

AND THEN: POEMS

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
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ABSTRACT

In *And then: poems* I explore damage, the construction (and de-construction) of grief, art, and passion. The poems range from “narrative” to “lyric” to “lyric narrative” and vice versa by writing through and about memory as fractured & fickle, immediate, protective, and unreliable. Some of the poems I’ve written engage with historical memory as a collective entitlement and an entanglement: what do we know of what we’ve not (directly) witnessed? Moreover, what do we know of what we’ve directly witnessed? Does memory work as fiction, creating itself while relying on some “facts”? Does memory work, mostly, as mood and sound, smell and desire, filling in, then, the narrative gaps as it’s recalled? How does the activated memory of an aggrieved person work? What of a traumatized person? In addition to memory, I write about the past as hankerings and hauntings, as spirits that live with(in) us. I also contemplate the ways in which grief moves through the body, through the senses, as vivid image and breathless movement. While I’m interested in form and structure, I work towards what Li-Young Lee defined as a “fully integrative” poem: one that is equal parts emotion, intellect, psyche, body, and psychology.

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*CAESURA

will we last much longer
than the misshapen beauty of a nebula?

are seagulls without flight
quasi-star patterns, smoke, fog?

how can a blade of grass
in water also be a gust of death?

does earth wane, desire?

does reality frighten distance,
does god? or god?

do bridges abandon
skyline, a lone moon?

FORT-DÁ

I have an ankh in my belly, a fish
swims in my face, a hieroglyph floats
in my skull. My breasts are skeletons
or blood of tulips.

Touch my fingers.

I am a chameleon of black lies. A lizard
dreams on my leg. My mother says
I'm legend, half-spine.

Whisper something nice to me.

I have a tooth lodged in my shoulder, a
tiger's moth'd limb under my elbow. I
have a brother who loves me, loves
to extract petals.

Please unhinge me.

(From my breath:
concrete conceals
moon; rattled
weather, swamp;
crocodiles, deliberate.
Rain, foster;
hail, never-ending;
storm, denouement.)

NOT NEARLY MIDNIGHT

Two men smoke in a basement, and I wonder how
my father is coping, a beer in one hand & an appointment
in another. Years ago he smoked pot with a friend & laughed
irrepressibly at a rig stuck beneath a low bridge. I can't help
but think of my dear, dead friend, leaking chemicals

while alive, naming himself Radiation Man, amused
& pissing green. A cat's howl, a harness of pain, will carry me
far into the night, and nothing, not the boy rushing towards
me, not the fifty-seven stars limpid in the sky, not the single
cigarette pack tilled into the dirt like mulch, nothing

will attack me more than the unbridled loneliness of that cat.
I can't help my father; my mother says a female doctor wants
to remove her ovaries, both of them, she doesn't need them
anymore, & my mother, she wants the doctors to pull
my father's prostate clear from his groin, what does he need

them for. My mother calls it his prostrate, as if she's imagined
him already weak, helpless, or confined; my father
who doubts nothing and fears only his own will to have faith.
My lover collapsed against a wall when I storied my pelvic

exam, when I entered our home, violated and sorrowful;
I felt like a shopping cart overturned on the sidewalk, oh
the wailing of that cat. Then, I tiptoed backwards, away
from its noise, terrified that this animal could be more

than a cat—a woman giving away everything and her heart.
Then, I sat our long-haired cat on my lap and cut out knots,
talked it through the procedure as if I were a nurturing
surgeon, as if somehow freeing this cat from its kinks

would save my friend from the cancer that carried him
to death, that could carry my father further than death, & me,
further from my father. I wished the night would end
dangerously, complicit & helpless. I imagine my father

wishes for the same, but he always sends me kisses
over the airwaves: a hand holding me back, locking me
inside this terror. Nothing can offer me solace,
not the drone from the bathroom fan, not the vapid breasts

of night's clouds, not the vacant moon, nothing. Not the night
I trimmed shrubs until they were uniform, collected
the falling leaves in a slip of paper, damp from

no, not the earth's tears, but the thing itself, the night fog.
Then, I thought of the second time I almost died, the doctor
who saved my sunken toe from its final tag.

Alone, I longed for the world to capsize, to drain
into the lawn of me, the way sugar water drips into the veins,
placebo, platonic. Then, I yearned for everything & nothing.

(break)

Then, love made me think of love more than the child
who slept inside of me, a paint-speckled egg, cracked. Then,
the doctor said, "It aborted itself," and I thought of a pile

of leaves, the emptied bladder of a dog, a moon, cratered,
a flimsy murder of clouds; god help me, what was I to make

of this? A car could nearly collide into another; a young man
could think of mugging someone for a heart; a girl might

dream of shoes & her father could die because he forgot
to grieve the ache in his foot.

You need more?

A woman could call her mother after months of silence,
an unfocused longing to feel the push of the phone, like

an infant's mouth, suddenly hungry, firmly on her skin.

IN SEARCH

We walk into the wrong end
of the mountain, trapped

under a church built atop a pyramid.

It is Cholula, México, and we fumble
through one of Cortés' rages, praying

we won't trip on another nameless skull,
another sin, another reminder.

We are tourists here. Despite our best efforts,

we trample the earth, collect dirt and stories,
buy paintings and write letters in choppy Spanish.

I want to say I'm sorry, but can't remember

which apology is appropriate for the occasion,
what I'm apologizing for:

the ragged bones of dogs slinking up the mountain,
the weight of tires crushing cobblestones,

the vacuous symphony of car horns rising

like pollution, falling pebbles, rage, stars.
We take photos that say look

where we've come, how far we've climbed,

the caves we've stumbled through.
I wish I could say I fell against the cool grace

of stone and earth, where Aztecs built underground
mazes for sanctuary. I wish I could say

the Aztec spirits arrested my soul,

but I'd be lying. We were in México; it was hot.
I'm a simple girl. I was floating & loved.

RISINGS: FOR THE WORKERS OF THE BLACK CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENTS, 1865-

It rose like a tempest,
a tsunami, a torrid fire swallowing
trees, perpetual cracks
in the earth's surface. It rose
with a platform, a market
bartering body parts, bull hooks, muzzles,
the heaviness, the chains. It rose with a rising,
high-pressure hoses, hungry
dogs trained to rip veins out of black legs,
muscles from black throats. It rose

in Galveston, Atlanta, Scottsboro.
It rose with the Malcoms and Dorseys, shot
in the back for traveling back roads
with a white man. It rose like the moon,
a breast, a breath. It rose with ten-cent ropes, black
necks cracking tree limbs, flash photography, strange
fruit. It rose beyond the rage
of white sheets, cotton balls; ashamed,

the dogwoods still flower. It rose with Emmett,
then Rosa, Medgar, Ray Williams. It rose
with Mister's late night visits, cornstalks,
porch swings, dirty linen swaying the ground.
It rose like waves, like sickness, like grief.
It rose like gossip in rice paddies, rumors stretching
like tobacco smoke, spumes of gin, violets
soaked in rain water. It rose,
torrential, in valleys, mountains, hollers,

pipe fumes, factory exhaust; it rose in black sweat,
it rose like an abscess, like the pucker
of burnt flesh, beachfronts, petty amusements;
it rose in steel, railroads, jackhammers, crosses, Christ,
like bleeding, like bloat. It rose like a harvest,
it rose with rivers, dimpled and visceral,
stagnant like lakes, bridges; it rose
in fury, in Cole Catfish, the Klan,
the Camp Hill shoot-out, the Reeltown incident.
It rose with marches, boycotts, peace, riots,
Kings, Xs, Bakers, Hamers, Johnsons, Bethunes.
It rose, by any means necessary,
like summer pollinating the sun, it rises, it blooms.

