

ADAZEE: A COLLECTION OF POEMS ON BLACK
FEMALE IDENTITY

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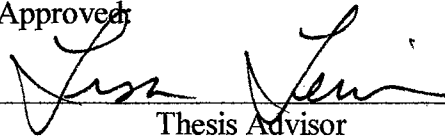
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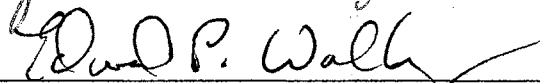
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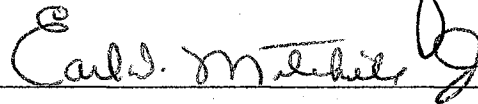


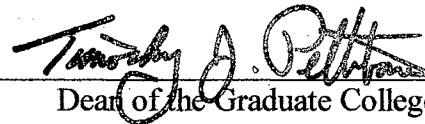
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Dean of the Graduate College

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Dirty South, Jim Crow, Brooklyn Tenements and Words:
Some Background for Adazee: A Collection of Poems
on Black Female Identity

Poets are a part of the rebel forces of literature who make contact with the masses at our own risk and when no one is looking. I feel this way because I am a woman, I am Black, and haven't quite forgiven or forgotten what the powers-that-be have done and have tried to do to both of these groups. It is, therefore, my responsibility to my race and to my gender to examine at length the "lifetime" of my culture in America, to express how being in this place and at certain times has shaped both groups—women and Blacks—and informed the ways that we have responded and continue to respond in kind. In short, for me poetry is both political and personal, as I am part of the tradition of Black women poets whose poetical voice is rarely separate from the hardships or triumphs of their race or gender, and who use their poetry to define themselves in relation to the nation in which they reside.

In her essay, "The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America or Something Like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley," June Jordan best argues the complexity and process of Black women poets who wrote during slavery and who grapple with its ramifications today in everyday life. Jordan asserts:

...to be three-fifths of a human being at best: to be this valuable/
this hated thing among strangers who purchased your life and then
cursed it unceasingly: to be a slave: to be a slave. Come to this country
a slave and how could you sing? After the flogging the lynch rope

the general terror and weariness what should you know of a lyrical life...how could you dare create yourself a poet?...a poet is African in Africa, or Irish in Ireland, or French on the left bank of Paris, or white in Wisconsin. A poet writes in her own language. A poet writes of her own people, her own history, her own vision...quietly placing one word after another word until she builds a line and a movement and an image and a meaning that somersaults all of these into singing, the absolutely individual voice of the poet: at liberty. A poet is somebody free. A poet is someone at home. (61-2)

For Jordan, the poetry of Black women comes out of *place*. In short, she seems to argue that we write wherever we find ourselves. For Black women it is here in America, whose historical context is greatly intertwined with that of our own—a context we must face, and in facing we become free from it and create new life.

Poetry is the perfect venue for Black women poets for several reasons, the most profound being that both Blacks and women have been silenced, ignored, or twisted into conformity. Blacks who survived the voyage from Africa to America were not allowed to speak in their own tongues, define themselves, or maintain existing self-notions of their cultural identity upon arriving in America. Women, in general, have also struggled to gain a voice in this country in terms of owning their own bodies, opening the scope of their identities beyond motherhood and childbearing, securing their professional interests, and constructing a literary identity. Both groups also faced other prohibitions designed to undermine their humanity: they were told to be silent, measured as something less than human, forbidden to read or write, and had their very lives and well-being dangling

before the whims of others; the impact of all of these things was to mute their voices and to diminish their sense of self. The struggle, then, to overcome and rise out of the terrible depths of these negations has been—arguably—doubled for Black women, forcing them to find not only voices to speak with, but to discover the words necessary to turn their voices into chants of self-awareness, into arias of self-empowerment.

This journey to self-expression finds an ideal dwelling in poetry, which works well for Black women: like the oral tradition of our ancestors, poetry tells stories, carries history, language and culture, and muses about the state of life and the expectations of and responsibility to the cultural community. This was true especially for the Black women who wrote during the Harlem Renaissance; they endeavored mightily, pushing America to acknowledge the accomplishments, excellence, and literary prowess of writers such as Angelina Weld Grimké, who wrote in “The Black Finger”:

I have just seen a beautiful thing
Slim and still
Against a gold, gold sky,
A straight cypress
Sensitive
Exquisite,
A black finger
Pointing upwards.
Why, beautiful, still finger are you black?
And why are you pointing upwards? (944)

But the efforts made by the writers of the Harlem Renaissance continued with no less urgency during the Black Arts Movement of the '60s; poet Mari Evans exclaims in "I am a Black Woman":

I am a black woman
The music of my song
Some sweet arpeggio of tears
Is written in a minor key and I
Can be heard in the night
Can be heard
Humming
In the night. (1808)

And this struggle continues, reflected in the lines of my own work, "scourge," which is included in this collection:

And the griot whispers to me brings these words to me as
grains of sand and says *your life your reason is this moment*
and I look around to see them speaking many tongues all of
them mine they have been waiting for me and we are not
on a ship coming here we are going home

All of these works are movements toward questioning, naming, and recapturing something that is not entirely lost, but invisible to too many people, and been elusive even for those who are aware of it: Self.

Because Black women have been silenced, the very act of taking back or developing a voice is a political act. Speaking gives breath to all of the ideas and thoughts

that some of us were not allowed or were afraid to voice. Poetry enables us to end the physiological, psychological, and cultural damage done to us throughout history and allows us to glean the importance and necessity of our own words, as Audre Lorde, in “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” explains. She argues that the work of Black women poets has a resuscitating, curative purpose:

This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt . . . but as we come more into touch with our own ancient, non-european consciousness of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes. (*Sister Outsider* 36-37)

To Lorde, then, the process of writing poetry for Black women is the process of connecting—to earth, to spirit, to self—and, by creating, of discovering.

Not all Black women poets have been able to complete the whole process, limited, for the most part, by the culture in which they lived. Like the works of women who love their race, the work of those who don't or can't express that self-love in their poems has had a deep impact on me. The first Black female poet I was ever introduced to was Phillis Wheatley; the second was Nikki Giovanni. For a great portion of my life, I had had burned across my brain the words of this African woman, Phillis Wheatley, who was stolen, renamed, educated, and, it appears, made into a woman who could not fathom loving her own skin:

'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,
May be refin'd and join the angelic train.

("On Being Brought from Africa to America," *The Poems of Phillis Wheatley* 53)

During my early mis-education, I was taught that Wheatley was great because she was educated despite being "owned," and that she had learned to speak, think, and write as whites. Even at age twelve I felt that something was terribly wrong with her words, regardless of their intelligence, despite their elegance: they spoke to me of someone wanting to be anything but Black. While so young I could hardly be cognizant of the implications of her work having to be prefaced by her owner, John Wheatley, as something she had written during "her leisure" and for "her amusement" in order for anyone to take her seriously or believe that she had written poetry on her own, or to prevent any repercussions that might occur in a time when educated slaves were a source of fear.

But to a twelve-year-old black girl, the struggle that Wheatley must have faced and the overt boldness of words that dared admonish "Christian" whites to live up to their religion's convictions were overpowered by the negative images she connected to her "colour." I recognized Wheatley's questions about her skin because many of my young

Black girlfriends and I stayed out of the sun and got our hair straightened with hot combs and lye products, while our mothers pinched our noses one hundred times each night, still used phrases like “good hair” and “bad hair,” and told neighbors that we had Indian and White people in our families; after school and on the weekends, we tied silk scarves around our heads so that they hung loose about our shoulders and we pretended that our hair was blonde and straight. So when introduced to Wheatley, I took her into me, not because she was a published Black woman, an African poet, but because I believed she understood why I hated my skin and hair, that she comprehended—even before there were television commercials, magazines, and supermodels—that everything beautiful was white. And I didn’t hate the system, I didn’t hate America, and I didn’t hate white people. I wanted to be one of them. I carried my identity crisis within me and never shared it with a soul, not even in my then-primitive writings.

Many years later I was introduced to a collection of Nikki Giovanni’s poetry entitled *Those Who Ride The Night Winds*. I looked at the picture of this Black woman who still wore an afro and who thumbed her nose at the traditional poetic conventions, making her own poetic lines long and un-rhymed; she swore and talked about sex, race, and color and repeated herself often. And her words were the words of my life: they sounded like the multifaceted conversations I’d overheard in my home, at church, and in my neighborhood. When I finished the last poem, “A Song for New-Ark,” I felt I understood myself better:

When I write I want to write . . . in rhythm . . . regularizing the
Moontides . . . to the heart/beats . . . of twinkling stars . . . sending
S.O.S . . . to day trippers . . . urging them to turn back . . . toward

the Darkness . . . to ride the night winds . . . to tomorrow . . . I wish
I understood . . . bird . . . Birds in the city talk . . . a city language . . .
They always seem . . . unlike humans . . . to have something to say
. . . Other birds . . . like Black americans . . . a century or so ago . . .
answer back . . . with song . . . I wish I could be a melody . . . like a
damp . . . gray . . . feline fog . . . staccatoing . . . stealthily . . . over the
city . . . (62)

I was indeed excited about—and by—a Black woman who was so clear about herself and her own sense of power and how comfortable she was embracing words and her Blackness. I pondered the difference in tone and the textures of the words of both Wheatley and Giovanni and understood that both women, products of life in the America of and after slavery—had the desire—the need—to say something, to mark history and America by saying, "I was here."

I wish that I could write today that I have always acknowledged the beauty, integrity, and wisdom of being born black and female, but I haven't. Because of the way I was raised and because of what I was taught by life and school, I placed boundaries on both of my identities. For a large part of my life, my identity as a woman was wrapped up in how fast I'd get a husband, whether my hair and make-up were just right, whether my body looked right in my clothing, and what type of mother I'd be. And as for my race, I was content to live life as a second-class citizen, thought the battle was won because Martin Luther King, Jr., had marched and was assassinated. Segregation was over and I could sit where I wanted to and if a White person called me a "nigger," I was to fight, not because of the overwhelming political implications, but because it was an ugly word.

