

2006

Everyday Zulu

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EVERYDAY ZULU

POEMS BY LILLIAN BERTRAM

Everyday Zulu

Thickit

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Acknowledgements

“Thickit” *Oakland Review (2006)*

“Chiropractical” *Georgetown Review (2007)*

Thickit

-after Cornelius Eady

This is how it really feels
inside the heart's black egg:
a bed dampened with spirits
& the cat clawing the bedpost by default.
Outside a car idles into curved emptiness,
I time wet footsteps returning
to someone else's locked door.

It was you I didn't halfly hear
through the window to the porch,
siphoning a cigarette of streetlight.

I know a slick trick to make a home
an open house.

What would you say if I knew you
were at the bar till the moon fell,
lost in deep crates & salted booths?

What if inside these walls
were lovers masking up for a robbery,
if inside or out,
you knew what I was mixed up in?



In the Flooded Garden

I. Untitled Communiqué

We bite our lips
into a mustard,

stretch skin into a projection,
a projectile, declare public art,

we paint over our exported jazz,
dump tar into the rented marina.

Our eyes howl in search
of other eyes, thirsty for skylight

& in our chairs we rock,
so presidential.

We've let our mothers be murdered
then pocketed their bloodwarmed pearls.

Now, we are in so much danger.

We fold our notes to the size
of postage stamps. Swallow hard.

II. *At the Dinner Table*

Like dying presidents we scowl.

We enter one another
like a priest to his cassock;

like fingers on a mission
for the right exposure.

A wild rove slides into
the bed between our legs,

at its touch we throw down
the gauntlets of China's,
of Russia's, of Spain's red side.

The Bonnot's and Bookchin's
pile at our feet, the tomes we choose

to stand on, the runes we count
& name our constellations by.

There are more in his sky
than in mine,

& in the kiln of our minds
our two black faces do not sew

a black flag, nor a country worth
the song that catches our scream.

III. *Untitled Communiqué*

In this world, when a woman breaks
with the code of a woman

by sending weevils to work
within the womb,

she places beside her on a cracked saucer
a small empty teacup smudged by lips,

thin rim threaded with gold.
The space inside the cup

becomes a crooked bird,
a crow with wings of a chickadee.

*her mind is a pink meshbag
filled with baby toes.*

Pink meshbag of god flunky
is a woman's parish of fire on fire.

*

In this world, that is to say,
in the world of un-oaths

& re-seeing, the un-woman
can re-woman

as a matter of facts,
of putting a bone to boil.

To call on a new moon
means casting out the rot.

IV. *Make*

She is undressing like a shadow
in the front bay window.

First, a thunderous trombone
undoes the skin

into a jacob's ladder
aglow with sweat.

She strips off the muscle sinew
stringing it through her teeth;

dangling staccato drip
& pluck of harp juice.

Bone by bone she stacks
up a little house,

a tiny cabin for the cold,
scoops up one, then another

thick purple lip, a pair that mouth
here, this is the living room.

V. Retreat

Winchester chested, taken
from above the cabin fireplace,

we shoot into the floating
leaves on the pond,

then dirt dances beneath
the flourishing ferns.

We don't mess with the wasps
or deer, just practice opening

our ears to the boom.

*

On the block, a cigarette
dangles from a lip for effect,

Timberland stomps by,
blooms between city firefights.

The lovers recoil
at the battery of this touch,

become dark oils in the windows
& beneath tire-crushed leaves,

become bodies smoked
in & out of hiding.

Loads of perennials
from the hillside swirl

down the storm drains.

VI. *Reconstruction*

Windows slightly cranked
let in the tar & blunt scented

breeze of the beltway. I make
the bed the way he likes

to have it waiting:
sheet rumpled and out of breath.

With pillows surrendering
beneath sheet, it can look

too much like a dead body.

Facing cinched Venetians
I perfume my private parts,

see through the slats
the tip of the top of Congress.

The newly enacted laws
are the same as all the old ones,

the one who waits is the first to go,

& my unspeakable somethings
wait in shift beneath the dome.

