

**LAMBDA LITERARY** foundation

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# Nepantla

A Journal Dedicated to  
Queer Poets of Color



# NEPANTLA:

A JOURNAL DEDICATED TO QUEER POETS OF COLOR

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## WELCOME TO NEPANTLA

“Bridges span liminal (threshold) spaces between worlds, spaces I call nepantla, a Nahuatl word meaning tierra entre medio. Transformations occur in this in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries. Nepantla es tierra desconocida, and living in this liminal zone means being in a constant state of displacement--an uncomfortable, even alarming feeling. Most of us dwell in nepantla so much of the time it’s become a sort of ‘home.’ Though this state links us to other ideas, people, and worlds, we feel threatened by these new connections and the change they engender.” – Gloria Anzaldua

## WHAT ARE WE DOING HERE

*Nepantla: A Journal Dedicated to Queer Poets of Color* is an intentional community space. Our mission is to nurture, celebrate, and preserve diversity within the queer poetry community. Through this journal, we are attempting to center the lives and experiences of QPOC in contemporary America. Thus, we view the journal (and our reading series) as part of a whole artistic project and not individual fragments of work. We believe that (here) the high lyric must encounter colloquial narrative. Here, we must provide space to celebrate both our similarities and our differences. We are one community with an array of experiences; we write in different formats, in different tones, of different circumstances. *Nepantla* is not the sort of journal that can project a singular voice (not if we want to reflect the various realities of our community). *Nepantla* is a journal of multiplicity, of continual reinvention.

## ACCOUNTABILITY CULTURE

*Nepantla* is NOT an apolitical literary journal. We stand strongly against racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism, xenophobia, etc. We do NOT believe in the notion of “craft” as an excuse to justify oppressive language. If (for some reason) you, the reader, feel discriminated against by the language used in our poems then please let us know. Keep us accountable. We have done our best to provide a safe space for the QPOC community. We hope you enjoy the fierceness!

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**to whom it may concern:**

i left my fishnet thigh  
high on your carpet.  
cherry stems littered  
on the bed. cobras in

my chest  
i'm messy

borrowed the sun  
to warm my feet  
left a trail of forest  
in your kitchen. used  
your toothbrush  
to do my baby hair,

molted a skin  
on your sofa

i've never  
been more  
unapologetic  
in my life

## The Terror of Clean

That space between  
a *limpieza* and sweeping your kitchen  
with a dirty broom, clogged with hair and dustmites is  
very, very small, or so they would have you believe.

List of items in a cleaning kit:

1. broom
2. soap
3. brillo
4. *machete*
5. Kalashnikov Modernized Automatic Rifle (AKM) or IMI Galil
6. shovel

It is Colombia, it is the 1990s, it is now.

The scrape of nation-building  
rendering pillage heroic by  
a placid discourse of bourgeois mediocrity:  
the exceptional or eccentric is dangerous,  
did you not hear? Did you not learn it from the inception of  
your breathing?

Aporophobia: fear of and contempt towards people who live in poverty.

And these are the disposables, the unwanted, the extraneous bodies, unprofitable,  
irrelevant to the march of silver and gold, the laborious privileges of citizenship,  
these are the ones who will catch the intention of lavish purges  
and be forced to swallow ammo too big for the throat.

Kill list for Mano Negra, the elusive yet pervasive hand of death,  
another piece of the putrid machinery that governs, that declares from the pit of unchurched holy  
taking, all the sins in their deadliness:

1. Foundlings, those with no nest, the homeless. Poverty is a sin. Sloth is a sin.
2. Nightwalkers selling their tongues like wares. Sex outside marriage is a sin.
3. False eyelashes and skirts on a cock-strut, Transgender, Transvestite, Transgressing bodies in a militarized culture. Deviation from masculinity is a sin.
4. Faggots and *lesbianas*. Homosexuality is a sin.
5. Human Rights Activists. Speaking out is a sin. Anti-imperialism is a sin.
6. Skin the color of earth and sunless hours. Refusing assimilation is a sin.
7. Mothers and daughters. Mourning is a sin. Remembering is a sin.

Police with their muddy heels in stirrups on badged horses  
talk their talk of cleaner streets, boasting of revelatory  
enterprise, bastion cities of order, security sacrosanct,

so the suits can take trains without trouble  
and the young women of El Poblado, Comuna 14  
can walk their unblemished cheeks and poodles down the sidewalks  
without risking

the tainted guilt of beggarly hands  
or the unfamiliar succulence of arousal,

we are the vermin here.

