

These poems are excerpted from Another Life, a longer sequence in which the adolescent speaker travels with his younger sister, aunt, and mother—who has cancer—from Buenos Aires to an ashram in India.

Susana, lotus flower

My aunt Susana weighs three hundred thirty pounds
my mother's eldest sister
who wears bright muumuus printed tunics
who keeps her hair cut short with highlights and paints shadow on her eyes
and rarely leaves the house
her house that smells of sandalwood two computers humming
like wind and night
Susana has no pets or children
lives off her father butcher's son
who fled the pogroms all the way to Argentina

Susana
which means beautiful as a lotus flower

she had two knee replacements
and then was hospitalized for her weight
she didn't slim down her bones kept carrying
they shrank her stomach with a belt the belt unfastened scratched her innards
food crept up to her lungs
but even so the ice cream flows inside her
gold-papered chocolates tumbling down like black snowflakes

Susana
which means beautiful as a lotus flower
who's never without angels
she buys angel stickers in bulk
from stores in the Once neighborhood and gives them away she says god listens to me
but her boyfriend Héctor lost weight and left
her husband Aarón ran off with a man
and her sister my mother has cancer
she'll be up in the soaring stars someday
like an angel

Liliana, lily blossom

My mother's five-foot nine
she has big bones and bleach blonde hair
white crinkle cotton dresses on blue-veined white skin
skin sweet with perfume
and draped with necklaces she wears at home
our house of grass-green carpets our house without flowers
in Once where our neighbors' heads are covered
because god's up there above it all
though I'm not sure about my mother's god

her name is Liliana
which means beautiful as a lily blossom

her grandmothers Fanny and Zelda were sisters
they could read the future in coffee grounds
and they knew everything about you from your birthday they were famous
they traveled far their customers were high-ranked officers important people
they hoped my mother would inherit their gift
but she's a therapist
receives her clients in the living room
and sees things sometimes
sometimes at night she pulls my covers off like something's wrong
and sometimes she walks backwards
like something's wrong

Liliana
lily blossom

my mother left Gerardo her first husband
she fled at night that's the way those things happen
she took the first black cab she saw
it was my father the tiller Aeolus pushed him
they married with me in her belly named me Daniel
but in the end my father left a knife clutched in my mother's hand
and now her parents ask her to remarry they want her house to have a man in it again
Ricardo her latest boyfriend's not around we don't know why
he lives in Avellaneda
he's a blacksmith

like the lily
Liliana

we live
many lives she says
our souls are old or damp and cool as flowers
and when you die god thrusts your head into the river
and you forget it all
you're light in the sky in the stars
in an orchard circled by hedges stately trees

pear and apple and fig trees their branches always heavy
and apple follows apple and pear follows pear
each yields to the other
delicious fruits
that offer myriad delights
and god thrusts your head into the river
you come back as a tree
an animal

I'm eleven
I'm drinking orange juice with my mother in a coffee shop
I think I won't remember her
won't recognize her if I see her in another life
don't be like that souls travel as a group yes even in the stars
they change I might become your grandson or your cousin imagine that
a dog of yours a spider in its web
a flower blooming on the terrace

Liliana
like a lily blossom

Estela morning star
is a friend of my mother's she lives in San Miguel
her street is lined with palm trees she has dogs and chickens
she cleans
my mother's energy
and lays her hands onto my mother's vengeful cells
and reads the planets
as my sister and I play with the dogs
and she says
my father will come back
come back from Ciudad Oculta the land of exile where he lives
with Analía the one who never rests
that barren land that isn't his
so now on Sundays
my mother calls Jorge we visit monks
and go to Rosario to see Ignacio the priest born in Ceylon and father Mario in González
Catán
and the universal church of the kingdom of god
where the pastor leads you up to the altar
and the evil spirits disappear

Sai Baba

A cobra
in the bedsheets of the boy
among palm fields and rice fields
the soundless cobra with the cosmos printed on its neck
the king of snakes
curls in the cradle of Sathya Narayana Rayu
the son of farmers
in a town of stone and straw in Puttaparthi

he speaks to animals
to pigs and zebus to the rats and dogs running in the field
one day he faints into a ditch what bit him
he's different when he wakes
he sings in Sanskrit now sometimes he laughs or weeps out of the blue
he talks about fruit trees that no one's ever seen
and calls for rites because the gods he says
are moving through the sky right now

an exorcist
slaughters a pheasant and a lamb
he sits him down and draws a ring of blood around him in the field
he shaves his head he slashes him
and cleans his wounds
with lemon juice and garlic but Rayu won't speak
his father is afraid he grabs a stick he screams you're crazy
you're either a ghost or a god

one morning
he gets up and calls for his family
he gives them fruits and flowers he pulls out of the blue and he says
I'm the reincarnation
of the holy Muslim fakhir
my lineage and my clan are sacred I am
Sai Baba
divine father divine mother

