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Poems of My Soul(s)

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POEMS OF MY SOUL(S)

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Master's Program in Creative Writing

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2021

POEMS OF MY SOUL(S)

by

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THESIS

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Preface

“Throughout history, the powers of single black men flash here and there like falling stars, and die sometimes before the world has rightly gauged their brightness.”

-W.E.B. Du Bois

“South Bronx, 1973 – An art form was born that continues to influence and inspire the world over. For myself and so many others, Hip Hop has been an all powerful voice, a way to change your environment, a way out. Hip Hop is the universe, and we are all stars in the galaxy, cosmically connected with the purpose of shaping the culture.”

-Nasir Jones

This poetry manuscript was first conceived while attempting to creatively render my own consciousness in the midst of America’s turbulent time of historic awakening and rebranded awareness of a long-standing, detrimental, oppressive authoritative narrative. The poems within this manuscript grew into a collection, *Poems of My Soul(s)*, in 2020 during a difficult period of stimulated racism, political atrocity, and a worldwide pandemic. Suddenly, an old notion of otherness poured down on me in an uncanny, almost undiscovered way. *Poems of My Soul(s)* developed in an effort to pirouette poetry around the notion of double-consciousness in African-American identity and explore how the integral components of inherent Black culture juxtaposed with American culture inflate a complex identity crisis and inform a rendering of the total Black experience.

W.E.B. Du Bois coined the term “double-consciousness” in his article, “Strivings of the Negro People,” published in the August 1897 issue of *The Atlantic*. In his article, Du Bois states, “One feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois, *The Atlantic*). Through the lens of a Black woman, *Poems of My Soul(s)* explores, examines, and dissects contemporary “two-ness” of Black identity in America and incorporates the theory of intersectionality - a term first coined by lawyer, scholar and

professor Kimberlé Crenshaw - used as a metaphor to interpret how more than one form of oppression compounds into a single identity.

One critical component of African-American identity is undiscovered otherness – a determination of Blackness to blossom in contaminated soil in which our exhausted bodies have been planted, to find a place of belonging in American culture and contextualize an identity situated between two unfamiliar ideas of culture: “African” and “American.” What emerges from such ambiguity is an entire culture plagued as America’s stepchild: a void in identity. Therein lies the problem. An invisibility of the Black body compounded into Blackness, a formless shadow that has been and still is the nation’s chief problem. Within the Black body itself, Blackness remains an unreconciled internal conflict.

This collection questions the correlation between modernity and progress, Black identity and American culture, Hip-Hop culture and Black identity; Black womanhood and *allowed* vulnerability. The poems included within these pages navigate across literary, political, and musical boundaries and aim to produce a robust understanding, hopeful appreciation and potential unlayering of Black identity and culture while addressing both the fear and fetish of the Black body. In that regard, *Poems of My Soul(s)*, recognizes the complex relationship between Black identity and an aggressive striving to thrive in American culture (essentially, an embodiment of European culture). The target benchmark of whiteness becomes the detrimental epitome of self-consciousness in Black identity.

In his 1922 essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Langston Hughes writes, “the word white comes to be unconsciously a symbol of all virtues,” (Hughes). Instead of turning away from our own Blackness, either a private disregard for it or a deliberate masking where suitable, (oftentimes seen as a necessity for advancement), it is a delicate and equally deliberate labor of Black Americans to disassociate from a standardized cultural mold in which we’ll never fit. At the least, the labor of self-love is a striving to express an authentic being within a subculture of a dominant sector of the world and to find peace and comfort with the authentic Black soul.

Double-consciousness has a long history of existence and has been used as a literary tool of self-reflection for Black writers, even before Du Bois. Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, "We Wear the Mask" is an early example of recognizing double-consciousness in Black identity. Written in 1895, two years before Du Bois's article, Dunbar writes, "Why should the world be over-wise,/In counting all our tears and sighs?/Nay, let them only see us, while/We wear the mask" (Dunbar). Black Americans still wear this mask, a metaphoric veil that prevents white Americans from seeing Black people as Americans - and even more detrimental - it prevents Black Americans from seeing themselves outside of America's negative connotations of Blackness.

The question in focus is not, *does double-consciousness exist?* or even *how long will it exist within Black identity?* But rather, *how can Black Americans reimagine their identity and voice their existence authentically and unchallenged, and volte-face on societal imposed inferiorities that keep in question the very nature of Black identity?* Politically, the challenge is an unresolved paradox. As Darryl B. Harris concludes in his essay, "The Duality Complex: An Unresolved Paradox in African American Politics," the political responsiveness of Black Americans is very much caught in the web of duality. "On closer examination, we discover that the manifest political urgings of African Americans are by-products of competing core values (mainly between those rooted in European and Euro-American conceptions of individualism) and those rooted in collective consciousness (an African-centered value)" (Harris).

Artistically, Black expression has been one sustainable method to authentically claim ownership of Black identity. Getting over the racial mountain within the art of expression has its own challenges, however if the intent of the artist, musician, or poet is to express Black reality, it is within the power of an African oral tradition that Western tradition can be abandoned. Nikki Giovanni adheres to the policy of abandonment in her writing in order to achieve the highest level of authenticity of the Black woman's voice. In the introduction to Giovanni's *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni 1968-1998*, Virginia Fowler says, "Further, while the sonnet may be a poetic form prized in Western literary traditions, it is not a form capable of expressing

Black realities; the Black woman's "authentic" voice has created its own forms through which to sing and speak" (Giovanni, xxiii).

With literary tradition in mind, it's important to consider Sonia Sanchez's reworking of traditional form in the haiku. Her reinterpretation of the natural world, however, stands separate from traditional haiku principles. Self-discovery, in a broken connection to the natural world based on racism, oppression and trauma, informs an authentic voice within Sanchez's approach to writing haiku. In this collection, "Jog (For Ahmaud Arbery)" and "Pine (For Daunte Wright)" were both influenced by Sanchez's use of haiku as an expression of the natural world expressed through Black reality.

Black expression is an embodiment of the acceptance and rejection of mythologies and stereotypical characteristics of Black identity, and an application of a deconstructive method of self-discovery. Historically, the overlap between musical tradition (Spirituals, Blues, and Jazz) and poetry has informed the approach of storytelling for Black poets. Now, the dominant form of storytelling, deconstruction, and recovery of Black identity can be found in Hip-Hop. Beyond a genre of music, Hip-Hop is a culture within a subculture that informs how we speak, write, dress, how we bond and love the hated parts of our Blackness. As Hughes writes, "But jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul – the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain is swallowed in a smile," (Hughes), the new tom-tom of expression lies in the manifestation of Hip-Hop culture.

Where the tom-tom and Jazz bands once laughed and cried for Black identity, now the "beat" alongside vivid lyrics and colorful language has taken on the responsibility of encouraging a culture to paint and embrace a true self-portrait of Blackness. It also confronts the modern Negro hell-bent on dispelling these vivid, sometimes brash images of Black identity in order to conform to whiteness. Since its birth in the 1970s, Hip-Hop has evolved into its own culture and has advanced into an influential writing tool for contemporary Black poets like Terrance Hayes, and Morgan Parker.