PATERNONTOLOGIPHOBIAⁱ

The man on the edge of the sidewalk presses
his feet into the concrete as if he were afraid
he'd fall from a cliff, felling the wind
like a lemur following the closest tail
it knows of love.

He waves his sign

Vet
will work
for food

and I want to pull over,
give him something to hold
but I'm forced to push
ahead, run away

from what I imagine could have been
my father, thirty-seven years ago, fresh
from Vietnam and a bout
of false insanity. I imagine

my father on corners, a sign of god
burning his fingers

vet.
will sing .
for god.

I can't be sure
if my father was crazy or the arc
of an angel's lung, but the not knowing
is heavy as smoke careening

into blood vessels. I wish I had
a heart high on bravado, but I trudge
through life, dragging fears. Once,
I dreamed my father confessed

he'd changed his name because god
spoke to him through creamed corn
and an I.V. tube. I wanted to hold

him but feared his god would contaminate me,
afraid that I could end up on a corner,
too afraid to move and even
more terrified of standing still.

EULOGY ON DELTA SLEEP

Last night I dreamt brother laid down, wrapped
cacti arms around my waist and slowly slid
through me . Ageless, I aged below
the waist-line. Once
 I'd belonged to me.

I slept through the night
 with his hand
resting
 on me,
quiet & solid
& thunder,

like trees assaulted by ice,
like storms.

This, the sleep of youth, when he'd appear,
 dusty,
 a moth,
 afraid
of nothing, and I'd
hold breath
as if it belonged.

I'd hold that breath through the dread of being loved
too hard,
through his voice in my neck, asking me to loosen up
a little,
to feel the crack of lightning split me open
to love.

But I've never wanted to please anyone.
 No, I'm not that girl.

I come from a long line
 of treacherous, beautiful
men. I learned early to clamp fast
mouth, heart; I learned
sleep was not the space
between slow-wave and REM,
 but the choke of a systolic heart murmur
minutes before the heart's muscle contracts
 against its own protection.

I haven't slept
since I dreamt myself
awake. I crawled through the night streets
just to feel
the first mist touch
concrete.

I let the atmosphere fall
(no break)

on me like
tears. I think I understand that relationship—
 that give,
 that take—

and I crave to be less
than alive, sometimes,
 to be concrete, at that moment
of blessing,
 of the mercy
of a light touch.

SOMEWHERE IN GEORGIA

He ran on concrete roads, no proof
he'd ever touched this earth. Clouded
and thundering, the heart of a woman
haunts him, carries the wind, carries him
to courthouses, to coarse handcuffs; God
tells us we all have a purpose, a time.

Because we don't know God's heat, or
Georgia's, we mantra; we imagine this
black man eats onions and peaches on the run,
hides out in shanties, shivers in corners,
and always, he's ten steps from lost time.
Let us imagine her in a chair, weathered

to a confession, if she can stay alive. Let us image
sweat clouding his soul, let us montage *his* terror.

JUSTICE

In Rwanda Belgians created Hutus & Tutsis, fractured
a country by nose widths & hair kinks, thick lips & pouty

hips. Where I'm from Tutsis would be called

redbone; children would tug their hair and wait nights
for stars to fall, just one wish would do; where I'm from

black women don't waste time on wishes,

they straightened their own hair, pinched their noses
at night with clothespins & spent their last dollars on bleaching creams.

Where I'm from postal workers deliver

magazines, snapshot beauties stuffed in mailboxes, fighting
with uglier things: telephone bills, last notices, and an occasional slip:

Jet magazine with its beauty of the week.

In Rwanda Belgians left Hutus & Tutsis
to fight the nature of color

(not color, the no one Belgians created),

who will call this? Where I'm from house niggers
would've been the Tutsis; slaveowners would invent

new uses for old languages. Where I'm from

the whites don't care if you're house or yard, a niggers
a nigger. Where I'm from newborn black babies get kicked

across white men's kitchen floors, a mess is a mess

& Hutu or Tutsi, redbone or black to the bone,
a mess is a mess & a nigger a nigger, and

(let's pause here, let's

pause, dammit

)

who will wipe the nigger from this mess?

AMEND

My father tells me a story. This is the year
of the dog; pelts of rain consume the streets.
In the story, a 200-year old oak crashes
in a Confederate cemetery. I say

Confederate, but there are Jews here;
dead, as well. Told another way, a headstone lies
headless in a cemetery. It was not the body
of lightning that raised an arm & sliced the sky,

but a wind someone trusted to raise leaves, or rustle
necks, or kiss skirts; or or or. Say, for example, gentle
breeze, or fierce atmosphere, or finicky, mercurial or hushed
wind. Say peculiar air, stream of heaven, or weathered

storm. Let's wonder why that chameleonic air
tornadoed, as jilted lyric, above the Jewish headstones. Let's wander
into that cemetery and feel earth's new weight,
how it must open itself to the ruin, because yes, the headstone

crushes the heart of this place, asks the earth to swallow or
abscond or womb it. Shall we thank wind for coercing earth
& water to rise oak from fatigued ground? My father
tells me a story. A man hangs a flag

outside his home. The man loves the flag as he loves
his grass, his recliner, and his wife. Miles away, everything
but lightning decapitates a Confederate headstone. In the man's yard,
lightning takes shape of sword, slices a child-sized

oak tree. Wind orchestrates a frustrated bruise, forces oak
from ground, hales body through air, drives this sacrifice
through the heart of the man's truculent X. This is the year
of the sorrowful dog. My father tells me a story

of a white man's anguish: a stake stabs the heart of the X
of his flag. The white man mourns his flag, replaces it, the way
people replace pets with statues of black jockeys, blood white, bone
red, and black. I wonder if thunder will bark & howl the sky

a penitent color. I tell my father a story of origins,
of plantations. Of an ochre & violent house burned in half. Or
a cross & rouge house drowned under flood waters. We share
tales for awhile. For awhile, we laugh.

MY LOVER IMAGINES AUTUMN

Wind raises snow; cobwebs & ghosts,
this wind. Shallow these waters. Shadows haunt
streets. Death snakes behind white. Tonight,
mercilessly, a car crashed snow. Undone,
ice drags along the river's bottom.

Merciless.

