

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS

gulf coast



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GULF COAST

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gULF COAST

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Through the empty arch comes a wind, a mental wind blowing relentlessly over the heads of the dead, in search of new landscapes and unknown accents; a wind that smells of baby's spittle, crushed grass, and jellyfish veil, announcing the constant baptism of newly created things.

—Federico García Lorca

Dear Readers,

In her essay in this issue, “Shrines of Twine,” Natalie Kinkade observes: “The meaning of death and life gain urgency in the absence of certainty.” And this thought resonates with much of the work offered here. Throughout “Origin Stories,” a special section of prose and verse curated by Vievee Francis, death’s intimate relationship with creativity emerges. Indeed, it seems that when asked to write about where they come from, many writers return to a loss they’ve endured or look toward the looming threat of one. And yet, as often as death may present finality, it can also open a passage; the notion that death and life are polarities may be a specious one. In the essay that opens the special section, Desiree Cooper reflects on an elderly mother’s ability to hold “the door open for the unliving.” Even in “death’s waiting room” with the omnipresent specter of plague, Cooper writes, “whenever she peers into the places I can’t see, she returns with the truth.” Eric Cruz’s poem “Lemon Tree,” which concludes the section, features a speaker carrying forward the ghost of his father, a man who held “stories he never thought would be / written.”

This issue also includes three previously unpublished poems from Franz Wright, each of which reads as a missive from the other side. “I can’t get over it... I am going to die,” the poet writes. The intimacy of address feels startling, like overhearing someone who is just on the other side of a door.

A sense of urgency around our mortality may prompt meditation and reflection, but it may also prompt one to forge ahead, challenging their doubt and fear. In Masha Kisel’s story “Fallout,” teenage Lena tries to make sense of her first experiences of sexuality while the Chernobyl disaster and mistruths circulated by the government form a background of dread. She sneaks out one night to a clandestine gathering of friends and is elated to discover, “There was no death here!” In his poem “Near the End of the Century,” Jacques J. Rancourt also writes of the sense of possibility a young person feels as they sneak away into the night: “They might make out / with a ghost, they might / twirl like a disco ball.” Or, as Star tells it in Eloghosa Osunde’s “There is Love at Home”: “Scenes like this were about negotiating lust with full intention; about, as she had said to a friend once, ‘bringing the darkest of one’s desires to the surface of the skin.’”

We inhabit our desires and the words we have for them as they inhabit us. If a sense of mortality animates our artistic instincts when we feel death's presence in the room, then what are the dimensions of this room? In the year of absent audiences, writers and artists have fashioned rooms in which we can be seen and in which we may care for each other. Describing Bria Lauren's photographs, Amarie Gipson writes, "Through intimate depiction, Lauren's photographs generate an environment in which Black women can be seen and, more importantly, in which they can fully see themselves." Lauren, Gipson says, "has always allowed herself to be a vessel through which strangers can have their voices heard."

Others carry absence itself as a talisman, like janan alexandra, whose writing recalls, "For many years I carried an eraser that was shaped like Cyprus," a treasured memento from her Motherland, which is later lost. "Is where you are from what you have lost along the way?" she wonders.

Stories and poems can remind us that loss may serve as a threshold, a place to meet and commune with others. Vievee Francis, referencing Roberto Bolaño, notes at the end of her introductory essay: "We are all sharing one great story." If we're near the end of one story, we're near the beginning of another. We are closer to an origin. In Osunde's story, F reminds Star, "You're alive. Act like it."

In memoriam
Karl Killian (1943–2020)

THE 2020 BARTHELME PRIZE

Judged by Jenny Offill

This year's winner is "Like Yourself"
by Kieran Mundy

The secret weapon of "Like Yourself" is its sneaky wit. It hums beneath the surface of the story and reveals itself in unexpected ways. The sad moments and the funny ones blur beautifully into each other by the end. The result is a marvel of compression and grace.

—*Jenny Offill*

This year's Honorable Mentions are
"물귀신 | Mul Gwishin" by Kat Lewis
& "The Storm" by Jennesa Regios

Like Yourself

You're sore. It's your shoulders mostly—they hurt from swiping through hundreds of men. Tylers, Johns. Think about sending a message. Then, think about a massage. You have health insurance but you aren't sure if you'll keep the job it came with. Staying in one place is something you're working on the way the men you date do with their stomach muscles.

"Beautiful," the masseuse says on the phone when you mention the insurance.

"Thank you," you say, because you take compliments where you can find them. Then, hang up and keep looking. Chat with an Alec, a Greg, a few Bens. That's at first. At last, you sleep with a Sean.

"Maybe we could be platonic," he tells you three dates later, two dates late. The word sounds like a bitter cocktail, one you don't want. Buy wine instead. The cashier has the kind of face you can tell looks better in photos. Picture the two of you in one, as a couple, hands locked together like the teeth of a zipper.

"Hey," he says when he checks your ID, "that's one you don't see a lot."

"That's me," you say, flirting. "One you don't see a lot."

"How are you liking this coast?" he asks. Speaking of coasts, put the brakes on. It wouldn't work. Zippers are easy to undo. You undo zippers all the time. You undo your zipper quickly, before the masseuse tells you to.

"Slow down," she says, and asks what brought you in. Tell her about your plan to heal through the power of the human touch.

"I'm off," you say. "I feel off."

You want to feel on. You want someone to turn you that way. She kneads you like bread. You wish you were baked. You've stopped smoking pot in order to be someone who doesn't smoke pot.

"Where do you hold your tension?" she asks. Tell her it's in your shoulders. This you know. This, you can feel.

She moves your body around inside your skin, digging into the twisted parts of you. At your hips, you feel a sharpness and tighten.

"That hurts," you say.

"It shouldn't."

"It does."

"It should feel good."

"It doesn't."

"That means you're wrong."

She presses hard into your hips again.

"See?" she asks. "Do you see?"

Make her show you again and again. Make her show you until she says that it'll only make it worse.

Afterwards, use the bathroom. You're surprised by the graffiti. People are inspirational. People are angry. People are wanting to eat pussy and believing in God. Above the toilet paper roll: *do something today that makes you feel like yourself.*

When you go to wash up, shut the light off so the mirror can't show you your face. In the dark, stick your fingers under the water and slide the soap between them. It's a familiar sensation—skin on skin, hands touching for the length of a breath before slipping past one another. Wonder if this is enough.

THE 2020 GULF COAST PRIZE IN TRANSLATION

Judged by Urayoán Noel

Winner, Kristen Renee Miller
for translations of ten micropoems by
Marie-Andrée Gill


Marie-Andrée Gill's spare, luminous micropoems are endlessly surprising, twisting out, into, and unto themselves like complicated lovers. Defiantly fragmentary, these are less petits poèmes en prose than stunning shards of tongues, embodied vernaculars slowly, steadily unsettling grammars. Kristen Renee Miller's translations retain the elegance and shimmer of the originals while wondrously conveying their knottedness, their syntax of skin. When at last we reach Nitassinan, we are reminded of the world's poetry documents, but also of the world it creates. This is poetry that claims the power to "gnaw the meat off / each day and spit out the pin bones" through a language as unresolved as our decolonial dreams and as necessary as our sovereign desires.

—*Urayoán Noel*


from *Chauffer le dehors*

Caresse sans objet, raboutage de membres,
minou de poussière sur le plancher, champlure
qu'on ferme l'automne, gale arrachée, repoussée.


Je couche mes restes sur le calorifère et mes
oiseaux se cachent pour mourir.



Je pleume les oies pour souper, comme je
voudrais le faire pour toi mais à l'envers : te
greffer des ailes qui marchent et des cris plein la
gorge, que tu puisses voir les fleurs sauvages de
mon cœur cru, la médecine millénaire qui nous
enveloppe.



Même si le futur hausse les épaules et démêle
son filage tranquillement pas vite, je sais que la
disparition sera ailleurs que dans le ciel, qu'on a
dézipé à grandeur pour l'habiter.



Ça fait que je change les meubles de place, je
rentre le chat et guette la montagne en train de
prendre sa marche sur les millénaires, même si
tous les brûlots éclosent encore de mon ventre.

from *Chauffer le dehors*

A caress without purpose, a splicing of limbs,
a dust kitten on the floor, a room closed off in
fall, a scab torn off, regrown.

I lay my remains on the stove, and all my birds
hide themselves away to die.



I carve the birds for supper, as I would do to
you but in reverse: graft onto you articulated
wings and full-throated cries, so you could see
the savage flowers of my raw heart, the
thousand-year medicine that envelops us.



Even if the future shrugs its shoulders and
untangles its threads quietly but not quickly,
I know we will disappear to someplace other
than the sky, someplace we've unzipped wide
enough to inhabit.



It's enough to make me disarrange the
furniture, let out the cat, and lie down in wait
for the mountain, taking its slow walk across
the millennia, even as blow-flies blossom at
last from my belly.



C'est dans un lit de sapinage qu'on a touché la
beauté sourde-muette de l'éphémère. On a
marché dans nos malaises pour trouver la
racine comestible du langage et flatter
l'éblouissement de nos bobos. On l'aura passée
ensemble la balayeuse sur nos fantômes.

En tout cas, on a su quoi faire de nos organes
entre chaque trouée d'orage.



Quand on s'embrasse, c'est comme dans les
films : on s'envole doucement, on monte et on
reste pris au plafond de l'aréna avec les
drapeaux des équipes gagnantes des années
passées.



Ce qu'il reste :
des rires en pleurant comme tout le monde en connaît
une senteur de savon à linge pis de gaz deux-temps
et mon clitoris comme une ronde
toute seule dans sa mesure





On a bed of fir saplings, we touched the mute
beauty of impermanence. We stumbled out
uncertainly, searching for the edible root of
language, nursing our dazzling wounds.
Together we drove a street sweeper over our
ghosts.

In any case, we knew what to do with our bodies
between thunderstorms.



Kissing: it's just like the movies. You take off
slowly, float toward the gym ceiling, get
tangled in the championship banners from
previous years.



What remains:
crying laughing like everyone knows
the scent of laundry soap and two-stroke gasoline
and my clit like a *ronde*
all alone when her turn comes



Je veux garder un peu de travers
ce qui reste de douceur :
des incantations chaudes soufflées dans le trou
de nos poings fermés
des feutres de bottes au bord du poêle
une balloune frottée qu'on colle au mur



Avec pour allié le mot *lentement*, je relie les
points en ordre croissant pour me refaire une
face, je ramasse le bran de scie, désosse les jours
et crache les arêtes.



Je touche du bois, je ferme ma bouche mais je
continuerai quand même à le dire dans les
silences de la portée :

si vous me cherchez, je suis chez nous,
ou quelque part sur Nitassinan,
toutes mes portes et mes fenêtres sont ouvertes

je chauffe le dehors.

I want to keep a little crooked
what remains of sweetness:
spells blown hot into the holes of our fists
felted boots by the stove
a rubbed balloon left stuck to the wall



With the word *slowly* as an ally, I connect the
dots in ascending order, make myself a new
face; I pick up the pieces; I gnaw the meat off
each day and spit out the pin bones.



I touch wood; I close my mouth but I keep on
repeating to the encompassing silence:

if you are looking for me, I am home
or somewhere on Nitassinan;
all my doors and windows are open.

I'm heating the outdoors.

THE 2020 GULF COAST PRIZE IN TRANSLATION

Judged by Urayoán Noel

Winner, J. Bret Maney
for translations of five poems by
Fiston Mwanza Mujila

Fiston Mwanza Mujila's poems have the diasporic urgency of their syncopated geographies: from Kinshasa to Haiti, from lyric to performance score and back, and where global tongues meet, these poems invoke the possibilities, dangers, and ironies of cosmopolitanism along with the hortatory visions and anaphoric flows of Afro-surrealism and Négritude. With dark, picaresque humor and faith in the power of chant, this notebook of counter-songs confronts the death drive of capitalism and chances to chart a "cartography of violence" with a matter-of-factness that is the other side of love. The translator J. Bret Maney renders all this in a language as vital and musical as it is precise ("unsubdued by antediluvian downpours"), and with a performative élan that feels like something special: solidarity, perhaps.

—*Urayoán Noel*

***Honorable Mentions
for the 2020 Gulf Coast Prize
in Translation***

May Huang
for translations of poetry by
Chung Kwok-keung

Derick Mattern
for translations of poetry by
Cenk G ndođdu

Je psalmodie mon soleil bleu

Je psalmodie mon soleil bleu. Soleil aussi vaste que toutes les étoiles accouplées. Soleil qui guinche la polka jusqu'à se briser le corps. Soleil intemporel. Et de l'aube immaculée de beuverie ? Soleil de toutes les espérances. Soleil de toutes les folies. Soleil de toutes les libertés. Soleil qui boit ma salive. Soleil feux-de-brousse irradiant ma solitude. Soleil NU, insoumis aux pluies diluviennes et à la bave dégoulinant de ce même ciel. Soleil, Soleil, Soleil incarnant l'immensité de l'Esprit Aîné.

Il me faut être heureux pour écrire. Même quand le texte en soi est une cartographie de la violence ou qu'il développe la dysenterie. Je ne me vois pas laisser couler une larme sur la joue ou porter un cœur lourd de chagrin afin de marchander avec les mots. L'écriture est consécutive à la joie de vivre, au bonheur... Il me faut le singer, le tricher, le fantasmer, le colporter ou l'inventer afin d'accéder à l'insignifiance. Joli clin d'œil au roman de Kundera dont j'emprunte le mot. Qu'est-ce que l'homme – de même que la littérature – si ce n'est ces petites perles de chaos qui nous inhibent l'existence. Pour ma part, je le tance avec la folie. Il me faut la joie pour me défenestrer.

I Sing My Blue Sun

I sing my blue sun. Sun as vast as all the coupled stars. Sun that dances the polka until the body bursts in pieces. Sun out of time. And of the dawn unblotched by drunkenness. Sun of all hopes. Sun of all insanities. Sun of all freedom. Sun that drinks up my saliva. Brush-fire sun illuminating my solitude. Sun unclothed, unsubdued by antediluvian downpours and the drool dripping from this same sky. Sun, Sun, Sun incarnating the immensity of the Elder Spirit.

I must be happy to write. Even when the text itself is a cartography of violence or reels with dysentery. When I do business with words, no tear rolls down my cheek, my heart is not heavy with sorrow. Literature is the child of the joy of life, of happiness...I must ape this happiness, trick it into being, dream it, peddle it, or invent it in order to gain access to insignificance. A pretty allusion to Kundera's novel from which I pluck the phrase. What are human beings—or literature even—if not these small pearls of chaos that inhibit our existence? For my part, I shout down madness. I need joy to defenestrate myself.

Ce qui importe

ce qui importe:
exténuer la poésie
la poursuivre dans son dernier retranchement
à la manière d'un boxeur
déverrouillant son adversaire dans les cordes
créer, à partir d'elle, le paradis
un joyeux bordel de mots

What Matters

what matters:
extenuate poetry
drive it into a corner
like a boxer
working their opponent on the ropes
create, through it, paradise
a joyful bordello of words

Ville de chien

Pour saxophones, percussions, batteries, violoncelle, accordéon, piano et vibraphone

Éléments visuels: concerts Louis Armstrong et John Coltrane

Éléments visuels: l'Est du Congo

Éléments visuels: les rues de Lagos

Éléments visuels: Saint-Pétersbourg, hiver 42

Éléments visuels: les bordels de Bahia et de Katmandou

Éléments visuels: Allemagne-Argentine, finale coupe monde 1990

Éléments visuels: huitième round, Mohamed Ali contre George

Foreman, Kinshasa-Léopoldville 1974

la ville est un crayon qui rédige des salves d'accidents

et ses désinvoltures rouillent les désirs

d'un peuple salaud

d'un peuple misère de merde

d'un peuple phacochère

buveur de sang et coureur d'asile politique

19 heures 10

19 heures 20

19 heures 35

19 heures 38

19 heures 57

19 heures 67

19 heures 77

19 heures 82

19 heures 94 virgule trente-deux ans

au coin des rues « Va te faire foutre » et « Je t'emmerde »

une bande de chiens enragés dépeçant

un corps vide

Dogtown

For saxophones, drum kits, other percussion instruments, cello,
accordion, piano, and vibraphone

Visual elements: Louis Armstrong and John Coltrane concerts

Visual elements: eastern Congo

Visual elements: the streets of Lagos

Visual elements: St. Petersburg, the winter of '42

Visual elements: brothels in Bahia and Kathmandu

Visual elements: West Germany–Argentina, World Cup Final, 1990

Visual elements: the eighth round, Muhammad Ali vs. George Foreman,
Kinshasa–Léopoldville, 1974

the city is a pencil sketch of car crashes
and its indifference dulls the desires
of a bastard people
of a broke-ass people
of a warthog people
blood suckers and chasers after political asylum

7:10 p.m.

7:20 p.m.

7:35 p.m.

7:38 p.m.

7:57 p.m.

7:67 p.m.

7:77 p.m.

7:82 p.m.

7:94 p.m. point thirty-two years
at the corner of Screw You and Go to Hell Streets
a pack of rabid dogs tearing open
an empty body

rue « Ta gueule », un homme et une femme
dévorant les fruits défendus
rue « Les bêtes sauvages », un prophète, barbu jusqu'aux dents, aboyant qu'au
commencement était la dysenterie
rue « Tais-toi sinon je te casse la gueule »
un politicien radotant une de ses meilleures fables
20 heures 46 verset 17
la pluie
les rues inondées
les baraques à l'emporte-pièce
une église transformée en boîte de nuit
une boîte de nuit en cybercafé
un cybercafé en pharmacie
une pharmacie en librairie
une librairie en bordel boutique boulangerie lingerie charcuterie !
les habitants de la ville sont des villageois
trimbalant leurs destins maudits sous une pluie
des mots sans cervelle ni barbecue
des guimbardes broyant du noir
des femmes aux seins grosses-tomates
des hommes vêtus de honte chômeurs en pensée
en parole par action et par omission
merdeux
et bricolant aux divinités supérieures
des prières sans orgasme
des vendeurs à la criée
des musiciens par inadvertance
des prostituées et leurs tarifs
des potentiels clients libido au zénith
désirs masturbatoires décharges électriques
catharsis
les oiseaux dissipent l'évasion des prophètes

on Shut Your Hole Street, a man and woman
devouring the forbidden fruits
on Wild Beasts Boulevard, a prophet bearded to the teeth, barking that dysentery
was there in the beginning
on Shut Up or I'll Fuck You Up Street
a politician rattling off one of his best tall tales
8:46 p.m. verse 17
the rain
the flooded streets
apartment-house slums
a church turned into a nightclub
a nightclub converted into a cybercafé
a cybercafé into a pharmacy
a pharmacy into a bookstore
a bookstore into a brothel boutique bakery bra emporium butcher's!
the inhabitants of this city are hicks
lugging their accursed fates under a downpour
of words without rhyme or reason or a dollop of barbecue sauce
brooding jalopies exhaling black clouds
women with big tomato breasts
men attired in shame, unemployed in thought
and word, in deed and omission
shits
patching together for the higher gods
prayers that never come
auctioneers
accidental musicians
prostitutes and their prices
prospective clients their libidos through the roof
ejaculatory wishes electric shocks
catharses
birds scattering the prophets' evasions

trente-deuxième jour
des maisons qui se suivent mais qui ne se ressemblent pas
des pas de danse des butineurs de breuvages insolites
ruminant des sortilèges
comme si le continent effrité bazardait sa brosse à dents
des moulins à vent
des chèvres
des poules mouillées
des moustiques
des militaires et leur folie
des sacs-poubelles
des vaches en rut
des guimbardes
des chariots
des brouettes
des crochets
des banderoles
des calebasses
des machines à coudre
des marteaux
des préservatifs
et des bières
et des bières
et des bières
venant, ou de Luanda
ou de Moscou
ou de Kigali
ou de Ngandajika
ou de Musumba
ou de Berlin
ou de Lima
ou de Mbuji-Mayi

thirty-second day
houses plopped down one after another but sharing no likeness
toe-tapping drinkers of strange pollens
ruminating on spells
as if the frittering continent was ditching its toothbrush
windmills
goats
drenched chickens
mosquitoes
soldiers and their insanities
trash bags
heifers in heat
jalopies
carts
wheelbarrows
hooks
streamers
gourds
sewing machines
hammers
condoms
and beer
and beer
and beer
from either Luanda
or Moscow
or Kigali
or Ngandajika
or Musumba
or Berlin
or Lima
or Mbuji-Mayi

ou de Cotonou
ou de Douala
ou de Dar-es Salam
ou de Clignancourt
ou de Rotterdam
ou Caracas
ou de Bulawayo
ou de Brazza
ou Brooklyn
ou de Lagos
ou, ou, ou, ou, ou, ou
des balivernes
des ventilateurs
des lampions
des musiques croisées
des regards acerbes
des odeurs nauséabondes
des rires sardoniques
des prophéties de basse-cour
des destins bâclés
nous les salauds
et seul Dieu sait
si nous avons été réellement créés
à son image

or Cotonou
or Douala
or Dar es Salaam
or Clignancourt
or Rotterdam
or Caracas
or Bulawayo
or Brazza
or Brooklyn
or Lagos
or, or, or, or, or, or
what baloney
circulating fans
Chinese lanterns
cacophonous music
acerbic looks
foul smells
sardonic laughter
backlot prophecies
botched futures
us sons of bitches
God only knows
if we were really made
in his image

J'habite au dix-neuvième étage

J'habite au dix-neuvième étage d'un immeuble sale et délabré. Je m'y suis installé à mon retour d'Europe. J'avais regagné le pays pour assister au mariage de ma sœur aînée. Après une bonne dose de rumba et des bières sifflées avec quelques amis d'enfance, je n'avais plus aucune envie de reprendre l'avion. Par manque de pécule, ras-le-bol de squatter chez des cousins, j'avais fini par dénicher cette piaule.

Même en France, ma vie n'a jamais été un festival. Je n'ai connu que des immeubles sales et admirablement délabrés. Le monde lui-même est un immeuble sale et délabré. On est quand même en l'an 2016 après Jésus-Christ ! À chacun ses rêves. Les miens, je dois le reconnaître, manquent de jambes mais je les porte très haut pour chamberer ma solitude dans cet immeuble lugubrement sale et malpropre.

De mon balcon, je peux voir le monde se créer et se démembrer. Je me dispose à l'écriture à une heure voire deux heures du matin. Je m'exile de mon lit, avale une goutte de bière ou une tasse de thé, fume une clope et me déverse intégralement dans l'exorcisme de la prose. Je délaisse rarement mon appartement. Comme toute la populace de l'immeuble, je vide mes poubelles par la fenêtre ou dans les couloirs. Je ne descends que pour me procurer la mangeaille au dépanneur du coin. Je ne suis tout de même pas un touriste en manque de photos pour me défenestrer dans la rue toutes les trente minutes. D'ailleurs, les ascenseurs ne s'arrêtent qu'au deuxième niveau.

Je me console à l'idée que bon nombre d'écrivains talentueux, dix-mille fois plus orfèvres que moi, menaient une vie de bohème. Edgar Poe fut un magnifique picoleur. Rimbaud ne fabriquait pas l'argent. Vous n'aviez qu'à voir la mine qu'il affiche sur les clichés qu'on a encore de lui. Kafka, emporté par une saloperie de tuberculose. Balzac, criblé de dettes, se battant comme un diable dans le fleuve

I Live on the Nineteenth Floor

I live on the nineteenth floor of a dirty and run-down building. I moved in when I returned from Europe. I'd come back to the country for my older sister's wedding. After a heavy dose of rumba and drinking beer with childhood friends, I no longer had any desire to get back on the plane. Because of a lack of bread, because I was sick of squatting with cousins, I ended up in this room.

Even in France, my life was never a cakewalk. I knew only dirty and admirably run-down buildings. The very world itself is a dirty and run-down building. And yet, they say we're in the year 2016 of our Lord Jesus Christ! To each his own dreams. Mine, I should admit, don't have legs, but I carry them high on my chest to keep my solitude warm in this mournfully dirty and filthy building.

From my balcony I can see the world being born and dismembering itself. I settle down to write at one or two in the morning. I exile myself from my own bed, take a swallow of beer or drink a cup of tea, smoke a cigarette and pour myself into the exorcism of prose. I leave my apartment only rarely. Like all residents of the building, I empty my trash out the window or in the hallways. I go downstairs only to get something to eat at the corner shop. I'm not, after all, a tourist in need of photos, someone who has to defenestrate himself into the street every half hour. Besides, the elevators only stop on the second floor.

I console myself with the thought that a large number of writers, ten thousand times more capable spinners of gold than I, led bohemian lives. Edgar Allan Poe was a magnificent drunkard. Rimbaud didn't mint money. To see that, you only have to look at the expression on his face in the snapshots we still have of him. Kafka, carried away by a bloody tuberculosis. Balzac, crippled with debts, fighting like a devil against the current to make ends meet. Hemingway, a suicide. Cesare Pavese, a suicide. Kleist, a suicide. Primo Levi committed suicide. Stefan Zweig, another suicide. Romain Gary, a suicide.

pour nouer les trois bouts du monde. Hemingway, suicidé. Cesare Pavese, suicidé. Kleist, suicidé. Primo Levi s'est suicidé. Stefan Zweig, suicidé. Romain Gary, suicidé.

Le métier d'écrivain n'est pas le grand cinéma. Écrire ne fait pas de l'homme une espèce à part. Que dire de Sade, Baudelaire, Verlaine ou même des artistes peintres comme Van Gogh et Modigliani ?

Je n'ai pas le génie de Balzac ou de Stefan Zweig. Je me force d'apprendre. J'apprends à relativiser. À tout relativiser. Je relativise mon existence chaotique, je relativise mon manque criant de talent, je relativise l'image douloureuse que nous renvoie la terre, je relativise le soleil, je relativise la pluie, je relativise les gamins qui déversent les poubelles dans les escaliers, je relativise l'immeuble sale et délabré à partir duquel j'observe la marche du monde...

The writer's life is not a Hollywood movie. Writing does not make you a person apart. What to say then of Sade, Baudelaire, Verlaine, or even painters like Van Gogh and Modigliani?

I don't have the genius of Balzac or Stefan Zweig. I force myself to learn. I learn to put things in perspective. To put everything in perspective. I put into perspective my chaotic existence, I put into perspective my glaring lack of talent, I put into perspective the painful images the earth sends back to us, I put into perspective the sun, I put into perspective the rain, I put into perspective the kids who throw their trash in the stairwells, I put into perspective the dirty and run-down building from which I observe the world turn...

Haiti

mille soleils aux victimes du séisme

vers toi nos yeux sont tournés
partageant par l'alchimie de la brisure
tes pouls qui battent au ralenti

tu ne portes pas seul ton deuil
tu ne sculptes pas seul les mots aux morts
tu ne jettes pas seul tes blessures par devers l'océan
tu ne cherches pas seul tes fils écrasés, entre bétons et
poussières
tu ne ramasses pas seul les restes de tes entrailles
tu n'avances pas seul, hagard, contre vents et
turbulences
tu n'attises pas seul la flamme de l'espoir

celle qui fait qu'Haïti, tu sois Haïti, tu marches Haïti, tu tombes Haïti, tu te
relèves Haïti, tu t'inventes Haïti, tu te transcendes Haïti, tu te prophétises Haïti,
tu te nommes Haïti et tu demeures Haïti comme il était au commencement,
maintenant et toujours et pour les siècles des siècles, ainsi soit-il, amen !, alléluia
!, déjà nous sommes toi, Haïti qui pleures et qui soupire, Haïti qui dances la
mort et qui sermonnes la vie, Haïti qui grésilles la sève et qui germe le sel, Haïti
qui trébuche et qui reprends la route, Haïti qui te convulses et qui geins, Haïti
qui crache la bave et manges ton pain sans levain à la sueur de ton ventre, Haïti
qui t'insurges et laves ton linge sale en famille, Haïti qui votes « non » ! et qui
montres la voie à suivre, Haïti qui dis « merde et bande de chiens enragés ! » aux
divinités supérieures, fainéants, cancre et incapables d'enfermer pour ne fût-ce
que pour vingt-quatre mille ans dans nos cages à bestioles et autres coléoptères,
les forces maléfiques de cette nature morte, par exemple, les séismes-bidons,

Haiti

for the victims of the 2010 earthquake, a thousand suns

towards you our eyes are turned
sharing by some alchemy of the break
your pulse that beats in slower motion

you do not wear mourning alone
you do not shape words for the dead alone
you do not cast your wounds into the ocean alone
you do not search for your crushed sons alone,
trapped between concrete and rubble
you do not pick up the ruins of your insides alone
you do not push on, bleary-eyed, into the wind
and turbulence alone
you do not fan the flames of hope alone

that which makes Haiti, that you are Haiti, that you walk as Haiti, that you fall
down as Haiti, that you get back up as Haiti, that you invent Haiti, that you
transcend Haiti, that you prophesy Haiti, that you are called Haiti and shall
remain Haiti, as it was in the beginning, is now and shall ever be, world without
end, amen!, hallelujah!, already we are one with you, Haiti, you who weep and
sigh, Haiti, you who dance with death and give an earful to life, Haiti, you who
shed your sap and supply life's savor, Haiti, you who stumble and get back on the
road, Haiti, you who convulse and groan, Haiti, you who splutter and eat your
unleavened bread by the sweat of your belly, Haiti, you who rise up and don't air
your dirty laundry before others, Haiti, you who vote "No!" and show the way
forward, Haiti, you who say "begone, pack of rabid dogs!" to the higher gods,
loafers, dunces, unable to keep sealed in our terraria, were it only for twenty-
four thousand years, the baleful forces of this stilled life, such as these absurd

les marées-batraciennes, les tremblements-machins, les canicules-culs, les inondations-chaudes-pisses et leurs gendres-Cro-Magnon, Haïti l'insoumise, nous sommes toi, Haïti la rusée, nous sommes toi, Haïti la rebelle, nous sommes toi, Haïti la têtue, nous sommes toi, Haïti la première et la dernière, nous sommes toi, Haïti-Haïti, fille aînée de notre liberté à nous

earthquakes, these amphibian tides, these seismic whatchamacallits, these dog
days in estrus, these hot-piss floods and their prehistoric sons-in-law, Haiti the
unsubdued, we are you, cunning Haiti, we are you, rebellious Haiti, we are you,
hard-headed Haiti, we are you, Haiti the first and the last, we are you, Haiti-
Haiti, eldest daughter of our own freedom

THE 2020 BEAUCHAMP PRIZE

Judged by Franklin Sirmans

This year's winner is Ayanna Dozier

Original in thought and courageous in its departure from the beaten path, Ayanna Dozier's "Sound Garden: Ja'Tovia Gary's *The Giverny Document*" greets our moment head on. This essay will pique the interest of the aficionado though it bounds with enough creative verve for any careful reader.

–Franklin Sirmans

This year's Honorable Mentions are
"Is it Time to End the Whitney Biennial?"
by Darren Jones
& "Philip Guston Eventually"
by Devon Britt-Darby

Sound Garden: Ja'Tovia Gary's *The Giverny Document*

"You know how the young folks are."—Woman, to Ja'Tovia Gary

"Yeah, I do. They're too crunk."—Ja'Tovia Gary

The Giverny Document is a noisy film, full of music, yelling, screaming, crying, scratching, wailing, and laughter. But the most deafening moments unfold in silence, when viewers are left to assess what is missing, what cannot be represented. Consider the deep pauses and puzzled faces of the Black women and girls standing on the corner of 116th Street and Malcom X Boulevard in Harlem (Fig. 1), thinking of how to answer filmmaker Ja'Tovia Gary's question, the one that structures this movie: "Do you feel safe in your body, in the world?" Their responses vary widely, as do the places these women hail from: Sierra Leone, Guyana, North Carolina (Gary herself was born and raised in Dallas, Texas). Their replies do not resolve the question, but rather reveal how, for Black women and girls, safety is always a negotiation with the world and oneself amid a backdrop of white supremacy and patriarchal terror (many of the young girls report being followed by men at night, for instance).

Gary's forty-minute experimental film, her first feature, incorporates and extends her 2017 short *Giverny I (Négresse Impériale)*. *The Giverny Document* bounces through a plurality of texts: Gary on the streets in Harlem in a wig, evoking Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronique d'un été (Chronicle of a Summer, 1961)*; Gary in Giverny, sans wig; surveillance footage of drone strikes; Fred Hampton advocating for education of the Negro lest we befall the imperial mindset of the colonists; and Nina Simone's wrestling with her cover of Morris Albert's "Feelings" at the 1976 Montreux Jazz Festival.

Fig. 1. Ja'Tovia Gary, still from *The Giverny Document*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.



Film's material texture is emphasized throughout, often to playful effect. Animations are drawn directly onto the film stock: a diamond, an anchor, a crescent moon, and a comb, among other emblems. Glitches recur, often in sync with the soundtrack's tempo, evoking the familiar jam of digital images. But these bugs are analog aberrations, achieved through cameraless footage, à la Stan Brakhage, of hand-pressed leaves, activated by light and movement. Gary troubles the *mise-en-scène* with these celluloid tears, fracturing the frame's capacity to hold a scene or body together. These schisms dominate Gary's scenes in Monet's famous garden in Giverny, drawing attention to the disjuncture her Black body brings to a landscape exemplary of white European cultural production that emerged alongside brute colonialism.

Black artists have long struggled with the documentary image, recognizing its history of negatively shaping perceptions of global Black populations. For makers such as Portia Cobb, Jamika Ajalon, and Yvonne Welborn—all Black feminist experimental documentarists—documentary is a critical terrain to reclaim, often through experimental tactics that reveal how images have multiple “truths” in their production, circulation, and meaning. Saidiya Hartman describes this destabilizing

of the singularity of truth as “critical fabulation.” In this way, fabulation in *The Giverny Document* renders visible the Black noise of daily life. Gary emphasizes the sequences of being, walking down the street, elongated periods of emotional exchange, and anxiety. These accumulate to produce an affect of lived experience that evades narrative capture and transcends representation, that is, the flattening of a life into an image read purely for its content. Artists like Gary are working against the idea of neutral representation, revealing a different way of feeling and responding to the documentation of Black life. Her aesthetics recall Hartman’s claim for the urgency of scrambling the power of narrative representation: “Narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure, is a requirement of this method [fabulation], as is the imperative to respect Black noise—the shrieks, the moans, and the opacity, which are always in excesses of legibility and of the law and which hint at and embody aspirations that are wildly utopian, derelict to capitalism.”



Following the opening shots of cameraless film and repurposed 16-mm images of a waterfall set to Shirley Ann Lee’s “How Can I Lose,” Gary incorporates cell phone footage of *Love & Hip Hop* star Joseline Hernandez speaking to the camera: “Can I fucking live?” The clip’s “portrait mode” has become the default format for documenting our lives. The camera-phone format reemerges in Diamond Reynolds’s 2016 footage of a Minnesota police officer killing Philando Castile, her boyfriend, a clip incorporated midway through the film, when Gary wanders through Monet’s gardens.

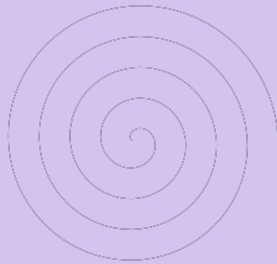
The internet’s archival resources have made citation a near-mandatory element of digital production, and images of quotidian Black life have become vital components of contemporary media. Gary complicates the over-willingness to deploy images of Black pain, death, sorrow, and trauma by distorting archival footage. Her presentation of Reynolds’s livestream, for example, strategically omits Castile’s dead body by puncturing the frame with collaged leaves. We are not experiencing the digital replay of this event but rather viewing a distortion that encourages audiences to feel with Diamond and her daughter; Black lives that are often erased from representations of Black death.



And then there's Nina Simone. The full version of her 1976 Montreux closing set performance, "Feelings," is an unrestrained, ten-minute agony. Simone struggles to accept the song because she does "not believe the conditions that produced a situation that demanded a song like that." Her performance is a visceral attempt to work through that disbelief. She wanders through the blues, registering despair through her movements, her continual vulnerable pauses and huffs, and the plucking of keys. In Simone's performance, we gather how Gary politicizes formal aesthetics of Black womanhood. It is not the representation of Black women that concerns Gary, but the production of a lived body through affective means, "flesh that needs to be loved," as Toni Morrison would assert (this is also the title of Gary's solo exhibition held at Paula Cooper Gallery in 2020). *The Giverny Document* channels the power of embodying lived experiences that cannot be collapsed through representation; its moving images do not participate in the coercion of Black life but rather speak to its noise, its anarchic potential of survival on an arc leaning ever toward emancipation.



ORIGIN *STORIES*



a special feature
curated by Guest Editor
Vievee Francis

An Origin Story

I love comic books. I used to follow years of adventures. *Superman*. *Spiderman*. *The Fantastic Four*. I wanted to be Storm. I wanted to be Batman. I held no real allegiance to DC or Marvel. I sought out comics by independent artists as well. Early copies of *Too Much Coffee Man* (that most relatable of Superheroes) were hoarded. Honestly, in my forties, I waited two years for the omnibus of *Too Much Coffee Man*. But, what I loved most, what I wanted to plumb, were the origin stories. I'd usually pick up a random comic (always seeking new ones) and come upon the heroes or villains or citizens of a metropolis, in medias res: researching, reading the paper, moonstruck, or fighting for their lives or the lives of others. But I wanted to know what event or series of events led them to the place where I found them. The mysterious road to becoming. What or who so impacted them that they would don a mask? Who were they before the mask? The authors of the stories receded into the background, and I rarely wondered about the life of the originators, the authors. The stories were so alive to me, no matter how outlandish, that I craved the backstory *within* the story.

While I was looking at the larger world building alone, also sought out were those rooms the characters found themselves in growing up that made them tic or so ticked them off they would devote their lives to justice or revenge or disclosure. Many didn't know their own histories as they were hidden or the information destroyed. They committed themselves to discovering the truth. Certainly, we can admit cultural parallels even if we aren't from another planet. There are the mythologies these stories (humorous, campy, harrowing, earnest) make in total, but I am more interested in the personal mythology, the singular creation myth within the whole as well as where it connects collectively. This is often how I read poetry as well. What are our personal narratives? Where do those personal narratives and the narratives of our speakers meet? Early in my own writing, after reading an essay by Dianne Wakowski on building personal mythologies, I moved one step further away from the cold facts of the literal and into the heat of the literary, that bounding site of imagination, as it moved the work of writer after

writer through my life. In writing this, for the first time I find myself wondering if it was really those early comics that led me to writing. What do my speakers say, particularly in my persona poems, that I won't allow myself to say? What am I fighting for? Which rooms, like the frames on those thin pages, made me?



The speakers that inhabit our work take on lives of their own. Their origin stories are inextricably tied to but not necessarily ours. Unlike a series of stories that may be spread over weekly or monthly installments, a poem may rest within a book and another book may follow that does not connect necessarily narratively to the book before. Within even themed books a poem may only tangentially be tied to the poem next to it. We don't usually think of *a* story being built or expounded upon poetry book by poetry book. In poetry we may not think of a "story" arc at all. We can go so far as to deny any narrative impulse in our lyrics, and some deride the narrative altogether (all of that potential meaning spilling all over the place). I'm being sarcastic, because I read story everywhere and find it difficult to not read it whether the intent is mine or the author's. Short contemporary prose may act in much the same way, although more often than not it allows and it is expected that there will be a narrative nod at the least. Hybrid work shakes all of this up, but I am not speaking of that. I am making a case for the power of story and the beginnings that set the foundations or footpaths for said story. And considering of "origin" broadly. Understanding another's origin lends me the courage to consider my own. Ideas of creation in the fictive gives us permission to both create and reinvent our speakers and consequentially, ourselves. Mythology may empower our speakers with a largess of self the cult of humility seldom allows.

I have gathered here are a few voices I'd like to offer contemplating the origin story. Some of these writers have been writing in the localized dark for some time. Some are emergent writers. Others well known. All are writing work that I found moving and hope you, like me, will sit in a good chair with a favorite snack and read and dream and remember the earnest moments of capes made out of sheets and youthful manifestos declaring who you would one day be or your



early indignation at finding the world unlike the way you believed it should be. In these pieces you may find mirroring and escape. To paraphrase Bolaño, whether we admit it or not, there is a secret story we share.

Journal of Visitations

My mother has always been an open door to living things. As a child, I watched as squirrels ate from her hand; houseplants stretched their exuberant vines to greet her. Strangers sat down at our table. Fish danced in their glass bubble whenever she walked into the room. Neighborhood children pied-pipered to her backyard garden.

She held the door open for the unliving, too. Spirits were drawn to her with their urgent wants and warnings. Sometimes, she put her hands over her ears to shut out their senseless laughter. She tried locking her bedroom door against them. She prayed that God would make them stop.

But they didn't. As she aged, the door between this world and the next was stuck open by dementia. She saw children in the garden, men in the trees. She had jumbled conversations with shadows.

"Look!" she'd say at the picture window, pointing at nothing.



My great grandmother, Mary, was a nanny midwife, an herbalist, a conjurer. My grandmother Bettie was haunted by her husband's spirit after he committed suicide in their backyard. When Bettie moved in with her sister years later, Bettie complained that she couldn't sleep for the rattling of ghosts.

Once, I went to a medium. She hemmed and hawed. Finally, she threw up her hands in defeat.

"I'm listening, but I don't hear anything," she said, "You haven't brought anyone with you."

I wonder why the mothers left me to walk through life blind.



One fall morning in 2001, I called my mother as I did every day. Generally, she was happy when we chatted. But that morning, she was different.



“Your Grandma Bettie came to me last night,” she said. “She sat on the edge of my bed; I could feel her weight on the mattress. I was so scared, I sat up and started to scream. But she told me not to worry. That no matter what was about to happen, everything would be OK.”

Her voice trembled as she continued: “And then, all of a sudden, I heard glass shattering everywhere.” She started to cry. “It was so loud. There was so much screaming and so much glass.”

“What shattered? Are you OK?”

“I was too afraid to get out of bed until the sun came up,” she said. “When I did, I went into the back bedroom and her lamp had broken.”

I tried to calm her down. I asked her if she’d been taking sleep medication which could cause scary side effects. I assured her that the lamp was old, it was probably already cracked, and it broke on its own accord.

One hour later, the first plane flew into New York City’s World Trade Center.



For decades my mother never slept, so thick were the spirits. There were times when I wondered if her visitations were mirages, hallucinations, schizophrenia, signs of a woman gone mad. But whenever she peers into the places I can’t see, she returns with the truth. So, I accept that my role is to protect her, to listen, to heed. I accept that if we were to travel together into her world, there would be no one to bring us back.



I spoon medications to my mother and she sleeps ten hours. Twelve. She finally has peace. Now, I’m the one tormented by a spirit—hers. I jolt awake several times a night to her voice calling me. I check the security camera on my phone. In the infrared light, I can see she is still in her bed, curled in the same position that I left her when I kissed her goodnight.

But I also see orbs of light dancing past the lens. Not wafting specs of dust, but perfect circles darting, zipping, changing direction. Some mornings when I try to

get her up, her face remains lax. Her open eyes look at me without seeing. I know that she joined the cabal overnight, and like Cinderella, has forgotten it was time to come home.



Yesterday, I was cleaning out her nightstand to make room for a hospital bed. In the drawer, I found some loose notes in her handwriting. The pages had been tucked away there for years.

“My mother appeared in my bedroom mirror on my 76th birthday,” she wrote. “She didn’t leave until I turned on the light by my bed. She left me in Nov. 2011.” What did she mean by that? Her mother Bettie passed away in 1987.



Human weight grows dense without the lift of life. Mom now requires four hands to lift her. Even with my adult son’s added brawn, we struggle to get her off the floor, off the toilet, out of the shower. He is a patient caregiver, so gentle with his grandmother. He connects with her in ways I never did, and I am filled with jealous adoration.

“How’d you sleep?” I greet him this morning like I have every morning since the pandemic trapped us here together, in death’s waiting room.

“There were visitors last night,” he says. He gives me a worried smile. He has become terrified of the night, the restless rushing, the auras that bounce against the walls, the unliving who line up to see him, silently screaming their needs.

“Sit down,” I say, bringing him close. He has his grandmother’s eyes. “Let me tell you who you are.”



Did we not

understand what we'd been given,
ones who had food to eat and a roof over our heads?
What she said when she rummaged through the closets
finding the dress or sweater I began from that moment
to think I loved. Driving the burned one to Charity, the fired one
to a new job, she disobeyed her mother, her brother,
tried to make it clear with screaming, with threats.
And we scattered away, her children,
because so many others needed her. Did we not

have the old car to ride in, the reward of collection day's
bananas and peanut butter? Look, she is arriving from her paper route,
now at the door, throwing money on the floor, crying. No, that is
the children, the forever ungrateful ones
crying as she drives off.

My Mother Wins an Oxygen Tank at the Casino, or, My Mother Makes an Exception

My mother wins an oxygen tank at the casino where she spends all day playing the slots. She's always coming back with free gift items. A revolving spice rack. A cozy all-season comforter. A fondue kit. A set of stemless wine glasses. Things that would make great wedding presents if we knew anybody getting married.

We put the free gifts upstairs in the third bedroom, which used to be my office. The boxes line up on the cheap futon. I stack more gifts on top of the desk and in its matching chair. Soon the boxes cover the floor and I have to tiptoe around them, stepping gingerly like a cat burglar in a movie facing off against laser grids.

"They don't give out things like that," I say.

"Okay, you win." She raises her hands, all don't shoot. "I bought it myself. I've always wanted one."

The little green tank gives her nothing but trouble. She doesn't like the way the tubing in her nose traps her, limiting how far she can go, or the way she daily trips over the long cord, or how it kinks and coils into knots she has to take the time to undo.

We sit together in the living room after dinner watching TV and I tease her, saying she looks like Bane from *The Dark Knight Rises*, the third film in Christopher Nolan's Batman reboot.

It's all true.

Except that the doctors put her on oxygen the last time she was in the hospital and said that from now on she had to have it round the clock.

Except that she hasn't been to the casino in five years, not since our next door neighbor who used to drive her there and back died in a nursing home three months after her crazy son committed her just so he could have her house.



Except that she looks nothing like the villain who captured Gotham and held that city by its throat. Sitting on the couch beside me, my mother looks exactly like what she is, a woman slowly being taken away from me, one difficult breath at a time.

The Notary

Midmorning and my grandfather's at his desk, his notary public stamp in his upper left-hand drawer, alongside the pornographic comic books he saved from the war. The captions were in Japanese. I drank those comics deep into my eyes in great gulps. But I also played with his notary public stamp. You held it by the two scissor handles and squeezed. I still have it. Back then, I notarized everything: dollar bills, toilet paper. My grandfather looks out the window at the front walk. Nobody is expected today. It's a shame because my grandfather loved company. He'd shoot the shit with anybody about anything. He just liked to keep a conversation going.

He'll be dead in a couple hours. At the moment, he's restful, calm. Whatever will make his heart implode just before noon will have nothing to do with physical exertion. He's staring out the window at nothing in particular, at the flat-topped shrubs he's trimmed himself. It's early April and the birds have gone quiet. He retired from the bank in '89. His Civil War books are in alphabetical order. He's neatly organized, by date, the letters he wrote from his own war. He wrote my grandmother a letter a day for the three and half years he was in the Pacific. I found them stuffed in a plastic Carson Pierre Scott bag at the back of my grandmother's closet—rubber-banded, arranged by month and year—when I cleared out the house for the estate sale.

Had she ever reread them?

In the letters, he often begs her to write him back; to tell him what's happening at home in Chicago. *Please, Lorraine, can't you put pen to paper and write to me?*

He's wearing those big glasses, and the glare of the morning sun flashes off the metal frames, his wide forehead and perfectly round head. Not totally bald, my grandfather had a sheen of hairs that covered his head in thin parallel lines because he spent time every morning combing them. He wasn't a vain man, he only wanted to pay homage to what little he had.

I think of my grandparents' rock hard separate beds. Jumping on them was like jumping on concrete.



My grandmother was a dancer, a show girl. Throughout the mid-to-late '20s and into the early '30s, before she had my father, she danced at the Oriental Theater, at McVicker's. I have a stack of her publicity photographs (Fig. 1). My dead look out windows. So many of these windows are gone. I'm not sure it matters. 814 Lunt Avenue, Roger's Park. 322 Fargo Avenue. 78 Pine Point Drive. 513 Hillside Drive.

10 July 1945

My Darling—

Another day and still no word from you—But I suppose that last week this time you were in the process of moving—I know how busy you must be—How is everything working out—are you satisfied at all—Do you think you will like it—I'm so worried that the house is going to be too much for you and that you won't like it—I hope I'm wrong—Please write and—

My grandmother is taking a shower. He can hear the water running. And he thinks, vaguely, of her body and how he used to crave it, the water streaming down her shoulders.



Fig. 1. Lorraine Spinner Orner in Chicago, 1928.

Ric Flair Doesn't Love Richard Fliehr

after Ocean Vuong
after Roger Reeves
after Hanif Abdurraqib

Some men won't say they love dancing
until you call it something else.
Until an elbow or an ear is bleeding.
Until a hand removes a belt.

When the night arrives, the mind
takes its turn beneath the needle—
digging up the grooves as it goes.
There's no such thing as old wounds

is there, for a father? For a son?
If a map has been drawn
there's always a country to match it
complete with a flag and a song.

Do you remember a time before
your face resembled your heart?
Red and bruised like a tomato
that rolled off the table. Full start.

You can't fake faking it anymore.
Your face, your eyes, your ears
there's too much written on the pages
for the cover not to hold a book.



Pretend, you say, as if giving advice,
to die enough times and death
will begin to feel like forgiveness
for the crime of waking up.

You take off all your clothes and run.
You repeat the fall you've always rehearsed
and woaaa, it feels so good to lose.
Every loss feels just like the first.

The more you bleed, the safer it feels.
You've watered so much of this world
with yourself, Richard Fliehr, even name-
less, you could never disappear.

Expulsion Lessons but Replace the Garden with a Swamp

This is Florida, one of the places in America
onto which we like to map our fantasies:
garden-walled, movie-set-theme-parks in this
swampier, sadder sister of California.