In an interview with Paul Gilroy, author of *“The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness,”* Toni Morrison addressed the Black experience and music saying, “black Americans were sustained and healed and nurtured by the translation of their experience into art, above all in the music” (Gilroy, 78). As Morrison used music as a form of clarity to her writing, much like other contemporary Black poets, this collection also hinges on and sustains a parallel expression, with the intention - not to imitate the artist, but to illustrate both implicitly and explicitly how cultural ties of music inform my writing. In some instances, the collection uncovers the contribution Hip-Hop culture plays into the rendering of my own Black *female* identity. The radical not only lives within musical expression, but now pours over to an inherent lifestyle that begs to be authenticated only by Black identity. Hip-hop culture is the inherent trait of modern Black identity: a culture that informs, comforts, and sometimes conflicts with my own *womanhood*. In that regard, a third layer of consciousness and theory of intersectionality is added to the already complicated issue of duality. It is not until double-consciousness is foregrounded, in the form of oppression, that Black Americans become self-aware of their two-ness. With that first established, *Poems of My Soul(s)* intersects Black identity, American identity, and Black womanhood.

In Chapter 4 of *Souls of Black Folk* titled, “Of the Meaning of Progress,” Du Bois writes about his experience teaching in a schoolhouse in Alexandria, TN, and his first encounter there with “The Veil” when he and a white companion have dinner with the school’s commissioner. Du Bois writes, “...but even then fell the awful shadow of the Veil, for they ate first, then I -- alone” (Du Bois, Souls, 48). Situated at the core of Black identity, still, lies this barrier between the Black world and the white world. As in the case of the commissioner’s dinner - there comes a time when Black Americans are swayed into believing in the process of progress, only to be reminded of The Veil that delineates Black opportunity from equal opportunity: “I have called my tiny community a world, and so its isolation made; and yet there was among us but a half-awakened common consciousness, sprung from common joy and grief, at burial birth, or wedding; from a common hardship in poverty, poor land, and low wages; and above all, from the

sight of the Veil that hung between us and Opportunity” (Du Bois, Souls, 50). In the same chapter, Du Bois goes on to recognize and appreciate the selflessness of the Black woman through his meeting, Josie, “a thin, homely girl of twenty, with a dark-brown face and thick, hard hair...she seemed to be the center of the family; always busy at service, or at home...She about her a certain fineness, the shadow of an unconscious moral heroism that would willingly give all of life to make life broader, deeper, and fuller for her and hers” (Du Bois, Souls, 47).

In this collection, “Formation Resurrection Zest” is a direct reference to Du Bois’s Josie, and his story of the Black woman’s zest for life and knowledge despite generational trauma, oppression, death of the Black body, and hypermasculinity: “young thin thang dark face/hips all the way/’live to a beat/the rhythm of a life hard-pressed/for knowledge/sways to the drums of an underbelly/sings jack kerouac’s choruses/studies nasir jones’s words/a half-awakened apparition stirred with terror when the wind blows opposite/the bend of her thick hard hair.” The poem places the poetics of Hip-Hop culture, hypermasculinity and duality in Black identity at the center of the Black woman’s consciousness. Here, we have to consider the Black woman attempting to conform to American (Euro-culture) standards and The Veil that barriers her from the white world, as well as the aggressive nature of hypermasculinity emphasized in Hip-Hop culture: “rises from the dead/a simple death/that she dies often/and sips *Lemonade*/falls/into formation/and feels no more black and beautiful/than her hair is flaxen and silk.” In these lines, “rises from the dead,” represents a metaphorical death and resurrection of self, a continuous effort to bring an authentic self to the forefront. *Lemonade* references an album by Beyoncé, a pedestaled character within the culture who has influenced one-dimensional beauty standards for Black women and a prototype of beauty for which some Black men prefer and promote through Hip-Hop.

Jessica Care Moore’s “Mic Check 1-2. A Duality Battle. Materials: Poem Breath & Voice. For Lupe Fiasco,” which appears in *The BreakBeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip-Hop*, harmonizes the idea of being a Black woman in America under the strange influence of Hip-Hop. To love Hip-Hop and to condemn it (with love) parallels the duality of

Black identity in America: “*I am a hip hop cheerleader/I buy all of your records despite the misogyny/not looking for the blonde in me/Respond to me./I feel molested/Hip Hop fondled me*” (The BreakBeat Poets, 73). Like Moore’s piece, “Formation Resurrection Zest” expands on the notion of double-consciousness and introduces to the collection the burden of “triple-consciousness.”

Paul Gilroy uses his critical body of work, *The Black Atlantic* to inform while at the same time challenging the traditional thought patterns behind cultural studies. In it, he reintroduces the complexities of Black identity from the approach of modernism and attempts to define Black identity at the root of the Black experience. He explores aspects of Black music that pervades both gender and race identity within the culture. Gilroy’s contemporary approach to the delineation of musical influence includes the interplay of Hip-Hop and R&B (Rhythm & Blues) with authenticity (or a striving for) of race and gender identity. “The power and significance of music within the black Atlantic have grown in inverse proportion to the limited expressive power of language” (Gilroy, 74). From this collection, “Chris Brown on Rotation,” expresses the “limited expressive power of language” of the Black man in relation to his total Black experience. In this poem, the Black man’s ability to communicate is portrayed as limited by the speaker referring to these men as “unrefined statues.” The poem speaks to both an inability to efficiently communicate and an unwillingness to express thoughtful emotion as a result of hypermasculinity. “I am surrounded by/unrefined statues in varying shades/of black and brown with penises/that hang so low, it causes them vocal cord dysfunction./I do the speaking/and not one ever moves to verbal/expression, tears dried long ago/under a burnt out sun,/stone-hands positioned as such:/middle fingers to the law/the others gripping their balls.” The speaker turns to R&B singer Chris Brown’s musical expression, a Black man just as flawed as the Black men closest to her, to ensure they too, love something: “I have to believe my brother, my father/my husband, my son, my cousin,/my uncle, my grandfather love/something, too./To be sure, I type Chris Brown/into a white search bar/first name white space last/and hit play.”

Where do Black women draw the line between quietly accepting an exaggerated masculinity on the basis of allowing Black men to hold *any* form of power in a castrating white society, and outwardly rejecting what white society has manifested into Black culture while at the same time nurturing the most delicate parts of Black boys and Black men in America? In her poem “Oppression,” Nikki Giovanni hints at the conundrum: “I mean I could really dig being oppressed/by Black men/cause that would mean at least someone I love/is in power” (Giovanni, 128).

