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BEING DESIRED

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Ninos A. Oshaana

May 2012

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BEING DESIRED

by

Ninos A. Oshaana

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2012

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ABSTRACT

BEING DESIRED

by

Ninos A. Oshaana

Existential questions inspire or rather demand creative expression. The present collection of poems attempts to discern the way humanity is propelled forward through its insatiable hunger for meaning. At the core of this hunger is desire. We are beings who are born out of desire, who also desire and want to be desired. We want our matter to matter. Our desire is for a lasting identity. In short, we desire being. Within the three respective sections in this collection, these poems express the journey of discerning our ethnic, social, and spiritual identities along with their formation, disruption, and celebration.

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I am grateful to my beloved wife Tina and our beautiful children Natalie, Isaak and Mariam for their love, inspiration and support. This collection of poems is dedicated to the memory of my grandfather, the Assyrian poet, novelist and playwright Mishael Lazar Easa. *I met you in poems*.

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Preface

In his treatise on Christian mysticism, Olivier Clement describes all human desire as essentially "God's desire for us, to which all human (or to be exact divine-human) eros is seeking to respond" (22). Whether we speak of the materialistic or of the transcendent, human beings are adept at desire. Our desire perpetuates an insatiable hunger and this hunger is the only thing keeping us alive. It is not tragic irony but simply the reality of being finite in an infinitely unknowable cosmos. Without hunger there is no struggle to live; this hunger becomes a desire for being – an existential marathon of sorts. Reaching out with our hearts and minds we offer it money, creativity, accolades – but the city still starves us. We want our matter to matter. But in the face of impending death, what is the point? Within this paradox we shape our identities, carving them out of our childhood with a hammering of memories – at times beautiful and at times dark, colored with culture, societal expectations and a spiritual ladder which most of us just carry around, unused. When the work is done, we step back and consider ourselves, discerning the many shadows and imbalances in our personality, the stone in our heart which we still have not broken. At some point, we recognize that ultimately our desire is not for something but *someone*. Having found ourselves after a lifetime of searching may fill us with ecstasy or perhaps sheer terror and the burden of acknowledging our insignificance. We have been looking for the wrong person. Where is our mark – our brush stroke in the bigger picture? It is not the picture that matters but our vision. What does our vision of ourselves tell us? That we stand meaningless, terminal, without that someone in whom we may see our reflection, in which we may finally perceive our royal identity as children

of God and with it the sudden realization of the blinding grandeur and priceless beauty hidden under the cloak of our mortality. The poems in this collection engage these existential questions. They traverse through three spheres of identity, namely that of ethnic, social and spiritual; illustrating their unique formation, disruption and celebration.

These three spheres of identity overlap. At times, they are diametrically opposed and at other times they exist in harmony within the individual. They also interpolate within the inner and external environment against which we find ourselves measured, valued, and known. This dynamic is partly reflected within the narratives of the poems but also in the order the poems are presented or juxtaposed in their three respective groupings: *Being Desired*, *Alteration* and *Liberation*. For example, in "Coming Home," a misanthropic speaker comments on a society sedated by commercialism and desensitized to the realities of the outside world. As in other poems, I use irony, double-entendre, enjambment, and symbolic parallels to elicit deeper and alternate readings.

> I have to tell
> you that I'm losing
> something here
> like a set of keys
> like both legs.

The poem connects thematically with "War is," which is meant to be read as a list of dictionary entries for the word "war." The poem defines or redefines the meaning of the word and states unequivocally its new or true meaning, with a kind of ironic authenticity. Lines such as: "War is a balloon of needles stuck / To the roof of your mouth" as well as "War is a boot of blood where names are drowned" are examples of the way the poem employs absurd, horrific, and sardonic language to convey the absurdity and horror of

war in a caustic manner. In the case of the poem "Coming home," awareness of this reality drives the speaker to misanthropy because his society has been lulled into a kind of indifference and insensitivity. As such, "War is" may be seen as the thoughts of the same speaker.

As the above poems were influenced by the long and still continuing American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, they examine and identity the effects from a communal or social standpoint by portraying the speaker's alienation from these historical events. With these two wars being waged in the background, other poems delve deeper into the nuances of ethnic self-identity, specifically that of a Middle-Eastern man. "The Politically-Correct 21st Century Middle-Eastern Man" is a response to the phobias and stereotypes about Middle-Eastern men in a post-911 world and depicts an imaginary, "politically-correct" notion of how an ideal Middle-Eastern man might look and act. While speaking of him in the third-person, the poem reads like an instruction manual or how-to compendium. Some lines address the perceptions of others and how those perceptions affect his identity. The poem alludes to his feelings of awkwardness and daily sense of rejection by his American society. This causes him to reject and modify his inner sense of self, namely his ethnic identity, to appease his raging desire for acceptance, incorporation, approval and his need to be identified as an equal, as a human being, and not with a wanted poster.

