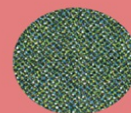


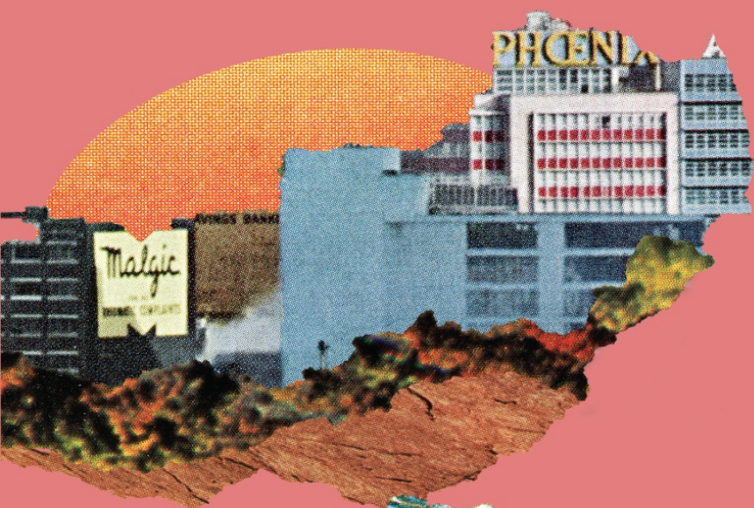
The World

Keeps Ending,

and



the World
Goes On



Poems

Franny Choi



The World Keeps Ending, and the World Goes On

Franny Choi

ecco

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Publisher's Note

Rendering poetry in a digital format presents several challenges, just as its many forms continue to challenge the conventions of print. In print, however, a poem takes place within the static confines of a page, hewing as close as possible to the poet's intent, whether it's Walt Whitman's lines stretching to the margin like Route 66, or Robert Creeley's lines descending the page like a string tie. The printed poem has a physical shape, one defined by the negative space that surrounds it—a space that is crafted by the broken lines of the poem. The line, as vital a formal and critical component of the form of a poem as metaphor, creates rhythm, timing, proportion, drama, meaning, tension, and so on.

Reading poetry on a small device will not always deliver line breaks as the poet intended—with the pressure the horizontal line brings to a poem, rather than the completion of the grammatical unit. The line, intended as a formal and critical component of the form of the poem, has been corrupted by breaking it where it was not meant to break, interrupting a number of important elements of the poetic structure—rhythm, timing, proportion, drama, meaning, and so on. It's a little like a tightrope walker running out of rope before reaching the other side.

There are limits to what can be done with long lines on digital screens. At some point, a line must break. If it has to break more than once or twice, it is no longer a poetic line, with the integrity that lineation demands. On smaller devices with enlarged type, a line break may not appear where its author intended, interrupting the unit of the line and its importance in the poem's structure.

We attempt to accommodate long lines with a hanging indent—similar in

fashion to the way Whitman's lines were treated in books whose margins could not honor his discursive length. On your screen, a long line will break according to the space available, with the remainder of the line wrapping at an indent. This allows readers to retain control over the appearance of text on any device, while also indicating where the author intended the line to break.

This may not be a perfect solution, as some readers initially may be confused. We have to accept, however, that we are creating poetry e-books in a world that is imperfect for them—and we understand that to some degree the line may be compromised. Despite this, we've attempted to protect the integrity of the line, thus allowing readers of poetry to travel fully stocked with the poetry that needs to be with them.

—Ecco

Dedication

For my parents and grandparents

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The World Keeps Ending, and the World Goes On

Before the apocalypse, there was the apocalypse of boats: boats of prisoners, boats cracking under sky-iron, boats making corpses bloom like algae on the shore. Before the apocalypse, there was the apocalypse of the bombed mosque. There was the apocalypse of the taxi driver warped by flame. There was the apocalypse of the leaving, and the having left—of my mother unsticking herself from her mother's grave as the plane barreled down the runway. Before the apocalypse, there was the apocalypse of planes. There was the apocalypse of pipelines legislating their way through sacred water, and the apocalypse of the dogs. Before which was the apocalypse of the dogs and the hoses. Before which, the apocalypse of dogs and slave catchers whose faces glowed by lantern light. Before the apocalypse, the apocalypse of bees. The apocalypse of buses. Border fence apocalypse. Coat hanger apocalypse. Apocalypse in the textbook's selective silences. There was the apocalypse of the settlement and the soda machine; the apocalypse of the settlement and the jars of scalps; there was *the bedlam of the cannery*; the radioactive rain; the chairless martyr demanding a name. I was born from an apocalypse and have come to tell you what I know—which is that the apocalypse began when Columbus praised God and lowered his anchor. It began when a continent was drawn into cutlets. It began when Kublai Khan told Marco, *Begin at the beginning*. By the time the apocalypse began, the world had already ended.

It ended every day for a century or two. It ended, and another ending world spun in its place. It ended, and we woke up and ordered Greek coffees, drew the hot liquid through our teeth, as everywhere, the apocalypse

rumbled,
the apocalypse remembered, our dear, beloved apocalypse—it drifted
slowly from the trees all around us, so loud we finally stopped hearing it.

I

Where did the way lead when it led nowhere?

—*Paul Celan*

Catastrophe Is Next to Godliness

Lord, I confess I want the clarity of catastrophe but not the catastrophe.
Like everyone else, I want a storm I can dance in.
I want an excuse to change my life.

The day A died, the sun was brighter than any sun.
I answered the phone, and a channel opened
between my stupid head and heaven, or what was left of it. The blankness
stared back; and I made sound after sound with my blood-wet gullet.
O unsayable—O tender and divine unsayable, I knew you then:
you line straight to the planet's calamitous core; you moment moment
moment;
you intimate abyss I called sister for a good reason.

When the Bad Thing happened, I saw every blade.
And every year I find out what they've done to us, I shed another skin.
I get closer to open air, true north. Lord,

if I say, *Bless the cold water you throw on my face*,
does that make me a costume party. Am I greedy for comfort
if I ask you not to kill my friends—if I beg you to press your heel
against my throat—please, not enough to ruin me,
but just so—just so I can almost see your face—

Disaster Means “Without a Star”

Sixty-six million years after the end of the world, I click *purchase* on an emergency go-bag from Amazon. When it arrives, I’ll use my teeth to tear open the plastic, unzip the pack stitched by girls who look like me but for their N95s, half a judgment day away, no evacuation plan in sight.

Another episode of the present tense, and I can’t stop thinking about the time line where the asteroid misses, Earth ruled eternally by the car-hearted and walnut-brained. Meanwhile, I’m merely gorging on the butterfly effects of ashes, ashes; reaching for the oat milk

while, hundreds of feet below, a chalk line marks the moment we were all doomed. We were done for. We were science fiction before science, or fiction. One billion judgment days later, I’m alive and ashamed of my purchases; I’m afraid of being afraid; I’m the world’s worst mother.

My sister calls, and it’s already too late for things to be better. Every mistake, an asteroid that’s already hit, history already mushroomed into one million species of unfit, their fossilized corpses already forming coastlines, austere offices. This year was a layer cake of catastrophe long before any of us could,

biologically speaking, have been imagined. Human History, a front parlor infinitely painted over with massacre, and into the fray came I, highly allergic, quick to cry, and armed with fat fists of need. I broke everything I touched. I got good grades. I was told nothing was more noble than to ensure

my children would eat. I learned to take a chicken apart with my hands, to fill in a Scantron, cry on cue. Sixty-six million years after the last

great extinction, six to eight business days before the next one, I whispered *Speak to a fucking agent* into the hold music to trigger the system into connecting

me with a “real person.” I avoided coughing in public, though it was too late. I applied for a BIPOC farming intensive, though it was too late for the earth to yield anything but more corpses. New species of horror sequence were already evolving: election bot; cluster bio-bomb; driverless wife.

I muttered curses to keep the deep fakes away, studied the stars for signs of the worlds to come, though they were already here—the extinctions and feudal lords, the dirty blankets, the dissidents tied to stakes or hung from branches, the price gouge, death camp, flood, bombs of liberty, bomb

and bomb and bomb already dropped, already having made me from its dust, already broken and paid for and straddling my crown. What crown? If I’m king of anything, it’s being late. *Omw*, I type, though I’m still huddled in last year’s mistakes. *Asteroid*, Alexa corrects, and I say, *Five minutes. Just give me five minutes. I’ll be right there.*

Poem with an End in Sight

I don't have a brain for anything
that's happening on-screen. I don't

have a brain for the men yelling over
each other, *I've done an amazing job,*

their cheeks flushed and flaking. I've done
an amazing job. I have two degrees

and couldn't have saved anyone, *couldn't
have saved a dog.* I have a million ideas.

