SHE MADE MY EYES

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> *"I cannot be trusted to return what I've been given I need to be taken care ofparadise lies at the feet of mothers I will believe you when you tell me your dreams please mother me kiss all my secret rashes I am awake and will be"*
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> *—Kaveh Akbar, "Milk"*

A long time ago, my Persian mother became a prophet, like Tiresias, and she told me I would die. But what does she know? She was cursed for interrupting love, for not allowing it. She was cursed for her crudeness. Is she a man or a woman? She is Woman and Mother, yet of no sex. No sight. She sees and does not see.

A long time ago, my Persian mother became a prophet, and she told me I would live forever after dying a terrible death. She told me that I would wish I had never lived at all, that the world would squeeze me so tight I would become the black hole which is the source of all broken things.

I tell myself that there is an escape.

In 2000, my mother had her first eye surgery. A standard cataract operation on one eye, her left. Though both eyes suffered from cataracts, she only wanted to take care of one eye at a time. She has always been a cautious woman.

I was in college then, and I didn't go home because my parents told me it was a simple surgery. I asked my mother if she wanted me to come home. I don't remember what she said.

The surgery didn't go well. Later, my mother would say that the night before the operation, she'd had a dream of her grandmother, Parijan. A warning. My mother should have known.

Her vision was not restored, and she suffered in the months following. She lost the independence she'd had her entire life. She had come to the New World, and now she couldn't drive to the grocery store. She became

depressed and, at age sixty, finally suffered a mid-life crisis of sorts. Her marriage took on a lot of her anger. I took on a lot of her anger. I took on a lot. I took a lot.

This is based on a true story, which is a still a story. This is based on a myth. A lie. When my mother loved me, a long time ago, she would lie with me as I fell asleep. She would *naz* my head, gently rubbing, until a small hole appeared. In came the stories. My mother always held us, her children, close.

Before all of this business about eyes, my mother was going to have an operation to fix her back, which had been injured while she was a nurse in the epilepsy unit. A patient fell on her. He was a child jumping to his mother, but he was too old. He was a man jumping to his death, and my mother caught him. The incident damaged a vertebra, and my mother had to stop working. She temporarily retired.

Summer, 1999. I was growing up. I thought I was really beginning to understand her pain, not through my words but in my dreams. I dreamt of her death, and then I called her and told her not to have the operation for her back. I told her that in my dream I'd seen her mother, my grandmother. In Persian, Maman Bozorg. Or I thought it was Maman Bozorg. This old woman, she could have been anyone. My mother believed it was Maman Bozorg and also other long dead female ancestors, like my great-grandmother, Parijan. All of them together. My mother believed the story of my dream.

I met Maman Bozorg just once, when I was fourteen. She couldn't speak English, and we (my father, sister, and I) couldn't speak Persian. My grandmother kept saying our names—Vinson, Nasim, Nahal. Nahal, *jan*. Nahal, dear.

The only other time I saw Maman Bozorg was in a video that my Amma Ghodsi brought back from her visit to Iran in 2004. In this video, Maman Bozorg sits on the couch amongst her children and grandchildren. There's a bright window behind her. It's midday or sunrise or sunset. The light is so bright and misty, a cloud of light. The light is on Maman Bozorg and her hair. The light blurs the edges of the video frame.

She doesn't say much, but I can see her heart in her mouth and in her gaze, which is on her loved ones. She does not stare at the rest of world like

it is something of importance. Her daughter, my Amma Ghodsi, is leaving soon. Maman Bozorg feels her way through the world with silence and the clearest view of her love. Words move outward too much. They have no focus.

In my dream, Maman Bozorg didn't speak. I don't remember the dream well, but my mother does. She told me about it. My dream is my mother's story. And she shouldn't have had that operation. The medical personnel were incompetent. When she and my father arrived for the surgery, the doctor wasn't in yet because he was out buying a car. The nurse prepped my mother for an injection. My mother, being a nurse herself, always talks to nurses and doctors. My mother told the nurse that she had a low platelet count and bruised easily, so "Inject me here, in this vein," my mother said. Her one good vein, the sure site of success. The nurse went to talk to the anesthesiologist about my mother's low platelet count. I wonder if my father was anxious as they waited. I wonder if my mother talked too much. The surgery was called off because my mother would likely have problems with clotting.

