

summer, somewhere

by
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Hopwood Award – Theodore Roethke Prize

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where do all the dead black boys go?
- Jokim, Age 11

somewhere, a sun. below, boys brown
as rye play the dozens & ball, jump

in the air & stay there. boys become new
moons, gum-dark on all sides, beg bruise

-blue water to fly, at least tide, at least
spit back a father or two. I won't get started.

history is what it is. it knows what it did.
bad dog. bad blood. bad day to be a boy

color of a July well spent. but here, not earth
not heaven, boys can't recall their white shirt

turned a ruby gown. here, there is no language
for *officer* or *law*, no color to call *white*.

if snow fell, it'd fall black. please, don't call
us dead, call us alive someplace better.

we say our own names when we pray.
we go out for sweets & come back.

//

this is how we are born: come morning
after we cypher/feast/hoop, we dig

a new boy from the ground, take
him out his treebox, shake worms

from his braids. sometimes they'll sing
a trapgod hymn (what a first breath!)

sometimes it's they eyes who lead
scanning for bonefleshed men in blue.

we say *congrats, you're a boy again!*
we give him a durag, a bowl, a second chance.

we send him off to wander for a day
or ever, let him pick his new name.

that boy was Trayvon, now called *RainKing*.
that man Sean named himself *I do, I do*.

O, the imagination of a new reborn boy
but most of us settle on *alive*.

//

sometimes a boy is born
right out the sky, dropped from

a bridge between starshine & clay.
one boy showed up pulled behind

a truck, a parade for himself
& his wet red gown. years ago

we plucked brothers from branches
unpeeled their naps from bark.

sometimes a boy walks into his room
then walks out into his new world

still clutching wicked metals. some boys
waded here through their own blood.

does it matter how he got here if we're all here
to dance? grab a boy, spin him around.

if he asks for a kiss, kiss him.
if he asks where he is, say *gone*.

//

*dear air where you used to be, dear empty Chucks
by front door, dear whatever you are now, dear son,*

*they buried you all business, no ceremony.
cameras, t-shirts, essays, protest*

*then you were just dead. some nights
I want to dig you up, bury you right.*

*scrape dirt until my hands are raw
& wounds pack themselves with mud.*

*I want to dig you up, let it rain twice
before our next good-bye.*

*dear sprinkler dancer, I can't tell if I'm crying
or I'm the sky, but praise your sweet rot*

*unstitching under soil, praise dandelions
draining water from your greening, precious flesh.*

*I'll plant a garden on top
of where your hurt stopped.*

//

mama,

*just this morning the sun laid a yellow not-palm
on my face & I woke knowing your hands*

*were once the only place in the world.
this very morning I woke up*

*& remembered unparticular Tuesdays,
my head in your lap, scalp covered in grease*

*& your hands, your hands, those hands
my binary gods. Those milk hands, bread hands,*

*hands in the air in church hands, cut-up fish hands,
for my own good hands, back talk backhands, hurt more*

*than me hands, ain't asking no mo' hands
everything I need come from those hands,*

*tired & still grabbing grease, hum
while she makes her son royal onyx hands.*

*mama, how far am I
gone from home?*

//

how old am I? today, I'm today.
I'm as old as whatever light touches me.

some nights I'm new as the fire at my feet
some nights I'm a star, glamorous, ancient

& already extinguished. we citizens
of an unpopular heaven

& low-attended crucifixions. listen
I've accepted what I was given

be it my name or be it my ender's verdict.
when I was living, I was born a bull's-eye.

I spent my life arguing how I mattered
until it didn't matter.

who knew my safe house
would be my coffin?

dead is the safest I've ever been.
I've never been so alive.

//

no need for geography
now that we're safe everywhere.

point to whatever you please
& call it church home or sweet love.

paradise is a world where everything
is a sanctuary & nothing is a gun.

here, if it grows it knows its place
in history. yesterday, a poplar

told me of old forest
heavy with fruits I'd call uncle

bursting red pulp & set afire,
harvest of dark wind chimes.

after I fell from its limb
it kissed sap into my wound.

do you know what it's like to live
someplace that loves you back?

//

I loved a boy once & once he made me
a red dirge, a casket of skin, no burial.

left me to become a hum in a choir
of bug mouths. he was my pastor

in violet velvet, my night nurse
my tumor, my sick heart, my bad blood

all over his Tims. he needed me
so much he had to end me.

I was his fag sucked into ash,
his lungs my final resting place.

my baby turned me to smoke
choked on my name 'til it was gone.

I was his secret until I wasn't,
alive until not. outside our closet

I found a garden. he would love it here.
he could love me here.

//

if we dream the old world
we wake up hands up.

sometimes we unfuneral a boy
who shot another boy to here

& who was once a reaper we make
a brother a crush a husband a duet

of sweet remission. say the word
I can make any black boy a savior.

I can make a boy a flock of ravens,
his body burst into ebon seraphs.

this, our hand-crafted religion.
we are small gods of redemption.

we dance until guilt turns to sweat.
we sweat until we drown

in a sea of self. don't fret, we don't die.
they can't kill the boy on your shirt again.