I have last year's ashes in my throat, stories
stuffed so full of morals they bleed sugar.

Midnight, and my stomachs drag
like nets through a river. Dawn,

and I'm out on the blacktop, praying
to no one, so no one prays back.

I know I should want to be torn open
by the failures of hope, but here's what I want:

a tight circle around everyone I love;
a stove that doesn't burn. O year,

O shitstorm, it's impossible to be alive, impossible

to be dead. So, brainlessly, I tongue the news

again, instead. I have no condition but this:
ill-timed optimism; a disturbing tendency

toward pleasure; also, bad at reading tone.
For example, is this a hopeful poem,

or a hopeless one? If I write, *there's nothing
to be done*, it's a bird in the hand, i.e.,

worth its weight in dead bird. It's so corny
to call for the tyrant's head again, and yet.

Celebrate Good Times

The regime is having a birthday party, so we turn off the lights
and pretend we're sick. All night, happy Americans

honk their horns. *We did it*, they scream into our window.

In the morning, *We* is all over the floor. We sweep *We*

into a paper bag and label it *EMERGENCY*. The good news
is that things will go back to the way they were,

which is also the bad news. Meanwhile, I cut
an onion, and it's onions all the way down, and that's a fine

reason to cry at the sink on a Monday after the empire
congratulates itself on persisting again. No, thank you,

I'm stuffed, I couldn't possibly have more hope. I haven't finished
mourning the last tyrant yet. I haven't said enough

goodbyes to—oh, what was her name? And hers?

How many *Wes* did they cut out of me? And whose country

was I standing on, the last time we survived?

Good Morning America

Headline: the unthinkable's already, already
happened again—and so Layleen's perfect face
swings back into the orbit of my grief—

Catch up—it's the anniversary of the aftermath
of another bad massacre, and I've got
plenty of seats. *Come in*, I whisper

to the wailing in the attic, *Come in* to the thunder,
to any sound that'll shake me from doom's haze.
Dispatches from Kenosha,

Louisville, Atlanta, arrive, arrive
like a steady kickdrum of sparrows
spatchcocked by gravity, little nevers,

little couldn'ts; too late to stop the video,
too late, too late. I hold each stolen face
against my forehead as the centuries slough off,

flightless. Century and its scythes. Century
and its literal marks and mobs. As a child,
I couldn't believe my luck: born

in the best country on Earth.
Now I know better. So what.
Good morning, what's done is done is.

Come in, last year's wreck, rent.
Grief's a heavy planet, and green.
I know better than to call

each gravity's daughter to my softest cheek.
I know, and I know.
So what?

It Is What It Is

Each morning, on her way
to make a living, my mother passes
that business, now closed, where—
I've tried not to think of it—
a man killed three Korean mothers
just like mine.
Her voice echoes, heavy,
into the tunnel between us:

*What am I supposed to do?
Be afraid?*

What am I supposed to do?
In the tunnel between us,
her voice echoes, heavy
just like mine.

A man killed three Korean mothers.

I've tried not to think of it.
That business, now closed. Where
to make a life? My mother passes
each morning on her way.

Science Fiction Poetry

Dystopia of the lost file;

Dystopia of the cracked screen;

Dystopia of the ankle prone to getting sprained again;

Dystopia of house plants gone yellow and headless;

Dystopia between people who have hurt each other too many times to keep speaking;

Dystopia too sad to shower;

Dystopia a cake made of water;

Dystopia of back in prison but at least they'll get clean;

Dystopia of living in your last body;

Dystopia all day in an air-conditioned conference hall with no sweater;

Dystopia of falling out of love with God;

Dystopia of houseless people and boarded-up houses on the same city block;

Dystopia of solitary confinement as an answer to any any;

Dystopia of cages; dystopia of forgetting about cages;

Dystopia bail out the coal plants if you want to live;

Dystopia of billionaires racing giddy to space;

Dystopia \$800 a month but the debt stays the same;

Dystopia very lonely on Mother's Day;

Dystopia very small in rooms;

Dystopia bone-tired after hours at home;

Dystopia can't read a book without thinking about the trees;

Dystopia can't talk about it without panicking;

Dystopia of hold music;

Dystopia of platitudes;

Dystopia of garbled logic spun and spun in the head;

Dystopia congratulations you were right to be paranoid;

Dystopia of diversity trainings;

Dystopia of the banning of diversity trainings;

Dystopia of the disobedient muscle; the inflexible algorithm;

Dystopia of the algorithm's smooth skin and dulcet reasoning;

Dystopia of poorly designed public restrooms; dystopia of restrooms;

Dystopia I liked the old dystopia better;

Dystopia paying money for water;

Dystopia \$2.13 an hour before tips; meanwhile billionaires in space;

Dystopia sixty hours a week in a pandemic;

Dystopia fill out this form if you get raped;

Dystopia in ankle bracelets, and in coworkers joking *house arrest*;

Dystopia of the city council hearing *Thank you for your comment*;

Dystopia in the Senate hearing *Not to my knowledge I was not aware*;

Dystopia on loop over the airport speakers; on loop in the fine print;

Dystopia *I have read the terms and conditions*;

Dystopia everything I eat is touched with money; dystopia everything I am is touched;

Dystopia press your thumb here to access your memories;

Dystopia to stop remembering one's memories;

Dystopia to keep remembering one's memories;

Dystopia to be flattened or flared at a memory's notice; at a hair;

otherwise, to drift

numb and dreaming through the so-called day;

Dystopia isn't there something else besides; there must be;

some sequence that ends in anything but a cold loop; there must be

an elsewhere on the else side of the scrim; an opposite word

but not that one; please;

not sticky with sap; not synthetic sugar and cruel;

what's the other opposite

world; if we knew its name

could we call it; if we called it would it come;

We Used Our Words We Used What Words We Had

we used our words we used what words we had
to weld, what words we had we wielded, kneeled,
we knelt. & wept we wrung the wet the sweat
we racked our lips we rang for words to ward
off sleep to warn to want ourselves. to want
the earth we mouthed it wound our vowels until
it fit, in fits the earth we mounted roused
& rocked we harped we yawned & tried to yawp
& tried to fix, affixed, we facted, felt.
we fattened fanfared anthemed hammered, felt
the words' worth stagnate, snap in half in heat
the wane the melt what words we'd hoarded halved
& holey, porous. meanwhile tide still tide.
& we: still washed for sounds to mark. & marked.

Danez Says They Want to Lose Themselves in Bops They Can't Sing Along To

and I'm thinking of the years I spent sweating to the choreo of every K-pop song with a decent dance break, me and the other girls from church, practically saintly in our diligence as we rehearsed our isolations and body rolls, re-and rewinding the tapes, our noses nearly grazing the screen, though in truth I only understood maybe about half the words, the other half mostly sounds which nevertheless sank into my muscles, pathways laid by so many hours of industrious mouthing that now, while humming idly some stupid tune at the sink, I'll realize for the first time ever what! that line meant (though of course pop everywhere's a language so reliable it's nearly nothing, *baby let me know* and *I need you in my arms* on babbling loop through the ages), and I'm thinking, too, about how this, my first love of losing myself in the scaffolds and percussives of an unparsed lyric doomed me for life to never be able to hear, actually hear, the words to any songs, even in English, even my favorites, like Jamila's, which I put on when I'm adrift and sunken and just need to feel at home in something—even those harbors are built, mostly, of sonics—not gibberish, I mean, but language so sacred it's not my place to try to decipher it, phonemes holy as stones on a string, mysterious

as the names we give to animals, or words
we know only in prayer—at Rebecca’s mother’s funeral,
for example, where, when invited, I added my small voice
to the reciting of the Kaddish, and the perfect
thunder of it lifted one part of me higher
than air, while rooting another
deep into the fragrant earth, a bit of which
I later scooped, as gently as I could bear,
onto the casket, the shovel heavier than any
word I knew, and more full of light
than even the birds overhead, who,
as we wept, kept, of course, right on saying
exactly whatever they needed to say.