We are the edged blades of fallen yearning,  
struck as with lightning and thunder  
for all the labyrinthine meanderings of our days  
away from the death of a thrust docility,

and we pay for our refusal of purity,  
we pay for the distress of their daughters' lips  
reaching for ours at sunset in the parks littered  
with deviants, our deviations carrying their discomfort,

we pay for not being able to pay, we pay for having been  
boys who wore their mothers' heels when she was away  
working her third job in one twirl of the sun, we pay for  
letting our nucleus grieve, for clipping our roses for hawking  
in moonlit markets, for fighting the deepest  
fight we can muster in the face of oblivion and contempt, for

that space between  
a *limpieza* and sweeping your kitchen  
with a dirty broom, clogged with hair and dustmites  
is very, very small, or so they would have you believe.

Watch out, they will  
sweep you into the gutter  
and bury you with all the refuse,  
tattered clothing, scrap metal, broken radios  
of a convoluted wartime sensibility  
in the afterglow of an immaculate sterility,

leaving your teeth to shine in the rain



## **r e a s o n s   f o r   s m o k i n g**

i.  
to preoccupy the mouth  
in the presence of men

ii.  
a burning tip  
is a weapon

iii.  
to still the anxiety  
in my chest

iv.  
a pallet  
for my lips to stain

v.  
a way to be discreet  
in kissing my fingers

vi.  
an excuse  
to leave

vii.  
my own bones  
burning

watch their smoke  
pour from my  
mouth

## Ominous Light

Walking down hill  
dirt path  
a little shack by the road  
rusty metal roof.  
Mami drags us there  
my brothers and I.  
“will she do brujeria?”  
but mami refuses to call it that  
“los van a cura.”  
She will heal them.  
We watch  
as she rubs medicine into  
her weathered hands.  
They are like aloe vera,  
skin hard and thorny.  
Mourning lines  
between the creases of  
her palm and fingers.  
Calluses tracing the tales of  
lost and fallen souls,  
of handguns hidden  
underneath her dress,  
surviving cross fires.  
And when you look  
deeper inside,  
there are centuries of  
healing power.  
The oil lantern illuminating  
the single room home  
fingers spread,  
she places them on  
my brothers bare chest.  
All eyes closed  
We bow our heads together,  
Orando.

## I NEVER WANTED TO SPEAK

of the house facing Cowboy Park  
where my childhood pets are buried.  
Eight small skulls scattered, each  
a burned-out bulb keeping the fig tree

company, guarding the needles  
I'd eventually unearth. My neighbor,

the infected queen, taught me  
how to shoot down pigeons.

Think of them as compliments, he'd say.  
By the time I was old enough to know

what he meant, it was too late  
for him. Still, he slept inside me

for many seasons, cocking  
his shotgun at a flinching sky.

Disguised in pill and sneer,  
he waited for warmth to enter the body.

## Prometí Nunca Hacer Drag

Te gusté tan *recto* como un hombre enamorado de otro hombre podría ser. Pero también amabas a las mujeres, como sus espaldas se ensanchan al aparecer las caderas, como sus cuellos se mecen cuales cisnes bebiendo agua cuando llaman tu nombre, su cabello largo acariciando tu cara al despertar en el nido creado en tu pecho, la mañana siguiente. Y aquí estoy, usando la peluca que hice a imagen de las rubias que preferías pero nunca podrías amar. Aquí estoy aplicando delineador sin planes algunos de lagrimar. *Yo nunca lo amaré otra vez*, anuncio decidido al espejo mientras golpeo con polvos mi cara hacia la sumisión; como si se pudiera salir de los brazos del héroe sin caer de nuevo al peligro. Hoy, por primera vez, bailo para salvarme, convirtiéndome a la vez en la única mujer que nunca tendrás. Hoy, en el bar Esta Noche, en el Lower East Side, soy distancia. Antes, lo más cerca que estuve de hacer drag fue al ser coronado Rey de la Graduación, pero escogí en cambio la tiara de la Reina; zirconia cúbica de alguna manera más real que la corona acartonada del Rey. Hoy, soy Diamante, extravaganza elegancia, una hembra cantando luz acompañando a Whitney, declarándome la Queen of the Night, dándote *that stuff that you want*, meneando *that thing that you need sashay-shantae-strut-shimmy* brillando en el escenario, haciendo moverse a la gente de manera indecente al ritmo marcado por el cetro en mi mano. Un rey, que es una reina tan poderosa que rompe las leyes naturales; lycra color de mi piel y leggings que me ocultan donde no brilla el sol. Un corsé de cordones negros cubre la costilla ausente pero deja salir colgando lo suficiente para deslumbrar y sumergirme en el aplauso del público que ama a este hombre vestido de mujer, hombre vestido de hombre amujerado, hombre vestido de suficientemente hombre para transformarse. Hombre transformado, hombre superado, hombre no más.

