Breathwork

By

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A Creative Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract	ii
Introduction	1-17
Breathwork	1-29

Abstract

The following creative thesis is comprised of a critical introduction and a collection of poetry. I am working in a particular form of poetry called the ghazal. The critical introduction delineates the conventions of the Urdu ghazal in particular, as well as some of the recent discussion surrounding the act of translation from Urdu into English. It then provides a brief analysis of free-verse ghazals written in English, and goes on to situate my work within this context, as an extension of, and at times response to, the work of North American poets who have interpreted the ghazal form before me. My interest in the form lies in working with many of the traditional conventions of the ghazal, while at the same time opening up the strict rhyme and meter scheme to a free-verse play of language. The formal disunity of the ghazal creates a space in which there is a desire for meaning, and a respect for the possibility of multiple meanings, the possibility of never arriving at a name or a home.

Introduction

I first encountered the ghazal in a comparative literature class when we studied the poems of Ghalib, the preeminent poet of Urdu. There I learned the formal structure and conventions of the ghazal, and was introduced to the problems of translating the original Urdu form into English. Translation itself is arguably always problematic, as certain cultural idioms within the original text do not necessarily come across or have the same impact in another language. But there seems to be a common lament among those who translate Urdu ghazals into English, a striking lament that sings the inadequacies of translation, the lost glory of the original ghazal. I will analyze this crisis of translation as an inevitable shift from one poetic tradition to another, a shift that does not contend with language alone but also cultural expectations of poetic form. I will then offer a defense for the poetics of the North American ghazal, and situate my collection, titled *Breathwork*, within this tradition. Finally, I will outline the ways in which the research I have done in the area of Kundalini breathwork, as well as Tim Lilburn's discussion of contemplative poetry and his poetics in *Living In The World As If It Were Home*, inform my work on the ghazal.

Originating in Persia, the ghazal is a lyric poem comprised of at least three couplets, with no maximum limit, each concentrating on a separate thought, image, or mood but connected by a common meter and rhyme scheme in the pattern of aa, ba, ca, da, and so on. A couplet should be autonomous, thematically and emotionally complete in itself: one may be comic, another tragic, romantic, religious, or political. Agha Shahid Ali argues that the technical context of the ghazal saves it from arbitrariness and gives it a formal unity based on rhyme and prosody, while at the same time enabling the ghazal to

embody a formal disunity. So that once a poet establishes a scheme, "s/he becomes its slave. What results in the rest of the poem is an alluring tension of a slave trying to master the master" ("Practice" 205). Ali does not distinguish between form and content, nor does he elaborate on what formal disunity is. He simply states that a rigidity of form saves the ghazal from arbitrariness and incoherence.

Thus the rigidity of the ghazal form is indispensable for Ali, but he concedes to the problem of translating it from Urdu into English. In one of his earlier publications, arguing for real ghazals written in English with a rhyme and meter scheme (as opposed to the unreal, unrhymed ghazals), Ali brackets the problem of translation while discussing a formal component of the Urdu ghazal: "All the lines...must have the same number of syllables (I will not go into metrical subtleties because there are no English equivalents for Persian/Urdu meters)" (206). In fact, in all of his translations of Urdu ghazals into English, Ali dispenses with the rhyme and meter scheme and opts for free verse instead because there are simply no adequate English equivalents for the subtleties of the Urdu form. This is not, however, without its lament. In his introduction to his translations of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poetry, Ali writes,

> Because translating a ghazal formally is just about impossible (beyond my powers, in any case), I have adopted loose, free-verse stanzas to suggest the elliptical power of Faiz's couplets. But the magic of the form is missing, often heartbreakingly so. Desperation, however, can lead one to freer ways of approximating magic. (xvii)

