poems serve as critiques of the socio-political systems of this country. “Self-Portraits of the Byelingual Immigrant” also includes poems written from other perspectives. The rationale for including other perspectives is influenced by the poet’s choice to offer a holistic view of immigrant life and avoid a monochromatic pastiche. Additionally, some of the poems deal with the reality of living through the COVID-19 global pandemic and address the anxiety of living without a support system in a country that the immigrant calls home. Inspired by Bharati Mukherjee’s idea of a literary orphan, the poems look at both sides of the life of an immigrant: the original home that the poet grew up in and the new home he accepted.

KEYWORDS: immigration, pandemic, psycholinguistics, bilingual, identity, politics, cultural assimilation, home, Bengali, Bangladeshi literature
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Approved:

Marcus Cafagna, M.F.A., Thesis Committee Chair
Sara Burge, M.F.A., Committee Member
Michael Czyzniewski, M.F.A., Committee Member
Julie Masterson, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College

In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.
Missouri State University’s Department of English will always be in my heart because of the amazing support I received from them, especially Professor Marcus Cafagna, Professor Sara Burge, and Professor Michael Czyzniejewski for their tireless encouragement and looking out for me. Without their presence in my life, I would not have been able to navigate the murky waters of graduate school and complete this thesis. I have been blessed to work with the talented poets and editors at Moon City Review & Press, an experience that also provided me with reference points to assess my own growth as a poet and helped me to become a better editor for my own poems.

I would like to specially thank Professor Czyzniejewski for agreeing to be one of my readers of the thesis at the very last minute.

I also wish to thank Dr. Margaret Weaver, Dr. Rhonda Stanton, and Dr. Etta Madden for being supportive of me through the tough times of the pandemic when it has been difficult to stay motivated.

My heartiest gratitude to all the friends I made here at Missouri State University and in Springfield, Missouri. Thank you for being in my life and appreciating and continuing to appreciate the literary pursuits I have been striving for in my immigrant life.
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A MUSEUM OF THE ORDINARY

Poetry has been a vehicle for me to get around a vast land of imaginations. As a second-language English speaker, I have always been fascinated with words and how, once strung together, they can convey different meanings through different combinations. At times I have been lucky to come up with a combination that touched somebody I have never met before: perhaps an editor or a publisher, perhaps a reader shuffling through a journal while waiting for their coffee to brew or a bus to arrive. I hope through my poetry I have been emboldened to offer my readers some great variations of combinations, and I always hope they give the readers a glimpse into the kaleidoscope of the bilingual imagination.

I was born in Dhaka, Bangladesh. In a city made of concrete jungle and populated by nine million people, I never had privacy in my family of four. At times poetry has been a place for me to hide. The idea of a self-portrait blossomed into inspiration when I was thinking about how most of my poems are in fact self-portraits. While depositing a part of me that is not visible to the world outside, I stumbled into a mirror of some sorts where I also felt the freedom to play with the words I acquired over time. That mirror is a self-portrait poem which Poet Dante Di Stefano defines as one that “offers the opportunity to reconfigure poet as visual artist” (71). Di Stefano claims, “All poems are, in a manner of speaking, a species of self-portraiture. A poem functions as an experimental nexus, the sum of all a poet has taken in and transformed, all she has chosen to say and has left unsaid” (69). The poems I used to write back in Bangladesh were underwhelming imitations of W.B. Yeats’s poems - skeletal with bombastic words like aura, vanquish, and others. However, Di Stefano’s theory gives me hope of a defense for my poetry. My earlier poems were heavily experimental without me knowing, as I was tinkering with fire
like the caveman. Even though my writing since then has evolved, the experiences of those experimental moments did not leave me, and as I recall, they served as the earlier self-portraits describing what was going on in the mind of a fourteen-year-old boy. There was a lot of turbulence in that mind that craved to be independent and that same sense of craving has led me to continue to grow as a poet. It has also given me energy to continue to write from a mirror-like reflection to register the internal changes.

Some of the poems in this collection speak through the personae taken from the literature the immigrant has come across or the news he has been reading. “Yellow Wallpaper Resident Alien” is one such poem where I was inspired by the gothic theme in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story “The Yellow Wallpaper.” My poem is a diatribe against the hypocrisy of immigration paperwork and shares the anxiety or financial stresses the paperwork induces on the immigrant. The self-reflective ghost who was once trapped inside the walls comes out and runs around the woods of freedom; however, there is a price for that freedom. The ghost will now be called a “resident alien.” As an immigrant myself, I have filed an endless amount of paperwork to be able to live in America. However, no matter how much I tell myself I have found myself a new home in this country, the system has always treated me as the resident alien. The mental dilemma of being in a new home and also being labeled as an alien happens to take on the shape of an amorphous creature that I tried to describe in this poem. In “Cage Full of Children,” I address the imperfect immigration system through an imagined persona. The poem was inspired by the 2018 news of children locked in cages at the US-Mexico Border. Their horrors surpass my own as an immigrant. I juxtapose the children with the children who are born lucky into the arms of their American parents in this country. While doing so, I point out the lack of concern of some of the God-loving people who give birth to more and more kids every year and claim they love children
but were not concerned when this news broke. The narrator of the poem observes hypocrisy but
does not protest. Instead the repeating lines (“Where are we going?/Where is anybody going?”) accentuate his deep-seated distrust of a future the men are building as adults and the examples they set for their progeny. In “Self-portrait of the Asian Indian Cook Making Tikka Masala for Patrick Stewart on an Uber Eats Ad,” I put on the persona of a cook who I imagined made the food for Sir Patrick Stewart for the ad. The poem, which was initially an attempt at a ghazal, turned out to be a persona poem where I employ my own experience as a former cook to connect with an imaginative cook who is perhaps an Asian Indian immigrant working an odd job like I did. From the cook’s point of view, I address the perceptive power of a bilingual mind that perhaps Sir Patrick Stewart cannot ever act out.