I take notes. Strain to see the wreckage.
Damage does to weather what love does
to the dying body. Merciless. To praise beauty
as truth, my lover imagines autumn: the fire
of leaves, the safety that is warmth. To praise
truth that is beauty, we make observations:

Someone wrapped tightly in layers of towels.
Someone losing a love to feet of fresh snow.
Red flags mute white. Observe: some of us cold to warmth.

Lights flash, as stars, so close to the ground, they
resemble residual evidence, resemble the unremarkable.
Merciless.

Someone dead, right in front of us, & I place my hand
on my girl's leg. We sigh. Watch red lights bounce
on white snow, white lights in dark sky. We ask forgiveness.

We ask to be spared. We make plans: move slowly
through the treachery of mountain. We worry ourselves
over deer survival, over our own blackness in this white.
& someone's life in balance. We make notes: remember
what can be forgotten. Merciless.

(Oh strangled beauty of white, talk us through death grown old.
Travel us beyond this mountain, beyond this ambulance, that
cop, that woman rushing ahead, please, reverse us.)

STRAY

Because he was on his way “up the river a bit,” to juvie, he sucked until swell pulsed, then more. Because this hickey was an exposé, scandalized the whole of my neck’s front, because this secreted sex was the secret of sex, he slapped my face in front of the whole & collapsed from the pain. When he woke, the night pressed the street, depressed the moon, blinked through clouds, hung half-limp, cloaked, then daggered.

Someone punched him awake, not because boys should not harm girls, but because I was thirteen with C-cups & curves. The hand that landed him imagined the swell of my lips closing around a toe, a tongue, fingers. Were you reckless to imagine heroes here? There were never children. Conversations went on. Street games resumed. And although my pulse was

proof that we were too old for tag, we touched anyway, felt the fleeting imprint of hand on flesh, the sting of being, of running up & up & from. Since black-outs never last, this story skirts the hand that pressed into my neck, pushed me against a wall, loved; breezes right past that tremulous hand handling me

not like the moon, but hot then tepid, then handed me over to a man fourteen years my senior, the voice of a teenage boy asking his uncle to take good care of me. Since secrets are more take than give, I’ll tell you most of all nothing. God, I want to learn to write the make-believe.

TO MAKE CLOUDS SHIVER, SHUDDER

Walk your dog along the tracks, study
the wrecked landscapes, the muddied marks
of your companion. Be grateful for the odors
living in yellowing leaves. Watch your dog. It will
pull on its leash, disturb your thoughts, your
meanderings. Never abandon your own thoughts.
Who else will wander through the wasteland of you,
poised beneath the interstate, watching life pass expressly
by? Yes, airplanes will deliver shadows. The deluge
of language will sift. You will think of talking
to God, you'll think the trains will up and start
their engines after decades of wasting away. But look
to the sky. It is a city of ramshackled houses,
and like language, it resembles bereft hatboxes.
No worries. Line up, wait to jump the line; cross
to the other side. Your mind will temper steel; it will not
rust; it will wreck itself. It will repair. It is bountiful. Yes.

*

*CAESURA

will we last much longer
are seagulls without flight
how can a blade of grass
does earth wane, desire
does reality frighten distance
do bridges abandon

IN THE CLOUD FOREST

The innkeeper phones in: *ellos son las Negras*; tells us,
the driver will be here shortly; he'll know how to find
you; we wait on the porch. At the coffee plantation
we pay to witness a man perform his daily ritual. It is low

season, & the berries seem erudite as they lean, red,
away from our brown & gold curiosities. The seasoned man
straps a wicker basket across his torso, a crocus sack
around his back, & ties these taut with heavy twine. He demonstrates

how he would walk through the field, pick reddened
berries, sort, then dry, then roast, then dry again, an eternal
rhythm; he processes seeds & beans to make coffee palatable to people
like me. He tells us a history of a boy who wandered

into the woods, picked berries when they were stubbornly green;
he could feel the earth swallow his tongue; he licked
the stem & swallowed the berry whole. In that heat, we sway,
look at the photographs scotch-taped to the wall. He warns us

against eating against nature, says, the boy almost died, & before almost
death, saw visions, & was less than happy. Says there were people before us
who died for us & curiosity, their hunger. We sway in the shed, in the heat,
look at the metal machines, the keys on the wood table.

Equipment waits to be useful. The man makes coffee-
picking a theatrical expression. We lean against the walls, against
the solidity of heat, against the temptation to pause green between two fingers,
press the hard flesh. His stories become ours, & soon, we see

hands on brown seeds, white gauze. Against heat, blink. He asks
if I will try to carry the basket, so I put it atop my head and stroll
into the field, my back aligned with a banana tree, my neck angled,
like red berries, away. The sun burns even my dark back.
In this country, too, I walk I walk & I walk into temperamental heat.

THERE ARE WAYS OF SEEING

10 things Paul Johnson sat on that bench to discover, or
PARIS, TN: NEGRO SHOT FOR SITTING ON WHITES ONLY BENCH

1. Rumor had it, if you sat still long enough, a ladybug would transform you.
2. Not once, but half a dozen or more times, when Paul Johnson cut the courthouse lawn or polished a judge's desk, he heard a particular branch sigh.
3. Did that bench always creak when someone sat on it, or was it simply aching under the stress of white folks?
4. Legend has it this bench is precisely in the location where the Eiffel Tower sits in that other Paris.
5. What must that 2 o'clock southerly breeze feel like right were the clouds hush the sun?
6. On this bench, could Paul wrench up the nerve to ask that gal out?
7. Hell, it's just a bench.
8. If 4, what were his chances of feeling French? of feeling free?
9. If 7, why no Negroes ever sit there?
10. If? Courage, man.

10 things Paul Johnson did not sit on that bench to discover, or
PARIS, TN: NEGRO SHOT BY WHITE CONSTABLE FOR SITTING ON WHITES ONLY BENCH

10. Courage is dependent on rage.
9. Courage is downcast with rage.
8. Courage :: rage as rage :: desire.
7. That bench is just a bench as that fountain is just a fountain as that counter is just itself. Courage.
6. That woman (courage?) didn't even bother to visit him at the hospital, at the jail.
5. A 2 o'clock breeze on a white's only bench feels like (courage) first one bullet then 2.
4. Feels like a lieutenant (coward) standing over you. That shadow. That sudden eclipse. That hand struggling to down turn (cowardly) that dream.
3. And yes, that bench was a creaker. Creak creak creak. Bang, nigger, nigger, bang.
2. Paul wants us to know this: in a place called Paris, TN, all trees sigh. All of 'em.
1. Rumor had it, a ladybug. A tree. A breeze. A woman. A bench. A sign. A rage.