> He likes to smile and nod a lot
> when boarding planes,
> talking big business on his phone,
> something about a Mercedes and the restaurant, thinking
> *Hello pale flight attendant; I'm not one of them.*
> *Don't spit in my tomato juice.*

Maybe he'll even cross himself
when everyone's looking.

In contrast, "Father's Hands" offers an intimate portrait of another, older Middle-Eastern man told from the perspective of his young son. The poem explores displacement, emasculation, and the power of love and honor among Middle-Eastern men to question the stereotypes of the juxtaposed poem.

Drops of soapy water would slide from his elbow,
land on my head as I stood tiptoed,
clutching the flooded white sink,
watching the razor race across his stone face,
to the whistle of Um Kalthoum or Farid El-Atrache,

Ragaa'ouni a'einaik el Ayam illi rahou
Your eyes took me back to my days that are gone

Songs of lovers lost,
hummed like mosaics,
between spit and the fingerprints of decisions.
Father's hands are trembling.

The image of a plane in the fourth stanza is not accidental but meant to connect with the plane in the previous poem, thereby indicating the contrast of this man's humility, genuine simplicity, and a deeply sensitive character with the image of a terrorist that has been cemented in many American minds. The poem also employs transliteration and translations of Arabic song lyrics to reveal beauty, humanity, and universal truth behind that which is foreign or exotic to Western ears. My goal is to celebrate the "exotic" by countering the tendencies of stereotypical associations and conclusions driven by post-colonial attitudes, which the literary critic, Edward Said, first exposed in his seminal work, *Orientalism*.

A third example of poems that interact on thematic levels are "Being Desired," "Salmon," and "Drivers Wanted." These poems explore a third sphere of identity, namely the existential question of what it means to have being and the often tumultuous and relentless hunger for this state of self-fulfillment or self-realization from a Christian point of view. In "Salmon," the speaker ponders his progress on the journey to a higher spiritual identity. Although this identity already exists within him, it remains elusive because of his fear of embracing it.

> The man inside of me
> cowers near the wall
> like a beaten dog,
> stealing glimpses at the glistening Gala
> where those who love and die
> have come to dance.

The dance of those who "love and die" is a metaphor for a joyous fulfillment that is found in *theosis*, an Orthodox Christian term, which denotes the ascent of human beings from a fallen, broken state to a reclamation and restoration of their true human nature – a participatory holiness – as originally intended by God. This idea is expressed through unusual and paradoxical associations, e.g. "sanctified fatalities," and "feathers kindling sun." Such a state is not to be initiated and enjoyed in the after-life, but rather in the present life and world as the opening stanza suggests. The second stanza emphasizes the celebration of this journey and the ultimate reward of "those who love and die" which the speaker can only watch from a distance. The word "die" is not referring to cessation of life but rather the demise of the old, fallen nature which St. Paul of Tarsus speaks of in 1 Corinthians 15:31 with the words: "I die daily." Therefore, the line: "Diminutives of immensity / they are – they are / being – being…" addresses multiple levels of meaning.

Those who work on the progress of this journey find themselves liberated, actualized and exalted by their finitude. As creatures made in the image and likeness of God, their finite state is paradoxically full of immeasurable glory and beauty. By discovering and acknowledging the source of this glory and beauty, they find self-actualization and identity, in other words, "they are." The repetition of "being" in this poem can be read as noun and verb, both of which elicit deeper meanings. They are "being" means that they have true being or identity and that they are also in a state of existence, of true life and living. The poem resolves with the last stanza and a reference to "the One who is," namely God, who as primordial being self-identifies himself simply yet profoundly as "I am" in the Old Testament (Exodus 3:14). The "One who is" is the only one with true "being" from whom human "beings" determine their being or the fullness of being. Other poems like "Driver's Wanted" and "Being Desired" explore similar themes of identity from a spiritual and existential standpoint. The present collection is divided into three general groupings reflecting the three above mentioned spheres of identity. Other poems in the collection touch on broader themes of culture, ethnicity and spirituality in one form or another.

Poets and writers from whom I have learned and found inspiration for this collection include the writings of Christian ascetics such as the hymns of the 4th century theologian-poet, Saint Ephrem the Syrian, and the mystical treatises of the 7th century monk Saint Isaak of Nineveh. Both were from the so-called Syriac/Semitic tradition. In contrast to the practice of explaining Christian theology via philosophical concepts of the Greeks, the ancient Semitic tradition of expressing theology through poetry, e.g. Psalms,

Proverbs, was maintained by the Syriac speaking churches located in Syria and Mesopotamia. Thus, Saint Ephrem used imagery, metaphor and double-entendre to write short couplets, called *memre,* to illustrate the mysteries of God and to teach Christian doctrine, virtues, etc. For example, in the following lines from *A Spiritual Psalter or Reflections on God*, Saint Ephrem wants to communicate the virtue of humility which he embodied in the wings of a bird that flies above the enemy.

