



# the last step

That was where I saw you first,  
on the last step of the well,  
wet from bathing. Drops of water fell  
in an arc from your hair, down  
your back, trickling into the cloth  
tied tight at your hips. My lips went dry.

My thirst began there and never stopped.  
Did you feel how I watched and willed  
you to turn? How I waited on the steps  
day after day for you to pass,  
for the light on your body, the sight of you  
sliding into the water, into my heart?

My heart hidden, I learned the art  
of making you up, making  
something of nothing,  
like someone drunk and staggering  
just from looking at a wineglass,  
the wine forbidden.

But I could swear you lifted your head  
for the scent of blossoms in my hair.  
Kneeling at the brink, I felt you near  
and wondered if you would dare  
speak. You left. Your eyes  
were elsewhere.

You must have heard when I went, the hiss  
of scandal. You must have asked  
if I was pushed or missed a step  
or went willingly over the edge.  
You must have wondered  
what I felt when I fell. I sank

and sank in the bottomless well  
like falling into a night with no stars,  
down the shaft of black, the finger  
that points out the way to hell.

Not alone, not the first. We are  
too many to count, too drowned to tell,

all the lost girls. Gone from the fields  
of sugar-cane that stroked our waists  
and spoke sweet words, from the houses  
that held us too tight and whispered  
behind our backs, to this open mouth  
with its dangerous breath.

You never come back to the step  
where I lie in wait, but other boys do,  
wrapping wet cloth around their waists,  
laughing with their heads thrown back,  
teeth white in the dark, the ones  
who could have been you.

I reach out to stroke that lovely dip  
they have, between haunch and hip,  
the silk of their skin, that should  
have been yours, and feel them recoil,  
shivering, as if they have been touched  
by knowing too much; by death.

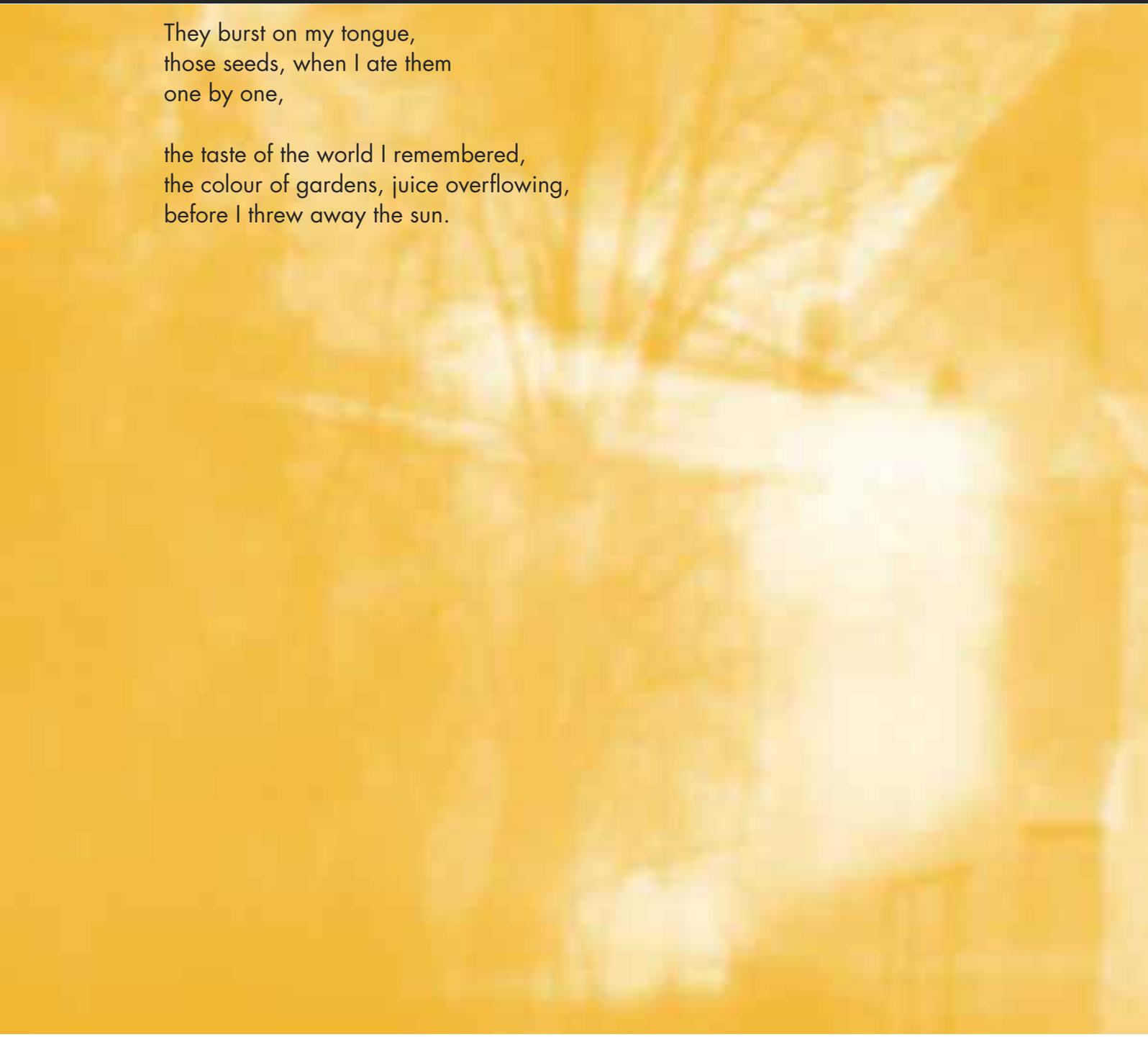
When I send a token, my garland of jasmine  
and a wisp of my hair, they pull back aghast  
at the ring of white afloat on black  
as if they can smell, braided in  
to the scent of desire, the stench of loss,

as if they have felt the caress of a ghost.