FREED AFRICANS SET SAIL TO SIERRE LEONE, 1820

They arrived with nothing and left
with old names tattooed to their tongues; dreams,
stuffed to the overflowing, tossed headlong

on the Elizabeth, Mayflower of Liberia. No shackles
or separations, mother held son held daughter and father; let's pray
they marked their tongues with baptismal dreams,

tapped their hipbones, ready for home. I imagine
if my great great great grandmother knew of New York, she'd have risked
the flight north, carried her son, daughter, husband, parents; she'd pray

for the safe return of others, gather courage and storm
on board, a song pushing from her lips, surreptitious as wind sliding
across the vast neck of the world. She could risk this sound in New York,

where others had been docked, sleep and mercy stolen from them.
I imagine the reckless harbor sounds, voices clanging
on board, off board, songs slipping in the wind. A furtive hand pushes

receipts in hands. I can hear the whip of bodies beseeching
ancestors to lift them overboard, into that unknown, unshackled
freedom of water, home to Nunⁱⁱ. I can hear them call out,

frantically to Nyamia Amaⁱⁱⁱ, then, and now, I wonder if they call him
again, to embrace the skies that carry Elizabeth, that vacillating beast, slicing
water. I wonder which ancestors danced on board, unshackled, to unknown
freedom. Nun, did you welcome them back to your world? Did you call their names?

*Nun—god of water and chaos

*Nyamia Ama from Senegal, sky deity who rules storms, lightning, & rain

FOR THE BROTHERS, WHO MOVED UPSTATE FOR A SLOW LIFE

On Avenue C in New York, they tapped soul beats in potholes, rode
F trains through rainstorms, dreamed badtimes on drum sets, floated
down stairs on heart's aches.

Light on the fingers, they glided through words like Astaire,
promised good times to bad girls, divvied up dimes for the luckless, sang
tone deaf love notes in the ground. Here in Binghamton, they cut hair

for conversation, paint cars for inspiration, trim weeds for dollars,
talk about making a living,

which is better than making nothing.

They've molded sunscapes out of debris, painted highrises in heads, ice caps
on feet, but they can't be weighed down.

They miss the City, and here began making babies out of boredom, jokes

out of juicy couture, picked up lines from the bridge, spat them out
on dancefloors. They trek through tree stumps, snow clumps, a forest of fast food
restaurants, worlds began to escape them.

On long days, they boil redbeans and rice, warm up tortillas, fry plantains,
and empanadas. They've taken up cooking.

They miss their mother. Here rivers are muddy, trees push

from foundations, geese mow their lawn, and the emergency room slips
into water. They can see the stars here and call them angel.

They see crows and call them smoke. God lives in mountain-houses

tipping over the city, so they raise their heads and pray.

MARS GETS CLOSER

I want to see the fat world
shift shape right before my eyes;
to taste the first fragrance
of the full moon. I pray
for an encounter with Mars
at dusk or Mars in the daytime. Venus
pulses in my cuticles because
astronomers haven't found the planet
that positions me rightly. I type
names of galaxies I won't remember
beyond a poem; nebulae called "cat's eye",
that actually resemble the shell
of a homeless snail, but who wants
the dulled truth? That kind of impression left
to take shape on the brain isn't why
a kid wakes at five in the morning
and polishes her telescopic eye,
eager to be the first kid on the block
who won't go blind gazing at the solar eclipse.
I wasn't born blind with ambition, wanting
nothing more than to become the first fool
who discovers follies come a penny a dozen.
I was the kid who preached
the dangers of photospheric crescents, made
viewing shelters out of leftover cardboard boxes,
aluminum foil, and saran wrap. I saw
the sun unfold through folded fingers, looked
for the burn of rays on leaves, for the heat
of sunsets searing clouds.

AUDREY LORDE, STUFFED & TIGHTENED,
WHILE PATIENTLY WAITING FOR HER MOTHER
TO WALK HER TO SCHOOL, PONDERES HER TONGUE

On her porch, she waits: no dog,
no turtle, no faithful bunny, not a single
flea, nothing and no one, ever, to talk to.
Her mother peers at her from the window,
tells her to stay still. Tells her, *be a good girl,*
now. The little girl muses: no sparrow,
no spider, no spindly-legged friends. No clouds
in the sky, nothing to shape snake, goose,
the woblblings of a penguin, a clan of ants,
one more child. The girl imagines all
of what she'd say, all of the words, crippled
in her mouth, that could tumble freely,
gracefully, if only. The girl's mother moves
from house to stairs, places her mouth
on her daughter's obedient forehead. The
child leans forward, goodly. Lets her
forehead receive its kiss. The mother
whispers, *be good while we walk, be good*
for mommy, hold my hand, stay quiet, be
a good girl, and they step, straight-backed,
down 1, then 2, then 3, now 4 stairs, and a slight
sidewalk, then street, child's hand in mother's.
The girl looks back at her stoop, to the sky, silently
sings: Sweet bird, singing so softly, rest
on me oftly, come to me now. Sweet bird,
sing me so softly...

LESSER PLAGUES

Brood X has arrived. Are you ready?

Tonight, Brood X of the cicada will surface, become adults, and breed in droves. Thousands of insects fucking, laying eggs, offering the standard sneer for the cameras, then die. After sexing her for days, the wild songbird

collects twine, rustles his feathers, puffs out for fatherhood. The female sits in the sill, muses on her life, the perfunctory dreams. Late last year, a woman desired herself under the table, silly & pregnant,

pulsing of mornings. Her man leaves for drier climes. An underestimated invasion of ladybugs swarm the city. News reports describe an outbreak. Advise to head for shelter. Journalists take photos, collect

evidence: snapshots of sexy ladybugs exposed for their dangerous beauty, their unflinching and persistent attacks to the flesh. Then the bats, the media darlings, the special interest stories. Anything to un-intuit the inevitable.

After weeks of fucking in the ocean, garibaldi fish lay their eggs. Famished, the women hunger after their own eggs, the fresh prey. They hunger and hunger and longing sends them swimming in circles, hiding in the crevices

of tough sponges, behind the backs of sea horses, themselves entangled by their tails, dancing and looping, shaping their bodies into two halves of one heart. Tentacled sea anemone anchor to rock, sand; eels lie in wait.

Soon, this storm will pass. Thunder will imitate the sound of celebration. The cicada will creep out of their shells. Baby penguins will crack on the feet of their fathers; a woman in labor will warble at fat robins in her window.

CHANGING TIDES

2005: L.A. police shoot and kill Devin Brown

1965: L.A. police beat the Frye family. The stop was supposed to be routine.

2001: Cincinnati. His name was Timothy.

1999: It was New York and Amadou Diallo.

1969: Chicago police and Fred Hampton.

1925: At least 25 were lynched.

1924: There were 16 recorded lynchings.

1923: 29

Fifty one in 1922

Fifty nine: It was 1921 and lynchings of blacks were on the rise.

Fifty three in 1920

1919: There was a "Red Summer" and 76 blacks were lynched to boot.

This is a timeline. It is not freedom.

It is incomplete. Generation

to generation, historically speaking,

from the perspective of centuries,

blood spills from black bodies,

time and time again, what we long for:

times to be a-changing.