## Florals

i was sent home today  
because i had a pink eye

but they never sent me home  
when i had a black eye

in the car daddy said  
*big boys don't cry*

but i don't see one in the mirror  
i wish mommy picked me up

mommy looks beautiful in her dress  
i want to be just like her

but my teachers and daddy  
and stupid sarah tell me i can't

i still want to anyways

## You Construct Intricate Rituals

You headlock.	You lockjaw.	You clothesline.	You thumb war.
You man up.	You man down.	You waterboard.	You bring em home.
You wrestle arm.	You firm grip.	You stiff wrist.	You slap ass.
You chestbump.	You huddle up.	You head-to-head.	You foul.
You hand-to-hand.	You good game.	You shoulder surf.	You endzone.
You friendzone.	You fuckin sluts.	You whaddup, yo.	You bro, bro.
You push it out.	You spot me.	You bloody knuckle.	(no homo)
You nutcrack.	You piggyback.	You pit sniff.	You mosh pits.
You haze week.	You blood pact.	You train run.	You fagbash.
You curbstomp.	You kiss of death.	You jump in.	You pour out.
You gaysted.	You wingman.	You mancrush.	You str8 bruh.
You be masc.	You no fems.	(in all caps)	You ain't queer.
You all top.	You bare arms.	You shotgun.	You won't kiss.
You close fist.	You zip lip.	You crosshair.	You f

## **Diva Doll**

Baby doll. Barbie doll. Mama was a Diva. Mama's baby was a doll. Mama collected dolls. Pretty pink, fluffy glamorous porcelain dolls. Mama dressed dolls, dressed me like I was her doll. Fluffy, pretty powder pink show and tell baby doll/baby girl/mama's baby's girl. Mama loved how dolls looked. Pretty porcelain faces. Ruby lips/ Ebony eyeliner/cinnamon blush. Perfect. Exteriors look pretty/ pink/ shiny/glossy. Cameras loved mama as much as she loved cameras. Mama shared legacy. Diva doll. Baby doll. Mama's living doll. "Smile real pretty for the camera baby" "Walk down the runway baby girl" Follow mama, follow footsteps, follow Diva. Mama didn't see her baby. Mama saw pink ruffled ponytails. Mama dressed me pretty like her dolls. Everything plastic/coated/covered/perfect show and tell. Mama loved things she could show and tell. Shiny surfaces. Exteriors. Kept dolls wrapped in plastic boxes. Trophies. Show and tell. Mama took pictures/mama loved studio shots/mama's baby had to sit for studio shots. "Smile pretty baby. Smile like mama. You look like a living doll." Pictures don't lie. Mama didn't see eyes. Peering out. Sad. Empty eyes peering out behind porcelain. Mama hung pictures of baby girl/baby doll/Diva doll all around the house. Mama hung pictures of herself around the house. Living dolls. Pretty pictures filled shelves/walls/empty spaces. Mama's baby doll. Mama's mirror. Mama didn't touch. Taffeta ruffles, bubble gum pink clothes filled closets. Mama covered her baby girl with layers of ruffles, bows, powder pink fluff. Mama didn't touch. Kept

her in the plastic box.