The confusion in the cultural relationship between Black women and Black men lies in the antagonistic ritual that has come to be viewed as our own cultural identity complex stemming from a continued disempowerment and unsuccessful reaching for unattainable status within American culture, emboldened by fierce oppression and a projecting of learned self-hate. In “Self-Portrait of a Shadow Boxer,” included in this manuscript, the speaker emulates self-hate, painting bleak images of herself: “A glimpse of an image/In a shower-steamed mirror/Scared the life clean out of me/I’d never seen eyes/So ripe with execration/A shadow - hard/At the core of nothingness/Dead mineral on its fade/To black.” The speaker later confirms in the following stanza, the root of this evil: a culture that uses the Black image for gain and disregards it at will: “A disproportionate glob/of invisibility starving/For a touch of winter/A leech for liberty/Stretched at length/For showmanship/Contracted into death for/Marvel.” Later in the poem, the speaker confirms an American standard that she cannot claim: “A disproportionate glob/Of invisibility starving/For a taste of the good-est hair/And the bluest eyes/If for nothing more than/To get many things.”

The trifold poem, “Ain’t Nobody Praying for Me,” included in this collection, layers power, oppression, and civil strife into a turning inward of self-acceptance in Black womanhood. The title of the poem is a borrowed line from Hip-Hop artist and 2018 Pulitzer Prize winner, Kendrick Lamar’s song “FEEL”: “I feel like the whole world want me to pray for ‘em/But who the fuck prayin’ for me?/Ain’t nobody prayin’ for me/Who prayin’ for me? Ain’t nobody prayin’.” The poem takes into consideration the insurmountable chip that Black Americans have on their

shoulders, but the Black woman is the subject of stability, motherhood and stasis. The speaker describes herself as, “a fixer-upper, broken but well-preserved/that kind of black woman/veiled behind a tripartite mask/hidden flaws and controlled impulses of rage/overwhelming belly aches with no one to comfort/me high expectations to be the comforter/to guard my man from a world that hates him.../a dark unarmed knight in tarnished garments/a savior in distress.” The poem questions, as Lily Klinek, Editor of *Berkeley Poetry Review* says, “not only who remains static and still, but who can afford to” (Klinek, *Berkeley Poetry Review*).

There is a tonal shift that takes place in the final stanza of “Ain’t Nobody Praying for Me.” The speaker celebrates the joys of Black womanhood and motherhood: “a black woman’s happiness is rooted in/her readiness/found at ground zero beneath the dust/of crumbling walls, found in the abyss of years/ that have seemed to escape me. Giovanni often writes about the Black woman’s selflessness and her ability to make use of empathy, while these things are often not reciprocated. This leaves the Black woman rarely celebrated and often depleted. An influential component to the final stanza of this poem, relies heavily on Giovanni’s poetics, which includes celebration in opposition to what oppresses.

“Thank Me Later,” and “Ego High (after Nikki Giovanni,)” included in this collection, continue the celebration of the Black woman under an egotistical influence. As Virginia Fowler says in the introduction to Giovanni’s *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni 1968-1998*, in regard to Giovanni’s poem, “Boxes,” “Expected to devote their lives to the needs of others, women do not necessarily receive any gratitude for such devotion, but may actually be punished for it” (Giovanni, xxiv). This claim is echoed in “Thank Me Later”: “I am the revolution/Been that/Set caged birds free/While wearing shackles/Did that/And fed the captor who/Pulled the trigger.”

The egotistical claim to power is playfully echoed again in “Ego High (after Nikki Giovanni,)”: “I am agile/I was born in a world/that don’t bend to my bow/still I run a million miles/a day/The ground/‘neath me tongue/kisses dirt from/my toes/I designed the playlist/that keeps us moving/I am the maestro/“Alexa, play/Tevin Campbell/*Round and Round*/on repeat for

24 hours”/I am sharp AF. Both poems suggest total self-celebration, while “Stand Up and Twerk,” suggests a cultural celebration of the body. The two total self-celebration poems, juxtaposed against the cultural celebration of the body, serve as a parallel remedy to the insults often cast upon Black women.

Poems of My Soul(s) further explores the concept of duality with an emphasis on survival in Black identity in poems such as: “Apples and Potatoes,” “A Rush to the Grave,” “Control,” and “On the Line with My Therapist.” A quiet parallel works its way through “Apples and Potatoes” beginning with the speaker reflecting on a matriarchal authority in which her grandmother could skin an apple or a potato. The ritual of skinning with acute precision and the speaker never knowing, for sure, what her grandmother was thinking about while performing this act represents a silenced American demographic and a form of therapeutic release of silenced rage. The pressures of being the best version of a Black American woman, are masked into a meticulous performance of silence, even if untrue: “I didn’t think about it much then, But I do now/The precision with which my grandmother could skin an/apple or a potato/Such serene cool about her face/Not a line in the skin reminiscent/Of a frown yet, nothing in the eyes/ Twinkled a smile/Her tiny fingers never slipped/Steady in their journey.” Later in the poem, the speaker - now an adult woman aware of her predestined role in American society, questions the progress she once thought differentiated her America from her grandmother's. Though her vigor may not be an exact parallel to her grandmother’s, she understands the inner workings of the Black woman in America: “Usually when I’m fumbling a knife around/An apple staring out into my backyard/(My lack of rigor reminding me that/My hardships are nothing to hers),/I do think/About our lives as parallel/Or as derailed synonyms.”

“A Rush to the Grave” offers a broader parallel of Black culture with an emphasis on what it means to live in a Black body in America and witness Black death at the hands of a country. The poem begins, “I’ve learned to live with ghosts./Terrifying/Is to live among breathing black bodies/On their way to the grave.” The speaker is acutely aware of the Black body’s fragility, and at the forefront of living is the fear of dying. In his 2020 book, *Long Time*

Coming: Reckoning with Race in America, Michael Eric Dyson says, “to be Black in America is often to feel under siege, to feel, in the marrow of our bones, genuine terror” (Dyson, 30). What manifests in the minds of Black Americans, is expressed quite simply in the poem: “To be black and alive is/To cradle death.” A running parallel between life and death, organized religion and street prophets begins in line eight: “Street niggas teach us to/Hail Mary -more credible than snakes who/Write religion. We have to believe in/Something./Run quick see - who do we/owe/Here now for that kind of rush to the grave?”

“Street niggas teach us to Hail Mary,” is a direct reference to the late Tupac Shakur, who Dyson writes about in depth in his 2006 book, *Holler if You Hear Me*. Situated in Black culture as a street martyr of his day, Tupac’s death changed the perception of dying young, Black, and male. There are two kinds of Black fear: (1) Dying a young death at the hands of reckless oppression, and (2) Dying a young death at the hands of reckless self-sabotage, and not being remembered for it. Tupac inspired the latter. Death is to be feared, but according to Dyson, “Black youth with death on their brains find other sorts of bedlam to blunt the pain, or tragically, they duplicate the trauma of loss by causing more death. These youth realize they are but a corpse in the making, an autopsy short of hitting the gruesome trifecta in too much Black life: targeted by cops, tagged by coroners, and treasured by loved ones, or -- if their bad luck turned to posthumous renown -- by a Black public that sees itself in their deaths. These young folk are made martyrs before their time, before they could take time to become who they were meant to be, or might have become, had they lived past their youthful experiments and indiscretions like millions of white kids who live to tell about it after they become artists, or writers, or gurus, or inventors, or business giants, or television stars, or president” (Dyson, 31). The poem concludes with, “A/Culture donned in subjugation halfway/Resigned to freedom by death - one foot in the/Dirt. The other gone tired from running.” Again, the parallel between life and death, hopeful freedom in living or a freedom finale by death is repeated.

