

13 Poems about Cyrus

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Hair

YOU TELL ME if I ever need you, to burn a strand of your hair, and you will come. I collect your hairs from the bed, from the bathtub, from the sink. I have a small wooden box where I keep your hairs.

I could call you by name.

I don't know what to call you.

You tell me about ancient slaves being painted. First white, then blue. Their arms like a fleshy part of sky reaching through cloud. Like water, then night sky. They can be traced. Nothing they touch is free of the blue. They can never hide, always leaving a trail. Their bodies lathered in cobalt, opaque lead white on their faces.

Painted white, painted blue.

Shave

You ask me to shave you one morning in the early winter. It's snowing. You want to feel the cold, and you sit outside without a shirt. I wear the white fur coat left over from your wife and my big galoshes. I slowly shave your left cheek. You grab my hand with the straight razor. Hold it to your throat. Your arm is shaking. Cut, you say. I try to pull my hand away, but you're holding onto me hard. *Cut*. I take the razor with my other hand, throw it to the patio floor. I put my hands on your face and cover your eyes. You hold my wrists, shake, weep. I sit facing you on your lap with my hands on your face.

—Don't, you say.

—Don't what?

We can hear dogs barking.

Wasps

My hair since I've known you is curlier. Curls of dark hair on my neck.

I drink bourbon. Walk in snow barefoot. Talk to trees. Sleep in eyeliner. Stay up all night reading A. A. Milne. *Blood in the river and on the stones*. I listen to the wind cut on tin awnings. I take folic acid with wine when I'm late. I singe hair in candles. I fall asleep with swirling stories of saints with severed heads and children with missing shoes.

The wasps are dropping in from a hole in the ceiling. They are eating each other. They fall from the vigas, drunk, writhe and climb onto each other and munch. Are they mating? Dying? A man comes to block their entryway, he squirts orange foam into the wood on the outside of the big south windows. They are gone for a day. And then back, dropping in again from the ceiling.

Persian New Year

Nowrouz marks the first day when the universe started its motion.

My yellowness is yours, your redness is mine. Jump through the seven fires and say this to each fire. Flowers in my hair, ankles bare. I might singe my eyelashes and eyebrows, but they grow back. Put my hair in braids so it won't catch.

The Persian New Year party is at your best friend's house. His name is Quimars, but is called Q, and his wife is named Bibi. You refer to them collectively as BBQ. When I meet them, you tell them that I have a song for them and you ask me to sing "Barbecue Stain on My White T-shirt."

Q cooks for days, with his mother who speaks no English and eats Lean Cuisine meals while making *fesenjoon* and *ash*. She tells you to tell me, when she (meaning me) makes *blah blah*, it's one egg per eggplant, use tomato paste not fresh tomatoes, and she forgot the onion. They make lamb and cookies shaped like men with tambourines, mulberry marzipan. They make a shrine from things that in Farsi begin with the letter S (for good luck and/or cleansing). Flowers, porcelain eggs, grass, a goldfish in a scalloped-edged bowl, hyacinths, roses, sumac, a tiny olive tree, candy, doves, bowls of brown spices, a glass of pudding, a glass of liquor, a mirror. On the thirteenth day after Nowrouz, you must put the grass into rushing water. You say you'll walk it to the river, Q says he usually flushes it down the toilet.

The earth is switching on the bull horns.

Children wait to see if the fish flip.

Blood

You tell me you've been leaving me since the day you met me, then ask to bathe me, you want to wash my feet.

The night we go to have a drink and end up staying at the hotel, the window open, lace curtain rippling over the Capitol Building, the Baton Memorial, the parking lot full of lowriders for the Expo, I shower and use a new razor from the hotel to shave my legs. I drank too much and I do it too quickly, nervously, and I cut myself twice, like the first time I shaved my legs when I was twelve. A thin strip of skin still hanging off the blade. I stand in the shower with blood swirling around my feet, you try to come into the bathroom, but I reach out of the shower and lock the door because I'm embarrassed about my blood.

Bath

I take a salt bath in the master bathroom. (We sleep in one of your daughter's rooms.) I never go into the master wing except to take a bath. Feet up on the white tile wall. Scars on my legs. You come in, read to me, wash my hair. Very volumizing shampoo which smells of strawberry. *The Story of the Husband and the Parrot*. You read too fast. You hold the book as far as your arms will reach. You can just get reading glasses, I say. Hush, Cheerio, hush. The veins in my body glow bright blue. You drop the book, climb in with your suit on. Your tie floats.

Pluck

The shower curtain is pink. The water hot and rushing. I clean my belly button. I smooth my feet and elbows with a pumice stone. I wash and then I dry my body with a pink towel. I clean out my hair from the bathtub drain. I floss. I clean my ears. I clean my nails, I push back my cuticles. I put perfume in my hair. I paint my lips red. I trim, I pluck.

I am in charge of the gardeners and of the cleaning woman Matilda. The gardeners refer to me as *usted*, and I tell them to call me *tú*, and they say, *sí señora*, and call me *usted*.

I change the sheets that smell, still warm. Matilda mops the brick floors. Her child sleeps in a basket on the kitchen counter while she mops the floors, after sweeping up the dead wasp bodies in the living room. We still can't figure out where they're coming in from.

I wait for you to come home, perfume on my neck, cardamom breath when I kiss you hello.

