

# The Clerk

In this and every city, I play Charles  
Aznavour when I want to swoon  
in all my languages. Or hear sorrow sung

out of them. His discography on shuffle.  
Each song drawing another relative  
in, until suddenly we're all slow-

dancing together in the blue light  
of dusk, of cornflowers, of seaside. I too want  
to write each silence into a song worthy

of translation. I'm the faithful clerk of this  
bloodline. I listen through the pleadings,  
the arguments. I store it all, every testimony,

so we might go on together, all of us,  
into the future with our histories stored  
somewhere outside the body—

to remember without the pain.  
I sit good and quiet to catch names.  
I fashion myself into a window.

## Before My Birth

The woman that is my mother lived  
as a counterfeit reflection, a specter in the hallways  
of the buildings she cleaned. Inside a high-rise so tall  
the night sky got caught in its mirrors, my young mother  
polished the clouds and the stars.

In a borrowed name, in an ill-fitting uniform,  
my mother, a steady shadow, a quick apology,  
removed from the glass all evidence of life—  
smudges, dust, handprints,  
even her own face before dawn broke.

At the end of shift she'd coil into the back seat  
of a night bus, run her hand over the sweat at her nape,  
trace the stranded wisps of darkness;  
and when she was sure no one was listening,  
she'd untuck her name from behind  
her teeth, just to affirm she was still there.

## A Mother's Work

A mother weaves an aguayo she'll fit  
to her daughter like wings. Even plucks  
the green feathers of the coca trees (para superar

el mal de alturas). No one asks her the cost of this,  
what it takes for her to do this sending—  
how many pleadings she has brought

to the feet of night, knowing  
what she does of distance, its appetite  
for daughters—but the girl

grows cloudward nonetheless,  
and the mother, weighted by what love  
necessitates, bends the sky

inside herself so not to break  
the sky inside her daughter. She weaves  
in what she can of wisdom

and tries to forget the story  
of the plumed boy plummeting seaward  
in an orb of fire.

## How to War at 3:00 A.M.

When the procession of the dead  
comes knocking at your door,  
do not take the candle they offer you.  
Do not hold it in the hand you use  
for writing or in the hand with which  
you'll feed your children. Do not take  
the candle. It is not a light.  
It is not a cup. Its weight is  
that of the long bone in your forearm.  
Better yet, when the procession comes,  
keep your curtains drawn,  
form your mouth into the white-blue  
flame, into that burning  
beyond translation. Turn your hands  
into cymbals.

# How Should I Like to Flower

*after Shawna Lemay*

In the morning,  
as a drop of milk  
does in coffee.  
All alone,  
when my face  
is still my face  
and not  
the stroked dazzle  
of liners and creams.  
As a greeting spoken  
in another tongue.  
In books?  
In books.  
As green does  
between the cracks  
of some edifice  
witness to centuries,  
privy to its secrets.  
On the tips  
of each  
of my lover's  
fingers.