

**Amit Majmudar**

**Gift Books**

*for Aishani*

A Queen bee is not born, but fed  
Her crowning diet in her bed.  
All bees, at birth, inherit toil.  
The royal jelly makes the royal  
And raises to the honeyed throne  
A girl who might have been a drone.

And so I serve my Queen-to-be  
The royal jelly, poetry,  
And all the pollen of the field  
That fragrant, ancient books can yield,  
A hive where she will rule by feeding  
On inksweet dynasties of reading.

**Fragment from a Lost *Prometheus* of Sophocles**

I slammed through double doors and double doors  
and double doors and danced that bee swarm fire  
down marble steps. What's with this fennel stalk  
they're on about? Whoever carried fire  
in that? The beggar's bowl of this cupped hand  
was what I used to rush it down to earth.  
It started out a spark no bigger than  
a firefly. I blew and blew to keep it breathing.  
It crackled up the flesh fuse of my arm.  
Olympus, self-absorbed as ever, never  
saw me burn alive. Thief in the night?  
Agreed. But I put on a light show for them.

This eagle-beak evisceration's nothing.  
I soaked in that burn-unit marsh while nursing  
the fire that had put me there. This eagle  
isn't the first bird to partake of me.  
Hummingbirds sipped my blisters smaller.

Easy enough to get a human being's  
attention. *Shiny shiny! Come and see!*  
Tinfoil could have done the trick, or else  
a pocket mirror tilted in the sun.  
Shiny: the pink sheen of my half-healed burns.

I slit an ox at the neck and flank. They pressed  
their faces to the wound and gnawed the way  
they'd seen the mountain lions do. I told them:  
No, cut a piece off, hold it over this first. *Then* chew.  
I taught them candlemaking, too, and with it  
the art of patience. Dip a stick in this stuff,  
I said, and it's a torch. Can you say *torch*?  
*Grey wolves are terrified* of these things. Here.

They thought the wick an orange orchid. More  
than once I had to stop them tucking it  
behind their ears. Perhaps I read a love  
of beauty into simple vanity.  
But Aphrodite loves a mirror, too.  
A string you dip a couple hundred times  
in a pot of wax. *This is how you get wise.*

The candle, tilted to another unlit wick:  
*And this is how you pass the wisdom on.*  
First metaphors. First inkling that a thing —  
a body — isn't what it is at all.

To give them a use for that intimate light,  
I taught them letters. These little marks, I said,  
are yours now. Recombine them how you like.  
Alpha, mu, iota, tau. Write your own name,  
or a god's. Don't like it? Cross it out.  
The letters have no right to stop you writing.

All this Olympian fuss over fire. That's just  
the light they see. The word I smuggled out —  
this *if* — was far more dangerous to Zeus  
and all his ilk. If I had never filched  
the fire, only taught them how to use  
the gift of *if*, that single verbal spark  
would burn them all to ashes. After *if*,  
they could imagine things another way.  
Their dream lives flickered on, eyelids aflutter  
like curtains hiding two thrown-open windows,  
jailbroken vision swimming with the current  
down the river of the optic nerve. *If*  
there were no gods, and *if* there were no fear,  
no suffering, no hunger, *then* there would be

us and only us. Prometheus  
foresees the justice. Burn, burn. Zeus is dust.  
He chained me to this crag. Ah, feel that: Waves  
explode, explode, explode. Rebellion weather!  
Fake rain I never sang for patters down.  
You want to know the name of Demogorgon's  
mother, don't you? The one mare you can't mount?  
Too late, you lech. The demos is the gorge.  
My people, my pupils, will spear you with a spit  
and cook and chew and swallow you the way  
I taught them, first slash to your neck,  
the second down your flank. I see this, I  
forsee this. Hell, I hear your melted fat  
spatter the cookfire like the spray of these  
white waves that salt the meat of me immortal.

Amit Majmudar

## Insomnia

1.

Not thought. Heat lightning in the skull.  
My mind, in neutral, revs  
a mile from the cliff. A would-  
be suicide, it lives

and lives. The living, enviably deadened,  
plump in their sparrow fluff  
on power lines with the power cut  
have shut their chirping off.

They lie there at their nightly wakes,  
resting in peace, the brain-  
stem's stash of nightcap morphine  
eased into a vein.

I used to swat at fireflies.  
I chased them on the lawn.  
They glowed one glow the whole time dying,  
damaged into dawn.

2.

My eyes open with the sound of gates  
slammed shut. I'm up, undead.  
I pace the hall, my road of exile,  
with clockwork-steady tread.

I pause a spell beside my wife  
and marvel through a window,  
divided from that kingdom I've  
no hope of passing into.

I fall asleep but never stay  
asleep, the cure-all slapped  
away, that one sip all I get.  
My time is strictly capped,  
the magic sound until the stroke  
of startled midnight, when  
my coach and four regresses to  
a four-post bed again.

I waft from room to room and watch  
my children floating on  
their backs, as peaceful as a wake,  
downriver to the dawn.

The mind is its own arsonist  
and dances in the night  
around the fire it has set  
by sitting down to write.

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## **December, Ohio**

December, Ohio, and winter still  
conspires in our burying —  
this snow-white dark we name for air,  
this gouge we call the harrowing.

Oxycontin breathes us, breeds us  
heirs of old despair.  
It circles churches into barns  
in sterile disrepair.

One pill, two pill, three pill, four,  
countless Ohioans count  
the flicks of the Bic to cook a spoonful  
down to a manic ounce.

The railroad crossing's overgrown.  
The bars are never down.  
A mile up these tracks, an engine  
smokes into the ground.

Snow in the mouth, a smoking censer,  
savors of mankind  
as white pills crushed to powder make  
a Christmas in the mind.

Our future is a skating rink,  
a pale and pill-shaped oval  
where long lost daughters lock their mittens  
and orbit through the snowfall.

**World's Worst Best Man**

Bowtie, and wedding band, and cummerbund on me?  
*Nooses, my friend, in search of a Judas tree.*

Will a true love knot, then, hoist me kicking off the ground?  
*Trust my rusty saw to cut you down.*

Does rigor mortis give a married man that stoic look?  
*Even Marcus Aurelius bit the hook.*

And when the wedding cake gets wheeled in on a gurney?  
*The biggest piece will go to your attorney.*

## Busking

When work runs late, and I race the bastard dusk  
beneath the earth, I hear a guitar sometimes  
calling me to the Green Line. It's an offset  
cosmos over there, a tandem cohort  
of commuters cursing the PowerPoint  
that stole the evening. Since no one awaits me,  
and since a long enough commute becomes  
a home, I theseus that six-string out  
into another life. The same twelve stops,  
but all renamed: The world I know, transfigured.  
The real weirdness on that Green Line platform  
is how no one can hear this woman busking,  
guitar case laid there like an opened ribcage.  
Only the coins she's tossed in it are in it —  
seed money, failing her in time of famine.  
I try to meet her eyes, but she is gazing  
beyond the Green Line, beyond the horizon.  
In this religion that I once came up with  
(I write them, then revise them back to nothing,  
like poems) buskers were the best of omens,  
a sacred class of holy beggars, there  
to hurry transcendence like a grain of sugar  
deep into our anthill, feeding all,  
even the fools who push their earbuds snug.  
What's paper money but a prayer flag?  
I drop some in her case, her collection plate  
to build the cloud cathedral of her body.  
The Green Line shows up, drinks the people in,  
and then it's only me and her a while  
on this familiar unfamiliar platform,  
acoustics perfect, like a monastery's,  
the Green Line illuminated with the blues.