

Kazim Ali

Ocean Street

*to Alice Coltrane*

1.

blue or white or very far away  
every avenue a rain-stroked aisle  
through the wild wind's theater

far to the barque floating in the last row  
your self laddered to an avenue of sound  
last streak of white-gold found

in lines along the branches or in the branches  
are you a branch that tries from the bark to speak  
cold roar of the ocean you cannot speak

how loud the blue-gray morning  
how loud when you dissolved into sound  
when you dissolved April

into the soul's first question  
what was your body but a first  
uncertain answer

2.

always awakened  
awakened and left

reft the wait's blue hollow  
sightless an oracle trying to tell

what recedes and what's left  
a shirt left crumpled in the sand

in the mist you balance on a board  
the shape of a prayerbook

racing along the surface toward the rocks  
finding in the water a pounding afterlife

sound that undresses itself  
prayerbook spun to unravel

answering the eroding cliffs and dunes  
dear orange shafts of late morning

speaking backward  
and in tongues

3.

wet-suited supplicants balancing on boards  
racing for shore

how do you find your self deeply  
in the forest on the ocean floor

dear snake-haired woman who wondered  
to some the book in sound you wrote was thunder

it is one thing to be lost another to be left  
seeking a slogan a sloka your own body

dear country dark houseflown homewrecker  
shy in the blackness telling how

you sailed again to arrive  
to found yourself in sound

dear hold me seen or sign  
the unsoundable notes saying

*dare to leave home*  
*drop everything*

did the universe write them  
or did you

4.

every aisle a rain-stroked avenue  
breathlessly quoted a letter in space  
of the sea's blue promise

each spring I lie on the surface of the sea  
hoping to stand aloft

my shirt crumpled in front  
of the empty-hearted tree one sleeve  
pointing the way to Nowhere beach

wantonly disappearing every day though  
I did not believe when with your breath  
you made a bridge and dreamed myself wrong

my strange and weary road  
my unkept figure my blue whisper  
winter god whose center

in the moment unwilling to be warm  
eternal the winter eternal the wind unmaking your will

will and whisper my anger my lantern my spaceless wick  
but how my tenuous prayerboard can a supplicant balancing  
on the surface know anything about depth

5.

struggling out of the waves  
moon a little red illegible  
whole sky starless  
in the late hour I didn't tell you  
wrote into me the answer or a map to follow  
boardless and battered  
heaved ashore on the pulled-back day  
in the effort of ache  
where did I swim in from  
water that wholly disappears into air or  
does not disappear

speaking underwater because afraid to be heard  
nothing after no one waiting for me  
sky and sky the same grave gray that terrifies  
turning the page of breath  
where I left myself without sound  
into the air I spell each spring like "swan"  
noises from the next room keep you awake  
god that was a noise in the night at the foot of the bed  
claiming kinship or revival  
transcribing the ghostnotes onto the sheets

we who each divine our self in spite of ourselves  
running wildly boards under our arms back into the sea

6.

in case of warmth the oceans will rise  
strange cup to move through  
after the continents came together

after you swam crazy through the storm to shore  
after you asked for it  
after you drove yourself relentlessly into the sea

we listen to one gust after the other  
a gorgeous scale in the most ordinary range  
drumming the time of the sea into a signature of leaves

twenty minutes of ecstasy  
blue and after the blue, blue-white  
a buoy, a sandpiper, a wholesale slaughter of blue

either way the harp's plucked chords  
like the fog or the answer of water  
dissolved into the shore's copious footnotes

transcribing the music onto ebbing surface  
a missing word where continents rub together  
disappear or dispel the notion  
there is any such word worth knowing

a bridge collapsing along unquelled cadences of sound  
when you whisper yourself to eternity  
whose name did you whisper and into whose ear

7.

blue my promise that divided itself  
from flesh into sound  
and from sound to womb  
womb to thrum that sundered

the water's surface clamorous and racing away  
dear unjacketed traveler evaporate  
ghostlike distance was that you who entered  
illegible annotations in my book on surf

in the tenth hour of the fourth month of which year  
god the river that raced you on the surface to shore  
every I a rain-stroked avenue  
breathlessly quoting rain to the sand

lean close saint nothing  
send me through it sister cup

8.

a body slides through the water  
cleanly angling for rocky shore  
eternal internal zephyr

men have dashed themselves to death  
to feel the racing thrill  
how do you pronounce year after year “home” or “death”

the ocean avenue a bridge ready to collapse  
pond evaporates to air  
your breath made a bridge

impatient penitents race for the exit  
lean close saint everyone  
I live neither here nor there

the ocean scrambling itself to answer  
sketching you in pieces everywhere  
in an odd scene paddling against the current

straining for shore  
you drew yourself in time a backwards sign  
surfing on the breath

wishing to be not an echo of the ocean but its escalation  
and when I cast myself across the surface I stopped wondering  
would I float or would I drown

Dear Alice, Dear Coltrane: On Writing “blue my promise a swan”<sup>2</sup>

When in January 2007 I was walking along the fog-beaches of Santa Cruz, looking down over the banister to the red rocks below, I wondered.

Wondered as I walked on the pier, the sea lions sleeping below, waking up with shouts in the early morning sun.

What is the edge of the universe, I wanted to know. What is the difference between I and I and what can I know when I know what I know.

*When I called you to California, you knew I would meet you in California.*<sup>3</sup>

At all ways and all edges the music of Alice Coltrane was the music at the end of what I did not know and what I knew and was the beginning of the new part—what I never knew and what I now know.

Which is:

On April 6, 1971, Alice Coltrane and her band got together in New York City. And under her direction, while she led them on the harp and the organ, they forged a fusion of new sound, sound with the movement and energy of jazz, the absolute Now, and the structure and instrumentation of ancient ragas, timeless and yet of course always absolutely Now.

So as my breath moved through my body I heard the sound of Alice Coltrane in the ether *as* breath—everlasting, taintless and pure, beyond all things.

And in my case, the first vibrations of sound off of Alice Coltrane’s harp *were* the first stirrings of breath in my new body being at last born into the air in Croydon, England that same day.

Unbeknownst to me (for sure) and Coltrane (perhaps), Igor Stravinsky had died some time during the night, likely in the very early morning hours when Coltrane was playing and I was sliding through from the other side of the universe.

*When I called you to Brahma Loka, you knew I would meet you in Brahma Loka.*

Only a few years after that Alice Coltrane renounced her public career and took a new name, Turiya Saatgeetananda, meaning Truth-Music-Bliss. Indeed.

I began writing the “blue my promise a swan” poems in September of 2006 before I knew Alice Coltrane herself was soon to fly forth from the mortal shape that had for a little while held her. But in the space left by her spirit the other poems rushed into their place.

Eternal sound of the universe who are you and what do you sound like. *When I called you to Turiya Loka, you knew I would meet you in Turiya Loka.*

Dear Alice, Dear Coltrane, let me in your light a little while sing.

Note:

1. Earlier and sometimes significantly different versions of some of the sections of this poem appeared in the following journals: Sections 1-2: *Hayden's Ferry Review*; Section 3-4: *Pebble Lake Review*; Section 5: *Lo-Ball*; Section 7-8: *Cavalier*.

2. "Dear Alice, Dear Coltrane" appeared on-line on *Memorious* ([www.memorious.org](http://www.memorious.org))

3. Italics are from "OM Supreme" from Eternity, Alice Coltrane, © Jowcol Music.