

**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

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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 Cafagña, M.F.A., Thesis Committee Chair

Sara Burge, M.F.A., Committee Member

Michael Czyzniejewski, 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.

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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 Chattopadhyay, 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—bylingual instead of bilingual. It is by 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 bylingualism 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 Bylingual

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 Bilingual 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.

“Self-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.

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## SELF-PORTRAITS OF THE BYELINGUAL IMMIGRANT

### 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 *Byelilingual* 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 avoid-  
ance 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 racoons 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 like 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  
brassiere 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:  
innate 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 capsized

## **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