

After Pulse

By

Joshua Moore

Thesis

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Approved:

Kate Daniels, MA, MFA

Mark Jarman, MFA

Camille Dungy, MFA

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Striking The Match: Transitioning From Stasis to Agency

Every morning — at what seemed a decidedly unholy hour — my parents corralled me and my siblings around the foot of their bed for Bible study. There, we learned the world was made from language, that every atom of the universe blossomed from a word. It was enthralling, to believe that all the power of creation resided in the space between our teeth. But for me, language was elusive. At Bible study I would stutter through the Psalms, trip over the refrain of The Lord's Prayer. I couldn't match the phonetics of the words to their meanings. And so everyone was forced to sit in agony as I stammered through any assigned verse. Perhaps this was most painful for my mother, whose proficiency with language made her appear something of a verbal conjurer. In one of my earliest memories, the two of us sit on the floor while I attempt to read a passage of scripture, and my mother winces with every garbled word. For her, the use of language seemed effortless. She could pull new expressions from the air: *mercurial*, *aberrant*, *phantasmagorical*. And it wasn't their polysyllabic sprawl that gave the words their splendor, but how like incantation they seemed, like scripture: capable of shaping whole worlds out of nothing.

This is where it started for me — early mornings immersed in biblical language, the sound of my mother's voice unfolding the mystery of words. These are the influences that pointed me towards a life of writing poetry, and, ironically, that nearly led me headlong away from it. Embedded in that irony is the motive for many of the poems in this thesis, the tension between what's shaped and obscured my identity.

*

An early memory: I am four and running in a herd of squealing preschoolers pantomiming action scenes from the prior weekend's episode of *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*. Feeling we should make our roles official, we all line up to name which ones we've picked. Antonio, the

honey-colored troublemaker who whispers from his mat to me at nap time, names himself the leader of our clique. “I call Red Ranger,” he says, then motions for us each to follow suit. The boy beside him puffs his chest bellows out his choice of “Blue.” Next, the girl directly to my left chimes in “Yellow.” Then it’s my turn, without missing a beat I shout back “Pink.” And they all pause, Antonio responds, “You can’t pick that one.” And then when I insist, he laughs, and says “Are you a sissy?” A word I don’t yet know the meaning of, but feel its fetid heat spreading through my chest, my breath hitching as the other kids begin to laugh. And I hear within their hollering, something like the clean edge of a threat.

*

During those morning Bible studies, I learned what the word meant. Alongside the tales of miracles and creation, our parents taught us about sin, about the actions that warranted disdain: the pride of Saul, the wrath of Cain, the debauchery of Sodom (a tribe of “sissies” the Lord reduced to dust). This was my earliest understanding of queerness — a sin that warranted divine punishment. A message that was relayed to me not solely by my parents, but by the culture at large, through the media coverage of the AIDS epidemic, televised depictions of gay bashings, and the staggering statistics of LGBT homelessness. All I knew of being queer was what it cost. And even before I fully knew that’s what I was, I decided that I couldn’t hazard the chance. I made a habit of correcting for any interest that could potentially put myself at risk. From a young age, evasion became a hallmark of my identity — essential to the way I constructed an early sense of self: hiding in the theater during lunch hour, intentionally running late for gym class in hopes that I could change in the locker room alone, sidestepping classmates’ inquiries about my seemingly latent interest in the opposite sex. In the social landscape of my youth, to evade was to survive.

It was during my senior year of high school that these anxieties spilled into the realm of poetry. I was enrolled in an advanced English seminar, and though, like many adolescent writers, I was churning out reams of poorly written couplets and passing them off as verse, a continued pursuit of writing poetry (beyond the pages of my notebook) couldn't have been further from my mind. I'd applied mostly to STEM-focused colleges, checked the box for pre-med on every application, and felt a commitment to pursuing a career in medicine. So I was unprepared for what I experienced when we began the poetry section of the course, and read W.B. Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium:"

I

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees,
—Those dying generations—at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.

I was enrapt, felt, as I had in childhood, the spell of language that both entices and confounds, words that require closer scrutiny. And though I was enchanted by the poem's diction, rhyme, meter, crisp images, and extended metaphors, what excited me most was its central narrative and its emotional core. Yeats lamented living on the margins, existing in a body whose worth and essential qualities are devalued by society, "Consume my heart away; sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal / It knows not what it is." I knew that feeling, for more reasons than I was willing to admit — the type of longing that leads to the desire to escape yourself. It was one of the first times I realized the way a poem can unmask you. It felt as though anxieties, it took me years to hide, were exposed in the span of a page. The experience both thrilled and terrified me, and made a fault line of my assurance in the path I wanted to pursue. Perhaps, this is why, for

some time after, the risks of poetry and queerness were conflated in my mind, both requiring a break between what I desired and what I felt was expected of me. In college, the strain only intensified. I started thinking of the decision between career paths (poet or doctor) in terms of Old Testament sacrifice: a life of medicine to atone for the want I couldn't erase. "If I can't be straight," I recall confiding in a friend, "at least I can get an MD." The notion was absurd, but it evidenced the degree to which my perspective had been warped by those early fears concerning queerness. Eventually, like the speaker in "Sailing to Byzantium," I was desperate to escape myself, to flee into the realm of art and assert a new identity. In my sophomore year, I changed my major to creative writing. For years though, I was unable to confront the motives of that decision on the page.

