

ZINEH ● UNCEDED LAND

# UNCEDED LAND

ISSAM ZINEH

POEMS



THIP

*Rare Bird*

Three boys from the refugee camp  
next to my uncle's house are whipping

a pigeon. They are dusty. I can see  
they're wearing the same clothes

from the day before. The bird is dusty.  
It's not going anywhere. A broken

bird trying to get off the ground sounds like  
a rolled-up paper through air, like errant skin.

You ask me to be more intentional.  
Today: work *cicatrix* into conversation.

Show me your scar, now your limbs—  
show me what it is that obsesses.

Ask one question that won't be answered:  
What is it about these parts?

Enumerate the invisible: not private struggle,  
which has its own airglow. Not exactly

the smoke from the fire that zippered more  
than it crackled. Not the escape tunnel that led out

from the concentration camp. Not the memory of *sea*  
when we came across seaweed washed up on shore.

These all have their signs and symbols—some way  
to point to, at least, the semblance of the thing in question.

The truly unseen—how when I say no one had ever  
touched me before, you think of the *pyracantha* we never planted.

The grass is a little taller and the clothesline  
a little slacker. How there is a certain

strength in naming that owes wholly to the intention.  
How the wind whispers *liberate*.

## *Catastrophic Sonnet*

[My grandfather still has his house key from 1948. He says he lives in the part of the village where the past doesn't kill you. He invites his neighbors in for fruit and mixed nuts and something cool then something hot. There is a belligerence of songbirds every square mile. *Come see what I brought you from the market*, he says: cucumbers, local, pomegranates, za'atar. *I see you've renounced your birthplace, which is of course your right. When they come for you, they will ask about your love's name, her contours, her address. You will dream of male sunbirds feeding on nectar mid-air.* Where is it written that we're supposed to call? I misheard him talk of our rightful place at the top of the hill. My kids fell in love with imperialism last summer in London. They discovered legacy in the gardens. They woke to the logics of the enterprise. I miss the burgers at Johnny's] .

## *Unceded Land*

This part of the cape is known for oysters. That part's known for turnips.  
The playhouse is closed until next season. I keep reporting in this way.

*fort      hill      rock      harbor*

We stand at the edge of town cove. You ask why  
I brought you here and if I remember any of the original intensity.

The sun is a kind of gratitude, you say, a continuously  
ringing bell in the lower belly that we can breathe right into.

You have done it again, this time without the modesty  
it might require:      taken your cresting pain and turned it into a kite.

You will come clean if I ask.

We should start seeing goldfinches this time of year.  
How would you describe a warble to someone who has never heard one?

A music without words, a euphemism in the cessation of sound,  
a scarce Bedouin music where we are in tents and pour each other out,  
bloated, amorous, into little bone cups for drinking.

*we might be standing on unceded land.*      I say,

Light in a field.

You say, *I have no need  
of such things. Just sing to me, baby, just sing.*

*I Name Your Body (This is Not a Poem About an Olive Tree)*

hour of my exoneration  
rebounding myth  
sequence of senses that antler, tusk, & bone  
blood & milk  
almanac of unnamed moons  
remnant sound of the sentient ocean  
vital surrounding billow  
reconciled city  
near-threatened birds of the plain  
headwater to mouth  
the Nauset light  
the darkest verb  
the word for land  
what I swallow when you say *swallow*

## *Coefficients of Friction*

The physicist in me,  
with polymers mated against steel thrust

washer geometry, in all my traction, grip, and desire,  
is trapped in the wrong version of eternity.

You are valuable and dimensionless.  
Load and velocity.

Somehow, we manage the perpendiculars  
that push us: classic form, controlled damage,

a growing evidence of others.  
While we fuck, you remember the lions

of Tsavo, *a hunger wholly justified*  
*by the cruelty of the colony*—how it happens

that the brittle bones of resistance  
offer little by way of deliverance.

The animal's rictus. Lioness with a broken  
sheering tooth, apex and insatiate.

You ask if what we know of each other  
is literal, say your body is indigenous

and insist I acknowledge the land I'm on.  
Then I wake. This is the latest version of the dream.

The basic requirement for movement  
is two surfaces: flight is / underwing /

air / a girl on the run / rubber / road  
beauty against bone / empire

We believe ourselves nations.  
I come to you because I want to come

and because coming is as much  
a going away from.

Measurement is its own form of witness.  
Tabulate. immortalize me.