> Love humility and you will never fall into the devil's snare, for, soaring on humility's swift wings you will always remain above the enemy's snares.

This idea of spiritual altitude is also communicated with the image of a tree. However, this tree image also employs a kind of metaphoric reversal: "height" is now associated with a vice.

> Arrogance is like a very tall but rotten tree. All of its branches are brittle and if someone climbs upon it, he immediately falls from the height he has attained.

I find this use of reversal of common association turned on its head a clever poetic technique. In a number of my poems, an image introduced in the first stanza is extended in some manner across the subsequent stanzas. However, what is extended is not the image itself but an attribute of it. This attribute is then used to construct another metaphor through a relevant image. For example, in "Drivers Wanted" there are three related words that depict a sphere in one form or another, in the opening stanza:

> Those eyes perimeter
> an eclipse of theology,
> black buttons,
> blinking like red lights
> where the timed trolley crosses lives,
> a ring in its throat,
> rumbling like a man,
> stuck in traffic of decision.

The recurring image in this poem is that of a sphere. The word "eyes" denotes vision, "perimeter" denotes an enclosure or restriction and "eclipse" denotes an overshadowing of, as the poem states, "theology," defined as knowledge or *logia* of *theos* or God. Other images of spheres elicit the metaphor of obstructed vision and the larger existential dilemma. Thus, "black buttons" simultaneously depict black eyes that are "buttoned" or closed, blind or hollow. Also, the "eye" image is extrapolated further with "blinking" but applied to the "red lights" of a trolley stop. The "bells" also "ring" which is another sphere image but now acts as an auditory element. In the subsequent stanzas, the spherical images continue with both similar and new connotations. The line "stuck in traffic" is meant to inject the image of a car, which will be then also further extrapolated and utilized in the subsequent stanzas. Beginning in the second stanza, the car's wipers are operating, implying that it's raining: "Wipers slap like conscience. / Who blurred our magnitude?" In this line, the implied rain is blurring the windshield, i.e., our vision of the sacredness and value of humanity. The vision metaphor is then continued in the subsequent lines with new associations. In the third stanza, I utilize attributes of additional spheres connected with the car metaphor to illustrate yet another metaphor:

> Those wheels, a perimeter or destiny,
> circle like ravenous ravens
> splash thirsting bystanders
> with that mirroring, vain water,
> where fish go to drown.

The "wheels" and "circle" are obvious spherical images that also hearken back to the earlier symbols. There are also implied or hidden spheres such as the puddle of water or mirror. Much of the meaning of the poem culminates in this stanza. The poem wants to

communicate that an obscured vision of humanity leads to self-worship which ultimately leads to self-destruction. Thus, the poem's nod to Narcissus and the irony of drowning fish.

My interest in communicating Christian themes, which are especially apparent in poems like "Drivers Wanted" and "Salmon," has also been influenced by popular 19th century Russian writers, in particular, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and his masterpiece *The Brothers Karamazov* and Leo Tolstoy's magnum opus, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*. Both authors were informed by Orthodox Christian spirituality and strove to communicate it through their creative work. For example, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky injects tenets of Eastern spirituality through dialogue. In the novel, Elder Zosima explains that the humbling of vanity and a proud will, through asceticism, results in true freedom:

> Obedience, fasting, and prayer are laughed at, yet they alone constitute the way to real and true freedom: I cut away my superfluous and unnecessary needs, through obedience I humble and chasten my vain and proud will, and thereby, with God's help, attain freedom of spirit, and with that, spiritual rejoicing!

In my poem, "Die before you Die," I express a similar idea to that which is expressed in "Salmon." The line, "You hav to die before you die in order not to die when you die," is taken from a placard at a monastery on Mount Athos, the spiritual center of Orthodox Christianity. This mantra speaks to the whole idea of spiritual ascent, freedom and immortality through the death of a self-serving will which, as illustrated in "Drivers Wanted," obstructs our vision of our true self and devalues creation.

While these works of prose inspired some of the themes I explore in my poetry, the poetic devices and techniques employed by other poets have also influenced my

poems. For example, the Wallace Stevens poem, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” inspired my poem “War is” in the way it offers a list or sequence of short phrases that illustrate definitions of war by use of specific images. The rhythm of Langston Hughes’ “Genius Child,” which reads almost like a nursery rhyme, when coupled with the poem’s dark tone, I found to be a powerful and unsettling poetic technique.

> This is a song for the genius child.
> Sing it softly, for the song is wild.
> Sing it softly as ever you can -
> Lest the song get out of hand.
>
> *Nobody loves a genius child.*

I try to achieve a similar effect in my poem “Nursery Rhyme.” The last two stanzas read:

> We still pay for your mistake
> Drunk with dreaming we will say
> Free us angels from your gate.
>
> Dip your finger in the lake
> Cool the burning of our day
> Woman born of man awake
> Free us angels from your gate.