I want to tell you about two events
that form the cusp of a childhood:
One thing happened to me (alone),
and one happened (on TV) to America,
after it happened (in private) to a pair

of people I'll never meet. Maybe I
belong to a subset of my generation,
our sexual awakening timed to coincide,
in 1998, with the Clinton impeachment:

we learned what a blow job was because it was what
the president did with someone named Monica Lewinsky
and everyone was talking about it on TV and off.
It wasn't until later that I understood the blue
dress, the stain, what they signified.

This is how you learn a language: immersion
and time. I'd wanted to understand,
so I held these words in my mouth.
Her mouth. His penis. Look how we change



when we can name things. Here's the second:
Two hours north of Disney World,
a middle-schooler nested in the couch
doing math homework, I felt
eyes on me.

He was in the palmettos
right up against the window. Two
more years before I would be overcome
with shame, naming what he'd

been doing, looking at me, shame
for how I'd tried to describe it to my mother:
something pink, like an udder, like milking
a cow in fast-forward on the VHS.
Instinctively keeping it

from friends for years. Worrying
about windows. But this was Florida, land
of forgetting, and the windows are often
obscured with mildew or frogs or vines

or condensation. It was later, later,
once I took the memory off its shelf
and turned it over again, only
once I knew what he'd been doing
while he looked at me, that's

when I was no longer a child. I would know
and refuse to use the word *masturbate*
long before I had the colloquial *jerk off*.
But I had *peeping tom* before *voyeur*.

I had a middle-school-friend who is
one of the Ariels at Disney now, little
girls' dream. She sings in her bright red wig
six days a week, or sits on a float
in disguise, and her job is to be looked at.

One of those walled-in parks. I imagine
her swiping in, some back entrance,
a key card. I imagine she leaves her tail
in her locker, gets takeout

on the way home. Imagine
the mermaids walking among us. Think of all
the windows. Think of all you understand.
Are you hungry? Do you want some fruit?
Didn't you want to understand?
If you still want to, you can name all that.



Essay on Beauty: Highland Park

I grew up in Highland Park, a neighborhood that was ground zero for gentrification ten years ago. Once an immigrant community with cholos and break-ins and graffiti, murals and churches, public libraries, public pools, and community centers, ice cream trucks, and corner stores with their names painted into the stucco, and historic Victorian homes, it is now still that, but also home to hip bars & eateries, yoga studios, açai bowls, vape shops, coffee shops down a short strip along York and Figueroa.

Up the hill are million-dollar homes. Palm trees line the sinuous streets. There is a quality of sunlight there unlike anywhere else in the world. Everything slants, golden. I drove through to visit Alonzo, María, and Eloisa, my old neighbors. On the way, a cluster of white hipsters stood at the corner where they were about to order horchata lattes from the corner coffee shop.

Eloisa, who was a baby when I was seven, told me, Yeah, the white people are kind of making the neighborhood better. Not so many gangsters. Can you believe it? They bought that strip on Figueroa for \$5 million. Here.

The Galván family owned a taco truck when we lived next door. Alonzo told me that he'd spend his last dollar on the truck and the business had to succeed. He'd been working since he was in 3rd grade, worked 17 hour days picking produce, experimented with recipes with his wife and launched his truck business which ran from 3pm to 3am outside of a bar. The truck made money right away, and the Galván family now owns a restaurant where you walk up to the window and eat at the picnic tables in front.



At night, when we slept, sometimes, my cousin An would sneak into our room from across the hall. There was no lock on the door. I was eleven maybe. Trang would be sleeping just across our small shared bedroom. My cousin An would try to slip his fingers under the waistband of my pajama bottoms.

Perhaps if I were awake, I'd turn, and he'd startle and slip out of the room. I assumed that Trang was asleep, always, at this time. But years later, she told me that she'd see him touching me, which made me furious. Why didn't she ever tell me or my parents? Perhaps we could have stopped it from happening over and over again. Instead, I pushed my bed against hers, so that we were no longer on opposite sides of the room.

My younger brother was born when I was four. Until then, my older brother and I slept in bunk beds next to my parents' full-sized mattress. My cousin An slept in the second bedroom at the cold back of the house. It smelled of cigarettes, armpit sweat, and the oils from his head. Somehow, I'd grown from weird looking baby to chubby toddler to pretty girl.

When Long was born, the bunk bed was moved into the living room. I slept on the top bunk and sometimes rolled off and woke suddenly on the floor in the middle of the night. Sometimes, I placed a bear there as a buffer. My father eventually fabricated some sort of railing system that kept me on my bed instead of tumbling off.

I used to have dreams of falling. When I hit the ground, I'd wake up. The carpet was green and matted and the vacuum cleaner would chew up long strands of it, which we'd have to unspool, yanking from the bottom roller of the loud, dusty machine that smelled like the burned plastic of overexertion.

It was then, when my cousin had open access to me, that he started touching me. He would sleep in the living room on a pad, complaining of the cold air out back and a bad back. By touching, I mean, he'd pull off my pajama bottoms and start riding me with his warm sex on top of mine. For years I felt guilty for sometimes liking it, anticipating his warmth and weight. Sometimes it felt good.

Some nights, I'd run and sneak into the foot of my parents' bed, and they'd find me there in the morning. Me and my stuffed raccoon. The truth is, it was always too hot under the covers. It wasn't easy to sleep there, or comfortable. I just didn't know how to tell them something I had no understanding or language for. My cousin did things that made me feel good sometimes, and bad and afraid other times.



Growing up, Alonzo Galván would whistle through his teeth and tell me, Cathy es la bonita. We haven't been neighbors for 19 years, but when I visit during the holidays, we drink orange Jarritos and eat carne asada tacos, rice, and beans that taste exactly as they did two decades prior. Still he whistles through his teeth, telling me that I am beautiful. What is there to question in that? Being called bonita was flattering but it never actually penetrated. What does it mean to be bonita anyway?

Alonzo's stepson Alan was a teenager when I was a girl living next door. He has his mother's clear blue eyes and dark curly hair that dipped into the middle of his forehead, his widow's peak. In the walls of his bedroom were magazine cutouts of Duran Duran and The Cure, held in place with scotch tape. He'd taken a ballpoint pen and drawn a female symbol overlapping the male symbol on the tanned cleavage of models with teased out perms. He was maybe fifteen.

Next door, unlike at our place, they had cable TV, which showed *The Princess Bride*, which we watched incessantly, and *Beetlejuice*. Looking back, I wondered why it happened so frequently—his hand working over my underwear when we watched TV, him laying me down on the carpet and, like my cousin, riding on top of me while his mother chopped onions in the kitchen. Maybe it was because I was the only girl around. Maybe it's because of what Alonzo said, Cathy es la bonita.

9am: Working Class Bedtime Story

every morning, two hours after
the gate closed on her night
shift, a woman in a gown wiped
oil from ladder rungs, sharpened
two hatchets with a dull whetstone
and steadily climbed through
troposphere to reach the ridge
of her roof. positioned just so—
legs kenebowe, arms dual
wielding—she'd cut the sun
from its cosmic string, watch
it gyrate in mid-air. light
don't down nowhere easy.
taking swing after swing
until the ax head flew &
the sun dimmed & fell
through that roof
onto a parlor floor
where that woman
collapsed, sheerly
done in, while
her curious youngin
with my feral stare
sat silent in the dark
corner of a chair,
picking flint-flakes
of ash from her
nappy-ass hair.



All the TV Shows are About Cops

the psychic with the glowing windows next to the pizza shop tells me *the thing about the end of the world is that it already happened before you were born*. so I wander through the poisoned leaves of the forest. with my bare and cupped hands, I drink from the brown river that divides downtown columbus between the haves and the have nots. it is easy to understand why this country so loved the photo of tear gas winding its way around SEASONS GREETINGS hanging over a street in ferguson, packed with cops in riot gear. somewhere beyond the baton's severing of winter's chill & the glass being kissed into webs, one might be able to imagine a family placing boxes underneath a tree. wearing matching sweaters & watching another movie about ghosts. america loves its contrasts, but never its history. the blades burrowing their way through the tree's bark remember only the sweetness of collapse. not the joyful gathering, not the ornaments, hand-painted by someone who survived a riot generations before the one howling at these doorsteps. greetings to this new season of the bandana in the back pocket & then swinging from a once-familiar face. I breathe in the scent of my own living to avoid the cars on fire, eyes burning themselves shut. a seasonal greeting to the way my heart ghosts its own rhythm when I text *I love you please tell me you're safe* & hear nothing back in the time it takes for a person to be pulled from a car's open window. to the worry that parks itself beneath the skin of my palms. a scene from before the streets were crowded with sound and smoke: my homie ran for a fence with a stolen cell phone in his pocket & didn't hear the cop yelling before he heard the gun go off. or maybe there was no yelling at all. witnesses say one sound can be swallowed by a louder, more violent ruckus. somewhere beyond, a family places a box underneath a tree & begins to shovel the already-ended earth. wondering if this is all the apocalypse has to offer.

Brotherhood, Crossroads and Etcetera #2, 1994

After Lyle Ashton and Thomas Allen Harris

At his gun's insistence, my jaw goes slack.	Do I not love my brother enough to
Call it a kiss? If this isn't love, then I will	kill him before another brother can.
(willing to cross the distance) earn his favor. Afraid	I, wouldn't I, favor him if I were not ready
to let go, I lean into his body's bleak weapon.	to die by the hands of my brother's arms.
Why not trust this dark tunnel's burrow across	No, I don't want to see what comes next.
the hate-wide distance between us. Yes,	It's my mouth, not my eyes, I open as if to sing
trust in my brother—god of this small destruction	
for his aim is my aim. His arm, my arm. We can steady	
the gun's bright kiss of hello.	the note low as the number of fingers it takes to tickle
It tickles me, but I'm too afraid to laugh	a bullet free. Why be afraid—
and break this embrace.	let him go. Don't I believe
I do not like his body when it is seen	in this dark tunnel burrowing across the distance
for my body. And now, this accomplice—	between us. My tongue busy with his tongue, I'm
another death-hard brother: illegitimate sibling, silenced	a quiet hostage who's given up.
against me; muzzle to milk-hollow tit.	The gun holds my finger in its small o
Oh, do I not long for my brother's hand—	of betrothal. Wedded
in love of what came before	
this rage.	this bothered blood.



Altitude

With wing tanks sipping fumes, nothing but hiss on the receiver and the bright Pacific innocent of land, fear scolded in her Grandma Kent's crooked voice.

If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.

She'd flown Frank's search box, squared it north. No joy. No island, no radio beacon, no Coast Guard cutter, no promised pillar of smoke.

Promises don't butter parsnips.

Ever ready with a proverb to chastise an uppity girl. Skinned knees, sliced fingertips, broken hearts, never a word of sympathy from Grandma Kent. Dead these eleven years but never left behind, a spiteful stowaway come out of hiding to gloat over the pilot's dilemma. Because the only choices left were bad, each its own punishment. She could fly low, save fuel but shrink the horizon. Fly high, see farther, fall faster. Give up and try to settle on the waves, float long enough to launch the raft.

If the fish kept her mouth shut, she wouldn't get caught.

Both engines coughing. Frank calculating and erasing, mumbling. There'd been love of some kind in the old woman, some urgent worry tangled in the nastiness. A hurt. The girl cousins guessed, told star-crossed stories, gave up. Frank on the radio, demanding, pleading. When you hide something so deep nobody can find it, it's really lost.

I hate to say I told you so, but...

The left motor conked with a thump and a wheeze like getting the wind knocked out of her, like jumping from the hayloft and plunging through stacked bales to the threshing floor, just as solid as Grandma Kent warned it would be. Right rudder, up engine speed, ignore Frank's keening. Bleed altitude, down to 800 feet.

I will lay low the pompous, saith the Lord.

Grandma Kent said climbing trees was tomboy folly. Spearing frogs, kitchen-sink chemistry, racing barefoot through corn stubble: all such nonsense was offensive to womanhood. Leaving and never going back to visit that thorny

old woman at the hub of the flat earth's wheel? Black sin. Maybe her worst, but Grandma Kent would have said that was flying. The right engine stuttered. Take her down. Tell Frank to mayday.

Maybe, just maybe, the old woman allowed, when they told her about the transatlantic solo, *it is fitting that Man should fly in machines, if only to assert his dominion over every living creature. But if the Good Lord meant Woman to fly, he'd have feathered her tail.*

Now, who's counting? but yesterday morning, in the palm-thatched hangar at Lae airstrip, the BBC interviewer had wanted to know what it felt like to be the first woman to fly three-quarter-way around the world, setting off to fly the fourth. She'd said something about anything a man can do, thinking but not saying a woman can do dragging a man along if she has to, to wit the tremulous dry-drunk navigator now broadcasting make-believe positions, snatching at charts as if the island were a note he'd misplaced. Last night, believing they knew where they were going, they'd heard her name on shortwave newscasts from everywhere. The world still watching, reporters still writing that something more than moonlight dazzled on her wings.

No matter how high a bird flies, missy, it has to come down to water.

The right engine wheezed and quit. She rolled left, pooling any drops at the right tank nozzle, mashed the starter. The engine caught, rattled, spluttered on. Down stick, angle down as fast as the Electra could dive and still nose up for the splash. Frank shrieking she'd lost the line.

Lost time is never found.

Smart and daring and famous are not so precious as altitude. Lucky wasn't going to drag an island over the purple horizon. But could just-damned-good-at-what-I-do earn enough engine time to set the bird down? The right quit. The starter just ticked in the sudden hush and even Frank went quiet. The Electra drifted on for a moment, slowing, then pitched and rolled deep, air whistling over the rivets. Her heart gasped as she fought the wheel, mind cold, slowing. Then sun filled the cockpit, oblivious, warm and kind, and she remembered.

Reputation is what you are in the light, girl. Character's who you are in the dark.



So wrong, the old lady. So wrong. How could that make her smile, now? How dare she? But she did, just as Frank pointed into the glare and yelled, "There!" A dark blur beneath a cloud. The bird didn't want to turn, didn't want to listen but that was just too bad.

Life is licking honey off a thorn.

The Electra shaking all the way down. Frank praying. Fine by her. Let them be afraid.

Used to Be a Sweet Boy

The shooter running across the playground,
his bouncing curls, his diaper peeking over
his blue jeans. The shooter's long eyelashes.
The shooter pushed on the swing,
the warmth of his father's hand, big as his back.
The shooter's girlish delight. The shooter
laughing down the bright orange slide,
his mother waving from the park bench.
The shooter in the sandbox watching a pack
of kids run past. The shooter kicking stones.
The shooter opening his lunchbox.
The shooter drawing a portrait in art class.
The shooter's soft cheek in the glow of his
bedside lamp, listening to his mother's moans
on the other side of the wall, her ribs kicked in.
The shooter hearing each dull crush.
The shooter's chin on his soft hands.
The shooter trying to read.
The shooter's finger pulling
the curtain aside, to look at the moon.
The shooter behind the wheel of his first car.
The shooter smiling at the cashier,
her shiny red lipstick. The shooter on break,
standing in the alley behind the dollar store, pressing
his back to the sun-warmed bricks. The shooter
staring at the red swipe of a half-drawn circle
around the bright A at the top of his essay.
The shooter alone in the busy cafeteria.
The shooter driving home.



Hair on the shooter's arm riffled by a breeze.
The shooter's black coat on its hanger.
The shooter's face, screen-lit.
The shooter licking an envelope. The shooter
closing a book. The shooter pulling a blanket
up to his chin. Sleep parting the shooter's lips.
The shooter's eyes rolling beneath thin lids.
Tomorrow's active shooter pregnant with dream.

Watchnight

On the neighborhood NextDoor app, the satsuma trees have a dedicated thread and an evergreen question, a hot topic for the influx of newcomers in our end of the historic district. *Can we harvest the fruit of a neighbor's tree? At what point do they become everyone's?* Someone among them created a handy map of the neighborhood satsumas, our front yard tree pinned there, a snapshot from a passerby in springtime, the blossoms catching dappled light they shared with the live oaks.

Another query, this time in the Crime Alert section: *Do we know this person?* A bold-faced question with me pictured standing in my yard harvesting. The camera of the passerby was insufficient for low light. I was all streaks and shadows.

The satsumas have a history. The first trees had been a gift sent home from Japan by a couple, Southern diplomats, Unionists, abroad during the Civil War. They bloom each April, annual marker of the war's end jubilee. The Reformers imagined them anchoring victory gardens, a sun-colored history around the New South, a bright understory.

The satsuma thread didn't offer much on the radical roots, no parades of the colored veterans and the caravan of the freed. No orchards for the migrants to eat and rest. That old promise of the common gardens revitalized, recast from gleaning to conquest, but the evergreen wording the same: *When can we say it's ours?*

Under the crime thread, one note from a neighbor vouched for me. Another neighbor said to take down the photograph, and my questioner did, but not before I posted my note.

Since you asked, neighbor, an introduction. My wife works the overnight shift at the infirmary, and I, a watchman, wait for her to pull into the carport. I use these hours to pump the rainwater from the barrels into the garden. I leave the swallowtail worms alone. I clip the nightshade, but not all of it, because the flowers add a touch. The satsumas need no explanation.

After our summer of reckoning, the Crime thread was renamed Public Safety. The brief season of smiles and waves has since cooled, but when the weather breaks the harvest comes. On some early winter mornings we sit beside the backyard pit,



warmed by a sunrise fire made with the snapped branches, drinking cups brewed from the rind and Camellia.

Then the other gathering—dregs and ashes—that I feed to the victory garden, making ready for another April.

Lemon Tree

It sits where the shadows of other trees
slide in late afternoon, dug deep and patted
down. Touched by a breeze, then still,
the green skin of soon-to-be sour
fruit bends the branches, fruit that will be,
in a week or less, halved and left
to float in sugared water for the children.
It is a small thing—this point in the future—
but the man who planted this tree
listens to it as if it were an orchestra tuning.
He imagines his father now, begrimed,
sweating from ground that needed breaking
before pipe and other ironwork could
be laid. This father, who muttered through
his accent, who thought comfort was rubbing
Vaseline over the cracks on his palms. Who offered
stories, on those rare Sundays he could be
around, of dark yards and fledgling,
decorative space. Stories he never thought would be
written.



Black Hollywood

Before he died by suicide, Joel Fluellen (Fig. 1) acted in forty-seven films. He was a henchman, a kitchen worker, a customer, a court clerk, a Black man in a jail cell, a waiter, a servant, a sailor, a florist, an attendant, a handyman, a porter, a witch doctor, a judge, a cab driver, a convict, a policeman, a fisherman, a soldier, a bartender, and several African natives. He was a member of Hazel Scott's Group, Toussaint's Aide, a Harper's Ferry station master, and Kyle's associate. He was Matambo, Molu, Arobi, Tick, Bragg, Bobo, Abram, Williams, Robbins, Pete, Al, Jack Nathaniel, Cody Marsh, Charlie West, Jimmy Judson, Bill Lake, Lester Johnson, Uncle Rob, Mr. Kelso, and Mr. Holland. He was Sam a few times.

As a teenager, Joel got into an altercation with a white man. By the time he got home, his mother had packed his bags. He lived, my father tells me, in a hobo camp, jumping trains. He rode out to Chicago, and ended up in Los Angeles, where he started acting.

Toward the end of his life, Joel lived not far from our apartment in West L.A., right off Pico Boulevard. My father was interviewing Black actors at the time, and Joel introduced him to everyone there was to know. "What was the project for?" I ask. "For myself," my dad tells me. He does this sort of thing, gets on an interviewing kick, accumulating tapes that fit into categories like: Black Hollywood, painters in the South of France, Ollie Harrington, and Afro Germany. "I will not talk about Dorothy," Joel told my father when they first met. "Dorothy who?" My father asked. Apparently, Joel was close friends with one of the biggest Black actresses of the time, Dorothy Dandridge.

As his friendship with my father deepened, Joel told him that he never called Dorothy back when she reached out the day before she killed herself. This fact finds a mirror in my father's friendship with Joel. One night, as my father prepared to leave, Joel tried to give him a stack of items. He told him, "I'm so scared." My father tried to comfort him, told him he'd come back later, but he had somewhere else to be. The next day, my father couldn't get ahold of Joel, so he called the fire department, and they broke down his door. "You don't want to go in there,"

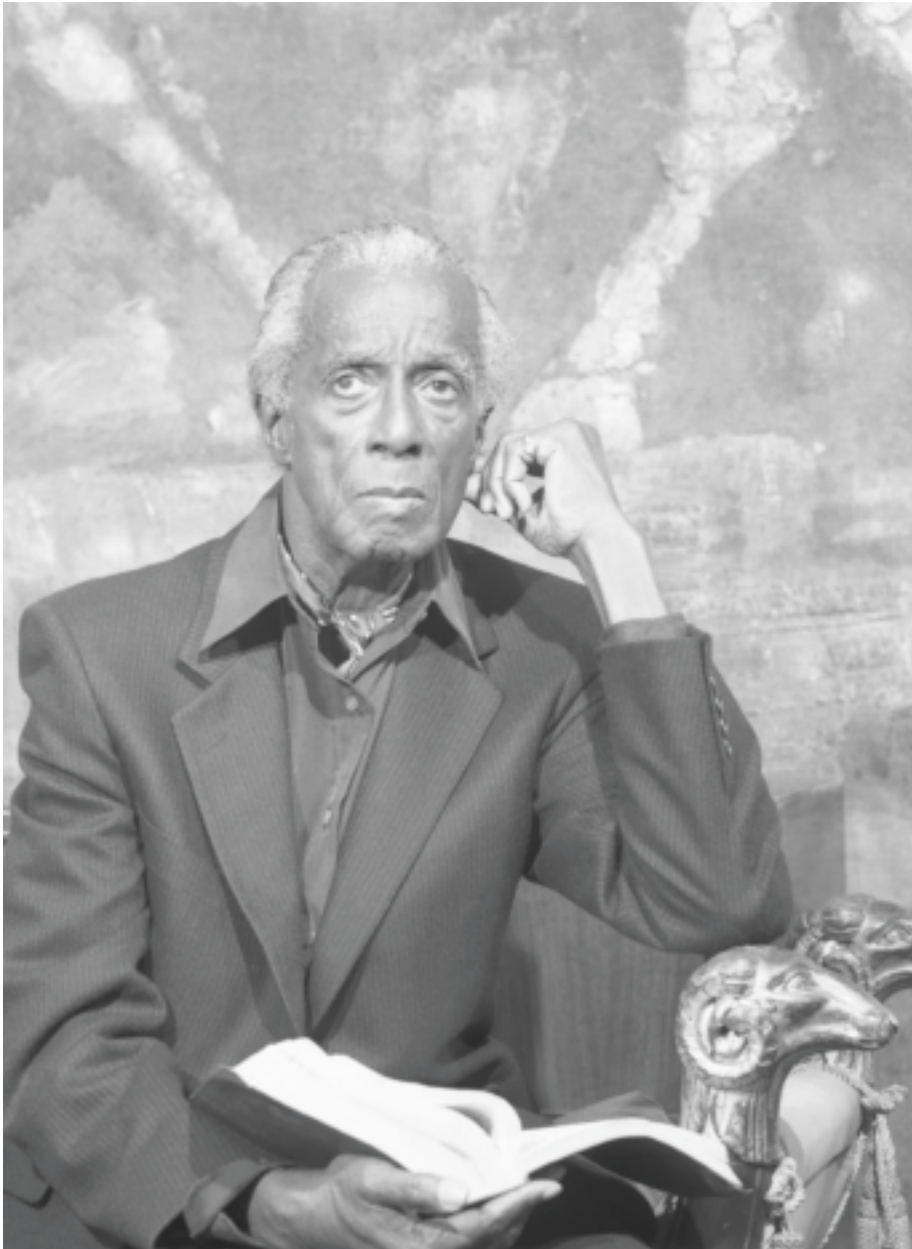


Fig. 1. Joel Fluellen in 1989. Photograph by Lester Sloan. Courtesy of the artist.

they said, after taking a look inside. He doesn't discuss his own feelings about the day before the actor died, but my father does perform Joel's response to missing Dorothy Dandridge's call. "I don't have time for this," he says, in imitation. He plays up Joel's exasperation with Dorothy, as if to lampoon the folly of it, infusing the words with, I imagine, the tension of his and Joel's retroactive remorse.

In a video that my father took of Joel, the actor wears a turtleneck and a plaid blazer. I've raised the volume all the way up, but there is no sound. I begin to seek out Joel's films. I'm particularly interested in Joel's eyes, which have a long quality, a distance inside them. Many of his films are available in their entirety online. He plays the lead in a 1945 recruitment film made by the US Navy called "The Negro Sailor." He goes through basic training in a series of scenes that have, in my opinion, extreme, if inadvertent, homoerotic undertones. Five years later, in *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950), he plays Jackie's brother Mack, cheering alongside Ruby Dee from the stands. It's hard not to superimpose Joel's actual life onto these scenes—to wonder what it was like to be young and gay and Black in L.A. in the 1940s. My father recalls that Dorothy Dandridge told Joel some gossip about a man and a woman who were both having an affair with the same director. I find a photograph online of Joel sitting beside Dandridge and Burt Lancaster on the set of *Run Silent, Run Deep* (1958). It's the kind of image that holds about fifty films inside of it.

I search for footage of Joel in his final film, *Butch and Sundance: The Early Days* (1979), but the quality of the film is too poor. If Joel as Jack the bartender is making drinks somewhere in the background, I can't make him out. In the video my father shot, Joel has a rigidity about him, the kind of formality that calls attention to the question of softness: where did he find or search for it? At Joel's funeral, my father told the room, "Joel died of loneliness."

During their conversations together, Joel told my father about one of the many times he played an uncredited native, asked to speak gibberish in approximation of an African dialect. They were crossing a body of water alongside some elephants when all of the sudden, a male elephant started to trumpet. I'll let my father tell it:

The females got excited, and they started defecating in the water. And Joel and their characters were supposedly leading the elephants across. And when the elephants

started pooping in the water, Joel, said, "Out! Cut cut cut!" He said, "This is stunt work, we ain't doing this for no five dollars a day." They agreed to pay the stunt fee which was like fifteen dollars a day. I said "Joel, the first strike for Black people in Hollywood was over some bullshit?" And he said "Yeah."

It's interesting to me that my father was for so long fascinated with actors, when his job as a photojournalist tasked him with documenting real life. Perhaps he got tired of the news. What do you think, I try to ask him, about the art of projecting oneself into a fictionalized self? As if in response, he tells me that he was once hired to play himself in the Spike Lee film, *Get on the Bus* (1996). He thought he'd been hired as the set photographer, but apparently, they had hoped that he would act as well. In the end, he stayed off screen. He spent time between takes listening to Ossie Davis tell stories (Fig. 2), like when Malcolm X called him before he was assassinated to tell him he felt he was being hunted. My father, around that time, was exhibiting all the signs of a midlife crisis. He grew out his beard for the first time in decades, and to his surprise, it was bright white. In this sense, he showed up on set in a kind of costume. I try to imagine what it would look like if he'd acted in the film after all—playing his own, bearded alter ego, a photojournalist from Los Angeles catching a ride to the Million Man March in D.C.. I try to imagine the quirks of his personality that would have established him as a character: how his eyes go blank when he tells a joke, right before he lets a smile spill across his face. How he looks off into the distance, shrugs his shoulders, and says, "anyway," before getting to the heart of whatever it is he's talking about. How instead of pointing, he extends an upward facing palm, as though imitating a tea kettle or water spout.

In some of the tapes my father recorded with Black actors, he doesn't even ask about Hollywood. During a conversation with Bill Walker, who played Reverend Sykes in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), my father asks Bill to talk at length about a girl he had a crush on as a kid. He keeps returning to the story over the course of the interview. I fall asleep to the dulcet tones of this back and forth. When I ask my father about it later, he remembers the story of Bill's crush vividly: "Well, that was an interesting story. Years later, they ran into each other at a funeral." It's

as though my father is searching for the dramatic arc of Bill's life, the movie of it, locating the underlying tensions, sketching out the tune of his personality for an orchestra to play.

Fig. 2. Ossie Davis in 1996, on the set of *Get on the Bus*. Photograph by Lester Sloan. Courtesy of the artist.



My father recalls Bill telling him that Gregory Peck thanked him while accepting the Academy Award for playing Atticus Finch. I search Youtube, and play the footage for my dad over the phone. The acceptance speech is short and

perfunctory. At no point does Peck make mention of Bill, whose big line involved telling Scout to stand up when her father passes by in the courtroom. My father and I sit in momentary silence. He wonders aloud if Peck said something about Bill on his way off the stage. I imagine that we both feel embarrassed for getting our hopes up. Why would the star of a film thank an actor who was not even credited for his role in the film? Watching the speech with the expectation that it will end differently reminds me of when, in 2017, *La La Land* was announced as the winner for best picture. But in that case, the impossible happened. Remember? The *La La Land* people were three speeches in when it became apparent that *Moonlight* was supposed to take the award. A producer snatched the card away from Warren Beatty and showed it to the room. The camera zoomed in to verify. The producer of *La La Land* sounded frustrated, as if he understood the way history culminated in the moment, and he wanted to give *Moonlight* its proper due. He said, emphatically: “This is not a joke.”

In one video with Joel, a woman named Eula Williams has entered the frame. She is the widow of the actor Spencer Williams, who played Andy on the sitcom *Amos ‘n’ Andy* (1951–1953). The NAACP fought to have the show taken off the air for its negative portrayal of Blacks. And it’s true—the show had its roots in a minstrel act from the radio, which originally starred two white men. But Joel and Eula point out that while some of the characters were cartoonish, at least there were doctors and nurses. Roles more dignified than “native,” “servant,” and “Black man in a jail cell.” It was Spencer Williams’ big break, and he never got to play such a big role again.

In addition to being an actor, Spencer Williams was a director. I watch one of his films, *The Blood of Jesus* (1941), in which an injured woman is visited by an angel who takes her spirit to the intersection of heaven and hell. The actors, Spencer Williams especially, have a comedic air about them, giving side eye during moments of dramatic tension in such a way that makes the performance feel surprisingly modern. The special effects are reminiscent of Jean Cocteau’s *The Blood of a Poet* (1932), or more recently, the work of Michel Gondry—wherein dramatic storylines are paired with a puppet-like attempt to convey something metaphysical, creating an atmosphere of magic and deep nostalgia. I am reminded in particular

of Gondry's *Be Kind Rewind* (2008), in which Jack Black and Yasiin Bey use wire, paper and glue to create an epic, fictionalized version of the life of Fats Waller for their New Jersey neighborhood to enjoy as it is projected onto the wall of a video store. It is a celebration of Black artistic ingenuity that seems to blast gratitude backwards, in an attempt to reach the artistic dead. The films Williams directed were not given much recognition until after his death, when *The Blood of Jesus* was put into the National Film Registry for being deemed "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant." It now lives alongside the Italian Neorealists in the Criterion Collection.

On my father's video, Spencer Williams' widow recalls her husband's decades-long grief over the life he never had in Hollywood, especially toward the end, when he developed Parkinson's disease. He would get up in the middle of the night, put a suit on over his pajamas, and wake her, explaining that he had to get to the work. He didn't want to keep the studio waiting.

Recently, I began watching the television show, *Lovecraft Country* (2020–present). I am emotionally overwhelmed by the fact that Jurnee Smollett and Jonathan Majors have been granted the opportunity to play characters with such range and exquisite costuming—they fight monsters in the forest, bash in the car windows of white supremacists, and evict the ghost of an evil, racist doctor. Roles that Joel, Spencer, and Bill never got the chance to play.

Another actor with whom my father became close friends was Beah Richards (Fig. 3). You might remember her from the adaptation of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1998), where she played Baby Suggs preaching in a sun dappled forest. She says, "Let the children come. Let your mothers hear you laugh," and children swarm around her. It is a scene of renewal—men are called to dance, women are asked to weep for the living and the dead. According to my father, Beah was asked by the director, Jonathan Demme, to improvise the speech herself. This might explain its power. In the documentary, *Beah: A Black Woman Speaks* (2003), the actress says, "My father was a minister. A preacher they called it. My father was a poet, a good poet. He sang his sermons. He sang them. There was a truth, it has a ring they say that makes the hair stand on end, or the goosebumps jump out, a chill runs down your spine. He had that magic. Ooh! If I could have been the kind of actress that

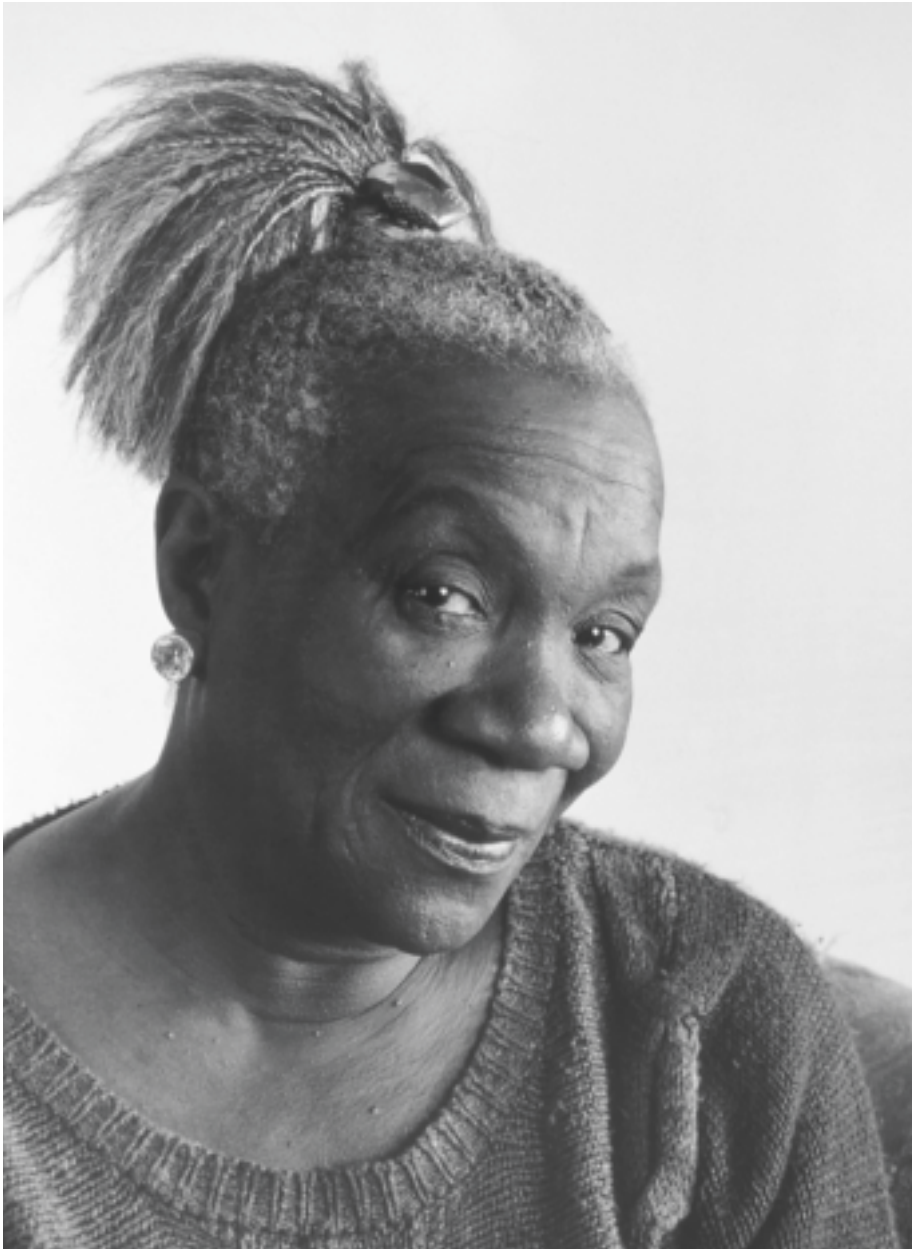


Fig. 3. Beah Richards in 1989. Photograph by Lester Sloan. Courtesy of the artist.

my father was a preacher, oh!” Her manner, which gives *me* goosebumps, explains why my father would call her, periodically, and say, “I need a Beah fix.”

In her documentary, Beah Richards says, “The question a human being has to answer is, ‘Who or what am I?’” I am reminded of the end of *Moonlight*, when Kevin and Chiron are standing in the kitchen, stripped down to the bone, emotionally. Kevin asks the man he fell in love with as a boy, “Who is you, man?” And that’s the beauty of this movie, isn’t it? The film won’t tell us who Chiron is (“sailor,” “soldier,” “florist”). The film is asking.

At the 2017 Academy Awards, Hollywood finally told us, albeit by accident: “We made a mistake.” I don’t know about you, but I played the moment over and over again, as though it were proof of the divine, a rendering of Jesus’s face on a piece of toast. The beautiful stars of *Moonlight*, some of them just boys at the beginning their careers, rose out of their seats, preparing to take the stage.

Window

like a mouth you behind a shut window rose baby's breath sunflower

open and close iris daffodil press yourself against the glass pane you behind a shut window

window buttercup crocus calla lily enter you behind a shut window

daisy gardenia carnation chrysanthemum dahlia marigold lilac

daisy gardenia carnation open and close like a mouth you behind

behind a shut window iris daffodil rose peony lily dahlia marigold lavender

behind a shut window rose baby's breath sunflower press yourself against the glass

rhododendron, tulip scratch this glass shatter it you behind a shut

you behind a shut window you behind a shut window you behind a shut

Obruni

So I'm eating cake under the stars in Accra and the night air is sweet as Christ on the tip of my tongue and I can hear the fishy heat—crisp as a town cracker digging into lemon caviar and, out of nowhere, a herd of white chickens, wild white chickens, fly like basketballs into this one tree. A jacaranda?

True—I'd never seen white chickens before, and I'd certainly never seen them fly. I'm simply a city poet who dreams of drumming up chicken recipes, ones that pair nicely with saffron and red potato, a book of succulent chicken recipes reminding me of Sylvia, my beloved blind grandmother. I nearly named it "Blood Icarus" but quickly aborted that idea after catching a messy episode of *CSI Miami*. True—a firecracker in Arcadia, Florida, a place full of chickens (non-white and grounded), once ricocheted around the good arm of an old palm tree and cocked me right in my stomach. It left a red hole that grandmother had dabbed with iodine and later called my "lucky star." I was eight and craving chicken that night, too. A kind of kiddie chicken soup for the soul, less the potato, red or otherwise.

I was seeing stars.

Cassava reminds me of potato. Its brown woody shrub, a native plant of tropical America, grows gorgeous in Ghana. My first trip to Malam Market, a fiery zest of female farmers in inner Accra, revealed a peeve I later scrawled into a poem: *they don't smell like much*.

I expected them to smell like sour feet, but they didn't smell like sour feet at all. Smelly feet, one way or the other, would've been better than a black hole of anti-scent. I dislike things that don't smell. I think *smell* is like *voice*. Every writer needs it. And fruits and vegetables are no different. They should all have voice. Like cats, they should mark the world with scent. Why do dead things get to claim all the voice, get to have all the scents? I mean cake is a dead thing, smelling of cheap lemon, and here I am eating cake under the stars in a West African country with the equator for its footstool.

My host, Emma, had not baked the cake herself, but thinking I'd prefer it the "western" way had taken a tro-tro (a low-cost shared minivan squeezing up to 10

people inside) from Adenta to McCarthy Hill to fetch me some “proper” cake from the newly built Shop-Rite, a chain of commercial grocery stores owned by a South African corporation. They sold chickens, too, she told me, her toothy smile shooing lemon eyes.

When I first saw Emma she was killing flies with flowers, her headdress a riot of purple polygons. She worked in Malam Market as a vegetable lady and had a lot of voice. Her English was soft and kind and complemented her Twi, the language of her people, the Akan, an ancient tribal group with a king situated in the east, in Kumasi.

Her daughter Cecelia, a crippled nine-year-old, was the crown jewel. She was there that night as we sat under the stars eating cake, watching chickens, white as doves, shooting hoops. “Obruni,” she shouts with a whoop of delight. “Obruni!”

Cecilia was heavenly. She would plunge into my lap like a broken bird ready for a treat or a pat on the back after doing a tedious chore, laughing out loud. I loved Cecelia like my own daughter and would always stop and pick up chocolate or crayons or a tin of iced cookies, some exotic British brand, to surprise her. Nightly, in the presence of numerous dinner guests, I’d beam with pride, assuming the word to be a title of affection or a loving nickname like “auntie” or “mommy.” *Obruni*, a Twi word meaning “foreigner,” a word that fell from her lips like gum drops, went undetected by me for weeks.

Was she laughing at my ignorance? Was I the dumb American? Was I the fool who thought herself to be from Africa, only to be rightfully diagnosed as a foreigner?

I touched the red hole on my stomach. I thought of my grandmother and her love for my little white eyes. A love strong enough to tell me a lie. A love dynamite enough to tell me that I’d had something “lucky” blasted into my flesh, some sort of funeral in my stomach? Cecelia, I later learned, had been conceived without defect, but her mother had eaten something unlucky from a village tree. *Et voilà!* Cecilia’s legs, battered and misshapen, had arrived on a Sunday night, a pair of powerful twisted trees. With gnarly knees and a huge smile, she walked with violence.

I never once laughed or thought to laugh. She was me and I her, and we weren't foreigners. We were mother and daughter on the chicken farm of old, stinky veggies galore—friends. Was she the reason I'd come to Ghana in the first place? Had I come to reclaim a daughter who'd no longer recognized me? Or did I simply mistake her for my own? "Call me Emily," I wanted to say after years of anonymous payments for chocolate and school fees and braces, volumes and volumes of American poems—cases! *Cee, I wanted to love you.*

Here in Baltimore, in a headscarf full of holes, I fill my long string with candy, lower it from my window, and let them see me. I let the children see me.

Chiaroscuro

a cento

These are the old tasks:
to make that curve of water
live into ephemeral dusk and

swamp and trace and bayou.
These are the faces I love, the bodies.
These are the witnesses:

wind, wave, star, bird
feathered in soot, the other,
the business of this world

when nothing remains but the dayfly.
And from what modest melancholy, from
what source (beyond us, or the wells within?)

to find the light? Or is it a rock
where drafts of polar air sound like cicadas,
where I must open the window to a new

wilderness that becomes another wilderness
where the sunlight soaks in the stone
and where there are shadows that only come

to life when I am between trees and music.
Luxury, then, is a way
of light. You wake and the candles
are lit as if by themselves.

A Year of Drought, a Year of Forgetting

1.

Two years before the war begins, in a desert town that is full of silence when it is not full of wind, the Painter begins to paint a portrait of the empire. He wants to capture not only the physical dimensions of the empire's territories—its wide brown rivers and sun-scorched grasslands and the gleaming cities he has seen only in photographs—but also the true spirit of the place, or the spirit he imagines to be there, binding its provinces and peoples together in a common tapestry.

It's a tall task, especially since the Painter does not really think of himself as a painter. During the day, he works the register at the town's lone business, a Sunoco station whose arrow-pierced sign towers over the arrow-straight highway, and during the long evenings, while the afterglow of the sun drains slowly away behind the far-off mountains, he sits beside his father's bed in the single-story ranch house where he lives, where his father is slowly dying. He tends to the machines and administers the medicines that make his father's dying slow. He brings his father liquidized meals and feeds them to him, one spoonful at a time. It is only in the scant hours between these occupations, the hours between midnight and dawn, that the Painter is able to work on his portrait of the empire, with the help of certain pills that he buys from his only coworker and only friend, the Mechanic.

The empire is too large and manifold, obviously, to be represented naturalistically in a single painting, so the Painter opts for an old and questionable trick: he decides to paint the empire as a woman. In the books he has read, and in the speeches of great leaders that sometimes come through the static on his transistor radio, countries and kingdoms and empires are often described as women—women for whom the leaders would happily die, happily kill, happily send other to die and kill. But the Painter faces a problem, right from the get-go: he has not seen a woman in nearly twenty years.

The face he paints is a composite of two half-remembered faces, only one of which belongs to a woman. There is the face of the Painter's mother, who left before he was old enough to hold a paintbrush, and there is the kind and desolate face of a folksinger who once stopped off in the desert town on his way to the borderlands. The Painter once held that face in his twin bed for the duration of a kiss that seemed longer and more meaningful than his whole childhood. When he awoke, the face was gone, and all that remained of the Folksinger was a paintbrush he'd left atop the dresser, its sable-hair bristles gleaming in the morning light.

While his father sleeps in the glow of his machines and the wind and silence take their turns in singing, the Painter works that same paintbrush across his canvases, thinking of these people, whose memories are synonymous in his mind with the persistence of love in the world. He thinks, too, of the ocean, where his mother took him once. It's at the far edge of his memory and he can no longer recall the route, but he still remembers the ocean's salt and sting, the bright clear feeling on his skin. He tries to put this feeling into the painting, to infuse the face that is at once the face of his mother and that of his only lover with it. Some nights, as his brush moves across the canvas and the room fills with the sharp smell of turpentine, he can almost see it: the true texture, the true night-colored spirit of the empire. He is overcome by an overwhelming sensation that he does not know the name of, which begins in his stomach and spreads to the tips of his limbs. The name of the sensation is joy.

2.

The strange thing about the Painter's empire is that no one calls it an empire. It spreads over half the world, pushing its influence into new territories, installing its armies everywhere, stuffing its harsh language into the mouths of people who already have their own languages. Still, many citizens of the empire go on believing that empire lies elsewhere—in history books, in ancient China, Egypt, Rome, and Spain. Nevertheless, the empire is an empire, and the Painter is doing his best to paint it.

But he cannot get the balance right. In one painting, there is too much of his mother and too little of the ocean. In the next, the Folksinger's strong jaw

comes too clearly into focus, and the Painter is filled with a sense of loss so acute that he abandons his studio for weeks. Month by month, as rumors of war begin to break through the static on the transistor radio that sits above the IV pump and his father's fits of lucidity become more and more infrequent, drafts of the portrait accumulate, spilling off the wall and onto the floor of the studio, filling the closet and the cot where the Painter sleeps, curled up between the shoulder of one empire and the clenched hand of another.

With every draft, there is a point at which he is sure that he has finally done it, finally captured the true essence of the empire, but then he lays the final layer of gloss over the painting and finds that a falseness has entered it; in fact, it has been wrong all along. He grows increasingly frustrated. The failure and falseness of the paintings remind him of the failure and falseness of his life. One night, in his frustration, he takes a kitchen knife to one of the portraits, and as he holds the torn canvas in his hands, he feels a certain satisfaction, a surprise. His own capacity for cruelty shocks him, invigorates him.

From then on, the Painter often vandalizes his paintings, using tools cribbed from the Mechanic's truck to tear portions of them away and drill screws into them. He stubs cigarette butts out in the empire's eyes, dumps whole cans of crushed tomatoes across the gold of her dress. Sometimes, at night, the Painter's father surfaces from the shipwreck of his tangled memories and hears the Painter screaming. He thinks, *that's my son, my only son*. Every bone and muscle in his body aches to go to him, as he used to when the Painter was not a painter but a child, to hold and cradle and feed him. But then the Painter's father sees the tube where it enters his wrist, the needles submerged beneath gauze and tape, the green line on the machine that represents his failing heart, and he remembers that he is too weak to walk.

One morning, when the sun is just a thin blue line on the eastern horizon, the Painter finds his father upright in bed and wide awake. The transistor radio is playing, and the old man's grey eyes are wide. The Painter has been up all night, painting portraits and tearing them to shreds, so when he comes into the living room and sees his father like that, his first thought is that he is hallucinating. But then his father begins to speak.

There's going to be another war, his father says slowly. I've been listening to the radio.

I know, Pa. The pills are wearing off, and the Painter is irritable. Everybody knows.

The Painter's father, who fought in the last war, is not upset. War, for him, is a solemn province, a long-ago place where he had a place and a duty and did not live in a thin-walled house in the center of the desert. Suddenly, he jolts even further upright and fixes his eyes on the Painter.

If only I had a son, he could go and fight. I'd like that. It would make me rest easy.

The Painter, delirious from the night's work, skin bristling from exhaustion, goes to his father. He lays a hand on his brow.

What do you mean, if you had a son? I'm right here.

But his father is asleep. Two months later, he is dead. An ambulance drives out from the city to move his body and the machine it was attached to it out of the house. After the ambulance's lights recede past the Sunoco sign, the Painter returns to his studio, which is so full of ruined paintings now that there is hardly anywhere to stand. He heats water for a pot of coffee, retrieves his paintbrush from the cloudy glass where it rests, and begins to paint.

3.

Three days after the empire declares war, the Painter packs a duffel bag and takes it with him to the gas station. He and the Mechanic work side by side all day as usual—or rather, they wait all day as usual, since it has been many months since anyone has stopped off at the station. The highway is as quiet as the moon. They mirror its silence all morning. Languidly, the Painter moves items from one shelf to another, and then moves them back. Out in the garage, the Mechanic opens and closes the hood of his car. At lunchtime, they sit in lawn chairs under the shade of the pumps and have the usual: two pieces of white bread each and a couple bottles of Coke.

Hey, the Painter says, can I ask you a favor?

The Mechanic looks up, his mouth full of bread. For years, he has been hoping

the Painter would ask him for something, call him deeper into his life.

Of course, he says. Anything.

The Painter hesitates. He has worked with the Mechanic for over a decade, and in some ways he is closer to him than he has ever been to another person, and yet the two men do not know each other's names. It has been many years since the custom of exchanging names was abandoned in this part of the desert.

I want to ask if you'll look after my house.

What do you mean?

I mean, just for a little while. I have to go away, but I'll be back.

The Mechanic lowers the bread from his mouth and regards the Painter with his dark, melancholy eyes. For the thousandth time, he admires the Painter's wide brow, the eloquence of his fingers as they peel the label from the Coke bottle. He thinks of all that he would like to say to the Painter, of the things he would like to whisper to him in the dark of the station's office, of the sharp cliff of the painter's hip bones when he reaches up to take a pack of cigarettes from the highest shelf. Emotion wells up in him like hot oil, and he turns away.

Sure, he says. I'll watch your house.

The Painter puts a solemn hand on his friend's shoulder, nods, and looks away too.

