HOW TO MAKE JUICE

Collected Poems and Writings | Adriel Luis
For human children will inherit the universe only if they lose all that makes them human.

Octavia E. Butler
Adriel—Making Juice
by Genny Lim

Be prepared and forewarned when Adriel cooks. Where there’s smoke there’s fire. And like a guerilla poet with a slash and burn tongue that cuts to the quick of what’s boiling over in Amerika’s melting pot, he doesn’t pull any punches. No he kicks open doors kung fu style and pulls the covers off the wounds of racism and sexism, often turning the mirror upon himself to locate whatever hidden seeds of self-hatred, self-oppression and sexual abuse and violence lurks in Amerika’s at risk communities. At the heart of Adriel’s tough journey to self-discovery, is the vulnerable core of a young man, coming to human terms with his immigrant mother’s sublimated dreams of being an artist through him and with his father’s growing estrangement from him in the suburban homogeneity of his childhood Union City.

Adriel’s promise as a poet is this universality of experience through persistent self-examination and frank honesty. His craft is lean and surefire and his vision is full of bittersweet yearning for a more humane world. Adriel demonstrates how poetry can be a dangerous tightrope straddling the hidden and public facets of ourselves. In that way, his rants against systems of oppression, whether they be institutional or social, takes on a personal dimension, which assumes as much self-responsibility as it does blame. We are all participants not bystanders in the spin cycle of oppression.

His words bombard you with the unrelenting ferocity of a tiger and just when you think you’ve had enough, they pull you to the quiet, dark corners of a young boy’s mind coming to grips with the strange and jagged edged world around him. Coming of age also requires the capacity to take risks in love and Adriel confronts himself with a self-conscious earnestness that strips his hip veneer. Whether in poetry, personal narrative, journal entries or graphic spoken word dialogue, Adriel’s message cuts through.
Reading these poems as Adriel’s editor and poet senior, I feel I’ve come full circle. Each of his poems resonate as if I were living through them. This is the world I’d be experiencing coming up now. If I was a third generation Chinese American Toisan poet this is exactly how I’d want to tell it. I feel like shoutin’ ‘yeah!’ each time Adriel nails reality on its head. Each naming becomes a collective catharsis binding generations of silenced and suppressed voices. I recognize the points of disconnection, the anguish and pain, the hope and promise that emerge from his stories and I am relieved to know that the bloodline flows with such vital force and craft.

I am proud that the tradition of what was once called, “Third World Poetry,” lives on in these powerful pages. The hue and cry that rose from communities of color for immigrant and workers’ rights, housing rights, civil rights, affirmative action, women’s rights, anti-apartheid, anti-war and human justice, has never been silenced. Our outbursts of truth, which the mainstream categorically dismissed as “Multicultural/Propaganda Poetry,” in order to discredit our voices and the legitimacy of our themes, has not only survived decades of neglect and censorship, but burns now with a brave vengeance so blatant and incendiary, that no press, government, academy or power structure can put out the fire. Adriel is heir to that uncompromised literary legacy. Let the truth be told with words such as his:

This is not my story
It is beyond that
We are not making history
We are narrating the world
This is not art
It is breath in its very essence

This is where it all begins
Every poem could be your last
So let them live

Keep squeezing, bro, let the juice flow!

Genny Lim
San Francisco 2006
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**How to Make Juice**
STEP 1:

SOW THE SEED

*KEEP IT NICE AND DIRTY!
I was born in the broken belly of the city.

And even within the suburbs,
I was raised,
I can hear,
the buildings,
breathe.

And sometimes,
if I pay enough attention,
I can feel myself,
trying to kick,
god's womb open.

Like this morning,
I woke up
on the floor of a playground
in horizontal posture.

The plastic slide
was a new diagonal
swallowed by the sky
clouds in cracked blues.

“Fetus,” by Matthew Luis - 2006
I REMEMBERED:  
I WAS NOT FAR FROM HOME.  
I AM NEVER FAR FROM HOME.  

I wonder if god ever resisted any images that I’ve had of her:  
whether  
MOTHERLY OR OLD WHITE MAN  
ENERGY OR IN THE SKY  
I wonder if she minds that she is more beautiful to me at some times than others  
And if she materializes in the ways the world transforms  
I was born in the Broken belly of the City  
And I cannot separate myself.  
WE ARE STILL IN EMBRYOTIC STATE  

This must be why we were born—  
to swim horizontally steady in this belly  
waiting for God to manifest  
while we wait in this void between creation and existence  

CLAWING FOR A LIGHT THAT IS ALREADY TRANSLUCENT  
IN WE  
IN HER  
WE SPEAK  
SOLILOQUIES  
OF SONGS  
US SUNBURNT CHILDREN JUST LISTEN:  
If not in us  
Then us exists in her spirit  
Celestial Atmosphere can be hard to see, child  
I want to break open in front of you.  
I want you to know that  
My brotherhood to you  
Is not bound by religion.  
I want you to see that I am confused  
At what to call God  
Because you might have  
a name that I’ll understand  
And I might be able to join you at birth.  
And together  
We can kick at god’s womb  
When it is translated  
That we are ready  
For peace  

Open Arms // Calloused Wounds // Tooth and Nail // Nail to Palm  

I wanted to break open in front of you.  
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That we are ready  
For peace
My name was born on the tip of my mother’s tongue. Stepping upon a new shore at the age of eighteen, still toying with consonants and vowels, she chose to challenge herself by giving me an elaborate label.

Always pushing boundaries, I would cup my palms to my ears, shudder as substitute teachers massacred its pronunciation, over-ethnicized my identity.

But hey, I’ve never led a simple life. When my mother was at the brink of post-graduate starvation, raising a rebellious teenage baby sister and trying to convince my computer engineer father that quitting her job for an extra five hours a day with me was worth struggling for, I guess a name like Kevin or Mike were easy ways out.

This is my reflection: forever mispronounced, folks could never get me just right.

So I believe, when my mother named me Adriel, she knew what she was doing.

---

Keep me in check about this:
If I ever tell a girl, in a sudden flurry of hot infatuation
that she is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen
I am sooooooo lying!

My mother was raised poor in Hong Kong, brushing her fingers along hot humid walls. They say she was a troublemaker. Angsty middle daughter, ready to shake down her two sibling pillars on either side of the age spectrum. Her parents yelled at her the most. Probably shook their heads like tired, rusty hinges at the would-be should-be docile year-of-the-hen daughter dancing around the room simulating Chinese opera, pissing off her older sister.

Her father’s mouth summoned a storm at her for one reason or another, and she stood blankly in the middle of the hallway, cupping her pudgy yellow fingers over her eyes, convinced that this provided a sufficient hiding place.

Imagination run amok in her silky black bowl cut.

If I had been around back then, I would have bet that she was destined to be an artist. Seventeen years later, I would take all that back, standing by her cubicle on bring-your-child-to-work day, watching her clutching her three-year-old firstborn son vomiting Cheerios on the office carpet. I wonder, at that moment, with soggy clumps of cereal and Vienna sausages petrified to her fingers, and a hideous little Mowgli spilling his guts on her shoes, if she realized that being a full-time mother was the only way I, who was raised to be as needy of attention as her, would survive.

My mom used to tell me she got off of work at 5. And so, sitting on the orange carpet at grandma’s house, the television was my clock. And without any concept of commute or colored people’s time, I expected that doorbell to ring as soon as the theme for Silver Spoons came on. And of course, it never did. So everyday I worried, 1980’s jingles
painting a portrait of my paranoia.

"Here we are…"

"Face to face…"

"With a couple of silver—

But mom told me that Jesus said that I shouldn’t worry.

And she stripped away all reason, diverting her art degree to a focus on giving me
drawing lessons and conjuring illustrations of ugly space aliens, saying that that was
what I looked like when I was asleep. To say that my mother—who now stays at home
to cook, clean, commute, and watch Korean soap operas—is the hardest working
woman I know, is a cliché that reeks of truth. And sometimes, soaking in tears from a
heated argument, she tells me that I am so much like her, the pain runs crooked down
her spine like birth revisited. She never got to finish school, or become interested in
politics, or get involved in so many of the aspects of the world that I have grown to
find as necessary to my being as my mother’s touch. But even still, without knowing it,
she raised me as a mama’s boy since age three, exemplifying the very essence of a figure
that demands respect—not in the stern-Asian-parent sort of way, but as a beautiful
construction of soul sacrifice—who just happens to be a stern Asian parent. And I know
bearing three Bay Area goblins didn’t kill her youth. It just corked it for preservation, to
be indulged sweeter still, like a good wine…or dried squid.

Last night my sister told me that my mom made her stay up until 4am watching her
freshly downloaded season of The O.C. That feisty middle-child-brat still lives on in her.
And I can imagine, when dad’s at work, and when all the kids are in school, that
she still waltzes the freshly mopped tile floor, simulating Chinese opera.
His arms are the silhouettes of wilted branches
stretched across endless wrinkled white plains.

He grasps all 76 years about him;
every word that has taken flight from his purple tongue
every syllable, every sound
he scrambles it all to scrounge each thin breath.

But air itself has become his lung's miser.

My grandfather is dangling
on the cliffs of life
above the abyss of forever,
and I am standing on his broken fingers.

I want to help him.
I want to alleviate my foot from his quivering hand
anchor my knees to the ground
and pull him back up to safety.
But each time I try I force more weight on my legs.

He shrieks as fingernails crack beneath my heels.
"Jie-jie!"
He pleads,
"Why are you doing this?"
I want to answer but I don't even know why.
to birth a humble kitchen in the shadows of the Tenderloin.
I, who stampeded through the gray mist of boiling bok choy and steamed rice
to embrace the grease-stained apron of my own Gung-gung.

\textit{crack}

He, who stood among American soldiers
but watched Veteran's Day walk him by without an utter of recognition.
I, who marveled at his Herculean muscles
scars of untold war stories.