Desperation leads Ali to Aijaz Ahmad's edition of *Ghazals of Ghalib,* a collaboration with a group of American poets, Adrienne Rich among them. Ahmad sent

these poets literal versions of Ghalib's work, adding necessary scholarly explanations, which the poets then translated into poetic form. "What emerged", writes Ali, "was sometimes spectacular, sometimes magical, sometimes passable – but always interesting.... They have shown me how one may at times use free verse in translations to capture the essence of a poem, even if the original is in a stringent form" (*Rebel's* xviii). Ali acknowledges here that free verse can in fact "capture" the magic of the original poem; therefore the magic is not dependent on stringent form alone. Yet he is not so generous in his estimation of unrhymed ghazals written in English, believing that they are incapable of reaching the same level of "breathless excitement" that the original form can generate. He makes a dramatic distinction between free-verse translations of ghazals and ghazals written originally in free-verse English. Something occurs in translation that must not be allowed to continue in ghazals written in English. Essentially, loss occurs, a loss of the original magic and presence of the form. Ali believes that a return to a strict adherence to form will somehow restore the loss that is irrecoverable in translations.

He does not therefore see these different attitudes toward the free-verse ghazal as contradictory but rather as a problem of translation. In essence, he believes the original form of the ghazal should be reproduced in North America because the magic lies in the form. There is something too special, too idiomatic, in the rhyme and meter scheme of the ghazal to lose to a North American audience. And since that form does not translate from Urdu to English, it must be insisted upon that real ghazals written in English have some manner of rhyme and meter scheme. This is a way of attempting to deal with what John P. Leavey Jr. refers to as the problem of idiom in translation:

> …insofar as a translation translates idiom, it violates it because the translation says, You're not that special. You are not that idiomatic, not that different; your context can be reconstituted somewhere else…. That kind of battle takes place every time, with the text attempting to wall itself off and say, I'm something different from you, and with translation saying, No, you're not that special…. The battle seems to me to be about this, the way in which those two questions of the absolute, the absolutely idiomatic and the absolutely translatable, are constantly in tension – as the possibility of any translation. (McCance 3)

What seems to upset Ali the most is that it *is* possible to translate the Urdu ghazal into English, and that part of the translation involves an absolute violation of the original idiom and form. A translation that says exactly this: "You're not that special."

The tension between the absolutely idiomatic and the absolutely translatable is evident in every discussion concerning the translation of Urdu ghazals into English. There is a consensus among Urdu scholars that the impossibility of translating the ghazal formally lies in the specificity of Urdu metrical patterns, which are far more complex than those commonly used in English. Rhymes are abundant and rhyming easy in Urdu, but this is not the case in English (Russell *Hidden* 168). It is important to note that this problem of translation is stated as a matter of fact and not argument. None of the scholars provides phonetic examples of Urdu script to show how Urdu functions as a more poetic language than English. It is simply understood that rhyme and rhythm are more readily available in Urdu. Thus Ali acknowledges that he must allow for freer ways of approximating magic in his free-verse translations because the Urdu form is so special

that its magic remains essentially Urdu and cannot be translated. But he refuses to acknowledge that the ghazal form is also up for translation when written in English.

Several North American poets, John Thompson, Adrienne Rich, and Phyllis Webb, to name a few, have interpreted the ghazal form, and each radically alters the traditional Urdu form. However, what remain consistent in all of these collections are the reflective, introspective tone and the self-contained couplets of the traditional ghazal. These poets work with the highly conventionalized form of the ghazal, but offer unique interpretations of it by opening up its conventions to poetic play. In his most recent editorial publication *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English* Ali speaks out more vehemently in his introduction against these free-verse ghazals:

> For a seemingly conservative, but to me increasingly a radical, reason – form for form's sake – I turned politically correct some years ago and forced myself to take back the gift outright: Those claiming to write ghazals in English (usually American poets) had got it quite wrong, far from the letter and farther from the spirit.... For those brought up on Islamic literary traditions, especially the Persian and Urdu ghazal, to have many of these arbitrary near-surrealistic exercises in free verse pass for ghazals was – is – at best amusing (1).

The ghazals that follow Ali's introduction adhere to the aa, ba, ca,... rhyme scheme. Here is an example of a "real" ghazal that Ali often cites as an outstanding representation of what ghazals written in English should look like:

> For couplets the ghazal is prime; at the end
> Of each one's a refrain like a chime: "*at the end.*"
>
> But in subsequent couplets throughout the whole poem,
> It's the second line only will rhyme at the end.

On a string of such strange, unpronounceable fruits,
How fine the familiar old lime at the end!

Dust and ashes? How dainty and dry! We decay
To our messy primordial slime at the end.