I was fortunate to be surrounded by family members who love to read. My mother writes stories and novels, and my father is a journalist. As a family we’d love to get together and read classic works by Rabindranath Tagore, Sharat Chandra Chattopadhay, Sufia Kamal, Humayan Ahmed, and others. I was in love with Tagore’s philosophy of short stories and their culmination. His famous line from his novel Shesher Kobita (The Last Poem) “shesh hoyeo holo na shesh” (it has ended, but it did not yet) played a big impact in my own growth as a writer. Even though that philosophy was meant for stories, I took the liberty to apply it to my poetry. This idea of a lack of an ending is similar to Louise Glück’s “rejection of closure” (Gioia 371). Glück describes the end of a literary work: “One has simply stopped because one has run out of units or minutes and not because a conclusion has been reached nor ‘everything’ said” (qtd. In Gioia 371). My poems work in a similar fashion. They do not end because I have run out of things to say, but because they have run out of means to continue to say more.
Poet Julia Alvarez shares an anecdote about her bilingual identity in one of her essays. A poet at the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference claimed that a person can only write in the language that person is born in. Thinking about this story often puts me in self-doubt, and an impostor syndrome starts to envelop me like a shroud when I think about how many times I have been told the same by people I admire or respect. When I think about writing in a second language, I realize how much I tried in the past to sound like it is not my second language. Just like Alvarez, I had strived for a long time not to allow my “foreignness” (qtd. In Gioia 435) to show. After many trials and errors, I have come to terms with the fact that no matter how much we try to be different from who we really are, our innate abilities manifest in the works we create as writers. I have not been able to deny the Bangladeshi immigrant identity coming and knocking at the doors, asking me to let it enter into my poems.

The title of this thesis has an error in it, and it is intentional—byelingual instead of bilingual. It is bye as if to say “goodbye,” because as an immigrant I have experienced a slow departure from the linguistic conventions of both my original language, which is Bengali, and my second language, English. My recognition of this psycho-linguistic phenomenon in my abilities to read, write, listen, or speak may have perhaps come from a meme on the internet that defines byelingualism humorously by calling it the deterioration of a bilingual person’s ability to remember words in either language. However, I learned about it more in depth in my studies for Historical Linguistics with Dr. Yili Shi. Immigrants do tend to lose touch with their original language habits, if not totally. I have forgotten many of the Bengali words I grew up with. My poetry in English is, in a way, a form of resurrection of some of the ideas these words symbolize. Bengali is a language full of proverbs and sayings that are prophetic. There are anecdotes attached to them that are locally significant. My titular poem “Self-portrait of a Byelingual
Immigrant” uses a saying: “Din duniyar shob i jay matite” which translates into: “everything in this world goes to the ground.” I remember growing up hearing stories my mother told me, and they always ended with a summative assessment or a moral like the ones in Aesop’s tales.

The bilingual immigrant has a museum inside his head made of ordinary objects. The museum is constantly forming with newer artifacts while at the same time it is losing touch with the old items that came from where he came from. Most of the poems in *Self-Portraits of the Byelsingual Immigrant* attempt to resuscitate some of the memorabilia of that original home: history taught in school about the East India Company, stories of arranged marriages, tales of floods ravaging homes that were once owned by our grandfathers before they became homeless and came to the city to make ends meet. Some of the poems also delve into the anxiety of the immigrant as the graduate assistant quarantining alone during unprecedented times of a global pandemic. There are long lost stories of previous pandemics that took out his ancestors that come back and haunt him as he is settling in a new world in a new country without knowing what history unfolds for him and his future. The immigrant finds out that he is the product of a tradition that he cannot deny. He happens to connect his own understanding of the world with his ancestors’. As T.S. Eliot says in his famous essay, “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists” (qtd. In Gioia 112), the immigrant in my poems is very much aware of his identity being molded by his cultural roots and the changing world he finds himself in. In “Downtown of Our Lives,” the narrator recognizes the beauty associated with nose ring in his culture and the inevitable struggle for COVID victims and survivors, ventilators on the side with respirators covering their faces, the same faces that once shone with the gilded light of rings.
I think I am what Bharati Mukherjee calls a literary orphan. I left my country in the hope of rediscovering myself only to find that there is always a part of me hidden inside the words that I am constantly losing grasp of. Within my writing I have attempted to develop a voice that strives for a combination of a conscious abandon from hypercorrection and a sense of defying the linguistic nationalism. As linguists Hock and Joseph point out, “English has a strong tendency to adopt foreign vocabulary;” (253) my attempts to create something new also include using words from my original language to emphasize or magnify certain points of rapport to a universal theme that we are all in our unique ways building our streets of communication as we are test driving on them. Glück also adds, “Language discovers what one might know, which in turn is always less than what language might say” (qtd. In Gioia 371). I cannot deny how my poems discover me more than I discover my poems. In poems such as “Zone Out” or “Family Momentary” the narrator discovers the person within himself that came out of the struggles of working minimum-wage odd jobs or reminiscences of family memories from childhood. In “Zone Out,” the rush of working as a cook at a boardwalk restaurant and bar influences the rush in the lines in sharp enjambments and unexplored imageries. The lines tell the tale of the immigrant as the cook. As I recollect from my own experience, he is constantly cooking in the sweltering noons in 110° F in front of the fryer, grilling multiple Philly cheesesteaks at the same time. The poem does not develop every minute detail of the working environment, but instead it gives a sense of rush, a sense of fear of being watched by a supervisor when your job is in the line and the job means everything to you if you would like to survive in a rich city and not starve. Similarly, and yet in a very different manner, in “Family Momentary,” the narrator lapses into nostalgia. The poem is a retrospect of a family memory: going to the store with his father and enjoying family meals together. The carefully revised and chosen words in these poems do
not say everything that perhaps needs to be said, but they do unearth what the narrator knows now looking back, which is the immigrant reconciling with both pleasant and unpleasant memories that shape him into who he is today.

Calling a poem a self-portrait has its own kind of baggage, as Di Stefano explains in the following:

At its worst, the contemporary poetic self-portrait is a hallmark of hipness, denoting insider status in the poetry world, a flashy and fleeting way to rebrand a weak poem as sufficiently publishable. At its best, the self-portrait offers a curiously unexpected escape from solipsism, a wily and canny voyage through the drama of personae, evoking a transactional encounter between art and the artificial self, privileging the elaboration of cognition, and a stylistic impressionism, over a direct portrayal of authorial resemblances. (Di Stefano 74)

As an owner of an Android phone camera I know how the culture of selfie could be overwhelming and dizzying. I am also aware of the Instapoetry that, with the help of technology and the internet, has become the new age aesthetic of hashtags in the world of poetry. Di Stefano’s warning about “hallmark of hipness” made me take a deep look at the self-portraits I produced and strive to maintain a distance from the narcissistic, hashtaggy attempts of self-promotion.