My mother narrated her way out of that one. Dreamed her way out. I was becoming my mother's daughter, a real dreamer. A girl who smelled her mother's dead body too soon. You know, Iran is far, far away. I'm not sure how we will get home to bury her.

Do you want me to tell you the truth? To tell it to you straight? I'm writing a story about my mother's eyes. It's ever so precious. This story will bring you to tears. I've told these stories before, but *this* one, this is better. And I know, yes, I'm making too many promises. Or perhaps predictions. Inside your teardrops, there will be little stars that you can wish on, and they will take you to other stories that aren't so precious or sad.

After my father died in 2003, my mother cried and cried, ruining her eyes. She also dreamt a lot. I listened to her crying. I've heard about all of her dreams. Her dreams are melodramatic—mine, something else. In my dreams, there are alternate realities and wonderland play. In mine, the dead can become alive or the living dead in order to communicate by means of a purple checkerboard. Porcupines keep score. Monsters eat glass, are made of glass. And we live in glass houses that are filled with music that doesn't shatter the glass. Mozart's horn concerto, number four in E flat. Bees

swollen to the size of hot air balloons and flowers in your hair. A woman in white. A woman in white. A woman in white with a bomb. In my dreams, my father comes home after a long trip, and I am the last one he hugs. My mother laughs and laughs, tells me it's no big deal.

In the fall of 2003, my mother dreamt that she was in Nayriz, in her childhood home. Her mother, Tabandeh (my Maman Bozorg), was there. My father was there, too. They were all on the summer side of the house. The room was huge and led to a balcony with pillars. They were inside, but there was a breeze. My mother grabbed my father's hands and said, "Look in my eyes. See how much I love you." She said it over and over. Her mother stood as witness.

In reality, when my father proposed to my mother, she made sure that he wrote letters asking permission of his and her parents. She said in those early years that she wished he could travel with her to Iran and actually look her father in the eye. She wanted her own father to *see* that my father was true and honorable. That he really loved my mother. She wanted her father to have no doubt. The meeting never occurred.

My sister and I were there, in the dream. We were running about as my mother said her piece, as she erased doubt. But then, we, the children, were running away. We were lost. We ruined the moment. We are always so disrespectful.

My mother misses everyone. She misses people who are still alive. She misses me the second I leave her. It begins with this notion of America. To come here, you have to leave somewhere else, home. So what you love, you leave, or maybe you leave because you felt whatever you loved left you long ago. Or maybe you never had anything to love. I can't trace it back for myself, let alone another.

My mother went to nursing school in Abadan. She could see another country across the river. Such a sight. To be that close. My mother never wanted to go to Iraq, but perhaps, in a certain way, that vista pushed her onto an airplane, a train, a boat.

In 2002, my mother had a cornea transplant done for her left eye. Again, I wasn't there. I had no dreams. Neither did my mother. The surgery went well. Maybe we—and our dreams—should just stay out of it.

In 2002, I was becoming a real writer. I had written about my mother's blindness. Well, some woman's blindness. I thought I was really beginning to understand her pain.

In 2004, my mother has another eye operation. This is for her right eye, as of yet untouched. This is a simple cataract surgery. But this time we go to a doctor my mother has researched in Washington D.C. This time I'm there, because my father is dead, just died last year. And this time, I know what the pain is and what pain might be at stake. I've got more life experience and have also gotten better at imagining. My father is dead, and as the oldest child, the duty is mine. I don't know much about the eldest Persian girl's duty to her mother, but I know generally what it means. It means that I will be there. The basics of duty: showing up and showing up on time. I can do this.

We arrive in D.C. within one hour of each other. I find my mother sitting in a wheelchair. She isn't comfortable letting a stranger lead her around. She will only rise when I'm there.

We go to the restaurant at the hotel. There's a buffet, and my mother is happy. After eating, my mother watches a lot of news. She prays for about thirty minutes, too. I ask her several times if she's scared, and she says no. Then she goes to bed.

I'm not scared either, just nervous. I don't know how to do this, to be strong for other people. I'm just figuring it out. I always opt for stoicism, which isn't necessarily being strong. Sometimes, you have to cry along with people, to raise up your fist with theirs. This surgery is my first big test as eldest daughter.

