NEZHUKUMATATHIL, Aimee

**Hippopotomonstrosesquippedaliophobia***—The fear of long words*

On the first day of classes, I secretly beg

my students Don’t be afraid of me. I know

my last name on your semester schedule

is chopped off or probably misspelled—

or both. I can’t help it. I know the panic

of too many consonants rubbed up

against each other, no room for vowels

to fan some air into the room of a box

marked Instructor. You want something

to startle you? Try tapping the ball

of roots of a potted tomato plant

into your cupped hand one spring, only

to find a small black toad who kicks

and blinks his cold eye at you,

the sun, a gnat. Be afraid of the x-rays

for your teeth or lung. Pray for no

dark spots. You may have

pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis:

coal lung. Be afraid of money spiders tiptoeing

across your face while you sleep on a sweet, fat couch.

But don’t be afraid of me, my last name, what language

I speak or what accent dulls itself on my molars.

I will tell jokes, help you see the gleam

of the beak of a mohawked cockatiel. I will

lecture on luminescent sweeps of ocean, full of tiny

dinoflagellates oozing green light when disturbed.

I promise dark gatherings of toadfish and comical shrimp

just when you think you are alone, hoping to stay somehow afloat.

**The Body**

Something poisons the sea stars

in the Pacific. They rip themselves apart,

twist their arms in gummy knots.

The arms just walk away from the body:

the pull, the pull- what a stroll: - until the arms

detach entirely and spill their creamy innards

onto the ocean floor. I want to do that with my arms –

maybe just my left one – the one that keeps

reaching back to your yellow house

and those slow summers when we grilled out

almost every night. I want to pull of my arm,

or maybe just one finger, or three, so I don’t point

to he playground where our blue dog jumped

through the rows of swings that still hum

their mild annoyance from each slobbery leap

they endured. Mzybe I just want to rid myself

of knuckles so I can’t knock on the door you now share

with another – just so I can see her sweet, blank face –

so I can laugh and say, Sorry, sorry: wrong house!

Forgive me I am nothing but a thumbnail. Yes – that’s

what I’d get rid of - my nail now blackened

with each thump of a sentence. See how

I accidentally brought you up again

when I picked up this nail, this hammer?

**Mosquitos**

When my father wanted to point out galaxies

or Andromeda or the Seven Sisters, I’d complain

of the huzz of mosquitoes, or of the yawning

moon-quiet in that slow, summer air. All I wanted

was to go inside into our cooled house and watch TV

or paint my nails. What does a fifteen year-old girl

know of patience? What did I know of the steady turn

of whole moon valleys cresting into focus?

Standing there in our driveway with him,

I smacked my legs, my arms, and my face

while I waited for him to find whatever pinhole

of light he wanted me to see. At night, when I washed

my face, I’d find bursts of blood and dried bodies

slapped into my skin. Complaints at breakfast about

how I’d never do it again, how I have more homework

now, Dad. How I can’t go to school with bites all over

my face anymore. Now I hardly

ever say no. He has plans to go star-gazing

with his grandson and for once, I don’t protest.

He has plans. I know one day he won’t ask me,

won’t be there to show me the rings of Saturn

glowing gold through the eyepiece. He won’t be there

to show me how the moons of Jupiter jump

if you catch them on a clear night. I know

one day I will look up into the night sky

searching, searching— I know the mosquitoes

will still have their way with me—

and my father won’t hear me complain.

**Always let the wonder win**

It’s there.

A grief is there.

Sadness and rage is always there.

And then the wonder wins.

I make sure the wonder wins.

And definitely there are harder days than others,

but that’s where the practice is.

I try with all my might to make the wonder win

by the end of the day.

**One Bite**

Miracle fruit changes the tongue. One bite,

and for hours all you eat is sweet. Placed

alone on a saucer, it quivers like it's cold

from the ceramic, even in this Florida heat.

Small as a coffee bean, red as jam—

I can't believe. The man who sold

it to my father on Interstate 542 had one

tooth, one sandal, and called me

"Duttah, Duttah." I wanted to ask what

is that, but the red buds teased me

into our car and away from his fruit stand.

One bite. And if you eat it whole, it softens

and swells your teeth like a mouthful

of mallow. So how long before you lose

a sandal and still walk? How long

before you lose the sweetness?

**The Rolling Saint**

*Lotan Baba, a holy man from India, rolled on his side for*

 *four thousand kilometers across the country in his quest for*

 *world peace and eternal salvation.*

 *—Reuters*

He started small: fasting here and there,

days, then weeks. Once, he stood under

a banyan tree for a full seven years, sitting

 for nothing—not even to sleep. It came

 to him in a dream: You must roll

 on this earth, spin your heart in rain,

 desert, dust. At sunrise he’d stretch, swab

 any cuts from the day before, and lay prone

 on the road while his twelve men swept

 the ground in front of him with sisal brooms.

 Even monkeys stopped and stared at this man

 rolling through puddles, past storefronts

where children would throw him pieces

of butter candy he’d try and catch

in his mouth at each rotation. His men

 swept and sang, swept and sang

 of jasmine-throated angels

 and pineapple slices in kulfi cream.

 He rolled and rolled. Sometimes

 in his dizzying spins, he thought

 he heard God. A whisper, but still.

**Why I Am Not Afraid of King Cobras**

*Kerala, India*

Forests equal fairies for a girl of eight.

What I did not equate was this was jungle,

just off the edge of coconut groves

and rubber trees, land where even my father

never ventured alone as a boy. But this

was vacation, time off from spelling tests

and fractions. All of a sudden I had grandparents

to buy me pieces of pink candy, and glass bangles

that clinked with each swing of arm. After dinner, I loved

to gouge the rubber trees with a stick, watch the plastic

ooze from each gash, roll the warm sap into a ball—

each bounce so high, I’d lose them in the last flicks

of sun. I had wandered further that day, deeper

in the groves where cinnamon and sweetleaf grew like weeds.

When I reached for a new stick, I saw him there, standing

in what I learned later is the Imperial pose—eye level,

his teeny tongue tasting the air for what I smelled of:

candy and glass. The ribs of his neck spread wide

as my father’s hand, then smoothed down, and I laughed—

he was suddenly small and naked, like he’d lost

his hat. We stood there for some time before I turned around

and went back inside to tell no one that just minutes before,

a girl and snake made their introductions—the birds overhead

holding their breath, the pierced trees bubbling at their bark.