Malesore, Amerikane
Albanian-American Reflections Through Poetry and Prose

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I'm ten years old. You wouldn't be able to tell from the expression on my face. I carry myself with a kind of dignity that is unfitting for my stature. It is my first time visiting Albania, the homeland of my two parents. Adorning my frame in this photo is our traditional dress, the *xhubleta*. That burgundy
is a prevalent color in my life, its depth taunting me. The weight of the velvet and wool beg the question “Are you sure you want to wear it?” My mother asks me this too, staring at me intently. While she is concerned with the physical strain of the garment, I imagine now she had an inkling of my future conflict. I recall the clinking of the golden lira as I shook with assurance.

I wore that dress with pride. Pride in my heritage. Pride in my strength. Pride in my family’s strife and escape. In the mountains of northern Albania, my parents were debilitated by scarcity, their trauma becoming my own with stories to keep me spiraling for hours. My father lost ten pounds in the first week of his conscription under the Communist regime. Tea was on the menu for two out of three meals, a fistful of bread for lunch.

At ten years old, I finally set foot on the land of my family. I donned the costume of my heritage, embodying for the first time this complex identity. What kind of nostos is this? Am I Albanian before American?

I think about this trip to Albania often. It is the first time I picked walnuts from our century-old tree with my own two hands. The first time I climbed the mountains of my parents’ villages with my own two feet. The first time I retrieved water from the well in my father’s yard. The first time I took that pristine air into my two lungs. Though I was only a child, I remember feeling like I was experiencing the sublime.

Today, Albanian women in the diaspora wear the xhubleta to church after they get married as a testament to their new lives. They have finally left the houses of their fathers for the houses of their husbands. From daughters to wives. It’s only natural that I view this costume with ambivalence.

My mother was seventeen when she got engaged. Nineteen on her wedding day. Marrying the first man deemed worthy was the only possible goal. Such was her scenario, no conflict of culture or ethnicity.
I think of a conversation I had with my father about three years ago. It’s rare that my father discusses my future in any terms other than my career and achievements. So when my mother prompted him, “You understand, our children will have the choice to marry an Albanian or non-Albanian,” he shut down. His pupils dilated, his brows warped rather impressively on his face. He is incapable of processing any shape of my autonomy. Instead of choice, I have the impending arrangements with suitors who ask for my hand in marriage. I express “I want to get to know my potential husband on my own terms before I can commit to this life partnership.” His voice boomed in my ears: “You will never know a man until you’re his wife. They always hide themselves.”

I am brainwashed. Any longing is cause for shame. I am a student, a daughter, an unpaid secretary, a maid. I am not a lover. Just a girl with that heavy wool dress on, entrapping me in this purgatory of womanhood.
Let Them Ripen

Lule is seven. Her name means flower. She is my mother.

She climbs the cherry tree with her older sister. They laugh so loud they don’t hear their grandmother shout “let them ripen! If you eat them all now, the family will never get a taste when they’re ready!”

Lule and her sister are not misaligned with the land, the regime is. There is a crushed ant stuck to her finger crushed onto the bark, onto her finger from the pressure from her excitement they sit on the branch and chew and chew and you’d think they forgot how to swallow the way their cheeks inflated like the gajde, that stomach lining that skin sewn together blown to celebrate.

They will celebrate one day but it won’t be for a decade until then they’ll struggle to be full they’ll struggle after too but that’s why they eat so many cherries today sitting in the sky no one told them unripe fruit hurts your stomach how could it hurt if God made them like that oh please I hope nobody heard that they’ll interrogate the elders “what’s this religious propaganda you’re feeding the children” they’ll respond “it’s the only food we have.”

Her stomach rumbles and she can’t control her little body she’s above the ground and she perches like a bird her insides forfeit those green cherries they fall to the ground Lule and Dranja laugh so loud they don’t hear the bells tolling for their youth
“Ndeze televizorin!” her grandfather instructs.

Bora unplugs the television wires twice and bangs its side before the screen lights up with a black-and-white gleam. Her household was the first in the village to get a television; that was in 1974. It’s now 1990. The television, among other things, is on its last legs. The newscaster’s nasal voice blares throughout the house: “Drejtperdrejt nga Shkodra, live from Shkoder, students are gathering to demolish the statue of Joseph Stalin in the city.”

“Bac, do you think they’ll finally succeed with these protests? How much longer can this go on?” Bora inquires.

His exterior is hard. He spent seven years in prison for smuggling families across the Albanian border into Yugoslavia. He was responsible for their family’s indefinite punishment; the isolationist policies penalized all individuals related to treasonous criminals. When Bora first learned about her grandfather’s jail time, she questioned why he would risk his livelihood to liberate other people instead of escaping with his own family. Perhaps it was a testament to his character, his selflessness. Perhaps he’s a bit of a coward. Couldn’t gather the courage to liberate himself. Bora knew it wasn’t her place to decide; it never quite is.

He coughs a questionable phlegm into his handkerchief, “I don’t know, my daughter. When Enver Hoxha died, I thought the whole country would be ablaze.”

