I still can’t remember when / or how I lost my way
Neil Young, “Cortez the Killer”

I have come upon it, I have come upon blessing,
People, my relatives, I have come upon blessing,
People, my relatives, blessed.
Navajo Blessingway

At the edge of the cove near where my mother’s / brothers laughed
& threw nets
The guanábana in the sand where they fell / Three palms talking
in the wind
When I heard them I was dreaming my aunts / laughing when
Mama say Gather enough
To make a pile like this & her sisters say Dee / Those girls gonna be
out there all night

& before we left they told us / what to say & which way to turn
& how to listen for what the day / whispered in the night
& when to go & when to stay back The sky / watching the fisher
birds & the fisher birds watching
Our village as old as the first palm’s seed / & new as one wave’s spray

& some dead forgetful places When someone / fell out of the
meshes & lost their balance
The places the soldiers found Embers / they breathed on until you
could almost not hear
The thickets stammering through burns The stained reefs / The
choked springs coughing all night
In the places where there had been messages Where we / were messages Before the captain came

A new world A flock made a scatter of bones / A nest made a pit grave next to a spring
They had to drink too Didn’t anyone teach them / what comes up from under the ground
Not the gold they preferred to freedom / Not the world they made called Hell
Looking down into their own reflection / as the earth called their old lost names

That their children would be filling our baskets / with our cut hands generations hence
On the banks of the Congo the Solo the Sola / the Mekong the Mississippi
That the earth they tried to make kneel as they breathed / on the embers of our division
Would burn & their breath become part of the burning / That a theft leaves a gap That what’s buried grows

Sometimes in the dark of the cimarrón caves / I could see the design of their plans for us
A net stretched across two trees nailed together / Like the place where they tied my aunt’s youngest girl
The soldiers fidgeting in a line while they waited / Later one drew her With snakes for her hair
But it was fire After they cut her / & put her face where a baby would be

This was the place they kept promising us / If I tell you does it make it come nearer
Or keep a witness who also remembers / how she laughed with guanábana smeared on her cheeks
How we opened & shared one when we were thirsty / The seeds at the tideline gone by morning
Scratching our backs on the *cocoteros* / The *cocoteros* thumping the beach with food

Scatter them he said Meaning the people / His gesture like flicking mosquitos away
In front of the guarded pits for their hoardings / Little prisons for gold & food
If we’d had a map of their hell if we’d learned / to breathe there long enough to recover
The time we lost in astonishment / when we could have been figuring out what to do

To find & repair the torn meshes that made them / make a world where the living would envy the dead
The seams between that world & the next / Where hell isn’t under the living ground
Hell is my aunt’s youngest daughter still there / in the middle of what had been our village
Where my father & his brothers have to pass to sing / to the sun coming up in the morning

& the way the memory of night Of fruit / Of someone’s mama braiding her hair
Of the birds’ voices not paying attention / Of the sun on the water before & after
Of the old ones laughing & lifting the babies / Of how we thought of ourselves before
As the sweetness of an unbroken body became / a curse & we sent it away

So who was there In what had been the village / of what had been a man & what had been a girl
When my father's brother reached for me / The man they called Haydé
Made someone else Someone they made / kill someone else at the mouth of their mine
His hand flecked with gore & wet gold dust / His strong hand that had lost its way

When he took my wrist The way you take / the neck of a fish just before you break it
To spare the people the torment of hunger / & spare your relative the torment of air
Under the ground would have been a blessing / The ground that kept my mama's salt smell
The ground lost when he lifted me up / & brought me here Where I live

2
Life lighting torches to look for her daughter / Life braiding her daughter's screams
With the useful parts of her ancient fury / & the free place she sees in the dancers & in dreams
Life replaying the last time she saw her / Tangled in the hunters' nets
Life gagged & drugged & blinded / Life made to wait in the hope she forgets

Life exiled by the settlements / Life following the green to the south
Life in the fugitive's wild honey / & the last unbroken horse's mouth
Life they hear rumors of & try / to find a way out of no way to meet
Life paying the captain's ransom / with the soles of her undocumented feet

Life with a question Have you forgotten / Watching the masqueraders whirl
Standing apart from the soldiers Life / whispering to the crucified girl
Life pressed to the cell wall to listen / Life whose laws the yard sparrows obey
Life mocked & cuffed & booked as subversive / Life with her clothes torn then taken away

Life called out of its names & customs / Searching nine days without food or rest
Life looking east for signs of beginnings / Life learning how things end from the west
Life with her undelivered letters / & fresh sorrow that forgets how to fade
Life up late playing variations / on the tune of the ache the captain made

Life that knocks & asks Have you seen her / Singing the grief song after it’s banned
When the bought guards come with doctored warrants / life laughing & spitting its teeth in its hand
Life's thousand names on the magistrate’s docket / Talking so true it can’t be heard
Life arrested Fingers laced in the chainlink / For spreading a fragrance For spreading the word

Life scanning blueprints for alternate exits / Hacking the systems with honey & night
Life resurrecting the murdered dances / to teach the walking dead delight
Arkwright life To get someone to listen / Building near where land used to be
Paintsmith life Smeared with outlawed colors / Writing on walls so someone will see