As a child, my mother dreamed of holy men. She was back in the early days of the Bahá'í Faith in Iran, where the prophet Bahá'u'lláh was first meeting with people.

And the people are all breathing deeply, I imagine. The words of the prophet are something new but not frightening. They're called to duty, and they've never felt this call before. They have a *purpose*. They are all going to be believers. My mother is there, in the crowd. She already knows the future—sacrifice, martyrdom. But still, she feels the excitement. She breathes

deeply with the others. I see them all, and they are so, so young. I'm not anxious. We're all calm. I understand this dream.

Before the surgery in D.C., my mother is taken away from me for prep. I get to see her again right beforehand. She is crying, and I am not. She holds my hand and gives me instructions in case of her death. I say, "Mom, it's only eye surgery." She hisses, uses my own name as a curse. I just don't understand. One small thing leads to bigger things. Every penny counts. The little ant can kill the tiger.

The surgery goes well. My younger sister comes down the day after to help with my mother's recovery, and I go back to school.

Being the oldest child means you are a good daughter. You don't have to do much. Just let them impose goodness on you. Don't fight back. Don't grow up. When duty calls, you won't have the strength to know what it means. You will think it's simple. The lessons will keep coming, but you might never understand. Or you will think you understand. Or a great bird will come out of the sky and snatch away your mother's eyes. You will think it's simple to be a good eldest daughter, to write the story. Easier to be a good eldest daughter than to write the story.

The surgery greatly improved my mother's eyesight. She decided to try to get her license back. She had many people take her to practice driving. When I was home later that year, I had to help her, too. We practiced parallel parking and the three-point turn, the two parts of the test that she said she had the most trouble with. We practiced at the DMV on a Sunday morning. I explained the details of parallel parking. She couldn't remember which way to turn the wheel. I made her practice the movements. I yelled at her, "Mom, don't hit the pole!" And I kept yelling. Her driving made me nervous. She wanted to go out onto the road in real traffic. I took a deep breath and remembered what it was like to learn how to drive. I remembered wanting my father to encourage me, to tell me that, yes, I could do this and do it well. So I tried to change my attitude, and we went out onto the road. She had trouble staying in her lane. She saw dogs where there were none. I thought how strange it would be if we both died at the same time.

She took the test three times before she passed and had the same tester

all three times. My mother said this woman was kind. I wondered if the tester would have handed her own blind mother a license.

This Sunday morning was the last time I was driven by my mother. I was and am too young for this, for this flipping of roles. I'm too young for my mother to be carried around like a child, though I know that day is coming.

My great-grandmother Parijan fell in love with the prophet Bahá'u'lláh's grandson, Shoghí Effendí. She saw him for the first time in Haifa. He promised her that she would return a second time to see him. Back home in Nayriz, Parijan prayed to God to take whatever he wanted so that she could return to Haifa and Shoghí Effendí. Her daughter Fatemeh Nur, my mother's aunt, overheard and begged Parijan to take it back. Too late. The sacrifice was made. Fatemeh Nur died in childbirth shortly thereafter, and a year later the child died, too. But a long time ago, Shoghí Effendí's father told Fatemeh Nur that she would make important sacrifices for the faith. This is how my mother tells it. I ask her what the sacrifice was for. My mother says religious people believe it. Parijan made it back to Haifa through a series of miracles. It started with Shoghí Effendí's promise, which was a prophecy, like so many of our dreams.

In the summer of 2007, my mother commissioned me as a writer and eldest daughter to take charge of the love letters she and my father exchanged before getting married. I made her sit with me, to help me date undated letters.

In a few of my father's earliest letters, he breaks her down into categories—spiritual, intellectual, romantic, and social—and gives her a grade, out of a hundred percent, in each category. Over the course of several letters, my father continues evaluating her like this, and she keeps trying to improve. I am outraged—such evaluation is sexist, racist, just screwed up. Why would you grade another person, especially one you loved?

Now, I know. It is always a matter of evaluation, though my father had the categories wrong. If he had judged her on freedom and obsessiveness, she would have scored off the charts. She would have gotten extra credit. You have to understand that my mother loves but doesn't know how to love. Nothing stops her, and nothing can make her care if she doesn't. Therein lies

her anger. You see, my mother was Persian, and my father was American. When the cultures clashed in our household, my mother had to fight all of us. She won some, and she lost some. But I always knew how my mother felt. I could always remember her love.