A QUARTER MOON DENIES THE SKY ITS RIGHT
TO HAVE SKY TO ITSELF

Over a decade, since I've slept near you. I know
you're awake, scratching reasons to worry. Is your
last child wearing the accoutrements of a proper girl:
a clean mouth, straight back, matching socks? Are you
rummaging through clothes racks of your mind, clothing me

in stable shoes, straight, patterned skirts reserved for old, lonely,
forgotten women. You'd be careful to avoid menswear with its tweed
blazers, its extended crotch pants, its shameless fedoras, bold
ties. Somewhere deep in you, maybe around the left ovary or treading water
in the fallopian tubes, a deep series of small regrets will tear you

apart. I'd call and say, don't bother with clothes. Love can't be delivered.
We haven't seen the same clouds in years. It's after eleven on Saturday morning,
and the quarter moon fights to stay alive, swells against these striated clouds.
I'd like to call, ask how your insides are treating you these days; I know you're somewhere
shutting down your organs. Do you hate the you that wishes, even for a moment,
you'd delivered a straighter child? I reckon you're standing

near to naked in the kitchen, a spatula in your right hand, and a brown egg
in your left. You run your thumb along the shell, feel for small secrets, tiny
bumps, indiscretions; you raise your eyebrows & tap-tap-tap, there goes
your foot. By now, you're fondling the radio, hope for the Temptations, the Whispers,
Miracles, or Impressions. You'll think these names speak truths to you. Love,
reach over, call me, tell me you're thinking something deep and serious

as cancer, but you won't say cancer. And you won't call your thoughts
a poem. You crack that egg now, and another and another and so on until your bowl
runneth over and you feel the first large tear drop before you see it stain a meal.
By then, it's too late. Grief is what's for breakfast. You hope, don't you,

your husband won't find you like this? Frail and loose, your hair standing
on edge or falling to the floor. I can almost see your arm, furiously whipping eggs
until you've forgotten their purpose, and you've lost your balance and sorrow. One
phone call would clear us. God help me, not even this quarter moon knows why I can't
give you what you want, just one call would end this ceaseless, merciless whipping.

GIRL WITH ARMS FOLDED

I was twenty-four before I discovered
good girls don't wear their hearts
in public. The first time I undressed her

we left the lights on, exposing our half-
moons, sea-crazed stars; a brazen room
filled with silence, voluble, unwieldy.

*

The abiding hum,
that is our wicked hunger:
yes, now, there, now.

The uncloaked sunlight
rains behind red curtains. Slight
sight of clouds, a sigh.

*

Her vagina, a nebulae. Call it cloud,
call it lyric, call it desire's desire,
the moon's reluctance to look away.

The increasing hunger. Reckless,
how it upstages the noon,
the parenthesis of sex, a half-naked sun.

*

In this room, I am the distance
between breaths, a lightyear—the rustle
of language. My arm, a breach, reveals

a dust-ridden girl, a crumbling ledge
singing to the sun.

*

IMPENETRABLE, POROUS

When I was a kid I discovered sex was about how far a boy could throw
a felled tree, how long two people could stare at each other instead of rain,
how hard it is to remove mud from the hair and handprints
from the thighs.

Because the first penis I ever saw belonged to a boy who used knives
as language, because that boy was my brother, because the boy
was my brother whose words were serrated, because he lived beneath

me, his wrists pulsing into the ceiling, listening for my heart
to cease being a haven, I began pressing my lips against any boy's body
who was strong enough to throw a tree. I was nine,
and brother'd convinced me that breasts were missiles,
exploding boys until their gestures transformed love to pain

before sex, pain with sex, sex of threat and secret. Because I discovered
the stains of sex live under the skin's pores, in the pegs of teeth
and tastebuds, because I learned early that girls who stroked

cigarettes were afraid and lonely, because whiskey burning
my tonsils made me remember my brother's saliva would always coat
my throat, I don't remember the first boy I gave away a kiss to,

the first boy I slammed against my parent's kitchen door,
or the first boy who slammed me against the rough edges
of a tree. I don't remember when I first gave permission to a boy to treat
me like a dagger, or the first time I discovered that crying

in the rain underneath a boy you don't love or won't remember
isn't the fastest route to god, to heaven or the torments of truth.

THIS IS THE SOUL

1.

poems scribbled blindly
in my girlfriend's journal;
the boys from Sudan never travel
alone; the sky demands
the wind: chime.

2.

I fill my lover's side of the bed
with longing: a remote control,
composition books, green
pens, leaves of sage, lemons,
a halved moon.

3.

ladies in burqa and abaya float
down the street. boys ride
bikes in circles, ghosts hover
in baggage. languid fog & terse
language. trees shed their lasting
leaves. I've not been with myself.

4.

three girls demand more
than the sun, divide light, teach
each other to jump rope: pluck
water from the sky's edges, desire.

5.

the runner, a homeless black
cat; a man thumbs my way, winks, &
castrates the road's side. I do not
recognize this white man's gestures. a blind
man and his sleepy friend, reluctant
clerks, hurried winds castigate the south.
more reminders of the not familiar.
I do not belong.

6.

the very floors are caffeinated. language
hovers, slips around the neck, digs
in skin, chokes back and vomits
forth the rot that is action.

7.

this bedroom, overstuffed
as it is with surrendering,
miniature deaths, familiar
urges. an acquiescence,
a rage of wind circles,
knocks against the fan's blades.
the cat backs into the hall.

8.

this is the longing that longing builds.

WHATEVER BEAUTY

1.

A is in love, still she breathes in the phone, with a married man who is teaching her to nurture her nurturing side. He has bought her a pot-bellied pot, soil, rocks, and a large plant. Today, he will teach her the sensual art of fertilizing roots.

2.

Although he tells her she's stupid and lucky to have any man, B clings to her guy. She suspects he's cheating, tears through his closet, then carefully refolds his sweaters, pants, marries his socks. She asks me to send holiday cards to her parents' house, one less lie to sift through, she says, before asking, "How's A?"

3.

See, for two months now I've dreamed myself in Cairo with a man whose face presses into itself like an accordion when he laughs. We drink tea, talk to children and pause five times during the day to pray, then make love. He never mentions his wife and six children in Durban. I never mention my lover in Binghamton. Every night I wake with my hand pressed into my mouth and hum a song that lulls my lover back to sleep.

4.

After she discovered I could be honest on paper, my mother sent me a letter outlining my father's affair with a sister from church. She said she'd never give her body to another man. She said nothing of the heart.

ONCE THE NIGHT WAS CAPTURED (KHAOS)

III. Air (Hemera)

She wakes choking on her own dreams.
Nightmares the wind's retaliation. Sand-clouds suffocate

air. Children dance. Knives sing. Blood spatters quietly,
like rain. Birds plunge through the night.

The sky cannot carry the weight

of bombs. Of her perpetual screams. Her mother phones
periodically. Reminds her to pray. Watch

evening's news and sunsets. She sleeps
herself into fitful despair. Into fabricated disasters. Hurricanes

of sand storms. Clouds suffocating.