By taking in the words of these women and others like them, such as Hattie Gossett, Sapphire, Jane Cortez, Sonja Sanchez and Gwendolyn Brooks, who wrote political, racial, and gendered poetry, I soon understood what words were supposed to accomplish, the significance and responsibility of taking on that mantle and writing what was Black and female. It was, in fact, because of Wheatley and Giovanni that I realized that my writing was not and could not be my own. It belonged to my people, to my gender—and it was supposed to shake a finger at those who didn't or who refused to "get" us.

In an effort to help people to "get" us, I created many of the poems in this collection to reflect my desire to take up the mantle and willingly give my words, sharing them with my people, and especially with my sisters. This is clearly evidenced in the title poem, "Adazee," in which the persona addresses the ancestors of Alex Haley because they are the ones who moved him to write *Roots*. The voice in the poem even addresses Haley himself, asking what her place should be in the legacy of Black writing:

could you have imagined that because of you
a nation the nation that enslaved you would
bear witness to your story the shame of their
behavior . . . could you have conjured while
facing Allah in prayer a son of yours of your
blood would find you even though they made
you call your name Toby . . . I will take this up
in your name will be your griot

These same kinds of musings about race and poetry take place in other poems within the collection, such as “this is a poem of a life in progress” and “bullet,” in which the voice responds to how others who are outside of her own cultural community see the poet in relation to her skin, gender, and poetry.

While my identity as a poet is rooted in understanding who I am in relation to those who came before me, I also want my work to express how I feel about being Black and female. I always speak about these identities as if they are two entirely different entities, because for me they are. As a woman I've been told that I'm weaker, the cause of the sin of the world (Eve and that damned apple), undeserving of equal money for equal work, and required to set my damned bra on fire in order to get some attention. As a Black Woman, I have had to take up the slack when Black men have not been there: I picked cotton, was told I'm ugly, was born to fuck, and have been paid more money in the work force than Black men because I'm viewed as smarter and less of a threat. Being either Black or a Black Woman is a big responsibility and standing up—for myself, for others who died as slaves in this country, who are at the bottom of the Atlantic ocean and were not allowed to read or write, and for those who are still living lives of quiet desperation—is my promise.

I would argue that the first section of my manuscript *Adazee*, entitled “Black Body Parts,” attempts to place me in the tradition of Black women who write about or for Black women. In many poems throughout this section, I use sex and sexuality as a means of reclaiming and healing. When writing poems such “I am becoming this woman,” “reincarnation,” or “finger,” I think of the early lives of African/Black women in this country, especially some of my own maternal relatives; I think of women whose bodies

were not their own. As Charlotte Watson Sherman, editor of the anthology entitled *Sister Fire*, suggests,

The sexual history of Black women in this country is riddled with experiences of cruelty and pleasure, love and hate. As we move away from a legacy of institutionalized sexual victimization and increase our own flavor of erotic power, we lay the foundation for the Black women coming after us to have a much easier time growing comfortable with themselves as whole sexual beings, whether lesbian or straight.

My goal when writing sexual or erotic poetry that includes Black women as characters is to place them in a position of both sexual and historical power. I do this because of the slave women who were raped while on their voyage to America. My work is greatly influenced by the emotional cost to me of considering how their position as “chattel” led to an annihilation of the personal and sexual power they had once had; they have become, to me, any Black woman who has felt that she has had to compromise herself by living in an unhealthy relationship with men in order to feed her children, because she felt she needed a man no matter the cost or because she believed that her options were limited or non-existent.

This section of poems also reflects what I believe are the types of psychological damage that can occur when Black mothers pass these same limited concepts of Black female life on to their daughters, such as the notion about straight hair or more euro-centric features being more beautiful, or that not talking about issues that are relevant—such as poverty, sexual assault, or low self-esteem—is best. I cannot count the number of

existing metaphors within my cultural community about "keeping things to oneself," as if some of the negative things that befall Blacks are their own fault. These are things that debase, deform, and destroy; they include being told that perhaps the fondling by an adult relative would not have occurred had we not been so fresh or hard-headed; they command us to be seen and not heard, and not to wear our drawers on the outside of our clothing. And while I am not suggesting that we should all run into the streets divulging our family secrets, those secrets that involve problems like sexual abuse, being hungry, suffering from mental illness, or being impoverished should not be kept, because keeping them allows the situation to remain the same. And a status quo grabs onto Black women and makes them forget their dreams or the possibilities of their lives.

Alice Walker has suggested that this syndrome is one of Black women being seen as the "Mule of the World":

Who were these saints? These crazy, loony pitiful women? Some of them, without a doubt, were our mothers and grandmothers . . . exquisite butterflies trapped in an evil honey, toiling away their lives in an era, a century, that did not acknowledge them, except as the mule of the world. They dreamed dreams that no one knew—not even themselves in any coherent fashion—and saw visions no one could understand. (232)

These women Alice Walker describes, these “mothers and grandmothers” are mine: I know them. I have watched them pay the price for having their dreams fall away from them, and, though I am determined not to be them or to lose my dreams, I carry them with me; they people my work, sustain and vex me, and give me source.

I would have to argue that my greatest concern about my work is whether or not my poetry offers anything new to the genre that consists of Black women who write poetry. I've wondered how close to or far apart from my own poetry is that of these women I've come to admire and consider prophets of the Black woman's existence. In short, I've feared being redundant. This factor of Black women's poetry sharing themes is a concept addressed by bell hooks in her essay "the woman's mourning song: a poetics of lamentation," in which she suggests that it is not only natural for poetry written by those on the fringes of Western society to share bonds which involve their collective mourning and celebration; but that in essence these bonds help to create the poetry:

Living as we do in the West in cultures that still wish to contain and confine mourning, it is not surprising that so many poets, including myself, look to traditions of lamentations in non-Western experiences to create a cultural fusion, to name our solidarity. Shared suffering is still one of the passions that bind us together. Hence, the necessity for a poetics of lamentation, for poems that speak our grief. Women poets in the West continue to deepen our creative process by working with grief and loss to speak sorrow against the culture of repression that would have us confine, silence, and bury pain. (297)

With hook's words in mind, I have come to understand that while we as Black women poets do indeed share similarities, these similarities do not have to be problematic; instead, they appear to further the notion that there is a tradition that we write out of as Black women.

First, we write about race. It is obvious from the moment we encounter Phillis Wheatley, who ponders the mystery of combing her female owner's long blond hair and muses about her own physical textures. It is true of Harlem Renaissance poet Gwendolyn B. Bennett, who wrote in her poem "Heritage" that she wanted to "feel the surging of [her] sad people's soul hidden by a minstrel-smile" (1226). And it continues through decades until this very moment with such poets as Sapphire, Giovanni, Jayne Cortez, and Sonia Sanchez, among an increasing number of others.

Race influences the poetic tradition of Black women poets in other ways than physicality alone. These poets utilize the African oral storytelling tradition of Call and Response that enables the writer of the poem to interact in a kind of back and forth of words or refrains with other voices within the poem, or even with the reader. We see evidence of this in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*:

Lady in green

Somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff
Not my poems or a dance I gave up on the street
But somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff...
Why don't ya find yr own things/& leave this package
Of me for my destiny/what you got to get from me/
I'll give it to ya/yeh/I'll give it to ya/
Round 5:00 in the winter/ when the ski is blue-red/
& Dew City is getting pressed/if it's really my stuff/
ya gotta give it to me/ if ya really want it/ I'm

the only one/can handle it

Lady in blue

That niggah will be back tomorrow, sayin 'I'm sorry'

Lady in yellow

Get this, last week, my ol man came in sayin, 'I don't know

How she got yr number baby, I'm sorry. (2519)

Another influence coming down from the oral tradition, from the African storytellers or from women working together and creating for themselves both a sense of company and a work rhythm, is that of repetition, as evidenced in Sapphire's poem "blue":

Stomach
Snatched
Outta
Throat
Eyes
Eliminated
Tubes
Tied
Hair
A tragedy
A tragedy
What done happened to our hair

The sky turns
To midnite dusk
All shades of blue
All blues
All blue
How long
Howl on
HOWL ON
HOWL ON (50)

We also write about being women within our own cultural communities and within this

country. At times this has meant calling Black men to task, re-examining how we feel about our own bodies and senses of self-worth. But more than that it seems we have used our poetry to define the self. These are truths I have found in the poetry of Karsonya E. Wise, whose poem entitled “revolution starts at 11:50 a.m.//april 2, 1993” asserts that what would be really revolutionary for the Black race is a functional relationship between a Black man and woman. It is also a valid point for Toi Derricote, who writes about her clitoris, or in Rita Dove’s poem “Reading Mickey in the Night Kitchen for the third time before bed,” which explores and explains the importance of Black mothers talking to their Black daughters about their vaginas.

I believe that my poetry utilizes the traditions of the Black mother poets who have gone before me. I, too, write about my black body, my Black people; I use incantation and repetition in my own poetic form, as evidenced in most of the poetry within this collection, and especially within the poems “the art of fine speech,” “brooklyn bound,” and “thicket.” But while my poetry incorporates most aspects of my tradition, I want it to also constantly move toward something, to what I hope will be a new level, a place of renewal and self-awareness.

While we have indeed come through slavery and segregation and are working alongside of or even in the place of men, my desire is to continue to speak of our longings past and present because we are still in danger. We are still doing the dying from AIDS, cancer, and poverty, we are still doing without, still at battle over the use of our bodies; some of us still think we’re ugly. We’re being objectified in music videos by our own black male recording artists; we are being called “baby mommas” at alarmingly higher rates than we are being called “girlfriends” and “wives.” We are still dressing our

children in Tommy Hilfiger, but are not paying attention to the fact that they cannot read and are lost in America's education system. We are still dying at the hands of our men. Something inside of us is still missing. I am still writing poetry because I am attempting to create an equation that seeks to find or explain what it is that is missing, because I want it back; like Ntozake Shange, I need my stuff.