Finally, in addition to the techniques of many other fine poets, I am especially drawn to Yusef Komunyakaa’s use of imagery along with his effective use of alliteration. For example, in poems like “The Whistle,” there are several lines where Komunyakaa enriches the vividness of the poem through the use of alliteration, making the narrative more palpable to the reader:

> The one o'clock bleat
> Burned sweat & salt into afternoon
> & the wheels within wheels
> Unlocked again, pulling rough boards

Into the plane's pneumatic grip.
Wild geese moved like a wedge
Between sky & sagebrush,
As Daddy pulled the cable
To the edge of the millpond
& sleepwalked cypress logs.
The day turned on its axle
& pyramids of russet sawdust
Formed under corrugated
Blowpipes fifty feet high.
The five o'clock whistle
Bellowed like a bull, controlling
Clocks on kitchen walls;
Women dabbed loud perfume
Behind their ears & set tables
Covered with flowered oilcloth.

Komunyakaa achieves a discernable staccato effect through the use of alliteration that seems to heighten the tension and euphony of the poem. In my poem "Being Desired," I use alliteration along with word play to achieve a similar effect:

People in pieces all over the street, the bombs fall
from billboards, the checking out of
check-out lanes, the glossy covering of
the naked, a chewable,
grape-flavored truth,
implosions of the hungering,
we merge like empty lanes.

The movie reel slaps the silent,
eyelids clapping for encore,
the final act - we came to see,
rides into the sunset,
on the back of a shopping cart,
wheels whistle a Byzantine dirge,
spinning the sacred.

Our desire for being is a desire to hold on to all the pieces of our identity which we carry around throughout our life, too afraid to let them go and too weary to put them down. The poems in this collection attempt to express this tension.

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Being Desired

Salmon

Wash yourself of yourself – Rumi

The man inside of me
cowers near the wall
like a beaten dog,
stealing glimpses of the glistening Gala
where those who love and die
have come to dance.

They are,
color and music, gasping
kaleidoscopes, salmons' exodus,
feathers kindling sun.

Diminutives of immensity,
they are – they are,
being – being.
Leaping like laughter
weeping like heroes do
when no one is looking.

They are,
fire and water
sanctified fatalities, earth
and stars, twirling
in divine darkness, reaching
for each other.

Inside them, the One
who is, they seek and find.

Drivers Wanted

Those eyes perimeter
an eclipse of theology,
black buttons, blinking
like red lights, where the timed
trolley crosses lives,
a ring in its throat,
rumbling like a man,
stuck in traffic of decision.

Wipers slap like conscience.
Who blurred our magnitude?
Glimmer streets, a mirage shivering,
dripping faces - painting stories
animated with strings
dangled from wrists
tied by humbled love,
the kind that dies for you.

Those wheels, a perimeter or destiny,
circle like ravenous ravens
splash thirsting bystanders
with that mirroring, vain water,
where fish go to drown.

The destination is coming to me,
an apparition unveiling fog
like the rabbit of my magic mind
it was there all along,
to fool the wise and the learned.

Being Desired

People in pieces all over the street, the bombs fall
from billboards, the checking out of
check-out lanes, the glossy covering of
the naked, a chewable,
grape-flavored truth,
implosions of the hungering,
we merge like empty lanes.

The movie reel slaps the silent,
eyelids clapping for encore,
the final act - we came to see,
rides into the sunset,
on the back of a shopping cart,
wheels whistle a Byzantine dirge,
spinning the sacred.

God the imminent,
like losing your wallet
that held all that mattered,
that held all that didn't,
the deathbed groaning under,
the weight of the unspoken,
the old coat we hung this morning,
will remind no one of nothing.

The pieces puzzle us, a mosaic
of desire for being, being desired.

Tell Me My Name

And I
a tumbling
universe beneath your chin,
cradled like sighing
tidal motion, your
blood fashions
me
Within pulsing walls, my
heart shelters beneath yours, your
voice my song, my
voice your love.

I don’t know our names
but I feel you
feel,
I taste your laughter
rushing like an avalanche
inside my budding body,
a flux of possibilities,
bent and bowing
to the promise of movement,
meaning, memory, music.
A little while longer
and you will see me
and I will share with you
the incomprehensible
love of God.

Die Before You Die

They put my friend in a box,
Dug a hole down deep,
left him
there.

I shook his hand a week
ago, talked about raising
kids, tomatoes and other oblivion.
And now they have planted him
in one of those community gardens,
where people visit memories.

There is nothing
mysterious about rotting
flesh. A universe
of electrons, sinews, fiber,
protein and water absolves
itself, crumbling
into the earth's embrace.

Flesh lures soul, Life
begs death. Flip the channel,
there's no more image
nor likeness left in this broadcast. You
had your chance to trace the fingerprints.

After the game, the king and the pawn,
go into the same box. You have to die
before you die in order not to die when you die.

He died, pushing away
the man in the boat
who drowns us.

