

## REGARDING LITTLE FIRES

I stood in front of the church door  
waiting for the congregation  
to fly out like a swarm of bees.  
I tell you I could understand the strange  
tongues of the Pentecostals.  
Could translate the language of air  
as if the sun was the dimmest  
star below and the moon was not dead.  
I'm told we're beautiful things  
waiting to sink in an ocean  
of joyous blasphemy.  
A little kerosene ready  
to burst into almighty light.  
The church pamphlet  
instructs you to hum  
in our father's voice.  
You do not.  
We live in a world of ordinance,  
dangerous ordinance. So please  
hold onto my arm and I'll open  
the doors to the synagogue,  
lift the curtains to the temple,  
climb to the top of the mosque.  
And if I'm words, I'll fill  
your speech with tongues,  
deifying the insides

of your mouth.  
Now try speaking.  
Hum a little. Let me out.  
Do you see the centipedes living  
under the rug? Kneel to them.  
Curse the ones lingering above  
the carpet. I promise  
on your head I'll build a garland  
of rocks and trees.

## NIGHT IN MADINA

I had turned 25, had arrived in Madina,  
where I couldn't utter a logical phrase  
save a translation of hello through clotted breath.  
I spoke to a stranger. I couldn't say much  
but I could smoke. The stranger didn't eat much  
and she didn't dance  
and she didn't remove her plastered shoes  
and her neck wasn't a pipe screwed on by smoke  
her knees weren't scraped with dust either,  
I cannot say the same about her fingers.  
In the evening, the trees turned to ice  
and I stayed at the restaurant  
watching the cars  
and I didn't eat what I was given,  
banana, wine, something that was once alive in the sea.  
I can't remember what was said  
or why the stranger yawned. But as I sit on the balcony  
I wonder how I say to the breeze,  
I'm overwhelmed by movement.

## FRAGILE CRAFTS

People cling to the pole lines.  
People swim through the sea with the light  
of a torch or the moon.  
Before I go swimming at night  
there must be a full moon.  
And my skin is a shade of blue under the moonlight.  
And my skin is a shade of black under no light.

My mother said to me, I'm the corner of a cemented wall  
or a tiled bathroom. One of the two.  
I can't remember which, but on Monday I sat beside her

watched her hands  
as she detangled her braids.  
Her long fingers lost in the twisted wires  
like the visible spine of a crow.

Two days later the doctor opened my mother's head  
finding nothing but a bee sting.

I watch the moon break  
and slide down  
like a miscarriage.  
Tonight,  
there's no light in the sky.

## THE ALMOST LOVE POEM OF ELOISE AND KOFI

When Eloise tells Kofi she wants a divorce,  
he sits naked on the kitchen floor skinning  
an ox tongue to prepare Eloise's favorite dish.  
Blood trickles down his fingers onto the floor.  
This is not in my head, in my head the bruised  
organ is in the hands of Eloise and she almost  
loves Kofi. What a strange word, almost.  
I look at the rain clouds and they almost seem  
to stagger. When did I last have a drink?  
My stomach feels heavy and a urinous smell  
stays where Kofi sits naked. So what if Eloise  
wants a divorce? She is made of stubbornness.  
Kofi is not thinking about the ox as he marinates  
its tongue in a basin of tomato juice. Eloise stands  
there, insisting on a divorce as the blood mixes  
into the tomato juice. A pause. Kofi has a chance  
to recover his patience and pull it over himself.  
They have many times pressed their bodies together  
and peeled them apart—elation. Love is a wretched,  
wretched thing. Eloise wishes Kofi would put down  
the tongue and say something.

## PROGENY OF WOUNDS

I am as dark as my grandfather  
and I understand why my father knelt  
to my height when he began to beat me.  
His voice touched my jaw as he muttered:  
Can you remember where it hurts?  
Now I understand pain  
as a question of perfection;  
it must be carried through.  
It frightens me, the mind we have  
for wounding one another.  
I was made in Kumasi, Ghana.  
Something leads me back.  
A breeze, a past beating, a floating balloon.  
Maybe I have not loved as much  
as a man should.  
In Kumasi, my grandfather  
goes to the lake to search for birds.  
What did he need among the birds?  
Here in New Orleans, I write down  
my grandfather's name on a music sheet.  
I continue to conspire with God  
to keep my grandfather breathing  
long enough to say:  
do you still remember where it hurts?