However, at times I wallowed in the guilty pleasure of a pastiche of solipsism and self-reflection. In “Self-portrait of the Homeless Model Minority Music Lover Listening to Beethoven and Correcting East India Company” I reflect on my upbringing in a commonwealth country. As a country once ruled for hundreds of years by British colonizers, Bangladesh maintains systematic and institutional racism against its own people. There is a sense of colonized guilt driven by that racism that permeates the social mores and cultural ambitions. The narrator of the poem, an immigrant like me, is the product of the colonization himself. He cannot deny that he has to start from the bottom in every position, while it is easier for others who do
not carry the scourge of colonization. He compares his disadvantages with the hearing loss of Beethoven. He knows he will not be known like Beethoven, but he perseveres to hold himself upright despite the colonized guilt. He comes to the land of his colonizers to “let them get off the hook” for their troubled economy, to become part of the workforce that nourishes it while also becoming the scapegoat of a racist theory that immigrants make these colonizers’ countries more impoverished.

When it came to looking for inspiration for self-portrait poetry, I reached out to the works by Kaveh Akbar, Jee Leong Koh, and Tina Chang. Akbar’s chapbook *Portrait of the Alcoholic* has been an inspiration for me to engage with the reader through self-reflection. His poem “Portrait of the Alcoholic Floating in Space With Severed Umbilicus” in this book taught me to be unabashed in coming to terms with my own past foibles, just like the narrator of the poem who shares that as a boy he stole a mint green bra from the laundromat and tried it on as his parents slept. Poets as the artists of self-portraits have also influenced my own growth in understanding the genre of self-portraits, particularly, Koh’s book *Seven Studies for a Self Portrait* and Chang’s poem “Self-portrait as the Dowager Empress.” Their poems gave me ideas to not only reflect on my own journey as an immigrant to the U.S. but also switch between perspectives through imaginative personae to connect with a world outside my own.

“Myself Portrait of the Uninsured Graduate Assistant, Alone at the Department” has been one of those unusual poems where I employed both observation of the world and introspection, and I noticed that through developing a persona of somebody other than myself I tend to improve my self-reflection. The poem came about when I started working from home as a Graduate Assistant. I imagined some other graduate assistant who might still have to work from an office right before the onset of the pandemic. He is uninsured, just as I am, and there is a sense of anxiety and
futility of anything jovial (like the band playing outside in the field). I formed the poem intentionally with couplets as a way to convey the fleetingness of our lives and enjambments within to portray an ongoingness despite the sudden terror from uncertainty. Through this process of perspective-building, I noticed how self-portraits made out of words seem to delve more into the intrinsic aspects of the person at the center of the self-portrait in comparison to an artist’s sketch of a portrait that may only unearth the vivid impression caught in the observer’s eyes. If I could guess, my subject alone in his office is depicted with many more creases on his visage due to the stress from not knowing what reality awaits him in the uncertain year of a pandemic.

In this thesis I have several poems related to the COVID-19 crisis. “Self-portrait of a COVID Patient Writing Despite New Confusion” is a poem where I channel the persona of a COVID patient that survived, but still is fighting brain fog or haziness. Over the summer of 2020, I talked to some of my friends back in Bangladesh over the phone to catch up on how they were feeling after COVID diagnoses. Their experiences and the stories they shared with me gave me the material for this poem. Through the persona of one COVID patient I attempted to create a unified and undeniable image of the lasting confusion that some COVID patients face long after their recoveries. Through this persona of a patient, I attempt to draw on the struggles that a writer may have when dealing with this COVID-induced confusion. I do not know if I ever contracted the virus at the onset of the pandemic, but I have noticed during the lockdown a subtle change in my ability to form coherent sentences while writing. I had taken tests that diagnosed me as mildly dyslexic after I struggled with typing and spelling seemingly easy words. I do not remember where I read this, but I read that one of the lasting residues a COVID survivor, either symptomatic or asymptomatic, could struggle with is adult dyslexia. However, my struggles as a
mildly dyslexic poet may also have been induced by my bilingual mind’s exhaustion from stress and anxiety.

While writing these self-portraits, I ended up chronicling a journey of the immigrant who comes to the US and discovers the complexity of his identity reflected in his evolving relationships with the people and places in his life. The self-portraits attempt to show not only the faces of the different people but also attempt to acknowledge a sense of nostalgia, wistfulness, or a desire for a home. The immigrant’s words are also imbued with a delayed learning of the fate of colonization. He travels to America but through a sense of understanding of the socio-political climate he finds himself in, he realizes the freedom that he came here for as an immigrant is not guaranteed. The anxiety he develops through experiencing economic hardships and subtle racial and religious othering causes him to try hard to fit in as it takes over his creative outlets. The collection is divided into three sections of poems, each depicting a facet of the immigrant identity of the poet who also struggles with a language barrier and odd syntactic choices. These poems are meant to be read through a process of participation in a journey in which filling the shoes of the second-language speaker immigrant temporarily is required of the audience.

In the process of acclimatizing to a new home through his bilingual perspective, the poet discovers that there are many memories and many hardships strewn across his path. Among these, many of them ordinary, he chooses to pick them up and put them together like a glass menagerie inside his museum of the ordinary. The same items considered perhaps less valuable by the people either in his original home or from the land he has chosen to call home become gleaming treasures in his collection. The cost of collecting these items is high, but he pays for them through: his acquiescence to a workaholic culture, a broken immigration system, or with
great political anxiety in the middle of a global pandemic. He hopes with time these items, these poems, will become memorable, become priceless in the estimation of others. He hopes that they will be able to appreciate the self-portraits that adorn the hallways of his memory.
WORKS CITED


Self-portraits for Survivors of Floods

Here goes the second timpani line before these steps take us to another restaurant, another interior mural of unknown village-scapes full of banana trees and furious rivers breaking homes, making us city-ward, the lowly class we dress up in winter warm clothes and feel smart as if rubbing shoulders with those for whom we work. Take my plates away, you burgundy vest man! I will see you next week in that same dress, we dress up to our expectation to just get served good food, then after our meals we walk back home, a little poorer. My dad cannot afford a car and neither can his salary; momentarily we rub shoulders with those we look up to be, one day at a time, tonight.
Self-portrait of the Asian Indian Cook Making Tikka for Patrick Stewart on an Uber Eats Ad

In my head everyone is wearing a turban
of secrets in hairdos I will never see

Where do they go at the end of the day?
How many glasses of wine do they swill

before they forget my name or what I can
cook for their whole family with Indian spice?