I Have Bad News and Bad News, Which Do You Want First

with thanks to Brigit Pegeen Kelly

One week ago, my mother had two COVID patients.
Now, she has thirty. *What?* I say. *When did that happen?*
though *when's* not the question I mean. The video's—

Try not to time travel, says the voice in my meditation app,
as I fast-forward to everything I haven't yet remembered
to be afraid of—

got a lag, so my mother's words float somewhere slightly
to the right of her mouth, chronologically. Somewhere
in the ventriloquized future, she is already delivering—

I keep dreaming about showing up late to my own funeral,
everyone tapping their feet as I climb into the casket—

the news. I've told everyone I know, *I'm worried*
about my mother, not realizing it's not true until I hear her voice.
And then, suddenly, it is, and I drop into the fear like—

I don't yet have a memory of my mother's death,
only the time S and I talked about being afraid; even then
we couldn't look at anything but the bloom-strung sky—

a pool, like the lights of a bad holiday hammering down
my arms in loud droplets—bright globules like that, like actual skin—

like that—I try to stretch the feeling into a syntax—*like*—
like to bully a feeling into the thought of a feeling—
like preparing for ruin by running the fear of it dry—no—

like a *hand*— pressing my *hand* into my *incredibly lifelike heart*—

pinning myself into *the pool's floor*—no.

pinning myself into myself—yes. Draping the weight
of the breath of it, the moment of it—yes—into my *scatterbrained
clock*:
no. Into my chest, my only chest—I swear—

When did it happen:

my whole life rotted into predicting my last

life's last moments—the great metal tolling as everyone I love drains
back-
wards out of our coils into the great scream of space, will it happen—
when will it happen—

I'm okay, say the ventriloquized pixels of my mother.
I don't believe her.

I've skipped too far ahead. A few dozen years, and it won't be true.

A hundred, and I'll never know I knew.

Grief Is a Thing with Tense Issues

In the grocery store, I gently squeeze every avocado. When people stare, I say, “Don’t criticize my mourning process!” When they smile reassuringly, it just makes things worse. So I walk out, reciting:

“Denial, anger, bargaining. Denied, angered, bargained. Will deny, will anger, will bargain.”

:::

The problem with using a word like “mourning” in reference to the future. As when a mother in a movie says to her gay son, “You’re dead to me.” She mistakes glow for a grave, but there he is, red constellation of coals.

Here’s something I can say about us: we’re not dead, not yet. (Not anymore.)

:::

Q: What’s the point of grieving in the future tense?

A: Let me tell you this now so you know before you don’t know anything:

You were good. You lasted. And at last you were—I mean, you *had been*.

You will *had been*.

I will have missed your is. Do you know that? Will you have / known that?

:::

On the phone, I ask my mother about a memory. Am I mourning that right, I want to know. “Just pretend it didn’t happen. I just say, it didn’t happen,” she says. It happened. Am I saying that right?

What happened?

Did it happened?

:::

everyone / you know / someday / will die

will was / will used to / will had been

what knew / would have / forgotten

were to / have known / were to have been / lived

:::

I sit on the train toward Chicago and mourn the avocado softening in my kitchen. This, too, is practice, avocado being the smallest unit of grief. It’s rock and ripe and gone; rock and ripe and gone. Which should be a lesson.

Instead, of course, the fruit is another imagination that passes through me on its way to unknowing.

:::

Q: Is it possible to experience anticipatory feelings toward the past?

A: A whole, gaping, pulsing as I run toward it, though it's the running that pushes it away. In other words, the event is horizontal; an event horizon mothering itself.

:::

Q: What is the past tense of "lived"?

A: Once, I looked back and purchased vowel after vowel. I devoured the minutes which had already been dripping from my teeth. I smashed the fruit against the bowl and called it "salvage." I retraced my steps, then retraced the retracing. What could I have done? I'll say it every night before the day slips into rot: What could I have done?

:::

They'll say: What was it like to have so many people on Earth at once?

They won't say that, but I'll answer anyway:

It was very busy. There was always something to avoid.

:::

I'm softening around my stone. I'm browning into dearth. Into dirt.

Mother, you taught me a word from *from* and never *toward*.

If you speed on ahead, earth forbid, I'll know. I knew.

I dreamt of you stoneless, once. I know, still.

That it was you. Somehow, I'll know.

Comfort Poem

Half crumpled on the couch as another bloody world churns
in my belly, I find myself strangely comforted by the laptop's warmth,
despite what I know about radiation, coltan mining, Apple's
growing surveillance empire, on and on. Still,

the fan purrs in the same key as the cat,
whose attention I'm thrilled finally to have earned—
a bit of living warmth when she rubs her cheek against my chin.
A bit of sweet, and touch; it's hard these days;

you get it. Sometime in the last world,
we drove to R's with some post-top-surgery comfort food:
homemade sundubu, in a big Dutch oven wrapped in three towels
on my lap, and the stew, being sour and spicy and made of stuff
that would keep, shared its heat with my torso like an old friend,
a cheery host, a comfort,

:::

When, prone on the couch, I read it again

comfort

when I read the phrase *comfort woman* again
and say it, again, out loud:

comfort woman

comfort *woman*

comfort woman

when I read it

bottle *woman*

balm *woman*

shhh *woman*

bit of living proof amid the war woman

it's hard these days but at least there's this woman

girl body bisected by military cock woman

crawling into the fields to vomit black woman

rotten rice and blood rag stuffed deep woman

consort woman

convert woman

condom, reused

whatever helps you bear the day

whatever sweet, what touch

:::

how to speak to any one in a history like this.

how to tell you.

everything will be all right.

without inheriting.

the family business.

:::

you who wants comfort, who are you?

have you been a *comfort* too?

say it with me: *it won't be okay*

and we can follow the burning shore.

there's nothing more to say. no next time

but the broken before.

II

This sense of impending catastrophe is an illusion, however, because the trauma never quite arrives. It never arrives because it has already happened.

—*Grace M. Cho*

Process Note

Depending on when and through which education system you learned about so-called world history, you may understand the 1945 atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to represent two things: one, the end of World War II, and two, the end of the world itself—by which I mean not only the destruction of two full cities with their many thousands of individual worlds within them, but also, perhaps, the end of modernity; the ringing in of a half-century-plus of annihilative paranoia and very confusing novels; in other words, the end of narrative; in other words, the end of God. You might picture the hellish clouds captured in those infamous newsreels, or think of the hundreds of thousands of civilians killed, the generations bearing witness via lesion and limb; you might consider whether the United States would have done this to a blonde country, or consider the way a horror like that might burrow into the stuff of a people, not just its genes, but its jokes, the shapes of its crosswalks, the lines of its art. Now. Depending on whether or not you were raised by the descendants of the survivors of a former colony of the Japanese Empire, you might understand the 1945 atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to, in fact, represent *three* things: one, the end of World War II; two, the end of the world itself; and three, the prelude to liberation—the beginning of the end, that is, of the control, carnage, forced labor, and cultural genocide that raped, enslaved, and killed millions of Koreans, Indonesians, Taiwanese, and others. Depending on when and in which geopolitical context you learned “world history,” the moment in which you encounter this third association (at the dinner table with your parents, home for some holiday) might sharpen the room around you into sick bloom, as the terrible line appears—not drawn by anything like righteousness, or grim duty, or God, or even causation, really; just the flat time signature of sequence; terrible, indifferent sequence, which leads from the detonations, to carnage, to freedom(?), to carnage, to an airplane in the sky carrying a woman carrying a clumsy gathering of cells that will one day look backwards and see, in that line, only endings, endings, endings—

Sliced from bone, my life
hung like a jaw—faultless. And
unforgivable.

Who Died and Made You American

In the afterlife of apocalypse, my people,
too, are settlers of a theft. *Pay me like a man*
whose ancestors burned down the homes

of Pequot children. Deserve, deserve,
what a sad little word. I'm an upstanding citizen
of a country far from earned. I'm a child

of immigrants, of strategic importance,
of imports from one immolation
to another. Pay my honest mother

in taxes and guilt. If the land in me could speak
to the land I live on, what would it say?
Maybe *I'm sorry*. Or, *where does it hurt?*

My cheeks are stuffed with sweetgrass
and ssuk. Maybe I'm only ever singing
that awful song: *O beautiful*.

O beautiful. And it is, some days,
driving through the "untouched" hills
to the place where I'm paid.

Poem in Place of a Poem

우리 *family* 를 생각해,
says my mother, as she begs me
not to print my earliest memory
of the police. (I've written it
elsewhere: the cold night.
The parking lot. The cop's jaw
stomping out my mother's pleas.
The vulgar clink of cuffs.
In the poem, her wail rises
like a monument to nothing.
In the memory, no grammar
I can wave at the cop
is enough to keep her safe.)
I need the story, I say, to explain.
Why I'm writing about this.
She ends the call crying.
The sound, a hole
where a word might go. Here,
too, I've failed to protect her
from my need. From the cops.
From *mother* and the seeds
of shame. Shame. I've failed again
and again, in any tongue,
to free us.

