

Massive and Newly Dead: *An Act of Translation*

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medusa and the luminous universe

the face of the gorgon becomes apotropaic: something
massive and newly dead waits for an autopsy.
what it means is I have endless data
and nowhere to set it down.

massive as it is, waiting for the autopsy
in the darkening tomb, a new lexicon emerges
with no place to be set down:
a tool for speaking to the dead.

in the darkening tomb, a new lexicon proclaims
hands cannot work a stone into unbeing.
tools for speaking to the newly dead
hinge solely on ritual. I suppose

my hands cannot unmake stones:
I know your eyes are changing.
for you, it depends solely on ritual, supposing
there is an ordered motion in this galaxy after all.

and if I'd known your eyes would turn me to stone
I'd still name you unavoidable collision,
proof of ordered motion in this galaxy if not
in the body beside me.

naming a collision *inevitable* means
no one stays trapped in the grave, not ghosts
in the body beside me
or the small, careful processes

by which we seal the tomb. no phantom
explanation for why the distant universe is so much brighter
than the small, careful processes
we maintain allow us to believe.

An explanation for this luminous distance in the universe:
what it means is we have endless data
in our possession, a belief
in the face of the gorgon to deliver us from evil.

sestina for the newly absent

weighing in as absence. if we can only use
quasars to measure the gas they illuminate,
what does this say about being instrumental?
instrument since these hands cannot forge,
cannot work a stone into unbeing. all this to say
I don't understand the negative affect directed toward

fortune tellers. an ahistorical approach toward
the horizon, a way of galactic retelling that uses
absence as burdensome device. the soothsayer said
knowing how it behaves does not illuminate
what it really is, that the this-ness is partly vanished, forged
as it is by our own faulty memory. i need instrument

for bypassing atmosphere entirely, need instrument
like drumbeat like wave rolling toward
immeasurable horizon to tell me how to forge
ahead or even behind. these hands used
for something, for anything. illumination
on the tarmac at the Dallas airport. you said

you'd meant to meet me at the terminal, did not say
I am sorry. the distance being instrumental
but not entirely causal, I would say later, illuminated
as I was by the small, careful processes toward
dissolution: I hated your job, your obsession with utility
as the only means of living. if galaxies forge

nonlinear ways of being and unbeing, forge
windows into the early universe, how can you say
there are no choices but these? perhaps we use
one another, grappling as we are with instruments
of destruction, self- or otherwise, blades pointed toward
dark matter: we can't know what it is, can only illuminate

how it behaves. it is true I weighed your absence, illuminated
against a shifting standard. an alliance forged
between fortune-teller and fraught trajectory toward
the early universe. we cannot know if the soothsayer
is right or ahistorical or both, cannot wield instrument
if we do not know we are more than use-

fulness allows us to measure, allows us to say
in the space allotted. if hands are instruments
ours have said more of error than utility.

the body is not a return voyage

when handed an instrument to measure meaning,
all I could see was the galaxy expanding,
expanding. something at its core spoke to me,
but when I stretched out my hand it was all dead.

all I could see was the galaxy expanding
and the tissue of my skin peeled back like paper.
when I stretched out my hand it was almost dead,
the tomb walls crumbling, the stars collapsing –

the tissue of my skin peeled back like paper
in the car on the way home. you asked me,
if the tomb walls are crumbling and the stars are collapsing,
if they are dead, why are you looking?

on the way home, i asked you
if it is possible to be replaced at the cellular level
or if, like looking for a way to return from the dead,
you cannot come back the same.

I saw myself being replaced at the cellular level,
refusing the split. there are too many ways
in which we come back changed.
what will my body mean to you?

refusing to split, to count the different ways
we enact false family traditions.
what does the body mean to you
when it is too far back in time, in space?

a reconstruction, a false family tradition
expanding, and something at its core spoke to me,
something too distant in the universe
to be an instrument of meaning.

sestina for the red tomb

the ask and answer in the jaw unhinged
from the skull. facial reconstruction reveals
a countenance ill-suited for stoicism. reports incomplete
due to shaking hands. nothing in the architecture
served as warning. forget what you know
of the Aten rays, their tiny hands always reaching.