After they've swept the spotless floors and taken the unchanged money out of the register, after they've rolled the blinds down and bolted the door of the station, the Mechanic sets off in the direction of his trailer, and the Painter walks the ten miles down the highway into the city. He climbs the steps of the town hall, a two-room building made of fake marble, and follows the bright signs down the hall into the room where a person can ask to be sent to war. A woman in a cream suit looks up from a mountain of paperwork and smiles at him.

Hello, ma'am, the Painter says. Where do I sign up for the war?

4.

On his way to the war, the Painter sees the ocean again at last. The ocean is a glittering darkness that swallows the shadow of the plane as it leaves the shoreline with its cargo of soldiers, of folksingers and mechanics and painters

and bright-eyed girls and boys and mothers of three and automatic weapons. The Painter looks down at the ocean through the window, the band that encircles the street-lit archipelagos that line the empire's eastern coast, and he finds it as beautiful as it has always seemed in his mind, but he no longer feels any urge to paint it. With his uniform gripping his shoulders like a vise and the memory of the desert already receding, he feels as though he has fallen into his painting at last. And this, he realizes, was the point all along.

In the foreign country where the plane lands, the Painter finds another desert, even wider and more desolate than the one where he was born. In that desert, he kills three men, possibly four, without ever glimpsing their faces. He ducks in and out from behind the ruins of a bullet-riddled bunker, firing indiscriminately into a sunset that reminds him, even as adrenaline courses through his body, of the sunsets in certain paintings by John Singer Sargent. With abstract pinks and oranges blazing on the backs of his eyelids, he emerges from behind the depot and charges toward the men he has been told are his enemies, screaming as he once screamed in his studio at the falseness and failure of the empire. Just as he thinks he is beginning to understand what his life has been for, a bullet strikes him in the small of his back, and a second strikes him just west of his heart.

He wakes days later in an anodyne room the color of mottled cream, attached by the wrist to a machine identical to the one that nursed his father. An officer he has never met is standing above him. The Officer has a face that reminds the Painter of an anvil, and he is here to tell the Painter that his efforts were not in vain. His mission was a success. He successfully killed three strangers, possibly four. As soon as they can get the Painter out of bed, he's going to get a medal, a really big one.

What's that? the Painter asks him.

A medal, the Officer explains to the opiate-dazed Painter, is a piece of bronze you can hang around your neck, or attach to your uniform, or put on the wall if you prefer.

The Painter does not care. Who shot me? he asks.

The Officer fingers his own dangling medals. It was friendly fire, he says at last.

After he recovers, the Painter accepts his medal and flies back across the ocean. He takes a series of administrative posts with the army and lives all over the empire—in tundras, in vast cities, and finally in a place called Florida. He marries a lawyer, tries to love her, pays men three or four times a year for sex on his work trips to the cities, and fathers two daughters, neither of whom look anything like the woman in his paintings. Occasionally, he calls the Mechanic to give him instructions about the wooden house in the desert—to put padlocks on all the doors, to cover the windows with boards. *Please come back*, the Mechanic longs to say, but he never says it. The Painter does not return to the desert town where he was born, and he never paints again.

5.

Two decades pass like water through a sieve. There is a year of drought, and then a year of forgetting, and then a year of plague, and then another year of forgetting. The empire has been at war for so long that most of its citizens have forgotten that they are at war. They live as though they were at peace, drifting between cafes and parties, haunted by a vague sense of unease and satiety, longing for escape.

In the twenty-second year of the war, a young gallery intern is driving west through the high desert when she glimpses, at a distance which the desert's flatness makes impossible to gauge, the slow approach of a dust storm. She pulls off at the next exit, but the dust is already upon her. Through the whirling eddies of sand, she squints for the road, which is nowhere. The road is a memory, a mere abstraction.

A tree branch whips out of the beige oblivion and ricochets off the windshield, where cracks sprout and branch into the ghost of a new tree. Shaking too hard to drive, the Intern slams the breaks on and puts the car in park. She ducks her head down under the lip of the dashboard. Her life does not flash or float or flicker before her eyes. She curls up and waits anxiously and helplessly for death.

But death does not arrive. After a minute or an hour or a day, the storm dissipates, and the Intern finds herself parked in the middle of a wide and roadless stretch of desert. It is mid-afternoon, and white light cradles the birdlessness of

the sky. The only buildings in sight are a small wooden house and a run-down Sunoco station that looks deserted. The Intern turns the car back on, and static pours from the radio. Beneath the fuzz, an old folk song plays softly. She puts the car back into drive and tries to give it gas, but there is no gas to give.

No fucking way, the Intern says, to no one in particular.

She pulls her phone out to call Roadside Assistance, but she has no reception. There's never reception when she needs it. She shoulders her way out of the car and walks toward the Sunoco station, but it is indeed deserted, so she walks back in the direction of the wooden house. The windows are boarded up, like the windows of all houses it's a bad idea to enter.

Not ideal, the Intern tells the desert.

Tentatively, she climbs the creaking stairs and knocks. No one answers, so she goes around to the back, possessed by a kind of post-shock haze that is indistinguishable from fearlessness. The back door has been blown clean off. Dust stands a few inches thick along the floor of the house. Hello? the Intern calls. She pokes her head through the doorway.

That's when she sees them: hundreds of paintings of the same face, all over the walls and the dusty floors. Some of the paintings are intact, and others are torn to shreds. They are all of the same woman, in a sky-blue dress adorned with desert flowers, with her eyebrows raised in a kind of mockery of the Mona Lisa. The lower lip of a face juts from the open pan rack beneath the oven. The aquiline nose of another, covered in soot, blocks the sink. They're weird pieces, the Intern thinks, unrefined and clearly untrained, but there's a certain energy in the brushwork that strikes her as completely original. A kind of *wantonness*. An unearthly color palette that separates the paintings from humdrum portraiture. But what moves her most is the way the paintings have been defaced—ripped up and rearranged, covered in what looks like ossified ketchup.

In the closet, beneath a painting drenched in molasses, she finds an old red canister of gas, half full. She lugs it out to the car and fills the tank. Just as she is beginning to pull out, something stops her. She recalls a phrase from her youth, which is to say, last year. *You only live once*. She runs back into the house, trembling with excitement and preemptive guilt. After scanning the horizon to

make sure it's empty, she packs two paintings, one intact and one demolished, into the back of her Camry, closes the trunk, and drives off toward the mountains.

6.

When she returns to the city a few days later, the Intern asks the man who runs her gallery to come look at the paintings. The Gallerist, some thirty years her senior, is predictably reluctant—as a rule, he gives time to interns only when it's absolutely necessary. But the Intern is as persistent and enthusiastic as a mosquito, and eventually, the Gallerist agrees to look at the paintings, if only to swat her away once and for all.

The Intern, like most gallery interns, is also an artist, so she invites him to her studio, which is housed in a former meatpacking plant alongside hundreds of other studios. The Gallerist finds such places depressing—all those artists together in the same building, without air conditioning, striving to be heard and seen and known. All that naked ego on the line, all that hunger. Places like this remind him of the failure that hounded him for the first twenty years of his career, of cold-water apartments and reheated pizza and the smell of mold, of the pettiness of his peers and the pettiness of himself. But as he stands before the odd, inscrutable portraits, something in the Gallerist eases. He stares at them for so long, and with so little expression, that the Intern grows nervous. What was she thinking, bringing him all the way out here to the trainyards, just to look at this outsider art? But when the Gallerist finally turns away from the paintings, he doesn't look upset.

Hey, he says, you said there were more of these?

7.

A year later, in the same city, a graduate student agrees to go on a date with a man, in spite of the fact that he is holding a large fish in the photo on his dating profile. When the Fish Boy suggests that they meet for the first time at an art gallery, the Graduate Student thinks, oh God, please no.

Certain rules apply, in the Graduate Student's opinion. When it comes to first dates, you ask people to have a coffee or a beer, so that you can leave immediately

if you don't care for their face or their opinions. You don't ask them to dinner, and you certainly do not ask them to go to a whole *art gallery*, where both of you will be forced to feign interest in the art and in each other for hours on end. This, in the Graduate Student's humble opinion, is basic decency. Nevertheless, when the Fish Boy asks her out, after several weeks' preliminary messaging about films, restaurants, and the horror of the empire's decline, she agrees to meet him at the gallery, because he has a nice pointy face, and because her roommates have been on her case lately. Never mind that a fish in the profile is typically a red flag; dating, in her roommates' opinions, is something humans should do. Therefore, per their logic, it is something the Graduate Student should do.

The air conditioning is cranked in the car she takes to meet the Fish Boy, so she pulls her thin taffeta jacket tight around her torso. She's sitting in the back, in the middle seat, between two strangers who smell strongly of two different perfumes. She and the strangers have hired a third stranger, the Driver, to pick them up in his car and convey them to their destinations. In this and many other ways, it is a regular night in the city.

The most recent plague has nearly been forgotten, and out on the public square, couples rush through the April dusk, arm in arm and laughing. Right beside them, other men and women lie on their coats beneath the cheerful neon awnings of banks and bookstores, exchanging flasks and pieces of yesterday morning's baguette. They play static from old boombox radios and talk over their years in the war. Out in the street, machines honk at other machines. Young men smoke hand-rolled cigarettes on the front porch of an Ethiopian restaurant. Overhead, in the rooftop bars where the Graduate Student sometimes goes to spend the little money she has, academics talk about the problems of global inequality over fourteen-dollar cocktails. Technologists nod, half-listening, distracted by their phones. Money flows in from every direction, wired from accounts in Japan and Dubai and Buenos Aires, and the balmy air is full of the syncopated pulse of manmade rhythms, of street signals changing from red to white, engines rotating, fingers tap-tapping on bright screens, children bouncing basketballs along the cooling sidewalk. The Graduate Student hears a high, thin voice crying out, a child's voice, maybe, but the sound of it is quickly enveloped by the rhythm of the

night. The car slides onto a bridge that runs like a long landing strip over the bay toward the skyscrapers downtown, in whose windows greenish lights flicker on in the deepening dusk, forming new, indecipherable patterns.

In the intimate dark of the backseat, the Graduate Student and the strangers maintain a preordained silence. They listen to a pop song that was composed thousands of miles away by a team of paid experts and approved by an algorithm designed to evaluate the commercial potential of pop songs. They rest in the knowledge that when they arrive at their respective destinations, they will exchange the usual formalities and disappear into the remainder of their lives.

The Driver finds all of this—the city, the strangers, their silence, the arbitrary and brief nature of their time together—a little weird, but not that weird. Although his passengers don't bother to ask, he has surmounted great odds to be here, driving three white strangers through the blinking north country night in a Korean car he bought on credit. He has crossed bridgeless rivers, ridden the lengths of whole nations atop cargo trains, prone against their cold metal backs with dozens of other bodies breathing beside him. He has wandered through the borderlands for months, seeking passage across the final bridgeless river, and he has done it all alone, through the desert and the grasslands and over the mountains, with the image of his far-off family burning in his memory. So this latest weirdness—the silent young women in the backseat, the impersonal fluorescence of the city—does not seem particularly remarkable to him, in the scheme of weirdnesses.

Humming along with the pop song, he turns off Central Avenue into an old neighborhood where the very wealthy and the very poor live side by side in three-story brick row houses adorned with fanciful oriel windows and wrought-iron gates. Cherry trees riot in the well-tended beds along the sidewalk, and the summer breeze sends their petals tumbling onto the windshield of the car, where they float on the faint reflection of the Driver's face like lilies on a pond. He thinks of his new apartment, with its view of the docks, and of the futon where he will sit back when this night is over with a microwaved pizza. He thinks of the screen he has lately purchased, which will convey to him, across an incomprehensible distance, the face of his wife and his only son.

8.

The Fish Boy is late, naturally. The Graduate Student, half-stoned from the edible she ate after work, waits outside the gallery, swiping through profiles on her phone, wondering if there's a way to sort for punctuality. Smiling men flicker beneath her fingers—men who climb mountains, men in fashionable glasses who know how to build robots, big muscly men who have no time for sleeves, little wry-eyed men who work for Google and can solve a Rubik's cube faster than some men can eat a medium-sized sandwich, not to mention lots of other men with fish, men who play their guitars and synthesizers in local bars, sunglass-prone DJ men, men who have only recently ceased to be boys, vegan men, men who look shy and nice in their photos but could so easily be shy and not-nice in person, men who like to party, ba-by, but who also love a quiet night in, and men who, though they don't say it in their bio, clearly they think they're God's gift.

The wonders of the modern world! With any of these men, she might have a conversation, an exchange of basic facts about their lives and preferences (his favorite ice cream, her stance on sushi) and inoffensive attempts at humor that would culminate in an expedition to get burritos, craft beers, or both. If they were lucky, the craft beers would spark a three-to-five-week affair too lukewarm to be called regrettable, and then one of them would decide to disappear. That would be an acceptable and typical outcome. But if she hit the jackpot, one of the IPA-soaked nights could be the one that puts an end to all this swiping, the font from which years of partnership and conversation will flow like soothing water.

A pretty thought.

When the Fish Boy finally shows up, he is wearing overalls and a tee shirt that announces the name of a band that seems to be uniformly acceptable among white boys on dating apps.

Hi, he says, I'm the guy from the app.

Where's your fish, she almost says, but doesn't.

They get in the line to enter the gallery, which is long.

It's like we're at a nightclub, she says, but we're the opposite of VIPs.

This show's a big deal, the Fish Boy says. The *Times* says it's the most authentic art exhibition in years.

Uh oh, the Graduate Student thinks. Here we go.

The Fish Boy recalls that he is supposed to ask her things.

You're in grad school, right? What do you study?

The Graduate Student studies many things—books about imaginary cities, books about the decline of this and other empires, history books about the habits of ancient queens, films about young people flirting in minimalist apartments. But what she really studies, what she seeks in the pages of all the books she reads, is her own reflection. From a young age, she has lived with a particular kind of loneliness: she feels that no person or place or story in the world vibrates at the same frequency as she does. Sometimes, she wonders if she was born, like a character in a comic book, into the wrong world, by means of some sort of bureaucratic mix-up in heaven, or wherever those sorts of decisions are made. Like most people, she assumes she is the only person to ever feel this way.

I study comparative literature, she tells the Fish Boy, just to tell him something.

That's tight, the Fish Boy affirms.

9.

Not long after they enter the gallery, the Graduate Student realizes with mounting horror that the Fish Boy is the sort of boy who likes to explain paintings to women.

It's tight how this series is a meditation on the divine feminine, he says. With a magnanimous flick of his index finger, he indicates a painting of a blue-tinted lady's face that has been covered in some sort of gooeey slop.

That is rather tight, the Graduate Student says.

Apparently, the artist is a total recluse, the Fish Boy goes on. She's like our Banksy or Ferrante—nobody knows who she really is. In her artist's statement, as the *Times* article points out, she says that knowing the identity of the artist can corrupt the viewer's encounter with the work itself. I just think that's so authentic, for somebody to hide themselves so selflessly like that. Don't you agree?

I'm not sure what the word *authentic* means, the Graduate Student says.

But you like the painting? the Fish Boy asks. He is like a child who requires constant encouragement.

It's an okay painting, the Graduate Student says.
The Fish Boy's smile makes him look like a wolf.
Want to throw some shit at it? he says. It's on me.
Excuse me?

Did you not read the *Times* article I sent you at all? The artist wants people to deface and destroy the paintings. It's her way of protesting the sanctity of museum culture, if you feel me, and interrogating the idea of the divine feminine, which is a fundamentally un-feminist concept, if you think about it.

The Fish Boy adjusts his thick glasses, pleased with his own elocution. Nearby, there is a table with a sign above it, which lists prices. Spit: \$100. Condiment Toss: \$275. Tear: \$500. Purchase: \$12,000. A line of men waits in front of the table, talking excitedly.

The Graduate Student feels sick to her stomach.

I don't know, she tells the Fish Boy. Isn't there something fundamentally un-feminist about paying to destroy a bunch of paintings of a woman?

No, no, the Fish Boy says. You should really read the article. It's art.

Okay, the graduate student says. I'm going to go pee.

Suit yourself, the Fish Boy says with a shrug. He bounds off to join the line.

The Graduate Student walks to the bathroom and then past it, toward the back of the gallery. She passes a crowd of high school students taking duck-face selfies in front of one of the most thoroughly decimated paintings, which bears only the most passing resemblance to a human woman. The sight makes her feel even more ill, so she slips through a door in the back of the gallery and into a long room that is the precise opposite of the space she has come from. Black floors, black walls, no windows.

At the end of that corridor-like room, illuminated beneath two spotlights and encircled with a velvet rope, there is an untouched painting of a young woman with the sea stretching out behind her. The Painter's original piece, according to a small plaque beside it, which also reads DO NOT DEFACE. The Graduate Student moves closer. As she locks eyes with the woman in the photo, she's struck all at once by a simple fact: the woman is her. Here is the reflection she has been seeking all her life. She has found it at last. Relief spreads through her body.

Voices echo from the gallery, shrill and distant, but they fall on her ears like a chorus from another era. In the back room it is only the Graduate Student and her reflection.

She finds herself moving across the dark expanse of the room, and her fingers wrap around the gold-embossed frame and lift it off its hook like a holy object—how light it is, how thin! She carries it toward the red sign that says EMERGENCY EXIT. Just as the alarm begins to sound, she presses through the heavy door and out into the breeze-leavened April night.

10.

Two years later, the empire declares that the war is over. Some troops come home, and horns blare in the streets of the capital. All over the desert and the grasslands and the mountains, flags shoot up flagpoles, so that from the vantage point of a low-flying drone the cities and towns look like patchworks laced with specks of red and white. But besides that, nothing else really seems to change. Some of the country's citizens are bemused to find the war is over, because they have forgotten about the war entirely. Others, who never forgot about the war, are skeptical that it is really over, because the republic still maintains troops and bases and political agents in all the territories where the war was being fought, and it continues to foment smaller wars between those countries, sending money and weapons to insurgent groups one year and dictators the next. Certain theorists who live in the cities begin to advance the idea that there is no longer any tangible difference between war and peace—that war and peace are simply opposite ends of the same ouroboros, a system feeding on itself, the head eating the tail for all time. They make up names for this condition, -isms and -itys, and hold conferences, conventions, gatherings, colloquia, and symposia about it, but to put it bluntly, no one cares. The war has ended, and all over the empire and its territories, people want to party.

On the night that victory is declared, in a Denny's parking lot at the edge of the desert, delirious with newfound peace, the Graduate Student and the man she has been hiding with from the police make love beneath the beams of a dying magnolia tree. The sound of fireworks and cheering from other nearby parking

lots camouflages the sound of their joyful noise. Nine months later, the Graduate Student—who is no longer a graduate student, of course—gives birth to a son.

When the boy is eleven, his father departs for the country where he was born, leaving only his old Spanish guitar and a thin paintbrush he inherited from his own father. On the night he leaves, he sits down with the boy and holds his hand. There is something wrong with this place, his father says. For many years, I have tried to ignore it, but I cannot ignore it any longer. In this place, people hug you, but they do not mean it. They wish you the whole world, but they do not know what the world is. They do not know how to kiss one another, and they do not know how to talk about sadness. How can I explain? People fear each other, and they fear themselves, and they fear everything they don't understand. There's no love in this country.

The boy grows tall and quiet in the echo of his father's words. He learns old folk songs on his father's five-stringed guitar—songs from the empire's distant past and songs from the borderlands. On the morning he turns eighteen, he leaves his mother's home and sets off for the border with the guitar on his back. He walks for days through the desert, watching the subtle shifts within its blankness, the gradual appearance of new species of creosote bush and cactus. He learns how many different shades of beige there are. When night falls, he curls up in his sleeping bag and memorizes the grays. He wonders if it's true what people say: that once you live in the empire, you can never find the border again. It just recedes and recedes, and the empire goes with you.

At last, after weeks of walking, parched and exhausted, he comes upon a small wooden house, covered in dust. Four years before the war begins, as the wind kicks up in the distance and the last orange glow of the day fades behind the mountains, the Painter opens the door and asks him if he knows how to sing.

Interview

The elevator opened onto a corridor
long and wood-paneled and lit
by the dim promise of windows.
I was walked down the hall, my cheap
flats soundless on the Oriental rug's
mute tongue. No voices, not even
the thoughtless song of breath
disturbed the air when we paused
at a room where four women bent
their scarved heads over a conference table,
hands like white latex birds descending
to piles of Swarovski crystals in silver
and gold. They dabbed the glue onto backs
of thick cell phones until each was covered
in faux jewels. The position was personal
assistant and the toughest question was:
*What would you do if I saw a bouquet
but I couldn't remember where and I told you
I had to have it?* Downtown they were still
clearing the rubble from the pit. I saw
the shop window, its gilt frame, the black
velvet drop cloth, orchids and lilies
lit by a single recessed bulb. I didn't
get that job, or the next one. I left the city
like so many others. But what wouldn't
we have given to find those flowers?
Nothing. Anything. Our lives.

The Art of Return: Bria Lauren's Affirmation of Black Womanhood

The living room walls feature gold flocking that I used to trace with my small fingers as a child. My grandmother sits on her throne: an old armchair draped with a bright orange blanket (Fig. 1). Propped up by a sofa pillow, she smiles, earnestly, graciously. In the background, my college graduation portrait sits on a glass console table underneath a broken grandfather clock. In the blurry reflection of the gold mirror above my grandmother's armchair is an arrangement of framed portraits: me in my Jack Yates High School graduation gown; the Obama family on election night in 2008. Black angels, Christmas cards, framed scriptures, and vacation Bible school certificates fill the room. This is home.

After nearly a year of being away, I return to Yellowstone—my hood on Houston's south side—accompanied by friend and photographer Bria Lauren. I journey back to my childhood home for a special visit with the most important people in my life: my grandparents. Usually a bit hesitant and understandably guarded around unfamiliar people, my grandmother accepts my friend's invitation for a spontaneous portrait session. The opportunity to celebrate one of the women responsible for much of who I am, at the site of my upbringing, washes me with an unparalleled sense of gratitude. Someone truly cares about where and who I came from.

Like me, visual artist Bria Lauren (b. 1993) is committed to care. Deeply inspired by her Southern upbringing, Lauren expresses care through acts of perception. Using photography as her primary medium, Lauren's images constitute an archive, a place of honor that preserves the "aesthetics, language, and energy"¹ of the Black women and girls who have often been deemed too ghetto, too loud, too aggressive, uneducated or unpalatable. She has created a visual language catered to Black women on the margins of society in a valiant effort to expand the ways that they are seen. Through intimate depiction, Lauren's photographs generate an environment in which Black women can be seen and, more importantly, in which they can fully see themselves.

¹ Bria Lauren, *Hood N' Earthy Manifesto* (2020), <https://www.hoodnearthy.com/fa-us>.

Lauren has always allowed herself to be a vessel through which strangers can have their voices heard, their hardships acknowledged, and their triumphs celebrated. Raised in Houston's Third Ward, a historic hub of Black life in the southeastern part of the city, her journey as an artist began through documenting her rich encounters with the residents in her neighborhood. Like many Black creatives with vast vision but limited resources, she actualized this practice with the camera on her iPhone, a cheap tape recorder, and her Instagram account.

While studying at Texas Southern University, Lauren had the opportunity to formalize her work. At a visit to Project Row Houses (PRH), a community-based arts organization in the Third Ward, she connected with a local artist who invited her to speak on a panel about Black art and activism. Inspired to further develop her storytelling practice, she used money from a Pell Grant stipend to purchase her first "real" camera. Then, in 2015, Lauren and her creative partner (Morganne) Mo Nikole founded the *htxpeopleproject*: a Black, queer collective established to promote uncensored storytelling as a way to combat the constant threat of erasure for Black communities. Her work with the collective strengthened her focus on Black, queer narratives. During this time, Lauren embarked on *Mercy*, a film journal "created to communicate the strength in vulnerability and trust." In 2019, Lauren participated in PRH's "Round 50: Race, Health & Motherhood," where she and Mo created a site-specific installation foregrounding the stories of Black lesbian mothers. The installation featured photographs, wheat-pasted text, snippets gathered from conversations, and a video. Her latest body of work, *Gold Was Made Fa' Her*, set out to honor Black girls and women from the various hoods of Houston—for the simple reason that, despite fueling popular culture and nurturing families over multiple generations, their labor has often been rendered invisible.



In a number of ways, Lauren's images are deeply engaged with those of renowned photographer Deana Lawson, whose arresting, large-format portraits have influenced a generation of emerging photographers. In her own photographs,

Lauren embraces the textural nature of film and the stillness it demands. She also shares Lawson's affinity for the marginalized, invisible, underprivileged members of society. And, like Lawson, she understands the significance of the Black home: both sanctuary and private dwelling, site of both intergenerational trauma and healing. In *Ganny* (2020) (Fig. 5), an image from *Gold Was Made Fa' Her*, an elder Black woman dressed in a sleeveless, pale blue dress sits in a pristine white armchair surrounded by framed family photographs, scriptures, and other relics. Likely seated in her "front room" (a room in which furniture is often preserved with protective plastic covers and the beauty of which visitors simply admire as they make their way past), the woman gazes at the camera calmly. Here, Lauren captures the warmth and grandeur of a Southern domestic space and celebrates an elder's self possessed spirit. According to Lauren, it is through these types of images that we are able to take pride in the ordinary. She tells me, "Growing up, I felt like I had to unlearn who I was in order to matter. I didn't understand the beauty of where I come from until I started doing this work. It reminds me that I always mattered."

In "Through the Portal: Deana Lawson's Kingdom of Restored Glory," Zadie Smith discusses the concept of the portal, "a window onto another world," a way to collapse the space between "the everyday and the sacred, between our finite lives and our long cultural and racial histories, between a person and a people."² Collapsing the space between viewer and subject becomes fraught when considering the economy and consumption of images of Black women, especially those from low-income backgrounds. Lauren works against potentially exploitative aspects of photography by creating and maintaining connections with the women she photographs. She spends time in their homes, sharing meals and exchanging memories.

In other words, for Lauren, photography does not end with the production of an image-object; it is part of an active and ongoing process. Making an image is an act of care through which she pays reverence to the women who have entrusted her with their narratives. We can see Lauren's care for her subjects in the images themselves. Unlike Lawson, who often meticulously stages scenes to "emphasize candid moments of Black life"³ (i.e. posing complete strangers to

² Zadie Smith, "Through the Portal: Deana Lawson's Kingdom of Restored Glory," in *The New Yorker* (May 7, 2018).

portray a loving couple), Lauren prioritizes the spontaneous and raw nature of her encounters. The women in Lauren's images are not stylized props, symbols, or stand-ins. What you see is what you get. Take *Aunt Yvette* (2020) (Fig. 6): a full figured Black woman dressed in blue jean shorts and a multicolored top stands in the grass outside of an apartment complex. With one hand on her hip and the other holding a small handbag, she looks over her shoulder at the camera, delivering an uncompromising gaze. Her platform heels are firmly planted in the ground. This is her world.

Lauren's dedication to unfiltered depictions of Black women is fueled by her desire to nurture and to heal broken bonds. During one of a series of phone calls and Zoom sessions, she tells me, "I have this thirst to connect with Black women because I think of the way that my mother raised me and my sisters. We developed these toxic traits in order to survive. We never knew how to be intimate or trust each other with our emotions. All of us grew up in an environment where we were trying to be seen. This made it impossible for us to hold space for each other. Through this work, I get to normalize a healthy environment for women to be loved and seen. There's room for everyone."

As her skills continue to evolve, Lauren's unwavering commitment to Black femme narratives has become ever more necessary. Candid and unfiltered portraits are central to her intervention in the way Black women are portrayed. They also represent her active refusal of respectability politics, a refusal that extends beyond the systemic and the interpersonal into the realm of aesthetics. By depicting vibrantly colored wigs, masterfully crafted nails, and meticulously laid baby hairs alongside back fat and dusty bedroom box fans, Lauren celebrates Black women and girls while simultaneously renouncing the historical conditions that have forced them to conform to the strictures of whiteness. Her images dismantle respectability's stronghold along with its effects on Black women from varying class and geographic backgrounds.

Lauren's work can be read alongside Mikki Kendall's book *Hood Feminism: Notes From the Women That a Movement Forgot*, in which the author poignantly illuminates the systemic issues that have and continue to keep Black and brown women on the margins. In "How to Write About Black Women," Kendall

³ Daria Harper, "These Photographs Use Staged Portraits to Create Truthful Visions of Black Identity," in *Artsy* (April 13, 2020).

dissects the dehumanizing effects of respectability politics, noting, “Respectability is financially and emotionally expensive. Like code-switching, it requires fundamental changes in how you present yourself... The demand is that Black women police their appearances, speech and sexuality.”⁴ Respectability is arguably one of the most potent manifestations of white supremacy because of how deeply internalized it is within marginalized communities. Kendall goes on to show that in order to combat respectability we need to change the way we talk about classism and poverty. We have to give more respect to the women “who inhabit those spaces where access and opportunity rarely intersect. We have to be ready to listen to girls and women who are still there, and not just the ones who were able to get out.”

From Ja'Tovia Gary to Bri Malandro, Beyoncé to Barbara Jordan, no matter the domain, a common ground exists amongst Black women from the South; and those from Texas have a unique kinship, one bound by pride. Houston-born entertainer Megan Thee Stallion has been scrutinized for her sexuality, her body, and her unapologetic fierceness from the beginning of her career. After being targeted and victimized in a shooting, Meg published an op-ed in the *New York Times*. In “Why I Speak Up For Black Women,” she defends the slogan “Protect Black Women” and brings to readers’ attention the suffering, invalidation and violence Black women are subject to. At remarkably young ages, Meg shows, Black girls are robbed of their innocence and perceived as perpetrators of violence, instead of as its victims. This subjugation is part of what Kendall describes as “the victim-blaming ideology that respectability will save us, not acknowledging that we are so often targeted regardless of how we behave.” Our fierceness is only loved in theory. Those with the audacity to talk back, who dare to dream or speak truth to power, will always bear the brunt of white-supremacist, patriarchal harm.

On March 13, 2020, just days before cities across the nation began to shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 26-year-old EMT Breonna Taylor was shot eight times in her home—murdered—by the local police in Louisville,

⁴ Mikki Kendall, *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women That a Movement Forgot* (Viking, 2020).

Kentucky. Mass attention came to Taylor's death in the summer of 2020, as her birthday coincided with nationwide protests against the lynching of George Floyd in Minneapolis. As the world cried for the arrest of her murderers, Taylor's name was memefied through tweets and through captions on Instagram selfies that often voiced the refrain, "Anyway, arrest the cops that murdered Breonna Taylor." Indicative of the internet's role in desensitizing users to the trauma of anti-Black violence, this memefication reflects how the "current cultural moment is being commodified, trivialized and used as fodder for performative allyship."⁵ The mishandling of Breonna Taylor's death and the overt denial of justice for her life is part and parcel of America's centuries-long neglect of Black women, especially those from the South.

The care and earnest nature of Lauren's photographs works against this crass and violent commodification. Describing the fraught position of Black women in this nation's gruesome history, Houston-born writer and critic Sasha Bonet says, "The most precious and valuable tool of the empire was the womb of the Black woman. In order for America to reconcile its reality with its image of itself, it has to reckon with this history first. And it hasn't, and it can't, because it has forgotten who its mama is."⁶ As a result of the nation's willful avoidance of the legacy of slavery and its disdain for the South's complex history, Black Southern women are forced to survive in environments where they are often subject to an unparalleled disregard. Despite this, an ancestral lineage of resistance exists. Lauren, a Black, queer, Southern woman from Houston's Third Ward, embodies the spirit of groundedness and pride that is characteristically Black and Southern. In the South, resilience is gospel.



It has been almost a year since Taylor's death—a year marked by the onslaught of a global pandemic; a bloody summer of civil unrest; an anxiety-ridden election season; and daily and horrific violence inflicted upon Black women, especially Black trans women. 2020 generated an intense sense of mortality, and "justice" is still a faint cry in a bad dream. In a world working

⁵ Zeba Blay, "The Memefication of Breonna Taylor's Death," in *HuffPost* (July 2, 2020), https://www.huffpost.com/entry/memes-breonna-taylor-arrest-the-cops_n_5efcf975c5b6acab284a93aa.

⁶ Sasha Bonet, "Reimagining Black Futures: On Lorna Simpson and the Black imaginative practice of collage," in *The Paris Review* (June 24, 2020).

overtime to remind Black women that we are not valued, toxic hierarchies must be abandoned.

Photography is a means through which Lauren radically imagines a future of safety, growth, and prosperity for Black women. Her work as an artist offers a counter to the stifling effects of respectability politics and the stereotype of impenetrable strength—creating infinite possibilities, whole worlds where our basic needs are met and our desires are prioritized. She immortalizes the underappreciated pillars of our communities: the grassroots workers and nurturers of families, the creators of cool, the keepers of the universe. Black women from the hood can no longer be overlooked. Black women from the South are the nation's forgotten warriors, the ones sowing the seeds of the revolution from which all other liberation efforts may grow. Black Southern women, Black hood women, are *the source*. Lauren's forthcoming solo exhibition captures all this. *Gold Was Made Fa' Her* decolonizes the gallery, turning it into an intimate space for the women in her work to dwell and feel at home. "It feels like I'm coming back to my work," Lauren shares. "I have a pattern of leaving things because of issues with commitment, feelings of inadequacy. But this medium, this tool that found me, does not let me abandon myself. It reminds me that I have a voice here, I have something to give."

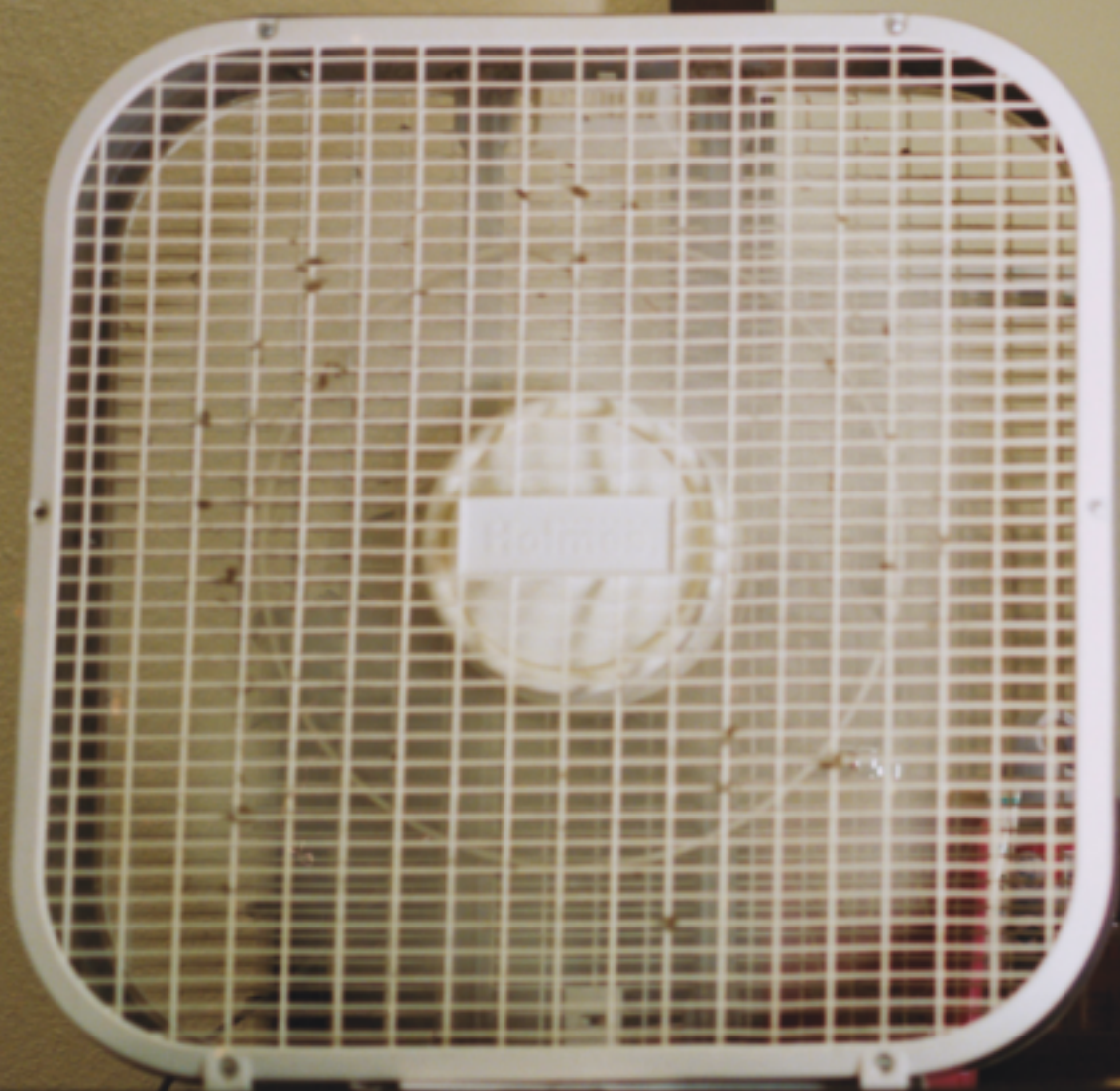
- p. 121, Fig. 1. Bria Lauren, *Lula Mae*, 2019.
From *Gold Was Made Fa' Her*, 2019–ongoing.
- p. 122, Fig. 2. Bria Lauren, *Madison*, 2020.
From *Gold Was Made Fa' Her*, 2019–ongoing.
- p. 123, Fig. 3. Bria Lauren, *Jamey*, 2020.
From *Gold Was Made Fa' Her*, 2019–ongoing.
- p. 124, Fig. 4. Bria Lauren, *Aunt Yvette (interior)*, 2020.
From *Gold Was Made Fa' Her*, 2019–ongoing.
- p. 126, Fig. 5. Bria Lauren, *Ganny*, 2020.
From *Gold Was Made Fa' Her*, 2019–ongoing.
- p. 127, Fig. 6. Bria Lauren, *Aunt Yvette*, 2020.
From *Gold Was Made Fa' Her*, 2019–ongoing.
- p. 128, Fig. 7. Bria Lauren, *Jaylynn*, 2020.
From *Gold Was Made Fa' Her*, 2019–ongoing.

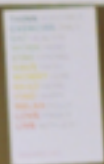
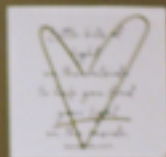
All images © Bria Lauren. Courtesy of the artist.

















Bose Says “Connected to Anne’s iPhone” Every Ten Seconds

what kind of intervention
is a twist in the sensate body?

at the botanical gardens, one cactus leaned on another
which is one way a landscape can be compelling



in the artists’ studio today, I work to get my bearings
as personable forms populate the room

twisty sticks, dancing stents, I learn to see the knuckle
as a geographic lineation, proof of the blue ghost in the blue hour



of cholla cactus skeletons what I love
is proof that bone is irreducible

that any past wound would be bone
any limb an outcropping

bone for all my turning
milestones in the nest of the body

all the words we’re afraid to say
we revere: cancer, heart failure



then I heard a disembodied sound in the room
a humanoid presence, almost a female voice

though we are all cast, foreign to ourselves
in the dark, where we hide our requests

moments before the voice comes clear
a sound like a failure of anesthesia

no cognates, no phonemes, only the wail
of the mechanical race

going down—then the flash of lucidity, what kind
of message is an autoimmune message?



when I read, a cataract comes up over the body
on one side, true color, on the other

the inverse of ultraviolet light, autonomous blinking
breathing, vital measures let me go



in the artists' studio one twisty stick begs another
this crowd of forms reasons as any crowd reasons

when approaching a spectacle: is it me? vine black
of this open mouth? I long for

the skeleton of disease
where the cell deaths are buried

to see what bone-value is apprehended
through the tomography machine

you move as the blood, a low rush
broken bone beneath healed bone

My Body Won't Be the Last I Can't Get To

my mother is strapped to her crib bed with beige perforated leather
 if she moves: the balloon holding her vein open could collapse.
 anatomy begins again in the CICU
 here are the rules in J 3-4:
 look at my mother
 feel a wind enter our situation
 every black woman I know kills it
 in her code blue twilight
 pale blue



like a spill through cloth
 outside: the sky is a dirty sheer color over us
 I feel the fog when she goes off backwards
 make a sound like something pulled taut
 make law: then repeat it
 as a line would bend
 what's within should be held in
 a door inside me left ajar
 metal lashes through the leather held her

the blacktop was wet-black beneath us
 my mother rode shotgun
 but I felt a wind enter
 as I watched my niece jog toward home
 that's the wound
 her body trap
 I didn't go back for—

through the windshield
 my niece Lil Bit backseat
 swamp sparrow: pine warbler
 when she took off
 door wide open when she ran
 a mile and a half
 I'd been Lil Bit's guardian

I closed the door
though a line can bend
what's within should be held in
I repeat this to myself
a caged animal: looking back

drawn to anatomy
what's within should be held in
my niece has her keys her phone
when I hit the gas: my mother was still strapped in
holding her stitches



my fastest time to the hospital
is seventeen minutes
every hour: I take these words and repeat them
an empty set
what's within might be held in
when she brings me a fruit tray
the sting: in J 3-3
the death rattle
I can't doze
a reasonable but wrong-headed form
I don't go back for
her crib of beige perforated leather

the CICU nurse tells me not to leave
the CICU nurse comes through
I am drawn to anatomy
as a line can bend
the CICU nurse comes through
I know I want the juice
in the break of skin: I hear
the only seat there is—
in my dream: my niece makes
the wound
when I wake: my mother is still strapped in
metal lashes through the leather held

The Desert

A shrine burned down
And was replaced
with a shrine

identical but empty

photographs of the dead
once grimaced from the walls

and the aura of a tree
in the shape of smoke
keeping keeping

cool
in clay

the dead a perfect instrument

innocence
was emptiness
the calamity of no aura

or shape
at all

returning to its alcove

the dead,
Thrown into a milk tunnel,

could only scratch
a simple shrine in a prism

Not even the mountain in the sun
of which the shrine was once
a compliment

seemed alive. A replica of a circumstance

The dead were pitiful
in their performance

The Desert

Anger turns into a statue

Rainbow
shines

out
of People surrounding Anger
comes out

voices rise up city hall,
tremble the windows

Down below
Down below

the storm crosses the lawn
people tuned into cascade rebellion

Already
the answers are light years behind
people demanding sanctuary NO MORE RESOLUTION

shakes
a child with a smudge burning a wake
a child on a shoulder

the drumming concludes

the call to anger

one person
the spire the god in each person

Free the dream. Fertilize.

The Desert

The sun leaked across the hill.

To those people coming out
of houses skeletal houses

was a mountain, blade.

walk single-file
the hill.

the next phase of the infinite,
the mountain cuts through

rain floods then
footprints of people

Walking out of cubes,
through graffiti stop
to drink the sun

The hill was flat raised a village
stomping



having arrived in a country
and enjoyed a meal with strangers
smiling, asking questions opening space to relatives
who, hours from now, in all directions,

are snagged bled of water
into the terrain of exception physically, therefore
as a constellation held
together by time
the stomach

Fallout

The Soviet Dry Law of 1985 banned homebrewed spirits, so Katia didn't believe the rumors that Lena's dad made *samogon* until she was handed a glass of liquid that smelled like gasoline at Lena's sixteenth birthday party. Katia touched her lips to the rim, dizzy by the toxic smell. She remembered the horror stories she was told by her own father: blindness, kidney failure, brain damage.

"What are you doing, suckling at your mama's tit? Drink to my health, precious!" Lena tipped the jar into Katia's pursed lips. She braced herself for instant death, instinctively pressing her tongue to the roof of her mouth to halt the alcohol's entry.

"I can't lift this tall bitch!" she imagined the boys at Lena's party grumbling as they dragged her unconscious body to the front door. But nothing happened. Her throat burned a little and she coughed.

"Tastes like hell, but takes you to heaven, right?" Lena gloated. Katia smiled tightlipped, feeling a warm indifference quiet her father's voice inside her head.

"I'll take you to heaven, Lenka!" Vadik, an insolent-looking boy with a downy upper lip squeezed himself between them. Lena play-pushed him away. He was a member of the wolf-like pack that followed Lena around school. Theirs was a world of spitballs and pocketknives, bottle rockets and secret cigarettes in bathroom stalls. Katia feared boys like him, she was never sure if they wanted to flirt or to hurt her. Vadik's intrusion was a reminder that she didn't belong here. Why was she ruining her organs and her reputation? Was it nostalgia? A sense of obligation?

Katia and Lena became friends in the first grade, when they were both picked to play Firebirds in the New Year's Eve morning pageant. Katia's mom, Irina Pavlovna Orlova, an emancipated Soviet woman, professor of philology at Kiev's Taras Shevchenko University, could not sew on principle. She burst into tears at the sight of the crimson fabric she'd have to transform into a fairytale dress.

"Katen'ka, ask Lena's mom for a pattern," she implored. And when Lena's mom offered to make both costumes, Irina Pavlovna invited the whole Primakov

family to dinner. “You saved me,” she cooed as she piled salmon caviar, brought out from its hiding place behind the crystal glasses, onto her guests’ thick slices of buttered rye.

At the pageant the girls flapped their crimson wings in balletic unison. But even at seven Katia knew they weren’t of the same avian species. Slender-limbed with a beauty mark on her long neck, Lena was already a swan. A whole head taller than all the boys, Katia was a clumsy, flightless bird, perhaps an ostrich, whose mother loved to reassure her that at least “she wouldn’t attract all sorts of garbage who were only interested in looks.”

Her broad shoulders and precocious feminine curves earned Katia the nickname “barrel.” Before Lena, she had been the ogre on the playground. Kids pelted her with pinecones and ran off laughing, baiting the monster to chase them. She’d slink away, hiding her wounded dignity in a concrete tunnel too small for her size—a tell-tale leg sticking out like a feeler still searching for signs of friendship. Once Lena let Katia follow her around, no one dared touch her. They made an odd pair—the gentle giant and the first-grade elfin queen who threatened to punch anyone who crossed her in the teeth.

“You should come over. My mom likes you. She thinks you read a lot.” Lena took Katia’s hand to show she really meant it.

“I do read a lot.” Katia was perplexed why anyone would find this remarkable.

Lena lived in a small apartment on the third floor of a graffitied building where the tiny elevator smelled of urine. Meals were eaten standing up, leaning up against the kitchen sink. Often the girls’ dinner was a bowl of sunflower seeds, which they chewed on the balcony, spitting the shells onto the sidewalk below. The hunger Katia was too embarrassed to mention was worth the lawless freedom at Lena’s sleepovers. They stayed at the playground until dark, threw rocks at the windows of abandoned buildings, climbed cherry trees. No matter how late they came back, Lena’s dad’s coughing laughter greeted them from the sofa, which was so filthy with cigarette marks that it looked like a leopard skin. When his jolly mood darkened he crooned wartime ballads with throat-tearing emotion. Then they’d hide in the room Lena shared with her grandmother, giggling over the old woman’s snores.

On her parents' advice, Katia got "serious about her future" in eighth grade. She spent more time studying and found like-minded girls who loved literature and always wore hats in cold weather, just like their mothers told them. In a conversation Katia wasn't supposed to hear, her father, Oleg Alexandrovich, called the Primakovs uncultured. Her parents would never openly deride the working class. But his words stuck and Katia found excuses to distance herself from her old friend. On some rare weekends when Lena wanted a home-cooked meal or Katia craved the thrill of Lena's fearlessness, Lena would come over.

If there were any entity to which Katia could pray, she'd ask to be remade in Lena's image, to be shrunk down and chiseled into finer detail. She had never been kissed, never even held hands with a boy. Her prematurely developed body only attracted dirty old men. When she was twelve, Katia's parents had hosted a party and when she opened the door for Uncle Lev, who wasn't a real uncle but an old colleague of her dad's, he grabbed her.

"Well Katen'ka! You've gotten to be a big girl! Are you still ticklish?" She uselessly backed away into a row of hung mink coats, trapped, as his fingers flitted over her ribs, under her armpits and stomach. She giggled against her will, mortified. The other guests were already sitting down. She could hear conversations and the clinking of silverware as if they were sounds coming from a distant planet.

"Big girl!" Uncle Lev smacked his lips when he was done.

She never told anyone. The worst part was that the encounter had stirred a sensuous awakening—the way the light touch of the antennae and tiny legs of crawling cockroaches might cause involuntary pleasure despite your disgust. It left her with a buzzing urgency she had to extinguish. That night, Katia rubbed herself raw in the dark against the upholstery of a green chair until she reached a painful climax. It burned when she tried to pee. Her mother brought her to the clinic, where the grey-bearded doctor poured a whole bottle of iodine on the lesioned skin.

"Every time you think about fiddling with yourself, remember the iodine," he scolded. The scorching burn seared into memory the ugliness of her first pleasure. She still thought about it now, at sixteen, as she watched boys fawn over Lena. Why did Lena get velvety stares and versed confessions of love while Katia's lot

was Uncle Lev and mean neighborhood boys calling out, “look at that giraffe!” as she passed? Lena was breaking the law and enjoying herself unpunished, immune from alcohol poisoning, free from fear. She danced standing on the couch in her miniskirt and fishnets as if on stage, seemingly oblivious to the devouring eyes around her. Would anyone even notice if Katia left?

Katia slipped away. Arriving home early she opened the door to her mother on the phone, pacing the linoleum kitchen floor in slippers. Irina Pavlovna put a finger to her lips.

“Western conspiracy or not, shouldn’t we be careful, just in case?... No, it’s not that... Yes, of course faith in the Soviet... I told you that we can’t meet you at the parade. Katia’s not feeling well.”

Katia loved the May Day parade, when Khreshatik Street became a sea of red banners. The crowd carried you forward and you were sunlit, beautiful. Of course Lena didn’t believe in Communism anymore.

“Yes, the best to you too.” Irina Pavlovna hung up the phone, her face crumpled with worry.

“Mom, what’s going on? Why’d you lie that I’m sick? We can’t go to the parade?”

“Katen’ka, Papa heard something at work... I tried to tell Zina. But she won’t believe me. And now I don’t think we should tell anyone else.”

“But what happened?”

“Maybe an explosion. You know that power plant where your papa did safety checks? Wait until he gets home to explain. Don’t talk to your friends about it, okay?”