//

*dear brother from another
time, today some stars gave in*

*to the black around them
& I knew it was you.*

*my ace, my g, my fellow
kingdomless king*

*they've made you a boy
I don't know*

*replaced my friend
with a hashtag.*

*I wish I could tell you
I draped his hands*

*from my neck, but his
shield is shaped like*

*a badge. I leave revenge
hopelessly to God.*

//

brother,

*last night's dream was a red June
filled with our mouths sticky*

*with sugar, we tiny toothed brown beasts
of corner stores, fingers always*

*dusted chetto gold. do you remember
those yellow months? our calves burned*

*all day biking each other around on pegs
taking turns being steed & warrior*

*at the park we made a shore to storm
our little ashy wars, shoes lit with blue sparks*

*those summers we chased anything
that would say our names, jumped fences*

*just to prove we could jump, fingers stained
piff green with stank, riding around*

*barely old enough to ride around, dreaming
a world to conquer? I wish you ended me, Sweet Cain.*

//

remember your mother's hands
& just like that it's wind.

remember the face of the man
who sent you here

&, poof, the devil
is a lie. we know what

we need to know:
our names, what trees

bear the sweetest plums
which lake gets the most sun

we know what being here means
we know why we own this place:

in the old world, dark skin
was almost a curse, but here,

call it our unkillable joy
our silver throne.

//

here, everybody wanna be black & is.
look – the forest is a flock of boys

who never got to grow up, blooming
into forever, afros like maple crowns

reaching sap-slow toward sky. watch
Forest run in the rain, branches

melting into paper-soft curls, duck
under the mountain for shelter. watch

the mountain reveal itself a boy.
watch Mountain & Forest playing

in the rain, watch the rain melt everything
into a boy with brown eyes & wet naps –

the lake turns into a boy in the rain
the swamp – a boy in the rain

the fields of lavender – brothers
dancing between the storm.

//

my stolen lover,

*when I want to kiss you
I kiss the ground.*

*I shout down sirens.
I know they bring no safety.*

*my king turned my ache
my one turned into my nothing*

*all last month was spent in bed
with your long gone name*

*what good is a name
if no one runs toward it?*

*I know when the wind feels
as if it's made of hands*

*& I feel like I'm made of water
it's you trying to save me*

*from drowning in myself, but I can't
wed wind. I'm not water.*

//

*dear dear
my most distant love —*

*when I dream of you I wake up
in a field so blue I drown.*

*if you were here, we could play
Eden all day, but fruit here*

*grows strange, I know before me
here lived something treacherous.*

*whose arms hold you now
that my paradise grew from chaos?*

*whose name do you make
thunder the room?*

*is he a good man?
does he know my face?*

*does he look like me?
do I keep him up at night?*

//

forgive those who trespassed
our bodies, got away with a boy

& watched his name
turn to snow

in late April. but look
at me now: I was reborn

a ship. I was reborn
the water. I was reborn

a grain of rice on a long
starved tongue. I was reborn

the first rain in years
reborn the harvest

that broke the famine.
my body came back to me

my body. no one
can take me away.

//

if you press your ear to the dirt
you can hear it hum, not like it's filled

with beetles & other low gods
but like a mouth rot with gospel

& other glories. listen to the dirt
crescendo a boy back.

come. celebrate. this
is everyday. every day

holy. everyday high
holiday. everyday new

year. every year, days get longer.
time clogged with boys. the boys

O the boys. they still come
in droves. the old world

keeps choking them. our new one
can't stop spitting them out.

//

dear ghost I made,

*I was raised with a healthy fear of the dark
I turned the light bright, but you just kept*

*being born, kept coming for me, kept being
so dark, I got sca- I was doing my job.*

//

*dear badge number
what did I do wrong?*

*be born? be black? meet you?
don't answer. you did.*

//

ask the mountain-boy to put you on
his shoulders if you want to see

the old world, ask him for some lean
-in & you'll be home. step off him

& walk around your block.
grow wings & fly above your city.

all the guns fire toward heaven.
warning shots mince your feathers.

fall back to the metal-less side
of the mountain, cry if you need to.

that world of laws rendered us into dark
matter. we asked for nothing but our names

in a mouth we've known
for decades. some were blessed

to know the mouth.
our decades betrayed us.

//

don't call it a riot if you can
call it language. the horizon

told me on the other side of her
something burns in my name.

dear old world, dear planet
of teeth & triggers & niggers

left to sundry, I am fine now
that I don't remember anything.

here, the past is a window
& I close the blinds.

I sing loud & unashamed.
I sing loud & the room

turns black. I sing loud
& become a darker sun

damn if I don't turn it all to ash
damn if I don't build a new garden

//

there, I drowned, back before, once.
there, I knew how to swim but couldn't.

there, men stood by shore & watched me blue.
there, I was a dead fish, the river's prince.

there, I had a face & then I didn't.
there, my mother cried over me

but I wasn't there. I was here, by my own
water, singing a song I learned somewhere

south of somewhere worse. that was when
direction mattered. now, everywhere

I am is the center of everything.
I must be the lord of something.

what was I before? a boy? a son?
a warning? a myth? I whistled

now I'm the God of whistling.
I built my Olympia downstream.

//

you are not welcome here. trust
the trip will kill you. go home.

we earned this paradise
by a death we didn't deserve.

I am sure there are other here's.
a somewhere for every kind

of somebody, a heaven of brown
girls braiding on golden stoops

but here –
 how could I ever explain to you –

 someone prayed we'd rest in peace
 & here we are

in peace whole all summer