The Dance

Come to the dance.
Your bones await you,
your song's crescendo
has broken new ground.
The sky is a river
that will not remember
your rippled face
among the passing clouds.

We have waited lifetimes
crouching
near that moment
when that gasping sun
drowns in your horizon
and your spirit rises
like the scent of petals
peeling from the center
the enormity of now.

I am creature
blinking beauty
stepping into
cosmic music
in a jungle
made of poses
shrouding my
skin disease.

Man raisin man
pinch this eternity
feel it sag like
wet pants
painful paintings
frame these faces
coloring a rainbow
with our trepidation
turning over stones
bleating for a name
in the book of life.

The dance is dancing
to an orchestra of being.

Waiting Leaves

Already the leaves
of faith had fallen,
when you heard me walking,
in the garden of my soul.
Though my feet trampled the flowers,
your love would raise them all.

That night, was
it not you painting
their parting in red and gold?
Like confetti they fell, fell as if
beckoned downward by some
unseen hand, holding a rake –
or a candle?

I had nothing
to put them in
no corner in which to gather
up a pyramid of prayers,
those millions of green ovals,
held up by millions of unseen arms,
trembling in the winds behind us,
in photographs of a picnic or the lake,
where we are smiling,
hiding the oval our mouth must wear,
when the season of letting go,
comes to be endured.

I left them there
and waited all winter
for you to come.

Adam

He awoke stained
by a scent, residual
from a time, he couldn’t recall.

“I don’t know,
the fruit of our second freedom,
within our bones we confined stars”

The taste of you
and all your sins and all of us
mingled with the dew of God’s love

I swallowed all that was
mistaken, void between us,
chances are you didn’t notice.

Are you

a kite
or the wind?

I am a string of thoughts.

Are you a door
or a knob?

I am longing and joy.

Are you a song
or an instrument?

I am desire and fear.

Are you a boat
or the sea?

I am Breath.

Are you a hand
or an eye?

I am temptation

Are you a sinner
or a saint?

I am being. Being.

Skydiving

Before you die
go skydiving
forgive clouds
their trickery
and like a boiling kettle
scream through the heavens
feel every sinking pound of you
vanish like mist.

Look down.
The earth is a genial brunette
heaving with possibilities
waiting to forget you.

Don’t believe me.

Mouth

Sleeping slug
smears from my roof,
slugs itself to sleep,
while thirty-two pallid stones
standing still guard, still
most are worn-out leaning
against one another
like Stonehenge

I've been whistling for centuries,
begging you to my shoulders
like a muted scarecrow
in harvested fields, A scattering
of ravens rage in my throat
these arms could stretch
horizons if only to embrace
your setting face, which I
have watched with
buttoned eyes, dying
with the sun

Open the door love
let in the cool of day, a wind
to untie the cloistering
curtains of courage.
Say a word and crush this life,
like ice cubes

Leftovers

There you are again.
Tick-tocking,
on your keyboard,
hunched over
like an abandoned
parrot. I'm watching nothing
on TV, trying to remember
the inside of your hands.

Dinner was leftovers,
Our life is leftovers,
Thinly sliced gestures
that keep the lights on.
Me folding your shirts.
You taking out the trash.
Like two department store clerks
after hours.

These are the after hours of love,
when everything is closed, the hours
of consequence, tick-tocking away
on your keyboard, while I
watch nothing, trying to say
this last I love you.

Stones

Our coffee-maker grumbles, at the hour
of our ritual. The family tree sheds
her hair. No one remembers why

in some sapphire river behind a star
a white stone bears a name fashioned
by years of yearning and the rain of repentance.

This morning we awake like stones
tossed out by the darkness.

Afternoon Cocoon (Kissing Judas)

I, the fallen, tangled
on spider's thread,
swaying in twilight's
last wind, ponder this
sticky skin-tight inheritance,
an heirloom I never deserved.

Consider, the only choice given,
the only wager earned: Tasting
the fleshy fruit of this cocoon
or kissing Judas in the tomb.

Perhaps this experiment will
simply crack, slip through, then flutter away,
a glimmering of defiant earth tones,
a dash of blue here, or maybe there,
then swallowed up by a hummingbird
hoarding up treasures for the last dance.

I have spent too much time,
in this, cruel hammock of thought,
the lethal vine of bitter truth.

Tomorrow, God willing, I will pluck a song
from the strings that bind me,
and celebrate the liturgy of Light.

My Thoughts and I

Dance on a cotton stage
While my heart and breath provide a waltz.

But ours is a wicked dance,
Lacking in any complimentary response,
Failing miserably in dynamic and muse,
Because we are both left-handed.

My thoughts and I
Rush into each other's arms
But fall short and crash to the ground.

Our stupid smiles try hard
To hide the mistake,
People only notice when we smile too much.
My thoughts and I never sold out a show.

My thoughts and I
Wage hideous war on each other
While all along we secretly pray for one another.

Our blood mingles and dissolves,
Leaving nothing but whiteness,
Producing nothing but air,
Planting nothing but grass seeds for a new battlefield.