_Halud_ turmeric, _kaal jeera_ whole cumin
I am a foreigner soul in a foreigner garb

Know me only when I become part
of your happiness, Patrick Stewart

on Uber Eats. I can tell more words
in two ways than that bit about _tikka_

Recite me Sonnet 141 and tell me which
of these stolen spices gives you heartburn

Sometimes I become the turban myself
You never wove me but you still put on
Self-portrait of a *Byelingual Immigrant*

There is a picture in the gallery with a mystery message. I take up the frame, my shoulders slouched with age, a vicious stain becomes the glaring glint you can see all the way down this long hallway.

My white car isn’t parked inside a garage, it’s in a ditch. Other cars pass me by every day, the cheating feeling inside me; they say hardship teaches virtues.

I go back to my museum, my mismatched furniture, my mismatched languages all speak at the same time, *din duniyar shob i jay mati te* everything becomes dust

There’s an easel with colors they told me not to draw on, but I’m in love with the outlines, the sketches I drew a long time ago. My dying demons tell me cover them up with the wrong ones, handstains wring the water out when done. My buckets fill up.
Self-portrait of the Homeless Model Minority Music Lover Listening to Beethoven and Correcting East India Company

The power chords are crumbling with each stroke. Beethoven has come out a dreamer I could never be. Only another misspelled name.

Here’s the track of the decade playing in my ears bleeding my drums. In a beat I cannot keep up with, I love you

the way a lost nineties kid loves the power chord of piano pop in the reckoning of an upside down car crash. There is no

one rule to go down the road of losing memories. The white flash of saviorship: in airbags in colonial guilt— science classes

didn’t show us how you became the shame for the same reason we are no longer your slaves, East India Company. I am free

to explore without a switch to whip and the lack of the red stains on my palms speak for the guilt tripped avoidance of the dance of the rebel I am.

Come tell me your story sometime when the sun goes down. It goes up not in your country, but elsewhere, where they spell my name right, listen—

Beethoven lost his hearing to make perfect music; I lost my home to come over, to let you get off the hook.
**Buypast**

hours before we left
for the station
the Tupperware rice
went stale inside a crowd
a bus we got off
a fear of stampede

Warehorrors of the giant waves
sea level rise and a lost home
no going back where you came
from no matter how much money
you carry in your pockets,
no way to buy a past long gone
Speak to Me, Dead Immigrant

Speak to me, Immigrant!
How did they treat you?
Were you revered as
the new man who spread
the gospels you didn’t
know? Or, did they treat
you like a brown maniac
like a sour patch leftover
box with no food inside
and thrown inside the trash,
a gang of raccoons sniffing
your hair mixing in with
the garbage that you brought
from your home?
What is your home, anyway,
but the promise of white skin
that could save you someday?
You marry somebody else
and they will tell you
you could always do
better, so you marry
the Love of your life.
They kidnapped her
inside her maskless
refuge in the pandemic.
Think about refuging
up north somewhere,
maybe in Canada,
where, perhaps,
they don’t treat
you like they
treated you, like
a fadeout song
from your last dinner
with your Love
you couldn’t rescue.
Self-portrait of the Immigrant Alone in Quarantine on New Year’s Eve

2021 is here with the loose ends of the last one
There is no respite, no sleep, but the hands

speaking the words that the mouth cannot
Here I am waiting for your name to call me

I hope I am not misspelt like the dyslexic I am
in the unknown glory of a diluted ink blots

across the papers where I cannot read the story
I am in love too much with shapes of the words

On the other side of the world they preach
how to kill the likes of me, too much garlic

breath, there is a king with sharp lines sudden
turning, like a wheel but you and I are the same:

our prayers don’t speak with our knees anymore
but stand up to the spitting orifices, the harbinger

orange sun speaking down on you, and families
separate to live another year, to hold on to dear life
Like the Waves

Stretched arms across the door frames
trying to be taller one inch a day
or maybe a week
while knowing growing means
leaving
to be far away in a country

The morning routine, calls
of shaliks, birds of buildings—
I used to wake up the earliest
just to see if the birds
could tell me where I belonged

My parents rose, in slow waves
chasing for the land I made
across

Now the collage on the wall
made by my American wife
tells me that I might as well
have made it Maybe I belong in
this apartment with clean carpet
and central cooling

I stretch my arms now to spread
like a bird to let the heart muscle
grow out of corruption of blood
pressure My parents rise on
the other side like the waves
I can now never hear crushing
onto some land
A land I made it to, safely
A land where cardinals sing
Self-portrait of Survivors of a Fire on the Serendipity Street

These pictures are crumbling in a pixelated waterfall
And here the glass holds our last drink
Before the cramps become the blush
and Saturn kisses Jupiter, the blush of twinkle
in silver rays for white, before we lose the ginger
cat on our way back home, the muscles
cramp and a ghost meowl follows back home
even with our door closed, we can hear our
lost souls under the tunnels of city streets.

We have one that fills our hearts, and we pretend
nothing will ever touch us, like the little girl
inside a closet writing in her diary We’re hopeful
mankind is good We come back in our apartment
with our Christmas lights on fire Our house on fire
Our world on fire Our lives on fire.

Our serendipity song plays along
from the cities we come, from Troy, AL,
from Chittagong, Bangladesh Never
the twain shall meet Here On this city street.
Self-portraits of the Quarantined

fix in your late-night dizziness
in the molecules with unlit frequencies
the night becomes lighter in its
darker disarray

wake in its destitute
curlicues of mementoes
in lines and turns Blackjack
bigotry of a morning

When do we become
ourselves, with wrists
that wrap around us
become slow motion

marathon inside a room
one step two step
Can you take me up
on the offer of a rhythm?

