

My Grandmother Breaks Her Hip

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Abstract

A collection of narrative and confessional poems. The poems are mostly short, cinematic, physical, imagistic: moments in time. They explore the poet's own life, body, memories, and family relationships, and the tensions between power, duty, love and faith. Several poems concern the navigation of meaning and belonging in a time when international urban culture often clashes with tradition.

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One

Fathers, love your sons

Love them beyond
the first fallen tooth,
beyond the scraping of their knees.
Love them beyond
the breaking of toys
beyond the whistling crack of voices.
Love them beyond
the down on their chins,
beyond the girls on their walls.
When you can no longer carry them,
this is when you must hold them.
Love them when they make your mistakes,
when your wisdom gets too small.
Love them when they leave you,
when their choices are not yours.

Grandpa

Papa passed away so fast
I only found my tears at the funeral.
That old man was too cool
you shoulda seen the pictures
like some David Carradine in the dust
Wild Bill Hickock with a soccer ball
that Bhamjee could shoot.
And on a big night or holy day
when everyone wants you to forgive them
Papa would just say
“ag it’s alright”.
Oh he lived full
but too quick
with a thousand devils’ cares,
winning horses,
and innocent errant truths on his tongue.
Like when he met that niqabi aunty
and told the room they went way back
to how they used to dance at Chez Gay.
Of course no one could see her blush.
Ah Papa, I can almost see you now
waiting for your reckoning.
And it’s going to be fine
‘coz you know what Allah’s going to say
“ag Bhamjee, it’s alright.”

My grandmother breaks her hip

My grandmother says we've brought her here to die.
Her broken bone picks under our fingernails;
a splintered stick,
splitting the tissue-beds, prying us apart.
We give her pills for our pain.
Her cataracts cloud over
her unlettered bewilderment
but she can see old blood on the ceiling
of the state hospital.
My mother is wrung out;
the guilt stretches across her bed,
nesting on sheets of the unsigned hospital plan.
The doctor at the private clinic tells my uncle
hip operations cost hundreds of thousands
and old people don't make it that far.
We've had to put a price on my grandmother.

The golden hour

I was told you are buried
in the row alongside the highway
under a tree along the fence
I edged along the red soil mounds of Muslim graves
where names-dates stencilled on green perspex
and prayers for the highest stages in Heaven
lie among the few entombed or headed by more
adamant supplications in granite.
There are some heaps staked with a clutch
of scratched-on plywood sticks like plant markers
adorning careful beds of succulents
blooms flourishing both wild and contained
in pots and vases like the ornaments
in your mother's display cabinet.
I walked there reading each name
heavy with someone's longing
none of the Khadijas I found were you Katy.
But I imagine what you'd say, being sectioned off like this
categorised by faith, *in death too we choose to be close to our own*
perhaps so that when we rise again
it is among comforting commiserators
and if we did call upon God by a rightful name
there'd be no rubbing our neighbours' noses
in more dirt than they'd become accustomed to.
The afternoon sun stuttered
through the trees flashing slides
in the golden hour and I thought
we could almost picnic in your cemetery.
I saw a man with a prayer book in his hand
standing at a grave in a sway-less vigil
I didn't want to break what he had
by the leaves that would have crackled under my foot
so I walked away not having found you.
But Katy, I will return to this nursery of loving wives devoted husbands
dear friends and fallen angels.
I will look for your tree in this sweeping space
clipped green and neat where the benches
are warm enough to cup us
between the hum of traffic
and the slow hush of grass.

A phone call from my Grandmother

I can hear the shivering crepe paper
of her hands tap the phone against her ear
along an unsteady metronome of bruises.
She says, "You're always busy, you never call."
I can hear her years through the line;
the frail betrayal of nerves
the pain in her knees her back her weary place
without me, the grand daughter
who is always too busy to phone
Until the afternoon when I suddenly miss
after-school lunches
of canned pilchard curry
muskaana biscuits
and unwavering devotion
and I need to ask her for the recipes.