I. Fire (Oya)

Far into her
night, she rages.
Prolongs grief.
Scrubs babies,
damages dinner.
Newsmen forever.
Her oldest child
wants to pray
in public. Believes
youth can undo old
damage. Language
failed her night.
Faced with moon's
emptiness,
leaves rage:
crimson colored
leaves, grape-
shaped leaves,
lunar eclipsed
leaves, leaves like
hands, like water,
windchimes, fall, God,
the silence.

II. Earth (Bhoodevi)

They emerge upon her two by two—a dark flight of birds. The
murderous headlines and fog utters, releases the children into
mourning. She has risen and follows the first air strikes. Dawn
resists her weight. Specious fog thickens, rebellious sand. The
breeze, a stranger's bullet. Two by two children bloom; they
drown in technicolor storms, impetuous dirt. Today, she can-
not cultivate. Cannot shrine. Iraq's children, she is certain, do
not frolic in man-made storms.

(break)

IV. Water (Tethys)

She drinks it all in.
Rain falls & shelters.
She plants flowers
in the lake. Writes.
Daily the news
wakes. Exposes cracked

streams. She prays
she can wash again.
Children flee.
Women collapse.
Buildings out of sight
drop. Like daybreak.
The first flock of birds
rain on the city.

The first bombs.
She washes,
from the street, blood.
In the passenger seat
of her car, eggs, ineffective
white bombs. She
wonders if children
have been fed.
Readied.

*

*

*CAESURA

will we longer
than the beauty of a nebula?

are flight
quasi-star fog?

how can grass
in water death?

does desire?

does distance,
does god?

do abandon
skyline, moon?

ELEGY FOR A, AT 8

I thought I'd done with me, simple & budding,
my body sensing your thighs lifting the air. You'd turn
cartwheels for hours, hurtling from one yard to the next,
crossing streets with your legs spread, sparing the world
nothing, not the weight of your belly (some kid said contained
the whole world), not the pervasive cellulose crowding your calves,

nothing. You were air, grabbing the sun, landing noiseless,
weightless, and free. God knows I loved you then, when I stood
in front of a 2" x 4", heavy with rusted nails; my sister swung
that board as if it were a scythe, and you, nothing but a field
of unnamed grass. It was my birthday, but you didn't know.

You were busy with the business of ripping me apart, snatching
seams from my favorite shirt, scratching to get closer to my sister;
her fire against your air. My jealousy held me in front of you;
your fingertips on my collarbone, your teeth on my cheek,
your hands dragging every strand of my hair from its holders.

My mother would beat me for that, for running around
like a wild woman; I knew and didn't care. It was my birthday;
I couldn't have you at my party. My sister hated you, and I smiled
through the celebration, remembering your feet in the air, your spit
mingling with stinging nettle, nightshade, morning glory. In polaroids,
you're missing from that day, but your particles still float mid-air.

I thought I'd done with you; you, beneath the earth for years; my body
still wanders to us, back then, back when my sister almost took you out
& I discovered what was stronger than love. Years later in the dead
of night, I took down the school bully for calling you fat. I envied that girl
for saying what was crowding her mind, for telling it straight. You were

fat; it's that simple. And I loved you cosmically, secretly, which was never
straight. We were eight; it was my birthday. At home my mother
was pulling leaves for the switch. It could have been so simple
to tell you. We were eight and had everything and time, nothing to lose.

BROTHER'S HEAD

Once, it billed the sun
for its own energy.

Once, it recklessly willed its hands
to speak against my father's belts.

When it reprimands the world
for its birth, it confuses nebula

with verbs, pronouns with riverbeds.
It touched its sisters'

bodies because roses smell like sex
in October. It borrowed church

money because it owned no religion.
Once, it almost lost its body to a mountain

of a big rig. On days, we remember.
His head is strong. We celebrate.

LETHAL INJECTION

Tonight a man was executed.

Oh Lord,

I slept,

I slept,

I slept.

In memoriam: Stanley "Tookie" Williams

EQUINOCTIAL

A woman, warm by the river, waits for night to freeze.
Houses drown in rainwater; children topple, lovingly,
down muddied mountains. Agony dwells in clouds.
Sun sets and a gun held in the mouth signals no easy
death. Earth shudders and buried in a tree, an egg cracks.
Someone somewhere steps casually off a bridge.
A father uncovers the voracious beauty of Bible verses.
I watch a woman pray for the return of stars to resuscitate
the night, for the moon to bleed an anxious beautiful light.

*

*

*

GOOD-TIME GIRL

She came to me first in a dream, straddling my thighs, pushing
plates of food on my stomach, laying desserts on my breasts.

Good Southern cooking, she whispered, collard greens & yams, grits
& cornbread, sausage, gravy & rice, biscuits, turkey necks, fried

chicken, sweet tea, and countless pies. She placed a heavy candlestick
on my forehead, struck the match, waited for the first beads of wax to sweat

down the shaft, stick to my cheekbones. It was sensual the way she used food
as a weapon, turned my South against me; no fusion foods would simmer

in her kitchen; she separated the Jamaican from the good times Southern girl.
She came to me first in a dream, stealthily like lightning without the thunder, rain

without sound, stripping the tin from roofs, concrete from pavement, washing
away all sound. She came to me in a dream, all patois and hincty-souled;

salt-fish & plantains, cassava, callaloo, and curry chicken trapped beneath her
nails. She put language between us, drew borders with bananas,

put ackee on toast, called me Wisconsin, and I knew she meant Girl-never-be-
good-enough-for-my-girl, I knew she meant no girl would be good enough

for her girl, so she came to me in dreamtime, then open-the-eyes time,
holding back her gasps when I crawled from her daughter's bed,

asking me if I'd like collards with some mackerel, meaning, would I like
her daughter on a bed of lettuce. I say yes, please, and mean,

please, ma'am, stop crawling on my dreams.

VARIEGATED

Street corners jerk
the way your body closes
down in sleep
fighting its own muscles,

the way paper straightens &
folds beneath your fingers,
the way my skirt flirts—
crease & wrinkle—
with the broad strokes
of your

*

For light I would become
anything—apodal & solid,
flimsy & opaque. Apocalyptic,
how I'd redeem us, too

*

Lakes, like hunger, shiver,
grow exponentially, like
lightning & sinus
pressure, cosmic discovery

*

I want to be invented blue
note, stretched as canvas,
laid bare, angled, jarred.

*

The final dusting
of leaves

*

*

Slightly, imagine
your heart bears
my winter, your dream
rubs into my haphazard.

RECORD

UNTIMED

UNTITLED

Track 1, R&B, adult time: the grooves
 you remember your parents dancing
 to: apart, distant. Track 2, quiet
 zone: their fingertips caress
 space. Track 3, blues infused: his hips
 reveal a story. Her hips contradict.
 Track 4, the remix: pressed
 one body into the other; her thigh
 opens to receive his knee; her nipple
 brushes against his chest the way a stylus
 slides along an album. Track
 5, soft scratch: apart. Her hands
 m-
 manage Her hands m-m-manage to turn
 blank space into a man taller
 and meaner than her husband.
 Track 6, remix: distant. As husband,
 he no longer sees himself as lover.
 Arms raised, he cups the air's waist.