Someday we may shake hands,
And hold each other with Prodigal essence,
And understand each other as though we were one,
And never again kiss each other with betraying lips,
My thoughts and I.

Blossom

Into dust
by light illumined
clothed in gilded
unraveling
dawn etches her freedom
like an ancient river
we were to drink from
and become.

Whose garden are you blossom to?
To whom do you belong?

Whose eyes is your beauty from?
From where did your breath fall?

At night we sleep between
anguish and wonder, rising with both.

Crown

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you
that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide.
(John 15:16)

Still learning
to be called
by that name
that will bend knees.
Denied by others,
he first denied himself,
sharing our weakness,
vulnerability so
he could vest us, wrap
us in the embrace
of His immortality.

It's a name I
often don't respond to when I
hear it called out
on the sidewalk,
at home – yesterday.
I am, somehow, to bear fruit,
and its not mine
but that of the vine,
this is why
it will never die.

I am a small, unconvincing
branch reaching for blessed ending,
in the struggle to bear fruit,
that I may crown the vine.

Gift

Because I loved
was loved I am
because you
tucked in my shirt
to keep cold out
cooled a spoonful
of our favorite soup
in the antique white
bowl we had
cracked along its horizon
in contours of lightning
like your eternal face.

Long the winter
hung around
our feet
its wait on our shoulders
no two scars look the same.

We found you
the hidden one clothed
with the swaddling clothes
of our disfigurement
wrapped like a last minute gift.

Hole

Washing my feet,
You called me friend,

Your feet, I nailed
to a tree.

What goodness from me
was not born of you?
What love held in me
was not first in you?

In me blood returns
to mud, bones sniff
for their roots,
greed and hunger
fills my mouth with cold,
hungry earth.

Only earth will satisfy
the holes in a man's face.

Your love is like the sun.
A violent love.

Ladder

The Kingdom of God is within you,
Dive into yourself, and there you will find
the ladder with which to ascend.

- Saint Isaak of Nineveh

The One who is
what we want
to become,
truly is
what we are, save
what weighs
us down
like a cross, borne

what we are,
save, what rages
within us,
universe or mustard seed.

Mother of God

Woman
giving life to Life.
Second Eve hiding
in her womb
Him whom paradise
cannot contain.
Virgin eternal,
gives birth to the Eternal.
Daughter of creation
becomes the mother of the Creator.
Princess of humanity
becomes the Queen of heaven.

Song of the Bridegroom

I am for you the blood of olives
that burns the quenching mystery.
I am in you the hollow valley
from which erupts the hidden sea.

I am for you the womb of heaven
that holds the fruit of barren life.
I am in you a sword of promise
that heals you in the unseen strife.

I am for you the hands of morning
that cover the face of the night.
I am in you a fount of mountains
from which the eagle drinks his flight.

I am for you the rain of freedom
that drums the fall of reckoning
I am in you the path of rainbow
from which returns the beginning.

I am for you the voice of sunlight
that whispers for the blossoming.
I am in you the song of color
which dances in the ears of spring.

I am for you the breath of nations
that rise and fall within your eyes
I am in you a thirsty river
that searches seas to find demise.

The Nardin Myrrh

A woman named Mary anoints Jesus with costly myrrh.
Jesus the Lord anoints humanity with his priceless blood.

The oil is poured out and fills the house with its fragrance.
His blood is poured out and fills the world with the Holy Spirit.

The anointment prepares him for death and burial.
His suffering sanctifies suffering.

His death anoints the mask of Death
and consecrates it as the face of Life.

God’s Poem

You, sweet child,
Are the poem of God.
He will not form you without meaning.
He hears the beating of your heart
And rhymes it with the song of the wave
His hand has measured the length of your design
And filled your eyes with divine imagery.
His holy word is personified through you,
And its hidden meaning revealed through the hearts of men.
You are the song of His first love
And the melody of His eternal grace.
You are the voice of His will,
And the instrument of his love.
Truly, he has raised you out of nothing
And written you with his blood

Incarnation

Walking to Jamaica Pond,
one after the day of the incarnation
I step into someone else's footprints,
a shorter man, imprinted in the snow,
to help me navigate, walk through,
my destination.

A roar of cars rush by me, jets
on wet, black asphalt.. Jamaica Pond
is frozen, its ripples frozen in time.
I arrive and see a swan bobbing
head first in the water, majestic,
like the Titanic. A lady in white
jogs by, eyes fixed, as if she were
running to save someone. A man runs
holding a dog leash and a plastic bag.

Seagulls are the only ones
that can tread on the sheets of ice
that cover the animated waves.
Another walks passed me,
a woman on a cell phone,
Oh good, good, she says.

A man in blue pants and yellow sweatshirt
looks at me half nervous,
maybe its my beard.
A black man mounts a sit-up bench,
working on his stereotype.

A couple walks – the man whispering in her ear,
This moment they will try to remember but won't.