\textit{crack}

He, who cried blood, sweat tears, and bled struggle for ten years
to bring his entire family from the colonized grips of Hong Kong
to the colonized grips of San Francisco.
I, who became infuriated
when he picked me up from school ten minutes late.

\textit{crack}

\texttt{Sorry, Gung-gung}
I can't come over for dinner.
Prior engagements

\textit{crack}

\texttt{Sorry, Gung-gung}
I can't come to your birthday party.
Too much homework

\textit{crack}

\texttt{Sorry, Gung-gung}
I know you only live five blocks away.
I'll visit you more when I get my car.

Finally, I lift my foot
Broken flesh from fingers
Red channels down the lines of his palms
I see the weariness
in the wrinkles on his forehead
the veins in his eyes

\textit{The concrete hardness of his lip.
I kneel down, lean forward, and kiss him.
For one moment his face softens.
He smiles and lets go.}

\textit{Fong Luis (1923-2000)}
Pointing Fingers

‘83
Redwood City delivery room. Easy first labor. I am born into the arms of a Berkeley grad so fresh off a computer science degree, its corners are still crisp.
My father names me Adriel.
First-born son of a last child. He holds me with a grip so tender, it could only have been molded by four older sisters.

‘84
I’m crying again. It’s 3AM but his eyes are bloodshot gongs. Sleep doesn’t pay for the down payment on the new house.
My tears aren’t wet enough to dampen his clutch.
He turns on the bathtub faucet because the sound of running water puts me to sleep.
And as far as he’s concerned, there’s nothing spiritual about that.
It’s just the way things are.

‘88
Elementary school Olympics. I am frustrated with dad! Three-legged-race and we are in last place. His strides are too wide.
I cannot keep up.
My left leg bound to his right. It is swept beyond its stretching point.
My right leg is dragged limp. Sneakers stained in crushed grass.

‘95
I do not want dad to come home.
His eyes will glaze. His sigh will tug at my soul.
Anxiety’s voice is his engine’s hum pulling into the garage.

‘01
I only come back home every three weeks freshman year. And even on those weekends, I don’t kiss him goodnight like I used to. His eyes are twin tunnels that trace a love that I may have intentionally rejected.
He wants to talk.
But he always catches me at the wrong time—when I’m studying, when I’m on the phone, when I’m writing. He has created a poet in me.
I have created a stranger in him.

‘05
Sometimes I don’t come home because I don’t want him to see the new dent I put on the car.
Sometimes I come home and the only sign of life in the house is light seeping through the bottom of the office door and the chattering of a keyboard.
I peek through the door and say hi, but honestly, sometimes I don’t see him.
I look past his eyes as if there I’ll find something better.
Those eyes are no longer familiar, and it is my fault.
Sometimes I watch old home videos and try to trace the moment my smile no longer existed as a right of his.
I want to pinpoint at what chapter I birthed this void, but I cannot.
I want to blame him, but I cannot, because the gleeful twenty-five-year-old father on the videos looks so damned much like me when I point at him.
And I just wish I didn’t have to admit
love has mutated into a whisper of a bond
only loosely laced by the four letters of our last name.
I don’t want to believe that our interaction is paved with obligation.
But sometimes I can’t even look at my father
without seeing a reflection of my rejection projected on his face.
Sometimes I want to illuminate his silhouette
and ask him if he has given up on a relationship
that may never share a connection as tight as both our zipped lips.

I wish this poem wasn’t just a defense mechanism.
But I have written my father into third-person existence too many times,
and poetry for me has never been a solution.
It just names my demons in stanzas.
It juggles literary merit into what I will not hold myself accountable for.
But dad,
I’m begging you to surface past the last scrambled pages of my notebook.
Because fatherhood has evaporated into a phantom concept
that ricochets from our shared silence.
And I know it’s as simple as initiation.
Emancipation from twenty-one years of miscommunication is a speed dial away.
But I suppose that is the sick irony.
Hand in hand
To foot in mouth
Open elbowed
Eyes half shut
Father son
Redemption
SAPPY BIRTHDAY PT. 22

I went home to see my father and mother... ever since I moved to Memphis I haven’t written my dad back since I left Tennessee. Today, I’m thinking about you guys! I am SOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO
**STEP 2:**

**PICK THE FRUIT**

*STAY AWAY FROM THEM SOFTIES!*
This is where it all ends
Because every stranger that has ever
dwelled in this house
is packing his bags with his back turned to me
And I don’t want them to leave
But every second that I’m clenching to these
mind-conjured gentlemen
my soul is losing breath and
my writing’s losing breadth and
inspiration’s losing its opportunity to shine
because I can’t loosen grip on yesterday’s
state of mind
See, these guests wear the masks
of my past’s poetry
nourished by a passion for societal angst that I’ve
long overcome
I should tell myself
that I will never write the way that I
did two years ago
because the world has changed since then
and so have I
And the fire that I came with before hasn’t died
the wind’s just changed the flame’s direction
reflection, we begin with...

Guest One.
AND SO I BOOTED HIM THROUGH THE WINDOW TO MAKE ROOM FOR

GUEST TWO.

he came to me
cloaked in a darkness
that spelled depression
outlining my loneliness

for 8 twirls
of the moon
i took solo mindtrips
with ambivalence
as my concubine

she wore a scarlet wedding gown
scoured by poetry
written by her other lovers
in my own pen

and i won’t front

i saw
SLAM
and tried to barter
to claim
A SAUL-STYLE
as my OWN
(oblivious to the fact that that queen
didn’t belong on my throne)
sitting on the dock
of another poet’s bay

SKIPPING
AMETHYST STONES!*

I WAS
biting all the poets who I felt were good
connection to myself unplugged

I WAS
fighting ego
trying to impress the people

my scarlet bride
dragged me deeper
into my solitude’s puddle
my guests in a huddle
GUEST THREE

UNTIL GUEST THREE CAME IN TO HELP ME FIGHT IN THE STRUGGLE!

(check it)

POLITICAL PRISONERS PRESSED AGAINST THE WALL!
HINTED THE MISSION TO EXPRESS AGAINST THE WAR!
AGAINST THE OPPRESSION THAT STRESSES ALL OF Y’ALL!
I WAS SPITTIN’ TO BEGIN A MILITANT REVOLT!
I HAD MY EARTHTONES ON!
A HEADWRAP TWISTED IN MY HAIR!
ONE FIST AROUND THE MIC!
ONE FIST UP IN THE AIR!
ASIAN PACIFIC ISLANDER AMERICAN ACTIVIST!
MAD AT THE SYSTEM THAT KEPT MY MIND
FROM ALL THIS INFORMATION THAT I HAD BEEN LACKING!
I JOINED ALL THE ORGANIZATIONS
THAT WERE NAMED WITH COOL ACRONYMS!
I COULDN’T GET MYSELF TO BE VEGAN
BUT I DID TAKE MORE VITAMINS!
CUZ THERE WAS SOMETHING GOING ON, Y’ALL!
THE REVOLUTION WAS UPON Y’ALL!

BUT ITS EXCLUSIVENESS
WAS THE ROOT
FOR MY DOWNFALL

I REPLACED GUEST THREE WITH HIS BROTHER,
GUEST FOUR,

who taught me how beautiful my community truly is

yellowbrown gods in context with a world in simultaneous chaos and harmony a wordfist of poets

he introduced me to some raw, real writing
(2) tongues // (8th) wonder // isang(mahal) // (proletariat) bronze
i was wrapped in the love of (ill)-literate arms
i took theory to practice
had to get my mind right
the movement was a backdrop to individuals in the backlight
pass it to others “ikalat muna,” right?
breathing these sunburnt children into my bloodstream
i believe
just like these other three guests
number four is still very much a part of me
focusing on using my voice to help uplift humanity

i guess?
I don’t know. Because my current guest, five, has left me on the brink of insanity.

Because it makes no sense why so much of my recent writing has found itself stuck in the scrambled pages of my notebook. Drenched in confusion, obsessed with third tongue movement, a wordsmith fascinated with the capacity of the communication that thrives in silence.

Surely, this eats me up inside
Like how these five eras of my writing have consumed my life
Five guests
Dwelling in my mind
Have you taken a look into your guest’s eyes?
Because I have decided that our poems take lives of their own
Scarlet brides sitting on their proper thrones
Broken word
Spoken unsurely from these quivering lips are testimony to collective consciousness
This is not my story
It is beyond that
We are not making history
We are narrating the world
This is not art
It is breath in its very essence
This is where it all begins
Every poem could be your last
So let them live
Indication That You’re in the Suburbs and Not the Hood #238: If you’re walking down the street and a car rolls up on you very slowly, you don’t duck…you buy a popsicle.

Growing up in the suburbs is pretty much the way they show it in *Desperate Housewives*. With a few minor changes.

Growing up in the suburbs is pretty much the way they show it in *Desperate Housewives*. With a few minor changes.

Union City is one of those towns that wants to be urban. Early 1970’s showed a farmer uprising. Brown, black, and yellow bolts implanted into the city limit quicker than you could say “There goes the neighborhood!”

A whole town is transformed into the All-American City in the apple of the melting pot’s cauldron. The locals rushing out so fast, The red clay dirt left bold streaks next to their white flight, leaving the dark, blue-collared cornered with stars in their eyes. The perfect American flag. For some. Especially the colored folks.

So no, it’s not quite like in *Desperate Housewives*. Instead of 50’s throwback diners and fudge factories, Newly paved streets are lined with taco trucks and Filipino bakeries intertwined with the scent of carne asada and fish sauce. The Decoto Street rosebushes are tangled with alcoholic twigs clawing at torn Steel Reserve labels and aluminum caps. Instead of white picket fences, Neighbors are cargoed into rented one-story pentagons separated by aerosol-coated wood planks lined side-by-side, and so in need of a paint job, It’s almost…vintage.

