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”
optes 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”

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.

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)

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