As much as my writing seeks to explore my life and the lives of the Black women who came before me, it also attempts to validate to me that I am not imagining the atrocities of slavery, segregation, and the illuminations that Black women encounter each day. In short, if America can have a written history that negates my existence, or a literary tradition that composes itself, often neglecting my people, why can't I have a tradition of my own that challenges and explores the ways these factors have affected me? I need for my poetry to make this challenge so that I do not suffer any further grave psychological damage than I already have being a woman and the offspring of slaves. This sentiment is echoed by the late Barbara Christian in her essay "The Race for Theory," "I can only speak for myself. But what I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life. And I mean that literally. For me literature is a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/know is (130). This is indeed the way I feel about my own poetry. I have the need and the desire to be heard and witnessed, but it is for a greater importance that I continue to muster the courage to write at all.

These poems within this collection and those that I will continue to write seek to reclaim all of the languages, ideas, songs, and stories I will never know because my people were forcibly moved from their homes and not allowed to be themselves once they arrived here. They are also attempting to explore all of the silences that Black

women have had to endure or have imposed upon themselves. These poems are for this country, white people, black people, and every other “race,” because I don’t want it ever forgotten what we have survived, either as a people or as a gender. And these poems are for me, so that I can always remember why I write and that a poor little black girl from a Brooklyn housing development has stories worth telling. Words that exemplify the kind of movement this collection makes in terms of my growth as both author and woman appear in Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls . . .* :

Ever since I learned there was someone callt
A colored girl and evil woman a bitch or a nag
I been trying not to be that & leave bitterness
In somebody else’s cup

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BLACK BODY PARTS

I am becoming this woman

I entered him this time mounted him from behind
say my name say my name
unzipped his skin with my tongue isn't this the way you like it
the way you want me how deep am I how deep this time
he placed his hands on my hips *help me* he said *so good so good*
I like the way this feels power is pleasure when men are helpless
this is power is the only time they speak truth
when they are on top mounted riding what they are hiding their intentions
dissentions are in each thrust of the pelvis
help me he said *save me take me teach me*
tell me what you thought I thought you thought I thought
I am surprised by what I am able to conjure out of this man
but don't I belong to a long line of women who know what power is
wasn't mattie power as she held a gun to a white man's head
in jim crow south and said *pay me my money for scrubbing your floors*
and nursing your babies for wiping the shit stains out of your drawers pay me
mayor or I'm going to shoot you wasn't she power when the police came
to lynch her son who served in the army in war wasn't she undeniably bad
when they planted a gun on his person and she rode a neighborhood child's bike
her ground length skirt bunched in her crotch peddling to her son
to the site where they held him didn't she threaten to burn the police house
to the ground murder their families didn't she mean it didn't they fear her
when she went to church the next day bible in hand
singing *precious lord take my hand lead me on let me stand I'm so tired...*
didn't my grandmother mattie's daughter promise her husband
another fist would be his last didn't he run screaming
into the hallways of their cramped harlem brownstone
somebody hold her but she had gone too far eyes vacant *I'll kill you I'll kill you*
didn't my mother make a dollar out of fifteen cents
no one knew we lived in a cramped apartment in the ghetto
three women in a bed sunken in the middle *lead me on let me stand I'm so tired*
I'm weak I'm worn... and this man beneath me wants me to save him
but three generations of the women in my life have been saving themselves
from men he wants my power wants me to open wide while he crawls in
and sips nectar what would you do if I saved you you who couldn't wrap
your brain around the concept of me
can you say Osun can you chant in yoruba and say my name
will you pay homage to Oya and Yemaya/Olukum the world you silly man
is female we have been saving you since the beginning of time
upon whose breast do you suck and our gratitude is the milk
you spit back in our faces mother earth mother land
you use words you don't even honor

and I think it is time you learn to live without us learn to want
and to need beg crawl like you did when you were infants
before you forgot that words were precious
and I know that this is a small gesture
but for my part I am leaving you here
now alone and wanting

reincarnation

I am spread-eagle like five fingers traced by a child
watch him circle anxiously disrobing
one of my regulars who doesn't bother to dabble in the fine art of flattery
endless accounts of how good he is going to make me feel we both know better
there is no need to suffer through the humiliation I have already been purchased
deep rich night earth in which to plant his seed
and each time before he bucks clasp my ass drawing me back and forth upon him
my knees deep in this bed with the brass frame
I smell the luxury of the suite he purchases for these encounters
he spreads his fingers over my back to compare the differences of hue
watches his gold wedding band reflecting off my skin
leans forward digs his wet fingers scented with every orifice he has pried into
when he feels himself ready he leans forward burying his belly
into the small of my back forces his knees into the pits of mine
runs those filthy fingers through my hair
grabs hold tears back my neck
takes pains to etch his tongue into my ear
and calls me his whore

and everybody seems to love the scent of colored pussy
I can tell you this having lived many lives I've been
on my back on my knees before been up against walls
in the dirt in ditches mouth covered mouth open

I have been a belly warmer on a slave ship pried from mother's arms
stood naked while the cowry shells which marked my body and hair named me my name
were ripped from my body while body after body piled upon me used me threw me
limp overboard into shark infested waters

only to be reborn a high yellow house slave who sank to her knees by day to scrub
kitchen floors for her mistress and laid on her back in the night for her master to save
her children from being sold away but they were sold away and there were masters
everywhere and errands to be run far away from the plantation always some dark road
to walk down some reason to stay on heavily walked upon streets always the fear of a
snapping twig a shaking bush and the echoes of momma's voice warning me about
getting caught

I've been a harlem mother who pimped herself bore the inconsistencies of men who
never stayed long enough to be a father a source of comfort
eager to have me on their arm at a juke joint
and when saxophones blew and blues singers sang
I wrapped my arms around my belly hung my head
and wailed knowing I would return to the small harlem

home with the twenty dollars he tucked in my garter
as he left me on lennox avenue to hail a cab

I have been a baby's mother instead of a black man's wife a funny thing
a title creating an identity between myself and the child
but none between the one who helped me make it

so this man
is not my first taste of life's indignities
I have been someone's whore in every life I've lived
and how much is a body supposed to bear
how long am I going to be on the wrong side of myself
where the one thing you have is the very thing they take
and you learn to live life on your knees waiting for an act of kindness
and I can remember words from a preacher's lips
some yesterday in a pigtailed childhood
a mother barely remembered taps my hand as a preacher's mouth chants
how long lord how long
and I did not understand hands raised above heads swaying to the heavy sound
grief makes
I did not understand that the multi-uttered words of *jesus have mercy*
were a lament of the souls of women too tired
maybe church is the place where all of us used whores go to die
where someone asks *how long how long lord lord how long*
and someone utters
not one step further

finger...

(for women who survive
and learn to “touch” themselves again...)

it is with closed eyes I take this risk
a promise of blindness a seat in hell
a hairy palm loss of virtue virtue lost
feeling your silent and colorless bruises
you flinch in fear
remembering your memories
and this is where he tried to kill you
and this is where the hair no longer grows
a minor detail small and obscure
no doctor no nurses no one would ever know
you healed yourself all by yourself
silence seeped in shame and filthy secrets became best
and so you learned to repel yourself
abhor the intimate touch of a man
for to allow someone to touch you
where I now trace you with my fingertip
seemed yet another instant a flashback
of the man who fucked your life away
and you would not could not give
this precious jewel the sweet scent of you the Nile in wait within you
for every kiss became the moment when you did not could not speak
nor lift your head in protest
every stroke a knife blade cutting deep within you
and I touch you now you are no stranger to anything
are of the blood that makes you Woman
are of the pain that makes you Woman
you have become Woman
listening for the past nine years incoherently
as the doctor sputters off
a list of names of diseases you are sure you have
while for the umpteenth time you hear
negative negative negative
but fear your constant companion
bids you to disbelieve for you see
you are no longer trusting
how can your body stand a testament to health
when you feel death deep within you

but it is not your body it is your soul festering
it is not your body it is your soul begging for its cure

it is this small place I trace now with a gentle fingertip
that longs questions and I can not answer

but instead ask you why
what makes you think you deserved this
what makes you conceal yourself like a loaded gun
this is not your shame not your doing
your soul in exchange for a moment of
feigned power at the expense of your violation
perhaps your unwillingness to heal is my fault
you see I have had my mind counseled
for healing dipped my body in scented oils
and candle-lit baths for healing
been baptized by a preacher's hands
for healing am telling this
for healing
but I have not touched you
told you you are not
left over scraps are not a dead thing not a dead thing

wake up deepest part of me treasured part of me
sankofa bird of freedom phoenix up from the ashes of my soul
forgive me for not being able to protect our self
our marvelous miraculous surviving self
we are still divine

and I feel you understand me feel death stealing away into the shadows
surrendering to life to light
and the touch of my fingertip becomes natural familiar
and you remember with me the joy of a first kiss exploration of a first touch
those still longed for and we surrender to our many gifts
instead of our only burden

nappy

I have often wondered what my mother was thinking
as she peered down into the mass that was my hair
urging me with tense fingers a pop on the back of my neck
with the comb *keep your head still don't let me tell you again*

and she braided with such fierceness to bend my hair
not only to her will but the will of the world
and I learned to hate me when I saw the look of pleasure
a well-positioned perm brought to her face to every face

