

Natalie Diaz
NEW COMMISSION

Radixes and Formations



“Natalie Diaz is a poet who calls out to us in so many ways, who reaches out to embrace her lover, her people, and her country.” Her most recent collection *Postcolonial Love Poem* explores body and land as sites of desire and longing, but also pain and erasure. It was shortlisted for the National Book Award and the Forward Prize in Poetry. Born and raised in the Fort Mojave Indian Village in Needles, California, on the banks of the Colorado river, Natalie is Mojave and an enrolled member of the Gila River Indian Tribe. She has received fellowships from The MacArthur Foundation, the Lannan Literary Foundation, Native Arts Council Foundation, and was recently appointed to the Academy of American Poets. She is the Director at the Centre for Imagination in the Borderlands at Arizona State University.

In early 2021, Natalie Diaz was commissioned by Manchester Literature Festival to write a new series of poetic sensualities exploring the words ‘origin’, ‘migration’, ‘freedom’ and ‘love.’ A deeply lyrical poet, she created linguistic maps of these words in English and Mojave, diving deep into their roots and the ways in which they echo in physical connection. Natalie performed the poems for the first time at an online event hosted by fellow poet Mary Jean Chan. The event was available to watch from 22 April – 21 May 2021 on MLF’s Crowdcast channel.

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excerpts from Duned

The worst work of my hands is in English—: I'm a chiral body writing into what I cannot coincide.

I've come to the mountain to bless these hands back. Clay clod & gypsum—: a way my body has been & will become. I rename one hand Occupied Territory, call to the other *Amante Verde*. & the mountain sobs its hornblende to the surface.

I am known in this place—: of Creation & cascabel. Mojave Greens are my relatives. I holograph in the ambient heat, green quicked with copper. *Don't play with snakes* they say *Don't play with your own power*.

Beneath the granite boulders the hibernaculum cools, empty with shed skins—: their spectered shells, curled ribbons of fried light.

The pressure of molecule & memory—: atmosphere bears touch on loop, apparatuses everything it has held. The salted swastiks of their bodies, thick, rope-heavy, a scent you have to lift.

My flesh-light cleaves their old energy eyes, slips each slit of limonite & aperture. In them I am struck—: a fever image. They coil into their handless work of transmutation, into radio sensation, rattling the hair on my forearms.

She recognizes me not as human but as her own imagination. I am granite reorganized, a formation—: yet forming. I dream with the mountain because I am *of* the mountain.

Grief for my elemental life respites my body. My snakes lick me from the wind like a chemical, return me to electric signal—: a web of small lightning suturing the mouth to the skull. Pleasure, unlanguage & noise.

I was dreamed into being—: I was the dreamer. Skin fleshes the world it's made of, in overwhelm.

Cloud shadow drifts a gray whale across the salt flats—: a periphery of white halite crust surrounds its slow shade. My lover crystallizes this same way along the ridges of my knuckles & back of my hand, the dorsal side, as we also call a fin—: I surfaced from deep submersion.

There is no pleasure not earthen or wet. *Ancient ocean*, we say—: & we mean every body.

Sand's gentle crust of berm edging the wash—: the desert a hot pie, juiceless yet swelling mirage. The neon red sign of a jackrabbit's spine eaten to its glow, dropped from the sky, flickers in the bleach-light gushing the open land.

How much love can a desert drink to bone? How many bodies—: pressed beneath this tectonic pie?

A shelled vehicle in landscape—: rust-burning, slow bleed of oxide having laced the chassis, licked the light bucket to chrome edges.

A ram's scattered skeleton—: empty lake of pelvis, desert grapevines threading the bone sockets, tugging the jaw vee deeper into the canyon. Its broken horn is a curl of gold telephone I hold to my eye. I am dislocated. Some knowledge is not mine, some is but I haven't arrived there yet.

A long time ago the wind licked the coyote's skull to glass—: this is how we happen. Atom-born, I bend back the atom world. My inheritance is hydrogen. How rain & clouds happen to one another—: wet though risen up from dust, abundant.