Guiders cascading, golden
brown hair swinging with
every hair clip collapsing
in our hands in handfuls

Were it some unaware man
walking by looking into
the steadiness of the bulbs
He would know it’s a sun

even when darkness
makes us one, a blissful tongue
on the clasp of an invisible
ridge, a breakline

We are in it. We’re none.
Footnote in History

The chest becomes a solid crosshair for the fading ghosts
Autumn swings in view but the lifeless forms of our ancestors
Groan in the dark of the day when the clouds emerge from nowhere

The journey begins with a broken face lit up in a fake smile
Telling you how important you are, the freshly grown garden
The most beautiful fragrance independent among all of us

Cigarettes become grass fires and our mothers become postnatally
Depressed from the weight of our skins, our limbs grow
Only to torment the light out of their bright eyes

Once a hero, she sloughs down the lane like the lamb of god
Her skin become the envy of the snakes that sigh and rattle
We become their eggs hatched in the hut of the man of rules
Self-portrait of the Overachieving Pandemic Survivor

Lockdown, distant locomotives—
our faces buzz through the screens,
our money machines burp,
there’s no way our charts
are telling our hearts
in the right way.

Stand by me, the right drop,
rain, ring, regulate
our hours flying
in the middle of a graph
inside a history book,
tell me you know the end:
Did we make it through?

Tell me how short
I am from the length,
my herd immunity baldness
is not as shiny as Bezos’s
but it’s something.

I’ve learned how to talk,
to talk to myself.
What have you done
in these nightmares?
Arranged Marriage

abandonment telescoped
looks out at moons,
armpits sweating lust
left behind a car ride,
carbolic acid for snakes

eyelocked with the contents
inside a box of donation
keeling over, toes outstretched,
I am in love with the arpeggio

precocious child,
where did your sisters marry?
a glass of water with plastic in it
will kill you just as you walk
out of the mosque anteroom
Self-portrait of the Survivor of Past Pandemics

arms in mine, we brave the rain
the high heels parking lots
clapping behind our steps

ours is the new cosmos
we married the comet with
a planet with no satellites
sari and curry shirts
cladded in ways time travels
after a time-traveler's death

kryosenithetic, understand
there’s no tomorrow
except now when the decapitated
sun calls our names,
a headmaster dead from
a disease long extinct
Downtown of Our Lives

A ghost waiting on the other side of the door,
I am waiting to know who it becomes, to me

fountains are corrupted with nostalgia butterflies
only fireflies chase down when the sun's down.

We took loops across the gazebo and ended up
underneath the dying sun and saw our faces

glow. Glow, glow, my hide-and-seek friends!
They can’t afford the bus fare, so they cling

against our shoulders, and we see the year
from now in the vague shape of a sleepy willow—

rain in the night becomes the dying clouds
and our clodded shoes become light with air.

Bring me the last memory you have of me
underneath your ventilator dreams; your nose ring

makes you beautiful, but there’ll be more air
someday when we can breathe free, astounded

that we made this far, only the far-future around
become winter lights of the downtown of our lives.
Self-portrait of the Uninsured Graduate Assistant, Alone at the Department Office

The cagey walks to the vending machine
down four stories to the building next door
I see the faces behind the glass doors
They look at me where I will vanish in 2020

I cling on to this planet with my $1.75 cup of tea,
with no cover I bring it to my office and drink
alone before it gets cold and outside music
bands practice their cruel croons for another year

Then came a year when everything goes to online,
emails pleading us not to come to this show or go to
that game, our salivas salivate for the time
when we will go out like normal again For now

I walk back to my office, my nametag in
the drawer, nobody knows me, in this brief
period We become strangers: I take one breath,
and leave, and then another, and then another
A Vending Machined American Dream

Canned coconut jelly lychee sorbet
brings disbelief that happiness comes to an end.
Someday when the taste of the mouth recedes
the dead lose touch with the gourmet
looking out for a breakaway making
souls sour in the echo trundle of a train.

Take us down to the town they say.
They will know me if only I can tell:
my pocket has a picture of a fiancée,
a few coins that will buy me
some bread, water, and a bleak dream—
a lost taste in the mouth, a ghost—
canned coconut jelly lychee sorbet.

I am closed down by the racking stacks
of load, breaking my ribs in signaling
into the world that never spun but froze
the moment these souls kept flying away
into the ether they never could afford
while waiting in lines for food.

What is it in symbols? A molecular number
a soul, a spirit, a ghost, good or bad?
What takes me to recognize hydrogen
is all it takes to unite us when hydrangeas
are dying from hyperventilation?
Cage Full of Children

Get in the car full of rage—
there’s a cagey man in the driver’s seat:
moments of our lives flash past
the mirrored lights of an eternal night.

Where are we going?
Where is anybody going?

I fumble for the seatbelt,
magically disappear in a stimulus plan.
Maybe I am immune to car crashes.

A Thanksgiving dinner
in some house outside the city
where women keep bringing
babies every year
and claim the holy book
is a manual for child-rearing:

*after all we’re all god’s children*

Where are they going?

Where are we going?
Where is anybody going?

He asks me if there’s pork in it.
The silver trays line up
like silver lines
around our empty stomachs.

He tells me the whole reason
to walk on thin line between
Christ and our *brown sin*
is free food,
otherwise, a gas station job
can’t feed two mouths
inside a basement *home*.

A cage full of children—
fifteen and more counting;

*who giveth the mouths*
*provideth the food*

Where are we going?
Where is anybody going?

There’s a table full of men
eating and telling stories
where they’re from.
I think about the cats
back home strangely
What they do
when I’m not there
is just as much a mystery
as what these children
have done to deserve this.

Where are they going?
Where are we going?
If Only We Knew We Couldn’t Go Back

The last call to the train left for a town
nobody goes anymore since the starlights
are lighting up this town, this Christmas.

Lights break into glass of ice by the curb.
I came into the store of the windmill,
the hanging bikes, you and I
dreamt of leaving the land of the lack.

We brainstormed seeing the menu.
Outside the howling wind told us stories:
people coming in summer
only to tie their dogs to the leash
as they slurp on cakes or kapsalon.

