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NOTES ON RITUAL AS HAUNTING // RITUAL AS HEALING

Let me start with my body. My body on an island with its wrists cut off. I am talking about the island's wrists. My body still has them, they hang at its sides. My body has forgotten their use, the gentle movement of a flick, a stretch, to reach toward something, and touch it.

My body is in quarantine.

≈

My body in quarantine is:

stranded

/

confused about its refusal of the phone as a line of connection

/

homesick for the cradle of my mother's kheer

/

confused that in the promise of a phone call, homesickness darkens like burnt raisins

≈

My body has forgotten how to create connection, that is, weave garlands, cross-stitch, wet rope - something that joins the borders of itself to where it came from.

Being stranded makes questions of origin pulse more urgently.

If I came from somewhere else, I must eventually, travel onwards, must eventually, escape, must eventually, return.

Whose borders/body did I come from?

≈

My mother's body is at our ancestral plantation, smearing the cream of thick milk onto her face. At her feet, neelam mangoes measure the season with their flesh. Know to chart each week's turn by their sugaring. She doesn't move towards them; they don't have the right spots yet. She begins to draw well-water for the pickling.

Late afternoon, I have awakened from my nap in the middle of the bath; mostly spilling. The edges are rusted, and the smell of moss clings to the sides. I slowly sink into it; my body could be a filling bucket.

DEAR MAMA,

we break ____ new rain ____ thick curried and split ____.
 ____ of me is wrapped around ____ of you.
 please can you say you love ____.
 tapestry of ____ thread. you always ____ to sew.
 I forgive ____ for when we danced, my hair streaking
 your ____.
 all that old cobweb, weaving ____, slow un-scalp.
 ____ am still your good-girl. one dearest ____.
 ____ have always had that woman-habit.
 gathering ____, tired, and shame-drip.
 last reminder of your ____ love, your hard ____.
 don't tally our sin into the ____.
 ____ of me is still wrapped around ____ of you.
 please can you say ____ love me.
 the thread runs ____ and I can't find the basket.

≈

Here is the crackling static of bad internet. Here is the cracked phone screen, the unbooked plane ticket, the white island with each vein being slowly drained. Here, I am always writing imaginary conversations between my mother and myself.

How are you? Did you eat? You are fine. You are fine.

The body knows the mirage of language on the tongue's desert. How the words sometimes fall into the drying pit of their centres. There is no good language to speak what distance does to an isolated daughter, or her tongue. How the words fit cramped together as babies swaddled in an aaya's cotton scarf. Forget to wake up.

MAMA FORGETS THE TIME DIFFERENCE

Baby, tell me how you wake up and
 Mama forgets she is five and a half hours
 ahead. Mama just calls me at her 7am, her
 lungs pumping punctured rhythm into the
 balmy monsoon air.

Mama says she learns to breathe this way
 to conserve heart energy.

She doesn't yet know to ask you happy?

Mama's breathing patterns spell
 Look I wake up within one inch of my life,
 but she says nothing.

I press the phone tight into my ear,
 I do not catch the stifled crunch of
 absinthe glass, the ruby throb of an
 opening bruise or the fading hum
 of a scream after it has pumped the air. I
 do not ask.

I wake up, Mama. I made coffee black. I
 fried eggs. I wake up.



Now I am standing with a phone in my hands. Ring
 ring. Can you hear me? Can you really hear me?
 What I am saying. What I am saying is

I want to find a way to mirror you, mama, across a landmass, across its tight red borders. Coast,
 and its wayward ocean. Distance has cemented the borders of my body shut, that is, made us
 strangers, or two beings on the blink's edge of tracing each other's blood.

I want to chart a (re)connection. I want to voice my scribbled letters, fill her head with the stems
 of dandelions, the ache of snow, the wrong burn of the wrong spices in this new country. I want
 to feel her body, not against or beside me, but as my own. I want to be connected enough that we
 stop running up against walls of language so familiar it is smothering.

A slow dressing in ease, a kind of falling asleep. ≈

My mother and I took weekly trips to the coast when I was a child. Gathered scraps of jetsam
 from the ocean – plastic flowers, sparkling cans, a snapped shell bracelet without its charms.
 Thick salt air, and the smell of oily washed-up slippers in the gel of it. One time a plastic lotus
 bobbed towards the shore; its leaves darkened with maggot's eggs. We sent it out with the tide,
 hoped the maggots would find a home. Even maggots deserve a grounding.

Hello, hello, she'd mock telephone them. Don't forget to call us back, and I giggled and giggled.