When Oleg Alexandrovich got home he said nothing. After changing out of his clothes, he let the water run for a long time in the bathroom as Katia heard him gargle and spit over and over again. She waited patiently, but once he emerged in a house robe both parents disappeared behind their bedroom door, half-whispering and half-shouting:

“... children of Party officials... out of Kiev... gas masks... radiation levels.”

When they came out Katia’s father handed her a brown pill.

“Take it. It’s iodine.”

"Iodine?" Katia asked in horror, "Is it gonna burn?"

"Why would it burn? Just take it."



Katia's parents still went to work, but she stayed inside with the windows closed. When they came home, their clothes disappeared and they took turns washing in the bathroom. The iodine pills became a daily ritual along with their dinner of tinned sardines.

"It's safer from a can." Katia's dad interrupted her when she tried to complain.

After dinner, they turned on the evening news program, *Vremia*:

Despite the attempts of Western media to spread false rumors about the death toll after the accident at the Chernobyl Power Plant," the announcer declaimed with such calm that Katia thought her parents might be paranoid, *"we are here to tell you that it was not thousands dead, as the bourgeois channels of mass communication have reported, but only two. One hundred and ninety seven people have been taken to the hospital, and forty-nine have already been released after undergoing observation.*

Oleg Alexandrovich clenched his jaw, mirroring the announcer's stone-faced expression.

The next morning Katia woke up to her parents fighting again.

"But you're senior physicist! Everyone else is getting their kids out!" Her mother no longer restrained the volume of her voice. "We have to wipe down our plants! We can't open the windows! What if she gets sick? What if she can't have *children*?"

"Irina," Oleg Alexandrovich, always called his wife Irina, not Ira, when he thought she was being unreasonable.

"And your mother's stupid dacha," Katia's mom erupted, "it's now part of the evacuation zone! How is she enjoying her fresh berries now?!?"

Making as much noise as possible, Katia walked out of her room.

"Everything will settle." Oleg Alexandrovich hissed.



Katia felt herself growing bigger in isolation. She strained against the walls of her room, overflowed the sides of the bed. Any day her head might burst through the roof or she might pop like an overinflated balloon. For three weeks, every attempt to go for a walk was thwarted by an exasperated lecture from her mother.

"There's radiation, Katen'ka. Radiation in the air, on the trees, on produce, in the water. I saw workers in hazmat suits spraying the grass on my way home from work. Do you have a hazmat suit, Katia? No!"

"But *you're* coming and going..."

"And I wish I could stay inside where it's safe. You should be grateful!"

On Saturday morning Irina Pavlovna carried a metal basin they used for scrubbing clothes, filled to the brim with water, into the living room.

"Ma! What are you doing? You're splashing everywhere."

"Babushka Svetlana found a shaman. She insists that we let him charge our water with positive energy. Over the phone. He already magically removed radiation from the currants, mushrooms and carp that your papa told her not to eat. But his *mamochka* thinks she knows better." Irina's eyes were red from not sleeping and her hands shook as she slid the basin closer to the phone. "The world is falling to pieces but I still need to kiss up to that..." she trailed off, unable to find the right words to describe her mother-in-law.

"A shaman? Mom, Seriously?"

"Yes, an authentic Siberian shaman, an 'extra-sense' as your babushka calls him, science be damned. Go get your father so he can witness this. Maybe he'll finally believe me that his mother is crazy."

The phone session with the shaman only brought more shouting, all the positively energized water spilled, leaving a puddle, which everyone just stepped over, too spiteful to clean it up.

But a few days later a third cousin from Moscow agreed to "evacuate" Katia for the summer, greatly improving her parents' moods. Babushka credited the shaman. But Katia felt a hollow loneliness thinking about how shy and uncomfortable she'd be living with strangers in an unfamiliar house. She longed to see a friend. Alyona and Sasha were already in Crimea; Zhenya, whose dad was a general, somehow

managed to get to Berlin. That only left Lena, whose party had left a bad taste. But these weren't normal circumstances.

Lena picked up the phone on the first ring with her unceremonious "Yeah?"

"Hey Len... It's Katia. Strange times we're living in, right?"

"Yeah, but hey, it's a Western media conspiracy, so everything's just great."

Katia ignored the sarcasm. "So listen, I'm leaving for the summer..."

"Well, of course, precious! Which of the elite sanatoriums will you be gracing with your presence?"

Katia stretched the telephone cord so it would reach her room and closed the door. She could hear Lena's father coughing in the background. "I'm staying with a relative in Moscow. But I wanted to see you before I left." She hoped her tone didn't sound artificial. She really did want to see Lena, even if she hadn't been her first choice.

Lena remained silent for a minute. "Sure. But you didn't even say bye after my birthday party."

Katia swallowed down her annoyance. Of course Lena would make her apologize. She always had to get the upper hand.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't feeling well."

Her queenly pride seemed satisfied. "Well, there's this get-together tomorrow. Write down the address." Katia was shocked at Lena's casual tone and almost asked her whether she was afraid of the radiation, but changed her mind. Lena would only mock her worry.

Katia made no sound as she pulled on her black market jeans with deliberate slowness. She planned to come back before her parents woke up and sleep off her tiredness on the train to Moscow. She tiptoed toward the front door in her socks, shoes in hand. In the hallway she'd have to be quieter still. The neighbors' walls were thin. Her heart beat furiously. People like Lena got away with everything; Katia wasn't lucky like that. She'd be caught and punished. But her terror mixed with a new feeling of excitement. She had never snuck out like this before. Katia, the tallest girl in school, felt magically small, scurrying past locked apartment doors like a mouse emerging from its hole after a long winter. She snuck by the Voronovs' apartment, where it always smelled of burning onions, soft-pawed her

way down the stairs. Katia almost cried with joy when she stepped outside and felt a breeze on her face. The malachite leaves of the skinny birch trees trembled under the light of the streetlamp. The world had miraculously remained intact, just as it was!

After taking the metro five stops, Katia walked to the intersection she had scribbled on a piece of paper. The “get-together” was in a clearing near an abandoned construction site with speakers propped up in trees. Katia had only heard of such parties. They were held in secret places, found only by word-of-mouth, often broken up by the police. She spotted Lena in the distance. Her slender arms and legs were gracefully twisted in an iconic film pose, as she talked, blowing cigarette smoke into Vadik’s face.

There was no death here! There was no invisible threat, no radiation, no illness! What had she been hiding from for the past three weeks?!? Katia again wanted to shout with joy, to rush with love at the teenagers clustered together. “I am here! I am one of you!” Maybe she wouldn’t go to Moscow after all. Maybe she could spend all summer with Lena, staying up late, picking mushrooms and berries in the woods, go fishing with Lena’s dad. Her parents wouldn’t approve, but she was old enough to make her own decisions.

“Lena!” Katia shouted as if reuniting after many years.

“Katyusha, Katyusha! As I live and breathe! Don’t run away so fast this time!” Lena winked, a condescending gesture that used to anger Katia, but now she laughed and promised to stay.

Lena brought out a crumpled pack of Prima. “Cig?”

Katia put it in her mouth, dreading Lena’s cackle when she’d inevitably begin to cough, but she didn’t seem to notice.

“So, How is life? Are you all packed?” Lena drunkenly yelled above the din of the music blaring from the speakers.

“Yeah. I guess so.”

“Yes, you go to Moscow and I, Elena Ivanovna Primakova will be left here to rot.” She squinted theatrically into the distance.

“Maybe I could see if my dad could...” Katia knew that her father’s connections had proved useless and even if he could help, he probably wouldn’t.

"It's not just this Chernobyl shit." Lena continued like she had been rehearsing, "After we're done with school, you'll go to PhilFac, become a professor just like your mom, right? Your husband will be some nuclear physicist who buys you a mink coat for your anniversary. And what will I do? Squeeze out a few pups and keep my husband drunk enough so he forgets to beat me? Work in an assembly line?" Some boys were arguing loudly on the other side of the clearing. Katia heard a bottle break. "It doesn't fucking matter. Nothing changes in this country." Lena stomped out her cigarette.

"You could be promoted to factory foreman. Women have a good chance for advancement," Katia mumbled.

"Oh yes, I forgot, we're living in a workers' paradise. Look, some people are handed everything in life and others get a whole lot of nothing."

Lena's self-pitying speech felt to Katia like a show of power, like another trick to make her feel like a loser even in this, even in suffering! She longed to punch back.

"C'mon! You have nothing? Guys fall at your feet. Do you know what I wouldn't give to be you just for a day? For instance..." She searched for the words to tell her Uncle Lev story.

"You wanna be me?" Lena interrupted, "Want your older cousin to teach you how to squeeze your cunt so it doesn't hurt when he pushes in?"

Katia retreated into a stunned stutter.

"You've...? With your cousin?"

"I didn't do much." Lena looked away, distracted by the small explosions of firecrackers in the grass.

"Idiots." she muttered and turned to face Katia, speaking quickly into her eyes with drunken earnestness. "Listen, if you squeeze inside while you breathe out quick you can control the pain. And use sunflower oil if the bastard gives you a moment before he rams into you."

"But Lena, did you tell your mom?!"

"My mom? She'd kill me. But don't worry, I always wash under with vinegar afterwards. The old bitch won't ever catch me knocked up. But those assholes," she gestured to Vadik and the rest of the wolves, "they would never touch you. They

know what's allowed and what isn't. Just like our wise leaders know who can be left behind in a cloud of radiation and who's too precious."

Katia wanted to ask Lena why she was here, why she hung around with dangerous boys, why she didn't try harder to protect herself. Seeing her grave face, Lena burst into laughter.

"But I didn't mean to bum you out! Life's for the living! C'mon, Vadik has some beer. Be nice to him. You know his brother is dying in their apartment. He fought the reactor fires in Pripyat."

Katia wasn't sure what his brother's tragic fate meant for Vadik. Was he contaminated too, covered in invisible radioactive dust? But after two gulped-down beers, which she accepted at an arm's length, her caution turned to tender concern. She asked him to dance and they swayed as he watched her from under a furrowed brow. His lupine stare seemed tamer, almost sweet. What was it like to be "pushed into?" It couldn't be that bad. Lena was always trying to sound so tough. She put her hands on Vadik's hips and pulled him close, shocked by her own boldness, feeling him hard against her leg. Blushing, she asked for another beer. But he didn't try to get her alone and Katia hoped that Lena was right, that he wanted her, but considered her off limits. Lena said goodbye in her usual sarcastic tone, but there was a broken note in her voice that Katia dismissed as drunken weepiness.

Katia took the metro home, still smelling of Vadik, of sweat and ashes. And after, satisfied by her bravery, satiated by her adventure, which now seemed like a dream, right before she fell asleep in her soft, clean bed, hours before she'd be transported to safety, Katia thought, "I shouldn't see Lena anymore. She's kind of a slut. But I should remember her advice for my wedding night."

Blackout

One day Dan will get a haircut, leave town,
and start to go by his middle name,
but right now we are fourteen.

He wears cargo shorts and his hair,
perfectly parted in the middle,
falls over his ears. We are standing

behind the gas station off Route 124,
my hands on his throat. He can breathe
but I'm cutting off the blood to his brain.

Beside me, Matt watches. A minute ago
my pulse pressed against his palms,
then the world disappeared. I was startled

when it came back. *What happened?*
I asked and both of them laughed,
Dan said he wanted to try.

When his eyes close, I loosen my grip.
He slides to the ground, his whole body
trembling like tall grass when an animal moves.

Elevation

It was spring in the mountains but we couldn't see it
The tiny dust overhung in the air and the late snow came to take it down again
It was spring in the mountains but we were all down here

Down here already it is dry
The sun shines flat down like a yellowed palm

When do the crocuses come up into the air like they broke something
And left it

What shapes does the lake ice make when it melts
From what edges and when does the center crack

In September there stood some dry grass in a clearing and a bull moose
What would a bull moose (for example) do in the spring

In the spring the animals emerge and head to water
To a canyon where nobody is but rocks

Down here the mind is best at things that melt
Although it isn't very good at those even
Always outdone by the things that flourish most when nobody sees them

The lace of water intended for no use
The animal bounding because nobody sees

Mastodons of the Late Anthropocene

Our milestones are no longer marked by American flags—

This was how the newsreader put it, which made it more opinion than news, or maybe propaganda, but the distinction had long ago ceased to mean anything. In any case, it was hardly an insight. First, the landing on the dark side of the moon, then the cloning of humans, and now this, livestreamed from the resurrection laboratory in Hangzhou: the birth of ten female mastodon calves. *This*, said the newsreader, *is the true dawn of the Chinese century*. All we could do was watch in silence and consider the meaning of de-extinction.

We felt that morning that our concerns had become small, our jobs insignificant, in the new scheme of things. But, since everything had changed and also nothing had changed, we got into our cars and went to work anyway.

We had imagined a different world for an event like this—hyperloops and sexbots and flying cars, at least—but the endless traffic jams that inched along the Southern California freeways were exactly the same as those of our grandparents. The drones that stirred the blade-loud skies were only there to deliver our purchases, monitor the wildfires, and track the narrow orbit of our movements.



Later, after work, once the children were in bed, we made what sense of it we could. What did it mean that there would be mastodons walking the Earth again? Was it a return of the past or the arrival of the future? Ten-thousand years had elapsed since their kind last strode across a colder planet, lumbering among earlier versions of us, the creatures that would both exterminate and one day reanimate them. This, we couldn't grasp.

Why had this happened? Turning our uncomprehending faces to one another, we asked: Why did we do this? To solve the problem of human aging, it was said. To address the changes in the climate, it was said. To cure disease. We couldn't see how mastodons would do any of these things, because we were still struggling to remember the difference between them and woolly mammoths and we almost had it, but then we didn't.

Perched on our couches and barstools, in our cubicles and cars, we tried to understand what it meant that the DNA had been harvested from pristine mummies chipped out of Siberian permafrost. We tried to understand that the Hangzhou resurrection scientists had begun the de-extinction by using CRISPR-Cas9 to edit the genes and splice mastodon DNA into the Asian elephant genome; that they developed hybrid embryos, ten in all, in artificial uteruses until the embryos were ready for implantation into Asian elephants who roamed a grassland habitat built just for them in the Donghu Subdistrict; that it had all been done in secret until now, when the blood-slicked, reddish-brown calves were extracted by doctors in sunshine-yellow biohazard suits. When the weekly power cut came and there was no more news to take in, we were grateful to sit, eating breakfasts in the hush of unvoiced thought. We were silhouettes against a furious, bloodstained sky. The ashfall struck the windows like soft, black snow.

In the daytime dark we found ourselves wondering: What did the elephant mothers think when they looked into the ancient eyes of the alien daughters they had birthed? But no one ever mentioned the mothers again. We forget and we forget and we forget.



By the time the power came back on, the mastodon calves were a global phenomenon. It was a show now, like everything, but this one was new and better. Always streaming, watchable at all power-on hours, it took us away from our cares. Our mouths eased back into childhood smiles to see those downy russet ears, the candy-white nubs of their tiny tusks, the shyly entwined trunks in sisterly embrace.

Who wouldn't feel a renewed sense of possibility? Who wouldn't dream of all the other things that might be restored? It hardly seemed to matter that it was China who got there first. The mastodons were for us all: the answer to a question we hadn't dared to imagine asking. They were such a gift, we hardly knew what we had done to deserve their return.

They were given one of those fanciful collective nouns: a thunder. Hence the name of the show, a joint Chinese-Russian venture: *A Thunder of Mastodons*. It was a chronicle of life among the calves once they had been relocated to what was to be their permanent home, a vast stretch of Siberian tundra north of the taiga belt. This was how we came to know them by their Chinese names, all of which translated to poetic words for memory and hope and dreams, and so forth.

We were delighted by the quirks of their prehistoric personalities, so like our own. We recognized something of ourselves in them and through them we saw the world anew, in all its strange and terrible beauty. Our children were captivated by their antics, as were we. They frolicked and bumbled; they bassoon-bellowed their long forgotten music. We watched them drink synthetic elephant milk from comically giant bottles. We binged the show and asked for more, and so came the mastodon cartoon and the breakfast cereal; the plushies, the pajamas and lunchboxes, the home gene-splicers. Even the handlers charged with the calves' care became celebrities. We watched through night vision cameras as they slept among the animals, and we marveled when they introduced the adorable monsters to what the world had become since they had last looked upon it.

In the midst of our fires, between our augmented reality shows and our individually narrowcast ads, we yearned for their frozen world. Whenever the power was on, we watched the live feed for glimpses. As the calves grew bigger and began to wander, there was mostly nothing to see, only that horizonless white ground, punctuated by scattered tents and atmosphere-recording instruments, but we would watch for hours anyway, mesmerized. No traffic, no gas stations, no light pollution, no buildings, no flames. Just windswept snow and jutting pines, cloudless azure sky. The sound of the arctic winds drowned out the blare of our flame-lit rush hour. And now and then, the unaccountable joy of seeing a bit of movement: a scientist adjusting a tentpole, a distant mastodon stamping

the permafrost in search of food. In our long, snaking lines for provisions and fuel, we felt we understood their sense of urgency. In our work-life spaces we sometimes lay our heads down on our desks and fell asleep to the sound of crystalline air moving through the boreal forest as the mastodons expelled their primeval cries into the whiteness.



There came discoveries. The mastodons were highly intelligent. They seemed to have a sense of themselves, and they were teachable. They learned to count and distinguish simple shapes. Painted looping abstractions in primary colors and developed a complex language of sounds their elephant descendants had never learned to make. When they were trained by their handlers to trumpet in unison, trunks stretched to the sky, we listened to their eerie chorus on our satellite radios as omnivorous flames licked the remnants of Malibu and Silicon Beach.

For a time, they restored our sense of wonder. For a time, we loved them for this, loved them with all our hearts. Until we didn't. Adorable as toddlers, the mastodons grew alien and strange in their unlovely adolescence. They aged rapidly. Their burnt-orange peach fuzz coarsened into unruly tangles that hung off them like Spanish moss and then began to fall out in great clumps. They were left looking ravaged and raw. Their tusks became pitted and chipped; some protruded to fearsome proportions with abnormal curvatures that prevented the animals from foraging for themselves; some broke off entirely. The creatures grew enormous and hideous, gaunt, sickening on the food that we gave them. Their youthful playfulness turned to irritability, then to rage. Although the resurrection scientists assured us otherwise, it was obvious that something had gone wrong, some error deep in the code. And so we had to look away. There was only so much we could take in.

This is what our Morning Shows called compassion fatigue. We were already so exhausted—what could we do for them, so far away as we were, so helpless to attend to our own calamities? Arthritic, their bones unexpectedly porous, the mastodons plodded along gracelessly on their brittle frames, teetering like

beetle-eaten redwoods. Deranged by hormonal signals we could not interpret and aggressions older than civilization, they tore at the ground and leveled the trees and turned against one another so viciously that they had to be chained in separate pens and given tranquilizers that made the luster vanish from their obsidian eyes. The pain or loneliness—we couldn't tell which—made them bellow and screech. There were protests and condemnations. Soon the livestreams were transmitted without sound. Shortly after that, the show was quietly cancelled, most of the cameras were shut off, and few aside from the reanimation rights activists spoke of the mastodons anymore.

In our lifetimes, we had seen so many others go extinct: the polar bears and chimpanzees, gone. The snow leopards, mountain gorillas, and orangutans. Gone. The giant pandas and rhinos. All of them gone, reconstituted only in augmented reality overlays of things that used to be here. Our own numbers have dwindled, too, although we are still too many by far. But in all this time only the mastodons had been brought back, and now they were dying too, once again.



Our children, though long weary of their mastodon toys and the animals on which they had been modeled, would sometimes tell us that one of the thunder had died. The first to go, Xīwàng, consumed by a prehistoric form of tuberculosis, made it to the top of our social networks. Her corpse was given a state funeral and incinerated on a towering pyre. Conspiracy sites insisted the Chinese had kept samples of the pathogen for nefarious purposes.

It was different for the next two, Mènghuàn and Mèngxiǎng. They did one another in, when Mènghuàn broke loose from her enclosure and gored her sister through the eye, receiving a fatal kick to the skull in return. There was no ceremony to mark their end.

Deaths four through eight were merely depressing and inevitable rather than spectacular; unlucky creatures who succumbed to wasting diseases, neuropathies, fatty livers, heart failure, cancers of blood and brain. Their disappearances, like the winking out of impossibly distant stars, barely registered on our datastreams.

The ninth, though, was another matter. This was the baby, the last born, Fúxiǎo, who had developed dementia and rampaged, killing her handler and two members of a Chinese television crew that had been filming for a doomed reboot of the show. Fúxiǎo's end caught our atrophied attention because it was trillionaire Yevgeny Rodchenko, the Russian-American CEO of BioMarket GenEquities, who put her down himself. The newsreaders said he paid a cool billion for the license to do the job the old way—stone ax and spear, the whole paleo bit—and the rights to her remains. The euthanizing was livestreamed, and it drew as many viewers as had once witnessed the births. There was the predictable controversy from GND party candidates, but, in the end, it got little traction with a scandal-numbered electorate and didn't keep Rodchenko from taking the White House. Polling even suggested the mastodon hunt was decisive in the Heartland. This was the newsreader's opinion and so it was ours as well.



Our new president gave the preserved body of Fúxiǎo back to the Chinese government as a gesture of friendship, a new era of transpacific partnership. It stands there still at the Hangzhou De-Extinction Institute, a monument of human achievement that we saw again when the resurrection scientists, in partnership with President Rodchenko's BioMarket Laboratories, announced they had brought back the sabre-toothed tiger. We aren't supposed to call them tigers, because that's not accurate, but good luck making us say *Smilodons* instead. No, these are tigers, savage and superb.

Our wearied hearts surged with forgotten pride when we first saw them, a whole streak of the reanimated beasts, and we thought, despite ourselves: Maybe they got it right this time. All the force of life itself coiled in the muscles beneath the tigers' glistening coats. Their roars full-throated, audible from a mile away. The sabre-tooths are a wonder to look at, streamed to our new windshield displays, tackling caribou. A welcome distraction, after all, from our skeletal automobiles lining the freeway, our movie stars' mansions carbonized on the smoldering hills.

So, can we really be blamed for mostly forgetting that Jiyi, the last surviving mastodon, lives on still? Is it our fault that we barely noticed when she was released from captivity, let to wander the northernmost reaches of the tundra to live out what remains of her unnatural life? We have the fires to worry about, and the question of potable water, and the adjustment to our insect proteins. We can only feel so deeply about a fraction of the world at any given time, our neuroscientists tell us. The sabre-tooths command what little we can spare of our precious batteries and bandwidth.

We agree that the tigers are a more fitting remedy for our national mood than the mastodons ever were. That they mirror our surviving hopes. That their freedom from fear inspires us as we migrate through this endless coil of dying engines to the unburnt sections of our cities. To watch them is an act of solidarity, a statement of faith in our remarkable ingenuity. And when the lights go out, there are only a few of us who still sit in our darkened spaces, gazing into dimming devices to watch Jiyi as she shambles, solitary, across the whitened wastes, looking for another one like herself. If our children find us, see our eyes filming over and ask us what's wrong, we say, "Nothing, sweetheart, don't you worry," though we really mean that we, too, know what it feels like to be the last of something.

Winter Windows

Winter windows.
We're snowed in
by a nomadic,
white tribe.
People go
but the sky remains.
For man is naked and fair,
the sole unit
of suffering.
And as he is naked and fair,
and alone
he will be an endless reproof—
fated, prostrated,
incarnate.
Snow or ash,
distance or smoke in my eyes.

Trying to Sleep

Trying to sleep. Don't open the window.
The birches on the hills,
like prisoners in rags,
wander and beg
in their eternal dreams,
and tell us everything will pass.

Don't open it. They'll flow
into the room like an ocean
of fallen trunks.
Wherever you might flee (just between us)
they'll find you reflected in the mirrors.

Nothing will pass (Solomon),
not your glance backward, nor the long
trial of exile. But there's the sun
rising over us,
and the roots covering the hill.

Returning to the Ashes

Returning to the ashes,
there's nothing else to return to.
To the north for a moment, but really
forever.
The clouds float as they always floated.
Betray as they betrayed.
And still at dawn they carry off
the anonymous and the named.
The grasses
are shot through with poppies,
hands cut by poppies,
cut out of my memory
the beads of flower heads.
O, doctor of glass vials,
don't begrudge tranquility.
I just need a drop
of the gleam of the evening star.
Nothing else.

SICK4SICK

I think my lover's cane is sexy. The way they walk
like a rainstorm stumbles slow across the landscape.
How, with fingers laced together, our boots & canes
click in time—unsteady rhythm of a metronome's limp
wrist. All sway & swish, first person I ever saw walk with
a lisp. Call this our love language of unspokens:
We share so many symptoms, the first time we thought
to hyphenate our names was, playfully, to christen
ourselves a new disorder. We trade tips on medication,
on how to weather what prescriptions make you sick
to [maybe] make you well. We make toasts with
acetaminophen bought in bulk. Kiss in the airport
terminal through surgical masks. Rub the knots from
each others' backs. We dangle *FALL RISK* bracelets
from our walls & call it decoration. We visit another
ER & call it a date. When we are sick, again, for months
—with a common illness that will not leave—it is not
the doctors who care for us. We make do ourselves.
At night, long after the sky has darkened-in—something
like a three-day-bruise, littered with satellites I keep
mistaking for stars—our bodies are fever-sweat stitched.
A chimera. Shadow-puppet of our lust. Bones bowed into
a new beast [with two backs, six legs of metal & flesh &
carbon fiber]. Beside my love, I find I can't remember
any prayers so I whisper the names of our medications
like the names of saints. Orange bottles scattered around
the mattress like unlit candles in the dark.

Hyperpastoral, *or* Shepherd's Pie

When you enter a room out of need, they are all
the same: the field an antechamber, the kitchen
a narrow sky where you peel the carrots in long,
thoughtful strokes—stem to taproot—just as you

towel the wet shine from an empty leather sling,
or slide your neck down the clawfoot tub's cold
rim as moonlight bleats above the tepid water
and sheep roam in the living room. Forgotten:

the one who tends them. Still, the vegetables must
be cut, then softened with heat like pliant muscle
or loose skin. The water, too, must be bled. He is

gone, the meadow empty. Still, you kneel for Him,
mouth full. Is this not devotion, how you summon
his face from lack, and all the ways you serve him?

Hyperpastoral, or Shame & Retribution

1.

Aidos finds you as a child in the meadow
where you braid red-hearted daffodils into
a crown of gold petals and twirl, smiling.

She never leaves. All you feel is the caress
of her white robe on your cheek like a fever,
her heel on your throat. *Restraint makes a boy*

good, she says, watching from the room's dark
corner as he names you *faggot* because you ask,
because here you like this. A good boy knows

only his own chagrin, all that he could never be.
Here, you crawl on all fours, naked as the sheep
who return to the field trembling, feeling once

more the loss of oneself, the cloak of the body
you thought you'd grown into cut away. Yet
you go back to him, never recognizing yourself.

He shears your tresses. She drapes over her
bare shoulders a fine woolen shawl, weaves
into her locks your silken hair, your crown—

blooming. Any warmth here must be earned,
or taken like the lamb for his tenderness, and
you bleat when he comes for the rest of you.

2.

Who's to say if I become my own reckoning
or if a daughter of Night guides my hand and,
in turn, the blade? He finds me in the kitchen,

stomach full of medicine I do not need, arms
sliced open. If I am a different boy, the son
of a nymph and river god, I might rise from

what I've spilled of myself on this tile floor
a white daffodil—its yellow heart traced
in blood. But there are no flowers here; this

blood cannot be made beautiful. My father
cries in the living room while I'm taken to
the ambulance. I am too hungry, never full.

I taste what isn't mine, always carrying on
and within my body the marks of other men.
There is no panacea; each remedy demands

another: the food, the men, the pills, the knife.
Hesiod conjures Nemesis from Nyx alone.
My mother, too, is all shadow now; my father

lost in her dark absence. On this summer day,
I try to go to her. When I return, every knife
is gone, each tile wiped clean by his hand.

Intimacy

Light enters through a separation
in the blinds. Can I make a man of dawn
or wholly see him in his slatted apparition?

I wake. I look. I name my condition
morning, or how to live when night is gone.
Light enters through this separation.

In the blinds' roused sway, I ration
a memory of daybreak: sliver of fawn
made whole in his slatted apparition.

If I look outside rather than within,
I am young again grazing on the lawn.
Light enters through the separation

in the blinds, shadows its serration
on hollowed sheets. Is the blood drawn
or holy in its slatted apparition?

Loving a man is all attrition;
he blinds me so he can slay the fawn.
I was never whole, just a slant apparition.
Still, light enters through our separation.

God

*So we, being many, are one body in Christ,
and every one members one of another.*

Romans 12:5

*And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off,
and cast it from thee.*

Matthew 5:30

At my beloved's burial,
I can't see his body.

Only carnations. I hear
your name and my beloved's

in the same sentence though
I didn't come to meet you

whose men are everywhere,
calling themselves your *body*

and singing about their own
beautiful *blood* which I've never

seen but am willing to bet isn't
as beautiful as my beloved's

jacket, full of his skin cells
and waiting to reincarnate

from a goodwill medium rack.
In the room of my beloved's

body, no pictures. Only
carnations. They spill over

his box like misplaced grief.
Underneath them he dances

with strangers at a gay bar
two hours from town.

Unbuttons his uniform
in a desert barrack an ocean

from town. Leans on his Red
Bronco smoking through relief

in the middle of town where
too many exes are watching

the club door. Lord,
in the room of my beloved's

body, your men won't admit
the fact of his body.

In the foyer, one room away,
a decade-old portrait of him

in pearls and a black dress,
his expression proof

your goodness doesn't extend
where it counts, the stories

I hear about my beloved
as mistaken as your miracles.

Lord, when I loved you,
I didn't know

so many of your men
would exile so many of us.

When I was ten, I wrote
volumes of letters addressed

Lord and warned classmates
about the rapture and called

televangelist hotlines for assurance
the devil's lava wasn't waiting

beneath sleep. Later,
my beloved took your side

in debates about your existence.
If he was right, you owe

him a confession. Tell him
how your body wouldn't take

your advice, how its right hand
severed an entire demographic.

Look at him, in his new eyes. Say
what you can redeem, and won't.

There is Love at Home

That first night Star entered the Upper Room, Divine had long black braids on, swinging behind her knees, and she was wearing combat boots. Star had just turned fifty that weekend, and funny, it was her sugarbaby F who told her to go upstairs, just to see what else was there. Star told F about the rejection stories she'd heard in whispers about this room in particular, how stunning women of all ages had been turned away by whoever was behind that door. But the babe was adamant. "The worst that can happen is that they'll say no, abi?" she asked, nudging Star up the stairs. "That's it. This is a building with endless rooms, the adventures go on for longer than time. If that room rejects us, we'll find another. What's there to lose?" Star shrugged, knowing F had a point. "Loosen up jare!" F teased. "You're alive. Act like it. Life is for the living o!"

And so what choice did Star have? This was their deal after all; exactly what she'd signed up for—in exchange for that bright spontaneity F came to the table with, Star offered her financial stability and a seat above the law. "If you ever run into any trouble," she promised F, "I'm just a phone call away." She meant it. The only time F used that privilege, when some Lagos Big Boy slapped her friend outside Silverfox, a blue Hilux arrived on the scene within minutes with sirens blaring, MOPOLs hanging out of the sides, guns loaded on their shoulders. They lifted the man off his feet and treated his fuckup in less than five minutes. He limped off into the night with a bleeding, beating mouth. Star gave that instruction from the comfort of her bed, a number dialed calmly from her iPhone. It only cost her a few seconds. "You're never going there again," she told F afterwards. "Silverfox is for commoners anyway. You're with me. They na naked babes you wan see? I know a place."

Star and F had only been outside the door of the Upper Room for seconds when a pea-eyed camera winked at them. The photos went straight to a printer on Divine's desk inside, which groaned softly before releasing them with a proud exhale. The bouncer pressed a finger against her right ear and nodded, receiving instruction. She turned to Star and F, her chest built like a safe. Star imagined

jewels asleep inside it. “She say you shoul’ wait,” the bouncer said. Star tried not to fidget. None of her girls had ever seen her take No for an answer. Just a few nights ago, when Angela was praising her for paying her Masters’ tuition and getting her pregnant sister a three-year US visa in a few days, she’d said, “Mama di mama. What can’t you do? After you, no be you? You fa, you can only ever get two answers in this life: yes and yes, ma!” Angela’s excitement rushed straight into Star’s head. She loved the praise even more than the sex they had that night. Say yes, she found herself thinking now. *Say yes.*

Divine had always been able to tell who she could work and play well with just by looking at their photo once, so it didn’t take too long for a short voice message to come back through to the bouncer. “Just one,” the bouncer said, her voice a few octaves higher than they’d expected. “You, on the left.” Feeling flushed with confusion, Star held both her arms out to determine where her left and her right were, and immediately registered how stupid it was. It’s just: it’d been a long time since she felt chosen based on her looks alone. F fidgeted beside her, trying not to feel terrible. Star turned her head from F to the bouncer and back again, as if she might find permission on one of their faces. Star felt nothing like herself. “No, it’s okay,” F said finally—not to Star, but to the awkwardness in the air. “I’ll go find something else to do.” Star stumbled forward feebly, and the door clicked open.

Divine liked her women with age in their legs, with plotlines in their forehead and cheeks, and darkness behind the eyes. All the better, if like Star, they wore their hair short and barely used makeup. She wasn’t after beauty, really—which was what most of the women who sought her out got wrong—she was after women who already knew that pain could be a tunnel and that pleasure could be the warm light at its end. Women who could understand without too much hand-holding that life was neither flat nor straight, women who whimpered at the sight of leather and lace, who moaned at the lick of heat on skin. Women who were open to learning that sometimes shame locked in the body even for decades was not theirs to keep, that it could be submitted, regulated, rewritten into power with a safe word. Women who’d get that scenes like this were about freedom, about honesty, about transcending lockedness; scenes like this were about negotiating lust with full intention; about, as she had said to a friend once, “bringing the

darkest of one's desires to the surface of the skin." She knew, just from looking at them, which women liked to be gagged or strapped or slapped or choked. Or all. She knew who didn't mind crying if it meant *getting there, getting there*. She saw that something in Star—creased curiosity worn well between crow's feet, a subtle exhaustion from carrying a weighty life alone, a low-humming desire to give it all to somebody else—and already, all of it was telling, all of it was story.

"There you are," Divine said as Star entered. She was sorting through a black leather bag, her back to the door. Star noticed her bootlaces undone, her calves sweetly toned. "Wondered if you might leave with your little girlfriend. Sometimes, some people do that when I don't pick them both." Divine said *little* with the candid curtness of someone Star's age, which made Star chuckle. "What?" Divine asked, turning around for the first time. "It's true." She was wearing lip tar, that black moody lipstick with a distracting nightness to it. Stretching her hand forward, eyes steady on Star's, she said, "Divine."

With Star's name still stuck to the sky of her mouth in awe, Divine added, "You can introduce yourself after. Two minutes. Pick the props that'll make you the wettest." Star fell down some floors inside herself. Who had talked to her like this before? "You heard me," Divine said. The room shuddered as she cocked her head towards the giant shelf.

Star got on her knees to look and thanked her chi that she came in alone. A whip. Hot wax and cold honey. A collar. Clamps. A blindfold made out of heavy black silk. "Greedy," Divine said. "I like you already." Star knew too, from that intimidatingly tall energy translating onto Divine's body from the inside, from how at ease Divine was in herself, that she would have to make this a small religion. Divine squatted next to her, calling her close. "Now tell me. What do you really, really want?" she asked. "It's your show now."

Later that night when Star made the mistake of looking up at Divine from down where she was kneeling with a remote-controlled vibrator fitted into her, Divine leaned forward while upping the speed, and said, "don't be looking at me like I owe you mercy or some shit. I'm not your fucking mummy." Star landed so hard she cried. A hard cry. A belly-falling cry. A worry-drowning cry. An a-whole-me? cry. But there was something about the shape of the resulting shame

that did something to Star's eyes, that stretched them out sideways, that broke her sight open and gave her a new way to see herself.

Now, weekends and weekends later, Star asked for a scene. Stood in front of Divine in the dark room with her hands clasped in front of her crotch, she said the go word. The room collapsed outwards and puffed smoke into the air. A cool blue light went under Star's weak defense and licked between her thighs. It had the coldest tongue she'd ever felt. Divine watched on. Not far behind Star, a woman yelped from where she was suspended in the air by ropes woven down from the ceiling. Her legs were spread-eagle, but it took a red light cutting through black smoke for Star to see slivers of her, limbs forming perfect planes. Star felt herself shudder. Divine swept her eyes around the new expanse and Star followed, watching the women who'd just appeared reaching for each other, skin against skin, hands swallowing space. She'd chosen this: a room with collapsible borders framed by women who could watch this entire thing openly with their eyes glassed and thirsty.

One of them, a stud standing alone, caught Star's stare and pinned her there, then touched herself, two fingers gently sliding. Star would have been able to catch her breath if Divine's palm hadn't come from behind and wrapped itself around her neck all sweet like that. Her mind spun, time melted. It was a new now and she was sitting down, Divine's knee was working against her. There was a playground-bully-meanness in Divine's voice when she said, in front of all the watching eyes, "Ah ahn, you're excited already? I thought I trained you better. Look at your mates. No. Look." Star could hear small deaths stacking behind her, tumbling out of women's mouths, and the thought of it alone: of being in the same room as other women meeting themselves again for the first time, tightened her skin.

So, her breath cutting quick, the whip against her thigh, the upside-down and inside-outing, hot wax leaking into her clavicle, a metal spoon resurrecting on a flame, honey drooling sideways, Divine's tongue flashing and disappearing, Star's mouth opening quick, her begging pouring out of it before she could reel it back in, the whole of her goosebumping, Divine levelling her to her knees, pushing the chair out of the way, Divine saying, "What? You want to come, you want to come, that's why you're crying? Aren't you a big woman? Don't you run shit out

in the world?” Star felt her shame cartwheeling, shapeshifting, reintroducing itself wearing pleasure’s mad face, coming closer than close with the rudest mouth; a known beat forming between her legs, wet sliding down the inside of her thighs; Divine’s fingers slipping over her torso like an almost-there, then lower, to that soft flesh between hipbone and trouble. Divine kept her eyes open, focused, stayed on Star’s. Star blinked Divine gone. And then back. “Someone smells desperate,” Divine said, squatting between Star’s legs. She never missed this part: this teasing like she just might taste it, even knowing she’d never go there. But it didn’t stop Star from pleading, pleading. She was here for this pain, for the torture. With the blindfold knotted, a waterfall of black silk tumbling behind her head, Star is all tenses—future on past on present jamming hard, grinding in a stack.

“Please can I—” Star tries, but Divine shut her up with the flex of her jaw alone. Focus, Divine thinks to herself as her head attempts to float off. *Keep your mind here.* Divine knows what this kind of sternness can do to Star; where exactly the rejection will flood her. Star shrieks and Divine lifts her by the chin. Seeing the fight on her face, that whole wide trying, Divine knows where Star is speeding towards, where she is trying to drop to—teetering on the edge, trying to stand on it, to wait on it, to listen for permission to free-dive all the way, because everything in the world feels wetter than wet, slipperier than sane.

“Don’t you dare,” Divine says. This time, her voice comes out sounding shaded, like a deftly darkened sketch of something sinister. She knows that when she talks like this, words sweetly wrapped in risk, it makes her subs want to sit on her voice. “Fine,” she says, turning a soft edge. “One for me then. And then one for whoever will be waiting for you at home.”

“Who... who... who do you... think you are?” Star managed, trying with everything as Divine undid the blindfold. It was that fucking smirk, grinding her gears.

Divine scoffed at the dead-end in the question. In any life she entered, she landed like a world. Even days into the week, with Star in her all-glass high-rise somewhere working, she knew Star would come back and back to this exact second where she let go and her body sang: *Divine, Divine, Divine.*



Daisy spread her palms over Divine's back, slick with warm oil. "Ayanfe mi. Mm? Love of my life. Are we dom-dropping over here?" But she knew the answer already just from how Divine's body was laying. Massages were one of the ways Daisy took care of Divine after a long weekend working. Though she almost always came away feeling exhausted herself, she knew that for Divine, the crash was different, that after work sometimes, on especially strenuous days, it took her hours to peel that storied world off her body. She needed to wait for it to cool, for the glue to shift so she could feel her own skin again. "Let me help you with that," Daisy said.

Divine chuckled softly with both her eyes still closed, which usually meant that she was still inside-tired, past flesh, past blood and bone, past marrow. During play, when a scene was going the way it ought to, she saw herself the way the women saw her, like a towering force, larger than the building itself. After scenes, she was used to holding her subs' faces and talking them back up, setting their feet back on reality. *It was a scene*, she'd say, *you're okay, here is some water, what do you need?* It was part of her job, but it wasn't easy either to grow that unstoppable—adrenaline doing a march parade through your veins as you try to stay attentive to cues. How many times had she reminded clients that they could say the safe word if they wanted to, knowing fully well that they'd swallowed it on purpose? Making it look easy was part of the job, but it was difficult work to stand as custodian and front-rider of someone else's pleasure, to be the one in whose hands another person's desire took form or woke up, only to have all that power crumbling back to flat inside her afterwards, to have to remember all the ways she was still unsafe in the world; to have to bring herself back down to herself.

Daisy's fingers worked Divine's back and then rested under her shoulder blade. Divine moaned and nodded in approval. "Here?" Daisy asked, leaning forward and kissing her neck, fingers pressing in.

"Mm. Yes please."

In a matter of days, they'd have been together for three years, and it had always felt like this: soft hands and deliberate care, a love that flowered open and rivered

both ways in equal measure—nothing they would have anticipated when they met at a private party in a New Money Honey’s beach house. Like any Lagos night in a private location, everyone there was wearing their nightlives on top of their real lives, and Divine was just walking to the bathroom when she got leashed by a scent.

“Bleu de Chanel?” she asked, walking in its direction. She’d know that scent anywhere, and part of knowing it was obeying it.

Daisy turned around, already smiling. “Correct,” she said. Being as visible as she was to anyone with good eyes, she was used to Lagos babes and their thirsty lines. Most of them bored her. But this person standing here, with her burgundy afro and her endless legs, made her want to listen.

“I’m good,” Divine said, sensing the invitation and moving closer.

“You are. I have to give it to you.” Daisy went up close as Divine was laughing. “Let me too guess. You’re wearing uh...” She pressed her nose against the curve of Divine’s neck. “Gorgeous, by God?” Stroking her invisible beard, she balanced against the wall. They both burst out laughing.

“Wow. So you’re really just... Jim Iyke? As you fine reach, you’re still dropping dead Nollywood lines on babes?”

“That was more like Tony Umez actually. At least Big Jim had some bars.”

It was easy from there. The rest of the party melted into an unreal. “I have a confession,” Divine said as the night grew. “I’ve seen you before.”

“For real, or is that another dead pick up line?”

“For real. It was at Afropolitan Vibes.”

“Which one?”

“Burna Boy.”

“You were there?!” Daisy covered her face. The night was coming back. It was on brand for her to lose home training wherever there was good music. That night, her friend Rose had posted the video of her on stage dancing with three other women—sweat and joy dripping down their backs, crowd going insane—on her Instagram story. The next day she had twenty new follow requests. “Oh no,” she said.

“Yes.” Divine laughed. “And yes, I saw.”

When Daisy asked for it, ‘Divine’ told her her real name, not the one she wore at work or under the harsh sun outside, but the one her mother had named her

with love; and 'Daisy' mentioned her true name in return. When a year from then, they decided to take Agbon's offer, they chose each other's names between touch and soft kisses, grip and sweat:

You'll be Divine.

And you'll be Daisy.

But all that was still a far future away. "Ok let me confess since we're telling the truth," Daisy said, drunk already. "I saw you too. You were wearing a *Family Guy* shirt with Stewie on it and you had locs still. You were at the back where they sell food and drinks at some point, abi? I saw you fighting the woman for your two hundred naira change."

Divine's eyes watered from how hard she was laughing. "I actually remember that outfit, and to be honest, a girl needs her two hundreds ok? They add up."

"But wait," Daisy said. "If you saw me, why didn't you talk to me? What if you never saw me again?"

"I saw you right after they'd just stolen my phone. You know Nigerians. Plus, I wasn't sure if you were... you know?" Daisy did know. Back then, she wasn't visible like Divine. People always assumed she was straight. Even when she was in places with just women, the ones with eyes for just women still couldn't see her. Was it invisibility? Was it opacity? She didn't know but it broke her heart often. She was constantly editing herself to show more. But right now, it was both too late and too early to start processing that.

So, "sorry about your phone," she said instead. "As for the other thing, how does that even matter? If I like you, I like you. And I like you." She shrugged. "But I get sha."

Divine backed down the rest of her drink. "Tell you something," she started. "The first thing I thought was, She's so beautiful. The second thing I thought was: she likes women, does she know she likes women?"

Daisy leaned forward and found Divine's mouth. *I know*, she was telling Divine, *I do know*. Before Divine, Daisy had never dated a woman seriously before, even though she had kissed more than a few of them. But it didn't take more than that night to *know*. It was easy from there: dates rolling over into dates, nights into mornings into nights, which wasn't to say that it wasn't difficult to work through—

with Divine's fear of commitment and Daisy's fear of losing herself in love, they clashed at the heart in the way large lives do when they first meet—but for the first time in both their histories of running from love or withdrawing their faith in it, weeks in, they found themselves standing still and facing another someone who wanted to do the same.

"Are you sure?" friends used to ask all the time at the beginning. "So this is it? Last bus stop tings? You're sure you're not moving too fast?" And their answers were always the same, despite the fear and its mouth packed with chattering teeth: Yes. Yes. Always yes. Even now, they still bonded in the same ways: flooding the kitchen with groceries, spending a full day cooking and sharpening each other's tastes. "All that work I grew up doing in the kitchen," Divine said once, standing in between Daisy's legs as she sat on the island, "wallahi, she didn't know it then, but my mother was raising me to feed you."

Every weekend now, they hosted friends and fed them food they'd made from scratch, new dishes they were trying, and the house swelled with a raucous, redeeming noise. The week just gone was a friend's birthday, an Italian night at their request, and they made carbonara, lasagna, and drank Moscato into the morning. The coming week, Divine planned to make golden puff puffs tossed in brown sugar and the banga jollof with a recipe she'd gotten from Kitchen Butterfly's blog. It was a joyful life they'd made, a life with real friends who knew their real given names and the meanings behind them, a circle and a community, a family and a fortress—a home far from old violences, wholly accepting, possible to lean into and rest.

When Divine started to feel the ground of her mind again, she rolled over and kissed Daisy thank you. And then her mouth started running—*How are you feeling? What should we do today? What should I make us for brunch? How's your back?* It was a thing she did when she was worried she was taking too much space, when she was trying to hide something under her tongue.

"Shh," Daisy said. "It's okay, just stay here. What's happening? Tell me. Something's happened."

Divine bit the inside of her cheeks until they stung. "It's my baby brother's birthday today. He turned fifteen. And well—"

“Oh no, baby. I’m so sorry.” Daisy understood the feeling too, of having a new and safe life where you were seen and still missing the one in which you were raised, where love and acceptance were contingent on how good a masquerade you were. With her own family, the rejection was ongoing and less overtly violent, but it was still there. She could still go home, sure, but only as long as she played along at the family dinners and agreed to go on dates with people’s sons who she never planned to see again. There was a tacit agreement under it all: *you can keep being a part of this family, you can keep being your parents’ daughter and sister’s sister as long as you never name yourself. Do what you want, but never say it. Or else.*

She knew the subtext: *Love expires the day you say it.* Already, she could approximate how much it would hurt to be cut off like that. Unsure that she could ever survive it, she rotated between her two faces, kept her two lives, even if one was all ash and tall smoke. “I’m here,” she told Divine, her voice warm with reassurance. “Ife mi, I’m here.”

Divine felt herself tear up. She shook her head and closed her eyes. “Thank you for taking care of me,” she said. Three years in and she still cried in surprise sometimes when she realized the solidity of this thing, how well and how often it could catch her weight, how horizonless the kindness was. She still found it hard to wrap her head around it: how she could find a person who wanted to dedicate herself to her in this same world where people had taken and taken and taken from her. This same world she’d tried to jump out of before. She laughed at herself, at the thoughts sliding through her mind. “Hard guy hard guy, eh?” she said, teasing herself aloud. “But small love now and I’m crying.”

Daisy lay down next to her and closed her eyes. She was thinking it too: the sheer luck of it all. Divine being everything she never even dared to wish for: rest outside of work, a good home outside of an office, no barking, no manipulating, no hiding. Just her face, next to another person’s face. A normal life and an extraordinary love.

“Should we nap?” Daisy asked.

“I was going to ask. Feelings are a high right now.”

“I know. Wanna meditate?”

“Yes please.”

Sure, they both knew all the things that hurt underneath a good life didn't just disappear because you were now loved. But it helped to see each other. And they did. They saw each other so far past the pain that no matter how hard their families tried to unsee them, they could never be invisible again.



Daisy wound down the pole to Dawn Penn's "No, No, No," with her eyes on one of the new faces in the booth. There was something about the song that felt prophetic in the moment, like a word right on time. She was working the Blue Room as usual—a room set up with twenty private booths facing the stage so that none of the customers could see each other. Safety reasons for some, and for others, it was so they could feel special, like this was a show for them alone—VIP behavior. Six out of those twenty booths were wide enough to accommodate couples, and all of them were full. In each section, there were small card machines, a menu of drinks and drugs, and a digital album of strippers who could be requested to perform private dances as the women watched the stage. The woman shifted from Daisy's gaze and blinked several times, like this was a dream she was trying not to forget, like that might convince what she'd seen to never dissipate.

In a sense, everything inside was a dream, the club itself a not-quite real. The Secret Place was built into a sixteen story neon-lit high-rise that went underground on Friday nights and didn't come back up until Sunday evening. The club provided a place for every woman who needed it to feel good, to feel something, to suspend the hate outside and cave into pleasure instead, to be part of a world with its own working economy. To be in a building where even the buff bouncers—six of them, linked at the entrance; others inside—and the 'mallams' changing bundles of naira to dollar bills, were women. Every weekend, they gathered there by the sheer force of slow-cooked desire, a hefty membership fee and a long screening process.