Dear Daddy

It's better you died when you did.
That way I will never have to hate you
for not accepting my choices
or the mistakes I swapped spit with.

You are unspoiled Daddy, dying when I was six.
Always generous with talking dolls and magnetised chess sets
leaving behind the library I lean on
your Bob Marley ties and feathered fedoras.
You will always be super-cool.

People still love you Daddy.
They remember your softness
and I've inherited your listening ears;
yielding like sponge, soaking up sob-stories,
absorbing the fabled and for-real.

And I no longer grudge
what you've passed on to me.
Your bold nose
and bolder chin
my too-small eyes.
I wonder if you had to go
so I could take your place.

I cannot eat dates without wondering

I often feel warm at Muslim funerals.
It must be the black cloaks of the women mourners
enveloping their embraces on the thin grey blankets
spread around the coffin
febrile tears disintegrating fistful wads
of pink and white tissue.

My very first funeral was cold though.
I look back to the camphor and calico,
my father anointed and wrapped
like an offering.
The final kiss on stiff lips.
The crystals of evergreen frost on his eyebrows.
My mother too young, far away in another room,
her world tossed into a corner.

Always
in the aftermath of sorrow
guests are fed
blankets are folded
furniture re-arranged
prayer books piled up.
And those date stones we saved
to tally our missives to the dead
and to God
return to their plastic buckets.

Growing bones

These bones begin soft and unknit, to mould
through mothers, to begin this work
of hardening our frames, to grow upwards
and fall free when six
from the top of the world
fracturing fear
and breaking in three places,
a school term cast in plaster scribbled on
in fruit-scented markers.

Under stretched-out bras and holy panties
there are other bones
written into perfumed diaries
that close with a heart-shaped lock
pickable with a paper clip.

Good bones make good backs
built to bend
under the weight of adolescence
and spring up
when the world becomes
ready for a woman.

Skin memory

1.

This scar, this one that frowns
on my middle finger was from a fallen reed
around the thatched roof lapas
at the high school grounds.
It absent-mindedly slashed through the skin
while I pretended to know everything
to impress the boy I would've died for at the time.
We rushed to the principal's office
bleeding-praying he wouldn't ask why we weren't in Maths.

2.

This dent, here on the back of my left hand,
happened outside the butchers' in Mayfair.
I helped my mother load packets of meat for a braai
into the boot of the car
and she shut the lid on it by mistake.
She had the same look in her eyes
from the night she left me
to marry my first stepfather.
Daddy had been dead three years
and I knew nothing of this man.

3.

Just under my right cheekbone, you can't see a scar.
But sometimes in the middle of a crowd there is
the throb of hot purple flush, a fleeting shame
covered in fleshy pigments and time.
Only I see it now as a stretch-mark,
a wavy silver strand from when I outgrew you.

Secret

We were eight when you made me
hold your secret squeezing
my fingers around it
until our joints fused
and skin knitted. I still hold
your secret
in my open palm.

I have not seen you in twelve years
but I hear you're a good mother.
Should we ever meet somewhere
I want to ask if you've taught
your children to shatter
the secrets in their fists over
men in sweet shops who touch them.

Plaits

We fail little girls by not
presenting them
with the alternatives. Think
of the waste that is a plait
 pulled and
 oiled and
love-in-tokyo'd.
God gave us the freedom
to use scissors. I could have been
as free as Abdul across the road.

Soundtracks

I used to find my way to infant sleep
on the shoulders of my mother's lullabies
songs made up from stitches of Shahaadah
her AllahuAllahu wound
around the thumb in my mouth.

Our car rides tread on Tracy Chapman,
Dolly Parton and the back
of a Buffalo Soldier.
We'd sing along but soon my pre-teen fingers
bore deep into my ears. A musical mother
at that age is embarrassing.
We couldn't agree on the top 40,
the soundtrack to my life
was her harried harpy noise.
That's when we switched off the radio.