*

Cooling unit coolant smudging
against legs, post-midnight,

post-tapas bar, blinds opened on us,
in full view of homebums,

of whirling rooftop ventilators.

One gray sheet, jersey soft,
rolls around us, we roll

the bed around the one room,

one room filled with Capitol halo,
refracting, vanishing as the bed pirouettes

away from E street and towards F.

*

Beside steady breath I lie awake
in queen sized makeshift darkness.

Congress too, is lying awake, legislating
knees together, breaking a sweat

over our breakfast of waffles with wine.



Miles and I

The I in This does not know
what Nina Simone looked like, never seen a picture
but thinks she sounds not Blue, but pretty sad.

The I in This only knows of Baraka's tongued-up
impression of Miles's *papastoppa voice*
so The I thinks *he must have made for an awful singer.*

When I was twelve Ma took me&bro to Shirley Chisolm's house
during her spring closet cleaning and I didn't give a shit about how kept up
the garden was, but was pissed off that she gave the stereo
with all the light up buttons
to my brother

& I think all I got was a tackyass wooden wall clock.

Then again, that clock was likely my own impulsive
flea market purchase from the year I did vintage,
remembering it this way is from a need to unmake my fault in that décor,
as The I didn't really get anything from Shirley's house, just complained
about being up so early on a Saturday until Ma took us back home.

I do remember she had a whole lot of records in there,
probably Miles too, but what's a record to a twelve-year old
if not another *don't touch* album sleeve where black men
all look alike especially, with a trumpet in their hands.

(did Miles play a trumpet?)

—and what's a Chisolm '72 button

if not to be pinned on for *Flashback Day* at the high-school
where someone came dressed as Miles and This I didn't
recognize him even though they say
he stood next to me in the line for cheeseburgers.

Africa needs us

Africa needs us. Muhammed saying this,
beads of other worldly abacus
singing through his fingers.
I steal looks: he's cross legged,
spirits beckoning.

He says it again: *Africa needs us.*
This time it is walking on an ice-pick;
like flipping through a *Women of Soweto* picture-book
while slinking out of my mother's eyeshot.

Back to empty blue enchanted land,
great Nile-side real estate;
dollar cabs and jitneys between shanties
& for the choir's lost child
repertoire: courtesy citizenship.

You can get there, and they'll take anything he says.
Even send our retired textbooks
with Africa written out out-right
and they'll give you a ticket to fly along.

My lips clamshell my mother's Africa trip,
a truth & beauty fact finding tour some ten years ago,
bus trips through Egypt & east Africa, though all of this
does not compare to being scared shitless about her
going so far on an airplane.

The singular vision left in my mind is of the sun hat
she bought especially for this journey: wide brimmed
flopping straw still-life masterpiece
billowing like a lift off

& the cool of her bedspread on the back of my legs,
purple flowers winking up at me as I pulled at the tips
of my braids, braids that would have to be
left to my father's hands.

Upon return, of course there were papyrus samples,
kente cloth, cartouches; pictures of camels,
sand, & scarabs. All these, I must have flipped through.

Most in focus is the photograph of her stabbed by the sun,
wearing her souvenir of sad looks, cradling fistfuls
of leaky facts, her head wrapped in shrouds of shadows,
of antishadows, the hat having been lost on a tour
through a tomb, having been misplaced in some pyramid.

Chiropractical

It was the month of July and I couldn't be
Japanese enough: lifting weights only made
me thicker. I was seen hijacking a bus, but the
office ladies vouched for my alibi: on the phone
with Tech Support. Faux: I was at the bookstore
giving a radio interview about gentrification,
fielding questions like Kournikova
until they asked me where I was born and raised,
the question to which I have never concocted the
suitable enough answer and blurt out *Parkside*.
One lone goldfish shimmers by and swaps
my khoofi for a surfer hat. Truthfully: it's a
reasonable guess that this poem ends with me
on a concrete bench outside the admin. building
at the Big U, watching pre-college ponies in ruffled
skirts prancing by with gumball tears in their eyes.
I might even have a Dean Young book in my lap,
and be wearing Terminator sunglasses or
Michael Jackson's one glove.