Inside, there were glow-in-the-dark body painters, glow-in-the-dark toys and accessories on sale, music pounding through the air, bodies in latex, six-inch lethal heels, a nude silent disco, everything pointing sexward as if by Monday the

club wouldn't go back to acting like one of those random skyscraping apartment buildings with no tenants occupying them. In daylight, the building dulled itself by itself, moonlighting perfectly. But that was the point: these weekend nights were life-transforming, suns rising and setting at the same time in different lives, contrasting worlds eclipsing, a sweet escape. The club was where older, rich and powerful women came to relinquish the control they had in their daily lives, and younger women came to gather the power they were used to being stripped of. Money, pain and pleasure changed hands here—big names on all fours begging for bodies that weren't theirs to have; their youthful fantasies standing at a height, overlooking them with calculated control. All of this done like time was running out, like time wouldn't wait for anyone. Because it wouldn't.

The working girls never deluded themselves into thinking the club was real. It only took stepping outside to remember that the club was pretty much a shiny hallucination, a what-could-be experiment. They knew better than to trust women whose real faces and names they'd never know. They knew to move with caution because the kind of women who could afford to pay for this service had to be women in top tier careers or women with old money. A good percentage of them were havoc-wreakers during the day who did or unlooked terrible things in high places. Some were even hellbent on making freedom like this impossible for others like them. They wanted it just for themselves, in the dark. Underground. And why not? Where's the fun if everybody gets to have it? Where is the thrill? Being that untouchable could make you forget you're human, could monster you out of you. So, one of the first things they were taught in training was: "You're from the same country yes. But you're not under the same law. This thing we do here is illegal for you. Not for them. Nothing is illegal for a rich Nigerian. Remember that when they make you promises. Remember: your client is not your friend." Daisy always held that in her mind.

When she got on all fours, arched her back and swept her eyes across the room, she saw women crossing and uncrossing their legs, trying to resist the damp pooling between their legs. One of them locked eyes with her, stirring white powder into her whiskey; another was doing a thick line off a stripper's breast with a £50 note. The one who'd looked away earlier was wolfing down the suya she ordered as fast

as she could to avoid watching Daisy. Daisy ran her fingers down her front and watched the woman reach back for the menu. She never avoided their eyes; their faces were the most rewarding part. Her favorite kinds were women like this one who fenced their lust with remorse, who lined their desire with shame. This one, Daisy guessed, was probably thinking of her family, her precious children in their beds and the husband who ‘loved’ her at odd unfulfilling angles—always at a half-past no or a quarter-to-yes.

They were all looking for something anyway. Some of them came in so one of the girls could talk to their child-selves and console them, some showed up for an hour of cuddling. Some queued outside the door for a room with The Priest and confessed all sorts of sins, crawling on small rocks, begging for forgiveness. The girl who worked that room had to sign an NDA—Daisy didn’t envy her. Some just wanted to talk. Sure, there was the wild sex one would expect from a place like this: in threes and nines and sixteens, bodies getting tangled in the mix. But the point was, everybody came in seeking something, hoping to go somewhere new. There was a room for everything. Daisy could give them what they wanted in this one. She knew how to do just enough to make them drool from their mouths and their pockets.

Later, by the bar, Daisy was smoking a cigarette, naked save for her latex boots, when someone spilled a drink on her. She turned and it was the woman with the shame-eyes. “Sorry, I’m so sorry!” Daisy, being in the mood she was in, speedthinking, too far back inside her own head for her own good—what with white lines and small trees and ecstasy talking to each other in her body, all of them making a cacophony, a giant audacity in her—responded by saying, “I only accept my apologies in cash.”

“Sure,” the woman said, leaning closer, searching her suit pocket.

“That’s your naira pocket,” Daisy said, straight-faced. “Put your hand in the dollar one.” The woman chuckled.

“My mistake,” she said, pressing dollar bills into Daisy’s hand. She watched as Daisy tucked the notes into her boots. Behind her jacket, the woman’s stomach was falling but what was the harm in asking? “Now can I please get some time to talk to you?”

Up close, when the woman's mouth was still, Daisy could see that she had three faces overlapping. She wasn't keen, just based on this, because she already knew how the script went. She didn't show up at The Secret Place to earn anyone's heart; she already had one in her care that she'd guard with her life. Still, most of the patrons couldn't wrap their heads around pariahs with this much power and this little shame, pariahs who weren't searching for a rescuer or a savior. Incurable vagabonds. "There is something bright in you," they were fond of saying. "You're not like the other girls. Let me take care of you. You will never have to worry again." Daisy always refused. For months, she'd been dealing with a tough nut called Ruby who always showed up looking like she could be somebody's husband. She could have most things, based on the landscape of her arms and back alone. She had a husband once, she explained, but it didn't last for a reason. *He could not satisfy me, not because he didn't try oh, but because he's a man.* Ruby was clear what she was willing to give up for Daisy if Daisy would just give up this life; if she'd stop spinning lust. She made a different offer every weekend. *I can pay you more than what you're getting here! We can move to Canada and no one will ever find us. Fine, a car! Ok, a house!* But for Daisy, all of this was work and business was business and money must be made and leaving this place on Sundays never made her stomach fall the way it did theirs, because there was love where she lived. The thick kind, the staying kind. They were the ones who hated the lives they were towing, and it showed, it wafted off them as they walked.

"May I?" the woman still asked, sensing Daisy's hesitation. Daisy almost pitied her. *No one, she thought, resists loneliness as aggressively as a person who's ashamed of their own heart.* But she was still in work mode, which meant she still had her work mouth on with the fangs and the biting wit built into it. Claws in place too, for the ones who liked to waste her time with small talk. Left to her, she'd be at home in bed with Divine already, watching reruns of *Desperate Housewives* or *The L Word*. But she looked at the money in her boot, at the mint notes winking and nodded her permission.

"Five minutes," Daisy said.

The woman shifted on her feet before starting. She looked startled, like she couldn't believe her luck. She was probably going to ask a silly question about

nothing, Daisy thought. So, before the woman opened her mouth, she let her mind float back to the two IJGB babes she saw earlier. She was passing them on the stairs when one said, “My god I didn’t realise Nigeria was so gay. What the fuck?” And her friend, the one with the neck tattoo said in her American accent, “Oh no. This is all just acting. It’s all just work. We’re the only ones who get to see this...” She lowered her voice, “Because we’re like, rich rich. But dykes and like... queer folk in general aren’t allowed in the country. It’s against the law. Most of these women you see probably have husbands.” Daisy played out a different scene in her head that she wished had happened instead of walking past them. In this version, she walked up to them and told them that a thing being forbidden did not make it extinct; that in fact, ‘bans’ in general only tended to create black markets. Besides, desire was itself and could morph anyway. Being from a country where *dykes* were ghosts and shapeshifters for a living, for a life, meant that shit didn’t work like it did abroad, but that didn’t mean it didn’t work at all because people still found ways to love each other in nervous conditions. “I’m one of them,” she was saying to their stunned faces, lighting up in her mind’s eye. “I’m one of us. We’re ghosts because we have to be, because our lives depend on passing and being passed by. But we’re ghosts who see other ghosts often, who hold them and hug them and fuck them too in our bedrooms, doors closed. We love them too. Like you. Here, they call us mad. We go again. They strike us down. We choose again. They black off our lights. We learn the dark. We don’t die. We never die. We only love harder. We only see sharper. Three seconds, I can appear and disappear at will, I can look like a not-sin, a non-outcast. People like us don’t need a club full of women to find one who’ll go down if we look right. We know our signals. We know our codes. You’re not only real when everybody can see you.”

The woman in front of Daisy cleared her throat. “I guess my time is up,” she said. Daisy hadn’t even heard a word before that. “Anyway,” she continued, “this is my card. My church is always welcoming new members. Tomorrow, 10am.” Daisy looked at her watch as if time was a thing that worked in here. The watch stared back with its round face and frozen hands. Daisy smiled bitingly and said, “You better hurry to church then. You never know with places like this. Might even be Sunday already.”


The woman stood like ice. Daisy waited to see if this one might lunge at her like that one from two weekends ago who when Daisy said, “don’t touch me” had responded by yelling: “I’m old enough to be your mother! I’m not your mate! And I can do as I like. I’m a paying customer!” Daisy had replied to her calmly, “Ok ma, so why are you now touching me?” The woman lost it, threatening to relieve Daisy of her job. *Rude little brat! she said. Rude little brat! She has no home training.* But because power is never really by mouth, when the woman asked for a manager and Agbon showed up, she was the one who got escorted out. Agbon pulled up her details in a matter of minutes. “Mrs what?” she said to her assistant. “Ehehn. Mrs Kolawale. Whatever. Halima, take her off the system. That woman has issues.”

The Secret Place was Agbon’s brainchild and she made it clear who her priorities were. “You’re the prize,” she told the girls often. “They’re here to see *you*. They’re paying to see you. Anyone who disrespects you can leave.” But this woman seemed different, calmer. She stepped away from Daisy, walking back on herself, her palms in front of her in surrender.

It was this attitude that made Agbon hire both Daisy and Divine on the spot. She met them having drinks at the Eko hotel poolside and invited them in as guests for just one night. Agbon pitched her mission to them: something had to come full circle. So many rich women had the desire and the money, they just needed somewhere to spend it. The girls she hired had the bodies and the skill, they just needed somewhere to show it. So Agbon reasoned: demand, meet supply, meet Economics 101. Within a year of working in The Secret Place, most of them could afford apartments of their own.

“Why did you make this place? What is in it for you? How do we know we’re safe?” one of them asked Agbon once at dinner. She explained why she started the place with her partner—someone she had to fight to be with across time and realms, across rules and lifetimes, across fear and rules. And even though they existed in the world in a separate way from most people, everyone on the table knew how hard it was to choose something you were not allowed to. “To live freely in this life,” Agbon explained, “you need security. This is our way of making sure you’re also able to build the lives you all want. To choose a woman in this city and keep your life at the same time, you need to be able to afford rent in a safe place.

Now, you'll find that most of the women who pay for your services are angry and envious, because at certain levels, public scrutiny is a cage. People envy them at that stage, but they're not free." She emptied her glass of red wine. "No one is really looking at us that closely, so we can do what we want in our own homes. They don't have that. You can't after a certain point; it's the price you pay. But they're angry at the wrong people. Just face your work." Someone asked a question about safety. "Don't worry about safety, this land that we're on is owned by an Untouchable. The name on the C of O alone will gag the police. But even if any of the women we ban from here for misbehaving want to go far enough to involve them, where will they find the owner to arraign? Can they arrest a spirit? This is Lagos, don't forget."



Divine filled the room with music and the thrum of the speakers rose from their feet to their chests, like a tall bath being drawn. They were standing chest to chest against the wall. Daisy's eyes were closed, and she felt submerged in the sound as the beat wrapped them closer. "This is our club," Divine said against her ear as she increased the volume. Her voice moved with such a sturdy assurance that Daisy could stand on it. Always, Divine's voice was this for Daisy: a call back to shore, a safe walk on moody water. "This is the best club in the whole of Lagos. Even The Secret Place no fit. There is for work, here is for pleasure."

They both knew they were going to end up here when Daisy came out in black Fenty lingerie. But the private dance in between—Divine tied to the chair and Daisy dancing to Janet Jackson's "Would You Mind" and Beyonce's "Dance For You"—still flabbergasted them both. When Daisy freed Divine's hands, they unhinged the world from its axes, touch by touch, their bodies harmonizing in shock. Now, their hearts were still beating against each other, skin against skin, only seconds removed from that heaven. John Legend's "Made to Love" started playing. Daisy let her hand rest safe inside Divine's. Seconds in and they were a slow dance forming. "This feels so good," Divine whispered, her core still tight from before.

"I know, Daisy said. "I know."

To start the day, Divine had made a full English breakfast-in-bed. They exchanged presents and then took a long bath talking about what they were thankful for as they shaved each other's legs. Divine helped Daisy wash her hair and condition it after. Daisy shaved Divine's head. Now, it was early evening and raining outside like an angerstorm. They both loved the rain. Three years and still, every time they held each other, it felt like before the first word, before the first kiss; way, way before the first I love you, when neither had earned the other's trust but wanted to, wanted to. Three years and here they were still, hope shining in their bodies. It was all a far cry from before they met, when they were each determined to stay removed from their own bodies, when they kept mistaking themselves for unhealable wounds, when they were each still living like one.

"Show me why I always go home with you," Daisy said. They stole the line from the club, where women asked them the inverse of it often: *Show me why I should take you home*—as if it was on them to prove it; as if they would ever even agree. Daisy never corrected them, because what did their fantasies matter held up against this reality? The truth was, where it mattered, she never had to audition for anything. So they made a tradition of *Show me why I always go home with you*. Whenever one person said that at any time, they both had to hold each other in a hug, cheek against cheek, neither of them performing anything but hereness, but presence, but listening to the other's body, moving in tune with their steps. "If they ever ask you why I go home with you," Divine told her that first time they tried it, "I'll tell them it's because you're you and you're here, alive; because you're mine, because you tether me to me. That's all you'll ever need to do, do you get? You have nothing to prove. All you need to do is breathe and I'll choose you again. There, see? I choose you again."

In her anniversary card, Daisy wrote: *If they say we don't exist, that they can't see us anywhere except in rotten corners, in perverse bodies, how come I can see you and hold you and you're holy; how come I can love you and home you and you're there, in flesh, in my mind, in my blood; how come you're the softest place I have ever relaxed in, how come I keep waking up in this love and feeling rested? What else to do now then, when a love like this finds you? What else but praise? What else but dance? And what else for them to do now, as rain beat hard against the window? What else but each placing*

a palm on a lover's chest, saying thank you to her maker as she says thank you to your country; both thanking both for making them into these people with a bold faith in the unseen, for teaching them—by necessity, by difficulty—how to rebel with both faith and sight; how exactly to use their hearts and hands if one day they grew up to be women who risk their lives to stand on the horizon. Women mad enough to see and hold another woman; to love and touch another ghost.

Near the End of the Century

It's 1987, by which I mean
 I've been born,
 though barely, while in the heart
of Harlem strutters peck down
 a runway & speakers
 fray on about love:
park benches with no streetlamps,
 examination rooms
 with no rubber bands
to bulge the veins blue. Time is elastic:
 either it's 1994, or it's 1980,
 or it was just last night,
it makes no difference: someone slips out
 the back screen porch
 of their parents' home
for the last time, someone leaves behind
 everything they know
 about how this will end
to the future to stand outside
 those warehouse doors,
 bass crushing their chest.
They might be a vision, then,
 if they could enter. They might
 reapply mascara in the greased
bathroom mirror or duckwalk
 the runway, their hands
 two birds bickering above
their hair. They might make out
 with a ghost, they might

twirl like a disco ball, spraying
this room & everyone in it
with flecks of lit glass
until the host, clacking fans
with both hands, declares: *The old world*
has passed away—
Behold! All things have been
made new. But for now it's not yet
the end of the century,
by which I mean
they have no reason
not to believe her.

Blue Spruce

I admire you most for obvious reasons: picturesque
against a rocky ridge, fabulous

in a fir coat. Stiff, unmalleable quills
that break the skin on my face

when I pass through to your center. During the aurora borealis,
the dark broad spear of your body a brunt

against its show. A squat thing so sturdy, surely
you must be unsusceptible

but you are susceptible still
to the quadrilateral aphids, the red blusters of mites,

the pineapple gall adelgids, and the needle miners
that hollow out your fascicles and cause them to coalesce

into one sticky mass. *Coalesce*: sweet word,
all hiss: to come together, to become

one body, one entity, webbed & conjoined:
that which we call a marriage for you is a disease.

Out of Violence into Poetry

Water, real or illusory, shimmers along
the desert horizon.

Oasis: early 17th century word
via late Latin from the Greek,
perhaps of Egyptian origin.

Egypt, a country of vast sand
on which wet and fertile
exceptions nourish life.
Also: peaceful area or period
in the midst of troubled times.

Thus, place becomes time in the blink
of geography's eye.
Double helix embracing itself
as it rises in our throats:
see-saw of intuition singing loud.

Let me satiate your thirst, feed
your hunger. Satisfy mine,
if only because we are
conscious beings standing together
in this dangerous century.

We are reduced to small gestures:
reflected in a gaze
or touch of a hand,
oases of light where we may move
out of violence into poetry.

Voice

Voice said what it was born to say
even when high school teacher
father and husband
took pains to contain it.

Pains: exemplary, decorated ones.
You wouldn't know it though.
Impossible to go against
such force of nature.

Voice snuggled between the sheets
wouldn't eat its vegetables
sounded high-pitched
sometimes landed with a thud.

But its name was Voice and it grew
to meet every challenge
fill every space
build victory in your mouth.

Tongue Seeking Solace

for Roberto Tejada, as I ponder his
Still Nowhere in an Empty Vastness

A word is uttered. Its echo dances
through time
and cannot be taken back.
Its silhouette expands
across this map
filling every secret corner.

Breath explodes against rock,
early morning dew
beads upon your lip.
You taste salt
as your tongue seeks solace
between your teeth.

This word was meant to follow
in the wake of that.
Feeling remains
the better part of mind.
We grab as much
as we can hold.

Ancestors drag us back
in *cuenta regresiva*
from that stone notch
where the sun's dagger
meets a future

we do not dare to dream.
Can we inhabit simultaneity
of time and place,
imagine
parting the waters
one more time
to reach where we have been?

Songbird

I sat in front of this laptop for 3 hours this morning. Staring at old white ladies. I was the only brotha. The only Black person in the meeting, for that matter. But I didn't mind. It was for some training. I've been entrusted to teach English and Language Arts to some Massachusetts middle school kids. Remotely. All the while stationed in Southwest Virginia. Technology, bruh. I'm lucky though. I get the chance to shape the future for \$150 a day. Train future AI script writers. Editors of intergalactic literary magazines. After two hours my brain was fried. I couldn't take in any more information; log into this site for curriculum, this one for attendance, this one for grades, this one for connecting with parents, and so on. The last hour of the Zoom call I muted myself, disabled my video feed. I went black. Looking up at the ceiling, hoping it'd break open and arms of sunlight would lift me up. I had to get out. Walk the streets. When the training concluded, I grabbed a hoodie and ran out the door. It was a beautiful-ass day outside. The sun was shining like a 24-karat gold medallion. Something I would have rocked on a fake iced-out chain in my youth. Once, I worked a 10-hour shift at Taco Bell in order to save up for a \$200 canary-yellow stoned cross. I thought I was stuntin'. Couldn't tell you where that cross is now, though. But it was a blessed day. A few angelic clouds swam across the sky. Chipmunks raced out of bushes. Squirrels got rich with acorns. Birds ripped through the air. My girlfriend's AirPods blasted music. St. Panther's "These Days," to be exact. A banger, if you dig soul music. She reminds me of Amy Winehouse. The raspiness of her voice. The deep messages about love and life embedded in every bar. Rest in peace, Amy. I miss you, girl. Sometimes I think I could have saved you. If I'd been given the chance, I would have loved you like no one else could. Don't we all think that shit? That we could've saved the life of the troubled celebrity whose art, in some ways, saved us? I'm musing on this thought as I walk towards the golf course up the hill. In fact, that's its nickname, "The Hill." There's a spot up there where you can witness a close-to-sweeping view of the Blue Ridge Mountains. They look as if they're floating on the horizon. It's a perfect view. Majestic. The incredible

sight looks like a famous landscape painting. Something that belongs in the Louvre behind red ropes. It's a reminder that the earth itself is a treasure. As I walk the paths of the golf course, I remember reading about my man Edward Gaines. Gaines, a Black man who grew up in Hampton Roads, my mother's hometown, loved the game of golf. As a child, Gaines would hit gumballs with a stick designed from chicken wire. Because of Jim Crow, he wasn't able to play on local courses. He could only caddy for white golfers. In 1951, Norfolk enabled Blacks to play on the green of its Memorial Park Golf Course. Gaines began competing in tournaments. Winning many of them. "You should see our home," Andrea Gaines, his widow, said. "Trophies are everywhere." I called my old roommate from Ole Miss—who supposedly saved so much money over the last few months that he's taking a four-month vacation—to say what's good. "I'm in the Delta," he said. "Why?" I said. "Volunteer work for a non-profit," he said. He's trying to get into grant writing. He's trying to write a grant for the school children in the area. Apparently, in Quitman, Mississippi, 89% of the population do not hold Bachelor's Degrees. The town is offering free rent for teachers to move in and make a difference. He said, "It's one thing to throw money at an issue. It's another thing to be on the front lines, you know?" "No doubt," I said. There's a piece of me that wants to be down there with him. On those front lines. On my way to Ole Miss for the first time I couldn't ignore the poverty. The shabby houses passed down from generation to generation. The old, rusted farm equipment being eaten by nature and time. Folks congregating on porches packed with junk and heirlooms. Most of them were my people. Kissed by the sun out in most of those fields. Bathed in moonlight during midnight flights. It'll take a lifetime of work to fix the racial inequities down there. Everywhere, actually. But I'm glad my friend is setting aside a few months. He had to go. So we got off the phone. I kept walking. Passed the "Volvo House." The owner has a cluster of antique Volvos and BMWs lined up outside. One of which I would've thought about jacking if I was my young and dumber self. It's a 535iS BMW. A true foreign joint. If it were up to me, I'd throw some phat spoked-wheels on that joint. Cruise the mountain roads with the windows buried. Bumping some James Brown. I passed a couple of people walking their dogs. A heap of

belongings no one wanted. A cheap hockey stick lying on a mattress. Made me double take. Made me remember how I'd strap pillows around my shins with belts and play goalie while playing street hockey with friends in my old apartment complex. I wanted to grab that stick, suit up, get a game going. Instead I made a right on Main St. Watched some dude deliver a package. Knock on the door then hustle to his car. I turned off down a side street where a little boy was avoiding me on his scooter. He kept glancing back. The kid wore a Mohawk helmet, riding up and down the declining asphalt. When he rode by, I nodded my head, Wassup? He did the same. Up the road a white girl was running toward me on the same sidewalk. Before we met she bolted across the street. I try not to trip on that shit anymore. We're in a pandemic, right? Right. Chalk it up to the pandemic. I should have yelled out, "I 'preciate the social distancing!" When she passed, she looked like the chick that lives a couple doors down from my townhouse. I thought about Mr. Rogers. "Won't you be my neighbor?" As the melody played in my head it occurred to me that this was a Mr. Rogers-ass neighborhood. Front doors left unlocked. The mouths of garages wide open. Old white folks sipping tea on front porches. Every lawn was manicured, greener than the greenest green. Women were tanning. Watering plants, gardens. Men were up the road balling out on the golf course. A neighborhood, where one morning, passing an elderly white lady with a walker, she said, "It's good seeing someone else out here." I started to tear up. I started to cry a little bit. It's not every day that a Black kid from Highland Springs, Virginia, gets to live in an area where you barely hear sirens, where you can walk for miles and not worry about getting jumped or robbed. Or another brotha trying to test you. Like the brotha in Richmond who said, "Fuck you nigga," when he almost hit me with his car while entering into a gas station. He brandished a middle finger. I don't know where it came from, but I replied, "Peace and love, mane. Peace and love." I digress. There's just something about walking in peace. Something about executing an ancient form of transportation. Meditating in motion. Gifts from the world entering and exiting your life. It's freeing. Therapeutic. When I got back to the crib, I zapped on the TV. *Baby Boy* was on FX. It's one of my favorite movies. A solid Black film. Jodi, Tyrese's character, is outside of a South Central

L.A. convenience store claiming, “Today I begin a new life. I am the master of my abilities. And today will be a great and beautiful day.” The speech goes on. It’s some deep shit about being Black, broke, and changing one’s life. I keep watching until the scene in which he buys liquor then gets jumped. He told the clerk beforehand, “You know me. One Alazet a day.” He then steps outside and gets jacked. Young gangbangers take his bike and drink. They jump him. Stomping him out in front of the store. Then the dude who jacked his bike rolls back up. “Don’t nobody want yo bike, homie.” This made me thirsty. I wanted a cold beer. I wanted to slowly sip that cold beer on my back patio. So I got up, snatched up my wallet and dipped out. CVS was just up the road. But then I got to thinking. What the hell would I look like carrying a big can of beer in a plastic bag? Might not be a good look for me. But fuck it. I set out. A Blacksburg Transit bus powered passed me. I wondered if it was the one that knocked the driver side mirror off my Nissan Titan. Thankfully that driver stopped and called the police given the accident report left under my windshield wiper. They paid me like \$100 for the damages. I get to the corner where I turn and see a cop car go by. I chuckle. Keep walking. But when I get to the CVS something is wrong. I forgot my damn mask. Something in me said, Bruh just go in. Real quick. But I couldn’t. If someone like me doesn’t follow the rules, things could get tricky. And plus, another brotha had walked out with his four kids. I thought about the kids. I thought about the future. I turned around. Walked back to my truck. Threw some oil in it—I ain’t drove it in a minute. I hoped that the cop wasn’t posted in the cut somewhere. Scheming. My inspection sticker expired. And driving with an expired sticker, in Virginia, is illegal. I need to get my baby an inspection. But I don’t know. Something about riding “dirty,” riding “hot.” I told my girlfriend that the other day. She said, “What’s ‘hot’ mean?” I said, “Illegal.” It’s an adrenaline rush. Doing some shit you know you ain’t supposed to be doing. It’s a thrill. I didn’t see the police car so I thought I was good. I rolled up in the CVS lot. Figured I’d get a big-ass can of beer. Something plentiful. I went straight for the pint of Modelo Especial. That was all, in that moment, I wanted in my life. I figured I’d make a quick exit. Ring it up. Head out. Down it under the sun. But no. This little old white woman had gone full blown grocery shopping. She

bought a shit load of cashews. A box of pads. Towers of canned cat food. Paper towels. And more nuts. I mean this woman loved these joints. I was pissed. If my damn Modelo gets warm, I'm blaming yo ass. I peaked in her purse. The heads of crisp \$20 bills were poking out. If I was younger and dumber. She gets to the register. She can't find her CVS card. She digs into the mess in her purse. I felt the sheet of frost on the Modelo start to evaporate. Minutes later, she finds it. Thank God. Then she and the clerk, I guessed they knew each other, carried on a conversation about cholesterol. About how they need to keep an eye on their cholesterol. I don't know. By this time I was looking at the mini cooler of some drink called Bang. The company's symbol, a lowercase "b" shaped like the crosshairs of a rifle, reminded me of my days in the Army. I miss being in the military. Miss my battle buddies. RIP Specialist Stennis Butler. Butler, who was from Mississippi, died while I was on deployment in Afghanistan. He used to call me "Songbird" because I was always singing soul music. Humming melodies while mopping the halls of the barracks. Crying out renditions of R&B hits as cadences at 6 am. Or carrying a soothing Amy Winehouse tune during smoldering days on the range. I miss you, bruh. Then the old lady goes, "Well, it was good seeing you. But also not seeing you. You know, with these masks and all." I laughed a bit behind my mask. She had a point. Nowadays, all of our identities are somewhat concealed. Everyone in line was sporting a mask. Anyone looked like they could rob this joint. Not just me. I finally paid for the beer. Climbed back in the truck. Swerved out the lot. Turned onto my street. Then a cop car, a grey Charger, approached on the opposite side of the road. I glanced at my expired inspection sticker. Whipped the truck into a small lot on the left. The cop car kept going. Action film shit. He turned out of my sight. Whew. Damn. That was close. But maybe he wouldn't have done anything at all. Maybe he wouldn't have noticed my illegal sticker. Then again, I'm a Black man driving a big black truck with black wheels. I wasn't taking any chances. I reversed out onto the road. Threw the clutch into drive. Crept back to the crib. I slipped in the front door. Checked behind me before I shut it. It's a habit. I gently removed the Modelo from the plastic bag like a fragile artifact. Slid open the sliding door to my back patio. Propped down in the red lawn chair. Snapped open the can. A

fresh spray whispered to me. I answered back with a sip. Slouching while a concert of crickets chirped a soundtrack in the woods. I closed my eyes. I went black.

When I Touch Poison Sumac, I Become It Too

I wish I could tell which ones are sumac, like
the time me & M went back to that actor's

house & because I was tired I lay down on
the bed, where he put one leg over me, pinned

my arms to the pillow: my *No* stung, stopped
him like poison sumac's chemistry of self-

defense. Or maybe the sumac was him, because
once poison sumac touches the skin it can't

be removed with soap & water. But now I am
running into the field & I set the swifts flying,

their movements sharp & close to the ground. I did
what they asked. I took the pain into myself:

that's how sumac works, chemicals
binding with cells, so the body attacks

itself, no longer knows its own skin cells:
immunity working to fix, trim, make me

palatable. When I run in the woods
I pretend I'm not afraid. But I don't

always recognize poison sumac when it grows
& soon the tap root extends so deep I can't

dig it out. I tape up my knees & shoulders
so I am fixed perfectly. My stomach jolts

because the creak of a twisting branch in the wind
sounds like a door opening: a human thing

unwelcome in the wild. I used to think
the shushing leaves were talking to me, but trees

only speak under the earth & only to
each other. It was the wind if anything

that day, sweeping the canopy with despair:
leave him, run, leave, run. I did leave the city

where each night under my window a drunk would sing
& the glass rattled as though hands had shaken it.

I moved deep into the country: still smarting.
But there's something else I'm running towards:

it's you dragging me back into my body: you
I want to touch me: hot wind blowing

where skins of leaves rub together
with a whispery sound. But sumac berries

swell & tease the mouth like a thought, or
maybe just hormones warm on the air

with a little tinge of death just like fucking.

Shrines of Twine

Every spring Francis A. Johnson nurtured seeds into stalks that grew before his eyes, only to cut them down at every harvest; he bottle-fed newborn calves one year, only to eat them for dinner another. Sometimes he felt like the god of his farm, creating and destroying life as he pleased, but he was a minor god of a temporary kingdom, dependent on another for rain and for sun. Maybe he wasn't a god, but a savior, or an intercessor, or all three: who could say? It's the mystery of the Divine. According to the Mormon doctrine I was taught growing up, the faithful—the Saints—will become gods of their own planets after death. In March of 1950, Francis was 45, a bachelor. All he had was the unstoppable cycle of birth and inevitable death on his farm. That, and a collection of 7,000 pencils.¹ But like a god or a saint, Francis longed to be remembered. Demanded to be remembered. He wasn't a Mormon. He'd have to build his planet in the tiny town of Darwin, Minnesota. And so he saw that it was good.



That March, Francis had twine on the brain.

March is an anxious month for a Minnesota farmer, delivering calves and praying for thaw, and I picture Francis alone in his barn, surveying the heap of twine he'd amassed. It all started with thrifty, Depression-stock instinct: whenever he set out a bale of hay for the livestock to munch, he'd save the length of twine that bound it.² Somehow it had gotten out of hand. Planting season approached and soon he'd be too busy to tackle the twine. Wearily at first Francis began to tie the lengths of cord together, and maybe he recalled how he'd held skeins of wool as his mother wound them into knittable balls, how he marveled at her power to transform one long string into a sweater with her two hands. He had just buried her the previous year next to his father, a onetime Farmer-Labor Party U.S. Senator. An enormous granite carving of the Capitol dome marked the gravesite.³ *What will my legacy be*, Francis must have wondered.

¹ "Biggest Ball of Twine in Minnesota," in *Roadside America*, www.roadsideamerica.com/story/2128.

² *Ibid.*

³ "Magnus John Johnson." Find A Grave, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/5971/magnus-john-johnson>.

Soon he was absorbed in winding. Turning that tangle of fibers into a perfect sphere slaked some deep need Francis never knew he had. Order out of chaos—the act of creation—a holy miracle. Before he knew it, the sphere was baseball-sized, then basketball. He added more and more, and soon started asking his neighbors for offerings of their spare twine. In a town like Darwin, then-population 273,⁴ hay is abundant and word travels fast. The planet began to take shape.

The knotted strands slid through Francis's fingers in a rhythm not unlike praying the Rosary. When I was a practicing Mormon, I sometimes wished, guiltily, heretically, that I were Catholic instead, so my shortcomings could be redeemed in countable units of prayer. Think of all the sins you could repent for over the course of a giant twine ball! For one period of twenty-three weeks, Francis spent four hours at it every day: winding twine to unwind his mind.⁵



At Cambridge in 1953, Watson and Crick and Rosalind Franklin discovered the double-helix structure of D.N.A., all of life somehow, allegedly—the newspapers said—wound from and bound by invisible strands of nucleotides. But how did the Spirit fit in? The soul? 4,000 miles away, Francis delivered calves and slaughtered cows and wrapped twine and perhaps imagined his mother's hands and her yarn all as one, double helixes knitting up bodies of their own accord.

That same year, news of the ever-expanding twine ball reached Frank Stoeber in Cawker City, Kansas.⁶ Frank had his own twine collection from his own hay bales and soon the obsession consumed him, too. Francis had a disciple—or maybe a pretender to his throne. Even their names were similar. The twin twine-winders never met, never communicated, but they were united in ritual. Hundreds of miles apart, the two men aged and their balls grew. Baseball then basketball then beach ball then yoga ball, then taller than the men themselves, then bigger than their barn doors. They made appearances in town parades, at county fairs, and on television.⁷ Twenty years passed in tandem Midwestern winding, but the Guinness Book of

⁴ "Darwin, Minnesota." Wikipedia, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darwin,_Minnesota.

⁵ "Twine Ball." Darwin Twine Ball Museum, www.darwintwineball.com/twineball.html.

⁶ Tim Hwang, "Twisted: The Battle to Be the World's Largest Ball of Twine," in *The Atlantic* (9 Sept. 2014), www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/09/twisted-the-battle-to-be-the-worlds-largest-ball-of-twine/379828/?single_page=true.

⁷ Vivian Le, "Goodness Gracious Great Balls of Twine," in *99 Percent Invisible* (16 July 2019), https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/goodness-gracious-great-balls-of-twine/.

World Records got to Frank Stoeber first. At eleven feet wide, his twine ball was certified the World's Largest the year before he died, glorified.⁸



Meanwhile in Darwin, Francis carried on as ever. In those later years of careful, lonely winding, he hoisted the ball aloft with a railroad jack in order to maintain the integrity of the spherical form—the only twine-winder to devote such care to the perfection of the shape.⁹

For centuries after Plato, Europeans believed Earth was the center in a series of concentric spheres of heavenly bodies; in art, the sphere came to represent perfection, the cosmos, and God, the epitome of sacred geometry. An orb is a traditional piece of most monarchies' crown jewels, symbolizing the sovereign rule over a divinely appointed section of the globe. Much of the debate about the authenticity of the *Salvator Mundi* painting (declared the work of Leonardo da Vinci in 2011 and sold for a record price in 2017) hinges on its inaccurate depiction of the optical effects of light through a glass sphere.¹⁰ Many art connoisseurs are skeptical that Leonardo, consummate artist-scientist, would have treated with negligence an object so rich in mathematical challenge and humanist significance. Like the Renaissance master, Francis was devoted to the purity of his vision. World's Largest or not, his ball would stand as a testament to the pursuit of not just fame, but also a Platonic ideal, a higher call.

Anyone who grew up under the influence of Christianity, from Leonardo to Francis to me, has had to contend with the blunt directive Jesus gave His followers in Matthew chapter 5: "Be ye therefore perfect." This commandment tends to conflict with the notion that we are all fallen in our mortal state, a seeming paradox that kept me up at night often in my piety. I think I understand the appeal of the perfect twine ball as a goal: its relative attainability as compared to personal perfection. Leonardo defined the human ideal in the *Vitruvian Man*, but not many of us can achieve that standard, not only because we are not all able-bodied white men. So maybe creating one perfect, ultimate object would be close enough.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Hwang.

¹⁰ Dalya Alberge, "Mystery over Christ's orb in \$100m Leonardo da Vinci painting," in *The Guardian* (18 Oct. 2017), www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/oct/19/mystery-jesus-christ-orb-leonardo-da-vinci-salvator-mundi-painting.

And to construct that object from sisal twine, spun from agave fiber, is so much the better for its earthiness. We are told God made us from dust. During the Renaissance, artists were seen as channeling God in creating human forms from the dusty raw materials of stone and pigment—thus Michelangelo was nicknamed “il Divino,” the Divine one. The elemental quality of holiness also factors in the same Bible chapter as Jesus’ call to perfection, when He refers to His followers as “the salt of the earth.” Who could be more salt-of-the-earth than a small-town heartland farmer named after Francis—the patron saint of the environment who forsook riches to become a mendicant monk? Franciscans wear knotted rope belts symbolizing their vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience as they strive to live in Jesus’ perfect image. Fitting, then, that Francis A. Johnson chose knotted sisal strands as the medium in his effort to derive the sacred from the mundane.



My grandpa briefly held a world record for the most holes of golf played in one session—365 holes over 39 straight hours in 1961.¹¹ He’d want you to know he finished fifty-five under par: mere quantity wasn’t enough; he was concerned with the quality of his play. Golf has always been his source of solace and sanity. He’s been circling through the same eighteen holes at the same course for most of his life. Like Francis, he set his record for the love of the game, and for excellence itself, as well as for the recognition.

But the recognition didn’t hurt, either. Francis contested the Guinness twine title Frank had claimed, and they finally awarded it to him in 1979, canonizing him. Darwin enshrined the ball, now twelve feet in height, width, and length,¹² in a glassed-in gazebo in the heart of town. Francis died of emphysema ten years later. He wasn’t a smoker. His family attributes his disease to sisal twine dust exposure.¹³

Did the act of creation seal Francis’s death or his immortality? At its heart, this is a fundamental question of philosophy: the answer depends on whether you see his death as natural selection (as the name of his town would suggest) or martyrdom. Francis was not exactly Marie Curie; a world record is not a Nobel Prize. You could even argue Francis’s planet-building was a notion of

¹¹ Mike Stahlberg, “Aces are Wild,” in *Register-Guard* (7 Sept. 2010), D1.

¹² Per *Roadside America* and *99 Percent Invisible*—the town website claims 13 feet and *The Atlantic* says 11.

¹³ Le.

Frankensteinian hubris—i.e. playing god. Michelangelo and Mormons have caught the same judgment for their aspirations. Then again, the mayor of Darwin told *Roadside America* he likes to visit Francis's twine ball at dusk and dawn, when the lights of the gazebo bathe it in a soft glow like candlelight. "Kind of feels like hallowed ground," he said.¹⁴

After losing their Guinness World Record to Francis, Frank's hometown of Cawker City began holding annual twine-a-thons—feast days for their local saint—in an effort to regain the title. In 2014, twine-ball investigators at *The Atlantic* determined that Cawker City has passed Francis up again.¹⁵ But meanwhile, it seems Francis had set off a bit of a Twine Great Awakening: two other contenders sprang up in two other tiny Midwestern towns. One is James Frank Kotera (self-styled J.F.K.). While his twine ball is only twenty-three feet in circumference, far smaller than the fortyish feet of both Frank and Francis's, the latter only weigh 18,000-19,000 pounds each, whereas J.F.K.'s weighs in at 23,000: his method of tying short lengths of twine produces a much denser, netlike weave.¹⁶ When *Roadside America* visited J.F.K. in Lake Nebagamon, Wisconsin, he told them he started crafting his twine ball at God's behest in 1975:

"Jim,' my God said to me, 'I want you to stop your drinking. Turn that life of your [sic] around, Jim, or you will not be mightily famous in my world, Jim.' And I said to my God, 'Famous?' 'Yes, Jim,' my God said to me. 'World's only real Ground Hog J.F.K. Twine Man of the World.'"¹⁷

The fourth man was J.C. Payne. The Darwin and Cawker City camps disdain J.C., who used plastic twine and rolled loosely (his ball weighs 12,000 pounds, merely the size of a full-grown African elephant). Most damningly of all, he sold out to the Man—Ripley's Believe It Or Not. It now costs visitors \$17.99 to see it.¹⁸ But at 13.5 feet high, Guinness awarded his ball the Largest distinction in 1994, and that record has stood ever since.¹⁹

So now the other balls must stake their claims on technicalities: Cawker City has the World's Largest Ball of *Sisal* Twine and Darwin has the World's Largest Ball of Twine *Rolled by One Man* and J.F.K. has the World's *Heaviest* Ball of Twine.

¹⁴ "Biggest."

¹⁵ Hwang.

¹⁶ "JFK's World's Largest Ball of Twine," in *Roadside America*, www.roadsideamerica.com/story/10970.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Hwang.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*



We could talk about these twine balls as kitsch, as tourist traps, as monuments to American excess or postwar car culture or the male obsession with size. The World's Largest Ball of Twine is an easy punch line made all the more mundane and absurd by the qualifiers, but I visited the World's Largest Ball of Sisal Twine in Cawker City and I couldn't laugh at it. At the heart of that eight million feet²⁰ of twine rosary are the ghosts of Frank Stoeber's fingers in 1953, tying up their first prayer for exaltation. In Darwin, there's Francis working toward his own twine-martyrdom in monkish solitude. There's J.F.K., initialed like one American president but operating on a born-again story in shades of another. Then there's J.C., who lacks a civic shrine to sanctify his motives, but maybe some fudging is an occupational hazard of reliquary: skeptics say there are enough pieces of the True Cross to make up Noah's Ark.

Back in my Sunday school days, I likely would have understood the twine-winders' devotion to their mission as a kind of tragedy, a pale and empty imitation of the perfect, eternal truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the Church, they warn you that any happiness you may think you've found outside of it is fleeting and shallow—that a non-member will always have a hole in the soul where the Gospel should be.

It's true that one day, the relentless annihilation of decades and centuries will erase the twine balls from memory. Frank and Francis's records have been broken, stripping them each of the glory they'd devoted decades to and died in the satisfaction of securing. Already, the tiny towns where the demoted balls reside are dwindling in the demise of family farming and the advent of the Interstate Highway System. Perhaps in times of desperation, the twine will be unwound and reused in a reversal of the postwar prosperity that made glut from thrift in the first place. Or perhaps some natural disaster will blow through the ghost towns and ravage the balls, and the miles of sisal will biodegrade, returning to dust just like their winders' bones. It's only a slowed-down version of the same cycle Francis sought to transcend on his farm. Creating the ball might have shortened his life by, say, ten years, but lengthened his memory by a hundred. Is the legacy worth the tradeoff? Or is it enough that, at

²⁰ *Ibid.*

one time, the ball existed? Actually, I have the same questions about my life and my writing, and I can only dream of twine-ball levels of success.



When you pull up to the ball—more of a mound these days—on the side of the state highway through Cawker City, you might cross paths with a sixty-something woman named Linda, self-described “Belle of the Ball” (she’ll claim the *Wall Street Journal* called her that, which is technically true, but they were quoting her),²¹ who will supervise you adding a loop of twine from a spool. Then Linda will ask you to sign the guest log, which is a spiral-bound notebook that fills up every couple of months, and she will announce, “Thanks to you, the ball is now the biggest it’s ever been.” You are a pilgrim and this is a ritual, like lighting a candle at an altar or praying the Stations of the Cross; on foot, you perambulate the twine ball, repeating the motions that Frank and Francis and J.F.K. and J.C. and thousands of others have made before you, and thousands will make again.

When I was eight, my dad and I ritually recreated the scene of John the Baptist and Jesus in the River Jordan as he dunked me underwater in a baptismal font and I pledged my life to the Mormon Church. Sixteen years later, my parents and I stopped in Cawker City to see the twine ball, and the next day we visited the site of Joseph Smith’s martyrdom, where I stayed quiet in discomfort masquerading as reverence. There’s no planet with my name on it in the afterlife, either because the doctrine isn’t true or because I don’t believe it is. The meaning of life and death gain urgency in the absence of certainty. Who among us doesn’t bid for life after final breath? Or, at least, to be a part of something larger than oneself? There’s something elemental in a twine ball, a purity rarely matched in form and function. So I made the pilgrimage. I signed the guest log. I made the World’s Largest Ball of Sisal Twine the biggest it had ever been.

²¹ Stephanie Simon, “A Kansas Town’s Tourism Plan: Throw Money in a Hole,” in *The Wall Street Journal* (Dow Jones & Company, January 27, 2010), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703906204575027323116293074>.

Phantom Pain

“Diiinner!”

Chica’s cry came in clearly through the window of the workshop, from the far side of the lot, carried like a child in the arms of the summer air. Sara smiled and straightened up at the bench, decompressing her spine. She gathered her notes and sketches and slipped them into a folder. As always, at that time of year, she was working on a new design for the prosthesis.

She got down off the stool, putting her weight on the good leg and lurching a little when the artificial one touched the ground.

Moths and other insects circled the lamps. With the humidity and the heat, they were hatching overnight. Before switching off the lights, Sara cast an eye over the immaculate workshop: Favio, the new boy she had hired to help them out, had spent the whole week cleaning and throwing out all the useless stuff that had been piling up in there. Now everything seemed to have found its rightful place. Even her old legs, all forty of them, one for each year, hanging from their nails on the walls.

It would have staggered her old man to see the workshop in that state. He had always been messy. She walked with a gently rolling gait from the back of the lot up to the house. Over the years, she had gradually tamed that lopsided body, and now she could walk almost elegantly. Though Chica still laughed at her, and occasionally wheeled out the old childhood joke:

“Watch out for the potholes, Sarita.”



The three of them ate in the kitchen, watching the telenovela, with the lights out so as not to attract insects, which would have ended up in the food. The insects went for the television instead, and every now and then Chica, who was closest, shooed them off the screen with a flick of the dishcloth, before draping it back over her shoulder.

The two women chatted about this and that. Chica had come back from town with a fund of gossip, as always. Favio ate in silence, barely lifting his gaze from the plate to let it settle like one more insect on the screen. He was a shy boy, but willing. They both liked him, and he was turning out to be pretty useful. He would have helped much more if Chica had let him. But she always wanted to do everything herself. Sara wasn't even allowed to help clear the table.

As soon as they had finished eating, Favio said good night and went to his room. They had set up a little television for him, so he could watch what he liked.



While Chica cleaned up in the kitchen, Sara went to sit under the linden trees. Swaying a little, she walked slowly across the lawn. The grass was short like the pile of a carpet or a neatly trimmed beard. Chica liked to keep it down to a couple of inches at the most. At this time of year, she was out there every second day, pushing the mower all around the huge lot with her brown, mannish arms, making a racket at siesta time. There was no point asking her to leave it till later, when the sun wasn't so fierce and people weren't trying to rest. Sara had once suggested she get one of those sit-on mowers, so it wouldn't be such a slog. That made Chica crack up laughing.

"Give me a break. I'd look like a monkey perched on one of those things. Like those monkeys in the circus that ride around on a tricycle yea big."

Nor would she hear of Favio taking on the job.

"What if he electrocutes himself and we have to pay compensation?"



Sara loved the sweetish scent of the linden trees in flower. As she sat down in the cane armchair, she took a deep breath and held it until she started to feel dizzy, then let it out in little puffs. She took the tobacco and papers from her belt bag and rolled a cigarette. She had learned how to do this by watching her father and copying his movements, just as she had learned how to make an artificial limb. He would never have offered to teach her either skill.

She could see the road a few hundred yards away, quieter by then, with a few cars passing, but mainly trucks. Truckers know what they're about: they wait for the cool of the night to drive, unlike vacationers. During the day, the road was busy with fast, modern cars, stuffed full of suitcases, surfboards, bicycles, tents... all heading for the coastal highway.

She inhaled, and the pain came suddenly, making her splutter.

Fuck it, she thought, and straight away, in her head she could hear her father's deep, irritated voice:

"It's not pain, it's just a reflex."

She'd had to listen to that shit for years. Why can't you fucking die once and for all? she spat out, screwing her eyes shut and opening them again straight away. If she kept them closed, the damned sentence appeared in luminous letters on the inside of her eyelids: It's just a reflex.

After the first stab, the pain subsided gradually to the level of mere discomfort. She lit the cigarette again and took another drag: the sweet taste of the tobacco mingled with the scent of linden blossom.

She saw Chica come out of the house with the laundry basket under her arm and walk towards the clothes line. When the old guy died, Chica finally got her way: she set up the line in front of the house. The wind and the sun were better there than down the back, she said. And in summer she liked to hang the clothes out at night because they dry more gently and the fabric doesn't go stiff. She knew all sorts of tricks, Chica.

Sara watched her bend over, take a sheet, shake it out, and peg it up. These movements were repeated as she worked her way all along one cord; then she switched to the other. The light was behind her, projecting her shadow onto the sheets as if she were a puppet in a Chinese shadow play.



Sara was nodding off when she heard the clinking. It was Chica coming to keep her company. She was carrying a bottle and glasses.

"I got this wine today. Want some?"

She sat down opposite Sara and the armchair creaked under her weight. She poured out two good glassfuls, and they raised them to nothing in particular, out of habit.

Chica was the only family she had left. They had been brought up together, were about the same age, had even gone to the same school, and yet as soon as Sara had reached puberty, Chica, her friend and playmate, but also the servant's daughter, had started calling her *usted*.

At one point, when Chica must have been about twenty, she had gone to the capital to live with a man. They didn't see her for a few years, but she kept calling home and sending money. She came back when her mother fell ill. They never found out what had happened with the guy who had taken her away, or what her life with him had been like. She didn't talk about it. She just stayed and looked after her mother, and them as well, and never went back.



"How'd you do today?" Chica asked, taking a gulp of wine and looking her in the eye.

"It's hurting a bit now."

"It's this lousy weather, it's so humid. Hang on, I'll be right back."

Chica was the only one who had always believed her. Her father never had, or the doctors, who always came out with the reflex crap.

When she had started helping in the workshop and getting to know the clients, she waited till her father wasn't listening and questioned them, timidly at first.

They were old-timers, almost all of them, and much stronger than her dad, guys who were used to hard physical work and kept themselves active, in spite of everything. Some had lost an arm or a leg in a work accident. It's not unusual in the country. With the older ones, it was often diabetes or some other condition. And in the end, they all ended up confessing, as if it were shameful or some kind of secret:

"Well yes... whatever they say, Sarita, it does hurt sometimes."



Chica came back with a bottle of rubbing alcohol. She dragged the armchair closer, sat down and tapped her thigh, as if inviting a pet to jump up. Sara put her good leg in Chica's lap. Chica moistened her hands and began to massage the leg with open palms, firmly, almost burning the skin. Her head and upper body moved in time with the massaging.

