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Ghazals

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MELISSA STEPHENSON

GHAZALS

I

Sitting under an elm during the first snow
I wanted to freeze there, like everything else.

I dare you to stand like a tree in warm spring rain
and keep from melting, like everything else.

When I die, cut off my fingers and rub them lightly
over your body so I can pretend that I loved someone.

A deer in the woods runs to the river for a drink
and doesn't stop to see her mother's face reflected.

When I was young I wanted to grow a straight spine,
keep my family in a house with marble floors.

I keep summer wrapped in a piece of linen
I can turn over and over like a story or a curse.

II

Some songs are for singing and some songs are
for crying
and what do I do with those songs only my body
remembers?

Somewhere in Alaska my childhood friend Celeste is
sleeping.
Celestina, ma cherie, you never told anyone about the
closet.

I gathered arrowheads with my grandfather once and
had nightmares of his wrinkling skin for years after
ward.

On the news I saw a mother turn into a ghost
for her six year old son, Jeremy who went to the water.

All things flow cold or warm. My father was never
very good
with books, but taught me how to read a river.

Winter lowers a white hand, black ice all the way to
Polson.

One Sunday drive and mother would never have to say
“suicide.”

III

Bent over the wood stove in winter, she throws on
another log,
face cast down to cracked wood floors. She smiles
tonight.

There's a star in the sky that's dead and a distance inside
even this bottle can't mend. Wild wild wild turkey.

A woman with wrists thin as stems sews a corduroy
dress,
each stitch, a name she wears for warmth.

Tell me a story that will bring dear Heloise to life,
make Abelard a man and I'll tell you a love story.

I have an offering for my life, two grouse in a fine glaze

and an old truck that can't run far enough.

On the highway in Wyoming I started to believe
blue was the only color I'd ever know.

IV

On a street corner at night, a man in a hard-hat
preaches religion in a language no one can understand.

I stare at the sky and try to memorize the color of
storms
so I will know them when they come again.

In a cemetery under the new moon I recited dead
poems
by a dead poet to dead people I had not known.

Night grows longer and covers us all like a cold
blanket.
Curled inside, dreams thicken in spaces that once held
sleep.

In the lake last spring, two men drown in a homemade
submarine.
"Mayday" I cried, standing on the bank in white
sun.

My grandma was hit by lightning, my uncle a tractor,
brother
in jail and I'm caught in the branches of an oak at
twilight.

V

I want to go to Arizona to see a cactus or eat enough
Mexican food to give my eyes a reason to water.

In the desert, they say,
there are women who can drink sand like wine.

One day my parents will close their eyes to sleep
and not come back.

My brother believes I write songs for him.
He has twenty tattoos that tell better stories.

A long rain, then snow. Hard snow, and rain.
When I am fifty I hope to birth rabbits from hats.

In the barn, a cold light burned all night and said
“Father found two good things: kerosene and a flask.”