The end of Hoxha’s dictatorship sparked excitement in the stomachs of thousands of starving citizens. Gradually, Albania began reconnecting with the outside world. However, the elite still sympathized most with the
For seventeen year-old Bora, this ‘discipline’ cut her academic career short at age fourteen. She was not legally allowed to receive a high school education. The regime marked her as undeserving of schooling because of her grandfather’s “TREASON” on her record. And so, there are only so many paths for a young woman like herself. “Career” is nonexistent. Therefore, the title “wife” awaits her.

She's careful not to look in the mirror too long this morning; if anyone caught her gawking at her own reflection for longer than a glance, she’d hear “Menemadhe, big headed girl” all day.

Though her green eyes are striking against her black features, she feels that they disappear under her brow bone. Her physical appearance is never a point of major insecurity though, except when she cuts her cousins’ toy balls in half to stuff her bra. Her frame is petite. The ideal for a woman of her time is a fuller figure, with blood in her cheeks. Bora internalized the teases calling her skelet.

The winters in Rapshë are not especially difficult. Comparatively, their village is better off than many others because of its lower elevation. When Bora visits her mother’s side in Vermosh in the winters, she mentally prepares to amputate her fingers each time. It’s never happened, of course. But she imagines it would be very sad: how will I ever wash socks without functional fingers?!

“Teuta, where did you put Baba’s dirty laundry?”
“I left them by the sink, we don’t have much soap left so I’m not sure if you’ll be able to clean all of it. The weekly rations haven’t gotten any more generous.”
“I’ll just lick them clean!”
“Bora..ew? Who taught you to joke like that? If baba hears you, you’ll really have it coming.”
“The mind is a mysterious place, my sister. Leave me alone with it too long and you’ll be shocked with the outcome.”

Teuta often admonishes Bora for showing anything that hints at a personality. She has her best interest in mind. Who will keep a rowdy woman around?

Bora doesn’t mind washing clothes; she finds it meditative. Her sore, bloody fingers wouldn’t say the same. But fingers don’t speak, so meditation it is. Coincidentally, she has some heavy topics to meditate on this spring.

At a distant relative’s funeral a month ago, she caught the green-eyed visage of a young man. He happened to be the first cousin of her sister’s fiancé, Marku. She learned his name… Arlind. Born of gold. He just turned twenty-four, a year for each hour of the day she now spends thinking about him and the black curls on his head. She is “ripe” for marriage, as her mother appetizingly puts it.

“Teuta, do you think they’re ever going to leave you and Marku alone?”
“That’s hilarious. You know they don’t even let us stay in the same room when he visits. Weren’t you with me last time I tried sneaking into the living room after Baci went upstairs so we could just sit together?”
“No, must’ve been Anxhela…do you think they’ll be the same with me?”
“Why wouldn’t they be? The thing is, you just won’t sneak around like I have. You won’t do what I do, you have to be more careful.”
“Yeah…sure.”
“Why are you asking? Is there someone you’re interested in?”
“T’ll let you know…”

Bora holds her breath as she scrubs her father’s socks between her hands. 
Maybe if I hold my breath long enough while doing this, I’ll faint and they’ll let me 
rest tonight instead of preparing the meal... but honestly, I can’t eat mom’s cabbage 
soup when she makes it. 
Maybe it’s better if I stay conscious. 
Or... maybe, if I faint, they’ll think I’m too weak and useless and ship me off to an 
orphanage in a box. 
Sounds good to me.

What is she but a service to others? While she does think she’s hilarious, that 
doesn’t quite fit the description of “housewife.” So she barrels through her 
tasks, not having much else to ponder but the future domesticity that awaits 
her.


17 April 1991

“Do not, under any circumstances, peek into the room until I call you over. 
You’re only going to come out to serve them kafe and raki, and then clean up 
when they’re done” Bora’s mother warns.

Bora has as good a relationship as she could with her mother. She is out with 
the sheep more often than not, sometimes traveling as far as ten miles on the 
side of the mountain in order to feed them. The lines of motherhood are 
blurred when survival is the priority.

Nevertheless, her daughters are the roots that keep her grounded. It’s 
difficult for her to contain her anxiety about their impending marriages. Will 
he use his words or his fists? Will her mother-in-law project her insecurities onto 
her? Will she be able to provide a son for their family?
“Mire se keni ardh, thank you for coming.” Her father’s tone is cordial this evening.

“We’re pleased to be here.” Arlind’s father returns the courtesy. He is a scrawny man with already greying hair. Bora imagines Arlind’s flustered cheeks as he sits next to his father, not knowing when it’s appropriate for him to speak.

She wishes she could get close enough to see each pore on his face, count each follicle of hair in his eyebrows.

“My son is interested in marrying your second daughter, Bora.”

7 Jul 1991

“Eight, nine..TEN?”

“Shhh!”

“I know! I can’t help it.”