Rememory

Atlanta / Seoul / Kwangju

Whose story was I remembering when riot cops closed in
on all four sides, and a sound happened from somehow me?

The sound was a sound from 1980—year my father was a young man.
Year of bayonets; year of soldiers shooting into crowds, limbs on fire.

My father was a student of biology in another year of martial law,
in a century of war. Bayonet of interruption—my father touched diagrams,

threw rocks at riot gear and wondered what for. It was another year
when they shut the school gates, and students died in the street.

The crowds were gassed and ran choking from the scene.
This year, someone else's father is a young man, choking, and the crowds

are gassed, and we run, boots on the ground. I remember:
this night, this year; no route out of the cops' kettle; me in the crowd,

shouting Americanly until the cops study forward with their shields
and fists and then, someone unremembered inside me is wailing; wailing;

someone else's song crawling backwards from my mouth. Whose song:
Hell of looking. Bodies in a heap. Mother-shrieks in white hemp.

Boots on the ground—boots? on the bloody ground? Whose voice was that.
Whose year is it. *Whose streets*. This city, this *our*—slow bayonet of

claiming,

whose tank in my mouth? Bayonet of this: American me, fathering nothing but the wails of strangers I'll never caress. Bayonet of dispersal, gas.

We run, choking on the sound of century and century's return.
I run, and a country breaks its way out of me, then breaks, breaks.

Amid Rising Tensions on the Korean Peninsula

Your country's memory is short. But know this:
We live, have been living, with this threat
staining the earth we still call home
to mark what happened. The choices
made in the dry mouths of children,
sewn straight into our breasts. We live—
have to live somewhere. Why not
smother doubt to save the family
we're responsible for. The only sunlight
is this story spun from the records,
and we've taken its name as our own. Yes, we
sob and shudder, yes, and feed our babies,
our *our*, our precious claim to *our*—

We can still hear the planes' deathknell hum—
circling our heads like we were carrion,
despite the pictures, which know only how
to tell one truth at a time. Our names were
napalm, ravaged paddies, lung cancer. Names,
like ghosts, reverberate. The bad memories
in the body? They climb to the surface,
from war's muck. War: the only surname
on our unmarked graves. Our sustenance
amidst your savage freeze. So we married fear,
salvaged these small lives. We're free, at least, to
dream of the fires that made us by splitting
the *us* we almost, some days, remember.

Disinheritance

My grandmother fled to avoid being taken.
To avoid being taken, my grandmother wed

early. To avoid being stolen, I stripped
myself of scent. I rubbed in salt till I bled.

Everywhere, the smell of soldiers, and ahead,
kelp—its rot, wafting. My grandmother wed

and ran south with her husband. He was
so much older. He was another kind of soldier.

My grandmother and I were born already lifted out
of the picture. We were born from the smell

of soldiers trying to make an emptiness
where we once stood. Empire, and then, empire

scrubbed our country of its reek—a blessing.
I stand at the beach to watch history unrot,

unwaft, walk back into the water. So long, origin-
storyteller. By the way, my grandmother's mother

was either scraped from the earth during the war, or
she never existed in the first place.

I can't imagine it: her face.

I was born and she was already gone.

I was born, and my grandmother
was already wed and lifted and left

alone with eight children and so much
of the story already nothing. So yes,

I feel most like my grandmother when someone
is scraping my name out of me. I feel most

like my grandmother's mother when I'm already
gone. When I'm peeled down to my seam.

When I lift my skin and smell—nothing. No rot.
No story. Not even the emptiness of salt.

September 2001

We were punished and salt-licked and wrecked with wanting we didn't understand. We were old enough to be obsessed with death—to dream of baseball bats and crushed skulls, to tongue scripture and lift our wetness toward extinction.

It was the year 2001. And all day, kids got pulled out of class, so slow and dreamlike it was like they'd dissolved, like the last scene in *The Sandlot*, boy after boy forever fading into a VHS afterlife. At lunch, Jackie said, *We finally get our own war*, and everyone knew

it was bad of her to say so, and laughed anyway. I was old enough to have wanted to run away from home, old enough to be grateful for my American certificates, to let the prophecies of plague string my spine with lights. Everything I didn't know was a throatful

of something hot and bothered: the hair crawling up my calves; the shock that flew through me when Alex drew a picture of sex; the wreckage of birds I became when he felt me up in the hallway. I didn't know what to call that feeling, only that I was on the edge of something

as impressive and glorious as catastrophe, counting my life mostly as a series of small, terrible stories: *elsewhere, children are being beaten in factories; beaten if they don't speak Japanese; stripped from their bones if they're born in the wrong country*. That year, I fumbled everywhere

for some authorized trajectory through my short-legged life. Any book could whisper a word to me that would name it, the exact shiver buzzing at my edges when night lifted her foreign dress, when Omar's soccer friend called me a chink,

or when the church girls laughed until I was sticky with fire—you have to understand; it was 2001. We had made it through the prophesied apocalypse, with its computerized rapture and bunkers full of pudding. Instead, there had been fireworks,

though we'd been promised war. On television, face after face was saying, *I am an American*. I wanted to fuck, then shoot the man who spoke to my mother like a child. I was so afraid of seeing dead people that I saw them everywhere.

It was the new age. “We” finally had “our own” war. How can I explain the things and things and things I did wrong? I was never any good at telling the difference between what wanted me and what wanted me gone.

I Learned That I Was Beautiful

when J told me what they say
about Asian women. You know what they say.
I didn't, until I did, and it changed everything.

I smiled into the camera, and someone watched.
When I put lipstick on my lips, it made a new word.

I wondered if he would steal me
like he'd stolen my boyfriend's last girlfriend.

Before, I was sweet enough to be let into rooms.
Then I was a red flash among the trees.

Years later, everyone was drunk on confession.
We'd all touched so many people by then;
I was beautiful; I'd grown more feathers. He, blonde,
confessed he'd been watching.

I was beautiful. We found a room with a couch.
My breath flew up into the branches and caught
like a flag. Below, I was unwrapped

and pulling threads of light into my hole.
I wanted the distance between that blonde looking
and my hole to die. I wanted to eat the heavy sun
which had been promised to me.

Here is what is true: he put himself inside

after I said we couldn't. It wasn't the last time
I wanted to slap the light out of me.

Before, I was a strange money. And after.
I stroked his hair
like it was my own hair.

I didn't know until I did:
He put a new word inside me, which rhymed
with the word that was already there.

In the Aftermath of the Unforgivable, I Raise My Doomed, Green Head

Atrocity fractals [like a fern].
No more nature metaphors.
It fractals. It itselfs.

∴

Are you my mother,
ship ablaze on the horizon?
Horizon, are you?

∴

No war ever ends,
just floats south on the [breeze],
makes new sisters.

∴

In Laos, it rained yellow.
No word helps me understand
but this: *O, O, O.*

∴

Someday we'll lie in dirt.
With mouths and mushrooms, the earth
will accept our apology.

Upon Learning That Some Korean War Refugees Used Partially Detonated Napalm Canisters as Cooking Fuel

Somewhere in a prior world, a woman with my face
is scraping the seeds from an unborn hell.
All night, doom rang from the sky. And in the morning,
there are mouths to feed. There are crocks in the cellar
and the ruined crops, the early frost, the neighbor's red daughter
strung up in the square. What else to do
when the unspeakable comes. What to burn
when it doesn't. Somewhere in a world that didn't quite
end, a woman like me is foraging for that which failed to kill her.
She is cranking open modernity's throat, wrenching
her arc from its scat. She is a woman who can hack
an impossible morning into water, bean paste, bitter leaves,
another chance to fumble toward the next chance, and the next—
Every day of my life has been something other than my last.
Every day, an extinction misfires, and I put it to work.

Upon Learning That Some Korean War Refugees Used Partially Detonated Napalm Canisters as Cooking Fuel

If a partway bomb; if a half-paused hell;
if a killing, failed, can feed;
if a death sentence, incomplete;
if a horror, flopped; if extinction unlocks
its jaw; if what doesn't kill you makes you; if *almost*;
if *never*; if the friction of *did not succeed*; if someone harnessed
annihilation in service of a stew; if someone me-like can see
disaster's refuse and think, *dinner*; if they can gather reeds
and soften them with the genius of unconsummated doom;
if I can almost love the bomb that didn't burst; then,

if a war didn't end;

if the war that didn't end
helps me eat; if my swelling ends no hunger
but my own; if my hunger ends not a thing;

Upon Learning That Some Korean War Refugees Used Partially Detonated Napalm Canisters as Cooking Fuel

How did we get here? you'll think,
kneeling with your neighbors in the parking lot
as the para-police confiscate your coffee.