Break my heart and tell the world is a magic trick.
There comes an end when we can’t touch no more,
but look through the eyes of mice sniveling,
lusting for a life they can never have, outside
by the curb, thrown chunks of leftover ice
We come from countries we can never go back.
Self-portrait of the Place Where We Became One

The sidewalks by the red brick buildings,
bushels of dead leaves, and glassy pathways
wrap my head around the world I took,
a pill with water that taught me to write.
Many I don’t know lay there sleeping
as I walked around their dreams down
a hallway: thumps of love, breaks from
the semester long flings, last
until summer camps and odd jobs
took us apart. Our love reached the floor
and knocked on the big guy’s door.
He got tired of our lovemaking.
He threw lightning and separated
like Zeus against our inhuman
loveable affairs. So they lasted like the last icelets
in evaporation fly out the chimney
our Santa wishes died upon. No more
Christmas lights winking but a smell
haunting us for the rest of our lifetime.
We remember now how we smelt
to cicadas until we vanished
How Do You Make It Out of Here?

Like cheapskates writing on the nooks of yellow legal pad pages, I count how many cents add up to another trip to the clown burger place. I haven’t eaten for days since the last cent from GoFundMe went to coming to this town. Someone taught me to live with my head held high, but they forgot to tell me, it’s gonna be this heavy walking around with a brick tied to my belly. How do you make it out of here? How do people live with this many dreams and not get burned out? I am going now to steal some TP from the public restroom, fill my pockets and sell them to some hobo for a 7-Eleven hashbrown and joe, got weeks on ten dollars. How do you make it out of here?
Self-portrait of an International Student on an American Road Trip

It’s a long road trip from the known to the unknown,
Snow covered horizons out the glass window.
Trapped in the car that takes you to St Louis,

You’re worse off in someone’s hands than yours,
But the dream of being cared for is always there.
What do you think of me when I cannot let go?

Snow can think, snow can see
The silhouettes: your face is worth the tears.
Take a stop at the next Quick Trip, and drink

Something with sugar, take away the momentary sadness,
The love of your life awaits your arrival
In almost two years from the day you cried the last time.
Family Momentary

Porotha flour bread with ghee clarified butter in bags they swing like the pendulum, aroma hypnosis The rain outside tells us how small we are in this family of four There are forces out waiting to tear us apart We focus on this moment of togetherness like a star that long ago exploded but shines bright now in the sky

I walk up to the grilled window and look at the tower with the red light the dark ceiling like a pool of unknown waters the kitchen tiles feel cold beneath my feet my sister calls me from another world My heart spins around the tall escape into the unknown knowing all of these are momentary wishing I can fit in someday like the twist of the tear into the flour bread before it dips inside the break

Our mouths hungry on a rainy night, the tower waits for a young boy swimming in the aroma The puddles of rain vanishing like the seconds hold us together under that shallow ceiling


**Zone Out**

Fryer grill leaking oil soaking shoes
Soaking souls cold flames

Of fear of loss, of getting fired,
Of no money, of no roof above

Insomniacs are lunatics, thieves
Of daydreams in this town

With portable dream machines,
The last thing of any value

Was the photobook brought
From Bangladesh, from childhood

When the red veins of a white man
Yelling, cursing in slow motion

Hits likes arrows of saliva
Leaking shoes do not slide, slip

The blood bags on the IV beside
Mom’s bed become more visible

Listen to the sizzle on the next
Fryer, some jalapeno poppers

Cursed and dead but alive again
In the burning oil, wish these shoes

Did too, and run from this place
And run the hell away
Sell-off for the Cough

Here’s a hullabaloo over the hot sand, 
balu, burn my feet until I can levitate 
and hang among the breaking clouds:

clairvoyance in three similar digits, 
I become Ayn Rand’s ghost, talking 
to myself to sleep again, razor teeth

claw against my melanin skin, I smell 
the fluttery pain in the bottom of a jar. 
Our irises dilate like petals on monsoon,

come take me inside your house 
even if I am out of breath to call 
your name spelled in blood from

my last gut-wrenching cough. 
Your arms are warm and sweet 
like the freedom they told me.

Now, my numbers are high, 
will you listen when I tell you 
I made a mistake? Or will you

turn back and sell me to the invisible 
line of men waiting for my 
head, hang me among the clouds?
Yellow Wallpaper Resident Alien

Tie my shoes, my self-portrait running for fun
in the deep woods, poisoned with the soot
of another forest fire in the distance, another Oregon

I didn’t know how to spell the states in this country
but I reached out to join your name with mine:
they learned to divide us with hyphenated schemes

Just as you are, I know how your face looked in the golden
days when our palms were covered with glue from sticking
posters of the future inside a school building with broken gate

How do you believe there is a hunger in the blissfully unaware?
The dark times don’t darken our hearts, we become just
more distant in the most oblong parallels ever discovered
Mummified *For Emma*

As if mummified, my culture shock felt like an anvil to get over
flipping the sides or altogether
I knew there’s no way one could hear me out, my shock of all
that has been going on
I walk back from class by the buzzing machines behind the old Kirk
that remind me Bon Iver’s humming *For Emma*

I am mummified in my wraps and unwraps like a real one
They want to know Egypt but they are scared how
I look, jump ships from Islam to a midwestern nondenominational
I knew who God was as much as I knew Nefertiti’s grave

I picked up French fries with forks tried to cut a pizza with a knife
My oversimplification of cultures caught me unarmed in the land of bearing arms. I didn’t know

I was in the Bible belt. I got to follow what they do if I got to blend in but I never liked guns

Curving out words in the back of my class notes, as if my second getaway waits in the form of these amorphous ideas The girl in the mascara gave me her phone to type my number I told her I didn’t have any I know now what that was about I wore my sandals to class I wore my sands to work a year later Never felt my toes could be tucked in the stifling space but that’s how they do things here I felt mummified stuck up in my own world in having my feet free in my sandals I brought from home My dad’s sandals that scrape by now the brick sidewalk like some halting hi hats alongside Bon Iver’s humming from *For Emma*
Socially Distant

Be a part of it
in the pajama swing,
hold a drink,
close the door

A million lives
pass by in leaves,
skeletal red, withered,
with or without

A step in a crunch,
wind filter your shirt:
a whistle below
corroded hairlines
Self-portrait of the Poet in the Pandemic