Arlind numbers the beauty marks on Bora’s cheeks. North of nine, he’s shocked. The two are hiding in the backyard of her family house. Anxhela, her younger sister, is supposed to be accompanying them to ensure modesty. Anxhela, of course, has chosen to climb the cherry tree down the yard, giving the engaged couple some privacy.

“I can’t believe we’re really alone.”

“Not in the eyes of God, we’re not.”

“Bora! You already have your grandfather’s treason, do you want your own for talking about… God?…Don’t roll your eyes at me. That’s disrespectful.”

“Am I your fiancée or your daughter?”

Arlind scoffs. “You know, I’ll be joining the protests in Shkoder soon. Has anyone told you what’s been going on?”
“Yeah, I saw a few months ago some students were tearing the statue of Stalin down...I didn’t know there were still protests. Also, how can you scold me for religious treason when you want to go to a literal protest?”

The recent government upheaval shook the nation yet families like Bora’s remained isolated from the current events. Arlind got insight from a family friend who worked for the municipality of Shkoder that they were considering shutting down government services in the months to come.

“Yeah, there have been protests. I really don’t know how they’re going to bring democracy to this forsaken country. Also, you’re a girl, you should know what that means. Regardless, I’m worried that they’re gonna close everything and we won’t be able to get legally married.”

“Don’t be so negative, I’m sure that will be dealt with when the time comes. Besides, why would that change our marriage...and our love for one another?”

“What do you mean? Obviously, you have to take my last name. This isn’t for fun. This is serious.”

Bora’s retort trickled out of her mouth, but not before the two were interrupted.

“A keni dal maç? Have you lost your minds? Where is Anxhela?”

“Nane, I’m sorry. She wouldn’t listen and stay when we told her to! She wanted to pick cherries!”

“Now what should I tell my husband and his father, Arlind? That you’re trying to be alone with my daughter? You want to take advantage of her? How could you be so inconsiderate...to put us in this position?”

“No, please, I would never want that. We tried to tell Anxhela to stay, she was running around and wouldn’t sit still.” Arlind grew yellow with fear, the premature wrinkles under his eyes curving to match the sprawling frown on his face.
It wouldn’t be true for Bora to say she lost track of time, she was very aware of their time alone. Part of her thought this seemed fated to happen…why would they even trust her younger sister to stay as a chaperone? Were they testing her?

“Çka ështe tane kjo zhurmë? What’s all this noise?”

“Bac, nothing happened. I promise you, nothing happened.”

She watched the blood drain from her grandfather’s face, ashen with anger. There was no place for explanation. He was not a particularly vocal man, conscious to chime in only when his ego was alerted. Though he was already seventy-two, he was still in prime condition to do what he thought would “protect” Bora. In this instance, that meant slapping her to the ground, and entering the house without another word.

9 Jul 1991

It is fortunate that they don’t traditionally announce engagements to the village in an effort to prevent evil eye, syni keq. At least they could save Bora’s reputation as a pure woman, or they could try.

In the two days since the family found Bora alone with Arlind, the engagement was called off. Arlind’s father was enraged. He attempted to call together the elders in the community to find a better solution.

“Have you no shame? To give your daughter away, and take her back? Have you even asked what she wants?” Arlind’s father presented a surprising amount of consideration for Bora.

“And you, to raise a son with no dignity. To raise a son who would take advantage of her privacy before they are wed. Your shame…where might it be?” Baci’s voice seemed to be digging its nails through his throat.
Bora’s father remained silent while Baci attempted to pacify his own spirits.

She sat in the furthest room in the house, yet their voices traveled like astronomical molecules. Kinetic speed, the particles of sound scrape the insides of her eardrums. She wonders if she will ever be able to hear again after the ringing ceases. Will it cease?

When Arlind’s father begins to mention Kanuni, her grandfather’s eyes ignite. Kanuni i Lek Dukagjinit is a code of law followed by the northern-most Albanians. When the Ottomans ruled over Albania, they had their own codified policies. These mostly pertained to Muslim Albanians, because the majority of the population converted through imperial influence. However, the malesoret, the mountain people in the North were geographically isolated such that they would not submit to these colonial laws and cultural conventions. They were mostly Catholic, remnants of their Roman past.

Kanuni is responsible for gjakmarrje: gjak meaning blood, marrje meaning acquisition. Together, these three syllables are spat out of Albanian mouths. The code of law often led families into blood feuds; if you stole my lamb, I’ll kill two of yours. Of course, this precipitates the murder of man, as well.

The only population guarded from these killings is women. Yet, there will always be men so morally bereft as to rope women into the circuit of their bloodshed. So when Arlind’s father mentioned Kanuni, Bora’s grandfather concluded that he must not have understood the implications.

“I am trying to believe that you were not born yesterday, yet you make this difficult for me. Do you understand that you and your son are the wrongdoers?”

“O bullar, do you have this little respect for your daughter? She loves him. She wants to marry him. It’s only natural that they appreciate privacy.”
Baci seemed to age ten years throughout the span of this confrontation. He decided there would be no resolution in that conversation. After he got up from the table, he tucked the seat in politely. He made sure that as he gathered his jacket to leave, Arlind’s father got a view of his pistol.

