Ars Poetica

A poem begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a lovesickness.

Robert Frost

A trip to the airport, the bus station. Birds cry, flying sideways and backwards. Puppets led by bellowing wind, put on a show.

A trip to the airport, the bus station. Squirrels run, burying acorns and forgetting them. Scurrying through Central Park, tripping over tails.

A trip to the airport, the bus station. Toddlers play, dodging Volkswagens in the street. Speeding pass their parents, feigning invincibility.

A trip to the airport, the bus station. I wish, guzzling gallons of water to stop the hunger. Pretending I have control over you not being here. Do I have a say?

A trip to the airport, the bus station. Without you, stoplights stay on red, stop signs are green hexagons. I just write it.
Song of Us

Loafe with me on the grass,
loose the stop from your throat.
Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”

When I can no longer make metaphors
out of the mundane, cling to me like
debris from broken cookies in the
bottom of a milk cup; hold me like
oatmeal sticking to my spoon,
my ribs, the creases of my bowl.

When I have dreams that stir me to steal
all the bedsheets, settle beside me like
honey swirling in the tea brushing pass
my lips at the dewdrop dawn; hold me
like rain dripping off the bodega
awnings, sloppy and in rhythm.

When I practice swigging moscato like
hand grenades, settle beside me like
thunder patiently waiting until
I give my lightning cue; hold me like
your fingers on the keys, coming home
after work and class and that one drink
at the bar.

When I run out of nail polish remover in
the middle of the third nail, cling to me
like the stretchy elastic on the waistband
of sweatpants; hold me like your fingers
on the strings, lacing up to go to the
gym or park or basketball court.

When I feel unsure, loafe with me on the
grass. Loose the stop from your throat.
And I’ll promise to do the same.
The Autobiography of My Mother’s Love

I.
In late winter of 1994, the first sacrifice my mother made for me was when she said no to the doctors who asked if she wanted to end the fetus forming in her uterus. Because 38 was too old and she already had enough children.

I was born on a Thursday evening in October. My mother alone in Bronx Lebanon Hospital. No one there to hold her legs or tell her to push. No one as they carved her a jack o’ lantern and pulled me out.

II.
And yet, I was ashamed of her.

When she asked me to spell words she should’ve learned by now. Are there two p’s in appointment and how about onion?

When she nodded softly and whispered to avoid showing the spaces in her mouth, more gums than enamel.

When she had to repeat herself over and over again because her accent was as thick as her hips.
Titanic

They say you never forget your first:
Soft kisses floating like icebergs,
double edged sharp sinking ships.
Don't forget the life vests.

Soft kisses floating like icebergs.
Leaving you at the door, convincing
you to forget the life vests with
Hershey Kisses knees against lava tiles.

Leaving you at the door,
swimming in the cologne stained air.
Falling to wobbly knees,
you claim his as your new adventure.

Cruising around the cologne stained air,
you dance in his oversized t-shirt,
a souvenir from this adventure which
was nothing like tag during recess.

You cry in his oversized sweatshirt,
remembering him, they never tell you
is nothing like playing tag.
It's razor lips sinking your battleship.
Exponent

I.
I am my mother’s youth escaped
from Jamaican huts on the mountain.

I am her willingness. Offering herself
without promise of more, diamonds.

I am her hair, spongy and black, a
familiar style. I am her cheeks, soaked
with silent tears, cushioned. I am her
cane, her back arched, aching, running
after children that are not her own.

II.
I am my mother’s scars, carved like a
gourd, her life expandable. Nurturing
five sons and two daughters. I am her
second chance, final moment to get it
right. I am her expectations handed
down, pearl necklaces and gold hoop
earrings. I am her moon, channeling the
waves, lulling the storm. I am

my mother’s attitude, eye rolls and teeth
pinching air thin. I am her crooked
smile, whimsical, breaking any minute.

III.
I am my mother’s accent stacked on
shelves, tumbling when I open the door.

Her snores ricocheting, switching
between wheezes and rumbles. I am
her voice heavy with vowels, hitting and
hugging me in the same breath.

I am her sorrow, buried in baby shower
RSVPs. Setting my pace, saying more
than that Bronx apartment. I am her
expectations whispered in a callus rasp,

“I love you”.

30 31
Deep Conditioning

I'm conditioned to disregard love
waiting for the backhand

of a compliment. Saying thank you
when I'm listening for the laugh track.

Saying thanks when I'm wondering if
you're blind. Feigning flattery when I

really should mean allow me to see
myself through your eyes for a second.

I'm conditioned to disregard love so
when he texts me "Hey" at 11 tonight, I

won't reply. Because "Hey" leads to
things that I'm not ready for.

Backflipping off the diving board into
an inflatable kiddie pool. But I should

be grateful so allow me to undress
without muting the lights, wincing.

at his arctic hands, hungry mouth
devouring my mind. Let me leave my

self esteem crumpled next to your jeans,
our socks, my bra. Because I am milk,

waiting for my expiration while you go
off to buy another to fluff your eggs, fill

your bowl, whip your potatoes. I'm
conditioned to disregard love because I

still hold you on a pedestal, counting the
days since we last spoke, waiting.
Back to Black

You go back to her and I go back to black.

Amy Winehouse, “Back to Black”

Not watery ink carved calligraphy
on a clean sheet, not naked

coffee that burns like bitter incense.
Not the cold eyes of my childhood

rag doll. But the nonchalant dark
denim jeans tucked in boots that scuff

snow. The hair coiled, curly cemented
to your sweaty forehead. The polish

on a hangnail, crooked and connected.
It’s the asphalt that stains our soles,

making silent changes in heat. More
than the belt, leathered and bending to

my waist. Hugging like this dress I slip
on, christening my curves. Not chucked

coal, burnt like unresolved mistakes. It’s
a rotten tooth commanding attention.

It’s especially the cat creeping carefully
along the armchair.