

# 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.

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<sup>i</sup> 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 Mawson<sup>ii</sup> 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 Laika<sup>iii</sup> began overheating,  
a failure of sustainer to separate,

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<sup>ii</sup> 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.

<sup>iii</sup> 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.

*sonnet<sup>i</sup> 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

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