

ODE TO SWEARING

back home this is the worst profanity
what men use when they need to curse
each other to cut word i only know

as a curse *your mother's []*
your sister's mine in arabic the word
hisses traps the tongue between the teeth

spits a little word so similar to an english
kiss turned to venom by inflection said
like it is ugly site of shame birthplace

of the profane but what word can i use
to call my own how without disgrace
can i name my body my wounds

what i am saying is if asked in arabic
i couldn't tell you where i open

ODE TO SUGARING

golden drip of sugar wax pressed
hot against the skin fixes
to the film of hair coating my

every part torn away in time
with breath inhale [press] exhale
[uproot] blood suspended in the honey

in dark sweetness named only
in euphemism in slant حلوة
candy سكر بنات *girls' sugar*

as a girl i'd watch my mother
grandmother aunts by turn stirring
sugar into water set to boil & boil

liquid darkening to syrup to caramel
a bite plucked & kneaded little
confection for my child mouth

& the remainder poured into cans labeled
for ghee & empty tins of baby food
& plastic tubs reddened by by past spices

carried solemnly upstairs to the women
hitching skirts about their knees fine down
of hair making slow velvet of each body

PORTRAIT WITH MY MOTHER CALLING

my tiny unlined girl mother
my daughter my mother my girl
my fault my secrets my shame
would curl my mother's hennaed
hair to look like mine my
divorcee her loneliness mine
my life our life its smallness
mine my sin my red interior
my life outside my cities my
suitcase my ringing phone my
mother's voicemail *hi habiba*
you must be busy just wanted
to say hi my mother calling
just to talk calling once twice
from her parked car after work
when i am not home no one is
when i leave home again who
will talk to my mother who will
order dinner or cook enough for
two or heat old rice in the
microwave who will watch
television with my mother who
will ask about her day who will
gossip & laugh & boil water for
tea & coax her into eating dessert
who will love her who will tell her
i do when every day i didn't say
it when all i did was write it down

TRANSPORT

sour heat of the taxicab my thighs stuck by sweat to the leather
in the aperture of the sunless hours i sit scarved in the quiet
that i think will protect me i've spent days inside & untouched
by human noise & i forget the lesson in the old hurts
that mark my kneaded body & sometimes i do not even register
the hands that steer the vehicle the man from which they protrude

until his eyes in the mirror hook the light & i see his want thrusting
into the backseat a leer scraping like a fingernail along my skin
dumb prey shut in the cage with its wolf while his looking catalogs
my edible parts gleaming in stripes by the streetlights & hushed
in brief sanctuary by the dark & the silence i've gathered will throb
when he asks *is this where you live* & i work to keep my face unchanged

& maybe sometime in the dimming past i was still unmarked
my girlhood body unoccupied by warning its curiosity still free to extend
to a strange or recognized hand engineering an unfamiliar ache
before my shame became my native tongue became the sovereign of my flesh
i had my milkteeth smiled green as a seedling in photographs in their silence
i was pure & cloistered & i did not yet need to take inventory

for my body to feel like mine the driver's eyes displace me & leave behind a list
of ways i can be hurt of all the places i am a door its use unaltered
by my yes or no outside the streetlights change to a bridge's trusses & i say nothing
the car points into a borough not my own while i watch the distance swell
between my watching & the slab of girl fastened to the backseat useless little carcass
so faraway in her smallness & already going missing already bored by pain

& sometimes even those whose touch i choose who mean me only tenderness
will with their smell or voice or a trick of the light or the faintest touch of an index
finger trip the latch that lets me out to the space above my peeled & emptied rind
when i return i tell this to my lover who braids himself to me & makes me new
who takes into his mouth my broken name & in an exhale of smoke it emerges
weathered but complete & still mine until i remake myself from stillness

& drape myself in the life of a different girl rupture smoothed over like the noiseless
surface of a lake & in the taxi i look out to the evening's copper bruising
i give directions i push away his looking & feel my body reinflate
i dial my lover's voice the car points homeward & my old panic melts back into its archive
when he fills the backseat with sound & maybe i can be reborn
as a girl who does not go missing a girl someone will look for no longer the decorative husk

men make me with their want the quiet shrinks & i come unstuck from the leather
i come unstuck from my hurts pay my fare & debark the car untouched
my home protrudes like a lighthouse from the night i settle the body mine to register