Key to the fire [poems]

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There's a strange over-growing of my skin.
It began with the feet and has threatened both ankles.
I believe my leg is in danger.
At any time I expect an ambush.
The eventual siege of my vital veins and womb could keep me from my body forever.

Let me explain:
I have never known jealousy.
I came of good stock and there was love.
I said "sunny little beaches, porch-lit-porches, dip of roofs, house to house,"
and they fattened my hand.

There's a future going out or coming in.
No medicine will do.
Each night in the bedroom my footfalls grow mute, tied up with some secret.

There must have been reasons.
Was a window left open?
Did a garden grow untended by that long lovely sea?
Perhaps my mother slept too soundly with the memory of my birth and no one yelled "stop!"
Perhaps as a girl I touched myself too often,
each part of my body infecting some other.

Ten years old, in the dark weedy spot
where garage meets fence,
to think that it all started here,
here, where I held myself and said,
"all the fame and berries of life."
Sunday, the day of desertion. Cars hum away
in the blue heat toward picnics and playgrounds,
redwood tables where families gather
with their own kind. I turn to the window
for signs of visitors, good luck in footsteps.

I've prepared for a gathering of one.
My guest, just rounding the corner, stands alone
at the curb, a twig of a girl, a feathery branch
in my image, all pinched in the chin,
a scattering of lentils by her child shoes.

There is just a boulevard between us.
I wave. She waves. Friends in a world of friends.
My mouth opens for the name, my hand
for the plate of sweets. I almost reach the door.
It is then the drone of a jet interrupts,
my invitation garbled, a voice that says
"Come swing in the belly of my hammock,"
dropped in a soundless thump to the windowsill.

The slim legs dissolve queerly as always,
the knowing eyes turned away from the kind I am.
The whole child is soon tucked safely behind a tree
or under a porch, hand cupped around the arch
of her foot like a dog in the circle of itself.
Tonight a curtain moves in the empty house.

My one dish is washed, sheets turned back and waiting.

Sunday, the day of brothers. There is no closet filled with elf shoes, no disappearing cup of milk.

The esplanade deserted, the suburbs will not shimmer their aquamarines. I alone

spread blankets for the dog I never owned,

my hammock warm for the only thing missed.
You can imagine the boy, just a shy wren
on some fleshy knee. One day he looked at that knee
and sent a shiver up it. Good mother, good breasts,
the boy with sea-level eyes. That year he saw
his adolescence in a bit of dirt and spat there.
He knows he will be taken out by fish.
He never learned to swim.

He is, of course, doomed. There are the photographs,
there are those indisputable accounts.
You can see it's not right, the hot day whispering back
"war" in the ear, a three-cornered blade.
It must have been that a page had just turned
and some illegible town spun around with it
like a strange tail. Or that a gate closed
on the mystery they would never solve
in any settlement, ever.

When it's done, there are still two mainlands
and a few bloodied ships. He hopes they will not dig him up
in Paris and they do. Sailors file past the tomb
with their own watery doubts and someone says,
"leave him to the worms." To look back now
is to see the sun enter everything like an ocean,
to find the snail spinning oddly in the delicate boat
of a paperweight. Bad musk comes from the ground.
They say it rises up from lead coffins,
out of alcohol and straw.

So let him wait politely for the flag,
and leave that tiny spot of blood
on the button of his shoe. It's too late;
the widows and their dead, the house full of orphans,
they're already here. They have gathered in crowds
at the dock and looked in. Too late again, the lid's down.
Let him wait for the light tap, for the tune.
They could have been our shadows,
joining one to the other on the surface
of the green pool. Perhaps two manatees,
two underwater orphans, loved there.

Joining one to the other on the surface,
those shapes so familiar we acquired them,
two underwater orphans loved there.
We were stubborn, looking on.

Those shapes so familiar we acquired them
as the water rose in little eddies warning.
We were stubborn, looking on
when the light had failed.

So the water rose in little eddies of warning,
as if to say, *There is no place for envy*
*when the light has failed.*
They could have been our shadows.
On the weak side of Notre Dame,
the spidery one with those hopeless
buttresses, the tour group is near tears.
You and I huddle among them, confused
and sympathetic for sad Europe,
Europe the tomb unjustly darkened.