Study in D.C. Stoop Sitting

all men look at least once, black men two
or three times.

(thirty-five-and-up with orbital afros usually
double back,)

only the khaki'd blond who knows he is
second fiddle

to the third string in some low rent capitol
orchestra says *hello*.

Assed Out

I know you know how to play dress up.
You wear the pink feathered Mardi Gras mask,
and I'll wear the long nails. I choke on noodle soup
while sitting down by the river & you get sun spots from
the ballpark lights. When you ask me to imagine
what it was like before there were buildings, I tell you
I see the beginnings of buildings. I am accused
of being too imaginative and a little bit colonial.
When making love to one another, you think
of your beneficiary & I think of mine.
I am jealous because yours is wealthier.
You are jealous because mine is black. When you
make love to your beneficiary, you think only of her.
I make love to mine & think only of the cat hair
on my futon slipcover. Every time you make a decision,
someone somewhere drops a pocket. Every time
you try to make me decide, dents appear in all
the cans in the grocery store. Every time I write,
I write a voice about a voice. When you run
down the sidewalk chasing your dogs chasing
someone else's dogs and your pants fall down
this voice yells: *ass all out! ass all out!*



#191

the last bloodless coup might have been when the cat came
to live at my house, and gift giving gained a new impossibility.

crouched in this toyota staring up at the unattended light
of a television in a window that sleuthing says must be yours —disgust
is in the air—and between the two of us—the time it takes to walk
back from having a corona with another woman. building letterhead
reads: *Casa de los Santos*. your new house houses the saintly.

few beings dissipate like this: into longing, hatred, a foreign word
for irreparable loss. the open veins of tattered countries and smoldering
truce dinners are being welcomed in to storage.

one loss deserves another: we are done vying for supremacy.
no scouring the parking lot in search of small stones. saints
need no polishing nor reasons to revel in the cold face that sits
bumper to bumper with vacancy.

#190

the rolling wheel of madness only gave us heaviness
on the mind like an old poet or a garlic spill. all praises of oaths
and words in confidence aside,
here is a rude domino player: this is your driveway, your table,
and the chips dance to your fist like a crew of cats in a bathtub.

these run-in's at the grocery store (for even those forced underground
still need to eat) are begging for new character assassinations
and angry trips to the nearby bar. this kind of warfare, trench digging
on a balance beam, is in the market for a printable name.

doves quit transporting messages across these lines
and the bottles pile up in a cool heap next to spent branches
of cure-all and foolish reconnaissance missions. still, we
go on for longer feasting on vacancy at overturned tables,
mismatching dotted pairs with our battered and blinking eyes.

#192

calling at the place where you were has been made ridiculous
by poets with third wives and forever beautiful children. by the end
of this story, hanging on has become terrible.

at the place where voices were left hanging in the air no one
was watching when we became plain-clothed, no more lovers
or thinkers swapping eyes and ears in the face of disaster.

to let us leave mountains alone, and turn aside are breaths pending
in birth, waiting to be fed, take their place among so many leaky doubts.

everything here has died and someone has come kicking up the dust, looking
for treasures, for foreign histories. story writer – in this world drunkenness
and beauty increase in tandem and now there might be wolves in this territory.
peddle your jars and stone polish at some other port.

#193

suckling for air, a plant is our love affair in permanent ill health—struggling to be kept alive in the eyes of a cat that nibbles away at it each day.

such an uneasy sensation to wind together all this common history, bathe it in the same water, and shoot it full of holes. bones rolling around in this bag we take out back to bury, murmur over, mark the spot with stones just in case—yet—the idea of return is a little too provincial, the way it always tends to be when confronting the startled heaves, sternums lurching forward through the skin.

here is our unfinished trestle that genealogy never grew or climbed around, an imminence never inspired. in the simplest of terms we have been killed—slaughtered in the slaughter.

we put it in the wash and out came a song, a fear of death, gaps in the skin. if all things succumb—then a creaky dock will always attract vultures to what ever we have left and are so unable to protect: these fallen apples in the hands of castaways.