But those silent years
became as good as sandpaper
a slow sloughing, a softening
of both our notes, and again I saw
the wisdom behind her Wailers.

In my throat, my mother's voice has grown
and it is smooth and resonant.

The hairdresser in Germiston

I remember when
that hairdresser in Germiston
told my mother "We don't cut Indian hair."
I didn't know that my toddler curls
required such specialised expertise
and thought her scissors quite strange
although her words were too sharp for my mother
who told her: we are going to put
a bomb in your shop.
I remember us walking out and now
that I think back to it, we had already.

Kisses

I remember the first time. The awkward insistence
the disappointment no one writes about
squashed against a cold car
next to the track field at Wits
while everyone else crammed for exams.
Let me tell you something, don't kiss anyone
because you want to get it over with. That type of kiss
you never get over.

The second one was more considerate.
He'd had lots of practice. That should have been a clue.
It cost R20 to buy the silence of the maid
hovering close to the couch,
cleaning while we clinched.

The third kiss I gave was cruel. It was only
to prove I felt nothing for him
at his cousin's wedding in the pitch
of the car park where no one could see.
In that darkness I felt myself grow ugly.

And then the one who kissed me to tell me it was over.
His tongue sliced me into ribbons
and left me clotting in the seat
of an empty movie theatre.

Morning

Before the birds
is the ebb-less tide
of the highway.
I am just far enough away
for the sound to be pleasant
swathed in goose down
Egyptian cotton and
electric blankets
close to the hoarseness of the hadedas
and the twisty calls of a songbird
I cannot name.

The day is just about to glow.
The air is still singed
from Friday's fire on the ridge.
The lightest of its smoke
crept through our windows,
left threads of ash on the sills
its incense caught in the curtains.
Men are arriving for morning prayers
at the mosque across the road.

Polycystic

Our house is not child-friendly.
Electric menaces jut out
of the walls, perfectly sized
for little poking fingers.
Our coffee table is violent.
The bookcase waits
to bury something.
The gynae points out on her monitor
clusters of cysts. Even my ovaries
aren't child-friendly.
On her screen I can see the ghosts
of bad-days, the offspring of troubled hormones,
clustering like fruit
disallowing any real life
to root.
In our house the steps to the garage
are dark and gateless.

Marriage

Be patient.

As you
must be
with pomegranates.

The good jewels
stick.

Membranes
are finicky.

But do
take the time.

Arabic lessons in Egypt

At a masjid in Madinat Nasr
just before Maghrib
I find Jidatee with her nose
in His signs while a metronome
of bone on bone
keeps time
with each fatha
with each kasra
she breathes, those knees creak
as much as the scuffed plastic
of the chair under them.
She's not really my grandmother
I hear only one word out of her hundred.
Ana la atakalam arabiyya the guidebook told me to say.
Ana talibah, min junooob iffrikiya was from today's class lesson.
Jidatee, who's not really my jidatee
fingers the dark cloth of my jacket
before pointing to my skin trying to ask:
South Africa but how, you are not black?
Ummi's ummi's ummi min Hindeeyah I stumble
I haven't yet learnt the word for great-grandmother
Jidatee brings her finger to her forehead
makes a little circle with it in the middle
La, la, Muslim I say
sounds a bit like a song.
We laugh before we pray.
When I return home to the real jidatee,
I tell her the Arabic words for jam, love and need
are the same ones in Gujarati
and that her asking God to keep her safe
from deprivation in her old age
was a prayer already made
by a woman in a mosque in Cairo.

Madinat Nasr – a suburb in Cairo
maghrib - the sunset prayer
jidatee – my grandmother
fatha - grammatical mark
kasra - grammatical mark
ana la atakalam arabiyya - I don't speak Arabic
ana talibah, min junooob iffrikiya - I am a student from South Africa
ummi - my mother
min Hindeeya - from India
la la - no, no

Poetic logic

I am told
the ancient Chinese
plucked their poems
from the air.

I have seen boxers
improve their grip
plunging their hands
into buckets of sand.