When you leave town, I don't bathe. I wear galoshes and the same jeans day after day, same sweater, no lipstick, no perfume. I'm muddy, no gold. Nothing around my neck. I wear cotton underwear. I eat garlic. I stick my tongue out, talk in a baby voice with my brother on the phone. Your co-worker Gustavo says to me one night when I see him out dancing, you're a dorky goofy girl when he's not around—he's not that great—just another asshole like we all are—don't be so cool, don't be so fancy.

Apnea

The sucked-in hush of sleep, like you're under water, drowning, holding your breath, for an impossible time, then inhaling fast and hard, snoring, grunting, grabbing me tighter. There you are, you whisper in my ear, there you are. Holding my body like a life vest in your upturned sea. When you kiss me, you look old, that's when you look the oldest. You age twenty years when you close your eyes, lean in with open mouth, teeth gnashing for my mouth. Eyes sunk back into your skull, brow furled. When you sleep, you shake, jolt, quiver. I anxiously feel your lack of breath. I kiss your shoulder to wake you so you breathe. I make you turn over.

I knew one had to wear out seven pairs of iron shoes. I knew to bathe in baths of scalding milk. I knew to rub salt into a self-inflicted wound. Arms laden, sacks bulging.

Tree

On the south side of the house is an old stone wall with broken clay plumbing pipes and overgrown ivy. I think if I stay in the house until next Easter, it will be a wonderful place to hide eggs.

I like to pluck hairs. I tweeze the hair tree on your chest, shape your leaf. What kind is it? A tree of heaven, of course.

We can only feel through our mouths.

I could call you by name. I don't know what to call you. How to call out.

I could burn the house down.

I have dark eyes.

Seven withered and seven golden.

Seven lamps of fire.

Seven horns and seven eyes.

Seven thunders uttered.

Seven-fold shield.

Seven hills.

Seven-mouthed river.

Our Life in the Empty House

The smell of rotting quince takes over the house. We make something with eggplant that I can't remember the name of. We taste of turmeric. Full-fat strained yogurt and strips of basil. Sitting on the brick floor. This, you say, is what I used to eat at home.

You come into the bathroom without knocking and grab my face. I was washing my hands. You file my teeth with your teeth. Hold my neck with both hands, step on my feet. Take off your silver bracelet and rub the inside of your wrists on my collar bone. I kiss back, stand on your feet. Your eyes are wet. Tears have tongues, you say, and I laugh. You lift my shirt sleeves and kiss my forearms. I sit in the sink, feel the faucet on my back, think about what you can see in the mirror behind me. The moles on my back, my hair, your eyes peeking out over my shoulder. *Paradise unearned is but a land of shadows.*

We sleep on the floor under the window which we always leave cracked. Through the dark blue light of night, with splatters of half-moon and streetlamp, a spiderweb quivers on the screen. The horsehair mattress has a spring poking through on the left side, so we stay on the right. I pull my hair up off the nape of my neck so you can sleep with your face there.

In your sleep you laugh, grab me, stop breathing. Rest your bended leg over my legs. In your sleep you hum. I don't sleep deeply when I am with you. Often I am awake in the middle of the night. When you leave town, I sleep like a baby, long long nights of sleep, half a day without moving.

Angel Food Cake

In Tehran, there are no pitched roofs. There wasn't a pitched roof in town. When it would snow, men would walk through the streets chanting *I will shovel your snow I will shovel your snow I will shovel your snow*. They use shovels carved out of a single piece of wood. The snow makes a loud thud when it hits the street below.

For a few of your childhood years, you lived in Nairobi where your father worked at the World Bank. You could watch lions hunting gazelles from the living room window.

You had a Kenyan cook with large stretched ear lobes which he would twist and hook on the top of his ears.

Your father hoped that if he got the right American education, and the right job, that he could return and save his country.

At the British school, you learned to pee without taking your shorts down.

You four boys had a Kenyan nanny named Catherine. She returned to Tehran with your family and she would hang the laundry on rope lines on the roof of your flat-roofed house. You remember Catherine baking angel food cake, and telling you four boys that you had to be very quiet and very still for a very long time, or else the cake would fall.

Sugar in the Milk

It can be told in any number of ways, but essentially a group of Zoroastrians flee when Iran is converted, by the sword, to Islam. They sail away, or make the trek across the Hindu Kush and arrive in Gujarat. There they are taken to the Rajah who shows them a bowl filled all the way to its rim with milk, as if to say, my kingdom is full, there is no room for anyone else. In response, the ones who would be known as Parsees take a pinch of sugar or by some accounts salt, and place it in the milk, as if to say, we will only enhance your kingdom, nor will we disturb your subjects.

And that is how the Parsees came to inhabit Gujarat.

(Of course you can add all kinds of embellishments, maybe give the ruler a mole on the cheek.)

Grave

In forty, maybe fifty years from now. I dream that I dig you up. I peel off the linen shroud. Your pelvis bones are like bat ears. Shreds of Stan Smith shoes on your pigeon-toed foot bones. Your black and silver hair. Your teeth. I sing:

*I tried my best to keep my distance from the devil
but his words wouldn't stop me and
his mouth was oh so wet
I tried my best to keep my distance from the devil
but his words wouldn't stop me and
my mouth was oh so wet**

*Song lyrics from "The Torture," by Leslie Stevens