It was just queer luck our mauve-skinned guide
erupted with those call to arms songs.
They were notes from heaven. They touched us
in the moonglow of the river, in Paris
of the lean windows and narrow futures,
the city of light without any.

Queer, too, our desire at that instant,
when you pressed the subway ticket into my palm
like a love note and my rabbit-heart lifted
right there in the middle of France
and her multiple seasons, her miracle fields
blackened by crows in great sexual numbers.

(The elevator pops open in surprise
on the upper étage, ten tourist eyes
blinking. Giddy with dark apartments,
the hush of candles and stopped traffic,
we skip past them up the stairs
to a wonderful door. Outside,
the cathedral slips into darkness
with each electric second.
Vive la France! Two American moans
have escaped the bedroom.
Vive l'amour! A tangle of angels
hovers between us at the moment
of moments, mouth to breast,
repeating our origins: two, two.)
When Gail fell under the cabin we took it as a sign. Our snow shoes had been locked up tight behind the lodge desk. The slopes were empty, the gondola still. The mountains leaned down upon us, their coats too big for anyone else.

It was before the sun and after the moon. We laughed, and called into the snowy hole she'd left, "Winter fox, what are you doing there in your den of dirt beneath the white quilt?"

"I've found the wall!" cried Gail, from under our feet. "I've found the shovel, the pick and the ax! I'm breaking through!"

We saw the trail of mounds she left, the fluttering scarf caught on a stone. We heard her buried singing. She didn't need us. There's no one left who hasn't stood alone in the bottomless snow and heard it caving in above them, hoping some ghostly miner will count an empty barrow and turn back.

Gail knew how it was. It was she who knocked
at the wall house, the snow oven against China.

We drank and waited. Once, we tapped the ground
to hear her cough. She had no choice but to come
back up where we weren't looking.
At the symphony
I often think
of the English horn
as the Sigmund Freud
trombone.
I believe its language
to be the lost tongue
of childhood, a disguise
to undo these nine violins
that have gathered in my ear
like a bevy of larks.

If remote is better
I know which notes
are honest
and which tell lies,
which ones hover
long after a musician
takes his measured half-steps
off stage.

In fact any listener
can distinguish
the voice of time
from a murder of ravens:
it is what falls to the ground.
Therefore,
in self-defense we cultivate lullaby from the noises in nests and avoid the fault-line of shells. The earth, too, has its little palsies. Tricked by the sudden tilt my hands draw lines that are chronic and mean, submit from the inside out.
Yesterday the drugs arrived.
Hunched under a single hot bulb
my enemies divide the uneven powder
between them, line by deadly line.
I wrestle with blindfolds and listen
for the muted tap-tapping of blade on glass,
refrigerator buzz, distant sirens.

I've met this solitude before.
I know the value of negotiation,
of trading sentiment for priceless
information when escape looks bleak
and the only place to run is back.
I, too, find moments of failsafe
when the world I woke in slips away.

Paper rustles without. To gain more time
I swallow the code and resort to whining.
But they have synchronized each pick-up
and delivery. They have braced their chairs
against each exit in the cardinal directions.
I'll tell them everything: the mystery
of the abandoned restaurant and what the safe
contains, invisible thumbprints and the whole
puzzle of wax. I've imagined the headlines
proclaiming my rescue,— friends from the city,
a wet-eyed mayor. Sweet freedom! Sweet proximity!