## the beautiful people

sleep in make-up wake up late wait—  
for no one run down streets in stilettos  
half-naked verge of strip sip tea in the afternoon curdle swoon  
into laughter spoon unfamiliar spill  
red wine on white sheets

and call it art

heart everyone who hearts them back slack  
and get over—  
cover mediocrity with pretty  
wear it like a mask suck at it  
like a titty ask and they shall receive we've all given in giddy  
weak  
they speak golden  
we beholden to every shiny syllable spilling raspy  
from their nasty mouths eat fruit fed them by lovers leftover  
from night before ignore

phone calls

fuck:  
in hallways—spandex screeching against paint on stovetops—pilot  
light scorching ass so hot  
in the ass they hardly notice  
quote bliss from Buddha  
and other enlightened motherfuckers sucker us  
with eyelashes dimples simple us

stupid

stupefy us  
with one glance—dance dirty against vodka  
bottles ashtrays triggers  
swagger us into two month's rent glint golden  
from glitter and angel dust trust only  
the glamorous  
glamour us and bear teeth thief  
our blood under strobelight moonlight glows a parade  
in their honor  
throw candy  
to the ugly  
below know  
we want nothing  
more than a taste of their sweet—



## On Grace

*For Tim Seibles, Ross Gay, Kevin Simmonds, & Pages Matam*

You know how when Usain Bolt runs  
& you want to cry it's so beautiful? That.

How could we not be a song? I hum  
this man in my bed all night, my mouth a loose choir

& his body a gospel & I don't mean like a song  
I mean gospel like a religion or like a testimony

etched in gold. How could we be *only* a song?  
I lay men down for what some call me a faggot for

but I call it *worship*, I see his wood & bark  
*Amen Amen Amen*. I call out God's good name

in the midst of the first miracle – the black body.  
Look at him, at us. Were the mountains not named

after some dark brotha's shoulders? Didn't the wind learn  
its ways from watching two boys run the spine of a field?

Bless the birch-colored body, always threatening to grow  
or burn. Bless the body that strikes fear in pale police

& wets the mouths of church girls & choir boys with want.  
Am I allowed to say I praised my pastor most without the robe?

I have found God in the saltiest parts of men: the space between  
the leg & what biology calls a man, the bottoms of feet, life's slow milk.

I watch the Heat play the Warriors & I am overcome by a need  
for tears & teeth. I stopped playing football because being tackled

feels too much like making love. I pause in the middle of the street  
watching the steady pace of the men on corners selling green

& all things dangerous & white. I watch the hands exchange money  
& escape, the balancing act of hips & denim. This awful dance of poverty,

but the dancers? Tatted & callous ballerinas, henna dipped stars.  
Do you know what it means to be that beautiful & still hunted

& still alive? Who knows this story but the elephants & the trees?  
Who says the grace of a black man in motion is not perfect

as a tusk in the sun or a single leaf taking its sweet time to the ground?

## **I expected to be sad in New Orleans**

The barrel-chested singer had his lips  
so close to the microphone  
that the side street dimmed black as a blue note

If only I could lose sight enough  
to feel my way through

Just wait

This blast of humid air shakes the pecan tree  
& there's so much meat left on the branches

I almost bite down into the air  
until under the green clapboard house  
the cats fuck their loud fuck

The full belly of night is slit

Ms. Lynn downs can after can of Coke  
as she surveys the block from her widow's walk

She said a rosary before the first mastectomy  
She pulled every weed from the flower bed  
before the second

My will has gotten stronger

When a Cadillac turns the corner  
I know Uncle Paul is haunting me  
his tongue red as cayenne

At Frenchman & Chartres the tuba  
holds down a two-measure bass line  
hooked in the snare  
The tourist fixes his cell phone on the littlest  
black boy firing his trombone from the curb

I'm leaning on The Praline Connection holding a bag  
of vintage porn that cost \$50  
I'll commemorate high school graduation in 1990 with this  
purchase from the bitter homosexual bookseller

Somebody's selling ice cold water

## **Aporia**

What is left out is often what lingers, remains after  
silence, stillness, separation and grows, groans into  
speech, movement, absent intention. Doors creaking  
open without hand or wind, drawers yawning wide,  
murmurs and whispered laughter, logic eating its own  
tail, the unseen announcing its omission from what  
is known, accepted and coming back, rehearsing  
its lacunate struggle with handles, shadow larynxes,  
the quotidian and reaching for us each flat, stark day,  
every burgeoning night simply by being \_\_\_\_ .

## THIS TIME, THERE WAS NO

police officer. No inaudible English  
or witness: the word *victim*

was not used at all. This time,  
there was no grieving.