≈

I am differently inhabiting a body that once came out of her. Once mirrored, was sustained by, made in the image of. And now every hello, how precarious.

I bought raisins today, your favourite sultana kind.
That was last year.
What's your favourite now?
You wouldn't understand.
.....
You are a different heart, every time

≈

This body keeps score.
Last Tuesday, maroon was my favourite colour. Last month, I dreamt of boiling rice, forgot to toss in the salt. Love the sharp crack of coriander, but my hands shake with their stems.
Yesterday, it was boiling cumin in the water.

How did I remember it was cumin?

I am haunting something or someone

/

I am being haunted by something or someone

/

I am performing a ritual that took breath in my mother's body while I was still inside her

≈

Where language fails, turn once more to the body. CA Conrad's rituals promise a 'collapsing of the walls separating us from where we have been, where we are going, and beyond.'

A ritual needs a conduit, flows from one bordered space to another, from one body to another.

Here is a way out, I have been here before,
it whispers.

I imagine a teething root emerging from the centre of my foot, burying into the floor, through the planet's core and towards my sleeping mother's feet. I don't ask her if it hurts.

Instead, I pull the dark braided hair out of the drain in my throat, the slush pours forth into my mouth. I sift through the mud to find the frayed strings of her voice. You have always had careless hands, she says, stirring the brass pot.

My mother's palms are hurting

/

My mother is saying I am a lazy child

/

My mother is asking if I am alive

WATCHING MA MAKE KHEER

the seven-hour soak, rice swelling
to its lips. her quick finger-pops
through hasty boiling bubble milk
breaking the sugar bonds rice
growing sweet-plump, rolling
happily her dark hands welted from
waiting burns.

in the last slippery seconds,
the spoon sinking to the burnt black
bottom, each carefully cleaved kernel a
languid puncture

Our bodies lose their borders at the tongue of this ritual. My hair grows frizzy as the fern fronds peeking through her kitchen window. My skin soils as the sun pours itself into the grooves between the glass. When I look at my palms, I see dark tracks. We still don't know how to say we love each other. Stir seven rounds, my mother says as her goodbye.

My forearms ache with a pain that does not belong to me.

I brew chai on high, sputtering flame that night, feel the burns dust up my mother's arms.

The pain belongs to my mother. The pain belongs to the body that came from her.
The pain passes into collective ownership. The pain is acknowledged, and so finally blooms into
a fragile tenderness; worrying a newly formed scab.

What I am saying is

I know how to haunt a body in seven rounds

/

I know how to feel my mother's muscles in my wrists in seven rounds

& three sets of herbs, coriander, tulsi and neem
& a burning toothpick stuck in old peppermint
& mama's sweet sweet laugh
& the tender hair sheared from behind my ears
& the plunging worship of a burning incense stick
& fresh-purpled brinjal, cut in ankles
& the wet red highways of a split chilli

The next day, my mother calls me up.

You're doing it wrong.

How do you know?

I felt it in my sleep.

I can hear her smiling.

The ritual inhabiting my body once lived within hers, memorised the rise of her fingers, the
blush of her collarbones, the tightening of breath before the final bubbling of syrup. I stop
resisting, allow the ritual the grace of my body.

≈

The next afternoon, I video call my mother, the laptop balancing on a flour-coated countertop
strewn with curry leaves. All we can see of each other are our hands, moving dough in lunar
circles – crescent for clockwise, half-moon for the opposite. We do not speak. We are in the
delicate ritual of making borders malleable. Her rotis are for chai, mine are for lunch. Her rotis
are smooth, and mine are granular with haste. All that remains is the steady comfort of her
body's knowledge, warming my fingertips. I hope you soaked the atta for eight hours, she
laughs, or my rotis will come out with little rocks.

At the corner of her screen is a ruptured pea-shell. I
find a hard green pea rolling near my feet.

We do this every day – one meal together. We have welcomed each other into our bodies, their motions, their unbearable aching. We have allowed this aching to bloom, and with habit, we allow this aching to heal.

This way, we have seen each other prepare the body's sustenance. This way, we have said all we had to of tenderness.



In embodying ritual, I have invited what is dear to her into me. Rituals have body memory, as reflective as the kindness of water. What it cleanses in one body, it restores in another. These canals of pain, these vital roots of love. They are build-up. Gentle. We must put our bodies through them, as they must put themselves through us.

You are a different heart every time, yet you are still mine



The rituals say,
In between, and of a breath

The rituals say,
And now you are here