I have almost wedged my message
into the bottle when their plan
to smuggle me out in a laundry bin
is revealed. One of us is bluffing.
From the darkroom I hear the slow approach
of demented wheels, and somewhere a wristwatch
is stilled to the diamond.
If four animals come,
one a badger, otters next,
the last a boar, and they
fall into step
just as you wake
by your window in Victoria
to look sleepily out
at your perfect elms,
the yard leaning its lazy green Y
toward the street, a sliver car
parked crookedly by the curb;
you will not yet have gathered
that order of thoughts tucked
sweetly under the pillow, or realized
the time, or remembered the shuttle flight
departing at two, or the bread
you must win and the kiss
that comes after. The four sets
of hoof-paws marching
up the walk, and the four sets
of otherly eyes, have come
to plunder your wakefulness.
Get up! Get up! The day waits
to be made history, to be stood
on its end, most vertical and wise,
full of tame children and many-sized dogs

who forever remember what you
always forget; if you lie down again
you'll lose your thumbs, your
terminal reason. Sleepy one,
you could be swimming for your life.
We in the cities believe firmly
in a stretch of land that is somewhere.
An island, perhaps, which for most
reaffirms an old promise. The years clatter
along after themselves, scaffolds going up
or down, and each one a futile puttering
in the basement, land of debts
and other snow.

Thus, the blue jetty, where simple
rules of trade evolved correctly, out
of nothing. Here the native bargains
with himself for the hundreds of coconuts
that are already his. It may be
he has bargained for generations, alone
on that beach, and alone counted
the muddy fruit he finds beside the high
Pacific. But surely he has gained.

We can see his eyes splinter in the sun,
and we know his words themselves
are the jungle and the foam. It is worth
our letting go, this greeting of the exact,
passing coconuts from our right hand
to our left, and pleased with the acquiring,
to lay them down in a circle before us,
so as not to turn around, and see the sand
going on.
It might have been the place, the empty streets
that changed my mind, the way the sky slouched
down behind that last hill and boredom
entranced the little town as it never had.
Or else it was the fact of finding money
on the street and bending over for the shiny
coins with no one looking. The guns
lay smartly in their rows.

The gunman needed to be introduced.
And me, I needed to squat in front
of his window knowingly, and he knowing
his weapons were the finest of their kind,
as salesman know such things about temptation
and weightlessness. There was nothing to fear.
We who've suffered ennui are obliged
to welcome the change. We have paid for it.

The civil among us contend; this is not
a real gun. I don't know from what pearly
planet it comes but I'll agree to send it back
before the confused give it meaning.
We have not yet discovered the trees,
and the leaves so indispensible to our seeing
of the trees. They are green. Are we happy now?
We have not yet searched the streets seriously
for explanations — any door, any window,
and in that glass the light between bodies.

It is said these things are more important
than the gun and its manners in the hand,
a story that disfigures all we know
of the nighttime, though I would give money,
real money, to touch it, and everywhere
to carry it, concealed or unconcealed
at times, as I pass by the unexplained
buildings of the city and into the alleys
that divide those buildings, to live there
with the needed gun and the flower
of its possibilities, its heaven,
its magnificence. No one questions this,
no one even looks,
In the kit of the stars, at the edge
of our world, you may find everything
you need to stay alive. I wish you well,
dear love, but clearly one of us must stay
behind, one to keep the apartment lights
on all night, so no shadows wander in.

Where you go you may discover an opening,
and inside, the wilderness of what is leafy
and overripe. In the far niche, a wild dog
might cower, and next to him a cache
of icons untouched by any visitor.
You may warm your feet in the old sand
from the old rocks, those that lay
defenseless and sifted at last.

You will speak to me somehow from these:
alitudes. You will come to me with secrets
like I found the deafening beauty of the wind
existing in a single seed, but we will
both misunderstand and feel ashamed.
It happens: the river winds away on its own
and you are left with a tree, a canteen,
a terrible bird.
You see, there could be trains. We could
step onto the avenue together at noon,
brush our hips happily against the bumpers
of parked cars, drink soda and try on shoes.
Here is our city: a blue building,
crowds holding pocket maps of coastlines
that fit in the hand. The makers and sellers
of everything we need are waiting.
They’ve offered their children, and their
children’s pennies and keys and balloons
and pebbles to make this island
we walk on eternal.