No finger pressed into the lip  
of a VHS, twisting the magnetic

tongue, the wild chrysanthemums  
blooming along my neck. This time,

there was no condom. No name.  
The only evidence I have is flesh,

the war that took it all  
away, that made this body

of water desert. And here,  
swimming in disappearing

dark, where language is neither  
feral or enough, I open

my mouth—a fault  
line, a tributary, an empty

vase—and unbury you: punctured  
photograph, plucked

flower, years of wildfire  
& earthquake, child

that could not remain  
a child unless cruel & forgetting.

For you, I unbury a mother,  
a row of teeth, the slit

of an eye to describe a home  
land also split apart. For you,

I reach my hands into this arid  
weight and excavate the word

*No.*

## **Eastchester Bay [ending with an offering]**

Now to waterscape; I am escaping.  
Now to hooking bunker in the stern,

the cooler full with bluefish flop,  
the forearm sequined in broodspewn scale,

and here stands I darting minnows  
fishing with my child in our porgy spot

who tails angling boys, thinks  
bait & tackle—the sea did good

to starve him alive. The tongue did fix  
to good filet knife—Two-fingered spirit

of trawling gut, I will give him back.  
I will teach him how a single line

beleaguers dark water,  
whose fiend soul is bigger than us all.

## Survivor 2014

Contrary to what's popular I never liked Diana Nyad  
in my mind overrated white woman  
ex-olympic swimmer most recently swam from Cuba to Florida  
privileged  
thrill seeker  
daredevil  
doing voluntarily what so many people of color  
are forced to do while attempting to gain freedom  
drowning in boats, falling overboard, terrible accidents,  
falling into the jaws of sharks, those waters a meat fest  
for predators, slavers  
Sometimes I think about slavery and think if only those waters  
could tell the tale  
I've always wanted to say to those people who go on the reality-show Survivor for kicks  
try being an artist and make it your career choice  
or how about a single mother or father trying to raise a family  
on minimum wage living in an impoverished area  
try being someone who comes to America and  
doesn't speak the language whose entire survival rests upon  
learning english  
arriving in a strange land, on strange soil, estranged from everything  
you have ever known  
like hitting your head against a glass door, or mirrors  
like optical illusions that used to be in the old fun houses  
or how about being uninsured and being sick for a number  
of years  
weathering that storm  
or insured but burdened with a costly illness  
health plans don't cover  
or like so many of my students who are bullied to the point  
they have nowhere to turn and no longer have knowledge  
of their own name  
No I never liked Diana Nyad  
until one day I caught a clip of her on Ellen  
I caught the part where she talked about her friendship  
with Superman Christopher Reeve who in real life suffered  
paralysis from the neck down.  
He looked at her in later years after she'd retired from swimming  
said he feared she wasn't living her own dreams, that  
she was an Olympian  
And something about her conversations with him motivated her  
to try again, to listen.  
Maybe through her I saw the frayed ends of my own un-lived dreams,  
my own fear that caused paralysis  
And so by the end of that conversation with Ellen

where Diana talked about returning to her Olympic Self  
by swimming from Cuba to Florida at age 60 challenging  
every notion of what it means to be an athlete, a woman,  
and the stereotypes of aging I was crying  
by the time she looked into the camera and said  
Never give up  
Don't ever give up on your dreams



***Constellated***

*My friend bought  
A star and named that  
Star after her boyfriend.  
I gaze at the summer sky,  
Wondering, "Is that you,  
Chuy Gómez?"*

## Butter Cream

She walks  
like soft cake  
butter sweet  
and light

my appetite whet

the day  
cold  
snow

I was seeking  
her spring whirrs  
hums like the land  
black and wet

inside her sanctuary  
I stand stare  
nervous windows sweat  
to spite the cold  
blackened trees  
bare branches  
etching  
the grey, grey sky

I dream of  
curling curving  
into a cadence  
take her in until  
we occupy  
the same place  
the same space

caressing her  
I touch myself

I feel delicious

rose chiffon light  
echoes off my skin

brushing close  
she says through  
Cheshire grin  
“if I like it,

I lick it.”

bouquet of  
myrrh sandalwood  
wafts and billows

faux ming vase  
bursting of cattails  
and pussy willow  
tease in the corner

atop  
the big, big bed  
royal purple  
gold sheets  
satin raw silk  
gregorian chants  
whisper lusty devotions  
my mouth goes dry  
my eyes wide  
damp palms grasp  
headboard slats  
for hands to hold