We have no word for God. It is sky because someone said it was. Until then, it was only what was in it: giant fish with pharyngeal teeth, orange sand clouds, & 'Amo—: the bighorn sheep made of stars & staggered, spear still warm from the warrior's hand,

its shattered torso notching the night. The first wound was a clock, our hunger. We ate the mountain sheep—: now our moon is a curve of cold fat congealing on a blued bone & lives in daylight, diurnal leftover.

Over night's black dunes we follow the trail of 'Amo's white face. If I speak of love—: who will believe me? The only poets in this desert are beryl & jasper.

Thunder is not thunder but the air broken by lighting. My lover backlit like a thunderhead, strapped with night until the softness of her hips disrupts—: her light-wet hands & cock. I am the sound I make breaking in a room.

We are always becoming—: from somewhere. Desire is a blood-colored worm flexing the sand sea around me. I have a power I am learning to be careful with.

They say *When you see Numet, she's already been watching you*. The stroke her long tail drags in the sand disappears where the loose wash turns granite outcrop. Looning & lonely, I thundercat—: stalk myself through wind-flooded canyons, watch myself happen to me in the map of my hand.

In the beginning we didn't understand the bullet. It had no head, no arms or legs—: *Menamentk* we said. It crossed the water. We named it 'Anya kwa'oorny. We named it Of the Sun. We had no word for shore, except how water touches land.

They gave us the word *shore* for their bullet to arrive on. Then said our flesh was also Shore—: so we called the bullet *Bullet*. We name things for what is done there.

The injuries of becoming human. Tuu'achk—: shoulder blades from turtle shell, hand from wing. The carpus erupting petals of wrist—: bone-flower, flesh.

Bats ripen like fruit in the lava fields, in volcanic caves of basalt. Dusk buds their breathing wings—: flowering angel-beasts. The bats remember when we loved ourselves & called so tenderly into twilight that our words brought us the throbbing world—: mosquito & blood. Kenakenem.

Even the eye's small water will evaporate to quench the sun. I search the rain from the tongues of my skin—: it is four months away.

The horse has been dead in the dunes all summer. Sun-chromed ravens in early devotion opened each bright window along its bloated belly—: unthreaded red curtains.

Desert as Plutonian shore—: the torso open, a sand-torn sail of hide flapping above the funeral boat. In Mojave a horse is what it does & how it does it, but our word for boat is a wooden box.

Mesquite pods drip in light from turquoise branches. Coyotes mistake the pool for moon water. If the shepherds don't poison the coyotes—: the coyotes will eat the pods & scat them out.

Scarification—: the obligation of breaking, of rock & whelm.

Every scar loses its wound. In the valley of loss I shift shape, an ache—: become one hundred coyotes in the 'analy grove weeping from every fleshed door of my body.

The land of Death is a duned land. Xeric. Saly'aay. Saly'aat. *We burn our dead* we say—: because we do. *Touch me* I say, because it's a story we become.

Colony

The coyotes are on the beach
vacuuming tonight's terrible light with their eyes.
They puncture the river's sleep with holes of blue-green eye shine.
The river rolls over, awake.

The coyotes are baptizing the rabbits,
dunking them in the shallow water.
The rabbits play dead in the coyotes' mouths
but jolt and cry out when they break the water.

The river is cold and they shake, the rabbits.
I've never seen a rabbit swim, and no rabbits will swim tonight.

The river because it is the scene of their crimes.
The river because it will clean us of what the rabbits have done.

The rabbits are not from here.
They come from another territory of night, from a different moon.

The rabbits are white—which is not a color but how fast it twitches.

The rabbits disappear our women.
Maybe not these rabbits, yet, but rabbits like these, and soon.

White rabbits as call and response, a multiplication.
The game where everyone holds hands, then someone squeezes,
sends a signal, and everyone sends the same signal they receive—
if that game were forever and played by rabbits.
Rabbits so white their eyes are pink.

The rabbits took my cousin.
They collapsed her down to a greasy spot, somewhere.
Like when your brother backs the truck out of the driveway
and the truck leaves behind an iridescent liqueur on the ground.
So you sprinkle sand over it to absorb the stain.

The coyotes are a night shift, a labor of shades against the pebbled shore.
They are a range of blue-black mountains reorganizing weight, a dusk.

With more night happening, the rabbits become stranger.
Their ears are slicked back, like men.