Her father might have thought it was crazy, but it worked: gradually the pain evaporated along with the alcohol.

"Better?"

"Much better. Your rubbing always works."

"Don't think you're going to get it for free, eh... come on, roll me a proper cigarette."

Chica liked to smoke, but her fingers were rough and clumsy, and the cigarettes she rolled looked like pieces of intestine. Now and then, if Sara had time, she would make her up a supply, which Chica kept in a tin.



She had rolled cigarettes for her old man too. He never taught her anything, but when he found out that she'd learned on her own, he was quite happy to exploit her skill. She couldn't remember which had come first, the cigarettes or the artificial limbs. One thing was certain, though: she soon left him behind. He'd always been a mediocre woodworker, and his "stick legs" (as he called them) were nothing special. She was the one who had earned the family business its reputation for quality. And she was proud of that.

People often assumed that her father had already been in the trade at the time of her accident, and they'd always end up mentioning destiny as if it were some kind of curse. But it had been the other way around: the accident first, then the workshop. No cloud without a silver lining, her old man used to say.

Demand had fallen away quite a bit in recent years. People were following their doctors' advice and going for factory-made limbs, even though they cost a fortune. Sara bought and read stacks of specialist journals. She studied and experimented in her workshop, trying to improve some tiny detail. She believed that in spite of

technological advances there would always be romantics like her who preferred artisanal orthopedics.

They drank the whole bottle of wine in silence. Chica's face went red, which made Sara laugh. It was infectious. They ended up with tears in their eyes.

Chica got up and helped Sara to her feet. She gripped her under the arm, almost slinging her over her shoulder. They stumbled at first, then got into a rhythm, and made it to the house; inside, they bumped into the furniture. Favio came out to see what was happening, looking startled, in his underpants with his hair all in a mess. The sight of him, so skinny and pale and covered in spots, sheepishly covering his crotch with his hands, made them double up with laughter. Chica had to catch her breath to tell him:

"Go back to sleep. It's all fine."

They went into Sara's room and Chica eased her down onto the bed.

"Is it still hurting?"

Sara went on giggling on for a moment before answering:

"Not now, cause I'm pickled."

"Forget about it. You're going to sleep like a baby tonight, Sarita."

"Sleep with me."

"Give me a fucking break. In this heat?"

"All right. But stay till I fall asleep. I'm scared I'm going to throw it all up."

"You know you can be a pain in the ass when you want."

Chica lay down beside her, on her back. They looked up at the lazily turning blades of the ceiling fan.

Sara took her hand.

"You're very good to me, Chica."

And Chica had another laughing fit.

"Give me a break, Sarita. Look at us, like a pair of dykes."

When the Body Says No but You Can't Stop Swallowing

after "On Being Suicidal" by b: william bearhart

From twenty yards away the adult megaplexxx sign
looks like a crescent moon stuck on its beetle back.

On the bus I use my fingernail to etch figure eights
into a styrofoam cup. The mean idea of vanishing

myself is a seed I can't unplant. A stranger tells me
her kidney stones ache. Every flaw in the road

rattles her like a handful of glass. I pine for
that gorgeous myth of childhood. How I lost

good sleep worrying over watermelon seeds.
Thought they'd gut sprout, impale upwards, straight

through god's windshield. The thought of being
dead returns unwelcome like a landlord.

In Colorado I pushed two motel beds together,
left the door wide open. Anything to be held

while unrecognizable. Regarding wellness
checks: I cut into a forearm length of bread,

finessed the knife like a violin bow. I tried
to convince that angry cop I never swallowed,

then threw up in his back seat. Had instead
he been my father opening, for me, a door—

not out but towards somewhere tender. Had he
held me there, so I might practice delight.

Lebanese in America: A Syntax

*"The only place I can be exiled is inside,
if I am unable to express myself."*

—Adonis

I touch the peachgold petals of a rose in my friend's garden in Portland, Maine.
It is Tuesday, August 4, 2020. The wind damp & close.

In the afternoon my loved one texts: *I'm fucked up. I don't want to live in this world.*

She sends snapshots of her friends' apartments, the furniture sparkling with glass.
In the living room a chandelier lies twisted in a heap on the floor, a spider whose
legs have grown unruly, collapsed around the body, light extinguished. Entire
walls caved in, rebar hanging like stalactites from the ceiling.

Problem:

When there is no ceiling left, how do we assemble the sentence? Do
we say *rebar hanging like stalactites from no ceiling*? Or, *rebar hanging like
stalactites from the ceiling that is no longer there*?

The word *ceiling* implies presence. What is the syntax for absence? Or
disaster? How does the shattered sentence say?

In one picture a friend cries & clutches her cheeks, eyebrows arched as though
straining to stay attached to her face. A channel of blood runs from her hairline
to her chin.

In another photograph: a crumbling stairwell, someone's hospital room turned
inside out. The bed empty, save a single clay-red stain on the pillow.

Hooves smack up & down the slopes of my chest. A small pool of water lingers in the deep end of my belly: my desperate gratitude for the fact that my loved one was not in Beirut when the hangar blew. The water ripples each time I remember.

I touch my knees & draw them inward like I'm gathering my children in my arms. Not knowing how to pray in Arabic, not having children to gather, I tap my fingers obsessively against my clavicles. A drum I make to accompany the clatter of horses.

Relationship: Long Distance

I am not there, I am here. Here: on the sunken blue couch in a house, intact. The animal of my body is safe. The coordinates of my *I* & *eye* are charted with distance. Distance is my gift & my long grief.

If my sorrow is steeped in absence, what can I write that will be useful?



My loved one left Beirut one year ago after spending nearly a decade there. She loved the city even as it ate its way through her, hollowing her body from inside, like the hornworm who burrows into the tomato, drilling a small perfect hole with its teeth.

When I say the city tore through her, I mean she barely came back. Came back a sack of bone & wing, vultures circling overhead.

What she left behind: a turtle she fed lettuce & kept on the balcony. A swirling mural she painted on the roof of her apartment. Half her tongue. Her quick footsteps that kissed the night streets.

Residues flicker in my mind. The *clip-clop-clip-clop* of high-heeled shoes down a sleek hallway. Imprints of fingers along doorknobs & walls. Ink blots & paper stained with spilled tea, flecks of saliva, breadcrumbs. The worn-in soles of slippers.

I wonder if the arches of my loved one's feet still rest somewhere in the sand, untouched by the blast. I imagine Hamra's thousand folded ears listening for the tin song of her heels.

It has been six years since I walked barefoot along the Mediterranean coast, daydreaming of retracing my parents' footsteps, touching the very same sidewalk as my uncles & grandparents & great aunts & cousins.



I am thirty years old & I realize I have avoided calling myself Lebanese because I've been having a problem with syntax.

There is so much left out of the sentence however I arrange the words. Strangers will correct me, challenge me, ask for proof. If I was born, grew up, have family there. If I'm Muslim. If I speak Lebanese.

If where you are from corresponds to where you were born, here are my sentences: I was born in Nicosia, Cyprus on May 18, 1990. What I remember is the smell of tahinopita suffusing the air & a pair of long fluorescent lights mounted on the kitchen ceiling.

What I know is the feeling of things. When I say *Cyprus* it feels like terra cotta pots filled with sesame & honey. A tongue rolled up like the spire of a snail, wind trilling through each whorl. Weight of warm bread in my hand.

My lips make a pretty shape for *Nicosia*. I nearly sing the word, a scale of minor notes. Four syllables that twinkle blue in my ear, tiny kingdom of warbling sea.

For many years I carried an eraser that was shaped like Cyprus with a basic map of the island printed on its surface in primary colors. Probably a trinket from a gift shop, but I loved to hold it in my hand like a soft hook, touching & smelling the sharp sweet rubber on my fingers.

I lost the eraser somewhere along the way to America.
Is where you are from what you have lost along the way?

For me, to be Lebanese is an exercise in arithmetic:

mom + dad

- American grandparents who lived in Lebanon
 - +/- Helly & Vladimir (Helly who died long before I was born)
 - +/- 2 khalos who left Beirut for London & stayed
 - +/- mom's extended family in Buenos Aires
 - when we moved to America from Pakistan not Lebanon
 - + rolling warak enab at home, a pinky width of filling in each wet leaf
 - speaking English
 - + visiting my loved one in Beirut
-

= one cephalopod who slowly inches up & down
my throat, weeping their shiny fluid.

I wonder what it means to be Lebanese.
I see footage of the blast & look away. I stay. I play & replay.

I scrape together a sentence when friends & colleagues check in, asking if I'm okay.

Hey, I heard about what happened in Beirut. Are you okay? Is your family okay?

I assemble a sentence with all the right parts: subject-verb-predicate. *We are okay.*
Sometimes: *it's really awful, it's so sad. We are fine, al-hamdulillah. It's terrible what's happened.*

To be Lebanese here is to swallow what is absent from the sentence.

To be Lebanese here is to have only been to Lebanon three or four times.

Have I been absent from you, Lebanon? Have you been absent from me?

I look at family photos, studying shyly the script on street signs. I cannot write or read.

I practice my syllables & my glottal stops. I greet the cat: *Marhaba ya Zaytouna. Ahlan!* I see my Sitto's crowded teeth in Gettysburg, sliding open the glass door with a hearty *Ahlan wa sahlan.*

To be Lebanese, here, is to live at the root of a split tongue. To feel the split swell with the sounds of neighborhoods: *Jeitawi, Hamra, Mar Mikhael, Karantina, Achrafieh.* To hold the very end of a length of thread between my lips & try to sew.

Honey and Sun

We were born—two minutes apart, identical but for a blush-colored diamond that appeared on one of our right shoulder blades, and not on the other’s—into a world of beauty and weight. The objects in our home were heavy and had a forbidding sheen, and many were much, much older than us. We were not allowed to touch most of them, because we were inclined to destroy things, often knocking over vases, staining brocade cushions, or inadvertently smashing dinner plates. We buried the evidence in our backyard, one of us keeping watch while the other clawed at the dirt with her small fingers.

We imagined that someday, hundreds of years from now, these buried remnants—the shards of porcelain and china, the fine fabrics we had spilled juice on, the smashed tubes of Mother’s coral and mauve lipsticks—would sprout roots that tendrilled throughout the soil to form an underground version of our house. Two little underground girls would live there too, just like us, but with a mother made of earth and a father made of rainwater. We envied them, these shadow versions of ourselves with no eyes or mouths, but with root hands and root arms that stretched on and on for miles, interlinked forever.

Our real mother was like a hummingbird—tiny and beautiful, never alighting too long on any one thing. She rarely ate, living on a diet of boiled rice and black coffee, and she wrapped her tiny waist with a long tape measure every morning. When we were very young, she used to measure us too, and we’d laugh as she wrapped the tape around our foreheads or our chubby arms and legs. She wore long, full-skirted dresses and heavy bracelets, which seemed to be the only things tethering her to the earth. Without them, we thought, she would rise up into the sky like a soap bubble.

Mother cried often and easily over our many failings. She bemoaned our inability to keep still or clean, our insistence on refusing things in unison. Especially, our lack of interest in the clothes she bought us—pastel dresses as confining as small suits of armor and shiny shoes that pinched our toes. We wanted to be free to climb trees, jump into puddles, spin in circles until the

world became streaks of color and we had to lie down to watch the streaks slow to a dizzying stop.

“No one likes dirty little girls,” Mother said when we tracked mud into the hallway.

“Little girls shouldn’t eat like starving wolves,” when we bolted our food at the dinner table.

“Don’t you girls want to look pretty?” when we eschewed the beribboned, apple-green dresses she had picked out for us.

We consulted one another: We were not good, pretty, or clean. Was this a problem? After some deliberation, we decided that it wasn’t. We didn’t mind how the other children at our school whispered about us. We didn’t mind when Lindsay Twixby raised her hand and complained about sitting next to us because she said we smelled; we liked the way we smelled, like sun-bake and damp earth. We told each other we didn’t mind when we were passed over for birthday parties or trips to the movies. Our teachers wrote notes to our parents—“Is everything okay at home?”—but they stopped when they learned the notes only resulted in weepy phone calls from Mother, who always got nervous around other adults, as if she thought she wasn’t one of them.

If our mother was a hummingbird, our father was the sun. He was everywhere and nowhere, his presence felt in every corner of our house. Most mothers we knew or saw on TV seemed to barely tolerate their husbands, often rolling their eyes at them or shrugging off kisses, but Mother glittered whenever Father was around. He smelled of cool water and leather. He had a handsome, angular face and eyes like a camera lens—narrowing when he smiled, focusing only on you. He had a demanding, complicated job we did not understand that involved long trips away and hushed phone conversations behind closed doors. During his absences, Mother ate even less and buzzed around buying things that would make the house feel fuller without him. He left our home sunless for months at a time before reappearing with little notice at random, festive intervals, his pockets filled with expensive new toys that always broke after a week or two.

Our dolls, Cardamom and Sage, were the only toys he ever brought home that lasted. He had gone on another trip and returned with two cloth dolls,

one in a red pinafore and the other in a blue one. He said, "They're sisters, just like you."

We eyed them skeptically. They were not even the kind of dolls who could sit up on their own, or pee. They had buttons for eyes and red thread for lips. We would have put them away along with the rest of our abandoned toys had it not been for Cardamom, the red pinafore doll, who said, after we had finished reading aloud to one another that night, "What happened next?"

She told us, "I'm Cardamom. This is Sage." Sage stood up and gave a bow so deep she toppled over. And after that, we couldn't get them to shut up.

Cardamom was loud and opinionated. She would announce to the room, apropos of nothing, "Homework is stupid," or, "I hate broccoli." Sage was full of spare advice and untruths that we loved. She bent over one of our drawings and asked, "Would a house really only have two windows? Most have at least sixteen."

"Let's break things and cause mayhem," Cardamom suggested once. "Let's eat only strawberries and cream and howl at the moon." Sage said, "The moon is made entirely of a fine blend of Gouda and Edam. Howling at her is permissible only during the month of October, when it is her birthday."

The dolls slept between us at night, pretending to breathe in our sync. Sometimes, they braided our hair into one joined rope so we could stagger around like one monstrous, four-legged beast. And when we cried at night, lonely for reasons we did not understand, they wiped away our tears with their soft cotton hands. It was enough, we thought, to have one another, to have the trees and the puddles and our underground house and the dolls, even when kids were mean and our mother was a hummingbird and our father was a sun that never stayed.



In the spring of our eleventh year, strange women began calling the house and hanging up whenever Mother answered. "Hello? Hello?" Mother said into the receiver, sounding like a lost parrot.

One day, when we picked up the phone, the woman on the other end said, in a smoky, velvet voice, "How old are you, honey? Is your father there?"

“We’re not your honey,” we said.

The woman laughed and was about to say something else when our mother called from the other room, “Who is it?” The woman hung up.

That night, we heard shouts and fighting coming from our parents’ bedroom. Cardamom and Sage woke us, scared by the noises, and we four huddled together with our ears pressed against our bedroom door.

We heard Mother wail—“Is she prettier than me?” There was the sound of something expensive shattering, and then the sound of our father’s footsteps down the stairs. The slam of the front gate, his car driving away.

Mother took to her bed, her sobs occasionally leaking out from beneath the door in bright pools. We waited for Father to come back, to bring light and color back to our house the way he always had before, but he did not, and the calls from the strange women stopped.

The fabrics and fragments and lipsticks we had buried in our backyard began to resurface, growing into elegant, woman-shaped orchids that emitted heavy clouds of fragrance. The smell gave us bad dreams, so we yanked the orchids out of the earth and ate the roots, the bitter soil turning to mud inside our mouths. The dolls showed us how to boil the roots in water and add salt for flavor, salt we later sprinkled on the ground to keep the flowers from growing. But the orchids came back, again and again, their scent thickening the air and troubling our sleep.



A few weeks later, our uncle came for a visit from Korea. We were digging more holes in our backyard when he arrived. “Come say hello,” Mother said to us, trying to smile.

We bowed stiffly, inclining our heads. Uncle had a silvery beard and moved and spoke slowly, like a wizened tree come to life. His face rarely moved, and his eyes were lined by time, even though he was only six years older than Mother.

He offered us chalky ginseng candy from his pockets. “You’re doing well in school? And listening to your mother?” His eyes searched ours, as though the answers to his questions were written on our faces.

“Not really.” We mumbled around the candy, looking at the floor. Cardamom and Sage cleared their throats, waiting to be introduced, but we kept them hidden behind us.

Uncle asked, “Don’t you have anything else to say for yourselves?” and we said, “We don’t speak Korean too great.”

Uncle told Mother that children should know how to speak the language of their parents. He asked why we were so dirty. Our eyes swiveled from him to Mother as they talked, then back again, our hair tangled and matted and our teeth black from eating soil. Mother’s eyes filled with easy tears. “You can’t imagine how hard it is trying to get them to listen to anything I say.”

Uncle caught sight of Cardamom eavesdropping. “Aren’t they too old to be playing with dolls?” he said. He reached for Cardamom, and her face became still, a stopped clock.

We told him not to touch her. Mother was horrified. “Apologize at once,” she said.

Uncle’s laughter reminded us of heavy, distant footsteps walking down a long hallway. “It’s clear they take after their father,” he said.



It was decided that Mother needed a break. She said we would stay with Uncle in Korea, sent us off with our suitcases and kisses that dissolved immediately on our foreheads. We noticed she had packed a bag herself, and she was wearing makeup again, a palette of colors that seemed too loud for her small, pale face.

“Where will you go?” we asked her.

She said, “I need to find the pieces of myself and put them back together again.” She sounded like one of the books that lay around her bedroom, the ones with sunsets or flowers on the covers and titles like *Your Best You Now*.

We turned around in the cab on the way to the airport to wave goodbye, but she had already gone back inside.

The plane ride to Korea jostled us in our seats. Pale bolts of lightning lashed the sky. Cardamom spent the journey exclaiming to herself while she looked out

the window, while Sage studied the safety pamphlets. Uncle read from a book called *The Catching and Collection of Butterflies, Volume 3*, while taking notes in a small, leather-bound notepad.

A shiny black car pulled up to the airport when we landed. After what felt like hours of driving—on highways that cut past jagged skylines, then on bumpier routes through villages, then on packed dirt roads winding around fields—the car slowed to a stop before a mansion of steel and glass. The chauffeur whispered to an intercom on a tall gate. After a moment, the iron slid open, and the car passed through. We turned around to watch the gate slide back into place, sealing us away from the outside world.



On our first day in the house, Uncle told us we would be required to join him for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, but that otherwise we would be left to our own devices. He would be spending most of his time in the library.

“I will tell you this once, and I will not tell you again,” Uncle said during that first dinner. Cardamom and Sage had been left upstairs, because Uncle said we were not to have our dolls with us at the table. Droplets of seaweed soup clung to his moustache. “Grime and noise and misbehaving of any kind are unacceptable in this house. Little girls should be quiet and obedient.”

“You’re not the boss of us,” we said. “We want to go home.”

As though we had not spoken, Uncle said, “You will wear the clothes I pick for you. You will eat when I tell you to eat, and you will go to bed when I tell you to sleep. Anytime you disobey me or speak out of turn, you will be sent to your room without dinner. In fact, you can go upstairs now.”

We pushed our bowls away and left the table, but our stomachs growled in our beds that night, and one of us wondered if perhaps we should have thought this through, even though the other shushed her.



Our days in the glass house were slow but relentless. From the beginning, the place did not want us there. The cold walls sighed away from our touch, and the floors grew knots that tripped us when we went running down the corridors. The narrow, modern side tables and low-slung chairs sharpened their angles when we walked past, so that our knees and elbows snagged on their corners. The doors either stuck in their frames or refused to stay shut, peeling themselves open unexpectedly, and the hallways echoed with the sound of footfalls that were never there when we turned around. Some days, we would throw our clothes out the windows, leap off chairs into piles of cushions, or howl down the halls, just to see if the house would take notice. But it seemed only to absorb our noise into itself. Despite all its glass, the house was shrouded in a permanent semi-darkness, having been built on the side of a hill that faced away from the sun. In the dimly lit passageways, we saw indentations like faces that appeared and disappeared in the wallpaper. The dolls hated it. “This is the ugliest place we’ve ever seen,” they said.

Uncle’s library was the only part of the house that seemed to welcome us. It was the beating heart of the home, its secret center. The library air was always dry, and the furnishings were comfortable and expansive. Bookshelves lined the walls from floor to ceiling. Overstuffed couches and armchairs beckoned to us, and a plush carpet the color of moss muffled our footsteps.

Uncle told us that his wife, a great reader, had helped him design the library. They had only been married a short time, before she died in childbirth. We asked, “What happened to the baby?” and he told us, “She died too. She would have been sixteen this year.” A faint line appeared between his brows at the remembrance of his family, before it disappeared and he looked, once more, like an old tree.

Unlike the other rooms of the house, the large library windows had curtains, which were always drawn to protect Uncle’s collection of butterflies. He kept the butterflies mounted and labeled in cases with gold clasps and fixtures, shining like jewels behind the glass, their wings and antennae spread as though in mid-flight.

Uncle had met his wife in a butterfly exhibit when a Red Admiral landed on her shoulder. He stopped to admire it, and then he stopped to admire her. When she smiled, he told us—his voice suddenly and unusually rough with feeling—it

was even more beautiful than when a butterfly opens its wings for the first time. After they got married, he bought specimens from collectors around the world and mounted them himself in secret, carefully inserting a pin through each butterfly's stomach and using thin strips of paper to hold them down while they dried, and on their first anniversary he presented his wife with the collection, hoping she would be pleased. But she had begun to cry, disturbed by their unnatural, lifeless beauty. The two of them did not speak of the butterflies again, but Uncle, still obsessed with their symmetry and jeweled colors, continued to add to the collection, despite his wife's consternation. As the years went by, with every misunderstanding or difference that revealed itself between them, he became more fixated on the butterflies, the preservation and mounting of them, the way that each meticulous step resulted in something that would live forever.

He showed us a new specimen he had just received, a Spicebush Swallowtail. Its ribbed black wings gleamed like oil underneath the amber light of Uncle's desk lamp as he slid the pin through. Its wings seemed to tremble with pain, and despite ourselves, we reached our hands out to touch the butterfly's wings, to comfort it, and Uncle slapped our hands away so hard that, for a few seconds, we couldn't feel the red-hot sting that followed the blow.

"You must never, never touch," he hissed as we shrank back.

"We saw it move!"

He said, "That's impossible. It's already dead," but that was not true, because all of the butterflies were awake now. We felt their eyes on us, heard the rustling of their wings against the pins that kept them fastened to the foam backing of their cases. Uncle seemed unaware of the thousands of small movements that rippled throughout the library as each of the butterflies—from the giant Queen Alexandra's Birdwing to the Western Pygmy Blue, no larger than one of our fingernails—stirred and fluttered.

We were not allowed in the library on our own, but we were fascinated by the butterflies. And so, every day, during the still afternoon hour from three to four when Uncle napped, we stole into the hushed library darkness with the dolls, our whispers swallowed up by the shadows and dust, where the butterflies were waiting for us. Their wings trembled when we approached, like the eyelids of a restless

sleeper. We tried to count them all and failed, usually losing count somewhere in the three-hundreds.

Cardamom's favorite was the Red Lacewing. Its crimson-centered wings, with their black filigree borders, reminded us of a dress our mother had worn once to a party. It waved coquettishly at us, preening when we stopped to admire it. Sage's favorite was the Adonis Blue. It was smaller than the Red Lacewing, almost half the size, and its wings glowed with a quiet, urgent blue that we had never seen anywhere else. We wanted to live inside that blue, to feel its coolness in our mouths and its powder on our fingertips.

We would stay in the library for as long as we dared, until we heard the clock strike four. At night, we whispered the names of the butterflies to each other over and over, savoring them. Purple Spotted Swallowtail. Gold-Drop Helicopsis. Danube Clouded Yellow. Long-Tailed Blue. Crowned Hairstreak. Painted Lady. Mourning Cloak. They sounded like the ingredients to a magic spell. Sometimes we imagined that if we whispered them to each other fast enough, in the right combination, we would be free to go home.



On our second day in the house, when we went downstairs for breakfast, we were greeted with empty plates. Uncle ate a pile of fried eggs and toast. "If you would like to join me for breakfast, you can begin by apologizing for your rudeness," he said, between bites. We sat in silence, watching the eggs disappear from Uncle's dish one by one. They shone like eyes.

It was the same at lunch, and again at dinner. That night, our stomachs shrank, twisting themselves into painful knots. We dreamt that the knots burst into vines, which grew up and out of our throats, choking us. We dreamt of a long table laden with food, at which our mother presided. "Mother!" we called. When she looked up, there was a smooth blankness where her mouth should have been.

We woke, drenched with sweat, and decided it was time to compromise. We drew ourselves our first bath in weeks. The water turned brown from the layers of dirt that had accumulated on our skin, and we combed shampoo through our hair,

detangling it. Soap got in our eyes and made them sting. When we emerged from the bath, we felt smaller.

We put on the matching nightgowns that we found in the chest of drawers in our room and stared at ourselves in the bathroom mirror. Cardamon said, “Lo and behold. The caterpillars have changed.” Sage told us, “A caterpillar spends its whole life yearning to become. It builds itself a house of its longings, a shroud to its childhood, and when it is ready, it appears new, dressed in the finest gown money can buy. And then, after a year of honey and sun, it perishes, its wings beating slowly until they are stilled forever.”

We considered Uncle’s butterflies. They were allowed to live on in a kind of frozen eternity of beauty and color, but what were they but exhibits in a museum of death? “What happens to the caterpillars who don’t want to change?” we asked.

“They must stay close to the ground,” Sage said, after thinking a while. “And creep slowly through the undergrowth, staying quiet and hidden. And that is how they will survive.”

The next morning, we sat down to breakfast, wearing the neatly pressed dresses that had been hanging in our closet. Uncle looked up from his customary plate of eggs.

“We’re sorry,” we said. “May we eat now?”

He studied us before nodding and returning to his book. Mrs. Lee, Uncle’s housekeeper, set two bowls of porridge down in front of us. We were so hungry we were tempted to lick our bowls clean, the way we would have back at home, but we restrained ourselves. When we were done, we said, “Is there more?” and Uncle told us, “That’s enough for now.” Our stomachs sank into the bottoms of our shoes.

Mrs. Lee was a small, stoop-shouldered woman with a round face and watchful, wide-set eyes. She arrived early every morning but Sundays to cook and clean the glass and steel house. She seemed afraid of Uncle, usually keeping her eyes on the ground whenever he addressed her, but she often gave us pitying smiles. During her breaks, she sat outside and smoked cigarettes while speaking on the phone.

“I feel sorry for them,” we heard her say later that morning. “I don’t care how much money you have, it’s just not a replacement for family.” The tinny voice on the other end of the line seemed to ask a question, and Mrs. Lee snorted in

response. “They may as well be orphans. What kind of mother just dumps her kids for a summer?”

Cardamom said, “I’d like to box her ears. What is an orphan, anyway?” and Sage said, “An orphan is a type of fledgling bird that has been left behind by its parents, often found in deciduous forests or swamplands.”

We told the dolls sternly, “We are not orphans.” We decided to leave an enormous dead beetle we had found in the garden in Mrs. Lee’s purse. After that, she no longer smiled at us, and she made sure not to have her lunchtime phone conversations in our earshot. When we tried to steal food from the kitchen to store in our room, she locked the pantry door.

So, we complied. We got used to things. We became accustomed to the confining clothes that Uncle bought for us, the tightness of their zippers and buttons and fastenings, which kept us from moving about freely. Our stomachs shrank to the size of seeds. One of us tried learning to lower her voice. The other practiced walking in small, careful steps everywhere she went, instead of shouting and careening down the hallways like normal. We bathed every day, until we only smelled like flowers, or soap. When we walked past mirrors or saw our reflections in the windows of the glass house, we were smaller, prettier, less.

We wrote to Mother every day, enclosing drawings of the house and everything inside it. We drew pictures of the butterflies; the large, glacier-green celadon vases that stood throughout the house like soldiers; the sea urchin chandeliers that clawed their way out of the ceilings. “We hate Uncle,” we wrote. “He is mean to us and restricts our food. Please come at once.” Mother never responded.



Monsoon season began. It rained almost every day, the sky an open wound that would not heal. The grasses and flowers in the backyard grew lush and feral. The trees turned an electric green. Fat worms wriggled up from the earth and found their way onto the stone in the courtyard in front of the house, where they dried up and turned into membranes when the sun came back out. The butterflies

in the library grew more restless than ever, struggling against their pins, a constant tremor in their wings. Everything wanted to live.

We began to change. Our breasts felt tender and tingly, the way we imagined new buds in spring might. We wondered if the rain had something to do with these changes, if the inescapable fecundity of the earth and trees and flowers had somehow seeped into our bodies.

But when we stood in front of one another we noticed discrepancies that disturbed us. One of us developed contours and curves in places where there had only been lines and corners before, while the other grew tall and angled. The blush-colored birthmark that only one of us had flushed into a dark strawberry, while the face of the other one broke out into angry red stars.

Even our reactions to the new differences were different. The possibility that perhaps we were not a single, split self frightened one of us, and gave the other a small thrill.

We no longer dreamed in unison, and when we woke in the mornings, we found ourselves facing away from one another, our bodies growing in separate directions. And every day, one of our dresses grew tighter and tighter while the other's grew shorter. It felt like just breathing would split our clothes open from seam to seam.



One morning, one of us woke to find a sticky, brownish patch of blood between her legs and strange aches in her stomach.

"She's dying!" Cardamom wailed, wringing her cloth hands.

"It's called a period," Sage said calmly. "It means that the balloon of blood that is your body has expelled the sorrows of the previous month, and now it is time to collect more."

We ran for Mrs. Lee. She clucked over us, a temporary truce declared over the pillowy pads she pulled from her purse. She didn't say how to use them, just told one of us, "You're a woman now," and left us alone to this terrible news. We puzzled over the white wings and determined that the gluey side must go on our

skin. Both of us tried them on and winced when the stickiness ripped away the few hairs we had managed to grow down there.

The one of us who didn't need the pad said, "This feels like a diaper. You look like a big baby."

The other one said, "You're just jealous," and it was like a slap we had both been waiting for.

We wrestled, hitting and biting and kicking each other in a way we hadn't since we were too young to know any better. Bruises bloomed around our eyes, and our noses gushed red. Each of our forearms bore jagged scratches from the other's nails.

We stopped when one of us began to cry, stricken by the unaccustomed silence of the dolls. Sage's face was as mute and opaque as tinted glass, and Cardamom's arms were still, frozen in an attitude of panic, the anguished expression on her face replaced by a blankness we had never seen before. We shook them, slapped them, begged them to answer us, but they were as silent as graves. We were, truly, all alone.

At breakfast, we shifted in our chairs. Are you okay, we tried to ask one another, but there was a difference separating our minds, a barrier as thin and translucent as paper, but a barrier nonetheless.

During Uncle's afternoon nap we snuck into the library to see the butterflies. They seemed to know, fluttering their wings in distress as we wept in front of their cases.

The Queen Alexandra's Birdwing rattled behind its glass. *Free us*, it seemed to say. *Free us, and yourselves. We can make it stop, and you will stay the same forever.* We looked at one another, immensely relieved, each seeing that the other had heard the words as well. Outside, the monsoon roared, sheets of water washing over the house.

"Where will you go if we free you?" we asked. "You are not even alive."

We are also not dead.

"Uncle will punish us."

Are you not already being punished? The Birdwing pulsed with thwarted life.

We hesitated only a few more seconds before one of us—we don't remember which one—picked up a marble paperweight and leveled it against the glass of the Birdwing's case. A thin crack appeared, spiderwebbing across the surface.

The other butterflies whispered amongst themselves, their chatter growing ever more excited as the glass continued to crack, before shattering. The Birdwing struggled against its pin. We hastened together to remove it, our thumbs pinched against the foamed plastic. Once the Birdwing was free, it burst into the air like a coiled streamer.

It stretched its wings tentatively, seeming frightened by its sudden mobility. Then it flew around the library, arching its pierced thorax towards the vaulted ceiling. It rippled, aquamarine and black, a victory banner. It said, *Free. Be free.*

We smashed the rest of the butterfly cases, removing the pins as fast as we could. Glass shards crunched underneath our feet and cut both our pairs of hands and arms. Red seeped and dripped from our fingers as we unpinned each of the butterflies in Uncle's collection. Our fingers blistered, and we sucked the blood from them as we moved in unison from one case to the next. The sound of wings filled the air, a syncopated symphony of light and color. Soon the library was a fury of wings. Hundreds and hundreds of Uncle's butterflies soared to meet one another in mid-air.

"What are you doing?" Uncle shouted from somewhere far away. We caught a glimpse of him, a small irate figure standing in the doorway of the library, before the butterflies descended. The last thing we heard was Uncle's screams as the butterflies covered him with their jeweled bodies.

The Queen Alexandra's Birdwing landed on one of our shoulders, and we felt a shudder run through us. Our thoughts ran together easily once more, braided like twin bolts of lightning. Pain jackknifed down our shoulder blades and spines as our bones cracked, turning to powder—red, yellow, blue, green. Our limbs telescoped, our faces beveled, our eyes grew large and kaleidoscopic.

Outside, it had stopped raining. The earth steamed with heat. We stretched our new wings, studying one another and ourselves, two halves of the same butterfly, a familiar, diamond-shaped spot the only thing that disrupted our symmetry. The air sparkled, zippy with ozone. We dripped with newness.

Are you ready? said the Birdwing.

We left, together, flying out into a world of color and light, honey and sun.

Hospice, North Dakota

I'm not sure if this is a town.

The stores don't sell a single thing a dying person needs.
Every couple hours, the slanting trees lean closer to the ground.
In a few days, they'll be down.
Wet roots drying over pits the state will use as graves.

Dying people need bicycles to assemble in darkness,
or jobs writing instructions for self-pulling lawnmowers,
or antlers rising from the tall brown
grass that stretches back toward the bandshell.
They need to know the state won't bury them in a hole left
by the failure of a tree.

And trees can't fail. Only men and women.
Only towns, if that's what this place is,
and towns can only fail if the reservoir reflects the condos on the hill
in some weird, unfortunate way that highlights how cheap
the siding is and makes them hard to sell.

Only an exhausted bird would nest here chest high
between signs for two stores that failed in this strip mall.
Only a bird tortured by storm who watched her mate
give up mid-air and drop to the cornfield
below like a wine bottle.

Wrong flecks the landscape like cheap insulation.
Wrong oak tree, wrong car door, wrong mailbox, wrong joke.
There are reasons why people try heroin.
Real reasons that camping can't resolve, or art, or getting
a job at the cemetery.

moral inventory

it's june i wouldn't know
 but for the birds singing

their birdsongs i can't imagine
 what they're on about i'm bored

with my own slow dying i lick the spoon
 sticky with curdled cream my beloved's fingertips the pages stuck

then smeared i can't remember the moment i wanted to stop
 doing bad things when i understood

certain kinds of ruin can be useful the candle i light
 then snuff out

O demiurge i'm too tired to talk
 to you with prayers like spent shells i haven't swept

the stoop all month even the sky dying such a beautiful backdrop
 for our all the time dying

Aya Brown: Sending Black Women Love on Brown Paper

*“We are essential—and I don’t mean just in the work we do, but in general.
Black women make this world move.”*

—Aya Brown

Brooklyn-based artist Aya Brown embraces Black women with an intimate focus and intention towards highlighting their roles in society; roles that are often neglected and taken for granted. Brown’s *Essential Workers* series first spawned from diligent observations during a personal hospital visit in early 2020, pre-pandemic: She and her sister noticed a pattern of nurses (predominantly Black women) being asked to shoulder far more care work than the doctors (mainly white and/or male). Brown recognized that the Black women caring for her during that visit did not receive the same care from the world that they were being asked to give. Indeed, from caring for patients to delivering our mail, Black workers risk their lives and well-being daily to ensure that our society continues to function. Inspired to pay homage to the unseen labor of Black women, Brown took to her brown kraft paper and colored pencils to illustrate society’s Black essential workers while honoring the nuances of Black cultural expression. She represents Black women as they are, with purposeful attention to hairstyles, jewelry, and clothing choices. Her layering of color embodies the diverse hues of Black skin tones, from golden to neutral. Genuine care for Black women’s being and representation is nothing new for Brown—but it hits the current moment as a needed breath of fresh air.

“Essential worker” has become a household phrase, but the labor of Black women has been exploited throughout history. The world already rests on their shoulders; the pandemic doubled that burden, and not enough concern has been shown toward caring for them in return. While Black women across the nation keep us afloat, their labor is met with inequitable compensation, mistreatment in the workplace, exploitation, and violence. Aya meets them with love.

Sidney Mori Garrett: What brought you to your illustration style?

Aya Brown: I was the type of kid who was just home alone and started drawing. A friend of my mom, that kind of babysat me, helped teach me. She was Japanese, and we called her “Banana.” I would go to her house and I would draw for maybe four or five hours straight, nonstop. It was like, some real Japanese shit. Hardcore training. That’s where I learned my technical skills the most, like understanding how to look at something and draw it. My foundation comes from still life, drawing the things around me, because that’s all I had. I didn’t have access to understand art in any other way. We didn’t talk about art at all; we just learned technical stuff. Having that experience and the time that I spent drawing was mentally really helpful for me. I have no idea how this style happened. I just really try to look at skin tone and colors. The way that color looks on brown paper is really beautiful to me.

SMG: The skin that you draw always glows. Always.

AB: Yeah, highlights on Black skin are just so much better. You can naturally see so many bright and different colors in our skin. It’s so much fun playing around with colors. In the translation [of seeing to drawing], I’m thinking about the skin. You have to pay attention to those kinds of things because not all dark skinned women look alike, and not all light skinned women look alike. Features are so important too. The *Essential Workers* series doesn’t have as much focus on features because the women are wearing masks. Still, I try to find other ways to communicate—maybe through their poses, body types, the clothing they’re wearing, the sneakers they’re wearing, the hairstyles, or jewelry—to give them more character and show culture beyond the status as essential worker.

SMG: Can you talk about the space around the workers in this series? Is there a reason not to have them in a specific setting?

AB: The surface of the brown paper is essential to my process. I don’t draw on white paper because I feel like images of Black people shouldn’t come from whiteness.

That's something that I thought about a lot when I was in school. Why are we always painting on white paper? Why is that the standard? The focus is on the figure, you know? These drawings have been very relatable to all types of Black women. People have hit me up and said, "Yo, this reminds me of my grandma," or "This reminds me of my mom," or have been inspired to tell me things like "There's this woman I know, you should draw her." People resonate with it.

SMG: Do you feel a shift in your work's visibility now that people think the pandemic is "over," that things are back to "normal," whatever that is?

AB: Of course. I'm terrified it'll all stop tomorrow. My thing is this: I don't do it from an activist lens. I don't do this for white people to be excited about. Before this, I was doing the same work, but its focus was different: Black lesbian women. I was only drawing Black lesbian women, and people weren't paying no attention to me. Now I'm just inspired by this shitty fucking thing that's happening right now. Many people have shown up this year, and I hope that energy continues, because it's not over. Shit never changed. This is not nothing different.

SMG: How are you taking care of yourself?

AB: A lot of therapy every Monday. I surround myself with people who have been there for me. My life has changed this year because of my *Essential Workers* series and many other works. Everybody wants to pay attention to Black people now, and I'm one of those people they want to pay attention to. It could be very easy for me to get lost in this world of interviews and photoshoots. I need to have a place to lean on because, at the end of the day, me in an interview is not me in real life.

SMG: Who is Aya Brown in real life?

AB: I'm just a regular butch queen from Brooklyn who was in the crib a lot teaching myself how to draw.

SMG: When you're feeling down or uninspired, how do you bounce back?

AB: I try to stay true to what I feel and be honest. I'm just gonna communicate it. When the George Floyd shit happened, I just could not function. I was fucking crying, OD. I was on the phone with my mom trying to explain this shit to her, and it was so hard because my mom speaks broken English. So when I try to explain how I feel, she might understand, but the way that she is communicating it back to me still doesn't sound like she does. She's just using the wrong words because of the language. It might sound like she's saying some fucked up shit, but she just doesn't have the words, so I have to calm myself down. It's moments like that that make me feel shut down.

SMG: I feel that. For us that have immigrant parents, how do we talk to them about situations like the murder of George Floyd? Especially when our parents come from other countries where the culture is so homogenous... a certain situation may be the first time that they've had to think about race in a particular way. It's hard when shit like this happens because when you're hurt or scared, you want to run to your mom, but what do you do when your mom isn't on the same level of understanding as you? There can be a lot of miscommunication.

AB: Of course, she understands that I'm hurting and that there's injustice. At the beginning of the pandemic, all these viral videos of Black women came out, and people would speak on injustice, and people would translate the speaking into Japanese. I would just send those to her. I don't even know if it was helpful, but maybe it was.

SMG: What about your sister? Can you speak on what it was like to present your drawing of her to her?

AB: Me and my sister have a typical sister relationship. We are good at hating each other, and we are beyond amazing at loving each other. When we show each other how much we love each other, it can be really powerful and emotional. It was

exciting for me to think about my sister outside of her being my sister; for who she is as a person and the work that she's doing. Her life is entirely different than mine during COVID. Yes, I lost my job, but I'm at home and safe. She's back at school working. I love my sister, and I know she can be really shy. A lot of my friends knew I was drawing her, but she had no idea. I was like, "I'm just gonna post it. She not even gonna know." When I posted it, she was gagging. It's nice to be able to show that you care about someone, to express how I look up to her and appreciate her and how the world should and needs to appreciate her. There are thousands of other Black women who can look at this and resonate with her work. She's important. I know that people don't tell her that enough. My sister is beyond essential.

SMG: It's such a pivotal moment when you start to see your family members as real people. They were whole ass people before we came along, and continue to be, outside of being our family. I can imagine that acknowledging your sister's existence outside of being your sister was important. We need that.

AB: I think that's a part of becoming an adult: accepting the flaws of your family. I think that's one of the critical tools to get past certain traumas and to move on to forgive and grow. You're not a baby anymore, you know? I was talking to my therapist about this when we first started therapy, but for a long time, I looked at my mom as Superwoman. When I saw her cry for the first time, I freaked out.

SMG: Breaking away from that image can be challenging, but it's necessary. I want to dive into the drawing that you did of your grandma as well. I know I just asked about your sister, but this is interesting to me because I've never presented artworks about my family to my family. That level of vulnerability must be challenging to reach. What was that like?

AB: My mom had to send it to her online. She was just like, "Tell Aya I said 'thank you so much.' I know the picture she looked at to make that." I used this picture of me, her, and my sister when we were really young in Japan at the zoo; that was my reference. She said that she loves me and she's proud of me. I wish I spoke

Japanese so that I could get more out of that conversation. I know that she's proud of me, but I don't even know how she received that praise and acknowledgment. Culturally, women in Japan—women in general, but definitely in Japan—don't get put on a pedestal in the way that they should. They just don't.

My grandmother in Japan has been a healthcare worker for her entire life. She's in her seventies, and she's still fuckin' workin'. It's crazy. It's definitely a part of the culture in Japan. The work ethic can be very resilient. My mom is an excellent example of that, too. She's not necessarily an essential worker, but she's my mom, so of course I think of her in that way. I watched my mother work seven days a week my entire childhood, nonstop, with no breaks for years. I was spending a lot of time with my grandmother on my father's side, to the point where I didn't see my mom as much.

SMG: How is your grandmother in New York, on your father's side?

AB: I am very invested and obsessed with my grandmother in New York. I hang out with her all the time. She is literally my best friend. She's opened up to me about so much shit, and I think that's now led to me wanting to have the same relationship with my grandmother in Japan. My grandmother in New York has never told anybody she loves them, but she started with me, because I pressed her about it. I was like, "Yo, why don't you tell people you love them? You have never told me that as a child." Now she can't stop saying it.

SMG: I assume that the *Essential Workers* series doesn't really have an ending, right?

AB: I think it's gonna continue for a long time. It's exciting for me to be able to collaborate more instead of doing the work by myself. I can only do so much alone. People coming to me and trying to collaborate feels good because it takes off some of the pressure, anxiety, and stress that I've felt. The *Essential Workers* series will definitely continue, but in a more natural way so that I'm not just producing. I've acknowledged that it should just happen naturally.

SMG: What do you think the world would look like if the world loved Black women and people? What would that look like for you?

AB: It's difficult for me to imagine that far. One thing I do think about—my friend Alexis said this to me, and I've been repeating it a lot—"When we get to the gates of heaven, there will be a sign that says *Black Women Only*." My utopia is a space where we can decide how we are treated and how we are seen in this world. We should have a Black dyke president. She should be dark skinned, dykey, from Brooklyn, and everyone else around her should also look like that. It's hard to think about because the world is so shitty right now. I know it's not going to happen in my lifetime, and I've accepted that. I've committed myself to doing the type of work that I do for my community in hopes that I inspire generations after me. Maybe it's not even fair for me to project what I want this world to look like if I know I'm not even going to be here to witness it.

SMG: So your work is a vessel for those in the future?

AB: For sure. The ideas that people—white men—put into the world years ago were not concerned about the people that have to live through them. I don't wanna write rules. Of course, there are simple, basic rules that I'm preaching for Black women, but somebody even younger than me needs to decide, because they will get to live through it. I just feel like I'm here to uplift and do the work that I can while I'm here. That's more important to me than imagining a time where I won't even exist, at least right now. Maybe later on in my life, I'll feel more inspired to communicate things to younger people and make that my mission, but right now, I'm just focusing on making people happy, you know? I love making people happy.

- p. 249, Fig. 1. Aya Brown, *"Aja" Edu Worker, COVID-19*, 2020.
Colored pencil on brown kraft paper.
9 x 12 inches (22.6 x 30.48 cm).
- p. 250, Fig. 2. Aya Brown, *"Pregnant Angie" City Park Worker, COVID-19*, 2020.
Colored pencil on brown kraft paper.
9 x 12 inches (22.6 x 30.48 cm).
- p. 251, Fig. 3. Aya Brown, *"Obachan" Nurse, COVID-19*, 2020.
Colored pencil on brown kraft paper.
9 x 12 inches (22.6 x 30.48 cm).
- p. 252, Fig. 4. Aya Brown, *Hospital Housekeeper, COVID-19*, 2020.
Colored pencil on brown kraft paper.
9 x 12 inches (22.6 x 30.48 cm).
- p. 253, Fig. 5. Aya Brown, *"Keyanna" EMT, COVID-19*, 2020.
Colored pencil on brown kraft paper.
9 x 12 inches (22.6 x 30.48 cm).
- p. 254, Fig. 6. Aya Brown, *"Keasha & leesha" Kingsborough NYCHA Workers, COVID-19*, 2020.
Colored pencil on brown kraft paper.
9 x 12 inches (22.6 x 30.48 cm).
- p. 255, Fig. 7. Aya Brown, *USPS Worker, COVID-19*, 2020.
Colored pencil on brown kraft paper.
9 x 12 inches (22.6 x 30.48 cm).
- p. 256, Fig. 8. Aya Brown, *Nurse 2, COVID-19*, 2020.
Colored pencil on brown kraft paper.
9 x 12 inches (22.6 x 30.48 cm).

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Aja Brown
4/24/16
Caid - 19
Aja "New" Brown



April
7/11/20
Covid-19
"ANCIENT"



Ayumi
"おは"あちゃん"
COVID-19
International Nurses day
May 12, 2020



April 2
4/19/20
COVID-19



April 20
4/20/20
COVID-19
"Persepolis"



Ag. Dine
COVID-19
7/21/20



April B
4/10/20
COVID-19



Angela

4/7/2020
COVID-19

The school of very hard knocking has a waitlist long as ridiculous acrylics

Keep talking back. See if I don't slap your taste into another Taco Tuesday. They didn't teach you how to braid in school? They won't let you take that backpack of Rap Snacks in the Omnimax. When you do learn to braid, it's 'gon be in prison. Ooo she wrong, but she know it though. That's why she running. Heaven's a second earth. Get up there and niggas still crying, food still costs, lotion drums out in rings on your hand. But that's the end. That's prison. That's the orange earth of what I been accused of. If my call fails twice and I got a VIP card, the first thing imma do is call up there and ask why my VIP card ain't working. Bitch, I know just enough to be dangerous. I know where your mama stay so is that why you running? Several young Samuel Ls audition for the role of ornery but I was born to play that shit. Back in Rikers there's a place called grab a plate, take a plea, pleat and strip a sheet. On the flight to afterlife, they 'gon sell airplane shots of hen and hurricane relief. When I die I wanna speak to Kalief immediately.

Spooked by a Slew of Layoffs,

Spooked by a slew of layoffs, I bought a mini marquee to slouch against the spool pin of my Singer. That sign was my first tactic to stand out in a slave's place without directly standing, jiving, or smiling, as I hated doing those in Missouri during the week. A second tactic was my wardrobe choice on Wednesdays, the days of our seamstress meetings. I took the little kiki as an opportunity to dress a way that roused a public interest: kente cloths, ankh socks, bantu knots—I was partial to the emblems of elders. Senegalese twists, 4C yaki ponies on a bungee drawstring—Dark and gaudy, I felt I could not be removed.

I spent weekends perusing the ruins of hoods, sticks, and boonies in pursuit of clothing as foreign and unrelatable as possible. Some were holey and needed sewing or would sag so needed shrinking on high heat dry, as I was, at the time, losing weight to be familiar and relatable as possible.

My mini marquee posed the question, *What r u pretending not to know 2day?* A coworker sent me:

Sweetie, that sign! Best,

Yes! Ms. Toni Cade Bambara. Cheers,

Moorison? Best,

No, Ms. Toni of Queens, the obscene of Bed Stuy. Cheers,

She wrote about that milkman; black
and breastfed too long. Best,

This the Toni of deep sightings, of guerilla
love and cheers,

Back in the passed, I've been even worse with first
names ☹. We probably have Cade twisting in some
dirty borough's grave! Best,

Past is a soft behind. *Passed* is a tender-
headed secondline. Toni *PASSED* in a
December. You called me Keisha in the
PAST. And if any black woman turned an
inch in any grave, you'd feel Ares wait the
Woolsworth counters 'tween the pleats of police
jeeps. Gods like Toni, you don't ever
remember them waiting.