11 July 1990

There was still a shadow of a bloodstain on the cement from her fall four days later when Bora sat outside with her mother.

“You’ll be coming with me to herd the sheep from now on.”

“Nane, do you have nothing to say? You’re going to let them call off the engagement like this? You don’t trust me?”

“I trust you. I don’t trust him. Who is he? To come into our home and disrespect us?”

“So, there’s nothing I can do to fix this?”

“No, zemer, let’s hope people don’t learn about this, maybe you can still get married in the future.”
Empty Stomachs

Have you ever left your orange peels out to dry?
Not by accident, a domestic oversight. But purposefully?
The fragrance is enchanting!
It'll tickle your lonely nostrils when
you've got no bodies to emit their own.

Or, it might camouflage an ungodly odor,
the breath of a father who has never known a period,
tongue yellow with insistence.
Or a brother, sugar-addicted and precipitating
sweaty, syrupy particles.

Their rinds harden, darken a bit.
Their zest, potent as ever, implores you to
rejoice in this earthly delight.

Won't you revel in these citric scents?
Won't you be grateful for your sense?

“We cooked them on the stove to make the smell stronger,”
Mom tells me.
If you've pictured a GE oven of sorts,
abandon that immediately.
Instead, come with me to this ancestral kitchen.

There is a single burner.
The propane tank,
acquired in seventy-something, is the size of an adult shin.
Half of my ten-year-old body.
The dark green paint is chipped
like the shimmery pink polish on my nails.
I’ve only boiled water for morning tea on our 2005 electric stove.
I’ve only seen wells in picture books about little girls
with long blonde braids.

I ask to turn the burner on.
Too ambitious, my grandmother deems.
But I know my little fingers can translate masterfully;
I spell *Albania* and *government* so well.

I am there. I’ve spelled it countless times.
The morning air freezes my hairs erect
like the mountains before me,
like the needles on the juniper bush.
*Baba said they make raki out of these...
It looks like a blueberry, they should make pancakes with them instead.*
I fill the pail with water.

When I hear my grandmother shout “*Hajde mren!*”
I follow her orders and run inside.
Not because I particularly respect her,
but because I think listening is strategic.
I’m convinced there’s power in obedience, but only when I pick and choose.
I don’t use these words yet, of course.

I watch her turn the burner on and off four times,
her hands unsteady as the turbulent flight to this terrain.
She pours the water I retrieved into a pot.
It boils eventually.

I’m excited to drink tea from this soil,
tea that didn’t come in a little yellow box.
Tea that smells green and bushy and thick.
She spills a bubble onto my arm. I remain silent.
The pain vibrates under my skin.
I’m distracted from the taste of the tea.

I hum my childish lament;
all she hears is an American brat.
“Mos kjaj,” she scolds me, watching muted tears fall onto my cheeks.
To avoid any more chiding, I lick them away,
wondering if my mom can hear us from outside.
I wait for someone else to enter the kitchen,
anyone else to relieve me.
It’s 2010, I am ten and feel thirty.

Thirty years old.
My brother will turn thirty in three years, 2023,
thirty years since mom took that red route in Shkoder,
a near fatal delivery.
With the walls warping in front of her, in her,
she called for her own mother fifty kilometres far.
Not dilated enough but her atoms made sure to tear her apart.
My brother infiltrated this world with wrath.
Retribution for his woes in the womb.

“A ka ma djath?” mom asked if there was any more cheese.
She knew the answer but
the second heartbeat in her begged for a piece and
another piece. No answer.
Just well water and stale cornbread,
filled with nutrient nothing.
Their stomachs imploded with grains.
There, my brother’s first developments were delayed.

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Studies draw direct correlations between a child’s nutrition in the womb and their metabolisms as they grow into adulthood. A malnourished mother
births a malnourished child, prone to cognitive impairments and various other health issues. So it’s 2008, I am alone with my brother while our parents work. He is seven years older than me. The house is new and quiet and fresh, our father built it two years prior. Amenities like a television the length of an arm fill the rooms, a fake fireplace for fake warmth. He screams “Tine, come count my sacks for me!”

NFL Street colors the screen, greens and browns of the football fields match the greens and browns of our rug. I lie on my stomach, cranking my little neck at an unhealthy angle but I’m eight and unconcerned. He throws me a notebook he should use for school but “they don’t teach us shit why should I give a fuck about *The Giver*?” I only know “the giver” as someone who gives you something. He instructs me carefully “a sack is when the people on the other side tackle the guy with the ball in his hand before he gets to throw it.” “Wait, which guy with the ball?” “The fucking quarterback, it’s how the games start.” “Okay, why do they do that?” “It doesn’t fucking matter I’m telling you to keep track of them.” “I will, I just wanted to know…” “It pushes the team back so it’s harder for them to get a touchdown.” “I guess I get it.” “Who is asking you to ‘get it?’ You’re not fucking playing.” “Okay, just play already.”