B-side, slow soul jam.
 Track 1, extended: late night
 and the sounds coming
 from behind that door are moans,
 not of love unshackled, no
 Eros to stroke the sheets seductive,
 these are sound a woman makes
 when her man snores
 and no, she doesn't imagine his sound
 as rolling thunder, or a lion's
 protective roar. His is the sound of error.
 Hers of life's long necessity.

Skip ahead and you think
 you've glimpsed it, that glimmer
 and shine of thighs after
 toe has imprinted itself,
 mapped its own devious course.
 You watch her slide into
 the kitchen humming a song you want
 to remember, a sound you need
 to forget, & then she slips
 her arms around her own waist
 and you realize it is this
 touch, the weight of her own hands
 that glorified her this morning.

Now, believe your memory
 if you want. You were eight
 before you learned to plot
 against love. Was it
 Track one: the overturned
 record player, Track two: the wall, tear-stained
 with coffee, or B-side, Track one: the Queen Anne,

(break)

its matching couch, lamps, and a bust
of the lonely black face all
tilted in the wrong direction,
never, in your mind,
upright as love again.
B-side, Track three: The second
he tells you the truth.
Scratch: he tells you the Scratch:
The truth Scratch: the truth the truth
The truth the the the the the the

Vinyl, Take two:
Track one, child-beat: You need them
to love, so you invent
tonal-teenager: a story to suit your needs.
Track three, vibration separation:
Let me
have
this, and I'll
never
no no no no never
lie
I said no no no no no
never
lie
again.

AT THE DUDS & SUDS

The television is tuned to a reality show; you watch me
settle in to a fitful episode. Listen: a man and his love
play pool without touching, and a little boy runs
from his mother. I hear pool balls knock

against each other; machine doors open and close;
the unavoidable scrape of laundry baskets slide
across the floors. Look at the couch cushions, dingy
& fitted to dozens of bodies; my gaze moves

from t.v., to pool players, you and your book. Think
of the silence couples harbor in dull places. Soon,
the washers will stop. The pool players will miss
their holes, and we will all miss a cue or two.

We move our clothes from one cramped machine
to the next. Reason: machines have it easy, always
a hand to open their doors. I'll ask you to play
me one, let you win. I'll call it love & mean desire.

SONNET

And this lust sticks to me like autumn, like
leaves damned to the breath of pavement, leaves
battered by rain, wind, and the pleasure of heat
hiding behind the cellulose thighs of clouds.

And because I am not my parents' daughter,
I whisper into the shoulder blades of the air.
Words ache my skin, sink into my muscles,
bleeding my desire like rain staining earth.

I am driven by this reckless longing
to swallow whole chunks of mercy, spit it
out and sort through the grace of childhood,
the love that shames me, the writing I can no

longer read, the merciful love, fat and
expectant as this tumultuous earth.

NIGHT: HAIKU: JAZZ

At Lincoln Center
Baraka called them Loku—
sparks fill a window.

You named the lights Christ,
a thorny joke, a circle.
Heartbeats break the glass.

Gil Scott Heron hummed
winter, a vengeful, jealous
season for lovers.

I touched your seven
sins, lulled by spring's ghosts.
The tap of chains, the pull.

Sonia Sanchez sang
lovers, disembodied, sold.
Auction blocks bloomed blood.

What slips between us:
lamentations without god.
I kneel forward, breathe.

Yusef dips music,
hangs and billows words on rods.
Curtains sway & haunt.

Slave plantations rise
against fire's floods. Orange flags
wilt. The pain, beauty.

ROSA INGRAM MURDERS GEORGIAN FARMER, 1948

Mother, wife of,
servant, sibling,
daughter, Rosa.

Woody Guthrie
ballad, a Black
history marker,
a mere footnote.

*
*

*Georgia, Georgia,
the whole day through
just an old, sweet song
keeps Georgia on our minds.*

You. Quiet, a haint, prick your ring finger
on stubborn cotton. Or you, a weapon,
silver, slicing cane, flickering in night,
an insect, floating, charged, wired, your lone rage,
revved, the rumbling in your children's belly,
piercing, like engines clamoring through fields,
tone-deaf mantras, pushing you from sleep,
to labor, a sharecropper, then slow pay
or no pay at all. Rosa, I wander,
strain my ears for a glimpse of your music;
I wonder if you sang, that night, did you
dream?

*
*

FROST HEAVE AHEAD

The road's middle explodes
a skunk. Decimated, a crow.
Broken open for the eye's
eye. A possum here. An armadillo
there. If you're lucky enough
to drive through Texas. Once,
a chicken. (Yes, to reach
the other's side.) Road signs
prophesize cowboys on horses;
the fattest, saddest, immobilest
cows; man rangy on snowmobile;
woman running with girl; an empty
wheelchair; lilted deer; ambient
moose. Ambulance. (What is
the apposite for emergency?) Cold
heaves. Signs warn. Disasters
always lie humidly in wait.

IMAGE IN CREATIVE WRITING, OR WHAT THE UNIVERSITY MAKES

I bottle myself in coke, fear
certain boys will drink me.
In their spare time,
do they dream of taming
my blackness, of pouring

me through history's strainer,
over and a redundancy of over, until
I, too, glisten
bone-white. I dream
their hands tighten the rope
around the weeping

tree. Around the tree
weeping, a white friend inserts
'niggerlover' in his love poem.
Burning flesh hangs
from poplar trees. Once,

a Japanese girl floundered
right in front of me. She was thin &
flimsy; then right in front
white boys' white noise
pronounce Wittengstein so fine,

strange fruit sprouts
(o, insurmountable
deeds). Listen up:

this is
reality:

a white professor promised
he'd tame me,
if only I'd let him.

*
*
*
*

CAESURA

will

beauty

flight
smoke

water

earth desire

does reality frighten

a lone abandon

SCRAPE THE SIDE

I'm an oilcloth stuck in the back pocket
of jeans you don't wear anymore. Brass
buttons on a work-shirt. Over exaggeration.
Under simplification. You make me feel
like a Jezie, a Madge, Rita, or Barb, a hole
in the arm of a nightshirt, a scrape
down the side of a chalkboard. A shoe neglected
in the driveway, remnants of broken glass,
a telephone left off the hook. A funeral. A
color. A design. A mute. A commercial snatched
from the air. A sonnet confined
by its own form. A villanelle. Villainous,
but this ink in my pen could kill you.