Poems of My Soul(s), serves as a metaphor for self-reflection and attempts to reconcile Black identity from an outward approach, working inward. “Control,” inspired by Amiri

Baraka's "Betancourt," a poem written during a visit to Havana, Cuba, included in his volume of poetry, *S O S: Poems 1961-2013*, offers a perspective of otherness and duality rendered from outside of U.S. boundaries. Betancourt reflects on the importance and true meaning of turning away from conformity. "Control" embodies a critical self-reflective energy and looks outside of itself and country. The speaker, while on her first visit to Havana, Cuba, questions what it means to be in control of one's liberations, under the influence of a true revolutionary island. The Veil that lay between the speaker and white America has become foregrounded during the trip to Havana: "swim good/as in you have to be/always drunk with ninety/miles separation between/liberty and liberation/wanting to be and never/able to make a snow angel/without messin' all over the purity/of power/without dirtyin' the hell out of/an american master-/piece."

Wearing a dichotomous mask, the speaker discerns how wrong she's lived in her own Blackness, under the influence of a white society. Her confession is no more than a stab at the ingratiating characteristic within her own Black identity. The speaker's apprehension to duality follows immediately after. Using lines from singer Frank Ocean's song, "Swim Good," the poem continues: "i got this black suit on/roamin' around like i'm ready/for a funeral/an inherent dichotomy/keeps me aware of how wrong/i've been wearing/the damn thing." Later in the poem, the speaker views, first-hand, the beauty of the island and the reminiscence of a revolution: "bullet holes/and american eyes vibe/over afro-cuban beats, the/dance of the morning/entangled with the/flex of '59," referring to Fidel Castro's revolutionary 26th of July Movement. From that point, the poem conveys a poignant awakening in the status of her own activism in America: "i kick off my shoes, take off this suit/and all that lies/between my soul and almost always/selling it, kills everything/i knew about turning my/back on 1600.

In Baraka's "Betancourt," he concludes, "I mean I think/I know now/what a poem/is A/turning away..." (Baraka, 38) - a pivotal component in his own poetics. In resisting the nightmare of stasis, there should be no other choice than to turn away from conformity and complacency. While "Control," the poem itself, turns away from a country and institution that

practices oppressive control, the speaker concludes with a stark realization: she has not enveloped the oppressive institution with anything more than a poem, leaving her feeling a false claim to revolution.

What is the price Black Americans pay for an unresolved duality complex? What manifests in the paradoxical nature of double living is unresolved mental conditions in Black Americans. According to a recent article published by Mental Health America, “Processing and dealing with layers of individual trauma on top of new mass traumas from COVID-19 (uncertainty, isolation, grief from financial or human losses), police brutality and its fetishization in news media, and divisive political rhetoric adds compounding layers of complexity for individuals to responsibly manage” (Black and African American Communities and Mental Health, 2021). In this collection, “Conservation” and “On the Line with My Therapist,” convey a disconnect between the white world and the Black thought.

In “Conservation,” the speaker is caught in a maddening life in America under the consideration of moving to Ghana: “I’m used up to no end/here I am, unending/sourced from perpetual poverty/I’ve spent countless hours/walking barefoot through “Ghana Living for Expats,” yet, with all the frustrations America places on Black life, the speaker likely won’t leave America. Instead, she will stay to pass intergenerational trauma down to her children: “I’ll still be here/singing lullabies to the/Natural Resource with/Dissociative Identity Disorder/in the middle of Baby Food/aisle of a burned and looted drug store.”

“On the Line with My Therapist,” encourages mental health stability within the Black community, but more importantly, the poem acts as a safe space for Black thought. The poem opens, “i pricked my finger on a phone and it bled into the receiver/survival/i hung upside down from a tree and told her, a woman as/ brown as i, the world was alright/i was making a way.” The world is always alright when Black Americans are in the company of other Black Americans culturally understanding of what they’re up against every morning that they leave their house, every night on the return home. Only once in the twenty-line poem does the therapist respond to the speaker’s thoughts with, “very good.” This is not to be interpreted as dismissive. Instead

that moment indicates a mutual respect for space and discernment, without banter, or judgement. Survival becomes the point of living in a Black body. The speaker comes to terms with the indisputable fact that she was born into a culture that was not ever supposed to thrive in America. After she works through her thoughts and ends the call with her therapist, the speaker must stand again in her own Blackness, and the idea of Blackness. This is expressed in the last line of the poem, with exaggerated active language: “i drove my car slow blasting Kendrick Lamar flashing/candy paint and gold teeth at/petty pedestrians.”

The beautiful thing about language is its subjectivity in context and its ability to stimulate and predict mood, a vibe, or a thought. Within the simplicity of words is a newly defined authentication of language through exploration. As poetry is simply an art form, art is a significant connection to finding the human voice and a survival mechanism in Black culture. Spiritually, therapeutically, and organically, oftentimes free of traditional form, the fusion of poetry and Black culture becomes the perfect recipe for authentic Black expression. Without acknowledging double-consciousness in Black writing, Black music and Black life, my work would not be able to reflect an accurate and significant relationship between authentic Black identity and American life. Black artists, writers, and musicians are ever tasked with reviving their authentic voices in new forms of acknowledgement of duality and working through a sincere deconstructive method of self-discovery. The undoing of the subconscious that white is the superlative is an ongoing labor in Black culture.

BLACK AMERICANA

What is the total sum of the Body?

Painted smiles:

And genuine joy

Snap peas on a crooked porch

God:

There's *always* God

And a hankering for deliverance

From bondage

Tragedy:

Perpetuate prayer practices

Without credentials to

Cross yellow tape

The kitchen table:

Hennessy and burnt hair

Bible study and homework

History books and survival kits

Sunday dinner and Spades

Idiom:

Knowing when to say,

“Nah mean?”

And when to say,

“Do you understand?”

Exhaustion:

Board meetings and

Funeral-home directors

Murder and thank you Jesus

Fear and Amen

THANK ME LATER

I am the revolution

Been that

Set caged birds free

While wearing shackles

Did that

Cleaned the gun held to

My head

And fed the captor who

Pulled the trigger

MY MORNING ROUTINE DON'T BE LIKE...

Yawn stretch perch elbows
on windowsill with time to kill
stewing in my own peace while
mourning doves remind me it's a
new day same shit.

Jump into jeans sip coffee and
think *If only the borough*
would allow a BLM mural to coat my
stone-cold street
we could call it even.

Whip up batter drip it into a
hot cast-iron pan wait for the bubbles
and flip. Ready the table with a
bottle of syrup and think *If they*
would just remove Aunt Jemima from
the label I'd bow to progress.