I tally, he looks over at the notebook every fifteen seconds, I tally, he scoffs at his ineptitude, he yells at the screen. “Stop yelling! I don’t wanna do this anymore.” “Shut the fuck up, just keep counting.” I start to get up, I leave the notebook on the floor. I imagine I have some paper and scissors in my room I can cut up for fun; resources for fun are scarce because fun is mostly irrelevant. He pulls my hair to restrain me so that he can spit in my face. I cry.

When my parents come home, I beg for them to listen, “Tani spit on me it smelled so bad I was just tired of listening to him scream I don’t like that game.” Mom can’t take it. She tells me “Just stay away from him.” I am red like a pomegranate. “But I have no one else.” A child’s pain must be a choice, I learn. Tears achieve nothing when I’m not a treasured character from the books I read. I just learned to read. I should be grateful for my sense.
ZHANGËLLIMI
Dissonance

Zog

I am her little lamb.
Her little grape, her little bird.
Utterance of our native tongue.

Trilled r’s reverberate through me.
Reminding me,
“you are her spawn.”

A

Walnuts fall
r
Trilled r’s reverberate through me.

r
Reminding me,
“you are her spawn.”

a

Grandfather cracks them.

“Come have some arra, Tina!”

This lineage cascades from my jaw,
Soaking the air in ancestral heat.

Marr frymë.
I breathe in the words
of those who bore me.

I am neither here nor there.
Instead, I occupy a plural space.
To navigate, I have this unique compass
in my pocket.
It propels me on an ascending path.

Yet, there are hiccups. A stumbling, stuttering and faltering of faith.
Desire riddles conflict into my speech.

This compass seems misaligned, iron of my loins deceiving its needle.
What is this path, again? Do I have permission to reroute?

My surface is permeable, susceptible to misunderstanding.
Communication only as valuable as my predestined cacophony.

Whose voice?
*Gjyshi,* cracking with the skin of walnuts and convention in his throat?
*Nêna,* between the clouds of this life and her last?

*Baba?*

*Baba.* Forest eyes that shift with yellow rage, skin paling and contorting.
Fits of unfettered ire stifling my...

I struggle to recognize choice.

Is it available to me while I speak this tongue?
Is anything mine, me?

These silly wings shamefully yearn for company. But I’ve pride to smother my regretful longing.

A beat of vulnerability like a shot to a feather.
I plummet, plunging toward an unforgiving end.

An end... an end with no beginning,
I am merely out of service.

I seep into the soil. Seeds I did not sow
decorate my decay.

Balkan strings eulogize me,
lahuta to score my premature burial. A melodic snare
to this inherited identity.

There is no speech left,
only a dignified ringing.
Purity and innocence succeed my name.

Custom sterilizes this would-be me;
perhaps I can try again next lifetime.
Kitty Kitty

“Make sure they don’t touch any of your stuff...you never know with Americans, sneaky motherfuckers.” My dad is a sneaky motherfucker himself. Something about projection, right? I heed his warnings, though. I’m moving into my dorm room. I applied to the Honors program so I could secure a room with my own bathroom, an explicit advantage. This will prove immensely beneficial to me on nights I sit on the shower floor and contemplate my function in society, wasting water in the process.

It’s the first time I’ll sleep somewhere that isn’t my own home, or a family member’s house. My mom sobs every fifteen minutes. I contain my own tears because I feel so guilty that I’m leaving the house; if I cry with her the whole time it’s like admitting to wrongdoing. And ultimately, it is wrong. “Ke shpirtin te shpia” They tell me. “Your soul is at the house.”

I’m laying a rug down on the linoleum floors next to my bed in Lenape Hall. It’s grey and new and shaggy. What a gift to have this synthetic sheet of fur between my toes every morning, thank you, Walmart. Not only did you employ my mother her first thirteen years in this country, but you offered me this homely rug. And a sleek, dark brown desk lamp that adjusts to any angle I could desire. And the hair products I line up on the top metal shelf in the bathroom I’ll share with two other girls. My curls require special attention; my father calls them his curls.

He’s pressed to leave once we’ve moved the last items in. “Hajde, shkojm tash se kan me ardh varzat tjera.” He instructs my mother to leave before my roommates arrive to move in. This is what he says, but I know that he wants to leave because he is trying to curtail his own anger that I’ll be alone and unsupervised. He knows he has no choice. He didn’t allow me to drive or work. But he wants me to go to a four year college, so this is the only option. And so I see him swallow his frustration in his customary evasive fashion. He orders my mom to stop crying.
I take silly photos with her in the bed. We kiss each other's cheeks and call each other “maca maca,” “kitty kitty.” They're live photos, and I'll watch our eyes blink and our grins widen and our lips pucker whenever I feel guilty for being in New Paltz, New York and not in my parents' house. It won't make me feel better but it'll remind me of the strides I will make—attempt to make.