My palms are soft
my fingers without tack
but I can feel poems
floating around me
just whispers out of grasp.

I look for the spaces
to reach into, to pull
at something to hold fast onto
like these fistfuls of grains
from fields of air.

Tangier

Eleven hours
on the train to Tangier
reluctantly asleep within
the queer intimacy
of strangers
breathing deep
and softly farting.
On the balcony
of the guest house
sea and sunlight
bake the scent of detergent
and frying fish into
our socks and underwear.
I look towards Spain
with tourist eyes
unlike the boy on the boulder
on the beach
gazing out.

Two

Prayers

my hands
are not big enough
to grasp
these prayers
my tongue
not loose enough
to utter them
either.

My husband whose

after André Breton

My husband whose arms are furry granite
Whose island hands can lift us both out of the sea
My husband whose mind is flint and flowing lava
Whose faith is the dam against the rapids
Whose mouth is a pool under pink-gold twilight
My husband whose mouth is duck-feather down
My husband whose smile is the blue moon
Whose smile is the Easter flowers in the veld
Whose smile is neon on the Ponte tower
My husband whose belly is a cottoned nest
Whose belly is the cool spot under a pillow in December
My husband whose legs are assegais
Whose legs are maharajahs
My husband who is a fresh horizon on a static sea
My husband who is a sudden star
My husband in whose eyes are all seven heavens
My husband who is still new to me

God

I seek you out
in the cradles of hands
between the creased ditches
and the padded mounds.

My thumbs are search parties
covered in prophets' ink
rubbing through the pile
on a prayer mat .

In a palmful of Jo'burg snow
I am again a child
who sees you clearly.

Farewell

Before day draws the strings together
sealing itself into a pocket
there is a moment when the sun
is softer than it will ever be.
This is when I think of you,
in the hopeful light,
before the dark shrouds love.
In this slipping away
there is nothing of your warmth
just grey listlessness,
a slow closing of lids.

Waiting

The oxygen machine is the only thing breathing,
its chest-falls humming deeper
than the murmur of prayers
and the woman on the bed does not move.

How will they know when she's gone?
Who will lean in with a discreet hand
to stroke a cheek but really
feel for warm breath dampening the skin?

I do not know her well, but here we are
in familial duty, waiting for her to die.

She's lived her pious years
and now her grandchildren hold her soft-veined hands
reciting verses committed to memory,
verses I don't fully understand,
but read along, moving my lips
making these sounds -
their own supplication.

I'm told every utter
adds reward to my afterlife.

Building palaces in paradise
on my foundations of ignorance -
does God want that in a tenant?

My own prayers are strange
collages to this God I've neglected
but I pray she goes where she wants to,
where she deserves to go;
that I go where I need to,
towards a truth I can hold.

The diet

every night it is a count
100 calories in that banana
250 in that soup
who knew food could be so numerical
every night I weigh up
how much I'll be worth
in the end

Sink

When I first heard of the bombs
I had just learnt how to float on my back
to trust the depths
be buoyant in friendly waters

And then the news at the poolside
the live packaged headlines
of the limbless and the bloodied
the dark of the world heavy

I sank under the surface
the breath all gone from me
grateful for deafening water
I closed my eyes.

My grandmother's prayers

She prays for the children unborn to me;
bachaa who will cling to my sleeves and heart.
Her hands reach out
to a world of troubled people
she's seen on the news.
She prays in choruses
loops of litanies
beseeching for my *bachaa*
and people in Palestine
and for her legs to uncurve and stride again.
When I listen in, I sing along
because I don't want her to feel any more pain.
God just has to listen to this old woman
praying for all on His earth and in her heart,
where she holds on to the memories of my grandfather
and the son she can't speak to.

I am a sound

I have made peace
with the misspellings of my name.
But let's start getting the sound right.

Begin with a slow hiss, but not menacing,
 like steam just coming into its own
followed by *aa*;
 like a sudden realisation
form the *le*;
 flick the tip of the tongue out from behind the enamel of the top teeth
finish with *ha*,
 like a slow discovery.