. . . (Hollander)

The words prime, chime, rhyme, and so on, function as the rhyme (*qafiyah*), and the fixed phrase *at the end*, which is repeated at the end of each of the couplets that follow, is the end refrain or end rhyme (*radif*). Ali believes that the only way for the ghazal to reach North American poetry's mainstream is through this rhyme and refrain scheme because it creates a cultural expression and expectation of poetic form. Underlying his assertion that those brought up on the Persian and Urdu ghazal find the free-verse ghazal amusing is the belief that the ghazal cannot function properly outside of its original cultural expression.

In the Islamic literary tradition, ghazals are primarily intended to be heard, not read; they are recited, often as songs, at a poetry gathering called a *mushaira*, to which sometimes thousands of people come. When the poet recites the first line of the couplet, the audience recites it back, and then the poet repeats it, and the audience again follows suit. Ali suggests that this back and forth "creates an immensely seductive tension because everyone is waiting to see how the response will be resolved in terms of the scheme established in the opening couplet" ("Practice" 209). Thus the highly conventionalized form, the strongly marked sound patterning, of the ghazal encourages and facilitates audience participation. And in a sense, the form itself is established through audience participation.

This cultural specificity seems to me all the more reason why a North American ghazal has developed without a strict rhyme and meter scheme. We have not grown up in the Islamic literary tradition, and we would probably be very frightened to sing our poetry and even more frightened if our audience actually started reciting our poetry back to us as we went along. Perhaps we do need more interaction with our audience, but my point is that even if a North American audience is aware of the conventions of the traditional ghazal, the actual expression, specifically singing or reciting, of the ghazal form is not part of our poetry traditions or our culture. So it is not surprising that North American writers, such as Thompson and Rich, have translated the ghazal form into our poetry traditions.

I was not even aware of the North American ghazal until a few summers ago when Lorna Crozier handed me a copy of John Thompson's *Stilt Jack* and warned me to guard it with my life, as it is out of print and impossible to find. I was amazed by the openness and improvisation of Thompson's interpretation of the ghazal form, and spent a few hours writing out each poem into an old notebook so I was sure to have a copy of my own. I am indebted to Thompson for what I believe to be an insightful and responsible translation of the ghazal form. In his introduction to *Stilt Jack* he explains,

> My interest in 'form' lies in the freedom it allows – the escape, even, from brief lyric 'unity'.... The ghazal allows the imagination to move by its own nature: discovering alien design, illogical and without sense – a chart of the disorderly, against false reason and the tacking together of poor narratives. It is a poem of contrasts, dreams, astonishing leaps. The ghazal has been called 'drunken and amatory' and I think it is."

Thompson acknowledges further that ghazals are poems of "careful construction"; but it is a construction that allows for the greatest "controlled imaginative progression", which guards against the arbitrariness – in ghazals written without a stringent rhyme and meter scheme – of which Agha Shahid Ali so diligently warns us. Listen to the nuances and breaks between the couplets in one of Thompson's ghazals:

XVI

The barn roof bangs a tin wing in the wind;
I'm quite mad: never see the sun;

you like sad, sad songs that tell a story;
how far down whiskey row am I?

I believe in unspoken words, unseen gods:
where will I prove those?

If I wash my hands will I disappear?
I'll suck oil from Tobin's steel and walnut.

If one more damn fool talks to me about
sweetness and light…

I'm looking for the darkest place;
then, only then, I'll raise my arm;

someone must have really socked it to you:
were the lips made to hold a pen or a kiss?

If there were enough women I wouldn't write poetry;
if there were enough poetry.

Far from being arbitrary and obscure, the poem moves from association to association, from image to thought, from idea to rhythm. Patrick Lane suggests that we listen to Thompson's ghazals the way we would listen to jazz, "full of improvisations, but always returning to the same theme" ("Two Ghazals"). Read it out loud and you get a sense of the song and the rhythm in the lines, in your ear, on your tongue. Thompson does not

abandon form altogether, but rather opens up the rhyme and meter to a looser interpretation of the song-like qualities of the original ghazal, creating his own magic.