I picture my toes wiggling like ten individual tails, happy kitties fed and content in their own plush beds. I am tucked into that twin XL but my toes stick out of the thin sheets because it's August and I'm on fire, physically, sure, but mostly mentally. Days begin and end but I have no concept of this. I only ever know flames, thoughts like matches I cannot blow out. They keep me from peace but I'm content in this barren room because I've wanted nothing more than space.

“Hey, could you open the window a little more?” one of my roommates asks. The crack of her voice, any voice in the dark startles me momentarily but I get out of my bottom bunk and push the industrial glass up. My feet feel cool now. These impersonal floors hold no heat, no comfort. But I have no need for that.

My sheets crinkle as I get back in and I'm cognizant of how strange it is to hear someone prepare to close their eyes for hours. Somewhere in this separate landscape none of us can touch, we're deconstructing the interactions of the day and anticipating those to come, creating fantastical scenarios of romantic partners.

I catch myself trying to think of nothing, a blackness that cannot be penetrated by these random girls in my room. I know this is irrational. So I reroute. Now I'm thinking of my father, and the expression on his face when I ended our FaceTime call a few hours prior. A degree of a furrowed brow, a deeper crease on his forehead, an eye narrowed by a millimeter. Any of these
send me into a spiral. Next time, I won’t intimate that I’ve interacted with anyone but the girls in this room. He won’t worry then.

I fall asleep at some point. I don’t usually remember my dreams; my sleep tends to be light and easily interrupted, never quite gifting me a respite. I will remember this dream though.

Blood clots erupt in his eyes. It’s a kind of molten anger I recognize in him, molten and then hardened from unanswered calls, unattended needs. His mother was debilitated in many ways...in spirit, in action. Arranged marriage arranged her expressions of personhood, of motherhood. She did not want her kids, she told me herself over some animal crackers and tea a few years back. He was groomed by his father’s mother. Her rashë was his baby blanket, black like his hair. I can see his curls blend in with that black fabric reaching her knees, and he disappears among her legs. I think they’re two poles of affection.

We are on our own journey, just me and him. We are driving to our church in Hartsdale, Our Lady of Shkodra, that center of social capital, currency exchanges. Attending this church consists of a series of calculated interactions because in the diaspora, we have a strategy for the succession of our race and that means I’m a spectacle in this supposed worship, ultimately a product to be purchased.

It’s on a hill, as they all are, we are driving around a steep, winding turn and there is a car driving directly into us. We drive through the car; I become aware this is a dream. I blink and we are no longer on this tangible asphalt. Now, we are in the sky, on train tracks in the sky but we are not in a train car, we are alone and hovering, the two of us. I look forward and the path is splitting and I dream-wonder “will we stick together?”

We do. I turn to him. “What is this all for? What does this mean, babë?” He says to me, “Sometimes, things are not in our control. We need to give it up to God.”
I am dreaming but I am bewildered like a waking person. I have never heard him say such a thing. He is irreligious and spiteful. I am silent and I dream-think, “I need to escape the pressure of marrying an Albanian.”
I ask him, “What does that mean to you?”
“Trying to give my mom a home and make her love me and feel love. She will always lack, nothing is ever enough I need to give up.”
He is weeping and I am weeping. I tell him he doesn’t need her love.

I think this is the closest I've ever felt to him and I am not awake.

What am I meant to do with these visions...hallucinations? Is it unfair to call them hallucinations? Is this my own katabasis when I close my eyes?

Waking up with tears in your eyes is a unique experience. I am unblinking for these emotions but I awake with physical repercussions. I wipe the eyes my parents gave me, eyelashes black and long like his. My feet touch the cool ground again and I enter this second day of quasi-independence but how can it be independence if I cannot escape my father in my dreams? How can it be another day if I didn't leave the last, just deviated onto a trail I cannot travel again?

I brush my teeth. My roommate has already left toothpaste marks on the mirror, clumpy, sticky beads surround the sink. I wipe the toothpaste from the glass, from my elbows. I wonder how I'll get close to them, or if I’ll get close to them. I decide I’ll ask about their dreams the next time I’m with them both.
Rain and Reverence

I remember the day my father started crying in the car. We were driving to New Paltz. This was one of our frequent trips back and forth from Goshen to New Paltz; I did not drive yet. But I went home every weekend to reassure my family that I was not up to no good in college. My father was taking me back home.

It was raining and we weren’t playing any music. Usually, we listen to folk music in the car. My dad is especially fond of songs using the çifteli, a two-stringed instrument used in Northern Albanian music. This day, we drove in silence. I’m not sure why. And I’m usually very comfortable with silence but I felt compelled to fill the air that day.

I am inclined to say that our relationship is one-sided but my guilt would object, “What a disservice to the decades he has spent cultivating a work ethic like no other; he has provided immensely for his family!” Nevertheless, our emotional relationship seems to be a one-way street. I play therapist, mediator, peacekeeper. He works and comes home. Father-daughter things. In the car this day, I feel a distinct pressure.