#194

books are done abusing their dust. the space between them is sifting
somewhere slightly beneath paradise—and in the window box—
the fragrance is startling.

something inexplicable has been left to the birds: an armistice in the space
where names used to be. we are dismantling the podiums. crystal balls
return to their cabinets, and knives from under the pillows to under the beds
or to places where they cannot be nearly as important as what they remind.

tucking away the gunpowder on our lips to disarm the revolver of our
words, we sow our chests with seeds of departure as the marathon poet
arrives—twenty six miles late to die with the news of love in his hands
that some kinds of knowing are exercises in cleaning up.

#195

so we are flying (yes, always flying) towards a motherhood that is
no longer such a perfect idea.

oblivion is nesting on our skins today, the same place where african violets
and rock gardens on your birthday are forgetting how to speak to us.

the one thing that was wanted cannot be trained for: a flag
waving frantically—the full length of our tongues stretched
across years, the space in the very back that has learned to stab.

so who was it then, if we are among the lost—found retracing the stitches—
if not some secret part that hates to inhabit this space between skin and here?
did we know it was already there when we arrived: a new speak
that has words we cannot wrap our words around.



EVERYDAY ZULU PHRASEBOOK

-found text from "Everyday Zulu, a vocabulary and reference book"

I.

Hello, Miss.	Sawubona, Nkosazane.
What is your name?	Ubani igama lakho?
I am John.	NginguJohn.
I live in Natal.	Ngihlala eNatali.
Where do you come from?	Uvela kaphi?
I must go now.	Sekofanele ngihambe manje.
Wait a minute.	Yima kancane.
I must go now.	Sekofanele ngihambe manje.
What is your name?	Ubani igama lakho?

II.

a storm	isiphepho
clouds	amafu
drizzle	khiza
it is thundering	izulu liyadoma
heavy rain	ozamcolo
windy	nomoya
there is lightning	izulu liyabanika
the sun has set	ilanga selishanile

III.

Hello, Miss.	Sawubona, Nkosazane.
How are you?	Unjani?
Are you very busy?	Uxakeke kakhulu?
I shall not keep you long.	Angizukukubambezela.
I enjoy music.	Ngiyawuthokozela umculo.
National anthem	iculo lesizwe
Love songs	iculo lothando
Folksong	umculo wendabuko
Gospel music	umculo wokholo
Hymn	iculo
Wedding march	imashi yomshado
Jazz	ijezi
Latest hits	izingoma ezintsha
What do you say?	Utheni?
Yes.	Yebo.

Truly!
Wait for me.
Let's go.

Ngempela!
Ngilinde.
Masihambe.

IV.

a lion roars
feed the fowls
fierce bull
flock of sheep
hens lay eggs
herd of cattle
kill the snake
make biltong
shear the sheep
slaughter the ox
spray the flies

ibhubesi liyabhodla
yipha izinkukhu
inkunzi enolaka
umhlambi wezimvu
izikhukhukazi zibekela amaqanda
umhlambi wezinkomo
bulala inyoka
enza umqwayiba
gunda izimvu
hlaba inkabi
futha izimpukane

V.

helmet
blue eyes
cheek
mustache
beard
white face
mask
ten fingers
fist
cloudburst
trapped
flying squad
take cover
scream
explode
dagga
I wish...
dizzy

ihelmethi
ikhala elikhulu
isihlathi
udevu
intshebe
ubuso obumhlaphe
imaski
iminwe elishumi
isibhakela
isihlambi
bhajwa
iflayingi-skwadi
casha
klabalasa
qhuma
insango
Ngifisa
nenzululwane

VI.

Excuse me.
He isn't here.
I don't know.
I will tell him.
I don't know.

Uxulo.
Akekho lapha.
Angazi.
Ngizomtshela.
Angazi.

It's not my fault.
No.
Please.
Please.
You must.