Thompson also maintains many of the conventions of the traditional ghazal. Each couplet is autonomous and evokes its own world of image and thought. And there is an overall sense of longing in the poem, as the lyrical "I" questions itself and its existence. Ali writes that "the peculiar fragrance of the form of the ghazal [is] its constant sense of longing" (*Rebel's* x). Thompson is a mystic of sorts. His starting point, however, is not that of the soul's longing for God but rather its longing for "the darkest place." And this longing resurfaces in couplets throughout *Stilt Jack:* "when I meet you again I'll be all light, / all dark, all dark"; "what lies in its right place, lives. / Brothers, sisters, true friends lie down in darkness"; "I feel all the weight:/ have I dared the dark center?" (28, 16, 46). Thompson opens up the "you" of the ghazal to the darkness and to anyone who will join him there, whether it is friends, family, or the unspoken and unseen gods he believes in, so that the beloved becomes all of these, and none of these at the same time.

In the traditional ghazal, the one crucial role of the beloved is to be *absent,* "and a radically absent beloved becomes a fantasy being, endowed with a shifting set of traits that exist only in the lover's imagination" (Pritchett 178). Thus the world of the ghazal can never begin with an Eden, "for the beloved has never been possessed as fully and as lastingly as the heart of the lover demands" (97). The beloved's gender is also unspecific. In an overwhelming majority of Urdu ghazals, no clue at all is given about the gender of the beloved. Frances W. Pritchett argues, "most descriptions of beauty, coquetry, and so on could apply either to a beautiful woman or to a beautiful boy – or, of course, to God, the ultimate Beloved. Grammar is no real help, for the beloved is by

convention (almost) always grammatically masculine, even when "he" is described in terms appropriate only to a woman" (178).

My work on the ghazal hinges on this notion of the absent and shifting beloved, which creates an overall sense of uncertainty and longing within the ghazal world I have written. But I extend this uncertainty and shifting movement to the lyrical "I" as well. In the traditional ghazal it is always the male lover who speaks. And a few women ghazal poets also speak of themselves in the masculine (Russell 137). I, however, have opened up the masculine "I" to the uncertainty of the beloved, so that the "I" at times is inhabited by the beloved, or by someone / thing other than itself. A line as simple as "I am an old woman. / My hands give me a way to you", transgresses the conventional certainty of the ghazal's masculine "I". The landscape also speaks from this position. The prairie speaks, from the open fields to the Badlands. And the beloved speaks.

I have tried in a sense to establish a dialogue in the space of the "I", a dialogue between the multiple subjects that attempt to speak from this space. The result is an uncertainty as to whether or not these subjects then shift from the position of the "I" to the position of the beloved. One of the predominant speaking subjects within this space is the poet herself. In the traditional ghazal form, the poet inserts his name or his penname into the final couplet, a convention referred to as *takhallus*. Here is an example from Ghalib: "Now Ghalib, these verses are idle amusements. / Clearly nothing is gained by such performance" (Mack 1057). I utilize this convention in some of my ghazals, but once again transgress it by using my own name and not adopting a masculine penname. The convention itself foregrounds a split in the lyrical "I", as the poet steps outside of the "I" and refers to himself in the second or sometimes third person.

I experienced a strange sense of awkwardness when I first wrote my name in a ghazal. Somehow it seemed too personal to include in something that really was not supposed to be about me at all. I cannot recall if I had ever been told not to write my name in a poem, but it seems to me that such an act would not go over very well in the poetry workshops I have attended. My name screamed on the page. Who needs exclamation marks when I can simply write Tavia? But it was not long after I began to write my name, I realized that Tavia had become part of the ghazal world, another name. The name-shift in the final couplet can also be read as the lover speaking to herself from the position of the beloved, as the couplet often reprimands or laments the lover's actions or perception of her world.

Another way in which I play with the shifting subject positions of the lover and beloved, the lyrical "I" and "you", is through an exploration of breath that I carry throughout my work. But before I go into the ways in which this exploration functions in my writing, I will explain how I arrived at breath. I had originally titled my collection of ghazals *Kundalini* because I loved the word and thought it had a good ring to it. But as I began to research Kundalini yoga practices, I was drawn to the notion of breathwork and the central role it plays in the realization of kundalini. Kundalini is in fact a particular form of breathwork through which it is believed one can unleash a female energy coiled at the base of the spine in the Sacrum bone. The awareness of the presence of this primordial kundalini energy within the human body was considered by the sages and saints to be the highest form of knowledge. Kundalini breathwork enables one to attain a certain state of lucidity in which the self fully recollects itself and paradoxically vanishes, and one enters into a heightened state of consciousness to what actually is (Nicoletti 156).