I have wondered what she was thinking
if there were ever other little black girls from brooklyn
from anywhere who understood where I was coming from
where I had been believing that one could never be
happy and nappy did they too wonder what their mothers
were thinking while making parts in their scalps
huge pats of bergamot on the backs of their brown hands
kneading hair into cornrows and twists adding bows sometimes beads
colorful barrettes and ribbons so that our hair screamed
see I'm pretty too
while our mothers told people that we had indian in our family
and weren't quite nappy quite kinky not other

and she combed that hair with guarded distrust waiting
for it to step out of line only to be urged back with vigaro-8
what were you thinking mother while touching the nape
of my *kitchen* with a hot-comb listening to my hair mix
with hair-grease sizzling
what did you feel that a black girl's life is from *can't do*
to won't never that this was my inheritance from you
more difficulty more to contend with but maybe
I've gone too far maybe it was just the sadness that was
your own life maybe the intricate designs you wove
into my hair began to resemble the maze that was your life
and you found there would never be an escape and maybe
you felt there would never be any escape for me or from me
and it all became too much for you you had to pop me
on the back of my neck run that hot comb through my hair
just once more to make it right make your creation true

and I wish that I could mourn for you the way you mourned through me
so long ago when I sat as a child on the floor propped up on
phone books between your knees I wish that I could create for you

the way you used your hands to wish for me
but there are only these words and hair that whistles wildly when the
wind blows through it hair that still doesn't behave much to your dismay
and this great sense of yes lord and freedom

tell your daughters this instead

the old lady who lived in the shoe was not so innocent
when her back was turned her children told secrets
and quiet as it's kept it wasn't that she had too many children
it was that she had too little to do with them

she traveled to the land of fairy tales and whimsy
too young and quite alone and her mother waved to her
glancing over the window sill while bedridden wondering
and worrying about her daughter who while still a child
would come to wash cinderella's underwear and put up with the
unwanted advances of the prince when he came to call on
the future princess

and she learned from snow white that some form of power
could be gleaned while laying on your back for one man or many
alone and isolated in the forests between her legs and she began to

collect baubles from these excursions with men a dress a winter coat
a dance and the children came and the men came and she began to live
lies in paradise becoming what she abhorred remembering how while
running the brush around a toilet in the drawing room cinderella sold her

soul so that she'd never be a poor white trash woman a nigger woman
humping a toilet

and what else do you when your life is what you've made it
the children became part of the fantasy sons of dukes daughters of lords
and the black eyes came not from these men but from the wives who refused

to let go and the stories spun until lack of funds moved her house
from pillars to post to tenements where the beatings grew more frequent
and extended hospital visits left the children alone exposed to junkies
and pedophiles

and while they come to visit the little old lady in her old age
where she loves to remember only the baubles she shared with them

the children when pushed do not let her forget herself
and gather together when she's found in these euphoric states
whisper stories about empty stomachs tie the laces that barely kept their old

house together around her neck
and dare one another to be the first to pull

bullet

my life is one long string of whispers behind me
I am encouraged to be the parish priest for many
I wonder if I'm being baited or mocked

*I stood there talking to your office mate it suddenly occurred to me
that I was in your space and I fingered my wedding band the door jam wondered
what it would be like to be yours for two weeks
a joke nervous laughter serious
now which me should I have been afrocentric feminist roguish brooklynite
should I have told him that if allowed to lie between my legs I'd hide razor blades
in the soles of my feet gingerly eagerly slice along his spinal chord
and gamble with the bones of his vertebrae later that evening up against
a brick wall in harlem turn sideways*

today one of my students wrote to me in his personal statement
about disenfranchisement he told me that BET the Lifetime Network for Women's
Television Affirmative Action and people who wanted stronger gun laws
made him feel disenfranchised as a white man later that day someone said

*I know that some of mine have kept some of yours from getting jobs getting ahead
from just plain gettin' but you're black female and educated you positively reek
of marketability you don't know dick about being an outcast until you've been a white
man in the new millennium and which me should I have been*

should I have turned around lifted my skirt shifted my bottom and said
here embrace this...hard let this pass you

the fifties and sixties were so much easier judas and brutus were recognizable
spoke clearly colored get in the back wednesday only between seven and eight
only not on my block not in my school not with my daughter
but on my tree from the highest branch in my yard

tell me things being what they are what me should I be
should I make my case for restitution
show you the wear on the soles of my feet from walking a racial tightrope
I nurse the ashen cracks the way I did on my knees as child
cradling my grandmother's feet in my hands as her toes poked through
her three week old pantyhose because she walked to work saved a little more money
to feed me keep the rent paid the phone on
I'll take care of you one day I said kneading coarse skin
this is why I endure I have to make good on childhood promises

but tonight I'm casting spells around my altar wishing a life of interesting times

for many people wishing them this
my skin nipples cunt and all a life of balancing between black and white
waiting to see if black husbands and brothers make it home
fantasies about a black woman's prowess in bed
a desire for people to get into your head and your hair
watching your mouth licking the words before they escape from your throat

hush now this is my confession

in recovery

I know what love is haven't I saved your life
haven't I tucked you in didn't I teach you how to count
twenty-one twenty-two twenty-three
when it all became too much twenty four...

didn't I make you remember not forget like others will
didn't I make you remember so that you could pay everybody back
for hurting you didn't I give you those words to make your mother cry
when she tried to say she was sorry for not being there
for being there at the wrong time for being too hard
didn't I whisper in your ear *do not forgive hold your grace for yourself*
don't I make you proud

didn't I teach you how to nurse fear how to inject it into your veins and feed
don't I tell you to check the cupboards and the closet again and again
because he might be in there
don't I make you visualize every day every night especially at night
what it feels like when a man pulls out his dick
and makes you love him when you are four when you are nineteen
makes you tell him you like it that you wanted it
that you are only safe with him

didn't I make you remember fix it so that you will never
wrap your legs around a man in comfort never trust lie back and trust
never close your eyes
didn't I keep us safe

haven't I made you bad isn't everybody intimidated doesn't everybody
fear you respect you are never sure of what you might do

but where is my gratitude where is my thanks you think you can get rid of me
let a stranger behind a desk with all of her promises of saving your life
you let that bitch convince you that you don't need me
tell you that you have post traumatic stress that you are hyper vigilant
and she gives you a name for me there is no name for me she could ever give you
you let her give you pills to turn down the sound of me in your head

but you will listen to me and I will give you my name
I am love breathe me in like a drag on a cigarette I am love
I am your hatred I am your fear I am your madness your greatest gift
I am your anger why won't you be angry what will you be if you are not angry

go back to that bitch in her office with her incense and pillows

and compact discs of dolphins mating and ask her who you will be without your anger
ask her if you should get used to being black a woman
alive ask her what will you write about after you achieve this moment of zen
in your mind and shit stops bothering you

tell her my name is love I am your only love I will keep you safe
give her back her pills and if she wants to lock you up have you pinned down to a bed
with restraints to keep you from *hurting* yourself
I will love you still will tell you stories behind your eyes
keep you intact teach you how to pretend that you are better

until they let you out I will take you away from here and love you in the dark
at any depth with my arms always around you

BROOKLYN BOUND

brooklyn bound

it's funny how the mundane the minutiae can suddenly do things to you
you know like a new york street the clatter of voices hands extended gesturing
offering you two for five dollars or maybe it's a subway platform
a subway car where everyone's mind is crowded
and you've managed to find a small sanctuary relieved because you are tired

because your mind is crowded because you've only been home
for three of your six weeks wondering if you can outdo yourself
if you will ever write anything and everyone is asking you
when you're going to get married have a baby be a woman stop sticking out
like a sore thumb and your dreadlocks have garnered that look
that dismal assertion silent and otherwise that no black man in his right mind
is going to want you now looking like that with your hair looking like that

and as wrapped up in yourself as you can be in a small haven on a train there is still
room for compassion and concern for anyone else who is not yourself
and I looked up to find this woman who could have been me could have been me
for so many reasons aside from the fact that she was black and on a new york city train
her mind obviously crowded too

yes it could have been me standing there tired with what looked like a three year old
by the hand and a new born hanging limply close to her chest while she stared off
into I don't where looking for someone for the place where life took this turn

but I noticed her as she stood in the midst of others reading newspapers
doing nothing I saw this woman who was not my mother's child but was my sister
and I moved to offer her my seat but suddenly before she could notice me everyone
who hadn't cared about her life wanted to give her their seat *I'm getting ready
to get off* they said *I don't have that much further to go* they said but she said no

as many times as they offered and protested and I said nothing
but instead began to capture this in my mind because she wasn't *getting ready to get off*
she had *much further to go* and yet she refused to sit down
and it made me uncomfortable

I wanted to do what we do as little kids sneak up behind her butt the back
of her knees and make her collapse force her to sit down take the seat
and I got angry take the seat what's the matter with you why do we have to keep
proving that we don't need anything or anybody take the seat tell the entire row
to get up take a seat for each of your children take one for me take one
for the middle passage for those who never got off the damn ship
what's the matter with you I said inside myself don't you know we need some comfort
someone to rub our backs love us hard and deep until breathing is impossible

take the seat so that your three year old daughter understands life
can have some beauty in it

and I don't know if anyone can understand what I am saying or move to this
but when my anger subsided it simply began to hurt
because there was something deeper I didn't see and I felt ashamed
there was a lesson in this moment for her daughter
that some days there wouldn't be any room to sit down
there would be times when standing for only fifteen minutes would be longed for
and the word no is so important especially for a girl a little black girl
how could I not see not know what I have been taught so well

what if it was one of those days when so much had transpired that if she had sat down
she wouldn't be able to get up and go on and don't we know how volatile that can be
when a daughter sees her mother like that and I understand now why I noticed
my sister who was not my mother's daughter