I ask him a lot of questions about himself, his life in Albania, his relationships (of which remain very few). I do this so he knows I care. I do this to suffocate many layers of a feeling, some call it survivor’s guilt. It might stretch beyond that. Honestly, I don’t think it’s a wholly bad thing to feel indebted to your parents. Children should probably feel more obligation and respect for their parents in America. Maybe I shouldn’t speak. I haven’t had American parents. So I’m not sure how I’d be as an American child.

Anyway, we were sitting in silence. I don’t know how I brought it up but I remember asking about his sister, Luçe. She died from pneumonia before she
turned forty. My father has always said “They would’ve been able to save her in America.”

She left two children, Sandri and Suela. Sandri went to London when he was fifteen without any parental figure. Suela was adopted by my father’s younger brother. He brought her to America when she was ten years old. Kicked her out when she was sixteen because they found her hanging out with a girl from the neighborhood. Friendship isn’t tolerated. Americans corrupt… they can give you this demonic sense of…personhood!
We took her in after that.

I asked about Luçe’s personality. “Was she like you?” He knew what this question implied. Was she like you, or was she like your greedy, egotistical, heartless siblings? He started to tear up. He said, “she was most like me, like Celi.” My dad’s father asked to be called Celi, a nickname for Vasel. He knew he didn’t need to elaborate in his response to me. Or he wasn’t able to elaborate. Either way, I understood the intricacy of his grief for his older sister.

Everytime I open that one tin can with the black handle, I smell him. Celi brought sugar back from Albania one winter. I’m not sure why given this country’s affection for sugarcane and exploitation. Anyway, it must have solidified, so he spent a couple days sporadically crushing the chunks of granulated sugar with his hands. We kept that sugar in the tin for years after he died.

He was a sugary person, charming and sweet. It was rare for him to raise his voice. The family would stifle their chuckles whenever he did.

My father has never recovered from these deaths. Who does?

So our eyes dry in silence again. He shuffles in the driver’s seat, pulling the seat belt away from his chest knowing that it will fall right back. I guess that’s
what it’s like to reflect on our pain. A band of resistance we perpetually pull and let go.
In the Lab

Dilute, grind, polish.
Stabilize your pH, too acidic...acerbic, rather.
And you know that.

This pitiful itch you can't scratch, your yearning stretches you out until your extremities are mangled beyond recognition.
Get back in the lab. You've got some more work to do, lobotomies to perform, perhaps.

Drip drip drip, a puddle of sticky self-reliance wets your socks. You've no choice but to swim in your own assurance.

Your feet drag through this pool, streaks spell swirling letters:
“i-n-t-i-m-a-c-y.”
How taunting.

Oh, paralysis ensues, straitjacket on your lower limbs.

You've got to protect yourself:
Coat your tongue in vinegar.
Preservative layer. Keep the acid high.
Diminishing Defense

Barbed wire circles, circling your form. Your skin rusts. Flakes of copper pollute the earth between your toes. They serve as admonitions to those who approach.

Be kind…
This one’s a little oxidized, corroded, burnt.
She’s enveloped by the stench of decaying armor, a pungent odor. One with a radius to repel.

When they find you,
they’ll see metal rings slither around your heart.
A thousand little tarnishing particles, chainmail.

But a ceremonial undressing awaits.
Disarm yourself, if only for experiment.
Drench your organs in lovely rainwater.
Divine tears will reach you. You’ll hear whispering:
We’ll try to be careful. The water’s been so murky.
Forehead Kisses

Scribbles his skin, needle-puncturing insects that fly.
He'll fly away from the horrors of my heart.
Ladybugs in succession, he's got them fluttering at every angle,
A band on his bicep, ninety, forty-five.
But what about me? What about my truest angles?

There's no trap, no pesticides hidden under my sink.
But he talks in circles! Talks himself in circles
and wonders why his tendons ache.
Can't bathe a brain, a throat in epsom salt.

His neural pathways long for some civil service,
some roadwork to halt the traffic,
to silence the engines.
But he does not listen to their pleas.

Somewhere on that road, I rest, stone.
Millenia of cardiac erosion
has carved me into this pretty shape,
a pear of tiger’s eye.

I am grand in spirit,
miniscule in effect.
My I love you’s negligible.

Performing, kissing my forehead when I cry and cry
about a life before.
A life when there was no me,
only reverberations of nuclear voices.
Once I blot a tear, he reveals his judgment:
“it seems like you don’t live for yourself.”
How clever of him, with his hollow sockets,
indents where his eyes should be.

Look at me, tattooed with transparent kisses on this heavy forehead.
In saliva, he leaves his muddled mark.
I'm left to smear it off.
I can smell the insincerity on my skin.
Swing

If this swing were a bit more sturdy,  
maybe I'd pump my legs into oblivion.  
Instead, these splintering threads get caught in my fingertips.  
My skin bleeds black.

I guess I should stand still,  
try to pick each fragment out.  
Fragment this swinging journey.

They say it's healing,  
"You should really let loose.  
Get in touch with your inner child!"

But I tried to swing. Now there are mistakes to mend.