Sajdah

Prostration in the five daily Muslim prayers

I wrap
knees to chest
collapse elbows
bend wrists
tape the forehead to the ground
and unwrap myself
to rise
and rise
to fold again
exchanging gifts
with God.

Paper clips

I bent three paper clips
to look like abstract forms in prayer.
My hands moulded their pliancy
into poses of submission.
It was a godly act I suppose
in shaping these wires
I found the acceptance
of my own form.

Conversations with my cysts

I have a friend who hangs well-meaning crystals
around the angels on her shoulders
and she tells me I must speak to my cysts,
that I must tell them I love them
and like the children they displace
they will soon know enough
to let me go.

I can't say I feel that much for these sacs of fluid in my ovaries
except that they are a kind of baggage
and the closest I get to dialogue is a mental image
of bubble wrap being popped for the stress.

How does one articulate with cysts, stupid
in their vagaries, and ask when did the salt of my eyes
migrate to a space so deep inside?

I place my hands over the skin where I think they lie
and in crouched awkward akimbo I begin
to lecture, not converse, because despite the research
on sugar and being sedentary
there was no invitation to squat in me.

My earliest memory

I have just eaten an ant.

My milk teeth deftly separate
its head from its rest.

It tastes sharp and tinny
on my tongue, is the beginning of blood.

Labour

For too long I have kept
the curtains closed and now
the drapes have begun breathing
in short quiet tracks, the inhale
exhale of their labour
marking up the dust scratching
millimetres onto the floor towards me.
This is how it is with things you avoid,
they flourish at the margins.
It is time to part the curtains,
I must begin this work.

The apartment

I've never met the neighbours
their lives just leak through the walls
slipping in through the window
along with the theme from Braveheart
and the colicky baby
pee finding porcelain
two flushes
a cough some guitar chords
and canned laughter bubbling under the paint.

Earthquake

I woke at 3AM
to the windows beating
against my chest
the bricks shifting
under my rib cage.
It was the earth moving
just a little.
I lay there out of dream
without revelation.
Just a body acted upon
by an external force.

Learning to pray

When I was a child, we learnt things off by heart.
Private angels worked just under the skin of our chests,
neatly scratching in prompts on the pulsing tissue.
In the afternoons at madressah, we prayed
by the sound from these engraved organs,
repeating after the moulana new Arabic letters
that came from different parts of our throats.
It was important to not mix them up, he warned, you could
be saying Dog when you meant Heart.
Not that we were taught the meanings of the words, just the subtleties
of the chant and that was enough magic for a child.
When talking to God became more than singing, and the mind
left nothing to chance, not even wonder,
I looked again into my heart and touched
those places in my throat and I knew,
that all along, the prayers were really poems.

Forgiveness

We covered my grandfather in autumn
soil, my uncle waters it on the holy days.
He is still waiting for something to sprout.

My father's tumour

The herbalist told my mother to put a pumpkin
on the roof of our house, not just any gourd,
but one that had been prayed upon, a vegetable effigy
of the thing in my father's brain.
You will see it shrink, he said, and your husband will get better.
So on went the pumpkin and the chemotherapy,
My father lost his hair, his sense of time,
and with each day in the sun, the pumpkin changed colours,
never rotting, hardening into a lumpy stone on our roof,
and at some point it just rolled off. In an unrelated event,
my father died from complications with his cancer.

I am ready now

I am ready for you child.
We are building your house.
The skins have been oiled to stretch
for you, the breasts are at the ready,
their vanities packed away in the lingerie drawer.
I am ready for your maps, for the silver borders
you will paint across belly and back.
I am ready for your words and the recipes
you'll teach my grandchildren.
I have meal plans and itineraries,
we will visit museums.
You will learn to read music
or whatever you want.
I have blocks for your cities
and paint for your worlds.
I have cleared a space in my mind, child,
in my schedule and in my heart.
We are framing your memories.
We are waiting.