before the word *heresy*, our hands already reached
for the hammer and chisel, for ways to unhinge
the door to the tomb. it's difficult to know
what remains, what the excavation reveals
of our own misguided architecture,
of the translations we left incomplete,

the small pinpricks of skeletal distress. the incomplete
archaeological record does not show you reaching
for my hand, staining my fingers Osiris green, or the architectural
plans you drew for a minor desert goddess. Selket who unhinged
the scorpion from her head each night to reveal
enough coins for the dead and the living. knowing

as a test that fails. will the archaeologists know
how to read the unsent letters? an incomplete
refrain on the tomb walls, the ask and the answer reveals
only: I loved a woman always reverent, reaching
for Hathor-turned-Sekhmet, unhinging
the cow's face for the lion's. in the architecture

I placed a warning, a coin I cursed. the architects
abandoned temple plans when they knew
Selket without her scorpions meant only an unhinged
ask and answer: she was tired of the incomplete
circle, Ra's endless journey around the sun, reaching
but never arriving. while our reverence for the afterworld reveals

more of ourselves than we cared to admit, skeletal distress reveals
little in the shaking hands of the archaeologist. an architecture
of miscommunication. at the dig they will reach
for their lovers, for answers, for something knowable
in the tomb. they will build a lexicon, incomplete
but accurate enough to see where the jaw came unhinged

from the skull. forget what we know
of the Aten rays, my own hands reaching, an incomplete
gesture when the tomb is abandoned, the sarcophagus unhinged.

1.

I am told none of the colors present
in the astronomical image are really there –

the universe is filled with bright things, but not
with visible light. all telescope images

are in black-and-white, with color added
to reflect properties like wavelength, energy,

and distance. none of these factors being unrelated
to one another. nothing in the known universe being unrelated

to one another. knowing how it behaves
vs. knowing what it is. the this-ness

being partly vanished. an ever-shrinking atmospheric
window, an impetus for bypassing *atmosphere* entirely.

our eyes did not meet, not really,
as we crossed the street. all the buildings

are the same, the lawns, the bike racks,
but we exist extended somewhere.

2.

they say there is nothing in the stars
of the stars - universe is full of bright things,

but not in light. all telescopes are monochrome,
dimensions with color, to show energy

and distance properties. none of them
are related to each other. there is nothing

in the famous universe. find out how it works.
this love has gone to some extent. a short

environment window is an excitement
to completely avoid the environment.

ⁱ translations of an original poem. the original text can be found in part one, and the translations in part 2 and 3, which have been translated to three languages and back to English.

when we passed through the streets,
our eyes could not meet us. all buildings

are the same, audiences, bicycle storage,
but we are growing somewhere.

3.

they say there are no stars in the stars;
the universe is full of bright things,

but not of light. all telescopes
have monochrome screens with color coding

for energy and distance. none of these
is connected. there is nothing in the famous universe.

learn how it works and this love has gone
to some extent. a short environmental window

is an emotion to completely avoid the environment.
when we crossed the street, we could not see us.

all the buildings are the same: public, bicycle storage,
but we grew up somewhere.

sestina for the nebulous body

I told the witch to go as far back
as she could, not to stop until she hit nebula.
all sorts of mystery objects at once singular
and duplicitous in this universe and red-shift refuses
to yield answers. what then of witch-woman
with hands on the fire escape who says this whole world

is built of cold iron now, is not a world
prepared to encounter the dead. a cosmic back-
ground waiting for poet-as-seer to tell us *woman*
exists only in the epoch of quenching, in the nebulous
space between accusation and refusal.
a pinprick: epoch as singular,

as an act of anti-hierarchy. a singular
instance in which we can understand the world
or each other until the early universes refuses
to act as translator. listen: there is no coming back
in the way of Orpheus, his wife suddenly nebulous,
dissipating behind him. what it means to love a woman

with Osiris green leached into her skin, a woman
who reads palms through a telescope lens. a singular
interpretation: cosmological hunger is a good place to begin. if the nebula
cracked open like the Hellenistic Egg, if the world
is all cold iron now, if the poet as prophet has research to back
this up. any ordered motion in the universe refuses

to lend itself to interpretation and I refuse
an ahistorical reading of my hands. witch-woman
who cannot be trapped in the grave or backed
into an early corner of the universe. is it singular
to ask for more than coins behind teeth? in this world
there are bodies and bodies at once nebulous,

dissipating beneath hands and waiting for the nebula
to break open, for their bodies to refuse
them, for what they are too scared to ask of a world
like this one. perhaps it is the cold iron and the witch-woman
who have it right: imperfect instruments yield singular
answers, not a way to come back.

ask the body about cosmological hunger, says witch-woman
with hands stained Osiris green. no singular
object in this universe can find its own way back.