THE SYNTAX OF SURVIVAL

Momentum momentous.
Caught on tape & damned
to perpetual rewind, the killer
tornado gains speed, sweeps
the ground of my mind, twists
and curves, an invective of opaque
angles, an intersection of whirl &
whorl, clip and glide, like a crazy

woman in love, dancing jitterbug,
strut and jive, her feet tumbling
into one dervish of an electric
slide, a graceless dancer, this tornado,
all tow and love kicking up
dirt, yanking weeds, an ecstasy
of flower beds, this killer tornado
snorts & stomps—a borderless bull

racing through towns with its tongue
thrust out, the way I remember
my sister, a category F5, seasoned
tornado, rushing through the house,
her hair electric like glochids,
her 80-mile wind prickly,
stinging the perfect storm
of our mother—never the cool
air traveling through her head—
they collide, cold meets heat,

the way the tornado races
from Lawrence to Henry, Renick
to Randolph, small Missouri counties,
newsworthy only from March
to August, tornado season, funnels
blaring through unprepared
towns like a renegade lover, fugitive,
misfit, a misanthrope, a man
rushing from his family, a dog
chasing a clowder of cats, a pack
of wolves hounding their own tails,
this tornado picks up a pick-up truck
harboring a couple who flee, thumb
out, hitchhikers running from nature's
law, unpaid bills, a wailing baby.

*

*

Because I arrived
in Austin, desperate
to observe the free-tailed
Mexican bats, joyous
in the humidity of night,
because the airplane that carried
us passengers death-free

(no break)

escorted a soldier, dead,
in the underbelly, inside
a white box stamped red: "Handle
with Extreme Care," a coffin
of unknown colors packed inside,
a soldier's remains I and none
of the rest of us saw, rested,
because I was traveling rapidly
towards my own accident, days
later, back in New York and a full
moon, because I saw this wreck
coming on for days, like the train
whistle propelling tornadoes
throughout the Midwest, because I
thought "Crash. Boom," as if I were
writing a story about me and my lover,
the moon and a cabbie named Islam,
because I wanted to cover
my heart in my mother's dusty white
milfeh and hail a cab from the rusted sky,
because I hoped for a crisis or trauma or
hopelessness, any grief, just to write,

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*

I dream Missouri, a whole state snatched up by a tornado,
the way a woman's breath collects and swirls in her throat
the first time she submits to the rhythm of her lover's gaze,
the way a tongue, loosened by sin, by Missouri, will yank a
man by the throat, push him against a tank of propane, the
death of death, lyrical, fantastic phantasmagoria, unmerciful
death that swallows Missouri, sketches a bluejazzgrass music
on this city's new wind, etches a stuttering, breathless syntax
skaeskaeskaedae...skaedaedaedaedae all on Missouri: a bed
of screaming red begonias, wide-mouthed lilies, baby breath,
swirling trucks, whirling women, bowls of dust dusting yards
made new from the grit of this glorious montage, this race to
the end for a dying couple, a chuckle towards death, towards
my need to turn tornado into pen, mucked landscape to paper,
a nod to death, who, like me, is

smoke .

. . .

AND THEN THEY MET

Evening sweats, she
sweats & outside pounds of rain.
His tongue, light dewdrops

in her mouth. His scent,
stained in her nose. The rain &
she weep, alone. Moons

burnished a copper
chrysanthemum, flecked. His breath,
a breeze for her back.

The sun rose. She clenched,
anguished, savored the rain of him
in her teeth. They paused

to listen to sirens,
to a song he recited in her
thigh, their sweat, haiku.

PSALM

I watch a man walk into a woman's bathroom and laugh
as loudly as I would if he'd walked sober into a wall.

Something inside of me has taken root, has taken the shape
of ravaging winds. I don't know what my body has to say,

but I haven't combed my hair in weeks and bathe only
when my lover begs me to slip

inside of her, freely in the fog,
through falls' leaves, & I kick just to see something rise

and take shape, to witness night release its damp coat.
If the moon could see me now she'd ravage

my stomach for clues. She's a true believer in curves, listens
to the growing rise and fall of bodies as if they were spirit

vessels. I listen to the wind raging from the South, open
my mouth to taste the vagrant gasps of autumn.

I can't seem to believe in taking what I can't give.
In some place called Lake Wylie, my sister closes

her windows against the breeze, wonders how she can stay
her children from traveling in the dark. I stay my hand

from touching too much of this awful, joyful world.

WARNING: SPEED BUMPS AHEAD

Do not leave your personal belongs unattended.
Do not wedge your heart open, unattended.

No open cups in the library.
No open souls in the bedroom.

Do not scatter your spirit.
Do not share cautionary tales.

Caution: slips into despair easily.
Caution: slippery rocks colliding.

Warning: Do not contain your heat.
Caution: Heat escapes when container opened.

Warning: the best doughnuts have holes in their hearts.

R, AT DAYBREAK

She wants to saturate me,
the way the moon seeps
into the ground nightly,
fluid and linguistic.
She tells me the moon
is the perfect metaphor,
the only adjective, the love
that no one can spell.
I want to tell her
the moon is an impervious
ghost, abrasive, raw,
and unforgiving, but I envy
all things cosmic. She wants me
to be softer, to absorb
satellites, let them pollinate
and feed. She's a metonym,
eclipsed, dizzying, petulant light.

ONE DAY THE SNOW ARRIVED

Winter, and you're leagues from my mouth.
At the X motel your body, a less than resistible storm,
signified every salient thing wrong with this world—
a vast green comforter hid the bed. The sun
appeared unkempt, stars collided

and bounced, fucked all over the planet. You,
a lazy, hinging beauty, magnolias draping
the porch. I, a languid drowning, the choke
of perennial kudzu. You, the blazing evaporation;
I, the heart, bursting into the dampness of flames.

BENEDICTION

Although it has been raining for hours now, the fountains
still toss water into air, catch most of what returns
to its wide, bottomless mouth.

It is this gesture that makes me realize:
tending to a fountain is like caring for someone beautiful
you can't bring yourself to love.

It is this ravaged thought that takes me back to 1992
where my best friend would have six days of living in her.

But this is how grief works:

First your lover asks how long
can a person milk tragedy.

Then a student asks
how many poems a living man can write
about a dead father.

Third. A man you barely know
will bring Franz Wright to class, and you'll feel
the deep agony of love walking all over you.

It will be this awareness of the terrible beauty
of loss that will make you think of your father,
how he reasons with you.

And you know mourning is temp work.

Soon, you will forget the moment you almost severed
your tongue to save yourself the horrible realness
of talking to your dead friend.

It's been thirteen years now,
and you've successfully grieved
one year of your friendship to one year of her death

plus one. Then the platitudes:

Go ahead, speak her name;
let her go;
forgive yourself.

Yes, you refused to watch her body,

draped in a casket, dip into a ground
until nothing remained of her body
but the sin of dirt falling against heaven.

It's not 1992 anymore,
and even if it were,
those six days wouldn't matter.

(no break)

You can't go back.

Yes, you swore on your unmarked graves you'd never
live long enough to see the other die. Yes, you swapped
spit and blood and the longest gaze in the history of childhood.

Thirteen years and what can you do? It's raining.

There is no love in the rain. There is nothing of love
if not rain. Remember the good times. Remember

nothing. Take your shoes off and dance in the fountain
with your lover. She's crazy enough
to love whatever beauty is left of you.

ⁱ PATERNONTOLOGIPHOBIA is an invented term: fear of becoming one's father's being

ⁱⁱ God of water & chaos

ⁱⁱⁱ Sky deity who rules storms, lighting, & rain