FORMATION RESURRECTION ZEST

i.

young thin thang dark face hips all the way
'live to a beat the rhythm of a life hard-pressed
for knowledge sways to the drums of an underbelly
sings jack kerouac's choruses studies nasir
jones's words a half-awakened apparition
stirred with terror when the wind blows opposite
the bend of her thick hard hair plucks a lion's tooth
from a lion's den and wishes a divorce from the veil
she was born to wear blows a dandelion from
a cotton field but what to a woman is a wish

ii.

young bad thang dark face moves her ass to
808s and the swish of a broom performs a
terpsichorean grind to Gil Scott-Heron's Comment #1
remastered over Kanye's heartbreak drops it low and
sweeps cruddy floors prepares a four-course meal
from scraps bathes babes who never swam
her canal and inhales toxicity from a job that doesn't
belong to her rises from the dead a simple death
that she dies often and sips *Lemonade* falls
into formation but feels no more black and beautiful
than her hair is flaxen and silk reprimands boys and fathers
brothers and sons they laugh and filth up the place
Resurrection is exhausting

iii.

with a blade remove the thin colored skin from the
white pith discard the white pith (the whole of it)
add what is left zest to the remainder of a life that
will end and begin bloom and wither over the next
10 years 100 years 400 years
:: years :: years :: years :: years
she survives america

A RUSH TO THE GRAVE

I've learned to live with ghosts. Terrifying
Is to live among breathing black bodies
On their way to the grave. Belligerence
Of a nation, under God, coils the necks
Of rowdy aspirations and hunkers
Down on will. To be black and alive is
To cradle death. Why, why, why God do we
Have to suffer? Street niggas teach us to
Hail Mary - more credible than snakes who
Write religion. We have to believe in
Something. Run quick see - who do we owe
Here for that kind of rush to the grave? A
Culture donned in subjugation halfway
Resigned to freedom by death - one foot in the
Dirt. The other gone tired from running.

A ROUTINE TRAFFIC STOP: YOU SEE IT YOUR WAY, I'LL SEE IT MINE

A lot of ~~police officers~~ **black people** get killed
doing what should be routine ~~traffic stops~~ **living**
and a veteran ~~officer~~ **negro** like ~~Potter~~ **myself**
~~would be~~ **is** acutely aware of that.

The longer you **live in a black body** ~~are on the job,~~
the more layers of stress you accumulate.

~~And errors of judgement happen when you are~~
We die under stress and **over fear of the black body.**

PINE (FOR DAUNTE WRIGHT)

An uprooted pine
tree on an unforgiving
road bleeds compliance

under the shock of
pure white snow. Limonene
lingers. Grief protests.

SHUT THE DOOR

I don't remember when the party ended
Only waking up a housecoat-wearing

Slipper-sliding, Marlboro chain-smoking
Hair screaming to the high heavens

Furtive window-peeking, lazy-shouldered
Sunken-eyed, curled-lipped

"Shut my goddamn door" black woman
I always wondered about that kind of

De-evolution -- it's alarming
A seamless transition of power: out with

Backyard barbeque coochie-cutters, in with
The fury towards a country that loves her

No more now than it did when her breasts stood
Tall and her hair burnt unnaturally straight

I always wondered how the story goes from
1AM at a backyard boogie on a Friday night in summer

The sound of potato salad on the smack of greasy lips
To the darkest hour in the loneliest corner of the coldest

House in winter
How it goes from too many shots to drive home to

too many shots, never to return home
I don't remember which one did it for me

But I woke up and the party was over
And I was yelling, "Shut my goddamn door"

ON THE LINE WITH MY THERAPIST

i pricked my finger on a phone and it bled into the receiver
survival

i hung upside down from a tree and told her, a woman as
brown as i, the world was alright i was making a way

a squirrel running on the ceiling of rose-cracked concrete
my soul radiated with the magnesium of okra

the moon poured his shadow over the wounds of my heart
and i jumped from water to land in order to suffocate

that i might appreciate the bleak privilege of breathing
in a polluted ocean

the magic of the ancestors pounding nails into my eyes
leaves no feeling of pain and

when i cry it's duty so our country doesn't fall into drought
some kind of witch-craft must keep me alive

because in truth, i'm not supposed to survive
she said, "very good talk soon"

i pulled myself upright and let my heart break over a full moon
and the world fell back to chaos

i drove my car slow blasting Kendrick Lamar flashing
candy paint and gold teeth at petty pedestrians

MY MOST USED JAY-Z LINE (WE DON'T BELIEVE YOU. YOU NEED MORE PEOPLE.)

IN THE POULTRY AISLE

Of a haughty supermarket

It's all free-

Range until

You discover the sky is

Only as far out of reach

As a cheap plane ride up

Hours spent making

Sense of good intentions

The ants you've annihilated

On the way to church and

Again tip-toeing

Down to the strip-club

ESPECIALLY AT WORK

Where worth is disinfected

On sulking 60-minute

Cycles clocked under fifteen

Dollars per hour

And here I stumble

Brooding in a perverse

Reality under the rare

Influence of *freeish* McCallan

At the company

Christmas party

I always end up paying for free

WHITE SPACE IN DIVERSITY

Splattered in covert statements

And white-guilt

Selling an American dream for

Clout, into grease-stained

Linoleum-floored

Houses reeking of

Gucci vs. false hope and broke

POLICE REFORM

For Dummies

In light of the world watching

OH HELL,

(We don't believe you.

You need more people.)

CONSERVATION

I'm used up to no end
Here I am, unending
Sourced from perpetual poverty
I've spent countless hours
Walking barefoot fingers through
Online home searches:
"For Expats in the Black Diaspora,
Ghana is a Real-Life Wakanda"
I'll still be here
Singing lullabies to the
Natural resource with
Dissociative Identity Disorder
In the middle of Baby Food
Aisle of a burned and looted
Drug store

FRANKLY

always bite the hand that feeds you
we are, very frankly to say, stirred by
spoon-fed information agitated by
the punctum

rolling pinned by privilege

mama said she ain't gonna take it

her mama said she ain't

gonna take it

cause her mama said

she ain't gonna take it

so here I am

ain't gon' take it

i was watching cnn on one of two tvs

in the newly renovated office kitchen

getting full from a never-ending

river of coffee

that flowed from a complicated

german coffee machine

(complicated german

machines make us feel more

american:

displayed on kitchen counters
parked in driveways)

my black body in america is a doorstep
that trips my mind, makes me hyper-
sensitive to the world's ills and forgetful too
i was following the story of a syrian girl
bone grossly to skin
we must act with urgency! urgency!

cause i ain't gon'
take that either

i brewed another cup of la colombe because
america deserves better coffee
i deserve better coffee, better pay
better whisky, better vacations, better brazilian
waxes, better lunch dates, better highs
for the price of the lows
is this what it sounds like when doves cry?

always bite the hand that cooks and
never feeds you
my brute woman hands wrap around white
ceramic shallow filled to the brim with

borrowed ancient and modern coffee
traditions of developing countries

i, very frankly to say,
forgot about the starving syrian girl
but when i think of her again i'll
remember to dream of running away
together to a land where we're both
better full and better wanted.