Some years, I feel the need to go home more often. Home is in a smaller Southern town. Home is just my mother now. In December 2007, I go home for Christmas. Though my family doesn't celebrate Christmas, we take advantage of the time off school and work. My sister doesn't come home. She doesn't have to as the youngest.

I go to the park for a run and lock myself out of the car. I call my mother, but I know there is nothing she can do. Her eyesight has deteriorated again, and she can't drive. She will have to call my aunts and her friends to see if anyone can bring me another key. I sit by my mother's car at the beginning of the paved running path. I pretend to stretch and stretch and stretch. I have to turn down rides. (My mother always said, *Never get in a car with a stranger.)* I think that maybe I should just run home, about four miles away, but I don't. I wait for the rescue.

While waiting, I feel panic. I can't figure out why, but it is building in me. I call my mother three times to see if someone is coming.

Back home, my mother says, "Why were you yelling at me so much on the phone? You know I can't do anything."

I say, "But you didn't seem worried at all." What I mean is, *You didn't comfort me*. This isn't the first time I've longed for my mother to be a mother. In my teenage and adult years, she had stopped comforting. The truth: I am still a child, but how can I tell her that? I try to speak but my voice cracks, so I stop. I think how absurd this is, a twenty-eight-year-old wanting her mommy.

I take a shower and then sit on the couch to watch television. A few minutes later, my mother comes in and sits next to me. She says she is sorry. She cries. She reaches out for me. She hugs me. I cannot remember another moment so clear of us, mother and daughter. I cry, too.

When I was younger, my mother thought people were watching her. She would keep the blinds down and stay inside with us, her family. Maybe, in the 1980s, people *were* watching her. I watched her. I watched her brown

skin stay smooth. I watched her perm her straight black hair. I'm still watching.

During this same visit in 2007, my mother's left eye is giving her trouble. She says it's allergies. I say, "In December?" The left eye is red and much cloudier than the other. I tell her we have to see the doctor. Of course, the doctor's office is closed all weekend, through Tuesday, for Christmas. I tell my mother to call his message service, that if it's an emergency he'll see her. She doesn't want to call him, but I pester her until she listens.

We go in for an emergency visit on Saturday. My mother chats away with the doctor, while I read Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* for my doctoral exams. I saved the book to read in the presence of my mother. I read like this. I write like this. With talismans for protection. Trying to latch on to something so I won't fly off. But I don't think it works.

My mother drags me into the conversation. Finally, the eye exam starts, and I can read again.

The first doctor comes in and examines my mother's left eye. He calls in a second doctor for a second opinion. The second doctor calls in a third doctor. The third doctor calls in a fourth. I'm not reading anymore. Now, I'm paying attention. I'm listening. My hands are shaking a little. I feel guilty for making her come here.

Finally, the other doctors leave. The first doctor tells us that my mother's cornea is "melting." This is the medical terminology. Despite the medical explanation—the eye rejecting the cornea, like the body rejects other transplants—I see her eye turning to liquid and running down her neck, onto her chest, her deflated breasts. The liquefied eye will follow the path of wrinkles all the way back to the womb, where it is dry but warm like a valley in the middle of many desert mountains.

The first doctor prescribes antibiotics. He tells my mother to stop using her steroid eye drops. He says once they're sure there's no infection and the holidays are over, they can do a graft.

Through all of this, my mother is stoic. I am stoic.

Outside in the car, I tell her we'll stop at the drug store. Which one should we go to? She says she doesn't care. I reach over and hold her hand. In almost a whisper, I tell her that I'm sorry her eye is messed up. She starts to cry. It's a wonder she didn't cry earlier. She's never been shy about

expressing her grief. So, here is my mother crying, and I'm afraid that I opened the floodgates.

"Stop crying," I say. "You're going to make it worse. You're really going to mess up your eye."

And I let go of her hand so I can drive us off into the sunset.

I write like this. Rumi writes, "Who says words with my mouth?" He means, *I feel another soul. But which one?* It's my soul. He writes of my mother and me. His words are appropriate. They fit. They can hold the hole in my mother's eye shut. I read like this.