I walk around the pond, thinking of palm trees,
foreign to this place as California.
A sign declares Jamaica Pond – a Boston Landmark
Others too leave their mark.
An ancient tree with two arms
across its chest, hieroglyphics: T.M + S.G
and I was here.

On the way back to the Holy Hill
the sidewalk is three feet deep,
I decide not to step into footprints
But walk on the street,
Against traffic, with a watchful eye – praying.

Tree

You stand, still.
The wind comes
to caress your falling face,
the rain to quench your tears,
the Sun to warm your bones,
and rob the flowers from your grave.

I yearn to become
like you – immovable
reaching for myself
in the heaven of my heart.

Rock

Something greater
than you must
move you, to build a house
or break or destroy.

In the grip of revolution
or invisibly, underground,
upon you I must build
this house of faith,
windows fronting heaven.

I carry you, my rock of faith,
like an anchor of truth
I cannot put down,
to rest a little while,
in cool earth,
something greater
than you must
lift you up again,
a greater love than mine,
must give you to me,
must help me hold you.

I hold you up
with my heart
for the world – a hammer.

Alteration

War

is carving I love you
into a baby's forehead

speaking with funerals.

War is a balloon of needles stuck
to the roof of your mouth,

demons playing footsie
under a blanket of souls.

War is the broken
toy you tried
to bury
in the
lawn.
Remember?

The lie you believe you believe.
forgetting your mother's name.

War is your enigma on parade,
the alphabet of sorrow.

Death in drag. The moments between day
and night when silence crushes a universe.

War is a boot of blood where names are drowned.

Coming home

In my country
we gargle blood
from silver nozzles
guzzle like frenzied
hummingbirds
blind ravenous
infants.

We pink plush
graze lush
lawns, praise
laws and burgers
and diamonds
and murders.

I have to tell
you that I'm losing
something here
like a set of keys,
like both legs.

It's just
war. Don't cry.
I will come home soon,
like an astronaut.
like a bomb.

Alteration

I found your crown, Nimrud,
on eBay for sixty-thousands shekels,
I didn’t buy it.
I was looking for a stone,
from the ziggurat of meaning, so I might
throw it at you, and laugh at your baffled face
laugh at our bewildered race of screams
and dreams we didn’t see coming.

Making gods is never easy. You built yourself
up too soon, brother. And indeed, there was time
for chypre and the sacrificed, to water your eyes,
And, yes, you might have wiped away that fool
gloating under your fancy hat, but like a smirking goat,
you dipped your insolent arrow, in a bucket of golden myrrh
and cooled blood, shot through a stuck-up cloud
pouring the kingdom of babble all over our naked minds.

The gods we make don’t talk back
they’re too busy fussing
with the stones in their hearts
that we placed there,
one on top of another,
like a pile of Jews.

Global Warning

Star unwanted billowing
murderous music
dripping galaxies
cracks invisible
melting humanity
purple popsicle
white car hood
skin on skull
desert terrain
an unearthed tomb

Superstar

What will they blame us for? Which convictions
By wiser men and their deranged children
Will hang us from *ex pede Herculem*?
You and I won't care so much in our absence.
For now, let's glow in our own brilliance.
Why turn back to watch your shadow darken?
We'll make gods and suck the ocean barren
And let our feelings numb our conscience.

Someday black wind will pass through your car,
Or hear your laughter in some usual place.
Don't worry. You won't feel a thing really.
I promise, you'll be a splendid superstar.
So make a nice photograph of your face,
They will need it for the documentary.

Invitation

Today your mouth goes dry
from remembrance, thirsty
like sand. “Life is a wound,”
your eyes tell me. I pretend
I don’t hear them,
but you see that I have.

If you wanted, we
could be children in the rain,
necks bent back, our faces
like flowers, opening to clouds,
or flaring as stars - arms inadequate,
squinting eyes, open mouth
missing God’s blessing.
Laughter would tell
me you can still feel.

Shattuck

It's where you go
when no one else wants you,
they say.
This red-brick factory
off Jamaica way,
the kink in Brookline's emerald necklace.

Hey, I gatshu,
slip a bag, in the chapel.
In the basement, walls the color
of cornbread, the demented,
the lonely, the broken,
the drugged-out, the prostitutes,
the illegals, the murderers,
the pedophiles,
the rapists
the thieves,
and you
hopping around like all is well.

Nursery Rhyme

Woman born of man awake
Garden dreams are locked away
Free us angels from your gate.

Songs are sweet that we will make
For the demons in your way
Woman born of man awake.

Papa burned you on a stake
We will sing and dance and pray
Free us angels from your gate.

Underneath your feet the snake
Curling ‘round to strike its prey
Woman born of man awake.

We still pay for your mistake
Drunk with dreaming we will say
Free us angels from your gate.

Dip your finger in the lake.
Cool the burning of our day.
Woman born of man awake,
Free us angels from your gate.