Akusilo iphuthalami.
Qha.
Ake.
Ake.
Kufanele.

VII.

black tea
blonde hair
brown bread
green uniform
grey sky
red bus
white face
white shirt
white bread
Roses are red.
The sky is blue.

itye elimnyama
izinwele ezimhloshana
isinkwa esinsundu
iyunifomo eluhlaza
isibhakabhaka esinsundu
ibhesi elimbumvu
ubuso obumhlophe
iyembe elimhlophe
isinkwa esimhlophe
Amarozisi abomvu.
Isibhakabhaka sisumi.

Paging Dr. Zeus

There are no men in here today,
save the one who saves,

who is manning the machine,
the *crank-crank-suck-suck*.

After cleaning house this unwondrous magus
plunges his speckled gauzes into

the dirty water buckets,
flings them out the door

on the stroke of midnight, making a new
new years day.

All the mops in this mans hands
can dance without a spell,

in each cheek he can fit
a bakers dozen of cherries.

Less than five minutes for each
go-round, *crank-crank-suck-suck*,

in a days work, the work of
a moment, of a million moments, is undone.

There are no men in here because there can be
no man in here, save the one who saves

all other men, his turpentine tools
can scrape a canvas cleaner

than white. So white it's crimson.

Knock Knock

My sternum is made of knock knock your tapping index finger
makes me sound made of wood, made of Hobbitowne, USA.
You came knocking at the holy land and were left in the fisheye air.
Don't knock knock my wishbone, or survey these surroundings.
I do disco, but not after discourse. If there is no town, there can be no
town bank robbery. I put my cellarbone to the tracks. Knock Knock.
High Noon. Nothing's been delivered yet.

Bohr takes the El

liquid, solid, then back to a liquid,
the oscillating fluid jet injected in direct symmetry
to the pumping organ equals the intensity of the nod, entropy
of the face facedown in the cheeseburger in proportion
to the quality of the Stuff, the liquid theory of junk droplets
in blood gas, mixing a nucleus pupiled with (),
planetary model of heaven, radii continuum of gram joy clouds,
orbiting a heart of all gears but no longer an agent of purpose.

8 things to see in Dee Cee

- 1) *that shiny dome
before it gets blown*
- 2) weight limit
on Q street
- 3) whirlygigged
firetrucks
- 4) a man dressed
as a woman
playing
the recorder
- 5) BlackHappyAfros
- 6) Adam's
Morgan's
Parkingscapades
- 7) melting
sno-cone
on capitol
sidewalk
- 8) National
Association
Of
Counties

Apropos, Queens

Slugging across the rivers elevated trestles,
steely boxes of steel cars leave
Manhattan fifty minutes behind us now,
the city's barreled heat watering our eyes
as we knock the bottles
on the corner bar's corner,
fuming on fumes, torn on drunk need,
I said *I'll cut you*,
no one believed I would do it, so I didn't.

Against one another we push, shout, then kiss—
pass the bottle back & forth until
we are shoved on our way again,
gnawing P.M grit
from beneath our fingernails,
as we stand under a tenement moon,
on the other side of breath fogged glass
over a pizza spread before us,
crated by falling rain unraveling the rows—

We hold our hands knowing they are the only
hands we have to hold, so we pick something
out together in the neon counters
of mafia parlors,
where one of us is chickenshit
& it's not me;
a hoop here, hoop there—
emerging swollen
in Times Square as the light
of day swims through the haze, a granite kiss
beneath the infinitesimal ticker,
lets pick a winner this time,

while we squat & squabble, waiting on the next A,
the 6:42 A.M. through to Jamaica, Far Rockaway
Rockaway Beach—

dreaming up a cup of coffee through shoulders
pressed to our faces, to the last stop
where the pickers & brick layers are gulled
on the corner,
as our unlovely shoes collect shards on the overgrown
concourse, a sun could rise between our clasped hands,

quarterless & bottomed out, but with two
& a half inches of hawk ready to fly from our back pockets,
ready to curse at the last gaunt mile.