Here and there, the lights are coming.
Now, everywhere, they come more brilliantly
as the first of many faces appears
in the night-glass. And you, on your snowcloud
above them, have brought me this message:
Hush now, the river speaks. It tells
of luckier animals, the ones without voices,
the ones who have never walked upright
on the land, I am not jealous.
I have seen just one tanager
and there was no sign in it.
I conclude nothing on air
persuades. Such frantic revolution
of the wings, who could trust them?
I turn now to chemical friends --
headlights, neon -- that speck
of yellow blood begetting the flash.
I know the bird that pecks there,
dazed little astronomer, lives
for my own glow. We accept
our incandescences.

The rest is tyrannically black;
a regression of sunsets, failure
at midnight. The few remaining pinks
I mistake for sad discarded melons.
So at last, to erase each weary corner
of the sky, full of sagging bears,
a twisted web, those agile
unrepeatable twins.
I have this impish lamp to see by,
and I will get there.
If you're eager for a wife, neither simple
nor melancholy, whose rare private pains
come on quickly, disappear -- there's something
you should know. Another wedding is in store.

All day you are careful to touch no one.
You shrug, what's to lose, pressing sideways
through the turnstile. You've felt it only fair
to accept her if she's plain.

But tonight, when you first opened the door,
were you quite expecting something smaller,
browner, waiting there in the corner
by the stove? You must now be introduced.

Of course, you protest, you turn away,
as any man would, stepping shyly
around that spot on the walk where another
man has spit. But if you are satisfied
in theory, with less
in theory, with less; if you've spent one night
kneeling at the brief edge of self-respect
and whispered: my legs, my brow, incapable,
untrue, you will offer a hand to your guest.
See? It has hidden itself and its homeliness under your feet. And there, those little ones teasing at the wall, they have waited years for the bearing off of packages, schedules, brave ideas, and perhaps, one sacred book that you may not read until, by invitation of their spokesman, in the ceremony of drums, you have risen to meet them.
I let my dog out to watch the stars,
and wait for him to strain his rope
digging up the more important ground.
It is I who stand under the showers
of March, with nothing to measure them by,
only this rope that now goes limp.

I think: what of that constant -- a hundred years to a hundred stars, fractions to plot
the path of the heart as it veers around
this silent house, past the garden and beyond
the trellised earth? I would have held it,
but it's late. The maps are curling up
to sleep. *Goodbye friends*, I say.
They answer back at once, but that busy
scratching interrupts. I open. My dog
drops a squirrel on the step, pokes it
with his nose to keep the thing in place.
A trickle starts behind the head. Both ears
are gone. Where, exactly, did it fall?

Is that place marked with fur? And what,

had I listened, would those dead words mean
to me, as they fell, one by one, in the yard?
We have been all night with our books, reading parts out loud. The finer passages are marked and held up to the light. It is good to find them thick with miracles; green there is no cutting through, red there is no blotting dry.

It is near dawn. We watch the drowsy city from our window, suspicious of its elements: drawn shades, some empty cars, two early dogs. All night we have kept them away, reciting perfect endings, a litany of spells, disbelieving what’s out there is partner to what’s here.

Brief alleys. A flush of new arrivals at the curb. The early offices display their signs and we are just asleep. It is no secret; we believed every word. Night charmers, left to the applause of fine points, are missing these: the dawn, the fantasy of faces in that light, the colors stepping in, the colors stepping out.
For some time now we have been meaning to ask about the near-at-hand. It is said you plan an offering, to be received by us openly on a hill under the big oaks in sight of the sea. If so, give it.

We who are in pain have made connections in pain; a hand held, a lament passed on as a ring is passed quietly, though its brilliance is like a herald, and we adore that light; or as a pocket watch makes its way through the tidy mathematics of the years, and we cannot resist things that move. "Do not fear me," says the red insect, curious enough to drop intimately onto one's cufflink as the two of them strolled through an old city's park and spoke of love and were amazed. It passed between them anyway, drawn like the blood out of one into the other.

It is for ourselves we ask, and for those who came out of us as we came naked out of you, a legend so unimaginable it must be ridiculed. But it was you who first allowed us the fires and the lamps, the visible planets and stars, those glowing bits of earth and grass out of which this queerest explanation evolved as we sat watching them. The sun came up. And here it is again in our own
reasonable sky. How like us not to look up more often.