Life coming to find the dreamer / at the bottom of his brothers’ pit
Life disobeying his fathers / in the freedom thirst his fathers lit
Life patient Life stumbling Life faithful Persistent / Hollering over traffic noise
Kissing the boy who sold sweet potatoes / Singing the names of the shoeshine boys

Life they tried to strangle with honor / Life with its tenderness seen as a curse
Life without weapons except sedition / The naked fighter The bearded nurse
Learning to walk again after the rack-time / Lifting its unemployed hands from its sides
Leaving the school of ruin to wash / in the slack water at the turn of the tides

Life watching currents for usable wreckage / Life without documents climbing the fence
Life arriving with his hands & his hunger / & one dollar and twenty-five cents
Life looking for his kidnapped daughter / & her sisters he does & doesn’t call his
Masked life Impersonating an absence / Life gone missing But look there he is

Life made to laugh by her fugitive brothers / in the key of defeat In the key of blue
Life rumored apprehended & buried / under the arch the soldiers march through
Life with the rain finding her pockets’ / cancelled eviction edicts & deeds
An expired visa A note from her daughter / A bloodstained rag & a handful of seeds

Life swimming between island prisons / Trying to read the captain’s blurred lists
Life hiding in a harbor city / in a heretic corner the searchlights missed
Lank life finding rapture in breakfast / Breath ecstasy to life almost
drowned
Finding underworld in high offices / & sustenance stirring under
the ground

Life at the seam between this world & the next one / Life told
what’s been will always be
Life carrying an unstamped passport / & the weird blurred memory
of somewhere free
Refusing the swallow of prison water / Holding out for reset jubilee
Life walking with two notes in her pockets / One that says Deliver me

3
Take her down After dark / Whisper but she can’t hear you yet
The terror bending her like an archer/ before she figures out who
you are
The edge of one eye watching / as you untie the knots of the
sailors’ rope
Made from hemp from a far field calling / to this one At the edge
of a beach

Where they cut the crown & the branches & tied her / to the waist
of a guanábana tree
& one of the branches to tie her arms open / as if she were
welcoming them
You’ve heard that part of the story haven’t you / The sacred theft
followed by the sacred marriage
We were all one family it says / on the settlement gates & the
plantation crests

& they’ve written it on her body In what / in another world would
be waters of life
Blood & come Tears & sweat / Streaks of salt from the nine days
they kept her
She’s trembling as you work Like the surface / of the bay when
winds you can’t see pass over
Like the mice dropped from the hawk’s talons / when something
goes wrong & they live

Her ankles first So she’s almost standing / The almost successful
attempt at displacement
Rilling into something else as you free / one wrist The other wrist
& she falls With her back to the rising / moon’s face blurred with
what look like erasures
Falls as if all her bones were broken / But not all the way because
you’re standing there

& you hold her the way you did when the winds / seemed to be
tearing your island in two
& she & her new name small enough / to fit in the crook of your arm
Your arm wrapped now around the waist / of an attempted
dislocation
The young woman you last saw laughing / now whispering Mama
I’m done

& the ripple of it passes through the leaves / Over the bay Over the
sand
Where the turtles crawl back to where they were born / to bury the
next generation
& something else passes back as you walk her / toward the river
where the others are waiting
You who remember what it is to learn / to walk then forget then
walk again

& when she hugged your knees & couldn’t / take a step without
leaning on you
& when she was learning to walk on the beach / & you stepped back & held out your arms
Your mother’s & your grandmother’s arms / The arms he tied behind your back
& she took one step & you laughed & said / You got a long road ahead yet Persé

What’s ahead is written on her body / You can read it holding her with your eyes closed
The sound of the wheel of repetitions / in the ache of the rope on the tree
The women’s hair brought to collect the bounties / The broken balconies of al- Mutanabbi Street
The boy at the corner of Amsterdam & oblivion / whispering Got that ready rock y’all 2 for 5

But you’re walking her toward something else Up ahead / by the river The smoke of the fire built
By the people who remember / a few recipes for resurrection
Mixed with the salt-sweet smell of the water / & you hold her & rinse her in the shallows
Sometimes it can take centuries / to figure out who your people are

& to distinguish the theft of a daughter / from the uninterruptible dance of the seasons
To distinguish nature from power / & winter from desecration
To translate the rest of her interrupted / messages from the matrix
When she was a possible dawn inside you / Waiting in a place the sailors couldn’t reach

Persé Persé Wake up & the river / touches her deep as what needs uprooting
& her voice or someone’s moves through & she shakes / the way something wild shakes to get free
Persé Come back & they wash her / in what they know Listening
To her grandchildren in her fingernails In the drummers’ / fingers
& the dancers’ feet

& they call all night at where she was / torn at every open place
& you say the name you all gave her & hell / retreats from her
disfigured face
& the songs & the blossoms on her brow the color / of the glint of
dawn on the heron’s bill
Make a light to see what’s up ahead by / The ways she won’t walk
again & the ways she will