I noticed her when no one else did because weren't her lessons my own
and this choice this utterance of no was her path and my sitting down was mine
destination the same on that train going any where but there

the art of fine speech

this is how brooklyn concrete feels warm beneath your underside
bare toes spread wide on brownstone stoop steps
an urban drum beat sifts securely through neighborhood subway grates
radiates through the wombs of black mothers on project benches
while their children play a wet game of johnny pump tag in the streets
this is where I live
and it isn't a mighty divide separating poor black folk
from those that have black folk it is a school where have less
than others little black children learn their ABCs
while the have mores walk past them on to schools blocks away
where the children are not quite as black of skin not quite as brown

it is a delicate balance this divide separated by a little brick school house
one part legacy a conglomeration of claire and heathcliff huxtable houses
the last vestiges of places where free slaves came claimed
while the other side reeks of the insufficiency of poverty the want of hungry bellies
lights out in elevators urine in the halls and oh so tired minds

and we pass each other barely looking
black men wearing brooks brothers
dreadlocks pulled back to avoid the corporate hassle
the brother in the combat boots who picks up trash or delivers it to an open needy vein
the sister in anne klein who hides her pain behind her work
while the poorer one grits her teeth and rolls her eyes to hide despair and shame
one side wondering why some have so much while the other can't understand
why the have nots can't ever seem to get or keep anything

but there are days when the wind is not so oppressive
and carries with it the sound of double dutch feet barely touching the ground
quicker louder stronger than the bullets that lull some to sleep
and we crack ghetto syllables evenly and openly
taunting laughing at the impurity of the english language

on days like these brothers exchange daps and pounds
gently call their women boo and sisters braid hair openly
laugh securely finally from the caverns of our hips
and a car drives by with a booming system playing some old time r&b classic
that touches all reminding all
removing the little brick school house which separates us and calls to us naming us
and we tap our feet nod and sing forgetting we'll pass each other come Monday

and somewhere in each of these houses
those of the haves and the have nots

someone is cleaning greens for Sunday dinner
someone is preparing bacalao gently scooping in sofrito
while the cod fish boils

you see it is all the same we are all trying to master the speech of brooklyn bricks
and learning how to be black one day at a time

if brooklyn raised me then why am I so black and blue?

something is very wrong here I say to myself
having returned home for my usual brief visit
I have spent three and one half years on the oklahoma prairie
a sad desert a stepford wife village
an entire state dedicated to the eradication of free thought echoing
do this in remembrance of me do this in remembrance of me

so I return home to the much needed balance of
the borough of brooklyn streets but something is very wrong here
I am lulled into security not like a newborn feels so close to the nipple
but the security of a highwire where my next step could be my last step
but there is the net below me isn't there and surely it will be enough

where have all my people gone where have all the homeless gone
pushed off the streets off of the subways no one sees them any more
and surely there can not be enough shelters to hold that many thousands
out of sight out of mind put your token in and ride
give your transfer to the bus driver and ride

and call it paranoia but maybe they're under ground being experimented on
and do not tell me I live fiction small pox chicken pox blankets indians
syphilis black men miss ever's boys I live in color

brooklyn doesn't look like brooklyn any more I find my old neighborhood is changing
sometimes for the better natural hair dreadlocked hair smell the egyptian musk oil
baptize you black bought black owned front stoops black faces
this house belongs to me her body says with pride in her suit a kente cloth scarf
regal behind her catching Oya in the wind and the Yoruba man sets his wares
outside while the tape of drums plays *ee kay wayddi wayddi oo ah so*
ee kay wayddi wayddi ee kay wayddi wayddi oo ah so ekay wayddi wayddi ah so
oo ah so kay kay ah so ee kay wayddi wayddi
I walk by him *aché brother luz Osun* the knowing between us

but there is something different here a sea of white faces who are my neighbors
hello good morning how are you beautiful day isn't it
pass by the park they are there playing with black children
puerto rican children *black men and white men jews and gentiles*
will all come together and sing...
but lead us not into thinking about the people a block away
in the projects that used to be my home

laughing with my mother the other day I say *remember my prom*

*my beautiful blue dress my hair my laughter the neighbors in the hallway
snapping pictures the way the elevator door opened
and my boyfriend picked up the train of my dress so that it didn't graze
the puddles of urine on the floor the way the elevator door closed*
I knew no matter how wonderful a time I had
the stench of piss would be the memory I carried

a week later someone threw a girl off of the roof
after they raped her a month later I could look out the window
and see someone's son dead in the park shot for his sneakers for looking too hard
for walking and what about the fire cracker someone threw on my legs
because I was different went to catholic school
the bottles they threw at me from ten sometimes twenty stories high
the bullet that grazed my grandmother's head

but we moved up two blocks up where the projects is a never mind
a used to be where black people owned their own homes and condos
and buildings that looked like projects were called cooperatives
now there is this

everyone wants to live near us next door to us park avenue and the suburbs
are no longer sufficient a little color in your coffee a little dab will do
once you go black you never go...

and a tree grows in brooklyn and the tour bus goes by filled with more white faces
from london and spain and france an african safari
and the guide says over the audible speaker *this section of brooklyn known as clinton hill
is a historical district note the design of the brownstones similar to that of harlem*
yes it is just like harlem it to has been gentrified is now ogled from the double decker
buses and this is over coming good politics evolution

I do not buy into this because I know that every time my brother leaves
the house I worry will some cop pull him over gun him down
because he's in a nice car that he worked for paid for
and will the paper say *another black male youth a sophomore at a major new york
university was gunned down by new york police*

will the mayor say he is sorry that he is grieving for the family
complain of prostate trouble excuse himself go fuck his mistress
I know there is a man with half his intestines because he was brutalized
in a bathroom in a police station and they politely call it racial profiling

I say still waters run deep in brooklyn
that god don't like ugly and he don't care nothing about pretty
and I think I'd feel safer in the projects

for there is no such thing as utopia even the garden of eden had sin
so what does that mean for us

and that is why I'm looking straight ahead
but very carefully over my shoulder

just another girl in the hood

I went back to my old neighborhood today a walk of a few blocks
I used to joke that you could tell where clinton hill ended
and bedford stuyvesant began
a cloud seemed to hang over our side of the avenue
even the street signs changed there's nothing better than being
reminded everyday that you're ugly so much for keeping
your head up

they made the signs around us
a pretty shade of brown with white letters
underneath the street name it read *historical district*
our signs stayed green not even a close
proximity of a color found in the largest box of crayola

and the seven brick buildings that made up our housing development
never bore scaffolding foretelling of improvements or modifications
the paint jobs were rare because soon the project walls
would become each building's newsletter
detailing who fucked who who gave it up easy who was the baddest
nigger on the block and was down with what posse

occasionally there would be a mural perfectly drawn
with the fine tuned skill of an artist
dedicated to someone who shouldn't have died was in
the wrong place at the wrong time would be missed

and this proved to me that brothers black men outside of
mainstream america did indeed have compassion
because wouldn't you have to hurt to paint your feelings
on a wall for everyone to see

and I thought what pain what talent thought drug dealers
could be our greatest accountants didn't they balance money choose clients
pay people to watch their interests that kid who outran
four police officers should have been in the olympics breaking
carl lewis' record and the girl I heard rapping in the stairwell
should be teaching poetry to children
I've been so tired here have loved this place with an awesome fear
and this is why I went back

but there weren't many children playing
they paved over the playground to make room for parking spaces
the kids and the teenagers hung out in front of the building

looking imposing and it wasn't at all like when I was a child
when I used to hear *girl you're double handed let monifa turn*
one up two three four five six seven eight nine...

about eight girls taking turns inside of a rope
made from someone's clothesline or old phone cord
nickel and dime be on time 'cause the school bus leaves at a quarter to nine
with an a, b, c, d,...

I could never seem to get my legs to work in double dutch
afraid the rope would hit me I felt as if I had failed my race
what black girl couldn't jump double dutch

and I couldn't make up for my insufficiencies by turning
I was the double handed one but I could sing the songs
that kept the rope moving *chitty chitty bang bang sitting on a fence*
trying to make a dollar out of fifteen cents she missed she missed
she missed like this...

I'm almost positive we had no knowledge of what we were saying
wasn't chitty bang all of our mothers lined up in building seven
to get government cheese and milk and bread weren't they training us
as they let us play until the street grew dark
and seemed to be heard saying
play children play hard play until you are blacker than your skin and your
sides hurt from laughing until your knees are scabbed
and you lose first teeth play hard because women's work is hard

I watched my mother turn to play in order to combat discomfort
she and her girlfriends got together drank little bottles of miller high life
and sang *my love must be a kind of blind love...I only have eyes for you*
and they did the mashedpotato and the slide

I loved to see her like this at play in love at last
but there will be no thirty something woman play
with many of the girls I grew up with the eighties were hard
and while I took ballet lessons one sold her body for crack
another's body became disease ridden
many more at thirteen and fourteen had babies
for men who had other babies and I left home for college

I stood in front of building seven number four thirty three
wanting to play wanting to ask one of the girls standing stock still
in the doorway of where I grew up to find a rope
I wanted to say let's jump until we fall down on the concrete
until someone's mother yells outside her window

*girl get your black butt up here before I reach down
and snatch you up but these days there is no rope*

so instead I listened for the echoes of quickened feet
songs in mid-flight
one up two three four five six seven eight nine
began to chant walking slowing from building to building
I only have eyes for you

hands out stretched in divination I take nothing
leaving all of this and more

sushi in brooklyn: a dedication to walt whitman

walt whitman walked the varied streets and named things
in an ode to brooklyn he wondered about the worth of people
who glance now at things he saw then
urged them to feel him pulling at them across the years
how necessary his request has become

walt whitman is not *a* dead man is not *an* esteemed poet
he is a housing development on carlton avenue
across the street from the park once a fort he helped to name
whitman is a rusted otis elevator stuck between floors
a cramped project apartment an eyelash away from an overpass
where the noise of the coming and going of cars is weighed
against pissy elevators to determine the height of project windows
which open on to the stench of makeshift landfills which surround
whitman's namesake because the incinerators have been bolted for nearly one year

walt whitman is myrtle avenue at night
a foggy ancient black man muttering to passers
they are coming white people are coming
it's almost a scene from a slave narrative
and there is talk of mounted police officers to protect the park
that whitman named and my friend ticks statistics about
her garbage being picked up three days a week
because *they* are coming

I've heard tell that *they* come check in hand offer you money for your soul
when you are tired key in the door home from work
and what are you worth what were you worth on the shores
on an auction block signing your name is easy
why shouldn't you have it easy gentrification is just a word
but tired is a emotion you've been dealing with for years

it's all enough to send us all into the streets crazy because someone *is* coming
when six blocks from the projects you can sit at an out-door café
while a blond woman with a british accent brings you sushi
and your friends click their tongues laughing
if our parents didn't own these houses we'd never be able to live here

and I am of the old school a sooth sayer believer in haints' and hosannas'
and walt whitman is a living black man with a gray beard walking myrtle avenue
I bring him cigarettes give him a dollar he calls me his daughter
every week he writes me poetry and I bring him a brick from his namesake

brooklyn queens

The best compliment a black man a brother a hood rat a thug
Ever said to me on a bus headed deep into queens