The actual practice of breathwork is given various names such as, Long Deep Breathing and Breath of Fire, each involving an awareness of the natural rhythm of the diaphragm.

Rather than focus on the Eastern religious philosophies surrounding kundalini, I have chosen to take the notion of breath and breathing and explore it in my work on the ghazal. I refer to this exploration as a lyrical contemplation of breath, which has also given rise to a contemplation of the body and its relation to place. This of course is not without a certain sense of mysticism and religious experience. But it is a mystical experience that is always frustrated and never fully realized. The Self/God realization promised by kundalini is not possible in the ghazal universe. But still there is the longing in my ghazals to attain this union between the lover and the beloved, a longing that expresses itself as a pervasive melancholy. I use breath to foreground this longing between lover and beloved, as breath is an intimate sign of the other's life force. In so doing, I play with the shift between the two subjects, as breath crosses over from one to the other: "I hold your tired breath / until I'm as drunk and wise as you". And of course what follows is the necessary response to the hold, the letting go, exhaling, so that the unity between the two remains a longing, "your breath at my ear, / when you are no where to be found."

I do not wish to impose a semblance of an overall thematic unity on my thesis, or set out to exhaust any one particular topic, as the ghazal's form resists such an approach. Instead, I am using "breath" as a refrain; and the effect of the refrain throughout the collection is similar to that of the refrain, or the *radif*, in the original ghazal form, which occurs at the end of each couplet in a ghazal. I am using the refrain in a much broader register, but it creates a similar sense of anticipation in the work, as the context shifts and

breath takes on new meanings. I also think of the couplets in the ghazal as a form of breath, the first line inhaling, the second line a response, exhaling.

The ghazal form itself embodies a tension between unity and disunity, the divine and the secular. I use this tension to explore the relationship between the particular and the universal through a combination of what Phyllis Webb refers to as, "the particular, the local, the dialectical and private", and a more contemplative and at times proverbial approach to a relationship with the absent beloved, whomever or whatever that may be in any given couplet.

The prairie is everywhere in these ghazals, a prairie that stretches from Winnipeg, Manitoba, to Red Deer, Alberta, the two homes I have been traveling between over the last two years. The prairie sometimes speaks as the "I", sometimes as the beloved. At other times it is silent, and the "I" is often at a loss for how to write the prairie. What is the body's connection to place? A question I have had in the back of my head as I write these ghazals.

Tim Lilburn's collection of essays *Living In The World As If It Were Home* has been indispensable for me in my thinking about language, the world, and how my own poetics and relationship to a particular place fit into these vast universal categories. Lilburn suggests that "poetry gestures to contemplation and contemplation feeds the poetry, modifying language by letting awe undermine it, pare it back, lending the poem a thinness, compunction. This is a land to wait in, watching. Bring anonymity; namelessness has a place here; the land worn to the bone hints into you an interior mimesis of namelessness. Bring sorrow. Watch" (11). Contemplation carries within it a sense of responsibility toward that which is other, a responsibility that recognizes that the

other cannot be fully grasped or named, cannot be claimed by language: "Contemplation lets fall names, eschews power, to clear the ground for astonishment.... It does not wish to subdue the world but to dwell in it" (32).

Dwelling in the world means allowing the surrounding world to give us meaning, rather than trying to master knowledge of the world. Lilburn refers to this dwelling as "affective domesticity: the birch branch is not an item of knowledge but where I love, where my look rests in insistent and adoring incomprehension. I do not define the branch; it defines me by giving me a home" (32). Contemplation is allowing that which is other to remain complete in its otherness. In contemplation, "marveling and questing to know is knowing" (35). What follows contemplation is a sense of a growing familiarity and living in the world as if it were home. But this familiarity is always frustrated, and one can never fully be at home: "If you look hard enough at the world, past a region of comprehension surrounding things, you enter a vast unusualness that defeats you. You do not arrive at a name or a home" (47).