There must be an abundance of bandages for  
this type of injury. Someone said they're in  
aisle “open-your-heart”…  
hard to believe it!
Split Pea

I'm a little split pea.
Whole in essence but sure, I'll
share half my wit, half my
passion.

I'm high in fiber, fibrous cords
extend outwards: Hug me!

Something about peas in a
Pot? Pod? No, I think it's pot.

A pot with two handles,
to be handled carefully. Boiling contents,
thoughts like I must not deserve anything.

Heed the warning,
you may get burnt!
Winter Warm

It takes a winter warm to stifle my breath.
A ruby embrace, red and sturdy. Arms around me,
shaking me from my deceptive slumber.

In this sleep I sleep with eyes open, I deceive myself with controlled breaths.
They say to breathe in, “imagine you’re sending the oxygen to whichever
organ is most in need.”
So, misguided, I send my breaths to my brain.
I think I can bolster it indefinitely, so that one day I’m most wise and
sensible,
level-headed and peacefully detached.

But my December heartbeat reveals an inescapable truth.
It is not the flesh inside my skull, this wrinkled thing I wish I could extract,
salt, hang up to dry like preserved meat, it is not my brain in need of breath.

This is not the first time I’ve had this revelation. It will not be my last.
I sleep this sleep so I forget again and again like when you wake from a
dream, droplets of sweat gathered on your ribcage, on your temples,
disoriented and unknowing of the truths you’ve just discovered.

It seems it will take many winters. I will keep my arms open.
Fog

“Where have you been?
You’ve been M.I.A.”

What action? Do you mean this perpetual
game of baiting, restraining our joy
our excitement our laughter our combative minds, thrilling us
‘till we’re red in the cheeks
and your fingers shake and I wonder
“Why is he nervous?”

Your nerves your fear your emotional fog but can it really be a fog if there is
nothing behind the cloud if you’re just inching incrementally toward some
delayed development and I’m the impetus, of course I am the impetus forced
to think eighteen years alone in my room of course you can’t seem to stay
away from me I am difficult and I don’t surrender unless I know I’m wrong
and I’m rarely wrong with you you’re twenty-one, twenty-one little brain
cells working as hard as they can, forming a phalanx against this world
against beautiful women against connection because “it’s okay if you don’t
want to talk about it” no it’s not okay, you should be curious and you should
be available and you should make me feel like you care to ask, to know about
my hurt even if it’s nothing like you’ve ever known you don’t need to know!
But you can try to understand, don’t you want me to open up don’t you want
to see that cliché, like a butterfly ecloses from their cocoon you like bugs,
ladybugs and bees you have them etched on your skin don’t you want that
for me?

Or should I sit pretty and tolerable but then I’m unfunny and I’m vain
because have you seen me I wear makeup I care about how I look your friend
said “she gets all dolled up for anything” yes for anything because I wake up
as me every day and you don’t know what that means I don’t know what that
means for you but I’ll certainly try and I can do that best when I feel good
and when I feel pretty because it's not just ancient Greek culture where ugly is bad it's today and it's tomorrow and I choose to acknowledge that reality thick layers of mud black on my lashes flushed cheeks with glowing dewy pink like the fresh young beautiful girl I am I have nothing else to offer you and we both know that's not true but I go through the world and I feel like it is because who wants to deal with this who wants to be curious about the ash behind my eyes about the ruins the remnants the remains of ancient shame of guilt of betrayal not you certainly not you but you like to pretend and that's okay we're all actors but I don't act to hurt others only ever to hurt me that's where I've been I've been staying away I've been picking at the threads of this inextricable tie to those who hurt me cutting up my fingers as I go but let them bleed please it's better than my organs
Fig-Eyed

Fig-eyed, tongueful of seeds in her speech
pressing into the soil little notions of big forgiveness
never without scrutiny.
She combs her tendril fingers into mud brown planting
assessing the stickiness of that soil, will this season’s harvest produce
adequate love adequate harmony?

Or will that parasitic dodder enlace the leaves the stem of
her wishes, of her connection to this ground, to the wind above it?
To the clouds rippling from the tremor of her words.

She will exact a deserving punishment.
Remove the weeds. Excess biological matter,
deluded by their own leechy inclinations
let’s rob this little fig of her delight, no sun no nutrients.

What an unsustainable mission.
Ember & Olive

Itchy little lashes line my cheek ember under my nails
I am carving and carving
let's uncover the warmth under this skin that infinite warmth
which doesn't lessen when sirens warn your strength is being challenged!
between her and another that warmth of labor
labor which brought us here that warmth is enclosed
behind this skin my olive
leather olive like the roots of civilization like the men before me
they've maimed me for millennia not my flesh but in this realm I meander
asleep I see a shade a shape a figure of man of partnership
it evades me always but not before it hugs me it kisses me
I cannot touch it it doesn't want to stay it wants to live free from duty
and maybe I should too
gnaw my teeth endlessly and countlessly collecting morsels of what?
Never stability because I am grand and I am gaseous
unable to be contained except of course by the forces of shame
how funny to be American and to be so far from it
to be woman and to be so far from it