# six pomegranate seeds

They burst on my tongue,  
those seeds, when I ate them  
one by one,

the taste of the world I remembered,  
the colour of gardens, juice overflowing,  
before I threw away the sun.



# arc

As I fell, everything fell  
out of my mind, the spark  
left my eyes, light drained away.

and I became a shell, beautiful,  
like something that could be filled  
with stories, tall tales, anything

worth imagining. Words  
are the pearl. Dive for them  
and we become real.

Do you hear my lustre on the line?  
Even with all its colour washed away,  
wet cloth slapped on stone,

thread beaten too thin,  
my voice is still there, an arc  
of drops hung in the air,

shining.

# warning

The pomegranate gave me warning signs,  
with its bitter rind, its thorny crown,  
but I broke in through its unwelcoming

skin, tore away the thin membrane  
to loot the seeds within. On my tongue  
they exploded like nothing

I have ever known. On my lips the stain  
remains. Even knowing what it means,  
I would do it all again.

## six rings

The phone rings six times.  
You rarely answer the landline,  
but tonight you pick up.  
Silence, crackling,  
then my thin voice speaks  
from a drowning world.

Others tune in, taking advantage  
of the opening, crying,  
wailing against the wall of white  
sound, sending messages  
for the people they still love,  
the ones they left behind.

*Tell my husband where to find  
the thing I hid, in the cupboard,  
top left shelf. Tell my daughter  
to be kind. Tell my mother I didn't  
mean it. Tell my lover I didn't  
really mind*

You hear something,  
but far, like a ghost with no throat,  
like a shadow of words under water.  
*You never spoke to me, but  
did you see? I wanted to tell you  
something, but something*

*tied my tongue.  
This is me,  
calling.*

# sixty seconds

Did you think I was gone?  
You were wrong, I crossed back  
out of water in that one minute  
of black when a cloud passed the moon  
and the moon looked away.  
I bribed the gatekeeper

with six silver rings.

I am here in this room  
and have plotted to keep you.  
Round your bed I draw a ring,  
surround you with growing things,  
sheaves of wheat and maize, sprouting  
seeds. I break a coconut

and find, inside, another moon.

In your dreams I sleep with you,  
breathing out when you breathe out,  
breathing in when you breathe in,  
stitching the night  
stitching the air  
stitching you in

to spring.

# sticks

I make you again out of sticks and string,  
bind you close and fix your face

with a stolen spider's web. Inside your head  
I cage a small blue egg, and where your heart

should be, I tie a lump of lead.  
This is how you live in my bed

and I in yours. She will never know,  
except that one night you will call

my name and your hand will find itself  
between my shadow legs. *Too late to stop.*

You will cheat her with me.  
I will cheat death with art, with artifice,

my ghost voice whispering in your ear,  
my spider words on your lips, *like this.*

# makeshift

Remember making a phone  
of your own? Two tin cans  
with a string knotted in,  
stretched tight, the listener  
out of sight? When you spoke,  
the other could feel  
the vibration through air,  
your voice on a line.

My heart  
is a cave in a cup. If  
you hold it up to your ear  
you can hear it thrumming  
through a piece of a string.

# beak

I am trying to take this beak  
out of my heart, this thing that troubles me  
with its demented singing, like  
the flame of the forest burning in a tree  
in that saturated world. You stop  
as if you have heard, and say, *Listen*.

*Listen to that koel  
calling.*

fix

It was loaded against me, the thing with the seeds.  
They were there, just inside the skin, asking  
to be eaten. Six pomegranate seeds,

six months in the light, six having sex  
in the dark with a god I don't want.  
I can't wait to get out to the shops, the hot

bazaar, the baskets of peaches. I never know  
if my voice reaches you, but I imagine you stopping  
to look at your phone, checking missed calls,

caller unknown. Then you go on, out  
of a station, crossing a road, my voice drowned  
in the sound of car horns and the light

off all those unfixed

living things

exploding.

# hell-raiser

Screeching out of the water,  
screaming over the line,  
I will be bawdy, tawdry, tough.  
Laugh from the belly  
when the holy men pass.  
I am fearless,  
striding back up the steps  
into broad daylight.  
Take off the white cloth  
and fly like a kite  
from the rooftops, and to hell  
with the watchers, the talkers,  
the gossips, the shame-peddlers.  
I am out of their hands, blown  
out of their sight.

# the haunting of words

What are these words for?  
What are they for, script

in every language, Spanish  
Chinese Arabic, running

this way or that, from right to left,  
from left to right, what right

do they have to be here  
unless they force you to listen to

the bird in your heart and hear  
the world as if it is new?

I am standing at the end  
of the line, looking back at you

and past you to white.  
Words are nothing

but gravestones unless they haunt  
your day and night.

If you do not read the pulse  
in my wrist I might

as well be gone.  
Why put these marks on paper

at all if they do not twist  
like a knife, prick like a thorn

buzz like a hive? What use,  
unless they wire me alive?