I try not to ask myself, What is a rabbit?
*I can't explain the rabbit but I feel it. I've felt it my entire life,
that there's something wrong with the world.
I don't know what it is, but it's there,
a white blot in my mind—*

The question distracts me and a rabbit kicks its body free.
The noisy shadow tangles and disrupts the coyotes' feet.
One of the coyote's shape transforms.
It opens all of its mouths and recaptures the rabbit.

At first, the cry of a rabbit is the cry of a baby.
Then the cry becomes something there are no words for.

The cry of a rabbit will make you cry, unless you are hungry
or the rabbit has pulled your cousin out of your life by her hair.

The coyotes plunge the rabbits into the river four times.
One of the rabbit's ears flap in the wind like empty violet shirt sleeves.

Each time they are sunk in the water the rabbits become more-quiet.
The silence embers the coyotes' eyes copper, chrysocolla.

Some of the rabbits hang upside down, staring off and soothed by the moon,
who is also soaked with river and whose light trickles out
from the middle of the water to the shore, in tremors.
Wounds move this same drenched way.

The mesquite trees along the jetty are tap-rooted in the water.
When you gash a mesquite trunk or cut its branches its skin seeps red gold sap,
weeps and crusts an amber blister.

The rabbits wish to begin healing but their wounds are happening now.
The rabbits wish to cicatrix.
Rabbits are always too late.

The rabbits' cries have become choked, with water or the coyotes' teeth.
Most likely with blood and fur. A burbling.
The river and its bullfrogs are also sounds.

A fish leaps from the water and falls back into it.
I should have said the rabbits were screaming not crying.
I am the one crying—on nights like this everything is wet as tears.

The coyotes move in a group, how mourners move around a pyre,
how authorities move to the door of a family
whose daughter or mother has gone missing.
Not a tight pack but a breathing.
How fingers brush one another on their own hand.

The coyotes' tails are down.
The rabbits aren't saying anything anymore.
They were another kind of quiet before this, before the screaming.
The rabbits have never wanted to talk about what they have done.

This rabbit quiet is a new quiet.
Tufts of pale fur rock in a foam onto shore, then off, back to and off again—
it never settles.

The coyotes clean the rabbits with the river and clean us of the rabbits.
They lick the terrible light from one another's faces and eyes.

But what the rabbits have done is still done.
The coyotes know this and cry the spilling moonlight back to the moon.
The moon crusts and closes.

The coyotes leave the beach one at a time.
We are all clean and lonely.

Pandemic Furniture

Its violence.

A condition
of Occupation
complement of
its occupants.

Furniture determines
an individual's world
in relationship
to the universe,

not the universe itself.

Still, yet,
the Occupation,
its occupants,
their furniture—each
uncountable as damage.

Furniture
and its personal
belongings.
I am holding
my mother's purse
and her phone.

This hospital chair
is an event
of my body.
Flexed calf, ankle hooked
around the chair leg.
The confusion
of chair and the body,
our unrestful world,
Saarinen's slum
of legs.

I'm always abiding
the bodies
who don't love us
to abide the body I love.
One of those bodies
is pandemic.

A bed is shaped
for what is done there.
My mother
is in the hospital bed.
I tell her and her wound,
Rest, but don't dream.

To abide but not dwell.

Furniture beetles arrive
with their instruments
of work. A group
of furniture beetles
is called an infection.

One bores into
my mother's foot.
Why her foot? I ask.
Appendages, furniture,
echoes the furniture beetle,
descending the wound.

My mother tells a joke:
*A coffin is not furniture
but its handles are.*

I try moving
my mother's wound
from her foot
to the other side
of the room.

I am bad at domestics
and the wound remains.
*I'm considering becoming
part of the furniture,*
the wound says,
spilling dust from itself
or my mother.

Furniture is not the body
but what they do to ours.

I press the red button.
The nurse arrives, says

*The wound has remained
long enough
to be classified
by the health department
as an abode.*

I look inside—
the wound has a bed
with a full set
of linens,
an entire dining room,
a dresser with drawers
of silk socks,
a small pistol
with a wooden grip.

The nurse says,
*Let's not say Occupation.
Let's say your mother
is a host.*

I tell my mother,
*Next time we're asking
for an unfurnished wound.*

My mother says,
*They don't require
a table and chairs
to make use of us.*