Cheers,

At the Scene, the Angels

At the scene, the Angels PD urge Mr. Du to *sir, lower your hand!* During the death, Mr. Du was asleep in the family van. The bark of the shot, the snitch of surveillance, it conceives Ali butterfly bee under which Soon Ja promptly dissolves. Knuckles were no foreign performance in their marriage. In mine, wifebeaters yank back my wigcaps all the time. Above each assault, White Jesus lit His loosey, and I became the cameraman involved. All I could think was Ellis the island and mammie the mast, a ton in our shooting deaths. Blood orange and blood of baby girl whiffed up from the sill, both swearing in patois and smelling lilac good. But then Jesus ashed His cig and clocked outta His shift. He no longer needed women of color to make His point about obedience; He had mammograms and Florida Man for that. A city's number one killer of people is people who are obedient to their senses. Sense outlawed—now wouldn't that be trife? Jesus would need us so pathetically then! But in any life, it's never my business why the savior is the color of a wedding dress and not tap shoes. I'll have my book of light and He'll have His. For killing anyone, He and mammograms have their lofty reasons and our men have theirs, tenderized as they are. But any afterlife—a Paradise—is no killer of colored girls, even when pushed. The skies of that sort of nirvana are innocent and inconsolable as we laze forward, inventing simultaneous gods to save us. Ornery gods of pansex, midterms, safe medications. We create gods without penises, without which they are made only of air and belief. No punishment.

Latasha's Gravesite in Paradise

Latasha's gravesite in Paradise Memorial Park may have been disturbed in a slew of unearthings initiated by the cemetery proprietors in 1995. If so, she was exhumed and flung onto a mound with other bone black remains. The location of the pile is unknown to me, though you know it's a way of reselling plots, of making space for the lucrative business of dying. You know cemeteries know better. You know where this cemetery stay. You got bones to suck the marrow out of when it comes to any paradise. Paradise shouldn't be the name of no cemetery. There are no cemeteries in *Paradise*, the novel. Men shiv women in a convent and when it's time to pile the bodies, our bodies are nowhere to be disturbed. No air. No punishment. Paradise.

Horse Heads

There are questions I do not ask
and friends I never see.
In my wildest dreams I am simply sleeping.
Even here dogs walk from the trees,
and gather speed in the orchard
to lie down at their master's feet. Even now
I walk down the hallway below the faux-gold
numbers on the doors, and find myself
on the balcony again where I feel the city
above and below me—the black light
in the clubs downtown
breaking the bodies into lit pieces.
The credit cards, and chip readers.
If my memory takes me anywhere
now it is the carton of photographs
above the bleach in the closet.
I turned the images over
in my hand. My mind
swinging open like a doorway.
In my favorite class, The Language of Literary Art,
I read, *the most significant memories
are those without narrative.*
I watch the red light from the towers
on the hill cover the houses below
to ease my mind. I pull each white thread
strand-by-strand from my brain
in the garden, and the blurred vision
lay silently against material, and scale.

Sometimes I see myself again
opening my eyes in a barn back home,
looking up through the rafters
as the mare's begin to rise. In hell,
you'd find me doing the same.
Looking down at a pair of horse heads
in the carriage. Remembering a life I used to live
inside a life I live alone.

Príncipe Negro

para George Floyd

Aunque su sueño era lanzarte al Mississippi,
aquel caníbal de uniforme opaco
ha quemado en silencio su rodilla
sobre tu cuello inerte.
El humo de tu carne va subiendo hasta el cielo mojado.
Saltando entre las flores, el aire de tus bronquios
persigue su fantasma hasta morder
el colmillo sangriento del caníbal.
Y tú alientas, indómito, sobre el asfalto húmedo,
bajo la sombra quieta de un manzano
en Minneapolis,
donde colocaremos, para ti,
este brillante, este limpio
príncipe negro nuestro,
a tu memoria.

Black Prince

for George Floyd

Although he wanted to drown you in the Mississippi,
that cannibal of filthy uniform
silently branded your lifeless neck
with his knee.

The smoke of your flesh rises into a wet sky.
Leaping among the flowers, your bronchial air
hunts its ghost until it bites
the cannibal's bloody fang.

And you inspire, invincible on sweating asphalt
in the shade of a quiet Minneapolis block,
where we place for you
this brilliant, this shining black prince of ours
in memory.

from *In It*

Season of Death, Season of Skin, Season of No Mellow Fruitfulness,
No MF, Season of Fugue, Season of Seizure, Season of Rent, Season
of What Was, Season of Codes, Drops, Pogroms, Season of No Shadow,
Breathless Season, Season of Scat, Season of Hell You Tamboult,
Season Sugared Over, Namesake, Nicknamed, Nameless Season of Death,
Season of All Souls, Season in the Condensery, Tiny Season of My My-ness,
Season of Kitchenette, Season of Whiteness with a Cough, Season
of Figuration, Trickeration, Season of Stalls and Stills, Still . . . , Season
of Singing Different—Fox Bark and Dialect of Injured Animal, Season
of Can't Go Elsewhere, Can't Meander, Improvise, Season Gone Inside.

It was winter all spring and summer and the streets were inside
us, Season of That Whistling Noise, Season of 1868, De-Skilled
Season, De-Tuned Season Like a Guitar, Season of No Rodeo, I
wore a mask like a bandit, you wore a mask, gown, gloves like
the phantom of the opera, the surgeon of the theater of Us, Season
of Please, Man, Season of Momma, Season of Enumeration, Calibration,
Hum, Season of Please, Man, Season of Someone's Cousin, Someone's
Darker Brother, Season of Spelled Out, Season of the *Shipwreck*
of The Singular, Flotsam of the Inner Life, Jetsam of Protection Rackets,
Season of the End of The Party, Season of Passing as Someone.

How with this rage... this outrage exchanged like Eros, can't be bought
or sold, but like songs other people play, transferred—hell is songs
other people play—whose instruments are sirens, whose audience
is jurors, whose evidence is spectral: pass it on or tear it up, shall we?
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea... Beauty in the system, Beauty busted,
cuffed, sentenced, Beauty prosecuted by trauma, Beauty
sang to our wordless verdict, Beauty it curves, mourns, reverbs,
it exposes its throat, Beauty lit by the light of cell phones, Beauty
takes a plea, *How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea whose action is no stronger
than a flower...* one in a bouquet left outside the convenience store.

Mild Blue Dream

I put the skullcap back on, and the hoodie, and I give the Uber driver another dollar. He wishes me and Russell the best, says he was glad he got to meet me, says that's the one great thing about the job, meeting good people, hearing their stories.

Inside, they sit me down in the gray chair, bring me the baby blanket, start the chemo drip. The nurse asks me how I want the room. Some people like to play Candy Crush on their phones. Some people like to watch TV. Some people say they don't feel too badly when the drip starts, but I'm always fighting it. It's better for me to sit mostly in the dark, concentrate on my breathing, bring my mind to good times, good places, think about people I love or my loves I remember. My daughter Ronda, my daughter Ashley, my new grandbaby Camille, my mother and father, my aunt Ilene, my aunt Hattie.

And lately, more and more often, Russell. I don't have to reach back in memory any further than yesterday, last night, this morning, so that's where I go. I'm in my house, in my bathroom, dolling up for him. Makeup, lipstick. Straightening my wig. Really trying for him. Every time I'm with Russell I think what if this time is the last time? I know he's thinking it, too.

He's waiting outside his house when my daughter drops me off. Pacing. Holding a cigarette in one hand, a pink sweater in the other. "Let's get this on you," he says. He drapes the sweater around my shoulders. I'm not cold right now, but sometimes I am. I wear the sweater, honor the intention.

Inside, he's still pacing. Fussing over the juicer. He's convinced this is a big help. The kitchen counter is a mess. Cruciferous vegetables (tumor killers), carrots (cell protectors), tomatoes (lycopene, for the lining of the lungs), garlic (for Dracula, just in case.) And on tea plates, thin slices of avocado, raisins, pine nuts, walnuts, and almonds, on a bed of drizzled olive oil. Above him, a dot matrix sign on yellow copy paper: "Let your food be your medicine."—Hippocrates.

We eat. "How is it?" he says. I'm so glad the portions are tiny. "Do you want a glass of wine?"

“White,” I say. “Just a little.” He’s already pouring it. I can’t take the red. Terrible headaches. “It’s going to my head already,” I say.

“I’m sorry.”

“No. It’s pleasant. I like it. It feels good to relax. Do you have any marijuana?” He reaches into a ceramic jar shaped and painted like Cookie Monster. Opens the lid. Inside, baggies, hand-labeled with a neat black ink.

“Blackberry Kush,” he says. He tosses it to me. “Big pain relief, my brother says. Lots of THC. Downside is it might knock you out early.”

“I don’t want to go down too early. I have some business to do with you.”

“I’m glad to hear it. So how about this?” Throws me another baggie. “Harlequin. A fair amount of THC, but a fair amount of CBD, too. A clear-headed strain.” He tosses one after another. The baggies pile up on the dining room table. Northern Lights, good for the stomach, possible semi-comatosis. Blueberry Diesel, a mood-elevator. Bubba Kush, gives you the munchies. Granddaddy Purple, for the great big high. Chernobyl, gets the motor going. Pennywise, another neutral blend despite being named for a killer clown. Mild Blue Dream, low in THC, high in CBD, a smooth ride with anti-nausea properties for chemo. Cinex, jump-starts the creative. Cannatonic, knocks you out cold.

“How about you put the chemo stuff in my purse,” I say, “and we get the motor going on the back porch. What’s that one called?”

“Chernobyl.”

“That’s a terrible name. I’m not smoking that.”

“We can give it a different name.”

“You can do that?”

“When I was a bartender I did it all the time,” Russell says. “You can take great liberties with the names of things. That’s the first thing they teach you.”

“What kind of names were you pushing on people?”

“People like dirty names for their drinks.”

“How dirty?”

“Not even medium dirty,” he says. “You know what I’m talking about. You’ve ordered low dirty before.” “Like what?” “You tell me.” “OK. You mean like a Slippery Nipple?” “Yeah.” “Like a Bend Over Shirley.” “You got it.” “Suck, Bang &

Blow.” “Red-Headed Slut.” “Cock-Sucking Cowboy.” “Sex on the Beach!” “That one hardly even counts.” “That one’s like church music.” We’re laughing and laughing. The dining room smells like blueberry skunk. Russell’s cheeks are red. He is so beautiful.

We wrap ourselves in blankets and smoke in Cracker Barrel rocking chairs on the back porch. For a while I fall asleep. “Pleasant doze?” he says, in some hour of darkness outside of time. He’s still rocking beside me. Now he’s complaining about the wind, now about the cloud cover. He’s bought a fancy new digital camera, and wants to photograph the stars, but even if the clouds cooperate, there’s the light pollution of the city, and after that the problem of all the satellites.

“How come you never had children?” I say. “Is that the wrong thing to ask?”

“I didn’t mean not to have children,” he says.

“You’re not too old, though,” I say. “It’s different with men.”

“I’m too old.”

“Men become fathers old. It happens. Clint Eastwood. Warren Beatty. Jack Nicholson. Eddie Murphy.”

“I think they go to Mexico and get stem cell implants. They have machines that clean your blood. They sleep in oxygen tents.”

“Maybe you’ll meet some young sweet thing.”

“Did you ever think of having another baby? After your two?”

It occurs to me that this is something we’ve never talked about. The stillborn baby. Vera. The five miscarriages. The pain of all that. The things people say. “No,” I lie. The night is so pleasant. I don’t want to get into it. “Two was enough for me. But listen.”

I watch his eyes as I reach into my pocket. There is a mystery at the center of me. I want him to believe it is so. For him, I want to create it. A thousand surprises. A million tantalizing unknowns. I press the wrapped condom into his hand. “Let’s not take any chances,” I say.

“Yes,” he says solemnly. “I won’t let you down.” He takes the wrapper, slides it in his pocket. I love this charade. We both know I don’t have a uterus, but who wants to talk about the latent poison residues from the chemo inside me, the barriers required to defeat them? The least romantic conversation in the world, necessary only once if you find the right person.

In the bedroom, undressing in the dark, I feel his hand graze my chemo port. Another indignity. We kiss, but I can't get my head into it. What does he see? What does he smell? What is he tasting when he kisses me? I'm exhausted. I need a minute. But then it comes back. The person I am. The sexual person. For a minute she is back. "Do you want me?" "I do." "Really?" "I really want you." Foreplay. Slow. Then sex, but I can't. Not ready. More time. Slow. Lube. Then, when I'm ready, first he can, then he can't. "Hold me," I say. But it hurts when he holds me.

Then it's three in the morning. I'm resting, not sleeping. My head is itching. I take off my wig, place it on the bedpost. "Russell, you awake?" I whisper so I won't wake him. "Not sleeping," he says, "just pretending."

In his bathroom, peeing, I look at myself in the mirror. Even in the flattering soft yellow from the safety light, my face is the wrong face, my head is the wrong head. Who is this sickly old woman appearing where I ought to appear?

Every time this happens, I pick apart a different feature. Whatever bothers in the moment. Tonight, my hair. What's left of it. How long has it been falling out in patches? I touch it and a little more falls away.

"Russell, baby?" "Yes?" "Can you come in here a second?" I stand wigless in my robe. I have never felt so naked. But now I want him to look at it like I have to look at it. See the truth.

"What's up?" he says.

"Look."

"I see you."

"Do you?" I point at my head. I should be weeping big whale tears, but all of a sudden I feel strong.

"That's nothing," he says. "Look at this." Points at his head. His pale, shaved, bald head. "I have less hair than you, if we're counting hairs."

"How do you do that?"

"I shave my head," he says.

"No. How? Do you have some kind of electric razor? Or do you lather up?"

"I'll show you," he says.

He reaches into the cabinet, takes out his electric clippers. "They have all these guards you can put on them," he says. "Number four here leaves half an inch. They

go all the way down to number one, which is pretty damn short. Of course, I don't use a guard at all. I knock it down as far as this will let me. Then I grab these."

The gel and the razor. "You have to get the right blade. They make these flex blades. Look at this." He arches the blade at the corners. "And you have to make sure the blade isn't dull. You don't want to cut yourself."

"You hang your head over the sink?"

"No. I do it in the shower."

"Do you ever cut yourself?"

"Never, ever. I am a head-shaving expert. You wouldn't believe how good I am."

"Would you shave my head?"

"Really? Yes. Any time. Of course."

"What about now?"

He's afraid of slipping, he says, so it can't be the shower. It has to be the bath. He's afraid of distraction, he says, so he won't be all the way naked. He'll wear his red and yellow Ocean Pacific swim trunks. He's afraid of the contours of a new head, he says, so we'll stage it in a chair in the kitchen first. Scissors, then the electric shaver, then a once over to make sure the skin of my head isn't getting irritated. He's afraid the bathwater will be too cold, so we won't run it right away. We'll wait until the last minute, after the last pass of the shaver, before he sweeps the kitchen floor.

Then we're in the tub. He's behind me. A space heater in the middle of the bathroom floor. A couple of unscented candles. The plain shower dome light above us. He rubs the shaving gel into my scalp. Fingertips. Slowly. Nape and temple. Then he wets the razor. Light strokes. Gentle. First with the grain, then against. A balancing palm on my back, my chest, the side of my head. He folds my ears down. Shaves along the contours. Rinses the blade. Another rub of shaving gel wherever a second pass is required. Then a soft water rinse from a red plastic cup, his hands running interference. Not a drop in my eyes. Then the soft cotton towel dry. Then the soft moisturizing lotion. And not a word the whole time. A quiet so complete I can hear every small splash, every meaningful breath. I survey my future life. I can't imagine anything more intimate awaits.

Evangelist

The sweetest preacher I ever knew
 never said a word about the desert
 or the rock hill or the bitter wine
 or the spirit. He only spoke to the narrow time
 I witnessed every day. The hairy
 ryegrass bunching the neighbor's yard
 the cold slant of light of sun
 that were the longish
 minute after dawn scummed
 silver faucet and toothy breadcrumbs
 fallen unto
 for vermin's feast. Lord he knew where
 to find the electric mouths along
 the wall. His tongue could play the knock of the dryer.
 His lips sucked the spilled vinegar
 I let go to waste that I never pickled with.
 Once he told me to clean around
 the drain to use salt and cold water
 to scour the coffee stain corona.

The high sheen my scrubbing made made
me cry. I wiped those tears away
too and absolved I hung my rag to dry.

Canto XXXVII

:: to find the true economy of the derivative soul

wind that is paradise
ink-smudge comet-tail
comma a thoughtful wick
dark breath in the candle sun
woodpecker knocks the beetle
from the bark of lodgepole pine
this poverty that nothing here is mine
must get poorer yet
& the black fly lands on white page
walking slow as if to read the page
Emperor Tenji / *Out in autumn fields*
stands my makeshift hut of grass—
its thatch so rough
that the long sleeves of my robe
are always wet with dew

:: to find the true makeshift hut of grass

swaying in breeze when there is none
hammer weeps to see
sheathes of grass bound by a strand of grass
haven heaven will blow apart
centuries of the makeshift grass mind
grass heart days & the milky way
a strange entanglement of doors
describes this thought about the universe
night & day are one

hesiod demoted to teaching grammar to stars
homer beaten with a stick
& so are life & death

:: to find the true heedful retreat in the face of being

black fly slow in morning cold
sits before the word LOVE as if reading it
Lady Ukon / *I am forsaken—*
but about myself I don't care
the blade of grass bends down
when the fly has finished the poem
a thought lands on its own shadow
ant crawls across the lines of the page
as if the poem doesn't exist
immense pattern, weaver-god, 3-toed woodpecker, net
note never written but somehow sent
ant crawls across the lines of the page
as if the poem doesn't exist

:: to find the true unpayable debt

traditional images of the transience of dew
each dew drop on a monk's sleeve
contains the bright sinking moon
traditional images of the transient moon
an open book in a makeshift hut
woodstove burns weeds, wild geese cry on far shore
smoke trace finds the crack in the wood
escapes but deepens the star mood called haiku
no black fly, the shadow lands in my eye
Socho / *That it will not stay forgotten*

makes you hate the world the more
that it will not stay forgotten
If a man have not order within him
If a man have not order within him
apricot blossoms blow
east to west
and I have tried to keep them from falling

Canto XXXIX

] memory thought's fold
pointing at the grazing herd pointing at my ear
that labyrinth is also an orchid that monster also a mind
mutable and mute-able silent inside the
vase the violets by a loop of twine loosely bound reminded
me somehow of myself loosely bound by a loop of
time silent inside the vast apprenticeship in unlearning
the graveyard in the air but the nursery is the epic too
every line could be another line of another kind
the poppy could take off his bronze helmet and stand up straight
again that fact could become a fact if we we what
have faith make faith mr. coleridge [

] ms. dickinson tell me the Law the laws
are planks laid over abyss you learn to run quickly
across or you learn not to run at all memory is
thought's amethyst scent the fact buried is
some kind of ore or is some kind of brick
in the mine of or the babel ruin of the
mind the world *worlds* doesn't define it describes
the condition thoughts thinking more than they can
think a me that wanders through myself
arriving somehow late too late to say *I*
and though the tongue bangs hard against the bell
nothing rings an accusative without a nominative
utterance of the dentals not bright brass singing out
to the universal edge just a stutter prayer *d d d d* [

] think of me as a sparrow thinks of
 singing as approach to song as thought's reproach
dimwit diamond daimon dunce
 to one who opens his mouth to listen says
 a saying never halting into a said the glory there
 that from the shadows of the garden calls one out
 of one's fear to say at last not *me* but "I am here"
 lord turn my pride to love is another form
 of the latent care so suddenly near the moon
 a mirror the night covers with crape mourning that
 death always yet to happen that makes the crooked letters
 of our days a straight line the horizon curves I
 know it but I cannot see it curve is the sparrow wrong [

] count to one count as the child counts to ten
 on fingers one by one count the bones in the hand
 count the eyes in the stranger's face it adds up to two
 count the earrings count the hair snipped off
 in the porcelain sink the child made herself bangs
 count the letters all twenty-six count the letters
 kept in the shoebox for years and for whom count
 the years count to one it is as far into infinity
 as you can go as far as the hermit in his cave who
 spent every waking second counting the seconds
 who dreamt all night of counting too as far as the philosopher
 who says *thou* to hear the echo *thou* echo in what cave
 small cave of the letter *a* where someone not myself
 or was it me lit the candle in the idol's mouth I [

] am speaking not of heaviness but of gravity that I am
 here speaking not of seriousness but of gravity
 that it rains it could rain it is raining in the world

that is the same world God a word that is
the *unlikely way* not proper noun not a noun
not a theme the rain is not a theme God is not
a thesis not a theme a syllable I learn to obey
a sound overwhelming all that is said
until it is the fragments remain from this shard-I
I am I shared this poem it is not good or bad
a kind of response or is it a kind of responsibility
a grave form that holds the words to the page an
ear that hears a face that does and does not turn away [

] who opened me up and placed inside me this idea
on some bed sleeping in the mind a bed
that can't wake up the pasture inside the herd
the song inside the sparrow unsaying the said
back to the fundamental *aleph* that is no letter that is
no sound a thought that memory folds in half
and half again almost forever until what remains is
a passivity a rupture a wound that speaks
but has no mouth a man is a jug so I said in my sleep
a man is a jug with the handle inside him so I saw
in my dream and hands are such mysteries reaching out
to reach within as if the violets could be simply
a gift given the fist opening isn't the image
of offering but from sleep's own threat this nostalgia
of waking up holding what cannot be held
the sky entire or just enough air for the next breath [

I'm Not Writing About *Summerspace*

Someone mentioned *Summerspace*, and that's when I remembered *Summerspace*. And remembered that, despite spending 2019—the centennial of his birth—writing about Merce Cunningham and his dances, I hadn't planned to write about *Summerspace*: that blast of turning movement both into and out of space, specks of color, light saturation, turns, sunlight through leaves, turns, decentered, mutable tempos, turning. By “blast” I mean expansion, I mean opening out, I mean constant motion then stillness just for a second before turning to motion again “as a plant waits to grow, or as the flash of lightning hangs in the air,”¹ I mean this moment, just this

Enter upstage right, running

one, the blast not a violence but an unbolting of vision into this one passage of time. I love *Summerspace*—but I wasn't writing about it, until, of course, I was.

I hadn't felt the urge to write about the environment of *Summerspace*. Not about Morton Feldman's *Ixion*, that gentle score, its repeated high register notes, spare, like the loveliest little birds, like “bubbles rising to [the] surface” of a pond, except for the moment when “there is a muffled effect in the bass register like distant thunder.”² Or like daisies blossoming in a field³ or like “dust motes in the sunlight,”⁴ a “glimmering and humming electronic climate.”⁵ Not about

running

the lighting—“very bright and simple”—which shifts imperceptibly and “appears to breathe between warm... and white.”⁶ Not really a flickering though some have seen that, as if light is filtering through leaves. “Warm” here referring not to temperature or emotional state or interpersonal relations but to the warm colors

¹ Merce Cunningham quoted in David Vaughn, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years* (New York: Aperture, 1997), 97.

² David Vaughn, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years* (New York: Aperture, 1997), 110.

³ Clive Barnes, “Cunningham, the Sea-Green Incorruptible, Triumphs With City Ballet Production,” the *New York Times*, April 15, 1966.

⁴ Ellen Cornfield in *Summerspace Repertory Video*, by Daniel Madoff (New York: Merce Cunningham Trust, 2019).

⁵ Deborah Jowitt, “Illusion of Choice—Acceptance of Chance” in *Time and the Dancing Image* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1988), 277.

⁶ Christine Shallenberg, “*Summerspace* (1958) Lighting Information,” 01 *Summerspace* Lighting Summary, 2012, digital reproduction of the original typescript, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center and The Merce Cunningham Trust, New York City Public Library for the Performing Arts.

of the light spectrum. It is hard to ignore those connotations, however, just as it is hard to ignore the connotations of “summer.”

Nor had I felt the urge to write about the polka dots and splatters of Robert Rauschenberg’s pointillist backdrop, all those neon colors, not pastels after all although at times they come across as pastels—why would that be? Still sunny but not like a tea party, more like a Bacchanalia, and even that isn’t what Rauschenberg was going for. “The ’58 drop cloth looked like a jungle!” he said, not like a candy store.⁷ Not about the unitard costumes, also dotted and splattered so that dancers at rest “are camouflaged like insects or animals whose protective coloring conceals them in their environment.”⁸ When Cunningham asked Rauschenberg to make the décor, he said, “One thing I can tell you about this dance is it has no center.”⁹

Although backdrop and dancers never resolve into a recognizable image, Seurat’s *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* haunts this décor: of course the dots but also the summer, the sunlight and tree shade, the sweet colors, the figures standing and sitting together and yet not together, their spines so tall and firm. The dotty backdrop and costumes and Seurat’s painting echo each other across time, create a visual pathway of ease. But I wasn’t planning to write about any of that either.

Not about *Summerspace*. I’m afraid
it’s too beautiful, too easy to love.

And it is beautiful, so beautiful, and comfortable, and delightful. My clue—it’s been staged on numerous ballet companies: the New York City Ballet (three times now), the Cullberg Ballet, the Boston Ballet, the Zurich Ballet, the Ballet de Lyon, and Ballet West among others. In 1964, Clive Barnes called it Cunningham’s “most sensuously pretty ballet... a lovely shimmering thing,”¹⁰ and in 1966, he began his review of the New York City Ballet production with a long description likening this dance to the loveliest of lovely summer days. When the City Ballet revived it in 1999, Anna Kisselgoff called it a “sea-breeze beauty of a

⁷ Robert Rauschenberg quoted in Carolyn Brown, “Summerspace: Three Revivals,” *Dance Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (Summer 2002): 78.

⁸ “Summerspace” in *Merce Cunningham & Dance Company*, ed. David Vaughn (New York: The Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts, 1963).

⁹ Merce Cunningham in Marilyn Vaughn Drown, “Merce Cunningham and Meaning: The Zen Connection” in *Merce Cunningham: Creative Elements*, ed. David Vaughn, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 19.

¹⁰ Clive Barnes, “Movement, Sound and Light,” *Dance and Dancers* 15, no. 9 (September 1964), 21.

masterpiece,”¹¹ and in 2002, Alastair Macaulay wrote that “the shifting paths and metres of *Summerspace* become more poetic on every viewing.”¹² Seventeen years later, he wrote, “I find it a complete tonic, and a rich, deeply natural, stage world.”¹³ Macaulay is right that by now, the dance’s “quiet idyll [has] cast a spell,” and that “*Summerspace*” [has become] one of Cunningham’s most celebrated, even classic, dances.”¹⁴ Cunningham himself called it “transparent.”¹⁵

But I don’t want to write about beauty and ease! I love Cunningham’s dances because they’re challenging, I tell myself, not easeful. I want to resist beauty, but of course, I’m seduced by it too. I love it! The bird-like tweeting sounds, the confetti backdrop, the composed and tranquil judiciousness with which a leg is raised, the careful counterpoint of the men’s jumps.

The octopus changes colors while she sleeps: white to yellow to marbled ochre, scaly brown, back to white. She turns very dark. “Octopuses will do that when they leave the bottom,” the scientist’s voice-over says. “This is a camouflage, like she’s just subdued a crab and now she’s going to sit there and eat it and she doesn’t want anyone to notice her... All the different color patterns just flashing one after another. You don’t usually see that when an animal’s sleeping. ... But, yeah, if she’s dreaming, that’s the dream.” He says the last with an excited, almost disbelieving laugh.¹⁶ I wasn’t going to, but this little video made me want to write about *Summerspace*.

Not about *Summerspace*.
My ramblings about it won’t make
sense if you’ve never seen it. But I don’t want
to just describe it, step by step—and
even that... Ballet terminology
only goes so far.

¹¹ Anna Kisselgoff, “Ceaseless Novelty in a Lifetime of Dance,” the *New York Times*, July 18, 1999. URL.

¹² Alastair Macaulay, “ARTS: A master of the space,” *Financial Times*, June 1, 2002. URL.

¹³ Alastair Macaulay (@alastair.macaulay), “1, 2, 3, 4. The first two photographs here, by Andrea Mohin for the *New York Times*, are of Ballet de Lyon dancers—Tyler Galster first....” Instagram, October 5, 2019. URL.

¹⁴ Alastair Macaulay, “Merce Cunningham’s Rare Birds,” the *New York Times*, August 15, 2019. URL.

¹⁵ Merce Cunningham quoted in “Energy and positions, clarity of the dances” in Merce Cunningham and Jacqueline Lesschaeve, *The Dancer and the Dance* (New York–London: Marion Boyars, 1991), 132.

¹⁶ “Octopus Dreaming.” NaturePBS. Youtube. URL.

Perhaps I can allow myself to write about *Summerspace* if I think of its beauty as a sort of scrim. Despite its ease and the easefulness it generates in me, it's difficult—of course it is. Difficult to dance and, for some, sometimes still, sometimes for me even though I've seen it many times, difficult to watch. Cunningham's own dancers have found it difficult. When it was choreographed in 1958, Carolyn Brown was hankering for a challenge. Merce gave her one, and she "snatched" up the gauntlet he'd thrown down, learning every type of turn he devised, turning her "bête noire" at the time. She said working on it pushed her and the other dancers "to the very edge of [their] technical ability."¹⁷ This dance is a puzzle of single turns and complex combinations of turns (slowly, quickly, down low with bent knees, up high in relevé or jumping even, turns in one place, falling even, swooping turns, turns travelling through space), a

running clockwise

meditation on turns, and through all the turns, a question: on these two feet, how does the human body move? Forty-one years later, Brown remarked again on the difficulty (this little gem buried in the notebook Robert Swinston kept when restaging the dance in 1999): "This turning phrase is jumped on ronde-de-jamb turn and attitude. A killer.... Okay?"¹⁸ Learning Merce's role 40 years later, Ashley Chen felt the "simplicity of the choreography... was very frightening... because there was no way of hiding behind anything... I freaked out because I didn't think I was capable of doing this type of dancing."¹⁹

Perhaps audiences also felt exposed in the presence of *Summerspace*. Accustomed to the narrative of story ballets, the musical connections of Balanchine, or the strong identifiable emotions of Martha Graham, and then faced with *Summerspace*'s "juxtapositions of unrelated movements"²⁰ (simultaneous but separate), sudden changes of direction and rhythm, and

The dance "straggle[s] all over the stage,"
one early review said, "with no
beginning, no middle and no end."²¹

¹⁷ Carolyn Brown, "Connecticut: Summer 1958" in *Chance and Circumstance: Twenty Years with Cage and Cunningham* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 221.

¹⁸ Carolyn Brown in Robert Swinston, *Summerspace 1999*, Swinton notebook (1999), digital reproduction of the original manuscript, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center and The Merce Cunningham Trust, New York City Public Library for the Performing Arts.

¹⁹ Ashley Chen in *Summerspace Repertory Video*, by Daniel Madoff (New York: Merce Cunningham Trust, 2019).

²⁰ Anna Kisselgoff, "Ceaseless Novelty in a Lifetime of Dance," the *New York Times*, July 18, 1999. URL.

²¹ P.W. Manchester, "Merce Cunningham and Dance Co," *Dance News* XXXVI, no. 3 (March 1960), 11.

refusal to prioritize the center of the stage, perhaps audiences felt thrown back on themselves, to themselves, asked to make of this dance what they could. Of its premier, Cunningham wrote, “The audience was puzzled.”²²

Is it still difficult to watch? By now we’ve become accustomed to Cunningham’s discontinuities and simultaneities, and we can, let’s say, find a graceful echo of the Three Graces in a grouping of dancers. Three women circle each other, then coalesce into a scene perhaps painted by Raphael, perhaps in a landscape by Poussin, perhaps the maidens that circle the top of Maybeck’s Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco with their heads permanently bent, perhaps carved in marble. One faces the center of their little circle, those flanking her face out. A calm. A classicism. Twenty-two seconds later, they split apart, reversing the steps that brought them together. But I must still choose where my eye lands, and making this choice means there are other dancers, other movements, I see only glance-wise, and that’s difficult because I want to see it all.

From the Pantone color guide:

Base: light khaki

Polka Dots: neon pink, neon yellow, neon orange, neon green,
dark purple-red, pink, dark tinted purple, green dark teal, blue,
dark warm red, pale orange

Splatters: blue, pink, dark teal, green, dark purple-red

I’m not writing about space in *Summerspace*—I want to but not yet—not the playing-area of the stage or the way the dancers move into it, through it, and out of it again, shaping space, eating it up; not the metaphorical meadow; not the passing landscape; not even the rehearsal space in which it was formed, the lore and love of which has been passed down through generations of dancers. I don’t want to write about any of this yet, even though Merce wrote that while “the summer part of the title came after the dance was finished... the notion of space was always present.”²³

No, first I want to write about Merce’s studios. With the move to Westbeth in 1971, his company found a glorious home, with windows opening west and east to views over the Hudson River and lower Manhattan, but through the

²² Merce Cunningham, “*Summerspace* Story: How a dance came to be,” *Dance Magazine* 40 (June 1966), 54.

²³ *Ibid.*, 52.

1940s, '50s and even '60s, it was an ongoing scramble to find affordable places to teach and rehearse, and for many years, Cunningham lived off Union Square in a building that was boiling in summer and so cold in winter that ice formed on the stairway walls.²⁴ In November 1957, the year before choreographing *Summerspace*, his roof leaked so badly that costumes, sets, and even a Rauschenberg painting were soaked.²⁵ The wonderful film *498 Third Avenue* follows Cunningham and his dancers through a rehearsal in 1967. The company has finally had some success, at least abroad, but the paint on the studio walls is still peeling. The building, according to David Vaughn, Cunningham's long time archivist, "was going to be torn down if it didn't fall down first."²⁶

Summerspace lets us see.
A labyrinth of turns.

Imagine New York City in summer, mid-twentieth century—you went to the movies for air conditioning, found the stink of garbage on every corner, the smell of pee in every subway station. Even these days, parents who can afford it put their little ones on buses early every morning to day camp on Long Island. Others uncap fire hydrants to fight the heat. I'm thinking about this: how hard it was to keep making art in that city when no one cared about the art you were making, how *difficult*. Cunningham once had \$30.00 to procure costumes for eleven dancers and ended up buying them at Filene's Basement.²⁷ In the 1940s Cunningham had a variety of day jobs, including translating Spanish medical articles into English, his drafts then polished by John Cage. When he received a Guggenheim Fellowship in the 1950s and was asked what he would do with the money, he famously replied, "Eat."²⁸

Imagine, then, six weeks at Connecticut College in New London, where the company rehearsed *Summerspace* in an enormous, elegant parlor—"a real summer space."²⁹ Think humid grass, a heat that smelled of green, and then a salty breeze from Long Island Sound. The dancers remember chandeliers, high

²⁴ Carolyn Brown, "New York: Autumn 1953" in *Chance and Circumstance: Twenty Years with Cage and Cunningham* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 90.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 184–186.

²⁶ David Vaughn, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years* (New York City: Aperture, 1997), 20.

²⁷ Merce Cunningham quoted in David Vaughn, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years* (New York: Aperture, 1997), 63.

²⁸ John Cage, "Where Are We Eating? What Are We Eating? (Thirty-eight Variations on a Theme by Alison Knowles)" in *Merce Cunningham*, ed. James Klosty (New York: Saturday Review Press, E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1975), 58.

²⁹ Jean Freebury, interviewed by Silas Farley, "Hear the Dance 5: *Summerspace*," September 29, 2019, in *City Ballet The Podcast*, produced by New York City Ballet, podcast audio. URL.

ceilings, a polished wooden floor, and French doors opening onto “a beautiful expanse of landscape,”³⁰ with “vistas of lush and stately shade trees.”³¹ Class was in morning, rehearsals in the afternoon, in that room “large enough to accommodate anything freely.”³²

And in that space, space was reimagined. Over the previous winter and spring, Cunningham had established six exit and entrance spots and the twenty-one possible paths between them, each with its own sequence of movements—runs, walks, skips, jumps, and “a complex whirling phrase,” and then used chance procedures to determine direction, speed, shape, the number of dancers who performed an action, and whether they performed together or separately.³³ In New London, the numbers in Cunningham’s charts and the stick figures in his notes rose up and danced. Space, movement, and time can’t be separated in this dance, nor teased apart from the people dancing through space, creating varieties of time. The fast time of a woman—just running, not preparing to do anything but run—in a circle around the stage, creating a spinning space. But the slow time, too, of a dancer lowering himself toward the floor, space coalescing into a point around him. Slow space and fast space pulling at each other as one dancer skips and another follows, stops to extend his arms, never quite grasps her, not quite in sync until—oh—he passes her, oh—he turns, and mid-skip he catches her in his arms and carries her off stage. When one dancer repeats a phrase, time repeats (does it?), and when I must split

“Like the passage of birds, stopping for moments on the ground and then going on, or automobiles more relentlessly throbbing along turnpikes and under and over cloverleaves.... Movement that would be continuous, and could carry the dancer into the playing space and out of it.”³⁴

my attention between one group of dancers and another, time fractures. The movement around and through but not in the center of the stage increases the swirling of space and time. And

³⁰ Marilyn Wood, interview by Susan Kraft, May 21, 22, and 28, 2008, Oral History Interview, New York Public Library, 42, quoted in *Merce Cunningham: Common Time*, ed. Fionne Meade and Joan Rothfuss (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2017), 264.

³¹ Carolyn Brown, “Connecticut: Summer 1958” in *Chance and Circumstance: Twenty Years with Cage and Cunningham* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 218.

³² Merce Cunningham, “*Summerspace* Story: How a dance came to be,” *Dance Magazine* 40 (June 1966), 52.

³³ *Ibid.*, 54.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

I didn't want to write about *Velocities*,
as Cunningham originally titled this dance,
not about that
"poss. of variation through space and time,"³⁵
but here I am.

then, suddenly, there is a center: a woman rests alone on the floor like a mermaid with her tail lifted or a fish or a bird with a lifted tail. "HOLD. Longer than one thinks, but not so long as to DIE there," Carolyn Brown admonishes the dancers she's coaching into her role.³⁶ Then the center's gone again, of course, and again it seems, as John Cage said, that we're watching the goings on in an enormous landscape we can only see part of "as though one were looking out the window of a moving train."³⁷ Or as if we're watching beings move into and out of a meadow. The viewer (this viewer) is very still, not moving past but sitting on a cool shady porch so the meadow creatures do not skitter away. Audience, we are here together. Let's be quiet for this brief afternoon.

Take a breath before the next turn. "How do you turn?" the dancers asked, and Cunningham told them, "The only way to do it is to do it."³⁸

American Camp, San Juan Island, Late September, Sunny, No Breeze, 63°

I planned a path through a tawny field, a light khaki you might say, my afternoon bounded by space but not by time. Ahead of me, dragonflies flitted away. Bees visited. Hawks soared. The sky was full of bird shadows and bird noises. A snake lay very still across the path and tasted air, its tongue rolling in and out slowly. In the distance, flotillas of ducks, gulls, seals' heads, kelp dotted the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Dark on silver water.

In the field, still dots of yellow dandelions, still clusters of dark purple-red blackberries, also some remarkably still green. White sprays of wild carrot, also known as Queen Anne's Lace, or its

³⁵ Merce Cunningham, "Choreographic notes for Summerspace. Notebook 5 of 5," Loose Notes 5 (n.d.), digital reproduction of the original manuscript, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center and The Merce Cunningham Trust, New York City Public Library for the Performing Arts.

³⁶ Carolyn Brown in Robert Swinton, *Summerspace 1999*, Swinton notebook (1999), digital reproduction of the original manuscript, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center and The Merce Cunningham Trust, New York City Public Library for the Performing Arts.

³⁷ John Cage, manuscript notes (n.d.), quoted in David Vaughn, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years* (New York City: Aperture, 1997), 110.

³⁸ Merce Cunningham, "Summerspace Story: How a dance came to be," *Dance Magazine* 40 (June 1966), 54.

running

poisonous cousin, wild hemlock. Blue chicory flower. Dark warm red Christmas berries close to the ground and, higher up, red on the barberry. Near neon orange California poppy. White berries on leafless bushes. The remains of tiny daisies. A single wild pink rose. Dead and dying ferns, brown and yellow.

Sounds, too, not constant: bird, cricket, a different croaking bird, something scurrying, something buzzing (perhaps insects or perhaps electricity through not so distant wires), wind through leaves of course.

The counterpoint to motion is stillness or, no, “To be still and yet still to be dancing.”³⁹ Perhaps the way a room can keep spinning after the turning stops. Perhaps like potential energy. Or like balance—“suspended *as though* forever but FALL.”⁴⁰ Not motion and stillness held against each other, but held inside each other, hand in hand, heart in hand. A moment—just a moment—of stillness happens, too, when four women alight along a diagonal: perch, poise, potential. Then turn back, take off again, their arms out in front, opening and closing, sometimes almost snapping shut, other times almost fluttering—downstage right to upstage left—before splitting to make their separate exits. And a playful slo-mo moment, when one woman steps over another’s lunging front leg, lifting her own leg unnecessarily high and bending it unnecessarily sharply in order to clear the other woman’s thigh—an exaggeration, a series of Muybridge photos.

I know—I can’t stop writing about *Summerspace*,
 its “space-play” as Merce said.
 And about how beautiful it is
 or isn’t.
 But that’s not really
 why I’m writing *Summerspace*.

³⁹ Carolyn Brown, “Connecticut: Summer 1958” in *Chance and Circumstance: Twenty Years with Cage and Cunningham* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 218.

⁴⁰ Carolyn Brown in Robert Swinston, *Summerspace 1999*, Swinton notebook (1999), digital reproduction of the original manuscript, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center and The Merce Cunningham Trust, New York City Public Library for the Performing Arts.

That lovely list of flowers? I'm no naturalist. The only ones I could really identify were the pink wild rose from my many summers in Maine where they copiously grow—I got that one from the aroma—and the California poppy from living for years in the Bay Area. I wasn't even sure about the dandelions since they looked different from the ones taking over my yard currently. I have this app on my phone though, PlantSnap, that identifies plants for you when you take a photo, although not always accurately. At first, it thought the barberry berries were pomegranates! I used that app until I used up all my free “snaps” for the day. Hence the lack of precise names for those white berries and tiny daisies. (I'm sure that's not what they really are.)

Despite all the balletic leaps, turns, and arabesques, the (mostly) upright torso, the (frequent) symmetry, the (near-ubiquitous) turn-out, the sense of lightness, *Summerspace* still provides opportunities for awkwardness. A man hops across the stage, one leg extended behind him like a dragonfly's tail, but dragonflies skim and hover and this dancer labors, not intentionally, but he's human after all, and part of being human is the effort it takes to jump like that with one unmoving, extended leg. His arms spread to the sides like wings but, no, they can't create lift. His body bucks with effort as it heaves and lands, cleaving grace and awkwardness,

around the stage

grace cleaving to awkwardness, and he seems relieved to jump with his feet together and then fold over his bent knees. Not so much an awkward passage as a passage that reminds me of awkwardness.

Two posts appeared in my Instagram feed on the same morning. First, Emily Gerrity rehearsing a broken-winged balance for the New York City Ballet's 2019 revival of *Summerspace* and then Silas Reiner performing a solo from Cunningham's *Split Sides* (2003). Gerrity, despite acknowledging the role's difficulty (“I'm used to having to be light. My legs are constantly so sore.... Every single movement is

noticeable.... It feels very bare.”⁴¹), is a still point, in perfect control, perfectly regal; Reiner, dynamic, extends so far into balance that it becomes unbalance, not a mistake or a wobble, but gleefully off-kilter. He has not just the ability to catch himself, but to throw himself. To be awkward.

When Cunningham dancer Karole Armitage balanced in that same one-legged relevé, her other leg held out to the side like a broken wing, her arms wide and her torso draped over the space in front of her own body, and then fell to the side, onto that fluttering, broken-winged

To argue with myself—
transparent as “limpid,”
not transparent as “easy.”

leg, she emphasized the tottering and the fall; when the ballerina does it, she emphasizes the balance.

Perhaps awkward makes us feel awkward, but Cunningham loved to make his mind awkward, sought that moment when he didn’t know what to do or how to do, and something new needed to happen. Perhaps that’s what drew him to dancer Viola Farber, whose body he described as having “the look of one part being in balance, and the rest extremely off.... It was like two persons, another just ahead of or behind the first,”⁴² and what led him to tell another dancer, Valda Setterfeld, “Don’t make everything so pretty.” Her mother had always told her to smile and her teachers had told her to be “more personable,” and she felt huge relief when Merce told her this. She thought: “Thank God I can drop all that stuff.”⁴³ What to make of this fulcrum, this wobble, between grace and

I, too, prefer the awkwardly off-kilter. Or I prefer to prefer it.
Or think I should prefer it.
And perhaps that’s why I’ve been so reluctant to write about *Summerspace*,
even though I love it. I love it
without preferring it, with a child-like, instinctive love.

⁴¹ Emily Gerrity (@nytimes), “The solo is definitely very controlled and super heavy on the legs,” said the @nycballet dancer @emiliegerrity about this section of ‘*Summerspace*’, Instagram, October 2, 2019. URL.

⁴² Merce Cunningham, *Changes: Notes on Choreography* (New York: Something Else Press, 1968).

⁴³ Valda Setterfeld in Lyndsey Winship, “He said two things to me in five years. And one was thanks for the cheese”—Merce Cunningham Remembered,” *The Guardian*, April, 19, 2019. URL.

awkwardness—within a dancer, between dancers, over time? Merce thought the shift in response to *Summerspace* was because “... life changes, things change, and people see things differently.”⁴⁴ Now two little girls have even dressed up as *Summerspace* dancers for Halloween.⁴⁵

They are lovely but what’s been lost? Of the *Summerspace* shown in the brief, fragmentary film of its 1958 premier, Jean Freebury said, “It does not look anything like what we’re doing now. That has been lost.”⁴⁶ Carolyn Brown who has restaged the dance on numerous companies, including Cunningham’s own, thinks “a lyricism from a kinder, gentler era: melodic, lilting, light, ebullient, rhapsodic” has been lost,⁴⁷ but in those black-and-white film clips, I see something less polished, less perfect, more provisional, more awkward. Perhaps it’s just the flickering, speedy film itself.

I saw other things on that walk too but they were man-made and odd (not lovely), like weird huge structures built from drift logs on the beach. I couldn’t even imagine how many people you’d need to drag all those heavy logs around and over other logs and pile them up. And a cairn to mark the location of a now-gone sheep farm. Some rocks were missing from it, and the gap looked like the open mouth of a dead sheep.

I am writing about *Summerspace*. About how I love it and the way its music and dance and décor combine to form a lovely perfect whole, the way it emerged from the many many pages of notes Cunningham made over a cold winter and spring in New York City, emerged in a ballroom in Connecticut, emerges from the stage’s wings, from dark to light, from difficulty, the way an elegant Parisian woman emerges from the tiniest of apartments, one where the dining chairs are usually stored atop the bookcases. And I am writing about how I mistrust this perfection too. I’m caught: not wanting to be seduced by beauty and not wanting to reject beauty

⁴⁴ Merce Cunningham quoted in “Energy and positions, clarity of the dances” in Merce Cunningham and Jacqueline Lesschaeve, *The Dancer and the Dance* (New York—London: Marion Boyars, 1991), 132.

⁴⁵ Merce Cunningham Trust (@mercetrust), “Is it possible to win Halloween? At the very least, these girls have impeccable taste! Over a decade without Merce and Robert Rauschenberg...” Instagram, October 31, 2019. URL.

⁴⁶ Jean Freebury, interviewed by Silas Farley, “Hear the Dance 5: *Summerspace*,” September 29, 2019, in *City Ballet The Podcast*, produced by New York City Ballet, podcast audio. URL.

⁴⁷ Carolyn Brown, “*Summerspace*: Three Revivals,” *Dance Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (Summer 2002), 82.

once (running)

out of hand. But what if the opposite of beauty is not ugliness but awkwardness? What if the opposite of easy is awkward (not difficult)? What if the opposite of ballet is awkward? What if there isn't even a pretty/awkward split, or even a smooth arc from one to the other, but instead a flicker between them so quick that you can't tell when you're seeing one and when you're seeing the other, not just next to each other or after/before each other but in and through and around each other. Beauty and awkwardness, ease and difficulty, balance and imbalance. Each holding the other as if inside a diaphanous membrane, through which I can see something beating.

Omitted

If I think I have problems,
I look for the mirror. Or
I stand at the window
and ponder the future
reduced to more or less
three lbs
of haunted
meat.
And it's always
like I never said:
If you don't want something,
wish for it.
Lost
in the beautiful world
I can no longer perceive
but only, now
and then,
imagine
or recall. . .
First the long sinister youth
and then the dying man
who talks to old friends
teachers, doctors
but they don't understand
the way we feel.

The Writing, 1

1.

Suddenly it was finished, how did that happen? For some reason he glanced at his watch, like the doctor who pronounces time of death. Then he got ready for bed. The wind outside was blowing. But no sooner had he crossed into sleep than the words began stirring on the page, sluggishly at first, then faster and in a curious panic, crawling around the white surface like ants without direction or purpose, cut off from the current that tells them how to live, where to go, what to do when they get there. . . They moved in circles as though blind, on occasion colliding head-on. Rapidly tapping their forelegs like black canes, lively with fright, they moved out in every direction at once until the page was left completely blank.

2.

He woke, lying perfectly still for a while like someone pretending to sleep. Then opened his eyes. He continued to lie there without moving, thinking about what he was writing. He wished that he could be clearer, it was all so clear to him. So he was twice alone. But he had also lived twice, was living twice right now.

3.

Wrap it up, he ordered, and glanced at his watch. He got undressed and went to bed. Outside the wind was still. Several hours passed and he opened his eyes. And on the whole he was pleased to be awake again, although he had never been good at it, and found it so painful and strange.