Apropos, LeRoi Jones

This is how we know each other.
You went to PS 54.
Drank pints of soured milk at recess, it made you strong.
We carpooled. You rode up front with my mother
in the '78 luxu Olds, fingers drumming wood grain, thighs to cherry red
leather, snapping chromed out radio buttons, ogling the flipping number
clock. We sang along to WBLK, slapped hands to Ms. Mary Mack.

I heard you went on to work a desk where every time you answered
the phone you couldn't help but laugh and yawn—
where you said the word *information* so many times over
it became *in for a nation*, then *affirmation*—

Then you juggled names, first The Noble Savage, Night & Death,
El Matador, Blessed Prince—
and my mother said she thought you were crazy, bug eyed & bugged out
on your secret passport to the lyric stash-house,
where you broke it, shaved it, thought it without thinking it,
and passed along a song for the long nightmare's dashing flight,
but the nightmare flight woke into another nightmare world singing
a rhythmic something sick and sad.

Because I want to tell to the truth I will say
that I am inventing you, a truth I like, like
a vapor between the leaves of a book seen in a storefront window
in a neighborhood where there should be no bookstore.

But I never knew you, not unless you were like a brother
who came sneaking back some bitter November night,
back from another country and defying the dial,
holding a new fashion for a foreigned family,
not unless on air and on record you've come back to
hold us, remember memory, to hold us through
the broken wheel,
its cooked up logic, the great empire and its great fall—

So hold us. Hold us through all the do-whop
and all the diddy-bop,
hold us until we meet again, a first time, for real this time,
all dressed in black/silver buttons all down your back
over your axe music, as you rematerialize, taking the triads three by three
bringing down a canary in one fist and a boom in the other.



What a strange spring

that began with a rainbow then rained out,
and everything went badly from there.

A mother visits her son away at school and finds herself strangely relaxed when she is pinned under a car at an outdoor vegetable stall on a Saturday morning, and she is timeless with the question no one asks. Another woman successfully unbolts the mind of another writer who rents a room at the hospital on the hill, the pages lumped and stuck like a fist in his throat; and in the back of a girl's mouth her teeth of sage come punching through like arctic ice seals and she bleeds out of her lip corners all through chemistry class.

If the mother could look up through the new hole in her mind she might think *things look the way they should*, that she smells the sweet uneven bloom and quick death of flowers born too soon to last. *What a weird way to end things*, she ponders, her hand still clinging to the mashed guts of an artichoke as if she still intends to buy and then cook it, as if at the end of a children's primer on history she was a prince, or the czar, running for safety, now short of breath, until he reaches a strange door at the end of a palace hall he's never seen before, turns its brocaded handle and throws it open to find a blinding moon above a forest of coal black snow, gently falling, and no one around to know what it means.

Four Letters

I.

dear lakeside imagist,

I eavesdropped on talk of your collection; so you have a Monet masquerading as a Basquiat? How nice that you are keeping current, though counterproductive. Being somewhat of a curator myself, I can understand the urgencies needs can bring, that the sympathy of the effort ought to be documented. Does this weather make your feet peel too? I can't help but notice that people are planning on living longer these days, so many children around. I left the cat in the car to run in and get a coffee: all the signs of a bad parent. Did you know television watching was once called fire gazing, that we used to circle up with inconvenient emotions? Send me your new address.

*very sincerely,
unlikely candidate*

II.

dear desperate luminary,

I got your note. Tell me that your residency is not the land of broken men, that your clocks are not running rabid. I would second your proposal for the elimination of streetlights, if Copernicus hadn't already died trying. Did the two of you ever get to meet, share something of the solid earth? Word travels that you might be thinking of returning to the archives for inspiration; and I haven't forgotten your promise to do something with the letters of my name. If you need assistance, or a good recipe for working among small dark words —

I will remind you for the last time that it is May and you should have set the clock back by now.

And your offspring? The cello lessons?

very sincerely,
argument

III.

dear whimsy,

Neither of us would readily take to incorporated islands for a holiday, but for some these antiquated spots are a perfect fit, the charm of oxidation on it all.