CONTROL (PERSPECTIVE FROM HAVANA)

what is
control?

grey smoke
from a vegueros, seduction
at noon, lips parted by
a sea of salvation
swim good
as in you have to be
always drunk with ninety
miles separation between
liberty and liberation

wanting to be and never
able to make a snow angel
without messin' all over the purity
of power
without dirtyin' the hell out of
an american master -
piece

i got this black suit on
roamin' around like i'm ready
for a funeral
an inherent dichotomy
keeps me aware of how
wrong
i've been wearing
the damn thing

bullet holes
and american eyes vibrate
over afro-cuban beats, the
dance of the morning
entangled with the
flex of '59
bullet holes don't get smaller
or less dangerous with time
wilder, even
after a cup of coffee

the taste of the sea
is more real standing
next to
stone barricades that protect me
from a violent crashing
that knows no limit
i turn away
from its power (i always feel
myself turning away)

i kick off my shoes take off this suit
and all that lies between
my soul
and always almost selling it
kills everything i knew
about turning
my back on 1600

MY BLACK FEMALE BODY

My black female body makes exceptions to many rules:
Misogyny gynophobia fire pain theft.
Formed of brick tears and muddy utterances,
My black female body creates new demanding language that hinges
On survival in the wake of death destruction detest and arrest of
Suffering flesh.
American-built black suffering flesh.
My black female body is hunted in the night,
But still, it rounds the sun each day.
A shadow preyed upon in bars, kissed under whisky lies,
Hands laid - prayed on in churches,
Mocked in the light of standards,
Underappreciated when penetrated, brain (power)
and pussy (power).
My black female body is an arbitrary love affair,
a guilty pleasure, a pastime.
Target practice.
A specter on a pale horse.
My magical black female body rests on an altar of exceptions and
Acceptances.
Offered up to a white man, I can't be sure he'll take it,
But he'd whisper in my broken ear how it belonged to him anyway.

Offered up to a black man, he'll reject it with a grand

Gesture

And come back to wake me from my sleep.

I like to observe my black female body under circumstance and
slaughter.

Blood under siege.

I don't like the taste of whisky 99 percent of the time,

My black female body dances steady under the fire of exceptions.

AIN'T NOBODY PRAYING FOR ME

is a woman ever ready? when the body stretches
and rounds itself right, perfectly so it tells her
no matter what self she fights to bring forefront
she's ready
Descartes who? this is a real mind-body problem

life took on a meaning all its own
i was entering into parenthood with a broken
black man
myself, a fixer-upper, broken but well-preserved
that kind of black woman
veiled behind a tripartite mask

hidden flaws and controlled impulses of rage
overwhelming belly aches with no one to comfort
me high expectations to be the comforter
to guard my man from a world that hates him...
a dark unarmed knight in tarnished garments
a savior in distress

...but how to when he returns to our home
and hates me *nah, uh* - not me but them
to him in that moment, i'm them not me
um, hum that's how it goes
shouldn't i now be ready?

with one on hip and a house in shambles
the aftershock of an earthquake rumbles

“where is dinner?” “where’s the thermometer?”
“where is...sleep?”

i’m entering motherhood again, this time my
own dreams are being swallowed by the stretch
of my body and the round of my stomach
lack of cohesion is more evident now
the only thing that adds up is the circumference

that keeps me from tying my own shoe
we grew by two and drifted further out into volatile
seas, stuck a broken black man anchored
down by too many things (life things, no-nevermind
things, black
man things) was called nigger on the job

the foreseen actions to follow were the air bombs that
catastrophically burnt the house to the ground
war, it’s everywhere outside and i can’t
protect him from the world *nah, uh*
battles within my own four walls

a mother’s failure *um, hum*
and what is my war? after every battle there’s
a series of rainstorms that pour down on me
a stream of babies’ cries and an ocean of aggression

in which i pray to drown
my tears can be heard, defeat sticks to the roof of my
mouth like melting tar on rubber and home
smells of black licorice

i dream of silence a rainbow to marvel
a unicorn to ride to the heavens high

the years have gone, scurried by like a leaf pushed
by a violent wind

is a woman ever ready? a crack in the sand follows
from the corner of my lip down to my chin but
i am not ashamed of my broken black man

or my own brokenness, broke-ness or my children's
breaking-to-come i can't lift the crack
that forms a detrimental frown
are they ashamed of me? where is happiness?
i say, it is at the very foundation of our home
in the pitter-patter of tiny

feet at grossly late hours of the night
in the tears we all cry at breakfast together
on saturday mornings and dinner alone after
everyone has been fed
a black woman's happiness is rooted in
her readiness

found at ground zero beneath the dust
of crumbling walls, found in the abyss of years
that have seemed to escape me

APPLES AND POTATOES (FOR VERA ESTELLE)

I didn't think about it much then
But I do now

The precision with which my
Grandmother could skin an

Apple or a potato
Such serene cool about her face

Not a line in the skin reminiscent
Of a frown yet, nothing in the eyes

Twinkled a smile
Her tiny fingers never slipped

Steady in their journey
She never wasted apple or potato

Only skinning what was necessary
Usually when I'm fumbling a knife around

An apple staring out into my backyard,
(My lack of rigor reminding me that

My hardships are nothing to hers),
I do think

About our lives as parallel
Or as derailed synonyms

As a little girl I didn't think about it much
But as a woman, I do now wonder

What my grandmother was thinking about
When she skinned with such precision

CHRIS BROWN ON ROTATION

At some hour in everyday
I type Chris Brown into a
white search bar
white space
between first name and last.
“Artist” or “radio”
or “playlist” returns precisely
what I want because I am a
woman, flawed and accepting
and I am surrounded by
unrefined statues in varying shades
of black and brown with penises
that hang so low, it causes them vocal
cord dysfunction.
I do the speaking
and not one ever moves to verbal
expression, tears dried long ago
under a burnt out sun,
stone-hands positioned as such:
middle fingers to the law
the others gripping their balls.
My heart is always
delayed by this rough terrain.
I hit play because I want something,
something that I can feel
I have to believe Chris Brown loves
something, a mystical nightingale
on the ledge of my right brain

a muse to the moon that walks a
bottomless ocean floor,

the white space in silence,
tattooed on sound waves.

I have to believe my brother, my father
my husband, my son, my cousin,

my uncle, my grandfather love
something, too.

To be sure, I type Chris Brown
into a white search bar

first name white space last
and hit play.