Lilburn's explication of contemplation as a form of poetics offers me a way of understanding the contemplative nature of the ghazal form. The beloved in the ghazal can never be fully known or named, but there is always a desire to know the beloved, and desiring to know is knowing. The stuff of poetry happens in the space between desire and naming, and the landscape of the ghazal inhabits this in-between space. The distinct couplets and non-linearity of its form frustrate any attempt to narrate a superficial relationship to the other, whether it is the beloved or the world surrounding the speaker.

The ghazal's very structure disallows closure in any respect. It is a form of desire and longing, a desire to know the world, to be at home in the world. But at the same

time it acknowledges and laments a divine strangeness in the world, an otherworldliness that cannot be grasped. The ghazal is aware of its own defeat, and in a sense of its own condition of homelessness. But that cannot keep it from forever trying to find its way home.

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Breathwork

If you look hard enough at the world…you enter a vast unusualness that defeats you. You do not arrive at a name or a home.

Tim Lilburn *Living In The World As If It Were Home*

And how to unearth the place in the person?

Aritha van Herk *Places Far From Ellesmere*

I

Moonshy, boneheavy,
I follow stones along the river.

Cattle,
coyote, thunder.

When these times are no longer fit to live in,
I'll shake off their dust and leave.

I've a strong sense of where I'm coming from,
no idea where I'm going.

Toss a boot across the prairie,
wait for rain.

II

Loss. Why is the measure of love lost?
The foolishness of God.

Close books, doors, windows.
Wait.

I argue long and hard with my words,
but they won't give up their meanings.

On the curve of your back
I lay my ear;

breathe deep for a thousand
tongues to sing:

Kundalini. I am
aware of what I do not know.

III

Last winter is frozen on the tip
of our tongues,

a polished stone
to remember us by.

Careless hands, lips,
eyes and this

cold
unraveling, love;

I hold your tired breath
until I'm as drunk and wise as you.

IV

I will sing of your love forever,
the stuff of myth:

Badlands of bone, railroad,
echo.

The prairie complains of ten thousand
summers on her back,

hard times,
hard time.

Love the woman who is near, who has
a certain knowledge of your footsteps.

If these bones picked up and walked,
I'd christen myself a saint.

Tavia of Red Deer, you have so much to learn.
The simplest gesture confuses you.

V

I am listening for winter to turn
water and birdsong,

breath a rhythm
of a heart,

Winnipeg's psalm of river
and sky:

I've never known blue
to fall like this.

Writing letters home.
Writing home.

VI

I fell for the saints when I told you their stories,
and you believed.

Are you a tired muse, as tired as
the rain and the road?

Tell me everything, you wrote.
But I misread the beginning

to dream permanence: worn footpaths
with no travelers to walk them.

This love is not a cold and broken hallelujah.
Come, let me warm your hands with my breath.

VII

Our works will outlive us: in another time
I will write these words and tell a different story.

Even God falls
down from the straight line.

I'd rather live on the corner of my roof
than share my house without laughter.

I set my heart on pilgrimage,
the way of a wall, warm stone, shadow,

your breath at my ear
when you are no where to be found.

VIII

This morning the snow, Pembina Highway,
the low hum of church-goers,

one grain elevator
surrounded by city;

talking to God on the toilet:
a wasted life?

If you send me an angel, no matter
the message, I'll scream a blue streak.

Tavia, you too have learned by going.
And still the same regrets.

IX

I found you
among books and tired dreams.

Breath – a palindrome,
always returning –

Can you imagine such a night as this?
My arms outstretched –

your face forgotten
by the years,

all this writing the dark where
you are, your hands,

our sleeping lives
portraitures of another time.

X

Geese braille the sky,
telegraphing their arrival:

Is this home?
I know where the cutlery goes.

In the bedsheets, the outline of my body
where the fever broke.

I watch two young girls swimming in the lake.
My hands slowly unsealing your letter.

XI

It is here a boy walks out of Swift Current.
His body turns to sky;

a field of Indian Paintbrushes
and my face on fire.