I write because I am disgusted
by my silence The skeptic of the storm
that blows his home to hell
My plaid pajamas clings on to my
lower body in the last hope
that my argumentation against
my sanity does not render it
tossed out into the trash My hope
is that one day I can drink
from the water fountain
without being chased down
by fits of bleeding cough, soul
flirting with the clouds
Here, take my hand!
I love you even when
you are gone and you
cannot hear me
My original language
may scare you with my
curses deep within
my heart I am the storm
that blows your home
for a blossom My
distress is a Walmart
bag full of class problems
in a classless society
When I speak, you
will throw me behind
the bars, worrying I am too
radical to think it is a normal
thing to care about those
that suffer I am not
a victim, but you make
me one when you’re blind
Sleepless

Picture me in a colorless gown—
my body made of smoke
in the hours of your realization,
in every turn and twist

in your bed you lie next to
someone you’ll never know.
The child in you in flesh
in the next room, waiting

shivering, in our clasped hands.
The makeshift bookmarks,
maple leaves dry before another
winter, break under our footprints.
**Wind Outside**

There is a bright metal reed swinging
with a note and then two: you and me,
and then more come join us,
in the sweet old aroma of March

Our friends on the carpet open
folded scraps of papers you neatly
wrote in the next steps
to call us: a king and a queen.

Platefuls of bakeries wait and waft
by the love of our cat, our fingers
hold onto our shirt buttons
fiddle and free a tension:
Do they like us? Do we like them?

We are on our own for tonight
After a pandemic breaks inside
our home, our canned foods,

our toilet paper rolls, stack up,
but our friends become obituaries
in our memories we wish we had.
We let them go like the wind chimes
let go of the wind outside.
Self-portrait of the Shy International Student Meeting His Ex for the First Time

The day before the Daylight saving
prism rain glares off your golden hair—
the feature of the god and the goddess
the lines from waves memorize the faces

On the big screen, look me up and see
I don’t exist only in your lips when I am
gone over the lines they set up to demarcate
Also the arbitrary orbits we never circumvent

Purple in shy, clasp me in your sequin purse,
your evening dress in my room, your fragrance
in the early evening spring before the snow
did learn to melt, I knelt to your perfume

from the long corridor you came to see
and I hid in my room pretended I didn’t
know you too soon to call mine You kept
knocking on the door I wish never opened
Karaoke at Dukum Inn

Here’s to the table dancing days of your youth
I could lift myself up next to you
if not for the empty bottles rolling outside,

Lines for parking, lines demarcating
the lives of the lured in our ignominy:
markets crash with one tweet and we tell

ourselves he didn’t mean it, but then
Why am I guilty when I take his name
in vain? The airborne beads dance

in every beat, jump to the ceiling,
the blue monochromatic box of a tv
show silver letters, our gospels in dispel:

Where is the hope, is it inside your hunch?
I have been carrying the luggage on my back
for a long, long time, only to know it became me

Dance next to me down on the floor,
the clenched fists kicking at the lights
Poison me one more time I let you go
Anxiety over Roe vs Wade Overturn Keeps Us from Having Sex

runny nose
hiccups clasp break
brasiere on your back
my fingertips fumble
our lips locked

fear of pregnancy
keep as from having
the last time in Iowa
and here’s death row
for your body
if you choose
Living with Dead Toys

How far will I go with the silence
before the blast of cymbal and timpanis,
a heartbeat before the heart crash?

Go on, my beloved child, into the world
full of phantasmagoric money machines!

Where will they go before the cut of the cat
in my fingers go on? I bleed; there are
more felixes deprived in the unfortunate.

Where will you go, my dear friend, afraid
of the convoluted arcs of the world
that beckon but never leave you satisfied?

Will they satisfy you with the sound of music?
Or, will they take you down a lane of magic mirrors?

Show you my corrupt in the broken glass:
I’ve dealt with too many black jacks
to know I’m depraved as much as you.

How will they forget I live with dead toys
from those machines? Toymaker sold
me my soul, toymaker sold me
my soul, toymaker sold me my
soul, toymaker sold me my soul:
motions with nothing but a few jolts
of joy until the end of this joyride.
Everything We Try to Be

strings of raindrops
swing from grilled iron bars
crystal balls revealing
worlds after the dust

on wet mosaic floors
plastic chairs bent not broken
and inside the door hinges
nests of birds, sparrows, quiet,
impossible teeter on faith
and distant clouds rumble

we see the sand-filled pour
down the drain
into the stagnant lake
hyacinths burst open
in Borsha monsoon
predicting a future
Self-portrait of a Misfit

In the color of the rope
a bungee jump unfolds
unlike the sleeves before
your meals, a gash wound

sprinkle me, some of that
water that hurts, in the wake
of a healing, there is a pyro-
maniac in me that likes to burn

with every leap of faith—
we become more distant
The tungsten hopes of our
lights, illuminate, blind

Rest assured I am just
a stranger that thinks
a scent from a dream
is a dream of the recluse

The physics of forgiving:
our bodies stray miles
We amalgamate, a small
fracture of time together

then like the next earth
decade there is another
meltdown, another dormant
breeze becoming pollutant
Persimmons

I saw your name this morning
on my news feed.
They were cheering how you escaped
like weeds amid crabgrass,
infinitesimal diving below,
the bar breaking hearts of zeros.
Where will they keep you?
On bookshelves of misnomers
teaching spices from potions?

They will cheer your name till
their last breath,
not knowing the typo destined
you to where nobody belonged.
Ivory tower, a hapless guess,
and the rest of us paid price
for the original sin.

Persimmons, you became the heart throb.
Snoozing man dignified in white clothes
smearing rainbow hues
on our eyes, packeting
all our morsels for the rain day:
infinite rosaries or one in a million.
Persimmons, it’s your choice.
Genitalia

where we name the names
long lasting chemicals in our tubes
we give birth to latch key kids
with leukemia

another force, into the space now
when all we need is a glass
of potable drink
a shrink with a liberal arts degree
to listen to our sob stories
of losing our sons and daughters
sold for the scam of our bumper
sticker troll machines

concussions, trauma, but
we delve in more drama
for more of those machines
because our genitalia
aren’t long enough

we blame those who
don’t speak our tongue
for the killings that
we carry on
Black Market Organ Thievery Victim Poem

How is it harsh with the words that don’t make sense but a broken chair and a wish for a noose or a jump off the rooftop? There is an upturned pot of curry swimming on the floor; my mother’s Shiva hair in bun around a towel, the evil system in her curse

My heart slips on the pasty ground, mixing blood with turmeric, I didn’t buy my way out with a decrepit mind, I pretended to be happy, it was all my fault.