SELF-PORTRAIT OF A SHADOW BOXER

A glimpse of an image
In a shower-steamed mirror
Scared the life clean out of me
I'd never seen eyes
So ripe with execration
A shadow - hard
At the core of nothingness
Dead mineral on its fade
To black

A disproportionate glob
Of invisibility starving
For a touch of winter
A leech for liberty
Stretched at length
For showmanship
Contracted into death for
Marvel

A singular object made to
Do many things
Many things
Many, many, many, many

Things

Made to have nothing

to show of doing

A crumb pecked in

A pigeon's beak

His beady eyes

throw shade

I itch all over

I am Corduroy in August

A disproportionate glob

Of invisibility starving

For a taste of the good-est hair

And the bluest eyes

If for nothing more than

To get many things

Many, many, many, many

Things

To have everything to show

Of doing nothing

A shadow - dusty and torn

At the center of triviality

A backdrop to privilege

The heel in a loaf of bread

A BAD RELIGION

Serene was a word you could put to Brooklyn like a
tropical storm a wholesome women's
magazine 5th Ave The Big Apple
New York too much to see I live among strangers
I could lose myself catch light as if it were a magic
carpet the stream of humanity pouring down
the tunnel the mothership can't save the destruction
a whole city gets burned I suppose it takes at
least one hour to lose time so I begin counting the seconds
give me time and I'll get out I am a strong dog
I was born underwater

A young man rises from his place fine neat clean
a bronzed man one of the toughest guys I had ever
hoped to meet I had been smiling
inadvertently at him trying to control my anxiety and
imagination he opened the window summertime
that grin was the devil we shook hands no less casual
losing language, losing words oh what a day
what a day what a day

I'd always get into his bed with underwear on I thought
about how when you don't want to do a thing your body
will try to trick you into doing it but I had to admit it was
comfortable quiet and that's when Sunshine Woman
started to whisper *see yourself through his eyes*
with his basic life philosophy naked body in bed
train yourself not to look back do not believe in God
become what you must

I felt more love from him than ever from
anyone he was a smiling man the kindest
and funniest amid glasses clinking fire and water
bare feet on his green carpet those were our
scrawny years three dollars and six dimes
blue sky and clouds moving like a rolling stone
I realized he doesn't mean anything to me the
world keeps turning

I spent the hour staring at a large wall clock
the smell of coffee and the way it was hot...
it's the sweetest thing there is it was wonderful
to know that you could have something worth
more than money my money's gone
a weird sensation darted through my body (I'm
feeling high) from him I learn to shape
my gestures my cypher keeps distance from a man
without religion my self-murder would not be
an act of rage and despair but only of despair not
quite worth despair I think I need peace and
blessings goddamnit I'mma sing my song 'til the
vultures swarm

the only thing to do was patiently wait by the light
of dawn the single candle illuminating us then
burn everything to cinder nothing at all
knowledge provoked manic optimism and with the
bittersweet taste of goodbye mingling with my inveterate
bad breath I wished I remembered every word
we said to each other the peacefulest words
drowned clean seem colder the world keeps burning

EGO HIGH (AFTER NIKKI GIOVANNI)

I am agile
I was born in a world
that don't bend to my bow
still I run a million miles
a day

The ground
'neath me tongue
kisses dirt from
my toes
I designed the playlist
that keeps us moving
I am the maestro

“Alexa, play
Tevin Campbell
Round and Round
on repeat for 24 hours”
I am sharp AF

I sat on my stoop
drinking summer's sun
with the devil
I choked and sent an
interglacial period
to earth
I laughed two moods into
a ring: (1) black and proud
(2) proud and black
I am the Arabica bean

sundried on a
plantation
a hot dark rarity
hidden on an island
I am bad AF

I am magic...I am ginger in
honey lemon tea
I am mystery
I am soul...I'ma vibe
I'm ego high AF

STAND UP AND TWERK

It's nothing I'd ever
Do on command

Let's be real - my ass doesn't
Do those type tricks

But sometimes I like to play
The part in a mosh of

Broken backs and unhinged knees
On off and in-between

The slayed beat
Pointing out the bounce

With my blood-stained sistahs
Tongues lathered with adrenaline

Pledging allegiance to
The body

Indivisible under God
Full-figured porcelain

Taken down from an uncleaned
Shelf from which it stands

Made alive and unified
One nation under a groove

One hand on a circling hip
The other on crowd control

Just for the hell of it
It's *always* for the hell of it

This fool with the taper fade
Haircut had the nerve

To demand it of me thrice
“Stand up and twerk,” he said

Again.
Then again.

As if my tapered ankle jumpsuit
Had anything to do with

How good my ass likely looked
In a twerk session

How would he know
I was sitting on it

Dangling my ankle
Under a dance republic

A perfect ankle waiting to
Be kissed goodnight

At the least walked to the bar
With liberty

But he never saw the good in it
After I stung him

With the whole of my heart
And a piece of my mind

He responded
With a careless silence

As if the soft brown of my eyes
Against the hard of my skin

And the pink of my lips
Against the filth of my words

Demanded I stand and
Pledge allegiance to his tapered

Authority blowing fallacies
Through the air

I had planned to twerk
That night

To finesse my way out
Of shelved constrictions

But his words
Held my ass like superglue

What a waste of a
Full-moon night and vodka

A BLACK MAN'S LAUGH

There are very few things
I'd take when I go

But if I could I'd Ziploc
store a black man's laugh

Like auntie's apple pie
Or mama's fried chicken

I'd bag it up for later
Take it with the part of me

That'll ascend to another life
Open it every now and then

To savor the taste of
one of the most delectable treats

A genuine burst of laughter
rubato rhythms

Breaking through inescapable
sorrow

TWENTY U.S. POSTMASTER GENERAL APPROVED TUPAC STAMPS

Image 1: Tupac

with a Gumby haircut leaning against a locker in a New York City school hallway.

Image 2:
Tupac

wearing wire-rimmed glasses dangling his combat boots from the moon.

Image 3: Tupac

holding *The Starry Night*.

Image 4: Tupac

sitting at a desk writing "Starry Night."

Image 5: Tupac

mid-stride holding his shirt above his chest - Thug Life blinding petty cameras.

Image 6: Tupac

blissfully sleeping on a starry night.

Image 7: Tupac

gripping bountiful bouquets of sunflowers.

Image 8: A rose

with a diamond piercing through its middle, situated in the crack of a concrete sidewalk.

Image 9: Tupac

sitting on top of a satellite image of Earth - knees pulled to his chest teardrops falling from his eyes.

Image 10:		Tupac
standing alone in a desolate Los Angeles street eating summer rain.		
Image 11:	<i>All Eyez on Me</i> album cover.	
Image 12:		Tupac
lending Lady Liberty his wire-rimmed glasses.		
Image 13:		Tupac
wearing a king's crown riding a camel into a black sand desert.		
Image 14:		A black
panther		
feeding in a vegetable garden.		Tupac
Image 15:	<i>Mad Max</i>	Tupac.
Image 16:		Tupac
as a mailman.		
Image 17:		Tupac
being photographed in 1993 for what would become Rolling Stone's October 31, 1996 cover.		
Image 18:		A young Tupac
with a mini-afro pointing to the camera with a megawatt smile.		
Image 19:		Tupac
with his face pointed away from the camera - his middle finger greets the lens shielding his profile from the world.		

Image 20

(as per Nikki Giovanni's 1999 request):

A thoughtful
Tupac

accompanied by the words C U in Heaven.