“breathe”  
she says as  
she parts me  
“breathe”

her breath warms  
I am made soft  
wanting wanting  
dancing on my skin  
I stretch/contract  
clutch pillow  
to the place  
she tastes me  
I hear the color red  
feel golden and sun  
piercing through  
eyes sliding back  
fluttering behind  
closed lids

“open your eyes

see,”  
she sighs

I ride and ride  
surrender deep  
into eyes reflecting  
rain and fire and all  
that is song

I ride and ride  
her breath  
my breath  
my breath  
I try to catch  
in earth cracks  
and breaks  
lava spews and  
monsoons and cave- ins  
and rapture  
revelations  
jesus  
coming  
coming

outside a pewter sky  
flocked by crows  
mirror our black bodies  
rising

## Cry Wolf

Born girl in the wither-lands and pop her  
hinges one by one to floor. No reason  
to wade towards the sad bucket feeling.

To love this twice-ghost of twill and songbird  
dead, I need her soldered to me. My grief  
often catches in the shivery goose trap.

The life expectancy of this kind of animal  
counted on the rings of a circus top. I say  
topple her years into a noiseless field.

She learns the word *albacore* and cartwheels  
off a nearby cliff. She lives and dives again  
to come back as ghost moth and shrill.

I hold her to a broken tooth. I hold her though  
to touch means to cut and barber; to touch means  
I am pressing juice out of her scarcest bone.

Cradle the shy end of her—that suckle and sour  
mouth going, *Mother, I noose you*. Forgive her for all  
her knife and flesh games. She is so small.

These are the things she loves: touch and the color  
opal, little lamb of every sugary rhyme, and that  
look of red faces tearing out her seams.

## Necropsy

A fallen chick, bonesoft and free  
of its incubational shell.

I imagine my body as this bird,  
opened like a fig, unsexed and  
ripening on the ground.

Its claws are frozen in grip,  
each finger bent at the knuckle,  
puckered toward roughskinned ankles.  
I am comforted by its spiny  
wings, downy underbelly split open;

this body turns outward without  
showing its underpinnings. The bones  
have reinvented themselves, no longer  
scaffolding, they fuse to organs,  
living in tents concealed by swollen tissue.

I lean close to the body, use a stick  
to search for sets: ovaries, tubes,  
but find none. I take the bird in  
my hand, press against its little bush  
of meat, its foul belly pushed open.

It is familiar. I catalogue its body,  
take notes on its napping guts,  
the tenderness found in expiry,  
the body no longer weighted with work  
or conditioned by movements.

Its form never flew, couldn't collect  
its wind-earned luster. It's just a body  
escaping its skin, hunting for  
purpose. This is why. I look  
towards its figure to guide my own.

A dead bird knows how to avoid  
self-pity: let injury be swaddled,  
let death be a marker of possibility. Become  
something more than a body,  
a wing, a slender beak.

## **Bird Hospital**

Hurling down uncaught by updraft he receives the page  
Saying cast off the woven coat of twigs and all the ice-  
Sheathed vestments and scrub in

The doctor is the beast he was warned about who will try  
To make him whole and dizzy from his fall he can't protest  
When his song turns monstrous

Nested in the anger he never wanted to be woven into this  
Bird made of bull and swan thundering on so no wonder  
The sutures fail in the traffic of wings

Now in the unraveling operation lonesome  
Haunted by malpractice and terrifying winds  
Abjuring the night's belated suit he solo wonton sings

## Another Middle-Class Black Kid Tries To Name It

I used to dream about a woman trapped inside  
a burning house. That isn't how she went,

my grandmother. Instead, the hood is full of grief  
that moved inside her like a drunk man's fist.

All I know about my father's mother are these holes  
in her, the holes she left. My father, pulled over

to the side of the road, crying because a song spills  
through the radio. I think her grief moved

into my father when he was born & into his daughters  
when we were born & I'm sure someone's tried

to tell you the blues is only music, *but the radio*  
*the radio.*

\*

Once, I watched my teacher tell another brown girl  
her language was too beautiful to belong to her

Once, my teacher bought me a cheeseburger & asked  
how come the other black kids weren't more like me.

Once, the girl pinned me to the wall until I called myself,  
or her, a nigga & all week I wore her fingers as a bruise.

That year, I wore cargo shorts through the winter,  
books in each pocket, haunted hallways full of words  
that weren't my own.

\*

Is there a word for a child talking to himself  
or no one? I've said *ghost*

but I do have skin & a father, after all. Hands  
after all, dirt colored & not buried in the dirt.