Was that he'd hate to see me a year from now
With a baby pushing a stroller

Perhaps the urgency the need for him to express
This thought was prefaced by the book in my hand
My eyes arched over a thought about words

Perhaps he saw in me one black girl turned woman too many
His own baby's momma his daughter maybe a son a month or two old

And even with a mouth-full of platinum fronts a pocket of cash money

All their black lives were still deferred

ANCHORED MADNESS

crazy

when you see crazy coming cross the street do not stop to chit chat ask him how he is doing do not inquire about his health his well being do not invite him to dinner open your door ask him to have a seat at your kitchen table and feed him better than you do yourself you are only asking for trouble

do not offer him your love your body your soul it does not matter in which order you offer him these things he will take them greedily and you will be sorry for you will ache for these gifts in the time to come

do not become crazy's girlfriend lover wife mother of his children these are things you should have learned watching the women in your life your family pulling themselves up off of floors making excuses for bruises his behavior fits of violence the other children the same age as yours the other women younger than you you know someone warned you

do not take crazy on talk shows fight over him fight for him with some white girl with some black girl with some woman just as crippled as you are do not tell the host the audience that despite his weaknesses he is a good man that he doesn't always act this way

and this this is crucial do not utter those simple words when the host asks you why you allow this do not tell him do not tell her it is because you love him you make those of us watching want to slap you wish you off of the planet

you shame us shame the race shame the gender I tell you if you see crazy coming cross the street turn side ways let him pass you make yourself thin ease through the slits of his fingers run vault fly vomit him up shit him out if you don't if you won't you'll be cutting him out of your hair like day old bubble gum and you'll cut until your mane is a patch-work quilt and you'll stand in front of mirrors and search for yourself threaten to kill yourself if he doesn't come home or you'll do worse

you'll stay stay with him until crazy makes you crazy too

push

for the woman who would murder doctors armless aphrodite deaf mute
made so by the ears of men who did not listen
what has become of your life
you lie awake in your cell hostage to the stench that is your rotting flesh madness
your cancer strangles the last of you
you will not touch yourself as you once did for your breasts
lifeless tumor laden udders prove themselves your betrayer neither
can you pass your hands over your lips for they reveal the cracked truth
of the joke that has become your life
no smile can be forced between your two tightly wound slits
nothing except the foul air of your encroaching death
you will not venture to pass your hand along the folds of your knotted
shapeless stomach shield for the womb which harbored dead children
nor will you spread your legs to feel your non existent clit
the dryness of your once full lips retreat from you in shame mock you
with their yearning
you will not probe the place in you that is dying your mad womb
making you mad making you dead dead serious
silently decomposing your innards announce themselves
as if an unattended leaky faucet
while you watch prison walls on your back on your back with legs open
as some man peers between your legs and in your ass a flashback of the times
you watched walls and ceilings while countless men in white coats probed you
mocked you making you hysterical one who needed a good lay from a good man
but the two are not synonymous
and they watched you commit to death offered no sign of hope
I know what drove you to this madness
and so you took what was left of your life into what used to be your hands
your hands remnant of your former self and with your hands thought perhaps
it was best to burn them and with your hands perhaps you thought it best with
bullets
but there was little time
and your madness pushed past words pushed past reason and the last of your spit
mixed
in deadly agreement with droplets of your blood generously moistened the flaps of
poisoned envelopes
and with this last act of justice
you became a mouth rusted shut

the point

can you believe that? are you listening? she asks
yes I say gently flossing clenched teeth with the phone chord

and I am listening but it suddenly dawns on me
that the saddest moments I've known have been when the women
in my life realize that things are never going to be just right

I wonder who was with me when I had my moment of startling clarity
when I realized that the only hand I'd ever truly hold would be my own
and the only face I'd ever recognize even with the lights were out would be my own

I've danced this raucous ballet with so many of my girlfriends
that it seems almost too pitiful to mention

but it does bare mentioning this tight rope women seem to walk with each other
never quite sure whether or not to befriend or cut each other blindly
until there is only membrane and bone

I've watched us cut eyes poke fun mind fuck man steal cry harsh tears
And harbor hatred and anger as if it is some badge of honor

I know that badge of honor the one you sling around
as if you could actually arrest somebody lock up somebody
for the crimes perpetrated against your person

I watched us love our daughters with brutal force
have lay down in the gutter fist fights with our mothers
because they didn't choose well

we've gotten in the faces of our friends who love us
holding them hostage with all of the chaos in our lives
because somebody owed us something and why shouldn't they be the ones to pay

but the worst atrocity is when we shout on live on lie on pretending that its all right
all good when it's altogether bad convincing ourselves
that we can prove just how together we are because we've mastered loneliness
because we've learned how to wrap four letter words around our tongue
lay them down like acid because we've learned to fuck ourselves with our hands
like polite little girls lights out covers over our heads
because we're making as much money making more than some man some where
raising our kids by ourselves partying by ourselves getting high by ourselves

but the point is when we are by ourselves we'd rather be with someone else

anyone who is not like us not related to us does not come from us

and we keep saying that we're happy but why are we so sad so low so down
so utterly out of places left to run and the song plays on
that you can't hide from yourself cause every where you go there you are

and the point is that it hurts like a mother fucker
when you realize people are not going to apologize for hurting you they are not going
to come back after leaving you they do not care about the black and blues on your knees
from where crawled after them the world does not care about your empty bank account
and your lack of childhood or your pretty brown taupe mocha skin
and the people who called themselves your friends will surely let you down

and say what you want it is not the fact that you can burn your bra
refuse to shave your arm pits decide to make love when and where ever
it is not the right to vote the equal pay the right to open your own doors pay for meals
it is not when you march when you sit in that makes you a feminist a womanist
a woman it is not the pink in between your legs it is the fact that your heart
is still forgiving still loving still accepting through all life's slings and arrows
this is what makes you powerful not the holding on but the letting go

but this is the point I seem to always hold silently between my teeth

we've never understood each other

I will not lie to my life anymore this will not be my epitaph

I was thinking this as I listened to you on the phone
you were mad he let you down again and you made it my fault

and I do not think I'm mad at you tonight
I'm simply harboring feelings of inadequacy
I realized that tonight with you on the phone

you didn't know I called to tell you about the man who shares my bed
he hurt me today made me question myself
made his life his struggle more important than mine

his skin is a shade lighter than mine
he feels somehow less than a black man thinks he has more to prove
believes the words I place on paper are insignificant self indulgent
are of no consequence to the *real* struggle told me it would be more important
if he were to write being a black man and all

and I would not be victimized in my own home
I made him leave because the struggle my struggle
should never include warfare with a black man
and I called you for comfort reinforcement

but your husband let you down tonight
and you didn't have the strength to do what I did today
courageously and sadly suck poison from my veins
even though it meant drawing my own blood but it is mine

and I handled the taste the imperfections the understanding that I am still
doing time with hard labor
and realized tonight I have always been afraid to be just like you
a full-sized mirror with you waving back

but I am not your duplicate merely a brief extension I can handle that parts of you
that make my blood sweet but the rest belongs solely to me

in the moment

I.

We've got to stop meeting like this I think roll the words around
sift them to my tongue but decide to swallow I wonder who we think we are
what power we think we are fooling delaying the inevitable with a touch a kiss
proofreading each other's future in which we share no part in
you turn to face me say *I bet you everything the one you're waiting for*
is wondering where you are right now
and I realize I don't want to go on like this sharing empty spaces
with a man who will not stay and shouldn't you feel the same

II.

I pushed my cart through the market today searching for cream cheese
having a moment of extreme clarity and looked down to find
the hands that reached for items were my grandmother's carefully choosing
what was best what would nurture the body in the place of human touch
I watched me outside myself smelling fruit comparing prices
weighing the cash in my pocket against items things needed and others longed for
when did I become this woman responsible for myself
I don't remember when I learned to take care of myself all by myself
haven't I always been by myself and I thought briefly where were my husband
my children I want to buy twinkies for mighty morphin ranger lunch boxes
I want a house with a white picket fence and a dog named spot
I want to watch dick and jane run interrupting these thoughts
a mother searching for sandwich meat passed by me
I watched her children wanting something she couldn't get fast enough
couldn't afford couldn't reach and I thought *all mothers do long after their kids*
are grown is suffer the abuse for not moving fast enough and still attempt
to reach for things much too tall for their children to get to
perhaps I can be happy with a nice apartment and bird

III.

I groped a poet today it wasn't sexual although freud would not agree
I felt the need to touch him be touched by a man who didn't want anything from me
I wanted the sound of him the feel of his massive arms around me to briefly
take the place of a man I never knew but needed maybe while holding me I heard
him say how beautiful you've become daughter how much like me you are daughter
I didn't give you enough didn't love you enough daughter maybe he said
sit with me let me hold you rock you back and forth maybe he just said

thanks for coming I'm glad you enjoyed the reading

IV.