Union City
Une Town!
The most ghetto-fabulous of the Alameda County suburbs, I swear, if someone were to take a bird’s eye picture of that town, the multi-green lawns and swimming pools would make out the silhouette of a G-Unit sneaker.
Indication That You’re in the Suburbs and Not the Hood #172: If there’s a rat running around in the halls, it’s not a scathing rodent. Its name is Wally, and it wears a mini Nautica sweater from PetsMart.

Sometimes that house on Jean Drive got too small.
Despite the fact that my brother, sister, and I each had our own rooms along the carpet path to the two-car garage,
Sometimes the shit was too small.

And when California Music Channel taunted me with brightly-tinted Puffy and Ma$e videos,
I couldn’t help but yearn for life outside these coyote hills.
Predictable like the garbage trucks at 9:30 every Monday morning,
I longed for something—anything—to shake things slightly away from the copy-and-paste responses I resorted to every time my parents asked how my day was.

Some kids were bored into thuggery.
Inventing themselves in front of 2Pac posters like they were mirrors,
breaking the monotony and their curfews to cause ruckus in elementary school playgrounds and maybe make the local headlines.

See, Union City goes through identity issues as the mulatto child of Oakland and the Silicon Valley, Almost too good for its own good.
Gated communities protect us from everything but ourselves, And with world views as identical as our mailboxes, Carbon-copy existences just didn’t cut it for everyone.

See, at least twice a year, The pledge of allegiance would be followed by loudspeaker fables of fellow students who opted out of a life of mediocrity with the swipe of a sterling razor just under the palm, or through a final visit to the train tracks to kiss an out-of-town locomotive head on.

In Union City, Some kids literally bored themselves to death.
The rest of us either left, or as they say, “got stuck.”
Indication That You’re in the Suburbs and Not the Hood #337: Everybody and their mama is at Walmart at 3AM…on a Wednesday.

For me,
Reflecting on Union City is like reflecting on Power Rangers—
I don’t want to admit it,
But dammit,
It played a huge role in my development as a person.

And I’ll confess,
Sometimes I return to it feeling like I’m better than it,
Not because I think I’m smarter, or stronger, or savvier,
But because I figured out how to escape it in the first place.

And it looks back at me like the one that got away.
The quiet kid in the corner that it used to ignore or poke fun at until he disappeared one day, only to come back fiercer.
Union City and I share a bitterness like only rival siblings can.
And as much as I grow nostalgic strolling down Alvarado Boulevard, I can’t find it in myself to forgive the isolation these suburban streets fashioned in me for 18 years.
All of the pigeonholes and limitations I barely evaded on my way out these city gates.

Union City
I look back and almost despise what I could have become—and also who I could have been,
had these sidewalks not been swept so crisp-clean everywhere I went.
Union City
Almost urban if you close your eyes and wish hard enough.
A big city trapped in a small town’s body,
But constructed to protect itself from the “concrete jungle” image that it wants so bad to be.
Birthplace of reverse rebels
sick of being blindfolded and spoon-fed security.

It is in this town that some people lose themselves
And where others avoid that
by sacrificing everything else.
ASIAN KID

Sometimes I wonder
If I ever lived through high school
Or if my adolescence was a period of virtual nonexistence

Swept off the stoops of popularity
Sanding my flesh with my palm
I could’ve sworn that if I rubbed hard enough
I could wipe this yellowbrown off

At James Logan High School
I never was down enough to hang out with the popular Asians
Silently cropping away at my self image since the 7th grade
It felt as if the cuffs of my Anchor Blues wouldn’t staple just right
The thick Walmart tubs of green gel wouldn’t slick my hair back all the way
And the seats at the lunch tables couldn’t pronounce my name

Constantly rubbing my skin to see if it would just peel
I just knew that if I ripped off that top layer
Black skin would be revealed

I backed this belief with
The fact that a seat was always saved for me elsewhere—
Three plastic booths between the lunch line and the Sprite machines
The Spot, they called it
Subtly subtitled The Black Tables
Yellow-tinted I, swimming in an oversized Ecko jacket
And a sea of ebony faces

This was no artificial validation

It’s not like I grew dreads and started claiming Compton
But inside
It was a struggle over who I was
I just wanted so bad to feel familial breath from my own caramel kin
But they would just juggle me around
Never allowed me in the crowd
But when I kicked it with other folks I was suddenly a sellout

(Sidenote)
Have you ever had a Filipino guy
Wearing a doo rag
Tell you that you’re not being real with yourself?
That shit hurts!

Welding strings of my self perception
My only concepts of Asian Americans
Were these people I didn’t want to be
While I exchanged pounds with differently hued realnesses
I just wanted so bad to be Black
How was I supposed to not want to swap my reflection?

Without a question
Other Asian men are the most difficult people for me to interact with
Even today
My notion of them have been tainted by that Union City mentality

And yes,
Things could have been worse

I narrowly escaped those campus gates
Still embracing my cashew eyes and mother’s tongue
But I believe I had to go through that awkward phase of self-hatred
Teeter on the cliff of being a wannabe
Ride seesaws with minstrelsy of longing
Face demons that lined my skeleton in tan hues
And yank them out of their closets
To understand how gorgeous this yellow skin is
When I allow it to shine on my own terms
because his loneliness poems still echo in his headphones
audio projections of solo lifestyle wars
story of a boy told through dreams crumbling slowly
they rock-rock on
silence doesn’t stop when
the wire is unplugged
when he steps into his bedroom
the hum of his computer is still all that sings him into
december slumber
his own fingers running through
his hair do not bring
the same comfort
his bad days stick like
gum to sole
tarnish his path with grayish pink acrylics paint his stumble in paradox
he misses skipping stones in chicagoan beaches
drawing symbols in turmeric with witches
solitude tastes better in the midwest
disappointment doesn’t get to him
unless she cloaks herself in his image
too many bonds have been shattered by his inability to embody expectations
he is forever reaching
they are the monkey bars that carpet heaven
it has gotten to this point
because he has surrounded himself with tired souls
spirits on the verge of meltdown
he has set fields ablaze with his solemn rants
so at any moment
he could be anyone’s last straw
the culprit of another’s woes
he has his own to be his muse
sometimes even kings trip over their own robes
no matter how thin or short
like kings
he has one eye on his community
his other is a poorly-wielded saltwater dam vision too blurry
to watch where he’s going

“Our Children Are the Future,” by Adriel Luis, 2005
A Lesson in Community Development in Davis, CA

Community development.

First day of lecture.

Welcome to Davis, suckers.

There is a professor
Thirty students
It's 11 am and among the sea of
Morning crust-infested faces,
UCD sweaters tossed on while rolling out of bed,
Grumbling bellies,
And breath reeking of stomach acid screaming
"Feed me!” from the brink of chapped lips
There is me
On the back left corner of this dingy gray classroom
"Yellow pimpslap" thermal cuffs perfectly lined on each wrist
And I'm trying my best to pay attention
But I've settled for either going to sleep or writing crappy poetry.

I think it's obvious which one I ended up doing.

The girl in front of me smells like meatloaf
Dude next to me has already dozed off
But I look like I'm the posterchild student
Scribbling away at my notebook
Perfectly in sync with the professor's words

Little do they know that I'm writing THIS
Muahahahahahahahaha!

The topic of the day is urban development
So here's the issue at hand:
There is a 15 story housing project in an ethnich neighborhood
drug dealers on every third floor
Walls painted with piss and blood
The building has its own murder rate
You're a community developer
What do you do?

A guy across from me
His baby-blue eyes light up
Braces gleaming
Hand shoots into the air
Abercrombie & Fitch sleeve creates a perfect crease at his shoulder
Fingers bolted together
Slightly tilted forward
Baby-blue's excited about this one!
I think I know what's coming
Teacher calls on baby-blue
I cringe at what I think he's going to say
Everything's in slow motion
Mouth begins to open
deep, low voice mutters,
"Tear...That...Building...Down!"
He giggles like the little schoolboy that he is
Pretty content with his little joke
And I'm wondering if he was raised by wolves or republicans
I want to lunge from my prison desk
tackle him to the floor
stab his eyeballs out with my pen
and shove them up his ass
so that they can be closer to his head

TEAR THAT BUILDING DOWN??

i want to take him outside
and catapult petition clipboards at his crotch
i-hotel
bindlestiff studio
east palo alto
renaissance plaza
homes toppled
shoving the ethnics onto the streets

buildings torn down
because baby-blue learned in college
that’s what you do when there’s a problem
it’s embedded into our history
native lifestyles
chopped to shreds by columbus’ hatchet
blood trickles down white revolutionary ideals
i’m in class 500 years later
and nothing has changed

i’m in a community development class
the class is in davis
davis is a bubble

ridiculous mentalities like baby-blue’s
have been allowed to flourish without interference

and as class is dismissed,
so is his comment
his racist sentiment tucked into his back pocket as he heads out the door
it’s the tragic tale
of white-bred amerikan life in the great town of davis

where blades pierce the hearts of gook boys in tetherball courts
where aerosol cans detonate the n-bomb onto gated community walls
where ghetto barrios have been tied to train tracks off L street
where fratboys grin in content, bloodstains of savage whores tainted on their
fingers and penises

welcome to davis, baby-blue.
welcome to davis.
Half Moon Bay

4/25/05

I chased the fog. It left a trail of sunlight in Half Moon Bay.

Crowd told me to stop. Correctly. But if not then
as court, waste time. If I had the will to chase capes of the
rest. I chose to go for the bigSAWBUCK.

Foot deep, one cleanse them. I have been walking on
clouds but my sails still ache. Lay my path, nearly
because I know I will pass by as many recognizable
landmarks as now once, if I step into familiar
places, allow me to start seriously in my own history.

Knee deep, knees buckle. We think in unreachable positions
like in that standing intake response. My suspended
awe words. Search cuts. My cause like acquiescent
astronaut boots.