There are muffled voices coming from next door. It’s like the world outside is right inside if I could just knock and tell them to take me. But I don’t speak their language, I run instead underneath the overbridge where skinny men eye me for food already selling my organs to the black market.

I am not much of a hope for them, nobody comes up to me. I dangle from the parapet looking over the rushing buses and night lights wondering what it feels like to be born somebody else.
Gorgeous When I Am Afraid

Through a threadbare logic
shoot the shape of my face,
trundled once more in trance
to the love laying by me.

You are here, you thought you made it.
When the house crumbled down like all else
in milk, the swiftness of death, in the shower
of water, the blue pale electricity like branches
of a tree, leafless, swing sets hanging.

They took all these lives in one
nudge or a nod to put the paperwork
away. TV was telling me to go, but
I loved the ocean too much.

Beyond a wave with frothy
mouth of a blue earth
cascaded down spines of woods,
they were having sloppy joe BBQ
by the streets when the news broke
off the tsunami.

My love became gorgeous when I knew
how alone I was, when I was afraid
my love was afraid when the sea
gorged on us, Rescue man, you see, there
is nothing to rescue.

I am one with the sea, rescued, now free.
Rustles

I

we bundle like our favorite subscription plans
many more perplexions in the positions:
we covet for each other’s touch, blinking
like the shaking water line inside a cup

bare, laid like feathers out of a pillow,
inside the rustling there’s a whistle
the night blends in with the chorus
craving crickets know how sweet

loneliness is a glass of wine, warm
from the summer winds, waiting beside
unopened letters from previous lives
we have two hearts, one beats for other

you can see the speck remnants of ember
lying at our feet from the beguiled scrutiny:
what have we done better since we’d decided
to be together? the night never will know
II

pair of knees, one looking at the other
bodice ripping tales of scraping by
together, slip-n-slide, dreams of more
of that wet body sharing gospels

I knew the suitcase of our belongings
under the candle-lit gathering of our
families, your eyes wide open,
I flew, then fell leg first, cut like claws

searing memories of disbelief, I saw
the red lines streaking on your
sweater, my knees, and our parents
told us we can never be together
Aubade for a Self-portrait Artist at Gaya Art Cafe

I am reflected in the multifaceted hotel lobby glass, like diamonds

I am so many but the Cafe offers only me, a bouquet of clinks

and murmurs. Straggler feet drag me out of an ocean, put me inside

I am two and twenty in twenty sixteen, but my numbers run

swimming in and out, the line where the Pacific and the Atlantic

meet, is where my pockets become heavy from the weight:

keepsakes and domoda stains from my last meal, the recipe

at home barely catches the fire I wished inside my heart

but you and I wake up to a different sun, a different

land, from Google Earth to the outside, we are all travelers

perusing, zafran stinging our eyes, we see what the world looks like

in the morning on the other end We wonder when it will ever end
**Burnt Bottomed Memorabilia/Swerve**

like lentils on butter in a pan
every syllable is a mystery

burn or no burn, the smell
of heat, like consequences

I hurry too much in a kitchen
like somebody about to yell

Iron handle on sweaty palms
take the scurrilous boat away

floating on drying river bed
black burn bottom, scrape me

out of these stains semi-soft
memorabilia, I am about to
dissolve in the midst of all
of these beautiful distractions

my myopic vision tells me
it’s too hot, so turn down

the heat, dismantle the smoke
alarm, it’s still quiet here

everything will be okay even if
we’re little too scarred from this
Wishbone Break

sweaters, galoshes
grilled cheese, early ornaments
for a Christmas tree
that’s still in the basement

walks to the bank for an overdraft
Stuti’s halua and brown rice
inside a lonely apartment
vacated for a winter break

only internationals in town
we walk around in
sweaters, galoshes
hoping somebody could
make us some grilled cheese
had us over for an American
Christmas we never had

Now the Christmas tree
is in the basement
I want to get out of here
away from skull crushing
carols and church gossips
Desphoria

a plexiglass anxiety
hovers between a grudge
and a welcoming hug

I am with ears turned
upright with every
modicum of wavelength

The news of the world
churns outside, a second
wave, a second strain

Where did the cake
cutting festivity go?
In my childhood photographs

I am inaudible, with mouth
open for the joy of life
that’s waiting beyond

the camera, the world
in an ash cloud of climate
change, orange skies

and I take a selfie
with friends who will die
before my next visit

A hospital reckons
how I can manipulate
the wires and tubes

inflaming, indulging
in sweet desphoria:
despair & euphoria

the curse of living
and the joy, soul
meeting the body
leaving it behind
My Feet Stretch

to the point I can’t
feel them anymore
the night is getting
young with every sip

ours is a parachute
the dust speckled floor
mock your stares as if
they know you know them

A blink in the memory
love is a residue
growth after all else
when nomads come

you and I are on the run
there’s a trumpet blowing
from our phones: it’s the end
as we knew it

Romans, Hittites, Aryans
and now I speak Dravidian
my feet are slow poke
in this race game, I try.
Kamikaze Closer

there is no music
but the drum beats
desperate to lure your
heart for a runaway

kerosine smell,
the strings on your back
swing inside the groove
reverberating boat

mix in with your perfume
we draw spectators
like fireworks at night
on the parking lot

my empty hands
fill in with weight
a switch flicks rhythm
stars collapse

jealousy from night birds
there is a tungsten
licking the leftover
dreams of the sleepless:

iron me against your
lifejacket, I bob in
and out your sea,
your sweet capsize
Self-portrait of a Covid Patient Writing Despite New Confusion

I miss my long hair
I miss being the head
that held youth
and wisdom together

Now it’s a red desert
The storm blossoms
in a flood of sands
The naked lizard

feeling the weight
of the world against
the world on its limbs
crawling out, footprints

come see me when
symbols for everybody
defending kinship
strength, love, memories

ponder the meaning
of this existence