I left home before my mother could have the graft put in. It was minor surgery, but I could have stayed for it. I wanted to, but I didn't. After that first doctor's visit, we returned two more times. My mother got more and more emotional. I had to deal with her pain.

The night before I left, I asked if I could look in her eye. I wanted to see the hole. I turned on all the lights in the living room and told my mother to look up into the light. I held her left eye open and stared into her eye, inches away. I stared until her eyes watered and she told me to stop. Then she rubbed her eye, asking, "Does it look okay?" I told her it would be okay. I left the next morning.

A few months later, on a windy night in New York, my younger sister and I stand outside a bar to smoke. She tells me that she will help me take care of our mother. She tells me that I should never ever have our mother live with me, that it would be unhealthy. She says my relationship with our mother is already unhealthy. My sister says she could arrange for a facility in the city. I doubt my mother can live in the city. She belongs elsewhere. The blue sky. A garden. A house with three sides but really four. A glass house. Elsewhere.

Rumi writes this in his poem "Who Says Words with My Mouth":

> Meanwhile,
> I'm like a bird from another continent, sitting in this aviary.
> The day is coming when I fly off,
> but who is it now in my ear who hears my voice?
> Who says words with my mouth?

I'm a halfie. I half-love my mother. I half-tell her story. What is the other half? Who is the other soul? I used to think it was me.

In 2008 we discover that my mother has Fuch's disease. It causes deterioration of endothelial cells in the eye, and the cornea is negatively affected. There really isn't any cure, except cornea transplants, which are hard to come by, and since her eye has already rejected two corneas, the chances of a transplant working in the future are small. Eventually, the doctors say, my mother will go blind.

We find out about Fuch's disease because my aunt Parivash has money to go to doctors in North Carolina. She will not have the problems with her eyes that my mother does. She caught it early and has a milder case. The simple treatments the doctor prescribes for her will work as prevention. Even though it's clear now that Fuch's is my mother's underlying condition, the advanced stage of the disease and her other problems with high pressure in her eyes leave her without many choices.

I ask my mother what it feels like to be going blind. She says it's like when the cable goes out. She says it's like having glass in your foot.

The Chehel Sutun is a beautiful palace in Isfahan, Iran. My mother has told me about it before. She says the pillars of the veranda become real in the water of the reflection pool. An illusion made of pieces of glass and special paint. I have my own obsession with the building. It always shows up in my dreams.

But my mother has never been there. Neither have I.

In my dream, we are in the reflection pool. We look back up at the pillars and say, "They are not real." My mother is young. She looks like my little sister. We splash water on each other, and we are happy. The tourists look at the crazy Persians. They leave dollar bills by the edge of the pool. Then, the water is gone and the bottom of the pool is empty, covered with algae, and that musty smell is the smell of dirt. How will we get home?

If eyes are the window to the soul, then what happens if one of your eyes is melting? Does your soul leak out?

After the graft is in place, early in 2008, the pain in my mother's left eye ceases. She can just barely see out of it, though. She's back to using her eye

drops. When she puts them in, she misses her eyes quite frequently and has false tears running down her face. She says that this is her punishment, and I don't know what her crime is or was. I think it has something to do with love. That's what I said in the beginning, right?

Whenever people tell me that I have pretty eyes, I tell them to thank my mother. A long time ago, this was a way to elude the compliment. A long time ago, this referred to the story of before-my-birth. My mother claimed that she knew what I would look like. She said I came to her in dreams. She kept telling her obstetrician that I would be a girl with brown hair and hazel eyes. Not my father's sky blue or my mother's deep earthen brown. Not green, *hazel*. He disagreed. They made a bet, and my mother won. Sometimes, I think she could see the future even back then, and sometimes, I think she was so powerful that she cheated and made my eyes just to win a bet.

Today, I still drag my mother into it when someone says I have pretty eyes. But now, she is paying the price for my eyes. Anything but a fair exchange. And one day, I think I will have her broken eyes. Anything but.

I ask my mother what she remembers of her own mother, my Maman Bozorg. My mother answers in generalities. I say, "No, *specifically*." My mother is incapable. She has bigger ideas, wants to make her mother out to be a perfect, model mother from before Time. I want to know what color Maman Bozorg's eyes were in the sunshine and how she wore her hair. I push her. As usual, we're fighting, and I'm being mean. "If your mother were dead and you had to deliver a eulogy including one specific memory, what would you say?"