Waste deep, can keep me in check. The telling likes to
give. Tell me many things, especially random sections.
Love base is unbraced. But my ceiling is sacred.
Love like love in case whom we are put persons who
think we’re Heller sexy or something.

[Right page]

I chased here. Because this is no true song. This is
the story of my life. Love, sorrow, whatever. Your heart
fills with enough to pump through you. Your furthest
fingertips kindle. Taking care of an overly
heart is like cleaning the crevasses of a late night
empty stomach. Fill it with water, and go to sleep afterwards.

Scenario: I stand here with this open. Only resisting
the winces from knocking me down stupidly so that the kids
thinking me couldn’t catch me, yes, closed, feeling the
pulse of the tide when my ears. I am grounded until the final
wave washes me back ashore.

I can’t even think I was at the beach for that long. These
glides are but shift hope, again that exercise with my
fists to build fragile mountains.

My journey begins and I am open. In my possession
penknife is stopped up absent. Leaves between seasons. Infinity
these invisible glass. Shadowed and filled pushing upon
trees from the ocean. Embrace flesh. I am let play. God
looks me. Because I am unwise. Thought the
already knew what was best for them. They’re tempted
tricks. Faced, not unspoken. This is where new colors
are introduced. New emotions are created. New love
is cast, and they change forever.

Infinity is always beginning.
STEP 3:

PEEL THE FRUIT

*EXPOSE THE TANGY INSIDES!
ONE,
DRIPPING, DROOING OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE
OF POET,
PULSATING MOSTLY OF PHILOSOPHICAL JARGON PLANTED IN A BERKELEY
TREEHOUSE AMIDST GLASS, FLAME, AND HAZE.
THIS IS THE HEALTHIEST TONGUE BECAUSE HE NURTURES IT MOST.
IT HAS BECOME HIS SOUL’S DIPLOMAT. CORRUPT, BUT ONLY WHEN IT CAN’T COME UP
WITH ANY ALTERNATIVES. BUT IT WASN’T ALWAYS THE STRONGEST.

THE 2ND TONGUE,
NOW DRY AND LIMP.
WAS ONCE THE JOYFUL FRESHWATER FISH
THAT HAS SINCE BEEN DRENCHED BY THE SALTWATER DAMS
THAT WERE TOPPLED AND REPLACED BY LANGUAGE BARRIERS
BETWEEN FATHER AND MOTHER.
IMAGINE HE WHO ONCE ROAMED UNION CITY STREETS WITH ONLY CANTONESE
SEEPING BETWEEN HIS TEETH, UNTIL RIVAL FIRST-WORLD TONGUE CAME AND
PUNKED WHAT HAS NOW BECOME THE SECOND ONE OF ITS POSITION. SECOND TONGUE
CAN’T EVEN Glisten LIKE IT USED TO. BECAUSE WHEN I WAS FIVE, THERE WAS A
BATTLE IN MY MOUTH, AND MY JAW STILL WEARS THE SCARS THAT EXIST THROUGH
THE RANDOM SLURS AND STUTTERS WHEN THESE TWO TONGUES BUMP AGAINST EACH
OTHER. NOW THIS ISN’T JUST AN HOMAGE TO ANIDA. IT’S A BITTER RENDITION OF MY
FRUSTRATION BECAUSE WORDS AREN’T ENOUGH.

AND SOMETIMES
MY THIRD TONGUE
SLIPS IN AND OUT OF EXISTENCE
AND TRIES TO LICK GOD.
THIRD TONGUE, DO YOU REMEMBER ME?
FROM IN THE BEGINNING,
WHEN HUMANS CIPHERED THROUGH HEARTBEAT?

FATHER MOTHER BROTHER SISTER COUSIN LOVER, STRANGER,
DO YOU RECALL?
BEFORE WORD WAS BORN TO REPLACE SPIRITUAL PERCEPTION
BEFORE WORD, THE NEWER BETA VERSION
WAS FORMED WHEN VOICE AND EAR BECAME EASIER THAN BREATH AND THOUGHT

THIRD TONGUE
THE ONLY SANCTUARY IN WHICH TRUTH CANNOT CONFLICT
THE CENTER IN WHICH EACH OF OUR MULTIPLE UNIVERSES LINK
BECAUSE NO MATTER HOW MANY NEW REALITIES ARE SPAWNED PERPETUALLY AS
PREMISES POSE PALETTES PER POTENTIAL POSSIBILITY
LANGUAGE CLASHES NOT WHERE SPIRIT HOLDS PRECEDENCE

WITH SPIRIT
WE NEED NOT QUESTION THAT WE CAN HOLD THESE TO BE SELF-EVIDENT:
TRUTH IS TRUTH
EXISTENCE EXISTS
AND MISCOMMUNICATION IS AS CERTAIN AS DEATH
AS LONG AS WE ALLOW OUR WORDS
TO DICTATE OUR REALITIES

LOVER,
WORDS ARE NOT ENOUGH TO NAME THE WAY MY HEART SPITS TO YOU.

MOTHER,
LANGUAGE ITSELF IS THE LANGUAGE BARRIER THAT WILL NEVER ALLOW ME TO
EXPRESS MY APPRECIATION TO YOU.

BROTHER,
THE MISUNDERSTOOD WORDS THAT I USE TO DANCE AROUND MY UNTRANSLATABLE
EMOTIONS DECLARE MY WARS WITH YOU.

BECAUSE WORDS ARE NOT ENOUGH, AND WORDS BECOME CORRUPT WHEN THEY STAND
IN THE WAY OF COMMUNICATION.
Can you hear your third tongue whisper?

Can you recall all of the universes that got lost between God’s voice and scripture?

All of the emotions that we forgot how to feel because we could not justify their existences through diction?

Did we not take flight before we invented the words to speak restriction?

Third tongue! Please save me!

You are the only one who has not betrayed me!

Because I have even lost a lover in my voice’s venom
I have bellowed roars
That have shaken the ribbons of infinity into question
In this same language
That left me alone and begging
When I sought to summon the words for my redemption

And I get caught up in this catch 22
Spewing jargon through poetry
Reiterating nietzschean theories when
Clearly the tools I have carved to
Bolt us together
Build the wall that divides us

Language is the very reason I can’t even know you—

God
Sister
Self
Like I used to.
D**IVINITY SINGS TO US WITH A **THIRD TONGUE.**

**LANGUAGE FORCES US TO PLUCK IT**
**ONTO PAPER**
**IN HEBREW**
**TRANSPLANT ARABIC**
**TRANSPLANT LATIN**
**TRANSPLANT ENGLISH**
AND COUNTLESS OTHER LIMITED SCRIPTURES WRITTEN IN A COLOR THAT COULD NEVER BE TRANSLATED INTO SPIRIT.

**BUT WE ARE SPIRIT.**

WE BIRTH
PERCEPTION

PERCEPTION CREATES
REALITY

REALITY NURTURES
THE EXISTENCE OF WE

FORULATING OUR UNIVERSE’S TRINITY

**THIRD TONGUE, SPEAK!**

IT IS THE ONLY ONE THAT HAS EVER TASTED TRUTH

TRUTH!
I WANT TO GRASP YOU

LANGUAGE!
I WANT TO BREAK PAST YOU

TONGUES!
I WANT TO OWN YOU

LOVE!
I WANT TO COMMUNICATE.
Slip of the Tongue

my glares burn through her. and i'm sure that such actions aren't foreign to her because the essence of her beauty is...well...the essence of beauty. and in the presence of this higher being, the weakness of my masculinity kicks in, causing me to personify my wannabebeiballershotcallergod'sgifttothefemalespecies image, like:

"YO WHAT'S CRACKIN' SHORTIE, HOW YOU LIVING? WHAT'S YOUR SIGN? WHAT'S YOUR SIZE? I DIG YOUR STYLE, YO!!" now this girl is no fool, and she gives me a dirty look like "BOY, YOU MUST BE STUPID." so i'm looking at myself like 'boy, you must be stupid...' but i am kinda feelin her style, so i try again. but instead of addressing her properly, i blurt out one of my fake-ass-playalistik lines like:

"gurrrrrrrlllllll, i must be parked at a red zone...'cuz
I AM SUBJECT TO MAXIMUM FINE!!"
now she's trying to leave and i'm trying to keep her here, so at a final attempt, i babble:

"SHAWTEEEE YOU IZ LOOKIN GOOD,
WHAT IS YOUR ETHNIC MAKEUP??"
at this point, her glare is scorching through me...reminiscent of feminist theory classes that i should have paid more attention in...and i'm envisioning her setting her bra on fire and shaving her scalp G.I. JANE STYLE, but there's no snap or head movement. no palm to face, click of tongue, middle finger, roll of eyes, or Girl Power chant. she just slits my glimpse with those brimstone pupils like:

"ok, mu'fucka. i'll tell you about my ethnic makeup...

I WEAR FOUNDATION.
But not that powdery shit
Because foundation was once grounded between ancestral toes
Foundation once caressed the waves that ricocheted off alabaster souls
But now it is capsulated tint of the bastards that sold us of our skintones
They found Asians
We lost nations
And I am pitifully padding fake foundation on my skin so now
My kin don't know how to get home
I want to get home
And so I ask my mother what my foundation is
And she answers, "Revlon."
And I want to speak out
But I don't know which mic to get on
And that's why I keep my lips skintone
BECAUSE FUCK LIPSTICK
Wisdom can't glisten with my lips stitched
My mother sucked blood-stained colonizer dick
For the survival of her daughters
And got her lips red
All over
Colonizer liked the look and told her not to lick it off
Oh mother!
Kept stick in her lips so her kin wouldn't suffer
But we got it twisted and said
“Mommy, we also want our mouths covered!”