Sure, I've been opened the way girls are opened.  
Sure, I've been a dark thing gone missing in the dark.



Sure, I've looked at my sister & seen a woman  
caught in flame. But we have pills for that.

We have money for the pills for that.

\*

*Please—*

what's the word for being born of sorrow  
that isn't yours? For having a family?

For belonging nowhere? Not even  
your body. Especially not there.

## **Lou Sullivan's Birthday**

Sometimes when you're broke  
and another someone moves  
in to help with rent

you wind up awake  
at four AM, vaguely coked up  
listening to two

boys have sex in the room  
below you. Something tells you  
to jerk off – why not

so you, on your phone  
watch a cock appear in and  
out of some stud's mouth.

You thrust helplessly  
into your hand, willing it  
to be your lover's

tongue and fist, but it's not  
going anywhere.

## **My Father's Boyfriend**

They enter the bed room  
and close the door, locked  
away from the world for hours.

Father sulks as his man goes  
home. He barely talks to us,  
most nights. Father shouts  
at Ma. She knows, doesn't she?

Father loves him more than  
us- and I can see why.

His boyfriend has big  
muscles and perky nipples.

Should I tell Ma what

I have seen? Should I?

## MY FATHER, SWIMMING

Waist deep in ocean, he was not my father.  
His wetblack skin gleaming unfamiliar,  
laughter spilling loudly from open mouth.  
The hands that I had come to fear  
acquiesced, deliquesced in seawater. I watched him  
anticipate the splash of each wave  
upon him, as though amazed.

He'd never been a child.  
Those were shrouded years,  
as the sole black altar boy at Dorr Memorial,  
the one dark child on the diamond  
of Walter Flynn Field. Watermelon eaten in secret,  
forbidden by his father. Reticence was demanded.  
This austerity is the father I know.  
How could it have been him, swimming?

My father was volcanic, his eruptions capricious.  
He'd have me retrieve his leather belt,  
before bending me over his knee.  
But in the water, I saw him surrender fierceness,  
his large palms drawing circles around himself  
a solitary space for something, someone, soft & safe.

**(no subject) –**

Children make people  
smile in a way that suggests

It is possible

The more familiar the surface the less  
fertile the soil Or this wasn't meant

for growing but rubbing uselessly against  
like a beast

after a hard day of being less than  
its troubles

I am sometimes concerned

when I am gone my family will scatter  
my body

just to continue the line by feeding it  
to the rivers underneath us

water is a kind of reproduction  
because we are carried by it changed

when I am maturing your hair or taking  
your fiancé from you at the beach

I will look so hot stupefying colonizers

Useless is its own empire

As it grows it settles

## Spell to Find Family

*for Kundiman*

I thirst for the starlight  
that opens elephant skin.  
I thirst for the raven

conjugated into riven  
by summer storm.  
My job is to trick adults

into knowing they have  
hearts. My heart whose  
irregular plural form is

Hermes. My Hermes  
whose mouths are wings  
& thieves, begging

the moon for a flood  
of wolves, the reddest  
honey. My job is to trick

myself into believing  
there are new ways  
to find impossible honey.

For I do not know all the faces  
of my family, on this earth.  
Perhaps it will take a lifetime

(or five) to discover every  
sister, brother. Heartbeat  
elephantine, serpentine,

opposite of saturnine.  
I drive in the downpour,  
the road conjugated

into uproar, by hearts  
I do not know.  
By the guttural & gargantuan

highway lion. The 18-wheeler  
whose shawl of mist is a mane  
of newborn grandmothers.

## I THOUGHT YOU SHOULD KNOW

The apple was supposed to have five seeds inside but when we sliced it open there was a sixth like a finger & I got scared. Scared like I was when I found you talking to yourself in the kitchen at five a.m. the morning after your analyst wrecked the last living part of you. You looked so pitiful sitting there with your hands in your lap & crumbs all over your face but to me in that moment you were a murderer & I wanted us both to die. Speaking of which, I keep my father in a Tupperware in the living room & sometimes when I feel numb I inject his ashes into my arm. I thought you should know.