She says, "I would say that she always told me stories, that she always woke me up with a hug. She took me to the store and let me pick out my own clothes. Big deal for a kid in Iran. She didn't make me get married. She was strong. She brought us warm water to wash our face and hands in the winter. She was quiet and hardworking. We could talk to her."

I suppose that will do. My mother tells me to leave her alone.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, one of the mothers decides this:

> I will see a thing that has already happened. The pain that cut my spirit loose. I will hold that pain in my hand until it becomes hard and shiny, more clear. And then my fierceness can come back, my golden side, my black side. I will use this sharp pain to penetrate my daughter's tough skin and cut her tiger spirit loose. She will fight me, because this is the nature of two tigers. But I will win and give her my spirit, because this is the way a mother loves a daughter.
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> I hear my daughter speaking to her husband downstairs . . . . I know a thing before it happens. She will hear the vase and table crashing to the floor. She will come up the stairs and into my room. Her eyes will see nothing in the darkness, where I am waiting between the trees. (Tan 252)

My mother is no tiger, not anymore, and neither am I. Not anymore. Instead, I am the trees, accidentally letting danger and pain and sadness sneak up on her. Her eyes will see nothing in the darkness, but the darkness we will share. *I know a thing before it happens*.

Christmas, 2009, my visit home is uneventful. My sister is home this year. We drive our mother crazy, mostly by wandering off together. By being children again. In her dreams, she always loses us. We scare her to death. Still, she is happy to have us both home. I don't think she's quite so sad anymore. She knows we'll always come back.

I feel giddy to make it through almost two weeks with her and nothing awful happens. I special-order her a mug with a picture of my sister and me on it.

She gets it two weeks later and calls me. "Suzi, I love it so much. It's so touchy. It's the best thing you ever got me."

"Touch*ing*, Mother. Say, *touching*."

"Just let me talk," she says. "It's my favor picture of my babies. I like to look at it every morning. I don't miss you so much."

"I got it so that if you have those dreams, you'll wake up and know we're there," I say. "We're there, and we're sweet. Not mean like we are now." And I laugh.

"Suzi, I just love it. It's so close to my heart."

"I'm so glad you like it."

"Did you do it, or you and your sister?"

"I did it, but she makes you happy, too."

"I know you did it," she says. "You're the sneaky one." I think of a tiger sneaking through the trees. Or a snake in tall grass. Or a prophet who speaks in riddles.

For years, I constantly beg my mother to have another eye operation. I don't want her to go blind. The longer she waits, the less of a chance that any operation can fix her. She says she would rather keep what she has. She says she doesn't want to take any more risks. I wonder what risks she has taken. Her path seems more like one of necessity. My own is one of pleasure and play. I take a risk in loving my mother. I risk my mother. You can love someone so wrong that they just disappear.

Eventually, I stop begging my mother to have another eye operation. *I am awake and will be* but dreams are so hard to return and I want kisses *at the feet of mothers* are rash paradises and my secret is the dreams I didn't tell you about and you, my stand-in and ghost-child, say, *tell me your dreams* but *I cannot be trusted*.

Tiresias knew every crime but her own. That is the only way to see into the future. Her crime was love, interruption, and that crudeness of loving the truth and speaking it. And also sadness and understanding sadness. Her crime was telling before it should be told or too long after.

I cling to my Western myths. Perhaps, they are just easier to understand. You might wonder if I value West over East. The West is just part of the world, but its language is one that everyone understands. The word *Tiresias*. We know this word. (I read like this.) No one knows Persian. I don't know Persian. So how can I tell you a Persian story? Is this one? I don't know if I will ever learn Persian. I don't know that I will teach my children Persian. Or if I will have children. I have many broken things and have broken many things, and my mother is one of them. (I write like this.)

And I will tell it to you straight.

When I think about the sunset, I think of different words for it—*aibojoj,* in Marshallese. I do not know what the Persian word is, though I can speak like Rumi: The sunset *is* mother, and I do not know when she will leave me alone. She has brought me here, but I have already escaped.

She is my own fallen prophet. She is a floating aviary. She is the window to the dreams I don't remember. She buries my head in the sand with her stories. Down there, it's silver and gold, pure blue, and shattered glass everywhere.