Girl, keep it covered
Girl, keep it covered, girl,
Cover, girl, keep your lips the way they were
When you last kissed your blood-covered mother
So please take cover

Take cover from the sun that shines on your brothers
Keep your vision from the light
Keep the shade in your eyes
I keep the shade in my eyes
UNTIL MY EYES ARE COVERED IN EYE SHADOWS
Pupils weary of suffering,
Manifested in dark circles
Like oil in my eye
I’ve become blind to the battle
And that’s why I don’t fuck with eye shadows
And that’s why the shade spreads over my face
Whenever I start crying

Because it has become apparent that
My brothers’ eyes are also shadowed from me here dying
SIMPLY MANIFESTED BY ME PERIODICALLY HAIR DYEING
Scalp no longer able to maintain Technicolor life
Because I’m too busy here dying
And I can’t even cry about it anymore
Because my tears get my ethnic makeup all smothered

And I don’t want this ethnic makeup
So don’t ask me about my ethnic makeup
I don’t want to believe my ethnicity can be made up
And I just wish my sisters could see
That they’re not made up of that shit they call make up
That shit is not makeup
That shit is make believe.”

and i can’t look up at her.
she, mystic historic capsule.
i, misogynistic asshole
we, another broken balance
my ego left in crutches
groveling for a lesson
in my beautiful rejection.

*Stills from *Slip of the Tongue*, directed & produced by Karen Lum, courtesy of BAVC-Youth Sounds
SELF-HATRED'S SOLILLOQUY

SELF-HATRED enters

SELF-HATRED (Looking hella angry and demonic): Taking jabs
At who you were born to be,
I've gotten all types of people to conform to me—
I've gotten women to be submissive for centuries
And men to take out on women
Their frustration towards me.
Now that's some pimp shit!

(SELF-HATRED pops his collar. Beat.)

I've gotten blacks to wanna be paler,
Gotten Asians to hide their accents in shame,
Made fags pretend to be straight,
And the masses chase paper. Do you know who I am?
That's right. I'm Self-Hatred, motherfucker.
And I am coming to an ego near you.
So if you have an inch of dignity, or emotional stability,
Know that I've got a list with your name written in it!
And no, idiot,
This isn't on some new shit,
I've been fuckin' with people since the beginning.
I've created a long lineage of suckas who would love to be anyone.
Well that's anyone but themselves.
See, that's where I excel.
I was there to help when Madam C.J. Walker invented hair straighteners.
Fast-forward to all the Filipinas who have ever bought Eskinol
To make their skin paler!

Pass it to their daughters,
So they can be raised to believe
That you could never
Be beautiful
Enough!
Now isn't that a wonderful way to grow up?
In a world where Benefit, Origins, and Philosophy are just names of makeup
That you can cake up on your face,
Because I've gotten all these girls around me to believe that they can't step outside
Without their face done! Face done, face down.
It's crazy how you can control someone when they hate themselves
More than the actions they're committing.
And I've got those same clown-faced bitches
Spiritin' up their favorite dishes, face-down in a toilet bowl,
Diggin' for a potion to make them more skinny.
I've got all the lost kids in the playground off in a craze,
Not knowing how to behave,
Because all they've been taught in school is how to obey!
I just give them gold stars and report cards to keep 'em sedated!
And if you comply easily,
I'll tell you you're a gifted student, and put you in advanced classes,
Advanced towards shifting your mind state towards oblivion!
'Tell you you're a wonderful, unique individual,
Then implement a curriculum that contradicts it.
And after all that, you seen what I've done?
Aiiiiiiiiiiight, DIG IT!

(Audience breaks out in laughter and applause)
That’s right. I’m laughing at you. And you are going to accept it. Because that is how I have raised you.

(Audience shuts the fuck up. Beat.)

Now, I don’t only deal with internal affairs. Because I have coined a patented method of taking the hate you have for yourself To also impair everyone else! 60
I’ve gotten civil rights activists to turn against feminists! 60
I even tapped Fredrick Douglass to say that all men of color should get to vote 60
Before women should!
I’ve got Mexicans fighting Mexicans to claim sets within California, Forgetting that the whole fuckin’ state was their set 65
Before the Europeans came and spoiled it!
I’ve got Korean store owners ready to blast holes in the black customers That hate Koreans for exploiting them!
Now DAWG!! Even I know that’s dirty!
I’ve got them fighting over the ghetto, to the point where they don’t even think about why they’re there in the first place! 70
All that is because of me! I did that! The killers, the takers, the stealers, The rapists, who can understand what’s precious to a woman, then take it!
All that shit, because you are brimming with Self-Hatred!
It’s racism, sexism, homophobia, anorexia, Conflict, poverty, qualms in the media! It’s problems in politics! 75
Bombs in the East! It’s the models in magazines!
All the implants I’ve seen! Plastic surgery! Bastard nurseries, Filled with illegitimate bastard emergencies! It’s envy! It’s enemies!
It’s suicide! It’s losing pride! It’s commercialism! Materialism! Lack of love for yourself, but BLAMING THE SYSTEM!
All this shit, because I live in you, motherfuckaaaaaaaaaa!

(Hella long beat.)

Now, you probably want to know how to stop me. Well, first, you’ve got to find me. And with all the shit I’ve spawned in my lifetime, that won’t be easy. 85
But I will give you a hint: If you can stop trying to find me in everyone else, stupid, Maybe—just maybe—you’ll be able to recognize me In yourself.

Self-Hatred’s Self Portrait, by Adriel Luis, 2006
Flipping through wire hangers
Scanning each dully colored garment
He chooses with deep concentration.
Only the best for him.

They call him Z. And never has a one-letter name had such a perfect fit. Since birth, he’s been consistently trailing in last place. The youngest of five, you’d think he’d be spoiled as the baby of the family. But after three siblings through college, seventeen years of Bay Area rent, and a failing business, Z’s family has been depleted completely of the financial and emotional resources needed to foster youth. So needless to say, Z reached adulthood early, like most immigrant children do, who join the workforce at age 8, stacking plates at his parents’ Asian bakery. Fingers soiled to the bone in dishwashing soap. So after school everyday, he hops BART across Oakland to do the only thing he knows how—survive.

Ok, he knows how to do two things:
Survive, and be sprung off his ass in love!

He’s been with Trish since the 8th grade. And if these past four years have taught Z anything, it’s that God must be a woman. And Trish is the reflection of both him and the Most High. She takes the train to his work everyday, just so that she can take a train back, sleeping on his shoulder. Only the best for him.

She makes him rich inside, which for some beautiful reason makes all this economic turmoil okay. Which is why he’s fine with flipping through wire hangers shopping at the St. Vincent de Paul thrift store off San Pablo Avenue. Combining frugal with fashion—perfect illustration of his adaptation. His musical taste is far advanced from his peers too—digging through used CD’s at Amoeba Records on Telegraph.

Flipping through wire hangers,
But Z’s learned to be tough growing up in his used Oakland shack
Like I said, Z adapts.

But then again,
Penny-pinching can only save you so much
Used music can only sound so fresh
And Oakland streets can only be so safe.

Which is why Z didn’t have to think twice about worrying when Trish didn’t show up outside the bakery one day. Sitting on an Oakland Chinatown curb for the longest two hours of his life, the sweet scent of mini custard tarts leaking outside the bakery, mixed with the metallic stench of smog and dead catfish from the market next door.

The rancid discomfort of panicking when you think you shouldn’t. When you can smell the sweat from your scalp. It’s incredible how insanely hot a gray November evening in the Bay can be, when you have not a clue where your own reflection is.

And so Z took BART home alone that night. Instead of studying the maze of thick black hair atop Trish’s sleeping head, he stared blankly at the trees and telephone poles whisking by the window. Towering vertical structures like brown arms outstretched to God in a passionate hymn.

But Z’s mind was not on that
It was on Trish, who he hoped was waiting at home
He would not be mad that she stood him up
He would accept any excuse
That she had lost her BART ticket
Gone out with friends and lost track of time
Was mad at him for whatever reason
But safe.
Which is why the sigh of relief came when she opened her front door.
Eyes raw of tears
Limply standing in front of him
She looked exhausted,
Like she had misplaced a part of her soul
And had spent the entire day clawing through the furniture searching for it.

He took her to her room where she buried her face in her heart-shaped pillow. Z’s fingers
waltzed the back of her neck the way she liked. But this time, the familiar smoothness
of her flesh was replaced by cold goose bumps. He turned her over. Her face was red and
swollen. Her bottom lip bitten so hard there were imprints of her front teeth on it. Her
voice was raspy as she explained in broken sobs that she had gone to a study group after
school. When she got there, Jacob (who was always trying to get at her) told her that she
was early.

In his living room,
Sipping on a cup of Coke,
She asked him not to sit so close.
And so he obeyed by slapping her to the ground
Broken glass and soda spilt onto the carpet

He was the only one who could hear her screams to stop.
How convenient for him, he was the only one who didn’t care.

And now,
Only moments later,
Z is a stone in front of his queen dethroned
Unable to look into the eyes of the only pure, untainted element of his life.
When everything else—his clothes, his music, his apartment, his family,
were gray and tattered.
She, his life’s pride
Was his only source of rejuvenation.

He hated himself for making that comparison—for casting her into the stash of the rest
of his fucked up life. This was not about him. This was about she whom he defined
himself by. He saw her wings wilt as he took her in his arms, her back quivering as his
palm caressed it. Whispers in her ear, “Nothing that you do not offer can ever be taken.
We adapt, remember? Only the best for us.”

Two tired souls
Wrapped in each other’s elbows,
Fall into a forced slumber.
Thoughts oozing down the sides of Z’s mind, even as his eyes flicker shut.

