

Extracts from *The Stars Inside* by Ayala Kingsley

The origin of language

Finding your face quite often
unapproachable, I would study your hands.
I would open them like uncut pages, gingerly.
I would follow the veins with my finger
as if looking for the sea

or divining a hidden source,
like the origin of winds or language,
or the pocket where your heartbeat stifled.
Your hands were so soft-spoken and precise;
they were a house made of cards.

They were those of an apostle in a doorway
accepting some form of the truth.
I looked to them for greater eloquence,
for something more complicit.
I would watch them pleat

their careful origami, and think how once
across a table of reflections,
hard night-rain and neon in the window,
your hands caught mine, and how
my skin became a lily, or a lotus,

or a sea anemone, longing for storms.
I would watch your fingers press together.
Might too much bleed from them?
Might they remember me too fondly?
I'd wonder at their papery resolve.

One day you wore your ring—a talisman,
an amulet—the usual, plain, rough-cut garment
of yourself in shadow.
Words edged themselves between us,
reddening our lips.

Tumour

You gave me a present—

 I guess I'd call it that—
out of the blue,
 won from the realm
of untamed possibilities.

 It was hard, heavy, beautiful
like an egg of polished alabaster,
 the grey of a winter sea.

I warmed it in my hands
 as if I was praying,
I tucked it away for safekeeping
 surrounded by scarlet cushions,
nursed it in the cradle of my ribs.

Later, you ask for it back,
 apologetically.

Its absence had been noted
 and was causing difficulties.

I raise my shirt to show you
 the smooth egg bump,
a small unyielding extra breast.

 My skin is blue with fingerprints,
an overlapping tattoo
 like gravel flung in a pond.

For a moment I think you will touch me,
 but your hands spread in helplessness
and your eyelids flicker away.

*You need to get that seen to
professionally.*

Liverpool sunset

Drawn, as one always is, towards the waterfront—
unseen, but making the sky more generous
in that direction, an opal bowl spilling
the day's late gold—they sought the river.

Not hearing yet the waves' soft slap on the dock
but still the earbones vibrate to the tink-tink
of shrouds and the bumping, like tired children,
of ghost hulls nudging the quay.

And salt air on the tongue etches the heart
—in blue like a sailor's forearm—*Go west*;
and a rope strong enough to heave the ocean
across the planet's back coils in the gut.

He had tucked continents into his pockets,
hills and cities and people, wound click after click
onto 35 millimetre, letters from women
between the sheets of his journal.

But the north, its grit, seemed in her gift,
this pilgrimage required her mediation,
though she had never entered either football ground,
or screamed *She Loves You* at the Cavern Club.

Light folded inward, the broad ways drained of hubbub;
he striding, she listening for stones' afterthoughts,
they brushed the granite hips of chained colossi—gods,
propitiated by cotton, sugar, and bananas.

Then further, out of time, past shuttered wharfs,
fluttering with ragged fly-posters cut off mid-sentence,
blank and forgetful of the engine-room bass,
or the white flash of sail in the distance.

And as the sky turned rose-quartz, cobalt,
with countless starlings sprayed across like iron filings
pulled to an invisible pole, she saw that he was transient,
and she, one step from steerage, just as temporary.

Turkish carpet

It lies there, busy with itself, almost dancing—
its rhythms and exact geometries,
the fretted bones of a best-beloved,
intricate under the skin.

I plucked it from the wreck of my first marriage;
it knew nothing of aeronautics, or navigation,
but embroidered the obscure pathway
with its traveller's tales.

Its colours speak; cream—the curled backs of
sheep, swept from the long Anatolian hills,
where the earth's hide ripples, burnt-gold
like a lion's pelt;

the red we call ox-blood, stain of winter sunsets
and aurochs sacrifice, bucrania and twin-horned uteri,
the red of becoming, regeneration, ritual,
and death's red ochre;

and here's the murmur of old rose—madder—cinnabar,
shading subtle as a maiden's blush, high-turreted,
a handkerchief of sky at her window
dyed the lapis of night;

for the blues are earth blues, the greens mineral,
not the shifting glint of the far Aegean
but malachite, azurite, antique turquoise,
lapis lazuli, old as trade.

There's always a new angle on it; new symmetries
absorb the eye, new figures and oppositions.
Yet Time is tied in with each knot.
Old, new, borrowed...

I find an inconsistency of pattern; deliberate perhaps,
for only Allah is flawless. Or a momentary
lapse of concentration, a bird on the sill,
a rill of gossip, a dream.

Rock dancing

Marloes Sands

When, in the end, the sun appears,
I know that winter is beginning:
the way it hangs on the horizon, bloated;
it has sucked all colour from the land.

The day rolls up and, in the space it leaves,
there is a premonition of rain.
Gas flares snatch at the sky
and starlings swirl above the cliffs like smoke.
Even the sea cannot bear this moment
and shrinks away.

I stand in a raw cleft of stone
letting the sun's long fingers brush me,
leave their prints on my eyeball,
strike the damp tinder at my core.
The rocks are intermediaries, sentinels,
Silurian chieftains;
they have squared their black shoulders
tide after tide;
they do not feel our weight, our movement,
hear us exhale.

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Smoke rises like a name spoken softly.
The wood is salt-scoured, white as whalebone;
it burns without protest.
Pebbles shift beneath my vertebrae
in small accommodations.
They lie on my belly, press on my eyelids,
pulse in the hollow of my throat.
They rise and fall with my breath,
with the push—pull of the ocean,
wave after wave.
Sometimes, to dance, we need do no more.
Jeannie plays her tin whistle
and a dark head surfaces,
shaped like a question-mark.
We have called the seals to shore.

I have grazed my ankle as a keepsake—
an inter-elemental memento.
Dance and music, skin, breath, and bone,
smoke, water, wood, stone.