I arrived here in the belly of a Greyhound,
as lost and screwed as Jonah;

found a banjo in a pawnshop and picked a song –
all the bluegrass in the world couldn't sing this longing;

I'll do breathwork on this harmonica
until I see stars.

XII

Akokiniskway, valley in the badlands, I carry the railroad
on my shoulders; my bones are not as old as some believe.

Storm-cloud and buffalo
hunched like boulders against the sky.

I awoke this morning to branches and birds
catching up on last winter,

geese billing their way through brome
grass, into wing-sleep.

XIII

Who named the clouds? Nimbus,
Cumulus, Big Canoe.

I wrote God's name on a paper
birch and watched it fade to winter.

Friend, go angry if you must,
crow-ready and breathing fire.

You left me standing in a land full
of cairns and effigies.

XIV

It’s that dream we carry of summer night, windows
propped open, as if they are never closed,

I hear a seashell when I hold your belly
to my ear, your breath the tide within.

I walk barefoot between the rows of your
garden, a measure of cucumber seed in my hand.

Give me lightning and a goose-coloured sky:
I don’t want to grow dim-witted.

XV

Too much time:
that is all I need.

Two buckeye and a bench.
One pencil and an empty notebook.

I learned a coyote's cadence
through the snow.

Above her bed the floorboards creak.
The child listens to herself breathe.

This land waits.
I lie on my back.

XVI

August hums its own heavy sadness;
our mouths and fingers stained with berries.

I can see more through small windows
than through big ones.

A raindrop falls on Bannatyne street.
Here is a secret I cannot grasp.

The wind catches Winnipeg in her breath.
A woman chases her umbrella.

XVII

Hail Mary, the light
after your hands.

I hold your breath between my legs,
make promises with your lips I long to keep.

Selah, you do not remember me by name.
Yet still you cry out to me.

XVIII

I always seem to live
just West of somewhere.

Even this hip-roofed barn will be standing
when I die.

October evening and the first sight
of my breath after an invisible summer.

Welcome: a word not meant
to be whispered.

XIX

As for saying goodbye, we never knew how.
So we keep walking.

I listen: your love songs remind me of Chinook
in mid-winter. Your arms somewhere.

Everyone looks forward to touch.
I lean into the silver body of a willow.

I breathe myself into a whisper
and a shout.

XX

What is love? This longing
for home.

I burn a candle into the night
and look for you in the shadows.

Breath:
                    the body's refrain.

This morning's bread cooling on the counter,
and all I can think of is you.

XXI

There are no words left
for the sounds in my mouth.

The smell of the dusk world
from the back porch.

On these backcountry roads you'll find
stories of ghosts and gods and weather,

colts bucking at the wind, playing rodeo
kings with an invisible clown.

I look into the dark pasture,
my body defeated.

XXII

This is what comes of being too much
alone: even my own name sounds strange.

You built this house of cedar
breath and glass.

One last tryst. One last reading
of your palm, my body.

Home is always
somewhere else.

I want to say that it is you
I have loved all along.

XXIII

We carry the passing seasons
in our bodies,

the way a cobweb carries
a thin rain, the morning sun.

To breathe this space between us,
caesura,

sunflowers, Tavia,
sunflowers.

XXIV

The cello mouths its song,
cadenza of mourning;

memory in ashes, anthemion,
the smile at your eyes.

As if my gaze could pin you here:
fireflies and breath.

There has always been a little dance
on bigger hills,

an empty hand,
an offering.

XXV

Always there is someone who is more
faithful, who believes in greater gods.

If Noah had built his land-locked ark
on the badlands, I would have laughed too.

The walls are so thin, I can hear the woman
in the next room change her mind.

da Vinci believed
the planet is breathing.

XXVI

Your eyes
a skyline far away.

I need the words of an old lover
to tell this story.

What hope is there but the journey?
What journey but hope?

Always some part of us away
in another country.

I daydream a fjord in Kristiansand –
tide like the breath of a calm god.

XXVII

I am an old woman: my hands give me a
way to you.

With a looking glass I check for my breath;
the hope of being heard always exists.

Writing out your ghazals, filling bedroom walls,
we never know where it is we'll meet.

I still look at trees, cup
my breasts in my hands.

The last word, love:
I left it with you.