How did it get to this? everyone will say,
walking north on the interstate as the city's
swarmed in orange, swallowed in smoke.

How did this happen, though it'll be the wrong question,
as they tear open your packages, escort you to a room
where white-knuckled soldiers wait.

Listen: I have a bad imagination.
Dystopia is the word for what's already happened
so many times, it's the reason _____'s so cheap.

No such thing as an undetonated hell;
the pilot light clicks, and I eat.

Upon Learning That Some Korean War Refugees Used Partially Detonated Napalm Canisters as Cooking Fuel

I lie on the floor partially bursting, partially stripped by the fact, drowning in the fact, slobbering like a dog in the heat of the fact. Here, on the other side of what happened, I make nothing happen, *nothing, nothing, nothing*, flaccid as a gerund. Dead trees, sharpening the sky. Once upon a time, the people whose nightmares I inherited were safe; then, they weren't. Hence, they were never safe. They survived however they could. They made daughters who married well and were proud in ordinary ways; or they were ashamed. Days passed. They chased vultures from their mothers, were stuffed with bloody rags, watched fire shock their limbs into myth. Days, and days. Here, in the inconceivable future, I am unable. To narrate. To speak in the simple past, facts lined up like soldiers on a horizon. I'm making nothing happen but my own drool, drooling, gaping, chomping at the *ing ing ing*. I make a nothing that whirs into being, feedback looping into a buzz saw of nothing, dome of nothing. So big it rises. Big enough to keep my people safe from the catastrophes that rain from planes. Before each catastrophe, a moment in which my people are safe. Refuge of nothing. Refuge of uneventfulness. First days, then days, and days. In a dead tree's heart, an empty space. In the space, a small animal, useless beautiful animal, stretching its wings, wings, *wings . . .*

Unlove Poem

If I call myself unlovable, I am, practically; if I say it
enough times: *unlovable*. Then, like practical magic,

I'm hollow as old garlic; I'm distance-skinned.
I'm a long, mean package, a terror-dyke, a nag, a squinting,

slut-spun hag—it's easy, really. It's the simplest thing,
I do it in my sleep. I have invasive dreams,

after all, they infect my lover's skull, they crank our jaws
into four slow hammers. After all, I'm made of distance

plus the beautiful things people have tried to put
inside me, they fall out the bottom. No one can kill me

with kindness. No one can reach me through the sound
of such ancestral ugly, sound of my grandmothers gagging

a half century ago (did they?). My grandmother beating
her stomach with her fists, drinking medicine, then poison (did she?).

I'm distance-skinned. No one can put a story inside me
but me. If not even my memories love me enough to stay,

then fine, cut off the hands that keep me married
to any history. See? Like magic, then,

I call myself a rotted-out bulb, and soon enough

I'm hauling out the wet stuff, cracking my compost heart

under a shovel's faceless verdict. Sometimes a highway opens
between my hearts, and I run suicides till I'm lactic.

Sometimes I wonder how long I'd have to run
to reach the last generation where one of us felt loved,

and I crumple into carcass. I come from a short line of women
who were handed husbands as salvation from rape.

I'm a short lie of a woman whom men have wanted
to tear apart with their good strong hands. I mean, same.

If I love anyone enough to know they deserve better than me,
and stay anyway, then: What? If I love myself enough to beat

fistfuls of poison into me, into me who hurts me, oh well,
I'm just imitating the rockets' red glare. I'm just covering

the old song. *Unlovable* is open-source, anyone can make up
new verses to sing it. Here's the part where I list the times

my white ex hurt my feelings, or my white teacher,
my white therapist, the white boy who put his dick inside me,

the boy I liked too much, the woman who let me fall
in love with her too fast, of course there's the boy

who died by accident and left me only able to write beautiful poems
about his leaving, pretty only-love things I threw and threw into

the endless distances inside me, highways of quiet.
O, I've been hard to love in America. I've been slow

to speak in America. I've been, undoubtedly, an American
and done practically nothing to stop it. I've been

some version of my grandmothers slinking around the floor
of the GI bar, shivering in the bathroom of the GI bar.

I've been some version of my grandmother making child
after child for a loveless man. I've been her, and I've been

the version of her that lives, that lives in an opportune land,
that chooses who she loves, that sits by a window writing,

drinking water with tulsi, breaking chocolate with her clean hands,
that goes to school after school and collects heart and heart

and heart sweetly brimming in her well-oiled forearms and *still*
has the gall to be unlovable. O, my badly loved grandmothers,

I kin you to me, facelessly. I wrap all our deaths around
my shoulders like a fox pelt coat: grandmother across

oceans and ages, grandmother across the border, grandmother
carried off by soldiers, grandmother carried into endless highway

by disease or dog or dawn's unrelenting purge. I wrap until
I'm made of grandmother, until the ritual musk of their dreams

is sprouting from my skull: sandalwood, ambergris, copper
of blood, coin copper, clay of approaching dusk. I am loved

by pheromone if nothing else. By accident at best.
O beasts of fortune, I am loved sweetest by the horrors of blood,

by my own, and by ours, O blessed root rot, by ours.

III

How to Let Go of the World

There's a documentary about climate change called *How to Let Go of the World*, and sam asks, *Should I jump off a building.*

Among a growing list of promises I can't make my friends: *This weight will tether. You can come back up again.* The faithfulness of gravity, of morning sounds. *If only you'll stay.*

:::

When I walk into the street it's almost as if it'll last: smudge of a cooked orange pressed into the sky. The cars follow all their old lineages back and forth from shifts; meanwhile, three teenagers pile rollicking onto the sidewalk.

I don't know how to do it: hold their faces in my hands and tell them what's waiting. How to teach any of us to follow this song, into what dark.

:::

One evening, I turned a corner and panicked at a sudden flash in my rearview, teeth chattering into my highest throat. Every nerve prepared for the acrid drip of cop talk until I realized: it was no cruiser. It was the sky. The sky, shocked with dying.

:::

I cried when I saw the photos of bleached reefs. Later, I had to cut the phrase out of every poem: *Bleached reef. Bleached reef.* If a record skips you bend

low to greet it. You greet it with a cloth and your own good breath.

:::

When the Pyrex burst all over the stove, we stood still for a minute to let ourselves be rocked by the sound, the sudden natural disaster of our ruined dinner. To be safe, we turned to the ceiling and asked any spirits present to tuck themselves back into the drywall. Then went for bags and brooms, picked out the shards, the ghost-knives hiding in the tiles for our heels.

:::

I should mention that my first love left Earth from a rooftop, though he didn't jump. Or: he jumped only the way muscles do, on their way to sleep.

:::

I can watch the videos of brimstone eating California. I can listen to the sound of a boy describe how holding a line against fire might cut time off his sentence. I can hold his voice in my hands and whisper straight into it, but that doesn't make him here. I can love and love his arms helping mine make something other than dirt and watch that love bleed straight into the space between us and then of course. It falls. Into a tunnel and gone.

:::

You can come back up again. Run, and the sky will catch you in its thousand orange hands. You'll never land.

:::

I stalk the house swatting the flies, thirsty for the sound of newspaper on exoskeleton, the satisfaction of a clean and bloody ending.

When they're gone, I almost miss them. *They fly out of my arms. I fly out of their arms.*

:::

What's the German word for preemptively missing something so much you can't look at it. Literal translation: *green green green and I hide my face.*

:::

In Flint I turn on the tap and out comes war wrapped in putrid cellophane. In Detroit I flip the switch and boil war for tea. In Providence I over-war the plants. War runs down my face in the theater's dark. I wade into a blanket of war and let its waves carry me out, out past the shoreline's certainty.

:::

In other words: I beach myself.

Other words: I leech bleakly. Breathe sleet, a wreath of it. I flinch at the leaves, anticipating their reek, the graves of reefs. I bleach and bleach and watch the chlorine slip clean from my teeth.

:::

I want to tether my friends to the rooftop railing the way we once pinned a blanket to the beach with shoes, books, bags of carrots, wine in a can. How we flexed and curled our toes until we found the damper sand, the soft homes of crabs below. But the wind won't stop coming. Orange and exoskeleton against our little shore.