And yet, it is no longer your secrets we desire,
when once we thought the sea owned them jointly
with what turned above it. We did go out and we did
go down, but there was nothing like a secret anywhere.
So we are tired, and to say it is difficult to come asking
is not enough. Our speech hovers in a wilderness,
the words tossed angrily from their jealous orbit around you.

And then, at moments, they fall unexpectedly here and there,
into place, reminders of our reasons for coming
to your hill by the sea, and before that, for standing up
through centuries of open desert where no trees were,
and no memory of trees, and nothing green came to be touched,
as if in touching we could know what must be done in living
and living again. Some of us have cleared a space.
For some that work was all. We are here, in the open,
having not gone away. Here. Over here.
What will it be like, the day death comes?

-- Faiz Ahmed Faiz

When the sky begins as a bruise
    inevitable in rain
and I cannot find the lake
now teal now snow
    camouflaged by clouds
when no path leads there
    and none ever has and I was
drugged
to follow a trail of portents
    I did not recognize
    and did not invite
when
in this undertow this dusk
a pall of birds lifts nine tattered wings
    drops
dissolves
leaving the single bulb of a moon staring back
    no boat comes
    no sea at all
no open field to shake hands in
    no witness or cigarette
    I will know it at once
When I stand before the reversible door

    where the past appears
and is envied
and that transom and keyhole
    reveal
the night you welcomed me
differently
the taste of salt on your neck and sand
on your face
what we promised on that beach
to one another
then sleep is no longer the puzzle of sleep
    petal
    shell
do
do
but a tide to the hour
you lie down with me
and a key will turn in the lock
and I have only just arrived
and it is a miracle
to begin
and I know
    my last light out
    my voice undone
you are this perfect night
1

Now, it is time to get out of the house
where the thinking has been arduous.
Long months of it have brought the sulky tops
of these buildings up too often, too unchanged.
Today, we believe, is the great collection:
the apple, plum, and pear. Last night,
by the fire, we counted our opportunities
and promised not to miss them.

2

Day of ice. We settle in our chairs,
predicting one another. The carpet turns
to frost underfoot. It does not have to be ice.
Come close to me, love. We can make this street
our August-of-the-gods, going on. A curse
on those cut off by some cold door
behind which a man and woman are indifferent,
those fluting out of themselves
into the common boredom of exits
and endings. Let this road be water.

3

The yellow car makes time on the road
to Malibu. It turns like a brush fire
onto Sunset, where a devil’s gift of speed
makes it love, makes it yellow smoke.
in a canyon up Sunset, a tornado down Sunset,
the living radio blaring out all windows on Sunset.
Can you hear that blood song rise up Palisades,
a column of air in the hills? It ripples
a fern, a dog-eared paperback, the edge
of an aqua pool. It lifts a dress of flowers.
It moves a tan thigh in Hollywood,
where the sidestreets lead the willing
to the unforgettable. I look to you and you
to me and this is our key to the fire.
The last notes drift down in ashen pockets.
By noon the sea has let them settle in.
Touch me. I know you.

4

At the edge of the window, ice melts for us.
The snow that's left, hot to the touch.
We have made it to the top of a red sun
and it is all love, like a red apple
in the hand of the beloved. Don't go
before you know what I know. The car door
is open and the sand stretches out underfoot.
It is angel beauty, living glass.
What do they mean, our thoughts? Once,
we held a lifetime by the right rosy edge
and found it possible. We will be
catching up forever.
I will make great friends in my lifetime.
Each will set a bowl of seeds
on the table I come to out of hunger.
Each will take a place in my story
and the earth will result around it.

We will share the plums handed down
by others before us;
four directions, two tides, an ancient sun.
We will wear the pair of shoes walked in
for miles on great human beaches.

And just when we know we are in the world
a lifeboat will appear, a sign
that all abandoning is good and must recur.
We will neither get in nor stay out
and this will be called fear of the first.
We will dismiss it for a second chance.

And when I get out of my lonely body at last,
there will be no more plain blue elements
or accidental chunks of land.
The first thing I’ll telegraph back is this:
the past is lunacy,
no one here can tell it.