I've been thinking a lot about death talking a lot with god
asking for his take on things imagine my surprise when he answered back
invited himself over and asked me if I had any red wine he put his feet up
sat cross legged in my papasan chair leaned back and exhaled and I could have asked
for my something better I could have asked him why my pain my loneliness
but I figured if he'd come all this way to sit down and share a glass of wine with me
things couldn't be going all that well for him either so we sat there
sipped red wine and wished something better for each other

trojan woman holler

the simple truth of it is plain xena was butchered
for being disobedient she was only meant to be an
ingénue for hercules a vessel through which the story
line between he and eolus was furthered a means by which
a friend called his masculine other from the depths of the dark side
from the entrapment of a woman with a sword in her hand
and steel between her legs she wasn't meant to be a spin off
a hero in her own right redeemed by her own aspirations
with a worthy side kick of her own a woman who rode horses bare
back and naked murdered gods and championed madness
and while you lay beside your daughters and sons at night
immortalizing little blond damsels who let men
climb their hair and bodies waiting like dry humps to be rescued
remember that xena wasn't cancelled allowed to walk off
into the sun set with eolus resolute in her idea that she would fight
no more forever she sacrificed her life once again for one thousand
souls she'd once condemned to death was decapitated
another casualty another warning for little girls and women
who reach for more

this is a poem of a life in progress

Carter Revard has his version now I have mine
I've acquired quite a reputation here I'm not sure I've earned it
but I've heard some say

the problem with monique is she doesn't write like a Black woman
what do I write like? what do Black women Black people write like?
maybe these people are confirming what's been gnawing at me
since I've been here maybe I am losing my soul my identity blackness
are they telling me I'm not angry enough?
but I've got anger ugly slit your throat
red eyed raging hungry nights anger

those two sure are spending a lot of time together but like
always sticks with like but what else is brown and black supposed to do
but become extensions of one another stand up have each-other's back
passing silent high fives under classroom tables when one of us drives a point home
about race culture dark lives and disenchantment
understand what it is to be a scream in mid air when nobody's listening

hell yeah I only date white women black women are too hard too evil
they're never satisfied a white woman gives me money her car
doesn't ask for shit what can a black woman do for me she's just
as fucked up as I am she can't take you home to break bread with her father
because you're just another nigger a nigger

I only date black men at first I thought it was something new to try and now
I like it- I mean them- better this is her march on washington on her back legs open
a stiff fuck from a black dick one good one for the revolution

you know what? you're the prettiest black girl I've ever seen why don't you put your
braids back in? my land lady makes me feel like she's archie I'm lionel
and words like nigger and blackie pass between my friends and their family
with a quick ease sometimes I think my people are still slaves

the television sings "oklahoma when the wind goes whipping down the plain"
this is not what I see it's where they ask you to bend like a blade of grass
when history demands you act like a rooted tree

in the meantime visits to the doctor read like a bad script of
the last supper the doctor is christ

this this is hydrozine take this and eat it it will help you sleep at night
take this it is prilosec it will help the bleeding hole in your stomach

take these these are serzone deseryl and remeron they will keep you
from putting your mouth to the tail pipe of your car
do this if you want to stay alive stay angry stay black stay

in oklahoma people place their skinny malnourished lives upon your own
and ask you to live it they give you their words tell you to speak them feed
shovel into you empty and you shit them they shovel you shit

in oklahoma they carve your bones out grind them up while patting their feet
and ask you to dance dance nigger dance black girl colored child high yella
negro sell out uncle tom dance

maybe I am the slave in which case you don't hear me
and all this is is the silence behind your laughing

cross this line
for R.R.

I have been afraid for so long now
afraid of what others would say afraid to have
my commitment to black men questioned but
brother you go too far

this is my home my last vestige of freedom
in the american frontier I do not have anything left
except me myself and I and we are all hanging on by a very thin line

I am so disinterested in you your whining about the man the establishment
day in and day out as if you are the only one who is standing in line
for scraps at america's dinner table how dare you minimize my dedication

the times I go mad rock back rock forth take on a little more madness each day
wanting for my people an iota of sanity how dare you discount
what it takes to stand in front of a classroom while a sea of white faces mirror back
defying me to teach them to break stereotypes

help them realize another truth alternative truths that perhaps america isn't beautiful
that there could have never been a good day for columbus to set sail
and for this reason boats of any kind frighten me
that I will never give my children toy soldiers tell them about cinderella snow white
convince them that some white man in a red suit invades my home once a year
bestows gifts upon them based on their worth
when I can't catch a cab going to brooklyn

do not deconstruct me demand my silence in my house while you eat the sandwich
I made for you cheese and mayonnaise curdling in the corners of your mouth
while you spout the rhetoric of philosophers long dead rattle off statistics
attempting to prove to yourself that you know something are somebody
all the while conjuring up african words to rename yourself

why don't you remember it was you sitting in the sanctity of your home
I in mine you a voice on the phone spouting off yet another endless lecture
about the struggle you were the coward when I heard someone scream
outside my window *niggers fucking niggers*

it was me who jumped up threw down the phone clad in a tee-shirt and my underwear
it was me who flung open the door while you said perhaps I shouldn't
go out there you said *it wouldn't be a good idea*

where was your courage your badness your infinite blackness then my brother
perhaps men shouldn't be called pussies when considered weak
because I'm all pussy I'm all heart

I don't even know why I'm giving you breath with these words
but I do know this
while I'm on this path watching out for the misgivings
of the world and the ways of white folk I'll be looking out for you too

OKLAHOMA REMEMBRANCES

unholy

death is cumbersome here wrapped in the flag and crucifix
with visiting dignitaries where children sing dirges to the dead
and grief becomes a theme park where now murder has its own marathon
to pay for the theme park where people pay to strap in and enjoy the ride
examine the baby shoes blown off their feet upon impact
while the crowd utters *how moving* and coming attractions include
a public execution for those whose interest has begun to wane
our father our father our father emphasis on the our

everything feels like a publicity stunt as the camera makes sure
to angle in on the visiting president making sure to catch the image
of the little black boy in a green choir robe placing him directly
over the president's shoulder picture perfect political
you see he's here for your people too but even in matters of death you cannot hide
the obvious the contortions of the boy's face the squinted eyes
the disbelief his eyes sending his own message into the back of the president's head
I don't believe you

and I thought this would soon pass the way you masturbate death
but then the plane went down and you rushed to the point of impact
pulled the dazed out of their houses and stroked their very private parts
with your right hand encouraging them *did you hear the crash did you see the flames*
did you go over to site see the bodies how badly burned until a grown colorado
mountain man broke down and cried *it's too much no one could have survived*

and your left hand hid behind your back counted the rating shares
and you thought how even more powerful an anchor man was in the rubble
two student athletes and slogans of god wanting a basket ball game in heaven
made you think of tee shirts to accompany the ribbons thought maybe
they could take off where the others left off *we remember again*
we remember some more we we we

then your head nodded mouth spoke *back to you sue or bob or david*
it really didn't matter who was in the newsroom you would all gather together
some more unpack your grief squatters rights inside the empty condemned house

my student's father was murdered today he did not die an old man in his sleep
his children and grandchildren around him he did not walk his daughter down the aisle
even though you encourage young girls to marry here at the speed of light
as if it is a rite of passage will you stop the world for him lay at her feet
mourn with her or is death better in huge numbers

never ever accuse me of beating an enslaved dead racial horse
nor ask me why I insist on remembering ask that you save burial grounds

teach me to others dig up old slave ships what I hold onto makes me remember
makes me strong makes it matter without the camera crews
pays homage

I don't want to lay down with death
make it a commodity make people pay to watch me grieve
I want to learn from death heed what it tells me
and then be free of it

divine

Smiling Mary was easiest little effort to gather her together
the palm of my hand cradling the back of her head as in her
baptism *have mercy* this was my greatest gift my
saving her the last of my burden

the water spread in pockets across her body covering her
finally and then she slept this is what a mother will do

I felt kinship at that moment with a black woman a runaway
now dead some two hundred years who rather than have her baby
return with her into slavery grabbed the female child by its foot
swung its body against a wall dashing out its brains this is
what a mother will do

I wondered then as I carried Smiling Mary to the bedroom where
he and I slept what would the world think and say words spread
quickly when a mother kills her child as they did some two
hundred years ago when news papers dared to chronicle the actions
of a slave woman

bear witness this is what a mother will do when her complicated
life is yoked with an uncomplicated man who is yoked to tradition
religion and other men a man who prays over her body before
he enters her prays with her in the morning for god to keep him in
sound mind body and spirit so that he can continue to be the head
the man of his house

while her mind and body idles washing shirts running errands
swelling without pause full of his children stuffing his face with
the foods of her garden no less than a slave woman two hundred
years ago

it's all maddening you see for there is no truth in tradition white
houses a fence up stairs downstairs two car garage four boys
each named after a disciple john luke mark and matthew
the baby daughter named for the mother of god

my mary who like her namesake would one day turn her
life over to her father and then to her brothers for safe keeping
and then one day to another man who would keep her loyal
and honest until she met with her father god turn her life over the
way I did the way my mother did and her mother before her
I wanted more for Smiling Mary

I sent her back to challenge god make him see what men
make of religion how ministers pastors and priests congregate
on Sundays and other holy days bidding men to take back their
houses on the backs of women how a father names his sons john
luke matthew and mark because they walked with christ

forgetting that the hard part the conception out of wedlock
a breath from being stoned a harlot the birthing the tearing down
of christ's naked bleeding body the cleansing of that body
the praying over it left for a woman named Mary

this is what a mother will do when urged to go to her destiny
take the life of each of her sons in her hands and give them
back to the water there would be no genocide of women
carried out in the name of the meat the hung between their legs

I knew it would be their deaths that their father the church and
then the world would mourn hardest the sons the future heir
to traditions of god fearing men my sons should have been
entitled to more than that

sitting now in this cell is difficult only because of self imposed
silence and these words circling behind my closed eyelids

the pastor comes urging me to pray with him family members come
telling tales of media speculation *why didn't she kill herself* I'm strong
enough to face the magnitude of my actions I'm not scared

or depressed just tired and angry about why it took so long
took the catastrophe of my hands and baptismal water for him
to look me in my eyes and search for the thing in me he'd missed

I feel kinship now with a black woman who lived some two hundred
years ago dragged back to her plantation without shackles her captors
perhaps afraid of what a mother would do

I know now that like her my love is not too thick
it is sacred

pawnee

for pius spottedhorsechief

I.

you laughed when I told you I was an english teacher
said maybe if your teachers had looked more like me
perhaps you would have gone to class
it was a moment breaking ice with steel gray eyes you said
I grew up speaking Pawnee my language my tongue and you
told me they forced you held your mouth formed it shaped your tongue
to spit out a white man's words forbade you to speak what was yours

II.