Attending an under obligation cocktail party (carnival print coattails are the worst) your name came up. So you have decided to call it *Songs from my life as an accordion*. As there are other things that need tending to—the slipcovers have been far too patient with my distractions— but do send me a chapter, it sounds fascinating.

very sincerely,
practical training

IV.

dear hedonist,

To follow the general rule: if it is
detailed, hang it where it will capture the most light.

very sincerely,
temperance



Sing to Me

I.

Let me give you a little advice about historical writing
my mother says. The panelist's opinions were sweet, but curt.
Was she a historian? Perhaps, but without portfolio,
without the button of closure. She could have told them
that a woman of her kind didn't live but once, and most,

not even that. She came to her marriage with a history
of two dollar skates, basic math, a love for theater,
and a knack for recipes of make-do & move-on.

Her kind had been sculpted by others, eased into *art*,
museums of owl eyes & nappy hair peaking from behind
laundered skirts were immortalized, given *legacy*.
Others took their place in undocumented collections,

to be dismissed and mismanaged. A little advice?
For gravy, brown the butter with cornstarch, add the neck bone
and its broth. Don't even bother with the panel
of paperclip counters. *Let them roost in their own shit.*

Sing to Me

II.

Niggerish.

Watermelon sellin'. Tar babies.

They were the undeserving poor,
no alms came around there.

For nickels and dimes my mother
was nickled & dimed

to look after *Little Bilsey*,

when pissy pink babies

meant a new yard of linen,

a new dress for the Memorial Hall Cabaret Hop

where she could dance

close like a forbidden nighttime swimmer.

They say that on the hill

John's Hopkins loomed

like a lantern in Hawthorne's woods,

sending down bewitching ambulances,

wide open mouths to snatch up

the shiftless children.

Their tiny brains, cradles

of false starts, were swapped

into the bombed out skulls of Vets, then,

let loose, noses running green

and eyes crying about everything.

Sing to Me

III.

To get to the bottom of the barrel,
so says my mother,
one must climb inside of it.

Now, all children know that a barrel
has no corners, but only poor children
know that it hides things anyway.

Not that any place was a good place to be it,
but she was black & poor,
poor & black, on the east side of Baltimore
before there was blacktop.
Everyone rode roughshod
& got roughed up.
It was a sad way to be in those times.

She was the runt, the pigmy,
the baby toe of the family,
but with nimble fingers
good for scraping clumps
of flour from the barrel corners,

from the same spots where the bugs
fed & laid their eggs.
They ate those too, for better or for worse,

them and everything else
not-so-good-looking
on the butcher's counter.

In the dusted wooden frame on the living room
picture table she is dressed
like a baby doll, a frilly white smock,

nothing too fancy with her hands
behind her back, trying to look proper.
There is no color, but mother says the bows
were pink, and the Buick
in the background was black.

She remembers the Buicks, all of them.

Work didn't come round often
and when it did, her father, the drunk,
came home with a different hardtop
each year, a newly painted rust bucket
& newly topped off bottle.

Took the kids for rides around town
till he couldn't drive back home,
while the Fridgedaire languished,
poisoning every last one
in a house of some thirteen-odd babies.

Sing to Me

IV.

The profound symptom was tragedy, the well everyone dredged their water from. The Chesapeake was infested *allkindaways*, but who knew better.

Summer's heat made the liquid behind one's eyes begin to bubble, it pushed the brownstone bricks out a little further, then a lot, leaning as if they knew the second coming, was coming.

The way my mother tells it, they snuck down to the water just after sunset, foolhardy, and waded in. There were no lights back then, nothing to shine upon something sharp

like a beer bottle shard or peeled off tuna can top to slide through her friend's foot, letting the fouled green water come inside to rest. It might have been that some of the others

ran off when they smelled the trouble that would summon a grandmother's switch to their palms. She couldn't walk, so my mother carried her, piggyback, her blood

running open & free. The way my mother remembers it, the blood was dark, shimmery, and impossible in the way it seemed to warm and fill up the bay.