They say that true monsters are those who can steal souls, and still look themselves in the mirror.
If so, then there must await a much more severe damnation for those who can do it staring into
the reflection of God.
CHAPTER 1
I don't even know how to pray. I don't feel any connection. I've spent a lifetime straining to build a concept of to whom I speak these alms, but when I close my eyes and clench my palms it's like my words wither. And so it's no surprise I've spent life lost, with no firm place to rest my qualms, because when I vocalize to vent to God I get silenced by religion. O man-made vessel of spiritual prison! These canned relationships with God inhibit me from seeing the Supreme Being.

It's twisted, because when I think of God, it translates to visions of twenty-one years of confinement of spirit. And I can't get myself to embrace that. And I don't think I was created to. But it's so difficult to believe otherwise when I'm praying to a two-dimensional Soul Dictator, like I've been trained to do.

CHAPTER 2
God, I know You're not who they tell me You are. But every time I hear your name, it's so hard for me not to lose focus and snap back into my Church's hypnosis. Because to me, the word "God" doesn't sound like "Jehovah." It sounds like holy water, bread and wine, chanting, and pulpits. Fear that these questions will infest me with locusts, and if I die still wondering, I probably wasn't chosen.

O God! Have I become so sadistic, that every week, I force myself to praise a church in a building? Raise my hands and close my mouth to worship the ceiling, comforted by the fact that I won't burn with the heathens? How did my Mother Creator get misconstrued into this? What is this ridiculous institution that swings continuous like a pendulum? I must be a fool to trust the view that to love God, I must pursue a church's curriculum. And every blink of the eye is another battle—clawing for religious light, but ending up in spiritual shadows. But I read the other night that the path to life is narrow.

CHAPTER 3
Oh God! I'm so scared! Because I've seen the thin line dividing blasphemy and the path to freedom, and I feel like I'm caught in between them—convinced I'm a divine being, but scared to Hell that the truth that I seek in myself ends up being a make-believe one. And I don't know how to pray for help if I can't properly see you.

So I sit in the pews, asking the pastor, "What could my purpose be?" But any response from the Church I see is the burning glare of religious purging. Jesus! It's like spiritual surgery with the skeptic's scalpel piercing me, and the Bible-belt's palm on my forehead, yodeling to the clouds to find out what my curse could be. So God, with these words I seek you. Because I have yet to see Jesus beyond the forty-day Christians and Mel Gibson DVDs and those who speak your name, but puff hate and blame from between their teeth, because I need to believe that, despite religion, I can find spiritual healing, and finally learn how to pray.
FIVE-O-CLOCK

It's 5:00

Somewhere in France
Paris Hilton is chillin' at the Paris Hilton
Flipping through the channels
She's skipping past "A Simple Life"

At the same time
That chick who sang "What if God Was One of Us"
Is polishing her Grammy
Watching "VH1's One Hit Wonders"

In Berkeley High
A crew of 10th grade hip-hop heads
Can't seem to remember the name of the other rapper in Run DMC

In Vallejo
Brenda is waiting by her radio
for Dominique to give her a shout-out on Wild 94.9

In Union City
Jeffery is checking his ex-girlfriend's MySpace page
To see if she deleted his photos

And not too far away
Someone is dying
His last breath slowly unclenches the back of his throat
Surrounded by empty picture frames

And everywhere
Everybody is dying
To live in someone else's thoughts

Ultimate loneliness
The greatest hell known to man
To exist as a drifter
Dwelling in homes with untouched doorbells
And minimum phone bills
As the only one who cares whether or not he's alive

(This is not on any Siddhartha tip. Ain't no one gonna be finding ultimate peace by meditating on images of the bum that froze to death last night on 18th & Shotwell.)

No one began life alone
So ending it that way seems backwards
And the fact is
Everyone craves fame—popularity
At least within their own social networks

I want my funeral to close down the street in front of the chapel
With people leaving fingernail scratches on my casket
And stopping traffic with an army of black Lincolns
My ex-girlfriends huddled in a circle
Padding down their tears with their veils
Reminiscing on my good lovin'

FAME!
THE LONGING FOR FAME!

It's the reason we get excited when we see our faces
On the big screen at baseball games
It's why we scratch our names into poles while waiting in line at Great America
Carving instant legacy with your house key
And don't front—
Everyone has Googled themselves at least once
Everyone wants to be thought of
It’s like we get sadder when we feel like no one cares that we’re sad
It’s so human to want to be noticed by other humans
Our names always sound warmer in the breaths of others
So we grab onto them as if we don’t hella own them
Acknowledgement is the greatest human necessity
And like all the others
We’ve created an over-consumptive obsession

When I’m not in this room
How many times will my name get mentioned?
I need to know that shit in order to validate my own existence

What can I do to be brought up in relevant casual conversation?
Because we all find a particular comfort in the fiction of another’s imagination
Whether it’s based completely on fact
Or loosely on fiction
As long as my name is etched on your lips
Among others from whom I crave respect

FAME!
THINK ABOUT THAT SHIT!

Because all it means to be famous
Is that you’re surrounded by more people trying to claim it
Going ape-shit over how many people are thinking of us at a particular time
How many yearbooks we’ve signed
I trip out even watching Trading Spaces
Knowing I’m witnessing these decorating neighbors
Experiencing what they must swear is the highlight of their lives

It’s crazy how today’s hot shit becomes yesterday’s not shit
Waiting for those 15 minutes of fame
Spending our whole lives beforehand trying to cop it
Spending our whole lives afterwards riding on the aftershocks
It’s like we’re struggling
To get into the daydreams and conversations
Of people who crave our attention
To claim the same significance
Cups pouring the same water into each other
Divine sojourners clinging to the earth’s surface
Unable to rise because we’re too busy trying to catch everyone else’s eyes
Is this all that we aspire for?

Do we build family or fan-bases nowadays,
Friendships or Friendsters, all of which we display
So that we can impress somebody
By showing them that we know somebody else
Thinking that knowing that “somebody else”
Will make us a somebody

"I was on Def Poetry Jam!"
"I won the San Francisco Slam!"
Trust me,
I only care enough to drop your name
So I can show everyone else how cool I am!

Modern day community building, y’all
Capitalism exists today, more than ever,
Manifested in the ways that we stack up on human interaction

Has human civilization only been driven by people
Who wanted to create a name for themselves?
Because if so
   How can I create *my* name?
   How do I get *my* signature scripted into the clouds?

   It’s 5:00

I need to know I exist,
   Can you help me?
Just say my name
   I need to hear my name in your lips
Please
   Say my name

Let me know that I still matter

---

**THE WATTS EXPERIMENT**

This is an experimental theatre.

*We have TWO SUBJECTS of observation*

(and we don't really need to give them names because they'll both be dead by the end of this poem)*

so we'll just label them as follows:
SUBJECT A

is a 16-year-old black man with a broken lisp.

At age 12, sirens blared his name and six pigs surrounded. Open palms to back of brown-flesh skull. Legs spread waist-length.

See, SUBJECT A fit the description. But not knowing so, he asked the cop “What did I do wrong???” but answered to baton against back of knees, toppled body tooth cracked on concrete.

And since then, SUBJECT A hasn’t been able to pronounce his words correctly. His tongue stumbles over words with the “s” sound helplessly. Words like “strength.” And “soul.” And “happiness.”

So no one takes SUBJECT A seriously when he speaks.

But not like anyone ever really did.
SUBJECT B

is a 43-year-old Korean man

(and I think you know where this is going)

The scent of freedom was strong enough to coax a family of 3 across the Pacific. But now SUBJECT B sells bubble gum and beer in a corner store in Watts. He hands people change through a bullet-proof face.

Folks always wonder why Mr. Subject B won’t smile

But after 17 years of wiping down the same dingy iron-bar window, there’s just not much to be happy about.

But hey, he can’t complain.

He sells enough Coca-Colas to pay the rent. And he sells enough lottery tickets to put food on the table.

His 18-YEAR-OLD-SON has been helping him out for the past 12 years, stocking liquor bottles in refrigerated cases. Ever since he was forced into this dust-ridden store, SUBJECT B has been dreaming of rice terraces that his eyes won’t ever kiss again. Dreaming of the home village where his name meant something.

But like I said we’re not paying attention to names this time.
Scene open.

Today the sky cringes with smog and brokenness. Rusty copper bells rattle as SUBJECT A enters the store. It’s hot, so he grabs a Coke and a Snickers bar for his girl. (It isn’t the fanciest anniversary present, but he’s adding a home-made slow jams mixtape so the gift will have some character).

SUBJECT B watches him from the counter. Despite the fact that he recognizes every Black face that enters the store, he can’t help but be nervous.

Because of the taunts. Because of the anger.

Because of the BLACK FISTS that picketed his store 2 weeks back, when the Black-owned store 2 blocks down closed.

“THESE DAMNED KOREANS NEED TO GET OUT OF OUR NEIGHBORHOODS!”

His ears echo their cries that swore that these rallies were fueled by a love that these foreign exploiters can’t feel. But SUBJECT B gave up his home so his son could eat a hot meal. So if that’s not love, then what is?
SUBJECT A has been standing there for awhile now.

SUBJECT B scrambles for the words but he just can't piece them together. He doesn't mean to be rude, but it's the only English mood that he's ever been taught.

SUBJECT B: Buy now or get out! Buy now or get out!

SUBJECT A doesn't want to hear it. He's been labeled as a thug inappropriately one too many times. Their eyes touch once.

SUBJECT A: What's your problem, man??????

SUBJECT A is pissed.
SUBJECT B is scared.
SUBJECT A steps forward.
SUBJECT B grabs the nine from behind the counter—

DEAD AIM ON BLACK MAN.

SUBJECT B (gun cocked back, sweat drips, fist shakes): Get out now!

But SUBJECT A has never been one to punk out like that.

SUBJECT A (takes another step forward): I have money, see?
I have money, see??

But both can't understand the words coming out of the other's mouth.