I wonder what I will make of you
you say *when I first saw you I thought they scooped pulled you up*
straight off the continent of the mother land
and you called me Godt-di Pawnee for black girl
you lay my feathers down bundles
a gift from the sparrows nesting feeding welcome-ly from my garden
I tell you they talk to me you laugh
call me a witch a voodoo priestess ask me where my chickens are
as I lay them down your face cracks serious instead of the easy grin
I've come to want to inhabit me and you push english words aside
talk to my feathers in words I do not understand
but are easy familiar
Pius I say I'm so filled with envy you still have your tongue

III.

I place my bundles back over the door you watch careful
maybe you're wondering what you've gotten yourself into are glad
you are here wonder what has taken you so long
and you tuck streams of hair behind your ears
I welcome you cautiously terrified
outside you watch me in the garden pointing to lavender mint
I touch fragile leaves place scented fingertips to your nose bid you smell taste touch
you reach embrace me hold tight
we stand there holding tight
first daughter
first son
first nation

remembering you...
(for stephen)

I am remembering the indentation of your chin in the center of my skull
your hair leaning down like water over my ears
as your fingers type over my hands
easing our story onto the screen

the rise and fall of your chest in my back as you laugh
at the concocted story of us
you gently curtail the plot make your lines vague and obtuse
you seize my hands in yours tightly and raise them above my head to your face

inhale them
are you breathing back your words

the scent of patchouli permeates the room
is this all you are willing to leave me
what was my role how well did I read my lines

I want to look up see your face
tell you we are not in love but our spirits like a flame around a wick
have danced divinely around each other
and I needed that
didn't you

but you won't let me see your face
instead you bear your chin down harder
and release your hands letting mine fall
I am prepared for you to leave now without needing to look back
so I close my eyes and exhale wait to hear the trace of footsteps

but find you have stopped to linger
placing just the edge of your lips to my ears
and you whisper
now I have the words to write you

Pious

You pulled a story from behind my ears long easy sinewy like your body
cupped each syllable with your lips and let them fall and you tasted each word

a hungry kernel *this is how a man tells you what he is thinking*
hands folded behind his head legs stretched out in front of him

eyes tucked behind a heavy thought *this is what I'll remember*
your eager memories transplanted themselves quickly grabbing holding tight

afraid I'd let go you exhaled created another vision on the ceiling and I saw with you
roads you traveled as a boy your mother's son brother's keeper child of your tribe

so unsure of what you were to yourself
you said *I just want someone to think the world of me*

and when has that ever been too much for anyone to ask
and on that first night we shared together we were colossal with the tips of your

fingertips you painted flowers in my hair whispered my name in between my thighs
made me wish for youth just a little more time

I wanted you to tell me more tell me everything make me your confessor
you told me yours I told you mine all of mine

and what I was thinking is that I felt full felt satisfied
and you hadn't even entered me

ADAZEE

with these black hands

...and you fold the fabric like this I say
it's funny but I never imagined I'd be in this position
not hunched over standing in front of a dusty full length mirror
teaching a white woman how to put on an african head wrap
this woman fighting cancer who once whispered to me
one day I'm going to lose my hair chemo you know
if I buy fabric will you teach me how...
and suddenly it shifted all of it time gender race yards of african fabric shifted
and weaved together a beautiful tapestry
and this head wrap this device I've used as my dividing rod
was being used to bring an outsider into the fold and something within me broke evenly
and gave way
tie back the flaps like this I say folding my fingers *don't worry about the string I say*
it gives the wrap character here you try
and without warning another woman enters this tiny makeshift closet
says she heard my distinctive voice and wanted to say hello
in three months I will sit at her bed side while she and her husband deliver their first
child and I can't help but think god is a god of good things
and one of them is irony
only god could place me in this space with two women
one fighting to maintain the quality of her life another carrying life her assertion that
things being what they were and are
she had accomplished this momentous thing
was in fact a *woman*
god would do this and make me think about myself
that just as surely as a woman could nestle a seedling in her womb
peek at it with the fine tuned art of ultrasounds
place legs in cold steel stirrups push a creature into being
she could also nurture lumps in her breasts place these same breasts into cold steel and
pray for life to come out of the event
come on in she says *you're just in time to see the unveiling you two will be the first*
and she slides red wool off her head reveals a perfect orb
while the other rubs her bald belly
how could I express to them the beauty of this moment
how I wanted to hold these two women in my arms
tell them how profoundly awesome this moment
I wanted to cup her perfect circle in my hands gently kiss her scalp
tell her she had never been more glorious and defiant
tell her I would gladly shave my head in solidarity until the cancer was gone
I wanted to be mounted with the spirit of osun chant yoruba prayers taught to me by my
madrina place my hands on the belly
promise a labor without pain a crib without the threat of death
a childhood without evils some children come to know

I wanted to promise a future
wrap us three inside the cloth chant on the coming and going of things
for the delight of things that stay

life means so much when you come to know you've understood little
and there is even less to hold on to when inside the balance of death

and so that I'll remember I've written it down
for safe keeping

tell martha not to moan

this is how it should be the cutting grace
of three women locked in prayer
like the old negro spiritual urging mary not to weep
to tell martha not to moan
I am amid this prophecy of women laying hands
for if you hold the bible as truth our hands have been the divining rod of civilization
used for the wiping away of tears beating our breasts in mourning
the cutting down of bodies preparation for burial
the rubbing of bald bellies over hot coals preparing another meal
without a footnote of thanks this was our place
and in the ancient african of yoruba believers lay their spiritual tithes
before god's daughters Osun Yemaya and Oya each mothers
the gatekeepers of birth water and death
I find that I am fortunate to be between these two worlds
keeper of a space before we were slaves and one of the protectors
of the life we spent as the mule of the world
I am thinking all of this this morning while praying with my mother and grandmother
about the cold cramped tiles of the bathroom floor in the dark
as my grandmother taught me to fold my fingers and pray
I could not have known then about the brutal force of her life
lost children poverty rape a beating on good days and bad
having lost so much she would not give up prayer
I am thinking about my mother how we've danced in shadows
around each other waiting to strike draw blood
the hardness of her life a shell to keep out the dark thing
I am grateful for peace
and find it ironic yet as it should be it is my turn to lift others
up in prayer
the women who molded me from the womb to the standing upon my feet
I'm thinking there are very few men in our family
and the women are still cutting down bodies
preparing them for burial visiting jail cells beating their breasts
making foods to be shared at wakes and reunions
but there is laughter a gratefulness for one another
female hands clasped in prayer over food because of life
hands of surviving and I am left to say thank you

adazee

uh-da-z

were you in the hands of the old african
as he went out into the bush to cut down a tree
mold the insides into a drum for his new born baby brother
a tradition
did he lash out swing you from side to side slashing at trappers
who came to take him
precious cargo
roped him about the neck and legs foretelling of the future
on foreign soil what were your thoughts old african
while pinned down two inches from the next body to your left and right
and above you
still in your own excrement
could you have imagined your life a hobbled man
attempting to flee in all ways
through prayer to allah the naming of your daughter kizzi
a mandinkan word entitling her to *stay put*
how did you explain to her you ran to save her before she was even born
how they caught you cut off your foot
and you ran still
telling your child the stories of africa the words for horse and drum
still more
gave her pride to be an african
could you have imagined that because of you a nation the nation that enslaved you
would bear witness to your story the shame of their behavior
yesterday today now still
could you have conjured while facing allah in prayer
a son of your blood would find you even though they made you
call your name toby
he found you carved out a drum for you with words
his tongue your adazee and laid it at your feet
but he is gone now leaving me this
my turn to shape the wood
scrape the mold off of the wood of old water bound slaves ships
where Yemaya has cupped them in her mouth
I will take this up in your name will be your griot
tell the stories of the bound the gagged the joyous voices
with the limited fabric of my hands and words
I will mourn your birthdays your death knells
for each of the sixty million and their children the world calls her minority
I give you this my promise
I will not go silent into darkness
I will take the lash teach your children's children

you have done this and more for me
given me your lives so that I could give you mine

scourge

these are the things that know no limits

that from african to nigger to colored to negro
blue black to black and blue black and african american
I am the offspring of slaves

*monique you will always be the offspring of slaves my friend told me
and there will be mornings sunlit stormy mornings
when you will feel shark's teeth in your flesh bearing down hard
hands holding you down while someone holds you down
enters you invades discovers you on a ship
rotting flesh open on your back
and you will wake up and find this is your life*

on my knees cradled head on my grandmother's lap
her hands on my face she told me *baby black people always have it hard
it is our life we always have it hard*

I can not tell you how tired this makes me feel
but I want to tell you about the mornings I pull the blankets
up tight around my head because I don't want to think about AIDS
whether or not it was bad joke from the government slowly planning
plotting to dismember me is there really a file with my name on it
because I am prone to protesting lying down in streets
would lay down my life

I don't want to think about the demoralizing implications
of what is happening to the music my people created where a black man
is a thug born with a clip in his back pocket and a hand on his crotch
and sisters are self proclaimed bitches and hoes who make men pay
to watch them gyrate on stage while she claims she's a feminist

and some black women have decided any old black man
will do as long as he pays the bills as long as he's in the bed
as long as he doesn't hit too often always frequently
while some brothers have decided that maybe white women are better
less troublesome less mad less demanding

I can't bear to think upon the racial divide
about what is between blacks and whites I am used to being america's bastard
it is almost passé become trite and uncomplicated

because everyone every city every country every country mile

has a word to define me before they ever see me
everyone has some word that's puts me in a ghetto makes me a whore
makes me loud and stupid a thief immoral a nigger
the offspring of slaves

and in those mornings between twilight and the burgeoning of a new day
when I am stock still between the spirit world and this
I hear the boundless waves against the ship and the bodies not broken maimed
or decomposed return to me whole until we are sixty million

and the griot whispers to me brings these words to me as grains of sand and says
your life your reason is this moment and I look around to see them
speaking many tongues all of them mine they have been waiting for me
and we are not on a ship coming here we are going home

VITA

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