FOR VAN JONES

that night Van Jones shed the Mississippi from one eye
and the Arkansas from the other

the tumultuous currents met at the nose
and what emptied from the mouth was an arousing

deliverance from an evil, a dangerous nisis it is to swim
a black man's tears

an untraversed tunnel into a gifted consciousness
of disturbia disregarded and abandoned

a moonlit centerpiece at a table of despair
bleach at the bottom of a blood basin

JOG (FOR AHMAUD ARBERY)

do you feel safe black
man? move your feet under the
guise of summer's sun

NICE FOR WHAT

I have a fistful of soiled garments
and a pocket full of dirty dollars

I still can't afford a water with lemon
But the vodka tonics flow all night

The moon tells me to put it all on
The table

Drunk hand meet virgin hand
Shake on it and promise to wash off

The day's blood
'Cause girl you be killin' em

Slayed it
The cool off routine is simple:

Collect a dune of sand
Eat it

Digest it
Keep it

Flip on my head full of corroded
wheels and eroded words

And pull shards from my palm
Feel the sand move from my feet

Down through my malnourished gut
Open my parched lips and watch dirty

Particles of an empty shore blow in
Slow motion, then

Get my motha'fuckin' roll on
Let loose

Cut up and chase the sun down
Broadway or is it Broad Street

I'm everywhere
and nowhere at all

I have a cigarette with the moon and
Wine with my drunk hand

whine with my virgin hand
act out and dutty wine

at an unoccupied red light
All in protest of baring it all

I have the same breakdown every morning
In the middle of whatever way-street I stand:

Said you'd be there for me...

Then pretend that you can't stay...

Tell me who I have to be...

To gain some reciprocity...

AN OPEN LETTER FROM A GIRL NAMED DEAD

An open letter to anyone who will listen:

I'm always told, "We want to hear your detailed thoughts on the multiple sex-misconduct allegations"

but every time I do respond to the current wave
I get the sense that nobody is listening

My name is Dead to the corporate culture that tries not to be anywhere between their culture and commitment or

sexual misconduct. First off, know that I prefer a window seat toward the wall of misconduct in America, which I really

shouldn't have to do since some people are obviously shoving everything under the seat (you know who you are) stand up

But I feel like you're not listening to me so...
lower my expectations for meaningful change, specifically

You guys all seem reasonably familiar with the world
It's impossible to think about the U.S. outlook on core values without

noting a blind eye to behavior
seems like a good place to start. This is in no particular order

but the landscape is: rape is to stay
I hope it doesn't though because I have nowhere to put my feelings

What's taking the rest of you so long? And while I appreciate the offer
I'd prefer not to dial an 800 number.

HYPERVERSIBLE DISGUISE (FOR TROY MICHIE)

Yesterday I left a vigorous
abstraction of time
on the N train
I cut a lock of good hair day
and glued it under my seat
for the sake of never
having to chase city
minutes turned
metal-rusted snowflakes...

...though I did pursue
bawling yarn down 5th Ave
as it picked up torn
pages from a magazine
that resembled my face
sewn together with
quiet violence

How much would it pain
an artist to add stitching
to my dismal canvas -
running circles in a gallery
- and put back together this
scrawny skeleton stretching
across borders of time
ocean and being

I found the tiniest
patchwork of my soul
blurred with American
standards in a
Troy Michie statement
freeing myself
from limitations

WALK TO BROOKLYN!

You have to walk to Brooklyn.
Not in a Puff Daddy power-trip
demand for cheesecake kind of
way. Although it's beautiful, they
say - that kind of power-trip, the
height, the journey. The East
River grabs at your toes,
protected by

space

time

and the splintered boards of an
American icon. At the pinnacle of
darkness the zenith of early
morning, the sleepy bridge
stretches its empty arms from
borough to borough. It's then I
realize that I'm tired, too. Dead
on my feet caught

in

the

middle

of a 19th century cab-less habitat,
stuck in a tortuous nirvana. A
shadow standing on an elevated
portion of America's

crust,

capped with unfiltered views. I
wore the wrong shoes for such
intensity so I plant myself against
a backdrop of vandalism. The
carnage I sit on engulfs my lungs
with an oppressive burning that
restricts breathing.

In an attempted act of pulling a
higher self from smoke clouds, I
become grainy street

photography that will later be sold as #hashtag something like “black plight.”

WHAT WRITER'S BLOCK READS LIKE (PART II)

i thought about writing
a silly poem today
and yesterday
and all summer '20
my good use of english
escaped me
i washed and blow-dried
my nappy hair
that's as far as i got

i thought about writing
a facebook post
that didn't include
the words
f*ck, hate, ~~tr*mp~~
burn, america, jaded
i drank a bottle of wine
that's as far as i got
i've been meaning to
hug my mama
forgive my dad and
make a summer quilt
i guess if i knew how

i skipped stones
across a river
of lazy language
and watched

persecution ripple
waves across the
bodies of my people

i had a dream
about colin kaepernick
i can't be sure
maybe it was
langston hughes
my eyes were open but
i was drunk
nina simone was ripping
my ears out
my brain caught fire
and shut down
i thought i had
a bad case
of writer's block

that misconstrued
thought was poignant
and sobering

AN AMERICAN SCENE

Billie starts in Philly and Nina leaves from Tryon, North Carolina
both agree to meet somewhere in New York but first Billie, on

behalf of Eunice Waymon, struts up and through Rittenhouse
Square and points red lips to an open window - where arpeggios

wrestle dizzy fingers - and shouts a million cigarettes from her
breath before she graffiti's her voice big and bold to the southeast

corner of the Curtis Institute saying, "Thank you for killing
Eunice." A mourning dove lost among chestnuts in blossom

of a Paris spring, a youngly-faced sistah maneuvering a foreign
identity, Nina embraces Billie at the knees - as the sky opens neon

pink in Harlem - and begs their people be set free. An appetite for life
a starvation of desire and a carousel of dead whirlwind a dying

city that is country. On a soulless train to my future, fragile fingers
pluck blood stained fruit from trees.

AMERICAN HOME

The burning of clove and
Cinnamon extract
Exonerates a nation
With every breath
We feel cozy
Warm and protected

Tonight
We burn wax
To shield a
Despicable stench
And hide
Our eyes into
A descent
Into a desolate
Waste land

Roses bred from
Torn pages of
Roots
Quiet imperfections
Catch fire
Nothing to taste

Burning guilt
and lies go aflame
With blood splattered
Paint brushes
The only way to

Depict a
Nation's gross negligence

Lilacs over the
Dead
Offer no peace
Nothing to hear

Siberian pine needle
Patchouli oil,
Lavender
And mint
Smearred on
American
Heads
Russian Leather
Blows along the shore
Of livelihood

Children in cages
This is who we are
Manipulated reasoning
Febreze'd with
counterfeit images of
protection

Tonight Black
Bodies are
Put on display
In a demonstration of
Anti-compliance laws

The blame
Will always be place
On the dead

Cozy corner
Fresh linen
American home
Ancient Roman memories
Melt into the cruelest
Summer heat

HANG MY BODY

Tie papier-mâché bullets
Of abhorrence
Around my neck
Hang my body
On a tree as
Tall and scintillating
As Rockefeller's
My life deserves climax
And ceremonious foot-traffic
I am American tradition

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Vita

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