

# DEAR PERSON,



*Issam Zineh*  
*poems*

*Beach Reading*

1. Summer

Earlier when you told me green was a hard color to wear,  
I thought you said it makes the skin look *fallow*.

I could barely hear you over the specific music  
we came here for: esses and effs of oceansound.

We will want, at some point, after having had our fill

of muscular Danes and Saxon blood  
and facts about the blockade runner  
that wrecked not too far off the eastern end of the island,

to dance with great abandon.

I will try to write some poems in my usual way.  
I will editorialize on the appropriateness of the term *spirit  
animal*, name the animal inside me

*fox*, opine

on the neighborhood flora,  
recall my grandmother who would make us stop

on the side of the road in Northern California  
so she could steal from the bright orchards—

the kind of thing that could get us killed now.

We've rented a beach house for the week.

Two young boys take turns swinging  
a shovel at a sand fortress their father took  
hours to build.

Our kids buy Italian ice from the vendor.  
They insist on blue raspberry even though the dye

gives them the shits.

I've left my glasses at home and can barely make out  
the supine bodies around us and who they belong to.

I would be a useless pillager.  
You theorize that religion was invented by the near-sighted  
of the species as a kind of self-preservation. We have a good laugh.

This light going from white to pink. I say I love you.  
You say you believe me. The light from pink to blue.  
I think about the man

who beat my mother over a parking spot.  
The silence that filled the car when she got back in.  
She was missing an earring.

I could see the pier in the mirror as she drove off,  
and it was spectacular.

## 2. Winter

I tell you I won't be long.  
It's the lowest the tide has been since we bought the house.

It's frigid. So cold  
the only reason to be out here is that I'm already here.

I see a wrong kind of grey in the southern distance,

walk toward it. My stomach opens  
into my throat.

A frozen racoon.

He's on his back, fours up, teeth bared with all viciousness  
gone from the body through wet obsidian marbles.

How long has he been like this?  
How long did he walk this shoreline before the knowing set in?

What terrible thing did he flee

in his keen imagination?  
Across the wide road,

in the adjacent woods,

pine is pine, cedar, cedar, tupelo, tupelo.

Before I left, you told me not to look  
at the charts, there are very few surprises this time

of year. I should see what the sea has to offer when I get there.  
There are only locals left and they don't go out in the winter.

I walk the stretch I used to walk with your father.

Light snow on a beach.

There is life: a few random gulls.  
There's also approximation. The moorings

are exposed down to the heavy chain.

There is death we've become so accustomed to we no longer see it  
as death: seaweed, razor shells, driftwood.

When I get home, you're lying on the floor.  
Your knees are up, bound to each other with a belt.  
Your hands are on your lower belly. You're breathing slowly.

I ask what you're doing.  
You say you're working with the front part of your heart,

the part that meets the world first.

*Ars Poetica*

Write a poem about lust without using the word  
*lust*. Luxuriate in the prayer.  
Give birth in an open field, then go back  
to work. Search for your own body  
among all the talk of other bodies. Draw up the resonant  
smell from memory. Be the biggest presence  
in your own life, your own biggest ghost in your own  
cemetery of numbers. Feed your guests  
sandwiches of sugar & meat from your best  
horse. Tear down the road signs  
to confuse the advancing troops.  
Feel the fullness of your bladder.

*Form & Occasion*

The grammarians are up  
in arms, and the war over  
the semicolon has been reignited.

The innumerable lists of grievances.

Today, the legislator notes his preference  
for certain kinds of killers. Those,  
one might say, with a European sensibility.

He believes in the power of crude  
measures and symbolism and, maybe,  
the special now of the lyrical moment—

The innumerable languages of the body.  
The disdain for the appearance of the word *body*.

The inconvenient sounds of our vital organs.  
The euphemisms that snow us inward.

*Against Rhetoric*

The soft slope and the green repetition  
of the Spanish hillside. The green  
that is also brown. The red farmhouse,  
two grain siloes. A single bull grazing  
on acres and acres of soft yellow.  
The Mediterranean air  
as it emancipates each molecule.  
What do you think? Lemons?

*When We Look at Ancient Mesopotamian Myth*

The goddess of young corn is warned by her mother not to bathe in the canal.  
There is concern the god of spring storms might seduce  
and impregnate, which, of course, he does.

She refuses him at first  
on the grounds of her age, the inexperience of her mouth,  
the inevitability of her parents' protests.

The god cannot take no for an answer. He orders  
his servant to build a boat that he might travel to her side  
of the uninterrupted bank. She has changed her mind by the time he

arrives. She becomes pregnant with the moon god.  
The god of spring storms returns to the city. He is declared a sex offender  
and banished to the far mountain river that leads to the underworld.

The goddess of young corn follows her beloved  
first stopping at the city gate, then just shy  
of the mountain river, then at the bank of departures.

Each time  
she meets a different man:  
gatekeeper, guardian of the river, ferryman.

Each time announcing she bears the moon in her womb.  
Each time, the different man is the same man. She lies with the same  
different man. She conceives a second son, then another, then

one more. The Sumerian word for *water* is also the word  
for *semen*. You are bathing in the canal, now, because I am  
attracted to stories of power and sex. I like

taboo. The goddess did not know she was sleeping  
with the god in disguise. She slept with what she thought  
were three men other than her beloved all in the span

of less than a page. Primal willingness, you called it,

what we might have to do to each other for refuge.  
You say you want

me to be more vulnerable. I can hear you telling me  
there's an opportunity, here, in this part of the poem, to open  
into the aliveness of my heart, blue and raging fruit.

We return to the city for the first trimester ultrasound. Our second  
daughter. This time they find a cyst on the umbilical cord. Rare  
this early in. The technician calls the doctor into the room.

She says it could be nothing.  
Artifact. Or the fetal heart could grow  
on the outside of the chest.

It's a long quiet ride home until it's not.  
We collapse on the couch.  
We hold each other longer than we've held each other before

and longer than we will ever hold each other again.  
I step outside for a smoke. The moon is out. I haven't prayed in years.  
One of the moon's brothers later becomes king

of the underworld. There are two versions of that story.  
I prefer the one where he journeys because death fascinates him.  
He glimpses death, naked, after bathing.

They make love for seven days, alternating riots of light.  
He runs off to the upper world, leaving a grieving  
death. He returns years later and, laughing,

grabs death, who is called *Ereshkigal*, by the hair, and pulls  
her from her throne. Another seven days,  
and they are together forever.

*God*, I say, *if you're out here*  
*please give me a sign that everything will be ok.* I hear  
a plane fly overhead, though I can't see it. I hear my own voice ask

*What is it? What is it we're naming here?*

*For My Father and His Tender Heart*

I'm on the other side  
and the messages have come through.

People have abandoned their theories  
of governance and are all

so technically virtuous at their music,  
which I hear now release from the cave

where your home would have been.  
The poets are busy with atrocities.

The men of discourse  
demote planets left and right,

but we have set up whole cities  
in celestial concordance. We have

planted our fair share of fruiting trees  
and cacti. We have been faithful

to language, called out the passive  
voice in this whole destructive human business.

Everyone has given their brief accounts  
for the archive: this one

loved playing with dolls,  
this one was working on space-time.

Each asylum  
seeker has been given a job.

When you get here  
you will be in charge of the museum.

I will dig up the children  
from their earth beds

and point them toward the rising sun.