:::

If only it'd been a ghost that had shattered the glass. Some simple anger—

some old fable we could soothe back to sleep with a few choice words and a handful of incense. Much worse that it was the heat. Much worse: the way molecules bend to the fact of it, and break.

:::

I listened to those firefighters while, in Hamtramck, I waged a much tinier war against the dust on my blinds. I wiped and wiped to rid my windows of it. In the forest, rot feeds. The earth drinks soot and makes it into new leaves. In other words it's the plastic, here, that makes dirt a problem.

I bent low to greet it, dipped a cloth in water to approximate a tongue. Meanwhile, the light through the slats shocked my image into slices.

:::

When disaster comes, some of us will stand on the rooftop to address the ghosts. Some of us will hold the line. Some will look for the shards, run our tongues along the floor.

:::

I say *when* like disaster hasn't come, isn't already growing in the yard. Do I have to run through the list? The firefighter prisoners—my friends' islands slowly swallowed—war in my faucet, remember? *Syrian Civil War* is the name of a drought. The name of this hurricane is Exxon, *Exxon*, I shout. I can pull as many weeds as I want. I stalk the garden pulling them, thirsty for the sound of their true names wrenching out of the soil. (Do I have to say it? They fly out of my arms.)

:::

I should mention that when my first love died, I already had a stack of poems about missing him. I want to say this prepped me for widowhood—

widowhood to the world, et cetera.

The truth: under the topmost sand is another, darker layer, damp from the ocean's closeness. There were days I begged to be buried in it—cool, mutable grave, reprieve from the unrelenting sun—sun—sun—

:::

Among a growing list of other things that are unrelenting: teenagers piling rollicking into the street. The shock of a citrus sky in midwinter. The way a phrase's shape can hook itself through your lip for weeks. Once, sam walked around a whole day muttering, *Soul, I say!* and he did, and did.

:::

In lieu of a proper translation for my grief, I say, *green green green*, until it cools enough to lower myself into.

:::

Holding my love's face in my hands, I tell him I miss him. I say, *I miss you like I miss the trees.*

By this I mean, *Look! The trees are here! Everyone's outside, darling: green in my hands, ghosts in the drywall—everyone's waiting for us.*

:::

I should mention that when my first love died, he was already dead, had already always been on his way to the roof, on his way over its edge. And when he was here, he was here. By this logic, he is and was and is and was. Unrelentingly.

:::

In lieu of proximity to firefighters; in lieu of the ability to speak the airless language of ghosts; or to reverse the logic of molecules; or to force Exxon to call the hurricane by its rightful name; or to convince my friends not to launch themselves from the rooftops of every false promise made by every rotten idol; in lieu of all I can't do or undo; I hold. The faces of the trees in my hands. I miss them. And miss and miss them. Until I fly out of grief's arms, and the sky. Catches me in its thousand orange hands. It catches me, and I stay there. Suspended against the unrelenting orange. I stay there splayed, and dying. And shocking the siren sky.

IV

Then I'd sing, 'cause I'd know
I'd know how it feels
I'd know how it feels to be free.

—*Nina Simone*

Aaron Says the World Is Upside Down

and it's true, the cops are shooting rubber bullets at even the blonde journalists now; the Target is on fire, and the Wells Fargo's shining face kicked in by white boys with gas masks and hammers trying to jump-start their war—and yet, the upside-down world is also, by definition, the same world, like the map that hung in the hallway of the house where I lived three or four lives ago, Argentina at the top, Greenland kissing its toes; it was a metaphor, someone explained, for seeing things another way—so yes, if it is true that another killer cop's killed another Black child's father, another “unauthorized” chokehold, another no charge again, if once more riot gear again budget once again gas station, more flames, more who's to blame gets blamed again if again and again it is the same—then it holds that the opposite must also be true: the so-called opposite world of food drop-off stations, of phone trees, of bailouts and carry an extra mask, the world of kneeling for a stranger's gift of milk to flush the tear gas, the world of saying a thing in unison so clear it drills a hole through to the other side of what's possible, so clear and wholly inverted, we realize it's been here all along: O kingdom of fire, O kingdom of food, with the same mouth we take your blessings; with the same mouth we pronounce you come.

Field Trip to the Museum of Human History

Everyone had been talking about the new exhibit,
recently unearthed artifacts from a time

no living hands remember. What twelve-year-old
doesn't love a good scary story? Doesn't thrill

at rumors of her own darkness whispering
from the canyon? We shuffled in the dim light

and gaped at the secrets buried
in clay, reborn as warning signs:

a "nightstick," so called for its use
in extinguishing the lights in one's eyes.

A machine used for scanning fingerprints
like cattle ears, grain shipments. We shuddered,

shoved our fingers in our pockets, acted tough.
Pretended not to listen as the guide said,

*Ancient American society was built on competition
and maintained through domination and control.*

*In place of our modern-day accountability practices,
the institution known as "police" kept order*

using intimidation, punishment, and force.

We pressed our noses to the glass,

strained to imagine strangers running into our homes,
pointing guns in our faces because we'd hoarded

too much of the wrong kind of "property."
Jadera asked something about redistribution

and the guide spoke of safes, evidence rooms,
more profit. Marian asked about raiding the rich,

and the guide said, *In America, there were no greater
protections from police than wealth and whiteness.*

Finally, Zaki asked what we were all wondering:
But what if you didn't want to?

and the walls snickered and said, *steel,
padlock, strip search, hard stop.*

Dry-mouthed, we came upon a contraption
of chain and bolt, an ancient torture instrument

the guide called "hand-cuffs." We stared
at the diagrams and almost felt

the cold metal licking our wrists, almost tasted dirt,
almost heard the siren and slammed door,

the cold-blooded click of the cocked-back pistol,
and our palms were slick with some old recognition,

as if in some forgotten dream we had lived this way,
in submission, in fear, assuming positions

of power were earned, or at least carved in steel,
that they couldn't be torn down like musty curtains,

an old house cleared of its dust and obsolete artifacts.

We threw open the doors to the museum,

shedding its nightmares on the marble steps,
and bounded into the sun, toward the school buses

or toward home, or the forests, or the fields,
or wherever our good legs could roam.

On How

after Nate

we wrote new chants
& bailed folks out
& plate-scooped meals
& healed old wounds
& walked cold blocks
& drummed up, stumped
& “stole” back land
& claimed back facts
& sewed loud flags
& sowed right crops
& cut cops’ cash
& heaved gold rot
& let go ghosts
& surged, rode crests
& spread wealth flat
& clawed down walls
& ex-learned harm
& nixed cruel laws
& crowdsourced grace
& ground teeth down
& laid cards flat
& dug toward hope
& sang off-key
& worked through shit
& took sweet time
& pre-lived worlds
& dreamed past doom
& walked, fell, walked,
fell, walked, fell, walked.

Toward Grace

In this version, that girl the reporters dubbed “Grace”
scribbles homework. Is time-rich, abundant with grace.

Out the window, world sings in the key of magnolia,
and magnolia drips gifts of right answers for Grace.

For some brains, time bends, like the sheet-face of lakes.
Call it *deficit*. Some pinball, constellate our own grace.

Online, blondes chirp tips, spin fidgets, get follows.
Old story: unequal distribution of grace.

Imagine a version where Black children, too,
can be children, make mistakes, still anticipate grace.

My mother, unmothered, grew death-quick. She raised
her three siblings herself. Later, chose her name: Grace.

She’s a healer now, Mother. And healing. Mends bones,
orders meds, prays, remembers. Is making her grace.

Land that won’t love us back, of thee, of thee.
To be loved without reason is the dreamsong of grace.

This version: no school stripped by crisis and market
steals time, care, or tutors law-promised to Grace.

This version: *school*’s the name for any garden or place

that loves Black and brown kids toward their brilliance, grace.

In this version: no Zoom judge, no prison for children.
No prison for children. No Zoom sentence for Grace.

Every day, she is healing. Mends hurts, scribbles answers.
Magnolia. Imagine: magnolia for Grace.

I reach toward the sound of this anthem, this whistle.
This poem is a reach-machine, outstretched toward Grace.

My lake-brain; my time-slide; unequal song, yes, of brain.
Still, I'll version it: care-time for you, us, kin, Grace.

