

Robbery

The rush through Bainbridge, its flat face —

red lights popping up
in angry zits. He's found curled

beneath the candy rack, hair still damp from wudu,

glued down with tap water,
rainbow of Skittles spilled
around him.

I'm sorry,

I can't write this straight.

I need metaphors:

his face the dates we mashed in wooden bowls on Eid,

softened for sweets.

All you need is a shovel
& a grieving foot to sink
into the soil,
a memory to blanket the mound.

Mercy cobbles history in a dark alley,
makes it a misshapen beast

as I write this.

It's the thorn & the gasoline.
It's the gag & the gold hand
of contempt. There's another word for it

I'm sure, in a prophet's dream. What did you dream of, Khalu,
gun pressed in the roof of your mouth, watching the sky drain
pink, waiting for someone to notice you? When help comes,

it'll be the trees, sending dust that rises

& falls like a sigh when they lift you.

God gives us these bodies,

then takes them away

little by little. Entibahu. Outside the store,
the magnolia blossoms call me to eat them.

The ground shivers

with all that's still
living, leggy vermin
dripping urban funk.

I fling rocks at the rats
scurrying midway
to meet me. I swear
they were humming
gospel. I wait for my eyes
to relearn aftah.

Volunteers sweep the street of glass
rain. The kid who sells fake sneakers
is helping. The store next door said
the barrage sounded like a mountain

buckling to its knees.

I can't write around him.

He's in the periphery, too:

They called him ISIS
& he thought they said iris,

told them, *No flowers here.*

They wanted all the money in the drawer,

snagged Honey Buns from the counter as they pointed their weapons.

He wasn't fast enough. Fumbled
too much. Didn't understand —

*My English please
what you want I give
please slow talk please
my children my children.*

This is not simply
about angry white men
rolling out before closing
into dimly-lit streets, kitchen

knife wrapped

in a tight fist. *Go back, go back, ain't nobody
want you here.* Malhom? Why were they really there? I want to ask,
but don't. The answer would be like puberty — too disturbing to forget. It's already kharban.

This moment is scared

into my timeline,
unchangeable as 9/11.
On the stretcher,
I mistake him for a ghost.
See his soul slowly slip out his
nostrils, sucked back in when
he coughs, my relief real
as the blood
he chokes on.

Khalu, I want to tell you the pipes are frozen again

as I lie on the roof,
stars twinkling off-key.
I saw you whirling
in the peppered dark.

Oh, I wish I could tell you.

Here is what drowning feels like —

hunched in the furrow of a house,
inhaling tiny storms, anxious days.

If I step out this door, I want to know

nothing will take me.

But the stakes are high, Uncle.

Kaleh baluk.

Cameras never saved anyone,
only captured.

Bes beyni wa beynek —

I know you can hear your father's scars

whisper slurs in the night,

trail you softly.

Looks like the hayawan

of America were trained

to prowl, silent even in a street of dry leaves.
You know what it means to gun it. You know
the dryness of a strange land — awful, relentless,

thirsting your whole life.

Nothing looks the same:

Not the plastic Spider-Man left in the corner

by your son. Not the stray cat you saved
from a sewer, guardian

of the store. It's not
the bodega in the Bronx
of my childhood: echoing

with accents. Sex workers
slipping in for a pack
after a long night. Where
the homeless guy behind
the alley stumbles into,
warms himself from the rain.

& you, Khalu, waiting for him by the door
with instant coffee, kind words, a few dollar bills in your hand.