

the cause of death was  
cryptococcal  
meningitis  
(spoken version)

**maya surya pillay**

*i.* I dream of the body  
laid out in our kitchen:  
thin hands folded  
under caving face,  
abdomen cleaned  
to a shallow pink bowl.

and of my mother,  
back turned,  
rinsing something  
in the sink.

*ii.* gently, we excavate the breast  
its host of white-walled rooms  
pillowed with golden fat.

there was a city here once.  
(later, when the lab is empty,  
I press the two halves back together.)

rubbing colon between my fingers  
as the rope comes unwound:  
there's something in there,  
I say, be careful.

*iii.* I dream the body  
is my body  
and it is my heart  
being rinsed out  
in the sink.

holding that thin hand,  
to be honest,  
I'd like to lie down too.

*iv.* the more we cut, the more there is.  
a sea, yielding its shapes to us.

the more we cut, the less of me:  
the tendons of my right hand  
the dent in my sternum  
the wilted labia  
the open eye:

eventually, we dig  
right down to the *you*,  
so neatly packed away.

v. if that was my uterus  
being unearthed,  
(sad winking moon  
pinned down in the dark)

would my mother  
rinse it clean  
the way she'd rinse  
my hair in her sink--

the way the hair  
that once was there  
on this head, which once  
belonged to you,

was rinsed clean  
once  
by a mother  
in a sink,

warm hand weighting necks,  
warm water weighting cheeks—

the way I pour formalin  
over these huddled little lungs?

*vi.* in Tupperware I find you,  
in clothes-hangers your ribcage,  
in orange-peel the folds of your brain.

when I try to tell my doctor  
that I may be seeing ghosts  
your fingers fill my mouth  
and, reaching down into my chest  
you say: “There’s nothing in here  
at all, is there?”

there was a city in you, once,  
but now it’s just us pigeons,  
picking through what’s left  
after that long and terrible night.

*vii.* I look at the body  
and you, tongueless in life, eyeless now,  
Look back at me.  
devoid of being, the void of being  
Is where you have left me.

later, when the lab is empty,  
I lean close to your ear and whisper:

if I could bring you back, I would.

the next day, I think we are on better terms.

while the others skin your thighs

I reattach your jawbone, adorned with its last  
remaining tooth, black to the bone, and

ask you: What comes afterwards?

you say:

there are no cities here.

*viii.* I cut into the body  
and the body cuts into me

and I'm leaking out  
into my gloves.

there's something in here,  
I say,  
be careful.