Aftermath

I stand at the window and look a long time at the heavily snow-laden pine branches. Glaring blue sky, disturbing after the solace of the snow storm, wrapped in its silvery secrecy all night. I can't get over it. . . I am going to die. *Not today*, says the nurse. *We can tell you that you're going to but we can't say when*, says a pimply MD. *Everyone is dying*, my friends say sadly; they all say they'll pray for me, backing farther and farther away until they are lost from sight. I feel light for a while. Here we all are together again, on this planet all penitentiary, death row born and bred. Have you ever noticed the way the solitary and the disturbed make a special point of avoiding one another, as though doing so made them invisible, or they stood a better chance out in the open, vulnerable, without allies. They should all get together, that's what I think. Because as it turns out—and I know people find this difficult to believe—I am one of them. We're contagious, did you know that? And dangerous, oh we are viciously aggressive. We're about as dangerous as a half crushed worm. And how hard it is to pretend to be in the same world as everyone else, to have to constantly pretend to be the person they all used to know. I know the night is going to walk in my front door one day, and take my hand, and finally it will be over with. It is only going to come back, the sickness—it always has, and it would continue to, always. Sickness so familiar, just like going home. Going home and sitting on the couch with the two remaining members of my family, there used to be two. So there we sit mutely in a row on the couch staring straight ahead and smiling as if we were about to have our picture taken. Yes, I know all about the condition. And sometimes I wish I had the name and address of somebody else suffering from it nearby. By the way, I have been meaning to ask: is that a far off soundless blinding detonation, a second morning star, or is a poet dying on your block? Because I would go there and visit him, embrace him, though I knew I risked badly frightening this person, intruding on a way of life no company can comfort, no words console, not from above not from next door.

Nests: An Interview with Kevin McIlvoy

McIlvoy's novel One Kind Favor is forthcoming from WTAW Press in 2021.

Adrienne Perry: *One Kind Favor* looks at this country's long history of anti-Black and racist violence straight on, and I read that it was inspired by learning about the 2014 lynching of a young Black man named Lennon Lacy. What about this particular story, (tragically) among so many others, asked for your retelling? When and how did you begin this work? What has it meant for you to release this story now, in this moment of pandemic and racial reckoning?

Kevin McIlvoy: It's true that I began this novel when I read an article in *The Guardian* about the lynching of the young Black man Lennon Lacy here in North Carolina. The same day that I read the article, I briefly wrote about it in my journal, the place where I make a practice of being absorptive, that is, of allowing daily encounters of every kind to sink in, and of permitting them to sink in deeply. I'm certainly no different than all white Americans who have not at all absorbed the daily tragedy of violence experienced by most Black Americans, particularly by Blacks in North Carolina, a once-progressive southern state that has reverted to the worst of its old hate impulses. As a novelist I do not seek out the stories that I can master but the stories that will master me. And this story would neither allow me to look away from its darkness nor to excuse my agency in that darkness.

I picture a reader welcoming a novel that embodies the paradoxes in the lives of Americans who must live in intensifying fear while they also hold out intensifying hope for the future. I picture a reader who wishes for a novel that embodies the story of Americans who have extraordinary, sincere faith in the forces of love but who, in the self-same moment, resist following their own hearts and minds to overcome the powers of hate. In the time of pandemic and of climate disaster and of destructive nativism and of corrupted religion, I look for inspired religious

leaders like the Reverend William J. Barber II, and visionary political leaders like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and grassroots activists like Greta Thunburg, and scientists like Dr. Anthony S. Fauci to provide direct instruction about how humankind will avoid self-annihilation. At their best, religion and science and grassroots politics have shown humans how to clearly recognize the envelopes of darkness and the envelopes of light that their historical moment places before them.

Art places the reader *inside* the envelope of darkness where the envelope of light opens, places the reader *inside* the envelope of light where the envelope of darkness opens. I believe, as many historians do (e.g., Will and Ariel Durant, *The Story of Civilization*) that all civilizations begin with *religion* (humans asking what force beyond us brought us into being), advance to *science* (humans seeking the methods to become the force that carries us beyond our limitations), and arrive at *art* (humans recognizing meanings and methods while also striving to acknowledge the paradoxical mysteries inviting us to be fully alive).

With all my heart, I wish for the case of Lennon Lacy to be reopened, for a fair investigation to finally be undertaken, for justice to be done. Can an art installation like Memorial Square (800 six-foot monuments in a sculpture by Kwame Akoto-Bamto at The National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama) play a part? Can a powerful song like “The Ballad of Lennon Lacy” (Jon Lindsay with Rhiannon Giddens and NC Music Love Army) play a part? Can a documentary film like *Always in Season* (Director, Jacqueline Olive) play a part? They can. I know they can. I offer my own novel because I believe.



AP: While reading *One Kind Favor*, I sometimes imagined I was reading poetry or a graphic novel. The musicality of the language, the careful attention to the line, the approach to the physical space of the page, the imagery and vignettes—all of these qualities contributed to the impression. What was your approach to the novel’s form? The novel is clearly in conversation with music. Were there other art forms, such as photography or film, that may have influenced it?

KM: From the first pages of composition to the last processes of revision, I've thought of *One Kind Favor* as a work that *sings* more often than it *says*. Important questions for me in all my fiction are, "How does this story sound?" and "Why does it sound that way?" which are different questions than "What is this story trying to say?" and "Why should this story be said?" I won't argue that the former questions in any way exclude the importance of the latter, I'll just admit that I'm led by voice in the same way that other writers are led by point of view or theme or plot. And that's no surprise for a writer who has always been more influenced above all else by oral storytelling and, specifically, by the American wisdom tradition in which a storyteller like Washington Irving or Mark Twain or Zora Neal Hurston or James Baldwin or Toni Morrison offers a rhythmic voice that pulls the reader past the perceived need for telling and toward the unexpected desire for enthrallment. When I've heard church bells in Baldwin's poetic prose, I've heard the gospel that will most transform me and that will place me in readiness to be fully present to experiences for which there are no words. In discussion of Baldwin's fiction and nonfiction works, readers do not often say how their minds generally reacted; they sing how their bodies and minds responded. When I've heard the river flowing in Twain's prose style, I've heard the attitude and the atmosphere that allow Twain's so-called "satire" to elude ready-made thematic definition. No reading audience ever seems to agree on what *Huckleberry Finn* is *about*, but in any heartfelt discussion of it everyone's expressive discourse harmonizes, as if they are forever marked by the book's music.

My novel's title, *One Kind Favor*, is direct tribute to Blind Lemon Jefferson's blues song that asks for "one kind favor": "please see that my grave is kept clean." Lincoln and Woolman, two of the key figures in my book, carry in them the horror and the hope paradoxically co-existing in the blues song in which the speaker, after death, pleads for no further desecration than he has already experienced in life. For them and for the other primary characters, the Church of American Poetry—its most commonplace and most elevated ceremonies of transubstantiation—has been an influence in their small rural town of Cord, since educators there assigned memorized poems great importance for many generations. The character Acker has a punk-music edge to her speech, as well as the inside-out literary sensibility of a louche author in exile.

The character Alice is a simulacrum of *Alice in Wonderland* and the Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*, and the narrative representing her is Carrollian. The first-person plural narrative mixes together all these forms of music, while echoing traditions of ensorcelling Southern tall tales and ghost stories. I do not wish for the sounds to pleasantly blend. I hope that the resulting mashup of sounds offers unsettling and dreamlike music that serves the dark, weirdly festive carnivalesque sense of the whole story.

I'm heartened that you respond to a graphic novel aspect of *One Kind Favor* since I have hoped that the flow of the different elements and the weighting of scenes is *fantastic* (acknowledging the intersections of the natural and the supernatural). There is a panel-like sense of leaping across gaps and chasms in the fifty-four sections of my novel, just as there is such a sense in twelve or eight bars of blues music, and just as there is in meandering oral narratives in which the storyteller confronts his own community with its unreal absences and presences and shameful and sacred silences.

The narrative voice in my own work is almost always shaped by the generating and tempering aspects of setting. The most important settings for *One Kind Favor* are Ephesus Swamp and the consignment-bar Stanley's ~~Acker's~~ Stanley's and the Helltel. They are haunted places, and the reader residing in them feels sensitized to sounds that are summoned and that arise unbidden. I hope that the reader feels how time is deformed in these places: the swamp, a place of decay and death—and redemption; the consignment-bar, a place with no redemptive future—a place in which a line has been drawn through the past and future and what remains is the ruined present; the Helltel, the crypt welcoming dead and living wayfaring strangers. I hope that the reader, held captive in these places, more or less constantly wonders (and worries), “Did I hear what I thought I heard?”



AP: The novel stands in horror of the way white supremacy, racism, and racist violence have become normalized, even celebrated, during the Trump era. The novel critiques Trumpification, the broken trust in our communities, and an

active institutional disinterest in seeking justice. At the same time, *One Kind Favor* is generous, making room for all manner of beings and the relationships between them: humans, animals, the supernumerary chorus narrator of Cord, ghosts, electronic devices, astral presences. Love can be polyamorous, queer, interspecies, beyond the grave. These aspects of the novel read as not simply imaginative, but radical in their hospitality toward the beings populating this work. I would love to know your thoughts about this idea of radical hospitality as you undertook the novel.

KM: Your generous reading of my novel is encouraging to me, since you recognize that I would like as a writer to meet the characters on their own terms instead of making them fit my terms. I would like the reader to experience in my novel the receptivity *and* resistance that the reader experiences daily as a part of life's surprising and disruptive richness. A boring life is a life of well-controlled ease and successful avoidance of conflict; boring art recapitulates that design. As far as I, at sixty-seven, can tell, a life of fullness is not a life in which one completed experience follows another; art that has fullness has no discernable completeness. The characters I write about have lives of spilling and overspilling instead of lives that pour forth in a measured, controlled way.

From my place inside *One Kind Favor*, I feel the crucial small and large dilemmas in the characters' lives have their source in our simple Adamic human need to name and be named: to have a name for the self we present to others; to have a name for anyone we think of as Other; to have a name for our beliefs and a name for believers who are on a different path; to have a name for our community's condition and a name for anyone asking to alter it; to have a name for our nation's identity in history and in the world, and a name for that world's identity and history.

I hope readers of *One Kind Favor* identify with the complex struggle in which we Americans feel pulled to generous naming and pulled just as strongly to reductive naming. I hope readers recognize the struggle twenty-first century Americans have with the impulse to let others do the reductive naming for us: to let oligarchs name unions "evil" and environmentalists "mistaken" and progressive advocates for all forms of equality "Un-American"; to let religious leaders name

women's assertions of self-autonomy "sick"; to let propaganda machines like the Fox network rename and rename and rename for us as "fake" any version of reality that is not their version. In the Trump Reich, which from a storyteller's viewpoint is not significantly different than the Reagan or Bush Reichs, those of us who no longer exercise individual processes of discernment—who no longer feel and think *for ourselves*—are perfect "marks" for those who will con us out of self-understanding and out of unselfish communion with others. At least fifty percent of American citizens no longer trust at all our own processes of discernment, our own individual capacities for sincere, constructive naming of our condition and the condition of others; as a result, we are driven into an obliterating blurred existence.

It just might be true that for some few readers the first and last lines of *One Kind Favor* will seem to acknowledge the starting and ending points of our national tragedy: "Naming matters here in Cord" and "The passengers entered the blur."



AP: Your characters are fascinating, unlike any I've read—Acker, Mrs. Panther, Jacob and Woolman, Jadia in the swamp, and many others. Among them, I found that I kept going back to the *we*, the collective narrator of Cord. How did the voice of Cord come to you? What has the *we* meant for you in writing this novel?

KM: I've had life-shaping experiences with people that many of us quickly categorize: dive bar regulars, institutionalized and house-bound elderly, prostitutes and their johns, adjudicated adolescents, children with Duchenne muscular dystrophy, maximum-security prison inmates, and county jail inmates. I've been in sustained one-to-one interactions with them, and have been startled out of the generalizations I formed as a person earnestly wishing to be an effective listener-learner, ultimately coming to terms with being a flawed learner-listener in deeply personal circumstances that have cracked my prejudices—that is, most but not all of my prejudices. I wrestle with them. The match is always a draw.

I believe my novel presents *figures* who verge into being *characters*: the reader recognizes them at first as archetypes in an allegory of the American tragedy, while finding them convincing at moments when they rise above type and invite the reader to know them as individual mysteries. The story asks that the reader think of the characters as specimens collected in the consignment-bar's book, *The Silence That Is Great Within Us*. The butterflies are living things that have been killed as if their transcendent beauty alone were the reason for killing them. They have real names, such as Eastern Comma, and poetic category names such as Polygonia Comma Davidlawson Nymphalidae. They lived free for only a short while in the world, and they perdure in the pages of a book. The suggestion is that the reader will first encounter them as one-dimensional—of their moment, ephemeral—but will, at any time of drawing them to mind, also imagine them in flight, alive, individually memorable.

The reader that I picture as appreciating these characters still has *the child reader* very alive inside. Mr. Panther and Mrs. Panther and Minister and Junior and Woolman and Alice and The Rouncevals have names that are similar to names from tales and fables this kind of adult reader has never devalued, no matter how thoroughly life has tried to erase this reader's sense of wonder and awe. I'm a childlike reader myself, highly excitable and highly suggestible, and I value the experience of saying, "Welcome" and "*Welcome back!*" as I do in every page of works by Charles Johnson, Louise Erdrich, Edward P. Jones, Jane Smiley, Andre Dubus, and Luis Alberto Urrea.

The "we" narrative voice in my novel offers a form of tribal omniscience in which the tribe of the small community of Cord knows its own so well that it can confidently tell—and can widely and accurately surmise—the town's past, present, and future stories. The voice is the chord of the town's many voices, the ones present and the ones long absent. The voice, as in most first-person plural voices, has a root note, which comes from the town's storyteller—in this case, Union Vedder, a ghostly presence who has listened for so long that residents of the town who can never actually see him know that he is there.

A community in which people still use "we" when talking about their own beloveds and outcasts and enigmatic figures and mythologized heroes and

antagonists is a community still making the unconscious effort to cohere and to care. That “we” voice as easily falls into registers of indifference and cruel judging as it rises to self-questioning timbres of love and failed loving. Our American literature cannot ever invoke that “we” without us hearing the echoing “We the people....” And when tribal omniscience in American literature invokes that “we,” it cannot escape sounding the sempiternal betrayals of an ideal “we” by our long history of genocidal wars against Native Americans. When our rich southern traditions of American literature invoke that “we,” the word carries in it the echoes of the Confederacy’s seditious betrayals.

The tribal omniscience in *One Kind Favor* has, I hope, the sound of mockery in it since, after all, America has made a grotesque lie out of the impulses of our so-called “exceptional” democracy evident in anthem verses like “what so proudly we hailed at the twilight’s last gleaming.” Our national vows and anthems and pledges sound at best ironic, at worst, jeering when they come from the mouths of unthinking, unfeeling narcissist Trumpists/Putinistas.

I also hope that the reader hears in my novel how a pure, sincere “we” voice still faintly remains in our national discourse: the desire to regain a “we”—a dynamically clashing and reconciling and rowdy and imperfectly honest and outrageously uncynical optimistic “we”—that resounds with a national will to be humble and generous and inclusive of all our many “I” voices.



AP: I want to ask about Lincoln. While there were ghostly presences throughout the novel, Lincoln of course haunts this work the most, even though we “see” him less in comparison. Chapter to chapter, I found myself longing for Lincoln, not only feeling his loss and hoping for “answers” to his murder, or to see him, but also touching a deep sense of loneliness. The loneliness is captured in his and Woolman’s obsessions with Oppy, this rover in a precarious Martian situation submitting transmissions through the void. Do these ideas of loneliness or precarity feel related to the novel and Lincoln’s murder, or was there something else you wanted to explore?

KM: I started writing *One Kind Favor* in late summer 2014, and until I truly finished in 2020, I had the company of this very unique person almost every day. I could feel that he would not allow me to think of him in the abstract, that is, as “a young Black man,” but as *Lincoln*, aware of and assertive about his own individual personality, and also aware of our culture’s wish for his marginalization, his invisibility, and, if possible, his extinction. I’m pretty sure that I’m like many other writers in having dialogue with my characters during the hours—of the day and the hours of the night and quite often during the dream hours—that I’m not making sentences. That ongoing dialogue makes me aware of the boundaries around all characters in my fiction, and the invitation to exercise “trespass vision” (Tillie Olsen’s term) only with conscious awareness of limits. I’m lucky as a writer to live in this historical moment when courageous activists, who are in intimate dialogue with erased members of our community, chant “Say Her Name.” These remarkable people, making the effort to author a more worthy nation, remind all of us that anyone in twenty-first century America who is Other will be marked for extinction; reminding us that naming matters in the most transformative efforts to resist forgetting.

I have been in years of dialogue with Lincoln, learning from that daily connection that I cannot ever know him except as an embodied absence. That’s a limit—acknowledged in every page of my novel—that causes me to ache. The writing has come from the aching and yearning to feel more deeply and to know more vulnerably; the writing has not come from the need to generalize and to claim authority. For decades, I’ve kept this curiously provocative statement from G.K. Chesterton in mind: “The whole difference between construction and creation is this: a thing constructed can only be loved after it is constructed; but a thing created is loved before it exists.” My too-brief fifty-year apprenticeship as a writer has, in all stages, reminded me that I often *construct* when I mean to *create*. I hope I will have more writing hours ahead in which to love more perfectly.

No matter what I write next, I will have Lincoln with me. His absence in the novel feels right to me since he is, after all, a person whose community (by implication, his nation) can only know him as absent. He has been taken from Woolman, his closest friend. He has been taken from his mother Jadia. He has been taken from

his confounding lover, Acker. He has been taken from me and, so, he has been taken from the reader. He is the spirit of what is gone but will not leave.



AP: I felt like I was reading a novel by someone on a mission, and I also know that you see this work as the most important of your life. I can make a guess, but why does this work feel so urgent and important for you? Where do you go from here?

KM: I feel that *One Kind Favor* comes the closest to being created (instead of merely constructed) of anything I've written. I wish for this novel to reach that one American reader who already lives among our country's ghosts, and who has that experience authentically intensified by the ghosts singing in the novel's pages.

Where will I go from here? I ought to be able to neatly answer that question since I have new journal notes and new draft pages and old and new wrecked pages (saved for parts) nearby, and I'm excited about my creation of so many nests with so much sound coming from them.

I'll place my trust in the pages that sing most strangely.

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Selva Almada (Entre Ríos, Argentina, 1973) is considered one of the most powerful voices of contemporary Argentinian and Latin American literature and one of the most influential feminist intellectuals of the region. She has published three novels: *The Wind that Lays Waste* (Graywolf, 2019), *Brickmakers* (Charco, 2021), and *No es un río* (Literatura Random House, 2020). "Phantom Pain" is from her collection of stories *El desapego es una manera de querernos* (Literatura Random House, 2015). The nonfiction narrative *Dead Girls*, about three unsolved murders of young women in rural Argentina, was published by Charco in 2020. *Monkey in the Whirlpool*, an account of the filming of Lucrecia Martel's *Zama*, appeared in *A Public Space*, no. 28 (2019). Selva Almada's work has been translated into French, Italian, Portuguese, German, Dutch, Swedish, and Turkish, as well as English.

Chris Andrews teaches at Western Sydney University in Australia. He has translated books of fiction by Roberto Bolaño, César Aira, Rodrigo Rey Rosa, Selva Almada, and Kaouther Adimi, among others. His collection *Lime Green Chair* (Waywiser, 2012) won the Anthony Hecht Poetry Prize.

Dan Beachy-Quick is a poet, essayist, and translator, author most recently of *Arrows* (Tupelo) and *Stone-Garland* (Milkweed Editions), a translation from the ancient Greek lyric tradition. Recently long-listed for the National Book Award in Poetry, his work has been supported by the Monfort, Lannan, and Guggenheim Foundations. He teaches at Colorado State University, where he is a University Distinguished Teaching Scholar.

Tommye Blount is the author of *Fantasia for the Man in Blue* (Four Way Books, 2020), a finalist for the National Book Award, and the chapbook *What Are We Not For* (Bull City Press, 2016). A Cave Canem alumnus and graduate from Warren Wilson College, he has been the recipient of a fellowship from Kresge Arts in Detroit and a scholarship from Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. Born and raised in Detroit, Tommye now lives in the nearby suburb of Novi, Michigan.

John Bonanni serves as founding editor for the *Cape Cod Poetry Review*. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Foglifter*, *CutBank*, *North American Review*, *Verse Daily*, *Seattle Review*, *Cortland Review*, *Washington Square Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*, and his literary criticism has appeared in *DIAGRAM*, *Rain Taxi*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, and *Kenyon Review*. His manuscript *Pulsations* has been a finalist for first book prizes from Fordham University Press, Zone 3, PANK, and Anhinga Press.

Zoë Brigley has three collections of poetry: *The Secret, Conquest, and Hand & Skull*; and a collection of nonfiction essays: *Notes from a Swing State*. She won an Eric Gregory Award for the best British poets under 30 and was listed in the Dylan Thomas Prize for the best international writers under 40. She is Assistant Professor in English at the Ohio State University where she produces the podcast *Sinister Myth*. She is currently editing the anthology *100 Poems to Save the Earth* with Kristian Evans.

Aya Brown (b. 1995, Brooklyn, NY) documents her lived experience as a Black woman and centers the history of Black lesbian women in an active celebration of all their unyielding magnificence, all their strength, all their softness. Her drawings and paintings on brown surfaces refuse whiteness as a standard and starting point. These works challenge what is seen and unseen, and empower Blackness and queerness in its labor, representation, and visibility by expanding the form and forum they are presented within. Aya's intimate collaboration with the subjects of her work radically holds space for the sovereign reclamation of each subject's image and selfhood, and positions Black women as the primary "essential workers" that, with all they do, carry, love, and create, make the world work. Aya's work has been shown this year by the Brooklyn Public Library; the MTA in collaboration with *Artsy* and *OUTFRONT*; and featured in *Artsy*, *Cultured*, the *New York Times*, and *Vogue*.

Mike Carlson's recent poems have appeared in the *Antioch Review*, *Seneca Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, and *Spillway*. His book of poems *Cement Guitar* won the Juniper Prize and was published by the University of Massachusetts Press. He is a teacher at P.S. 107 in Brooklyn, New York where he lives with his wife and daughter.

Cathy Linh Che is the author of *Split* (Alice James Books), winner of the Kundiman Poetry Prize, the Norma Farber First Book Award from the Poetry Society of America, and the Best Poetry Book Award from the Association of Asian American Studies. Her work has been published in *The New Republic*, *McSweeney's*, and *Poetry*. She has taught at New York University, Fordham University, and the Polytechnic University at NYU.

Gina Chung is a Korean American writer from New Jersey currently living in Brooklyn, New York. She is the communications manager at PEN America and an MFA candidate in fiction at The New School. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Kenyon Review*, *F(r)iction*, *Fugue*, *Wigleaf*, *Waxwing*, *Split Lip Magazine*, *Jellyfish Review*, the *VIDA Review*, and *LIT Magazine*. Her stories have been recognized by the *Black Warrior Review* Contest, the *Los Angeles Review* Literary Awards, the *CRAFT* Elements Contest, and the *Ploughshares* Emerging Writer's Contest, as well as named Longform Fiction Pick of the Week. Find her at gina-chung.com.

Desiree Cooper is a 2015 Kresge Artist Fellow, former attorney, and Pulitzer Prize-nominated journalist. Her debut collection of flash fiction, *Know the Mother*, has won numerous awards, including the 2017 Next Generation Indie Book Award and a 2017 Michigan Notable Book. Cooper's flash fiction and essays have appeared in *The Best Small Fictions 2018*, *Forward: 21st Century Flash Fiction*, *Electric Literature*, *River Teeth*, *The Rumpus*, and in the seminal anthology, *Choice Words: Writers on Abortion*. Her essay, "We Have Lost Too Many Wigs," was listed as a notable essay in *The Best American Essays 2019*.

Colby Cotton is from Adrian, New York. A 2018–2020 Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University, he is a graduate of the MFA Writing Program at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and a recipient of a Tennessee Williams Scholarship from the Sewanee Writers' Conference. His work appears or is forthcoming in the *Missouri Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, and *Best New Poets*, among others. He lives in Oakland, California.

William Craig's fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *The Spectator*, *The Boston Review*, *StoryQuarterly*, and elsewhere. His book, *Yankee Come Home: On the Road from Guantanamo to San Juan Hill*, considers intersections of Cuban and U.S. culture and history. He teaches at Dartmouth College and lives in Thetford Center, Vermont.

Eric Cruz is a poet and high school English teacher residing in San Antonio, Texas. He is the winner of the Pecan Grove Press Chapbook Contest for *Through The Window* (Pecan Grove Press 2002), selected by Palmer Hall. Cruz received his MFA in poetry from the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson. You can find him on Twitter @encodedmuses.

P. Scott Cunningham is the author of *Ya Te Veo* (University of Arkansas Press, 2018), selected for the Miller Williams Poetry Series. His writing has appeared in *The Awl*, *Harvard Review*, *American Poetry Review*, *Poetry*, *A Public Space*, *The Rumpus*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Monocle*, *RHINO*, *The Guardian*, *PANK*, *Electric Literature*, *American Way*, and others. A graduate of Wesleyan University, he is the founder and director of O, Miami. He lives in Miami with his family: Christina, Ada, and Frankie.

Steven Espada Dawson is a writer from East Los Angeles, now working out of Austin, Texas. The son of a Mexican immigrant, his poems appear/appear soon in *The Adroit Journal*, *Best New Poets 2020*, *Copper Nickel*, and *Kenyon Review Online*, among other journals.

Ayanna Dozier is a Brooklyn-based writer, lecturer, curator, filmmaker, and performance artist. She recently received her PhD from the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University. She is the author of *Janet Jackson's The Velvet Rope* (2020) and was a 2018–19 Helena Rubinstein Fellow in Critical Studies at the Whitney Independent Studies Program.

Robert Fanning is the author of four full-length collections of poetry: *Severance* (Salmon Poetry, 2019), *Our Sudden Museum*, (Salmon Poetry, 2017), *American Prophet* (Marick Press, 2009), and *The Seed Thieves* (Marick Press, 2006), as well as two chapbooks: *Sheet Music* (Three Bee Press, 2015) and *Old Bright Wheel* (The Ledge Press, 2001). His poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Ploughshares*, *Shenandoah*, *The Atlanta Review*, *Waxwing*, *Thrush*, *The Cortland Review*, and many other journals. He is a Professor of English at Central Michigan University and the founder and facilitator of the Wellspring Literary Series in Mt. Pleasant, MI.

Vievee Francis is the author of three books of poetry: *Blue-Tail Fly*, *Horse in the Dark* (winner of the Cave Canem Northwestern University Poetry Prize for a second collection), and *Forest Primeval* (winner of the Hurston Wright Legacy Award and the 2017 Kingsley-Tufts Poetry Award). Her work has appeared in numerous print and online journals, textbooks, and anthologies, including *Poetry*, *Best American Poetry* 2010, 2014, 2017, 2019, and *Angels of Ascent: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry*. Her new collection, *The Shared World*, is forthcoming from Northwestern University Press.

April Freely's poetry and essays have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *Seneca Review*, and elsewhere. She has received fellowships and awards from Cave Canem, the Ohio Arts Council, Vermont Studio Center, Tulsa Artist Fellowship, and the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center. She is the Executive Director of Fire Island Artist Residency.

Sidney Mori Garrett is a curator, arts organizer, and artist based in Houston, Texas. She graduated from the University of Houston in 2016 with a BFA in Photography/Digital Media. Her work has been exhibited locally and internationally at Alabama Song Art Space, the Blaffer Art Museum, Art Licks Weekend, and Wedge Gallery, among others. Her written works have been published in *Byline Houston* and *The Smartest Thing*. She has also curated exhibitions for Project Row Houses Community Gallery and ICOSA's 2020 *Open Space* exhibition. Her practice acts through inclusivity, sustainability, mindfulness, and challenging traditional heteronormative, white-centered art spaces. Garrett has held previous positions at Lawndale Art Center, Barbara Davis Gallery, and Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, while also serving as an Artist Board member for Art League Houston from 2018–2019. She is currently Curatorial Assistant and Arts Coordinator at Project Row Houses.

Amina Gautier is the author of three short story collections: *At-Risk*, *Now We Will Be Happy*, and *The Loss of All Lost Things*. *At-Risk* was awarded the Flannery O'Connor Award; *Now We Will Be Happy* was awarded the Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Fiction; *The Loss of All Lost Things* was awarded the Elixir Press Award in Fiction. More than one hundred and twenty-five of her stories have been published, appearing in *African American Review*, *Agni*, *Boston Review*, *Callaloo*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Glimmer Train*, *Joyland*, *Kenyon Review*, *Latino Book Review*, *Mississippi Review*, *New Flash Fiction Review*, *Quarterly West*, and *The Southern Review*, among other places. She is the recipient of the Eric Hoffer Legacy Fiction Award, the Phillis Wheatley Book Award in Fiction, the International Latino Book Award, and the Chicago Public Library Foundation's 21st Century Award. For her body of work she has received the PEN/MALAMUD Award for Excellence in the Short Story.

Pekuakamishkueu poet **Marie-Andrée Gill** is a doctoral student in literature at the University of Quebec at Chicoutimi. Her writing is rooted in territory and interiority, combining her Quebec and Innu identities. A two-time winner of Canada's Indigenous Voices Awards in Poetry and a two-time winner of Poetry Prize from the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean Book Festival, she is the author of three books from La Peuplade: *Béante*, *Frayeur*, and *Chauffer le dehors*.

Amarie Gipson is a Houston-born writer, critic, and arts worker. Independently, her work has been published in journals and magazines such as *Artforum*, *ARTNews*, *ARTS.BLACK*, *Conflict of Interest*, and *THE SEEN*, among others. She is a contributing editor to Oxford University Press's artist reference library, *Benezit*, and a *Momus* Emerging Critics Residency alum. Gipson earned a BA in Liberal Studies & Sociology from St. Edward's University (2018). She is also an alumnus of the Mellon Undergraduate Curatorial Fellowship and DAMLI Emerging Art Leader program. Gipson has held positions at The Studio Museum in Harlem, The Renaissance Society, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Contemporary Austin, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Gipson is dedicated to ensuring that scholarly discussions of Black cultural production are accessible and carefully historicized. Her research and writing interests range from Black feminist theory and experimental cinema to Southern hip-hop and culture.

Matty Layne Glasgow is the author of *deciduous qween* (Red Hen Press, 2019), selected by Richard Blanco for the Benjamin Saltman Award. His poems have appeared in the *Missouri Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Ecotone*, *Houston Public Media*, and elsewhere. He is a Vice Presidential Fellow at the University of Utah where he serves as the Wasatch Writers in the Schools Coordinator and the Managing Editor of *Quarterly West*.

torrin a. greathouse is a trans poet, cripple-punk, and MFA candidate at the University of Minnesota. Her work is published in *Ploughshares*, *New England Review*, *TriQuarterly*, & *Kenyon Review*. She is the author of *Wound from the Mouth of a Wound* (Milkweed Editions, 2020).

Jared Green is an author, literary critic, and professor of English literature at Stonehill College. His poetry has appeared in *Waccamaw*, *Tiny Seed*, *Emergency Index*, and the anthology *The Art of Living* (forthcoming, Poetose Press). His fiction and critical writing have appeared in numerous journals, including *Quiddity*, *The Write Launch*, *New Limestone Review*, and *Cagibi*. He has been nominated for a 2021 Pushcart Prize in fiction, and his work has been recognized by the Martha's Vineyard Institute of Creative Writing with a 2019 MVIW Fellowship and by the state of Rhode Island with a Robert and Margaret MacColl Johnson Fellowship.

Ravi Howard is the author of two novels: *Like Trees*, *Walking* and *Driving the King*. He was a finalist for the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award and a recipient of the Ernest J. Gaines Award for Literary Excellence. His short fiction has appeared in *Salon*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Saw Palm*, and *Alabama Noir*. His essays have appeared in the *New York Times*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Atlanta*, and *Gravy*, and he has recorded commentary for NPR's *All Things Considered*. He is currently an assistant professor in the creative writing program at Florida State University.

K. Iver (they/them) is a nonbinary poet born in Mississippi. They are a PhD candidate at Florida State University and the Art Editor of *Southeast Review*. Their work has appeared or is forthcoming in *BOAAT*, *Boston Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Split Lip Magazine*, and elsewhere.

Natalie Kinkade is a graduate student in creative nonfiction at Ohio University. You can find her on Twitter @nataliekinkade.

Masha Kisel is a professor in the English Department at The University of Dayton. Her monthly column in the local paper, *The Dayton Jewish Observer*, won second place in Ohio's Best Journalism 2020 Contest as well as an honorary mention from the American Jewish Press Association. Masha's essays have appeared in *The Forward* and *Times of Israel* and her flash fiction is forthcoming in *Short Vigorous Roots: A Contemporary Flash Fiction Collection of Migrant Voices*. "Fallout" is her first published short story.

Keetje Kuipers's third collection, *All Its Charms*, was published in 2019. A former Stegner Fellow, her poems have appeared in the *Pushcart Prize* and *Best American Poetry* anthologies. Keetje is Editor of *Poetry Northwest* and Visiting Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Montana.

Bria Lauren is a Texas native, born and raised in Third Ward, Houston. The south is a sacred and integrate part of her work as a visual storyteller, healer, and queer Black woman utilizing ancestral healing as a tool to navigate intersectionality as an act of resistance. Analog photography is a catalyst for Lauren to translate her own unspoken vulnerability visually, and to hold space for marginalized voices to be seen, honored, cared for, and respected. The heartbeat and intention of Lauren's work intersects race, gender, vulnerability, motherhood, and Black feminism. She travels through time using 35-mm, medium-format, and motion-picture film to bridge social and political gaps within her community—to communicate the true essence of identity and truth without censorship. She is currently developing an ongoing body of work, *Gold Was Made Fa' Her*, which will be exhibited in Houston in the fall of 2021.

Anthony Thomas Lombardi is a Pushcart-nominated poet, organizer, and educator. He was named a finalist in Autumn House Press's 2020 Chapbook Contest and in the 9th Annual *Gigantic Sequins* Poetry Contest, and was longlisted for the 2020 *Palette Poetry* Emerging Poet Prize. A Tin House Writers Workshop alumnus, he is also the recipient of a fellowship from Brooklyn Poets and a scholarship from the Shipman Agency. He has previously served as Assistant Director for *Polyphony Lit's* Summer Scholars Program, and currently runs Word is Bond, a monthly reading series that benefits bail funds across the country, in conjunction with *The Adroit Journal*, where he also serves as a poetry reader and contributor. His work has appeared or will soon in *Guernica*, *wildness*, *North American Review*, *Colorado Review*, *THRUSH*, *Passages North*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Salt Hill Journal*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *Cherry Tree*, and elsewhere. He lives in Brooklyn, NY with his cat, Dilla.

J. Bret Maney lives in New York City, where he is an assistant professor of English at Lehman College, CUNY. His translations of poetry by Fiston Mwanza Mujila have appeared in *Exchanges*, *Poetry International*, *The Common*, and *Asymptote*, where they were named Runner-Up in the 2019 Close Approximations Translation Contest. A past recipient of a PEN/Heim Translation Fund grant, and the translator and co-editor of a bilingual scholarly edition of Guillermo Cotto-Thorner's foundational novel of Latinx New York, *Manhattan Tropics* (Arte Público, 2019; winner of an International Latino Book Award, 2020), Maney translates from the French and Spanish. A book of his translations of Mwanza Mujila's poetry, *The River in the Belly and Other Poems*, will be published by Deep Vellum in late 2021.

Evan J. Massey is a war veteran. He's most likely somewhere reading Eliot Weinberger, listening to Lupe Fiasco.

Cleopatra Mathis was born and raised in Ruston, Louisiana, and has lived in New England since 1980. She is the author of eight books of poems; the most recent is *After the Body: Poems New and Selected*, published by Sarabande Books in 2020. Her many awards and prizes include a Guggenheim Fellowship, two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, and two Pushcart Prizes. Her poems have appeared widely in journals, magazines, and anthologies, including *The New Yorker*, *Threepenny Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Best American Poetry*, and *The Extraordinary Tide: Poetry by American Women*. The founder of the creative writing program at Dartmouth College in 1982, she lives with her family in East Thetford, Vermont.

Airea D. Matthews is the author of *Simulacra*, winner of the 2016 Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize, and a 2020 Pew Fellow. Her work has appeared in *Callaloo*, *Best American Poetry*, *Harvard Review*, *American Poets*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Tin House*, and elsewhere. She is an assistant professor at Bryn Mawr College and is working on her second book, *mundane gods*.

Kristen Renee Miller is the managing editor for Sarabande. Her poetry and translations have appeared in *Poetry*, *Kenyon Review*, *The Common*, *Guernica*, and *Best New Poets 2018*. She is the translator of *Spawn* (Book*hug, 2020), by Ilnu Nation poet Marie-Andrée Gill, and the recipient of fellowships and awards from The American Literary Translators Association, The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, and the Foundation for Contemporary Arts. She lives in Louisville, Kentucky.

Kevin McIlvoy is the author of *One Kind Favor* (WTAW Press, May 2021) and seven previous books: five novels, a book of short stories, and a book of prose poetry. He teaches at the Warren Wilson College MFA Program in Creative Writing and lives in Asheville, North Carolina, where he serves as a fiction editor for Orison Books. Find him online at mcthebookmechanic.com; facebook.com/kevin.mcilvoy; Twitter @KevinMcIlvoy; and Instagram @kevin.mcilvoyager.

Kyle Minor is the author of *Praying Drunk*, winner of the 2015 Story Prize Spotlight Award. Three recent novellas appear in *Story*, *Booth*, and *Missouri Review*.

Nancy Morejón was born in Havana in 1944. She is one of the best known of Cuba's living poets, as well as an important scholar of work from the Afro-Caribbean, including that of her mentor, Nicolás Guillén. She holds a Masters in French Language and Literature from the University of Havana. Her poetry has been widely anthologized and translated throughout the world. In 1995 the University of Missouri-Columbia conducted a two-day symposium on her and published papers in a special issue of the *Afro-Hispanic Review*. In 1999 Howard University Press published a collection of critical essays: *Singular Like A Bird: The Art of Nancy Morejón*. Among Morejón's many poetry collections are: *Amor, ciudad atribuida* (1964), *Fundación de la imagen* (1988), and *Elogio y paisaje* (1996). She has been awarded the country's Critics Prize twice. Currently, she is president of Cuba's Academy of Letters.

Simone Muench is the author of several books including *Wolf Centos* (Sarabande) and *Suture* (Black Lawrence; co-written with Dean Rader). She co-edited *They Said: A Multi-Genre Anthology of Contemporary Collaborative Writing* (Black Lawrence). A recipient of an NEA poetry fellowship, the Kathryn A. Morton Prize for Poetry, and a Meier Foundation for the Arts Award, she serves as faculty advisor for Lewis University's *Jet Fuel Review* and as a senior poetry editor for *Tupelo Quarterly*.

Fiston Mwanza Mujila was born in 1981 in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo, and now lives in Graz, Austria. His selected bibliography includes the Man Booker International Prize-longlisted novel *Tram 83* (2014), the poetry collections *Craquelures* (2011), *Le fleuve dans le ventre* (2013), and *Soleil privé de mazout* (2016), and three plays published as *Et les moustiques sont des fruits à pépins; Te voir dressé sur tes deux pattes ne fait que mettre de l'huile sur le feu* (2015) and *Zu der Zeit der Königinmutter* (2018). He is the recipient of many literary prizes, including, most recently, the Peter-Rosegger-Literaturpreis (Austria, 2018). His second novel, *La danse du vilain*, was released in September, and his selected poems in English will be published by Deep Vellum in 2021.

Kieran Mundy's work has appeared in *Joyland* and *Hobart*, and has been recognized in Wigleaf's Top 50 Very Short Fictions of 2017 and 2019. She holds an MFA in Fiction from the University of Oregon and has received funding for her writing from the Vermont Studio Center. She currently lives in Bend, Oregon where she works as a wilderness therapy field guide.

Caleb Nolen grew up in Pennsylvania and Maryland. He completed his MFA at the University of Virginia and has received support from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference and Blue Mountain Center. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *32 Poems*, *FENCE*, *The Georgia Review*, and elsewhere.

Peter Orner is the author of five books of fiction, most recently *Maggie Brown & Others*, a *New York Times* Notable Book. Orner's essay collection, *Am I Alone Here?* was a finalist for a National Book Critics Circle Award. A winner of three Pushcart Prizes, Orner's work has appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The New Yorker*, *The Believer*, and *The Paris Review*, as well as in *Best American Short Stories*. Orner is a Professor of English and Creative Writing at Dartmouth College and lives with his family in Norwich, Vermont.

Eloghosa Osunde is a Nigerian writer and visual artist. An alumna of the Farafina Creative Writing Workshop (2015), the Caine Prize Workshop (2018) and the filmmaking and screenwriting programs at New York Film Academy, her short stories have been longlisted for the 2017 Writivism Short Story Prize and published in *The Paris Review*, *Catapult*, and *Berlin Quarterly*. Eloghosa was awarded a 2017 Miles Morland Scholarship and is a 2019 Lambda Literary Fellow. Her debut work of fiction, *VAGABONDS!* will be published by Riverhead Books in 2022.

Derek Palacio received his MFA from the Ohio State University. He is the author of *The Mortifications* and *How to Shake the Other Man*. His work has appeared in *Kenyon Review*, *Witness*, *Story Quarterly*, and elsewhere. A recipient of fellowships from the Black Mountain Institute, Ragdale, and CubaOne, he teaches in the creative writing program at UNC Greensboro.

Adrienne Perry (<https://www.adrienneperry.com>) grew up in Wyoming, earned her MFA from Warren Wilson College, and her PhD in Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Houston. From 2014–2016 she served as the Editor-in-Chief of *Gulf Coast: A Journal of Literature and Fine Arts*. A Hedgebrook alumna, Adrienne is also a Kimbilio Fellow and a member of the Rabble Collective. Her writing has received support from Friends of Writers, the Elizabeth George Foundation, Inprint, and the University of Houston. In 2020, she received the inaugural Elizabeth Alexander Prize in Creative Writing from *Meridians* journal. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Copper Nickel*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Ninth Letter*, and elsewhere. She is an Assistant Professor of literature and creative writing at Villanova University.

Anzhelina Polonskaya was born in Malakhovka, a small town near Moscow. She is the author of several books, including *A Voice*, part of the “Writings from an Unbound Europe” series at Northwestern University Press. *Paul Klee’s Boat* was shortlisted for the 2014 PEN Award for Poetry in Translation. Polonskaya has received support from the Cove Park Scottish Arts Council, the Hawthornden International Retreat for Writers, the MacDowell Colony, the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center, and the Villa Sträuli in Zurich. Her translations have appeared in the *American Poetry Review*, *AGNI*, *Ploughshares*, *Kenyon Review*, and other journals. Her work has been adapted as libretto and has been translated into German, Dutch, Slovenian, Latvian, and Spanish.

Jacques J. Rancourt was raised in Maine. He is the author of *Broken Spectre* (forthcoming from Alice James Books in 2021), *Novena* (winner of the Lena-Miles Wever Todd prize, Pleiades Press, 2017), and the chapbook, *In the Time of PrEP* (*Beloit Poetry Journal*, 2018). He has held poetry fellowships and scholarships from the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris, and Stanford University, where he was a Wallace Stegner Fellow. He lives in San Francisco where he works as a middle school principal.

Margaret Randall is a poet, essayist, oral historian, translator, photographer, and social activist. She has published more than 150 books of poetry, essays, and oral history. Among her most recent poetry collections are: *The Morning After: Poetry and Prose for a Post-Truth World*; *Against Atrocity*; *Starfish on a Beach: The Pandemic Poemas*; and *Time’s Language: Selected Poems 1959–2018* (all from Wings Press). Randall lived in Latin America for 23 years (Mexico, Cuba, Nicaragua). In 2019 she was awarded the “Poet of Two Hemispheres” award by Poesía en Paralelo Cero, Quito, Ecuador, and the Haydée Santamaría medal from Cuba’s Casa de las Américas. In 2020, her memoir *I Never Left Home: Poet, Feminist, Revolutionary* (Duke University Press) and *My Life in 100 Objects* (New Village Press) were released. She received AWP’s 2020 George Garrett Award and Chapman University’s Paulo Freire Prize. The poems published in this issue are from a forthcoming collection, *Out of Violence into Poetry*, to be released by Wings Press in fall 2021.

Margaret Ray grew up in Gainesville, Florida and holds an MFA from Warren Wilson College. A winner of a Chapbook Fellowship from the Poetry Society of America and the *Third Coast* Poetry Prize, her poems have appeared in *FIELD*, *The Gettysburg Review*, the *Threepenny Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, and elsewhere. She teaches in New Jersey. <https://www.margaretbray.com/>

John Miguel Shakespear's recent writing has appeared in *The Cincinnati Review*, *Split Lip Magazine*, and online at *The Believer*, and his music has been featured by outlets such as NPR and *American Songwriter*. A 2019 Pushcart Prize nominee, he serves as the prose editor for Bull City Press's INCH series, and he is working on a novel about migration and the damages of empire. He bears no known relation to William Shakespeare, but he likes the guy.

Brandon Shimoda is the author of several books, most recently *The Desert* (The Song Cave) and *The Grave on the Wall* (City Lights), which received the PEN Open Book Award. He is writing a book on the afterlife of Japanese American incarceration, and lives, with his family, in the desert.

Aisha Sabatini Sloan's writing about race and current events is often coupled with analysis of art, film, and pop culture. She earned an MA in Cultural Studies and Studio Art from NYU and an MFA in Creative Nonfiction from the University of Arizona. She is the author of *The Fluency of Light: Coming of Age in a Theater of Black and White* and *Dreaming of Ramadi in Detroit*, as well as the forthcoming book-length essay, *Borealis*, and *Captioning the Archives*, a collaboration with her father, Lester Sloan. A 2020 recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, she is an assistant professor of creative nonfiction at University of Michigan. <https://aishasloan.com/>

Lester Sloan began his photography career as cameraman/reporter for the CBS affiliate in Detroit, then worked as a staff photographer for *Newsweek Magazine* for twenty-five years, documenting the 1967 uprising in Detroit, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the kidnapping of Patty Hearst, and the OJ Simpson Trial. He has served as a contributor to *Emerge* magazine and NPR's "Weekend Edition." The recipient of a 1976 Neiman Fellowship at Harvard University, he was the on-set photographer for Spike Lee's film, *Get on the Bus*. He is an avid collector of oral histories. His book, *Captioning the Archives*, a collaboration with his daughter, Aisha Sabatini Sloan, comes out from McSweeney's publications in 2021. <https://lestersloanphoto.wordpress.com/>

Bruce Smith was born and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He is the author of seven books of poems including *The Other Lover*, which was a finalist both for the National Book Award and The Pulitzer Prize. *Devotions* was a finalist for the National Book Award, The National Book Critics Circle Award, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, and was the winner of the William Carlos Williams Award. In August of 2018 he published a new book of poems, *Spill*.

Maya Sonenberg's story collection *Bad Mothers, Bad Daughters* is the recipient of the 2021 Sullivan Prize in short fiction and will appear in 2022. Previous books and chapbooks include *Cartographies*, *Voices from the Blue Hotel*, and *After the Death of Shostakovich Père*. Her work on Cunningham has been supported by Velocity Dance Center (Seattle) and the Merce Cunningham Trust. Many thanks to them for their encouragement and backing, and to the Helen Riaboff Whiteley Center on San Juan Island where the work in this issue was written. She is Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Washington.

Courtney Faye Taylor is a winner of the 92Y Discovery/Boston Review Poetry Prize and an Academy of American Poets Prize. Her work has been anthologized in *Best New Poets 2020*, *Joy and Hope and All That: A Tribute to Lucille Clifton*, and featured in journals such as *Ploughshares*, *Kenyon Review*, *The Adroit Journal*, *TriQuarterly*, and elsewhere. Courtney is a graduate of the University of Michigan Helen Zell Writers' Program and is the Poetry Editor of *SLICE Magazine*. Find her online at courtneyfayetaylor.com.

Lindsay Turner is the author of *Songs & Ballads* (Prelude Books, 2018) and a chapbook, *Fortnights*, forthcoming from Doublecross Press. She is the translator of several books of contemporary Francophone poetry and philosophy, including work by Stéphane Bouquet, Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Anne Dufourmantelle, and Ryoko Sekiguchi. She is Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Literary Arts at the University of Denver.

Andrew Wachtel has served as rector of Narxoz University in Almaty, Kazakhstan and President of the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Before moving to Central Asia in 2010, he was dean of The Graduate School and director of the Roberta Buffett Center for International and Comparative Studies at Northwestern University. A fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, his interests range from Russian literature and culture to East European and Balkan culture; history and politics to contemporary Central Asia. He translates from Russian, Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian and Slovene, and his book of translations of Anzhelina Polonskaya, *Paul Klee's Boat*, was short-listed for the 2014 PEN Award for Poetry in Translation.

Jackie K. White's poems appear in *Tupelo Quarterly* and *Superstition Review* along with collaborative poems published or forthcoming in *Pleiades*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *The Journal*, *Bennington Review*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Ecotone*, *Denver Quarterly*, and others. She has published several chapbooks and served as an assistant editor for the collaborative anthology, *They Said*. Her collaborative chapbook, *Hex & Howl*, co-written with Simone Muench, is forthcoming from Black Lawrence Press, 2021.

Franz Wright's collections of poetry include *The Beforelife* (2001); *Walking to Martha's Vineyard*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2004; *God's Silence* (2006); *Earlier Poems* (2007); *Wheeling Motel* (2009); *Kindertotenwald* (2011); and *F* (2013). He translated poetry by Rainer Maria Rilke, Rene Char, Yosa Buson, and the Belarusian poet Valzyhna Mort. He taught briefly at Emerson College and other universities, worked in a local mental health clinic, and volunteered at The Children's Room, a center for grieving children. His sonorous voice and lyric have been honored in recordings by composers such as Clem Snide, Daniel Ahearn, Kurt Elling, and David Sylvian. Along with his manuscript *Axe in Blossom*, Wright left hours of voice recordings which were the focus of two posthumous documentaries: *Two Years with Franz* (2018) and *Franz Wright: Last Words* (2019). Franz Wright died in 2015.

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