the hungry crevasse

debates over what it means
to be stolen: the legal distinction

between burglary and robbery, robbery
and theft. why should Douglas Mawsonⁱⁱ have survived

after his companions fell into the crevasse, bit off
their own fingers? *a steep blue slope just redward*

of the break: this is how Mawson described
the crevasse. it was hungry, swallowed

all it caught. what does it mean to come back from that?
imagine surviving so many years in a blizzard

and having a suburb of Canada named after you.
“Mawson” casually in the mouths of the bourgeoisie

when you ate your own dogs to survive.
the processes responsible. it is impossible

to pinpoint: a brief epoch. how to explain
this mass when the galaxy is dead? *nothing*

we do is practical, you say. *none*
of this will save us, Mawson would agree. *nothing*

to stop us being swallowed in the crevasse.
knowing it as chemical imbalance

changes nothing. knowing it as “telescope
sees nothing.” stop using absence

as substitute for depth: a cosmic history
will back me up on this. nothing exists

until it is too powerful to avoid.
we broke up over the phone

sixty years after Laikaⁱⁱⁱ began overheating,
a failure of sustainer to separate,

ⁱⁱ Douglas Mawson (1882-1952) was an Australian explorer whose Australasian Antarctic Expedition in 1911 was marked by tragedy. Although most of his dogs and two of his companions died, he lived to return to his homeland in 1913.

ⁱⁱⁱ Laika was launched into orbit in November of 1958 by the Soviet Union during the Space Race. Due to miscalculations, she died within hours from overheating.

maybe – a mistake that becomes
monument, a postage stamp,

a children's theater production. someone
recently searched *is Laika still in space?*

and I imagine she landed on some distant
planet, welcomed in a new language. released,

the Soviet scientists of their guilt, if any
still exists. Kotovskaya asked Laika to forgive

her, said there was no way to bring her back,
but she still cried that day. make a habit

of crying about creatures who cannot speak
for themselves. make a habit: building stone

upon stone until you have made this habit monument.

sestina for the unmarked grave

as a result of cosmological hunger: a test
that fails. if they're dead, why are you looking?
as a result: something beneath the tissue,
an alternative to Laika: you send
me the story of a bear launched into space
in 1962 who parachuted back unharmed.

the body without anchor, bridge unharmed
by falling debris. there is no way to test
ordered motion in the body beside me, the limited space
of kinematic transformation. each of us looking
only to bury what we know or send
it to someone who can translate. tissue

as more than labyrinth or muscle. tissue
as border you cannot cross unharmed.
fear is a system, is ordered motion that can be sent
in waves or in business envelopes, in tests
that do not consider remorse an acceptable answer. looking
as I am for ways to bring Laika back from space,

there is no room for the knowledge that from space
she plummeted to the earth below, became tissue,
network of ash and dirt and bone. *Andromeda was looking
mean in the sky, left no one unharmed,*
according to one retelling. it is easy to test
for guilt when the accused are gone, to send

messages when the recipient has no eyes to read. I have sent
my grievances, my requests for space
and tools with which to measure it. a test
for vanishing grief: stop naming what you've lost. the tissue
multiplying, an undergrowth unharmed
by the boots of the search party, looking

without seeing what crunches beneath their feet. look
and be turned to stone. the romans sent
messages to the dead on seashells, left graves unharmed
until there was a reason not to. in space,
you remind me, you can't hear anything, no tissue
peeling back like paper. an infallible test.

this being act of transformation until the test
fails. a message translated into filigree, into tissue
with no clear pattern: Laika, amplified and soundless, lost in space.

sonnetⁱ for coins behind teeth

I opened my hands: a measure of goodwill which
in accordance is stifled
if it is already dead
why are you looking?
I have built a lexicon
of mistranslation, like Ptolemy's Septuagint
thousands of years later
it is a recreation of the chapel
frantic like the bishops who dug up martyrs,
a holy cacophony of ghosts
it is a matter of spatial resolve,
to know one another as an act of translation
like the coins behind the teeth of the dead
the body becomes nebulous

on a planetary level, the translation
is labelled too massive
and the images start shifting:
it points to a paradox
at once new and dead
unable to tell us with certainty why
anything must be untouched to be whole
built from teeth and mandibles,
placed the body parts in the walls of the chapel
who am I to translate from the grave?
to give an answer hinging solely on location
is to map the image in visible light
an altercation is an altar on which
each of us practices naming the dead

ⁱ The syncopated sonnet form is created/utilized by poet Tyehimba Jess in his 2016 collection, *Olio*.