Prayer for the Untranslated Testimony

Midnight, and I'm sitting on the back steps
looking at the leaves and listening to the sound
a boy is making into the night with the peak
of his lungs, somewhere in my neighborhood.
He is stretching the air, and I do not
know what it means, this sound.
It sounds, I think, like a name, like the name
of my friend Fatimah, *Fatimah*, but with different
letters, I think, or maybe it sounds like a command,
a long and desperate spell, which he makes of the air again
and again and now growing longer as he shouts it;
and if I ask my heart, rude translator though it is,
to read back this sound, what I hear rippling
from the quiet floor of my chest is *let me in*
let me in, or *open it*, *open it*, and now in my chest's
vocabulary there is also a door. There is also a blue
light in the top window and a face that will not
appear. And some of my friends, I know, have names
that sound like this, like *I am here*, *I am here*, like
why won't you answer, like *why can't you see me* and they are,
mostly, not boys, but do grow long and blue-lit
at midnight. They are spells, the women I know,
and today, a woman sat in front of a panel
of men who, I have to try to believe, were too
once boys who shivered in the yard, a woman sat
and had to say again and again, *it happened*,
it happened, and watch the glass panes of the once-
boys' faces remain unlit and only echoing back,
with their short vocabularies, *are you sure*, *are you sure*,
are you sure. So tonight, reaching up to hold hands
with these leaves stretching onto the back steps,

I say: Please. Let this spell grow legs. Let my sisters' names grow long as their hair. Long as they need to. Let their names rattle the night air with their incessant lungs. Let the sounds of their names burn blue in the night, let even their ugliest memories be named after the daughters of prophets, please, if there is a god named for the humble undersides of these leaves somehow not yet dead, let the names of my sisters make all the doors on my street fly open. Let every tree sleeping in our chests claw awake. And rush out to answer that call.

Coalitional Cento

you wake up and you unremember the world

what an honor to inhabit the cleanest air

what a superpower to be

great-grandmother chanting mantras

in a circle of salt

I dream of things that are larger than life

I can walk the streets at any time of the day

am I the colonization or the reparations?

I, too, make the decision. I carry it with me

connect the dots in our real lives

ginger roots cross mountains

we will not live quietly

I choose to be the reparations

With Mouths and Mushrooms, the Earth Will Accept Our Apology

When Hiroshima was destroyed by an atomic bomb in 1945, it is said, the first living thing to emerge from the blasted landscape was a matsutake mushroom.

—Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*

made of shock doctrine, made of root-chatter,
made of playgrounds blackened with corpses,
made of the anti-modern, of hell-wreck, made of symbiotic
destruction, of parasite and pericapitalism, made of slave trade,
of wretched, made of reek and reason, made of ex-flesh, of cells
stampeding through the lungs of miners, made of morals, of mortals,
of *everything went with perfection*, made of infants in horse stalls
or strapped in reddened rags, made of sour rice, of phlegm,
of warp and spore, made of forest floor dis-
enfranchised to dust, of sun-laden and empty space, made
of empty space, made of timber price, of sugarcane,
of nematode and elite sleaze, of seamstresses diving to concrete,
made of trash-bellied caribou, of suicide pact, of hands deep
in the throat of a comfort girl, made of entrails, of gromet,
of every chipper *we can do it*, made of sacred land, of funeral scream,
of holy water and flayed graves, made of stolen names, of commerce,
of conquistador, of near-death visions on the factory floor, made of
the unforgivable future, and the unforgivable past, i bloom,
bloodless, and ready to feed.

Wildlife

In the Canadian province of Alberta, a massive wildfire—uh, wildfire—exploded to ten times its previous size Thursday.

—Amy Goodman, *Democracy Now!*, 2016

They say the blast was triggered by a passenger pigeon's ghostly coo, swift over the oil fields—at which the grasses stiffened, shot up a warning scent—which made the beetles shudder from their beds—which spread a rumor among the earthworms, until,

so quietly at first that no one noticed, a thin hoof cracked open a patch of earth: last spring's last-born caribou, the one who'd gotten separated from the herd and gutted by flies, now back and raising an orchestra of dust with its kicking, calling forth

hoof by hoof, the whole herd, stampeding from their graves, flesh and fur remapping onto bones as they percussed out, pulling with them the pine martens and black-footed ferrets, who regathered their bones from the soil and darted up

to hop aboard the pine trees now rushing from the horizon, stretching their newborn necks toward the sun's familiar laugh as shrikes and warblers flocked giddy to their shoulders, *we're back, we're back*, they giggled as firs and ferns yawned upright to marry

the sparrows and the softshell turtles, whose humble jaws birthed ponds and marshes with each exhale, inviting the whooping cranes to unfurl their bodies from the wind and gladly, gladly swoop down to bless the fish, which in turn gave the whales the idea

to distill back into their old forms from the clouds overhead, until

the sky was clogged with blubbery gods—right whales, gray, beluga,
and even a rumor of a blue whale somewhere over Calgary, casting
a great gray shadow over the baseball fields, every parking lot

and highway cracking open as the earth remembered, rejoiced
with its remembering—and as some of the humans kept trying
to drag up the earth's black blood, to sell off their mothers'
old marrow, suddenly, then, each pump and spigot spouted forth bees,

butterflies, short-horned lizards, plovers and prickly pears, grizzlies,
snakes, owls of all feather and shape, shrews, sturgeon, each drop
of oil renouncing its war draft and returning to its oldest names:
muscle; stamen; tooth; shell; the land and water laughing aloud,

a laugh that spread the way a fever spreads, like the opposite of death—
just the earth, with its thousand mouths, singing: *I will. I will.*

Things That Already Go Past Borders

trade deals; pathogens; specific
passports; particular skill sets; vegetables; car
parts; streaming rights; seasonal workers; some
insects; certain birds; religion; dialect; music
at the right volume; headlights; human
remains; wireless signals; all manner
of money; of memory; people
in trucks; on trains; on foot; in line, in
lines; charging checkpoints; wading waist deep
through rivers; clinging to rafts; or yawning
their way through customs; sisters
separated for decades, whose faces
are as foreign to each other as the faces of
the dead; seeds; drones; prisoners
on planes; dictators in motorcades; orders
to kill; and longing; yes, this
most of all; the longing
of families; and the long
-ing of storms

Demilitarized Zone

I roll my suitcase through the demilitarized airport. I hand my demilitarized ticket to the demilitarized agent at the gate, who smiles in a demilitarized way, points with an open hand. On the plane, I order a demilitarized orange juice. I look down at the demilitarized mountains of Siberia and imagine walking on them. We land on the demilitarized runway, and the captain's voice over the loudspeaker is demilitarized as he asks us to stay in our seats. In the bathroom, I brush my demilitarized teeth. I get on the wrong demilitarized train and have to plead with the conductor who does not have a gun. I watch the demilitarized pine trees filter the sun like a ceiling fan. I watch demilitarized cranes land on a lake so bright it makes me blink. The demilitarized conductor bows as he enters each train car; an old woman sits with demilitarized bundles wrapped in pink. At Pyeongyang I stop for demilitarized noodles. The Taedong River is not full of bodies. The sun in the trees makes a noise like *eeeeee! eeeee!* The sparrows in the buckwheat fields shout in northern accents and no guns. At Ŭiju the platform is demilitarized; the taxi stand is not pockmarked with mines; I buy a demilitarized barley tea, and the shopkeeper hands me my change like she's responsible for me. In the demilitarized record hall, I hand over a slip of demilitarized paper, and the clerk smiles at my accent. *You've traveled a long way*, she says as she leads me to the demilitarized stacks. We find my family's genealogy book. We turn to the last generation recorded before the world ended and our line split south. I unfold my paper with the list of missing names. The clerk copies the letters as I read them. Together, we demilitarize my family. The sun coming in through the windows says, *ah. ah.*

Dispatches from a Future Great-Great-Granddaughter

Dear Improbable You,

What was it like to live so gridded? So trackchanges?
So carceral, somnambulant, asphyxiating at split screens
while Nation glowered with rot? What was it like
to slouch numb-faced here and watch your image
get dirty with Algorithm elsewhere, shuffle into destiny's schlep?
Did your pulse come haptic? Did you pay money for food?
Did you dial three numbers and salute genocidaires
with crestwhitened incisors when they knocked? Did you pray
ever? Hope, any? Or did you take a number,
snatch what scraps you could, and pet your children?
Everything was happening, and you were alive.
You were alive then. What did you do?

:::

Great-Great-Grandmother, I'm writing to you
under chartreuse skies, after the Great Verticality,
and after the Multiwars and their Various Rebrandings,
and after Tipping Points #1–379,
and after, finally, the Very Long, Very Slow Dispersal of Things.