2 subjects
2 speech impediments
Struggling over 1 language
Demonstrating 500 years of socialization

Shouts continue, sirens approach. With all the commotion, SUBJECT B'S 18-YEAR-OLD-SON bursts in through the back, gun in hand—

DEAD AIM ON BLACK MAN.
Shouts continue

**Sirens approach**

**18-year-old son**  
**Gun in hand**  
Shouts continue  
**Sirens approach**

**18-year-old son**  
**Gun in hand**

...**TWO SHOTS FIRED**

*But SUBJECT A is thinking 2 seconds ahead.*

*He jumps aside and*

**SUBJECT B** takes 2 bullets to the chest.

---

Dead silence.

**Sirens approach.**

**18-year-old son.**

**Gun in hand.**

Dead silence.

**Sirens approach.**

**Rusty copper bells.**

**PIGS enter.**

**OLD KOREAN MAN** down.

**BLACK MAN** standing.

6 shots fired.

**BLACK MAN** down.

Scene close

---

This is an experimental theatre. Red and blue spotlights. Cameras in the sky. The audience is numbed by another story of Black and Asian conflict. Tonight, the sky bleeds of distortion. The news will paint a picture of it. The 2 SUBJECTS will be replaced. The scene will play again.

This is The Watts Experiment. Thank you for watching.
Step 4:

Smash the fruit

*If it don’t hurt then you ain’t doin’ it right!
SYNCHRONICITY,
LOVER! ::

*sigh*

AS FLAMES IGNITE AND EXTINGUISH ONE ANOTHER IN HARMONY,
WAVES DAMPEN EACH OTHER, ALLOW ME TO MELT INTO YOU ::
LET OUR MOLECULES INTERTWINE, AND WE CAN QUENCH EACH OTHER
WITH THE LIBERATIONS WE FIND IN EACH OTHER’S IRISES ::
YOU KNOW ME WELL, BUT YOU DON’T YET KNOW HOW WISE I CAN BE ::

AND IS THAT NOT THE ULTIMATE POINT OF EXISTENCE (?) TO

LOVE WITH WISDOM ::
I WANT TO LOVE YOU SO INTENSELY THAT PROVERBS SPROUT
LIKE LOTUSES FROM OUR SEPARATING LIPS EVERY TIME WE FINISH EACH KISS ::
COULD WE ILLUSTRATE THESE RIPTIDE FLAMES WHETHER THROUGH SECRETS
WHISPERED UNDER DOWN COMFORTERS OR TATTERED CELLULAR RECEIPTION? ::
SISTAH, COULD BOTH OF OUR CALLOUSED FINGERTIPS BE THE NECESSARIES
TO GATHER OUR PERSONAL SHARDS THAT SHRED OUR PALMS
WHEN WE TRY TO TEND TO THEM ON OUR OWN? ::

TRUTHSPEAKER, I HAVE DISCOVERED WHY MEN SENSE THAT THE
UNIVERSE IS CONSTANTLY EXPANDING— ::
A WIZARDRESS STRETCHES STARS TO SHINE PAST WHERE ITS BORDERS
WILL OTHERWISE SIT STAOANT ::
WHO NEEDS THE SOCIAL ILLS OF TOMORROW WHEN YOUR BEAUTY TURNS HEADS SO OFTEN
THAT WE CAN’T HELP BUT REDISCOVER THE MIGNIFICENCE OF YESTERDAY? ::
RACQUETBALL

i was disrupted from my sleep by a white dude parked outside my window pumping “SPRINKLE ME” BY E-40 & THE CLICK. what the FEEZEE. it’s “move-out” weekend for the freshmen. and since i live on campus, i’m forced to witness the hoard of adolescents, still scraping the rusty surface of adulthood, engage in a campaign of heaving their lives from their dorms into their parents’ cars. apparently, 8:30 in the morning is the appropriate time for any 18-year-old wigga to display his impeccable taste for 1995 vallejo gangsta rap. windows rolled down. music blasting from his speakers so hard that the bass could simultaneously pop every single pimple on his grease-stricken face. the volume is bleeding through the entire apartment complex, as if pleading, “girls, if you are impressed by overpriced circuit city paraphernalia, then I’M YOUR MAN!”

last night’s 151 proof did nothing for me except teach me how to instantly give myself a headache and a sore throat. i still meandered home in a lonely stupor, reaffirmed that college parties just aren’t my thing, and on the same hand, having a satisfactory social life just isn’t my thing either. life at davis has left me as isolated as the town itself.

and so i commence to lying in bed, crust dangling from the corners of my eyes like shriveled grapes rotting in their vines. i wish i weren’t such a light sleeper. but i am. and as suga-t croons about her own name, with e-40 echoing her like a supersized bay area puff daddy, i am reminded of that past era. when i was in 6th grade—still pining after my first real crush, the first of a series of realizations of how beautiful a woman can be, and how unattainable her attention is.

and now, three broken love lives later, i am in the same place that i was almost a decade ago. maybe i was even better off back then. because my lips had yet to taste the bitterness of romance. an addiction for affection had yet to develop. i feel hopeless, like homeny-boy with his system cranked up, hoping to milk the emotions from an unsuspecting heart. to lure her with such a shallow act, long enough to expose something deeper that she would never be drawn to in the first place. this process translates to the same game for every man who has ever fallen in love with a wall—quietly engaged in a sullen game of emotional racquetball. tossing affection at a blank structure only to have them bounce back at him effortlessly, and without the same passion. hell yeah, it’s pathetic.
SANCTUARY OF SHE

dwelling in the sanctuary of she
broken pellets of you poking freely
from my skull
you are
swimming circular motions in my head

this place is new to me

so forgive me if i sound too forward
when i say
i just might have found
home

and i refuse to write a poem about how good i would love you
because i don't know
i haven't embarked on that journey with you yet
we haven't boarded that magical school bus
flown in a microscopic vehicle to gawk behind
shatter-proof windows
to see how future hearts act

but yeah, i'll say it
i think you're hella dope, yo

but i will not write another poem about how beautiful you are
because i am hard-pressed to believe that any
long-meditated lines could ever justify what you define
just by breathing
that i could take what i see when the sun reflects off your flesh

and translate it into a three-minute spoken word piece that could
help one not blessed by your presence to perceive it

i won't stoop to that level

but just in case you prefer for me
to illustrate to you
just how damned saucy you are
i would be honored to do so by walking at your side
as your reflection

because there are far too many lonely adriel luises in the world

and i have dedicated far too many rotations of "candy girl" to you
to let this thing fizzle like stale pop rocks
i have spent too much time posing,
playing charades over the phone in hopes
you'll be able to tell yourself my
secrets i'm too chicken to disclose

surprise!..
i bet you didn't know
that you've been talking to a mime

and since meeting you
i've developed a horrible habit of fantasizing
staring at the ceiling in darkness
trying to formulate images out of concrete storm clouds
thoughts gnawing at my heart like
love's rubber toy
it's ridiculous
i tread through this everyday
and i'm still not used to it
thrashing at the walls of my scalp
this cannot be all it amounts to
but is it?

because for every second that i think about
how badly i want to be with you
there is a mirrored image of how
horrified i am
to do anything
about it

like regurgitating a sack of x-acto knife blades
it's insane that i've been able to
full-frontally display every emotional aspect of my life
except for the one that's most relevant
to you

and i know exactly what's happened
i've learned to love like an artist
gauging the exact timing and setting needed
to create the most favorable outcome

i'm sorry

because in trying to figure out the best way
for me to open myself to you
i've put more faith in circumstance
than your heart

and i'm not trying to win circumstance
and i'm not trying to dictate your future with
my amok-driven emotions
or claim that your life would be so much better with

me calling you “baby” over the phone
or that i'll be that dude that you can forever turn to when
you're feeling alone
because i can't even guarantee that after writing this
i'll be able to separate myself from logic long enough
to read it to you

stepping astray, i've heard denizens say
"present moment,
beautiful moment"
and despite the fact that
i don't know
what will come out of this
here i am
raw, open, and stinking of honesty

present moment,
beautiful moment
right now
the future is irrelevant
it is my pleasure to be nestling in this wrinkle in time with you
Reflection in Red

10/2/04

romance keeps tapping me on the shoulder and looking away when I turn around. Then everyone laughs at me.
CLENCH

i.
we are born into this world
with nothing in our clenched fingers
naked and pink
broken and disheveled
greeted by an urgency that pushes
these tears from their eyelids
hearts unaware of the earths they will hold
still fresh of their first beats

we incubate behind glass portals swallowed
by baby blue and pink blankets,
cotton caps, and mittens so that
we won't scratch our new faces
we squint to the hum of florescent lights
and brace ourselves
a fire burns in our bellies
if you pay close enough attention
you can smell smolder from our cracked lips

ii.
as children
we serenade our shadows
and learn to pronounce our names
sunburnt tongues breed
scathing mispronunciations
and at times
we take our wounded reflections into
our hiding places

iii.
it's always the pretty ones that are the wackest
we place our palms near them like simmering stovetops
it is a rush
like birth
like bleeding
we smile when it hurts less than last time
we convince ourselves that we have
evolved past this pain
that the fires in our bellies flicker more fiercely than the ones

but our hearts sometimes revolt
sometimes they creep out in our slumbers
and we awake to chaos in our bruised romances
at times
our hearts escape into our fingers and caress
our poison lovers
seeking redemption in the scars they planted on
our battered surfaces

risk—it is the language of the lovesick
not to be mistaken for desperation
but often substituted by it when our bodies
crave the warmth of another's grasp
i want to be owned
i want to be controlled
because then i will know
that i am not alone
it is during these times that we know we are alive
we long for lovers who will remind us
even if it means they will destroy us
that burned our guards down
that this self-torture overpowers the hits from the external war field
we're tougher
more sustainable
ready for anything this traveling circus has for us

and so we love
like the way we eat vegetables
like the way we prepare to scrub the bathroom
it sucks
but it's good for us
it will make sense
eventually

iv.
father mother
brother sister
cousin lover
stranger
i have seen mud-faced regret
sustained the nonfatal hits that are to make us stronger
the purposes had by everything
the reasons everything happened for
and i am tired
i want to rest in the crevice of another who will
convince me that there is nothing more ultimate
than this moment
but i cannot fool myself any longer
there is a fire that burns in our bellies
if you pay enough attention
you can smell the smolder that screams to
demolish the inhibition that
bars human connection

we were birthed by a movement
we find the evidence in the sediment
left on the wrinkles of each other’s faces
we were destined to create so much more
than these selfish games of scattered ego

i find my purpose not in your time
or your attention
or your promises
but in the fires that tango when our
frequencies align
human
look at us
we are broken and disheveled
but it is what we were born into

and life has provided
and we are no longer unaware
and i find refuge
when i look into my clenched fingers
and fine yours pressed against my palm
STEP 5:

DRINK THE JUICE

*MMM...PULPY!
SKIPPING STONES

to sarwat

spirits don’t break
they transform as collectives of self
like pebbles from rock

on a murky gray afternoon
in a flooded lake michigan beach
sarwat taught me to skip stones
panning the warm multi-gray surface with her palm
she taught me to love each one
like as they were placed specifically for me
handheld time capsules
they looked even more beautiful against her bronze flesh
radiating of the energy in the waves that juggled them into smoothness
i got lost that day
staring hypnotized by a slab of stone
with wet sand slung on and off by the tide
like an aquatic yo-yo
scattered grains in a freshwater storm
guaranteed to return back in place
like infatuations that won’t dissolve
it was all because of sarwat that i could see this

upward armed sister
fly poetess
i recognize her by her wide open eyes
breathing chicagoan moonrises with her pupils
succumbing to earth

like a browntone version of amelie
sliding fairy rocks into her pocket

the week before
she taught me how to taste
cressing golden trout steaks
with turmeric and cilantro encrusted on her knuckles
she spoke to them as they simmered
lullabied flavor into them
i never knew fish could taste so sweet
taking in a woman’s work
it was at that moment that i realized what christ must have meant
when he suggested to love like a child
wide-eyed, curious, vulnerable
and with an innate confidence that the universe would take care of you
to think, i learned this from a desi witch from the midwest

skipping stones into the san francisco bay is lonelier
magical, but still lonelier
but i suppose not much can outshine a friendship
where the first day that we met resulted in us bawling in each other’s arms

i could never be a stranger
to someone whose tears are tattooed into the backs of my shoulders
Some stories need to be written with raw ink on paper
Because sometimes
Our audiences don't capture present moments as readily as imprints bronzed in longevity
And it has become apparent to me that you are the makings of oral tradition that was lost in the stutters of past generations
Bright-eyed sister
Manifestation of breath
So how do I write about she who was conceived while dancing on ancestral tongues?
I guess it begins inevitably at One.

Before History
Before Once Upon a Time
Folklore as it was before it became what it exists as now
What were the first stories that the first humans told each other?
    And who were they about?
    Were they focused on Self
    Or completely absent of it?
And it’s that same paradox that unsheathes itself in your presence
You,
    Suspended just one inch below the divine
    At level glance
    It can seem lonely up there sometimes
But you once told me that you could find peace in isolation at sea
    Steadily treading water with only skylines surrounding

I guess some stories can exist alone
And some tales can be projected to the masses and go unheard
Because sometimes

Our audiences fail to recognize Self when spoken by others
But deafness doesn't invalidate voice
And stubbornness doesn't invalidate movement
And emptiness of spirit isn't a reason to stop writing your history
Because some of us hollow souls are still listening
So speak, Poet
And if your roar breaks us open
So be it

Focus on self
    Beautiful reflection
You are the Phoenix you have breathed life into in your past poetry
Hawk of the sun
Fire on the moon
Recognize and comprehend the arc of your wingspan
Because Phoenix,
    I am convinced that you possess the capacity to break myth
    Shatter the confines that fence human interpretation of celestial song
Recognize and comprehend
    You do not need to burn to ashes in order to rise
Phoenix,
    You possess the capacity to rise consecutive times
But it just means that you need to break myth

Call your kin see unaccustomed colors
Break myth
Because only then can you own reason
Break myth
    Shift perspective
    Balance energy
    Speak easy
    Breathe peace
And sometimes
    Open wounds
Because sometimes
    Scars are beautiful
And when you breathe, Phoenix
    You make yours seem vital
And I feel lost, Poet
Because I don’t have as many of my own
   to trace my history
But you wear yours so nobly
   I catch myself envying your pain
But our experiences are our own
So all I can do is cup my hands when you bleed to me
And I just hope that the lines of my palm
   can be channels for you to confide in
when you need a reference point
Because I appreciate that remnants of our conversation drip
from your fingertips, too

It is a blessing
The silhouette of my hero keeps outlining you
Sister,
   You have opened a new eye of perception
And it can see 720 degrees
   All around
   Twice over
   Once, as it seems
   Once again, as it could be
It is the truth
   Because Hi-Five Connect means “free”
And in the end
   I guess this poem is about me
Broken shards of Self handed back to me
   from you

In the presence of beauty unabridged
Many have come to the conclusion
   that you are simply not human
On the contrary
You are a palpitating reminder for those of us
   who have forgotten how to be
Thank you for narrating me back into existence.

UNIVERSE UNFOLDS

I’ve learned that it isn’t all about me
Hardship can turn me off
But its appeal can’t be predicted by whom I wish to be
I still have control
Just not that measly
The universe will unfold
And I choose to be lost in its vastness
When it does.

This year

peace to god, my creator, my universe, my center, my reference point, my self. i think i'm lost again. please send help.

mom, dad, kimberly, matthew, for understanding when i'm feeling too emo to come home for dinner. to the almighty luis clan, to fong luis, my elders who i have only joined hands with during those times you handed me red envelopes and white rabbit candy.

curtis and nikki for letting me use corey for my cover guinea pig.

ill-literacy, my vital organs :: ruby for telling me when i'm being ridiculous, dahlak for telling me when i'm being wack, and nico for saying "naw, i feel you though, drizzle," even when i'm being hella confusing. arcala for starting the ish up with me. sa, david, drew, homer, caleb, ej, leejay, anghel, armael, jun-fung, sickspits, for making up the ungeekiest poetry club ever.

to the tangled branches of the berkeley treehouse :: jish for asking how i'm doing even after five minute breaks from each other, rafa for raspy-voiced brainstorms, hozay for random roadtrips, mush for having similar tastebuds, viveca for the best cookies ever, chinaka for being the most amazing person on the planet. ever.

to youth speaks, i mooch off your wireless internet :: james for shaking your head in frustration when i outwit you (which is always), bamuthi for putting me to sleep at slims, joannie for jumping out of your chair to hug, paul for pretending to be swamped even though i know you're thrilled to see me. khalil, you know i make that 15 minute detour to carpool with you cuz i goz love for ya. elz, you fit in my armpit. watsky for being shaky. ise, for your analogies. tomas, aya, hodari, laurens, leah-joy, spokes spokes spokes, the yooft, thank you for painting the bay so beautifully.

to the yay area shards of my cities :: 8th wonder for showing me how to lick buckshots from my belly. jocie for introducing me to seared ahi tuna, dwellah for laughing when i
imitate you even though you'd rather ring my neck, alan for crying on the floor with me, lily for being the sweetness of the shugashack, jayar for greetings like long lost friends, irene for always making eye contact, golda for genuine smiles and passing swishers with fishnet gloves, denizen for greeting me at the door like i should've come earlier, micah and mahalya for being wide-eyed and curious, lyle for being brokenhearted with me, dandiggity for sushi and orange sauce, jimmythong for hating slam with me, dave huang for being the sweetest man ever, zellee for being my broadband buddy, mai-lei for zoning out in front of vh1 soul with me, m'kai for flying with me, kit for the fuzzies and dessert invites, liz for sending me instant messages from next door, 2004 sf slam team, and the bindlestiff tribe. the lavish crew :: james for saving my life, etienne for saving my life, shaud for saving my life, daniel for saving my life. other james for saving my life.
genny lim gets her own line because she's cool like dat. thank you for taking my book on as your own and introducing me to that dope veggie burger joint on valencia.

my scattered sages :: tommie lindsey for showing me my voice, anida for woodchuck cider and pun contests, marlon for barefoot afternoons with deepdish pizzas and tivo, sarwat for cherry tomatoes on your porch, vanessa for calling me "hun" since day 1, jill for being almost as cool as me, saul for pronouncing my name way cooler than i can, ishle for telling me i'm a superstar, chris lee for being the kindest and humblest urbanite ever (thebeastisback.com!), helene for music swapping at twilight, beau for the dope conversations of now and future, ebz jade pearl and eileen for 97% of my smiles at davis, stephen for periodically becoming my favorite writer, giles for being hot and chinese, j9 for spam & eggs, anita for putting up with my asian jokes, bao for having the best musical taste. mango tribe, isangmahal, yawp!, suicide kings, undocumented sons, end-dependence, 2tongues, jigsaw, and the wordfist community for being the sexiest people in the universe. to everyone who has offered me a couch and a pillow.

to asian people worldwide, i speak this with you in heart. do not question your magnificence. beautiful like yellow, beautiful like brown, beautiful like you.

to the kid that picked this book up at the used bookstore. watch out for that booger on page 38.
This book, much like its author, goes through identity crises. It is full of poems that long to be paintings, photographs that wish they were soliloquys, and words that fight with every other word in this book for you to love it most. Chances are, you won’t like all of them, but maybe a few will strike you. Maybe some of them will converse with you when you call their names. And maybe in time, they’ll recognize their names in your voice, and find contentment in who they are.

---Genny Lim, author of Child of War

and despite the fact that
i don’t know
what will come out of this
here i am
raw, open, and stinking of honesty

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