

Fourth Eden

What food feeds your belly, daughter,
what covers your feet?
You bend to asphalt

that smells of stone and tar,
poke the summer melt of it.
Trees swim in the heat

and the birds shiver in the sky.
The sidewalk burns, just enough
for you to skip from shadow to shadow

where the snake sleeps in some noonday heat.
Go ahead, adjust your khimar, look up at the birds—
Do you see how they sing the air thin, how

their bodies fill the sky?
Those birds see you, see you
in the entirety—you young, and

even later, your belly stretched,
your body old—they see you then too.
From up high birds can see everything.

Eventually we are all lost
in the short shrift of midnight—
shame snaked, even in day. Or

perhaps we love, but hurt
each other anyway. No matter.
Someday soon you will swallow

the darkness, never see the beauty
of your eyes. You too will have daughters.
They won't see their own eyes either.

Only tar —

tar burns
and darkness



Four toothed, hollow breathed.

That I might split my fingers,
split my tongue —

be the empty pipe all wishes could filter through —

Me, barefoot, toe to nose
with the snake.

Still, I hate to pray at graves, hate
to belly up to any oven,

all truths complete and whole, any idea of perfection —
set it aside.

Marble monuments are just that: cold.



Furrowed rows of fennel, clouds impaled on the fanned lace,
wet wisps tall as her cheeks, swells of anise pungent the air.

She runs through the rimpled land, through loamed days,
her arms out, her body pressed into each next moment —

Her energy raises the vultures from the fields,
their fat bodies preventing a nimble flex into the sky.

She can hear the rush of the Barada, spring swelled, frigid —
and beyond it, gunfire, a rattle asymmetric and angry.

Here the spring grass is soft, is wet —
She sets herself upon it — waits for the snake.



What traps you today, daughter? Once you knelt in gutters, pebbles sharp under your knees, chalked bright colored homes, the snake blessed beside you, your mouth open, open to the air. What was that noise, lollipop, respirator, choking? The sound of fingers grabbing hair and throat scraped, what aural pleasure is this?



If the snake becomes you, open wide and swallow.



Children in playgrounds,
 babies asleep, tied to their mother's bodies,
 heads dancing with every step,

a hand, an arm, the gentle curve of a torso,
 perfect as a lunar eclipse,
 the tips of fennel, laced as sea anemone

waving in captured air — Ghouta,
 blood trafficking in endocrines,
 white, protective, pulsed

from a nuclear heart —
 Khan Sheikhoun — eyes glisten — the hand turns
 again, a soft sound, or

no sound, no smell, no taste,
 just this chiraled molecule
 transparent on the breeze. Sarin.



Once I held my daughters' hands as the air filled with a siren's breath. Hydraulic doors spread wide as we were coughed from bus to a stairwell of strangers and there I held them close, my daughters, my neighbors, everyone, urged their trembled selves back into my body.

Is there shame in that too?

Stepping into the all clear the sky opened into dispelled mist.
Can I breathe?

In Syria, neurotransmitters switch off with the flick of a trigger,
and then the scattered petals of bodies,
small children, their shelf life complete.

When the darkness comes, bare your feet.

When the air clears, breathe.

When the snake becomes you,
open wide and swallow.



Talar Kalajian, *A Smoking Print*, photograph

Fajr

with lines from T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land"

Translucent morning. No stone, no sound, not
water, only this sense of me, set inside
cupped palms, each along an ear — *Allab, Allab, Allab.*
Between I hold my need, missile-shaped,
heavy metal — desire — on the bus, on the street,
my eyes burn — everywhere — unbuttoned shirts, shoulders
exposed, jeans puckered like mouths around sour
fruit. Lips. Lips. Lips set against the tendon of a neck,
the thrum of an adams apple. Drop me to my knees. *Allab
hu Akbar . . .* forehead to carpet, the scent,
like sneakers slipped off in the backseat of a car — I wet
this scratched surface with saliva that escapes
the horror of myself, the scope of my fear.

There too, nose to pubic hair —
sneaker scent or maybe morning breath — the smell
of things closed and held close — underbelly
skin pearled, opalescent and warm as desert sand.
I will show you fear in a handful of dust and me,
hairy, lily-white, neither living nor dead, weak
as a corpse planted last year in the garden, my penis
nothing but a speck of salt.

Look right, look left, my face, still, my neighbors, lost
in prayer. And me — heart iced in silence. God,

my God, soften
me. Please.