Sing to Me

V.

I am on the lookout for lost & found histories, pilfering this tucked away photo
from the pages of *The Kings of Kush*, where my mother
is reclining on a barstool, one leg slightly extended, beveled,
as if we should be looking at her ankle, entranced & in love with it,
strapped in stiletto, the rest of her swathed in gold plated shells
that go *clinkclinkclink* when she does the Wop.
Seeing the clay they were cut from, I caress my own crisp collarbones,
her hotcombed hair hangs straighter than mine will ever allow,
& as if her captured image could ice-grill me, I don't ask
if she's of drinking age. A woman who poses as unquestionable
is never questioned.

Yet, by this time in her life, underneath all of this
might be a head like a fuzz covered marble, discovered
one granite morning she rose from her pillow & all her hairs stayed behind,
a besieged city of scorched fields where nothing grew again,
the calling card of some botched gene--the sort of thing that happened
in colored families of dubious ancestry--though not quite as subtle
as her sister Ursula, born sister but blossomed into brother,
or, something of both brother & sister until she grew
into something of no known name to simply disappear from family register,
save one or two photographs in the back of mother's untouchable
makeup drawer of a woman with a mustache--
& here began her fifty-some years of roundabout wraps, replacements,
and her rush-hour hands holding down wigs in the wind.

Sing to Me

VI.

We are one breath that begins
where everyone else leaves off,
our matching smiles raise
in crooked arcs across our faces as if drawn
by offstage music—
but this is no everyday mirror,
in raw light I appear yellow.

We know we are not twins,
that my face maps on to none.
We could wring our hands until
they break off, but right below the surface
what brought me to this world is a nature
that will always come between us.

Sing to Me

VII.

What the New Era gave with one hand,
ordinary folk snatched back with the other
& on cream-colored carbon paper, slightly perfumed,
the pretend higher class letters came,
typed in the font of the *Times*, their polite discourse
we don't appreciate your kind around here.

In a city on the Last Stop on the Railroad
those with no pretensions to nurse
sent slanty jagged ransom-style notes, as if cut
from classic cinema, all comical and sad.

It wasn't like enemies were a new fad, so nobody bothered
to pay them mind, get to the bottom of which neighbor
owned an *after-dark-behind-your-back* kind of face.

It was as if regular people sprouted the thought
that there was more than one well to cast your bucket in,
as if all the fish weren't already three-eyed, or as if fear
grew like fruits that could be shaken down all at once.

Sing to Me

VIII.

You can't know about ghosts
until one has climbed in bed with you,
draping a cold arm, the memory
of its flesh, over your tepid breast
as it whispers in its rattle of falling teeth,
some other woman's name.
After that, my mother gave up house-sitting.
No deal was this good, no nickel, not even
for university tuition, was worth the unseen
elbow jabs, ragged breathing
from the bathroom, or the banging about
of some lost mind in the kitchen drawers.
Some women did worse,
but this was more than just what a woman
had to do. Burned by the shadow
left behind, she leapt out of the master's bed and shaking
the bruised peaches of her hands at the end of each wrist,
brandished all she had.

Sing to Me

IX.

I wonder, delicately, if my mother imagined
an easier life with a white man,
if she imagined carving him into part of her,
the way a scrap of Caesar's dust
resides in every being.

When the laboratory of her mind
quieted at night she thought she could hear a tree
singing, that its song was a red song
about a rock she could step on to reach it,
if its blossoms didn't become briars or pop off as cattails
or ripple into pools of moonshards breaking over water
when she touched it with her infinite hand.
She thought of paintings lit by their own light,
shining inward on castles nested in landscapes, wracked
her brain for a myth starring her at one end of a sea
filled with flaming mouths and at the other,
all she was unable became her,
the way a piece of cut tin glints
at the bottom of a hole borne in wood for the raccoon to grab,
so swollen with promise, her clenched paw
too bursting to be pulled from the trap
without leaving the jewel behind.

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