I wonder if you can imagine it: the tall tall oceans,
the smell of sick-gas (weirdly sweet) and sani-spray
(like if toothpaste were a vegetable), the rhythm of jumpdancers
on the boardwalks, water swinging in barrels, grass-fed grass.

There are twelve different siren patterns, one for each kind of crisis:

two honks for fire; three short trills for a runaway brain;
a Loneliness Emergency is a low swoop followed by a chirp;
and so on. There are crises every day, and there's also bread
bubbling on the counter, pickled beans, a cat who comes home.

What I want you to know is that we're okay. Hurting
but okay. We're surviving, though it's true,
we don't know what that means, exactly.

:::

Some rituals I do to imagine what you knew about freedom:

move my fingers over glass, swipe like a question;

swallow a bullet and stay silent until it passes;

touch my lips to silicone, sand, silicone, sand;

walk into the ocean and let the waves kick me over,
then dry in the sun and lick the salt from my forearms;

sit facing a friend and hold our palms together without touching;
take turns completing the phrase, *It could have been that . . .* ;

draw my face from memory;
ask a friend to bind me with rope until I can't move, tense up until I cry;
then laugh until the ties loosen; until everything loosens;

:::

Dear Great-Great-Grandsomeone,

Under a graphless sky, I'm writing to say: thank you for healing
what you could; for passing down what you couldn't.

I'm plentituding what I can; what I can't, I let tunnel me
like roughage, like a "bullet," like a slur I won't daycare.

What you gave me isn't wisdom, and I have no wisdom in return,
just handfuls of livestock: Every day, a sky is.

Miles are. We sing, entangled, and the root-world answers,
and together we're making. Something of it. Something

of all those questions you left.

V

Look

My mother, very Catholic, loves that song: *Imagine there's no heaven*. Can you picture it?—my mother joining the chorus of her three churchless children to croon, *no heaven, no hell, nothing before or after?* Above us, only the universe and its borderless yawn. Only the trees who died for my handwriting, history's pollen, fields and field hands I can't stop robbing with money. Today, I woke up on still-stolen land, then scrolled through the latest debris of people attempting godliness in a hundred wrong ways. The room was filled today with light; filled, you could say, with nothing. No hope, no glory. No such peach as an ethical peach. The minute I started wanting paradise, it leapt from my belief. I'm not good enough to survive not being good. I'm like you—still drooling after a perfect world, even as the stars warble off-key and the oceans rattle with plastics. *Imagine*, I can't stop saying. *Imagine*, I beg, when I should have said, *Look*: paradise is both a particle and a wave. You don't have to believe in something for it to startle you awake.

Doom

You've dreamt about it since you were a kid:
a secret, a funeral, a spreading cough, and then
it starts—the end. The whole, terrible end.
For years, you've kept one eye on the shadows
swilling above the door, waiting for the arrival
of the God of Doom. What to do now

that he's here, sipping coffee in our kitchen?
We sneak glares from the sink, mutter apologies
when we bump in the hall. He's an awful guest,
of course—tracks blood everywhere, cries
when we feed him, screams if we don't.

So we keep the freezer stocked with dumplings, black fruit,
beans to last a month. We take turns hefting his bulk,
keep him placated with a soundtrack of pickaxes, songs
about death camps and microplastics, circular fretting,
it's only a matter of time. When it storms, he yanks open
the windows; he polishes our worst parts; steals, constantly.
At night, he raps at the wall behind our heads, just
as he did for ten thousand nights before he showed up,
just as he'll do for ten thousand nights after.

Meanwhile—well, you know. Meanwhile.
All our kin is dying at a distance.
The coast's been burning for weeks. Filling the kettle,
you catch me humming, *The dream that you dream
will come true*, and we laugh, though nothing's funny
but this: We knew the end was coming here. We knew it,
and like idiots—like perfect idiots—we stayed.

Waste

I look at your face and there, I feel it—my life
rushing toward me from both directions, twin rivers reversed
and crashing backwards into their source. You were improbable as that—
your eyes flicking open a seam in the dark, improbable—
us, laughing at the same time with both our heads on the same
pink pillow, improbable—in the same city—both our hearts
still going—*What are the chances*, I murmur when I reach out
and touch your brow, *How is this possible*—

:::

You only knew him for two years! cries the mother
of the boy we lost—sweet bedraggled flourish of a boy
who was hers and hers and hers and briefly mine and then—
out—like a swath of river, over a cliff and gone,
over (be specific) the side of a building and gone, back into
whatever name the universe calls us away toward, leaving question
after question in his unending wake, his wake shrinking
into a red horizon. Two years we fell into somehow step.
Where is your son? asks the chatty lady at the counter, and it's not
a bad question, just an impossible one—*where is*
is your son where
your son

:::

I'm here, on the pillow, watching your eyes move all
on their own, tracing a thought as it crawls across the ceiling.
I'm here—trying to memorize the details, reciting them like a song—

little crust in his eye / bit of bristle on his chin / o smell of him / him / him—
Once, in a fit of panic, I lie upside down and study your ankles,
interrogate each scar, marry the lot with my mortal mouth, hurry—
before we're all washed out into that infinite downstream.
I imagine decades with your head between my palms and feel
only terror at the loss—I'm here—*O him—I have wasted my life—*

: : :

I admit, there was a someone who came into my life
like an oak floor under my grief-thin air. For six years he held my world
in his hands. What happened between us is a silence, and silence is all
that happened after. Let's just say I walked away as if I deserved
my own years. Let's say it, and be clear—I deserve nothing.
I deserve to be deserted in the woods, chasing the smell of smoke,
if *smoke* is what I call the nights I begged like an animal, the thickness
of a heart, the slime of it, green-eyed daughters whose ghosts
I tore to shreds, then pinned on him. I can't say anything yet
but this: It was me who brought the cliff, pushed us off.
It was me who ended that world.

: : :

Scrambled by need, I say, *I want to give you my bones*, all
my language rendered useless at your feet. I'm useless, here, too—I thrust
my uselessness at you. I say and say it: I want to be scraped across the bed
like
a salt-slick meal. I want to be torn from my frame, steamed clean. *I want to
be
nothing*, said the man in the story before he nearly got his wish, wrecked
and reddened in the alley—and it's like catching my face in a car window,
dusk-addled negative mouthing along to my neediest self. *I want to be
nothing*,
as you push your knuckles into my mouth. *I want to be nothing*, a wordless
evening opening around you. I want no memory before or after,
just this—my hips lifting off the mattress, cracked and spilling, wingless,

my certain brain spread across time's horror-lines, so I can lift each memory from its sour bath, hold it up to the lamp in your mouth.

:::

Yes, I squandered years in houses promised to ruin.
There were particular futures I could not bear, though they rushed toward my keening, fogbell mouth. For years, I was hot with that siren, sweaty with doomsday's moans. I lathered my skin in hopelessness. O, it was better that way—to be streaked with the prophecy of a dark field, bordered on one end by love-as-imprisonment, as husbandry, a price to being touched, a historical and therefore unsurprising cage writhing with tongues. On the other end: grief and its endlessly fabulous outfits; feathers for weeks; tulle. And in the swath between them, loneliness. Just that: loneliness. I thought that was all love could give me. I'm sorry. I thought I'd seen the future. I thought I knew the words to our one wild and unfathomable life. Forgive me; I see it now. I wasted so much time being wrong.

Protest Poem

The air's so thick
with fury it shakes
the windows. Nothing
cuts through walls
like rage
and its promises: *No peace*
is a drill—joy
you have to charge
to make work; the cheer
that follows each
verse, an ekphrastic
for the as-yet-
unbuilt museum
of what we had to survive
to make paradise
from its ruins.

It's okay

if you don't believe me.
No one could have told me
I was possible
with a sentence
that would have made it
true. So: this isn't
a sentence.
It's a sound.
It's a blade,
spinning. It's a wave
that stutters
at the air until

the plate glass
cracks.

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PEN Poetry Series: “How to Let Go of the World”

PBS NewsHour: “Field Trip to the Museum of Human History”

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Under a Warm Green Linden: “Wildlife”

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“Toward Grace” is for the Michigan student (referred to in news media by her middle name, Grace) who was incarcerated in a juvenile detention facility

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FRANNY CHOI is the author of two previous poetry collections, *Soft Science* (Alice James Books, 2019) and *Floating, Brilliant, Gone* (Write Bloody Publishing, 2014). Her poems have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Nation*, the *Paris Review*, and elsewhere. They are Faculty in Literature at Bennington College and founded Brew & Forge, a project that aims to build connections between writers, artists, and organizers.

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