The thing is that all my girlfriends keep getting raped, which makes it hard to appreciate things like, you know, music, even though I know that all your girlfriends get raped too & music is the only thing that ever makes any of us feel better. I'm sorry I'm not blonde anymore but I used to be & that should count for something. I'm sorry all my wheels fell off. I can still hold a tune & I'm a good kisser when I'm not too anxious. I don't know how Twitter works but I hear murder is trending, which would scare me too if I weren't so bent on disappearing forever. It depresses me how much the kids on the boardwalk love Amerika, & how all the really cool murals are based on logos. I feel above these things somehow, even or especially when I know they're inside me too. I wish our sex felt less like the military & more like flowers, except whenever that happens I always wish the reverse were true. I don't know how anyone could ever love such a basic bitch, but I hope one day you'll try.

In a poem Ke\$ha & I coexist differently than in the world. In my dream we were all living in a palace of hair, someone made a bong out of a mango, & everything was free. If I were a mom I'd be a cool mom, & if I were a dad I'd shoot myself. I think war is a problem you & I have not really reckoned with, which isn't to minimize how harassed we feel by the dailiness of each day, but rather to call attention to differences; degrees of separation. This morning I said a prayer & it helped me. Someone is drunk-dialing you, & from further away than you think. I often wonder what my dead dad would say about the fact that I quit school & fuck girls now. Where did the time go, & why. When did everybody's hair get so long.

I hate this venue. I hate it when you shake your ass in such a way as to mark the distance between yourself & the people whose ways of ass-shaking you imitate. Self-parody is unattractive, but maybe if you went all the way through & actually became Other we could love each other in the end. I'm not Black but sometimes when I think crackers I don't mean food. I think mercy could be an air. I think a forest could follow us around. I even think we could become legion. A shining stone; a silver arrow. A YouTube video about bioluminescence or solar flares. Hey. When I said pingback I meant world. Sometimes when politics find their way into love it can be exhausting. My identity tried to fuck your identity but it felt awkward & we both got soft. Speaking of which, when I say I love you I say it mostly to remind myself of a kind of softness we keep trying to cultivate or enter. I wish we both could stop taking it so seriously. My penis is sky-sized. It takes me where I want to go. Away.

## Major Arcana: Judgement

During hurricane parties, beer  
foaming on the curb,  
we prepare for the inevitable

return of glass bottom boats,  
trawl nets, and oil cans—  
all we've cast into the water.

Jade oak leaves quiver  
and clouds wing  
from the bay. It's not unfamiliar

to see bodies rolling in the water  
after flash floods. Clothed  
in tuxes and paisley dresses,

it's as if they'd brazenly decided  
to swim. If you stared  
long enough they would stand

tall and flat like the horizon's  
oil rigs. Instead they rest  
in slick loam

beside bricks and shattered cedar,  
dreaming of moss  
on cypress knees.



## **She Calls Once That Is A Lie**

When she calls in the morning  
I've changed my number address identifying features  
I've sacrificed my name when she calls in the morning  
With news she's selling my teeth on eBay  
The teeth she broke off  
One by one  
While I was sleeping that is a lie when she  
Calls in the morning I was awake  
Each time she whittled away my ability to bite  
Once on VH1 in a thrash metal rockumentary that is a lie  
It was at the Kentucky Derby when she calls in the morning  
She's taken all my hats and next my hair  
And my scalp is an angry red gash  
Once eating toffee by the sea that is a lie  
When she calls in the morning it was a reststop  
In Jersey and the assortment was unreal  
And of all things I chose Dentine  
Once I knew all the lemon drops by names  
And identifying features they had names  
When she calls in the morning she wants the children  
When she calls in the morning and then the house  
And the hospital where they won't operate on me  
There are no spare parts not even a space between  
Whistling  
Like a fist of the bank in wet  
Season lying through her teeth

**{insert terror}**

born after midnight & before morning before we name it witching hour born on  
the night stars turned inside out leaving light spattered sky raven born above  
ocean born tumbling between heavens & earths born when jupiter first shaded  
half the moon born of wine & meat & war born between slaughter & laughter  
between torment & tease Argus came feet first eyes on his soles eyes closed on  
his toenails eye stamped in the small of his back eye lodged at the base of his  
neck his mouth a red silent yowl of eyes

## **if my slumlord allowed pets**

i'd adopt every  
after hour paw  
mauled in battle

trimmed with scabs  
toppling trash  
for fries & wing tips

fur splattered  
with egg foo young

these streets  
weren't paved  
for tenderness

a tabby's pregnant belly  
low-hanging  
as a rain cloud

a swollen nimbus  
grazing the ground

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