County Limo

Blue chairs,
torn rattling,
festooned by graffiti
substance sagging.

Road gray,
heads bobbing,
right-left symphony
a homeless mumbling.

Phlegmed cough,
piercing perfume
cake make-up setting
on faceless gloom.

Stop requested
brakes weeping
auto gates opened for
three beings leaving

Bobbing heads
bus of dreams
passengers pass
passing of peace.

Liberation

Father's Hands

These days his frame leans like Pisa,
but I remember Babylon behind his breath,
and glorious campaigns of blood, sweat and purple thumbs,
in his small room of a thousand and one inventions,
each hung abandoned like fragrance left unnoticed.
Father's hands are willing.

Drops of soapy water would slide from his elbow,
land on my head as I stood tiptoed,
clutching the flooded white sink,
watching the razor race across his stone face,
to the whistle of Um Kalthoum or Farid El-Atrache,

Ragaa'ouni a'einaik el Ayam illi rahou
Your eyes took me back to my days that are gone

Songs of lovers lost,
hummed like mosaics,
between spit and the fingerprints of decisions.
Father's hands are trembling.

In those days, we drank black tea
on white plastic chairs,
his fingers serenely pressing
golden walnuts into purple dates
like Nebuchadnezzar
on the banks of the Euphrates,
pointing up at the roar
of the 747 above us, marveling at its miracle.
Father's hands are hoping.

Hat eydak tiryah lilmoustahm eydaiyah
Bring your hands so that my hands will rest
in the touch of your hands.

Hands that betrayed defiant dreams,
writing a thousand and one scars,
faded roads to friends and lovers,
and the meaning of yesterday,
these hands clenched like unwanted flowers
and never conquered the glistening sea in his eyes.
Father's hands are yielding.

Liberation - Baghdad 2003

The day of liberation is at hand!
An old, and salty day. Children sing
forbidden songs from the balconies of Eden,
their fingers reach for once understandable clouds.
In our sedated avenue, *Allap* explodes.

But in another alley, behind the ancient Bazaar,
where watermelons and Pomegranates
gush red on the pale hood of a Volga,
L.N. returns from *al-Rashad*
to open the door of memories.

Her darting eyes search the tired walls of her former life for a part in liberation.
Just a small unclaimed portion, fraction,
where she can paint
in marooned lipstick
the still-life of serpents
with beer bottles and hairy fists.

“There's so much inside here I have to take some of it out and put it down somewhere or I will burst." she cries, striking the side of her head.
But the walls are shrinking, buckling
like a ruined dam of an unhinged life.

“They have turned me into a witch” she says, clenching
her thin hair. “They have made me horrible.”

The Butcher’s face hangs near the door.
“I am still here” she screams,
Feeding her Chaldean shoe into his smile.

The 21st Century Politically Correct Middle-Eastern Man

He likes to smile and nod a lot
when boarding planes,
talking big business on his phone,
something about a Mercedes and the restaurant, thinking
Hello pale flight attendant; I'm not one of them.
Don't spit in my tomato juice.
Maybe when everyone's looking
He'll even cross himself.

He'll buy a flag sticker and slap it on his bumper,
next to something about his other car.
In the supermarket he'll buy beer and hot dogs.
Maybe even a magazine about Golf.

On Friday nights he'll be in the bars,
patting backs, buying drinks.
Laughing about reality TV
and what he would do with a million dollars.
Maybe he'll even flirt with the waitress.

He'll opt for a goat-tee or soul patch,
never a full beard.
Baseball caps and beanies,
never skull caps.
Maybe even team jerseys.

At work he'll pronounce words carefully,
focusing on vowels, w's and s's
when recapping his weekend trip to Vegas.
Maybe he'll even show off his eagle tattoo.

He won't wear white, beige, brown, black or gray,
only politically-correct colors like mauve, yellow and baby blue.
He'll listen to alternative rock and take guitar lessons.
put highlights in his thinning hair.

He'll stay away from turmeric and curry,
preferring Wonder Bread instead of *lavash*,
beef stroganoff instead of *kabobs*,
potatoes instead of rice.
Chicken soup instead of *bushaala*.
donuts instead of *baklava*.

Ninevah

Under sand sleeps Ninevah.
under warm bones and unknown flags,
scarves, shoes and placentas.
A mighty slumber which no prophet,
no fear and no sacrifice can disturb.

The ground is moist in Ninevah,
the Tigris is bitter as wormwood.
Where you wore sackcloth for mercy,
ate ashes for love,
where you sank my infant heart
and lost your womb to dogs.

No one remembers you Ninevah.
no one remembers you.
Your headless bulls have folded their wings,
your glory sits in a glass.
Your children drink deep from your dark fate
and walk as guests in their land.

I still love you Ninevah.
I love your sleeping face, your alabaster smile.
The rise and fall of your virgin breast.
The days when we walked
through the orchards of Eden where
we found shelter beneath the Tree of Life.