I wake up in India

3 a.m.
the alarm goes off
I slip out silently so I
won't wake my mother at this hour
when sleep still nestles in her head
and in the heads of birds
I know how to get to the temple and I know the gods
still as fig trees along the path
bound to the world with roots
no lights are on in Baba's house
the phone booth's closed the canteen where I eat alone
the sound of crickets
and my strange crackling steps
crumple the silence
and the distance though there are others now
all dressed in white sitting in rows and waiting for the doors
of the mandir to open
hours from now
my mother says I get up early
so god will hear me first
but what I like is one leg crossed over the other
the tingling in my hands my arm asleep
as the birds wake
and the day glows all over
and everything's so calm I almost don't know why
I'm here
an ant in the sequence of ants
the doors open
with the first ray of sun
we file into the temple we're led to sing to call to god
five ohms through the nose eyes ears skin and tongue
through the feet anus penis hands and throat
through the air that lives inside the body
through what enfolds the body
and one last ohm for me
shanti shanti shanti

silence

this is what speaks when no one speaks

what does it sound like
the jug of the mind
a stream of rain of birdsong
that twig of sense along the border of my bowl in the canteen
and if I move
and if walk up to the current
it's the rustle of flowers the stone that breaks the surface of the water
the name as brilliant as a clearing in the woods of noise
or more concretely an American
who speaks a phrase almost in Spanish

this is what speaks when no one speaks

when my mother tripped on a mound of dirt
and wrenched her foot
we took a rickshaw she exposed her swollen ankle
and the man brought us to the clinic
the waiting room is full
we're the only ones dressed in white people come up to us
they look concerned about my mother
they speak in Hindi in Sanskrit what is it they speak
to become this oracle
who answers a question
that I don't want to ask myself that no one asked

this is what speaks when no one speaks

I was in the mandir
waiting for Baba to come out the sun had risen
and then a language spoke to me
coarse as the voice
who's turned into a tree and still has lips
the old man with ebony skin
no flag around his neck
drew in a long thin thread of breath blew out a tiny ball without an aftertaste
and looked at me as if to say it's your turn now
forget about what brought you here
your school your friends the girl you like your other life

this is what speaks when no one speaks

and the fingers of the day wake up the sky
and wash its eyes of fog
and everyone moves toward the temple doors they want to get there first
like the wind
when it brings the murmur of the waves all dressed in white
who rise and hurry to the shore
with open mouths

like lava lighting up
a monkey in the jungle
that's how the faithful show themselves
before the sight of god

and the man filling bags with ashes
under the eaves shaped like an insect wing
he shovels cosmic ash
into each bag
beneath an insect wing

like crickets singing to the night
huddled in nothingness
in a force field of sound
that's what mantras are like
like crickets
everywhere

the goddess looks at me
from her glass box
with all her heads
five heads stuck to each other
she trails me with her open
eyes as I make my way to the temple
at three in the morning

and the gods are there watching us
and the gods are there watching us

all day
my voice hid in my throat
like a mouse
in a dresser
a knot of silence in my throat

like ghosts
those glints of tooth and hair
the girls from school
I jacked off when I was supposed to nap
it's been a long time since I've seen them and now
they're glints of tooth and hair

it was still dark
I sat down on my folding chair
and waited for the temple doors to open
and now it's day
I sing and call to god
he comes

is this what sacred means?

the head dipping into the river
in this orchard of fruit trees
of flowers and birds with no name
cows resting in the shade
my father's Taunus
newly washed the engine running
is this what sacred means
the burned dung ash streaked on my forehead
the vessel moving across the night
the gods hiding in the fields
the smell of livestock in the afternoon in Mataderos
my mother
coming toward me like a dog a spider in another life
the heads of god that watch me
Sai Baba dressed in orange making something manifest
the island of Aeolus
where Ulysses disembarked where my grandfather was born
and washerwomen shining in the valley with their sheets
my nine-year-old sister in her white kurta
and the monkey who pulls her hair
is this what sacred means
the coconut just cut down from the tree
my aunt with all her angels
the cabs the maps the boys hauling luggage
the footsteps of the gods across the sky
is all of this what sacred means
my mother's cancer
this lineage of leaves the wind disperses and returns
the smoke from the meat
the engines rumbling like stars