*

The poet Danez Smith once called poetry, "the freest place [they] know." I think I have always felt, if not known, this to be true. But for me, the effects of that freedom — at least initially — were largely paralytic. While it's true that in poetry you can say anything, voice any fear, confess any hurt or shame, it's that very quality of transparency, of an absolute liberty of speech, that terrified me most. Before arriving at Vanderbilt, I'd never said the word queer — in a classroom setting — within a hair's breadth of my name. Having been trained to believe that life and death are in the power of the tongue, I still felt I couldn't hazard the risk. That to say the thing or put it on the page, was to cement it in reality, to manifest the rift I feared was waiting to erupt between my family and me. I didn't want to write the poems in this thesis, or perhaps more accurately, didn't want to suffer the consequences I feared writing them would exact. And so, when I decided finally to write into the landscape of my own life, those childhood habits of evasion inevitably asserted themselves on the page.

*

In my early attempts at writing poetry that explored my personal history, familial relationships, sexual identity, racial identity, and faith, I wanted to be invisible in the poem, to write around or near my own experiences without ever expressly having to own them. I attempted this largely through persona, allusion, and elaborate metaphor. I would speak in the voice of fictional characters who shared my insecurities, fears, and desires, or else allude to archetypal figures like Odysseus, Abraham, or Icarus, and project my concerns onto their experiences (a strategy which, I, like all poets, sometimes still employ). Like a politician, perhaps, I wanted plausible deniability. Like a poet, to quote Dickinson, I wanted to “Tell all the truth but tell it slant—” (Dickinson 506).

While it's true that this evasive impulse arose from a need for self-preservation, in regard to my poetry, it largely degraded the quality of my work, and not because persona and allusion are inherently ill-suited for the topics I wanted to explore (namely, queerness and the consequences of queer desire), but because the way I used them set limits on the depth of that exploration. And it is hard to overcome an impulse to remain hidden when it feels as though hiding is literally what's kept you alive. Eventually, however, the costs outweighed the benefits. I kept receiving feedback from my peers that the poems were indecisive or opaque. In those early poems, I was only gesturing obliquely, towards what I really meant to say, using craft as a smokescreen to the truth.

It was in my “Big Poems” course, during the fall semester of my first year in the MFA, that all of this came to a head for me. As the initial concept for my poetic sequence was unraveling (a series of poems linking the narratives of Icarus, the Old Testament patriarch Lot, and victims of ISIS homophobic violence,) I distinctly recall Kate Daniels likening my attempts to engage the subject of my sequence to the image of a boy, standing with a long string attached to a balloon (the

object of his interest and attention) miles above — out of reach. It hit a nerve, largely because her words articulated something I secretly knew: my poems weren't working, and they weren't working because I was unwilling to engage directly with the poem's actual emotional stakes. Acknowledging that critique helped me to move past my hesitancy on the page and write into the more personally invested poems of this thesis. With them, to quote Adrienne Rich, I've tried to engage "the thing itself and not the myth" (Rich 370).

Diving Into the Wreck seems an ideal metaphor for the process of excavating painful or traumatic narrative — the requisite isolation, the mounting sense of pressure with descent, and increased shortness of breath. These were my sense experiences when writing into my own personal narrative, in making myself visible on the page. When I consider the arc of the poems in this thesis, I think that this quality of emotional and narrative transparency is what I was most able to develop from the first to the final poem.

A Note on Structure

I found it useful to apply a structural metaphor when determining how best to order and distribute the underlying themes of this thesis. To my mind, the collection operates as a sort of maypole; where queerness and queer desire, are the central, beam/theme that runs from the top to the bottom of the collection, and the intertwining narrative threads that wrap around, support, and in case it, are those of: maternal/filial relationship, racial identity, religious tradition, and cultural heritage — with each topic weaving into and sprouting off of the central theme. These thematic intersections are primarily explored through the lens of identity, and the tensions that arise from existing within multiple intersecting identities. The collection begins with "To a Friend on Coming Out," a poem chiefly concerned with a type of psychic discord that arises from asserting a queer identity within a conservative Christian tradition. The poem explores what it means to have an

inexorable quality of the self, in this case, sexual identity, be fundamentally at odds with the traditions, histories, and cultural practices of one's upbringing, and how that tension shapes, or deforms, an individual's conceptions of self:

hear the low
hiss of parishioners seething *sinner*
sacrilege, insisting I be partitioned
from their kids, had never wished
to, have it fixed, pay strangers to affix
two small electrodes to the temples
let the voice of god charge through,

The way the self is constructed within schism is one of the motivating questions of this collection. The poems in this thesis aim to re-interrogate, and hopefully complicate, received narratives, and contradict notions of shame communicated — first — through family, culture, and systems of belief, then internalized and reenacted on the self. The type of shame that was foundational to my earliest conceptions of desire.

After Pulse progresses, roughly, chronologically, depicting a speaker who grapples with these questions over multiple phases of life, gradually acquiring insight, and interrogating previously held prejudices, transitioning toward a more complex understanding of his intersecting dogmas and identities. The collection documents the slow and arduous coming to consciousness, of a young, black, queer male speaker, while paying due consideration to the texture, complexity, and difficulty inherent within each of those identities. I took as models for this type of identarian exploration: *Trouble the Water* by Derrick Austin, *Don't Call Us Dead* by Danez Smith, *Please* by Jericho Brown, *A History of Flamboyance* by Justin Phillip Reed, *When I Grow Up I Want To Be A List Of Further Possibilities* by Chen Chen, *Trophic Cascade* by Camille Dungy, *Citizen* by Claudia Rankine, *Monolithos* by Jack Gilbert, and *What The Living Do* by Marie Howe.

Narrative Arc: From Static to Active

After Pulse is ordered in three sections, each drawing its name from the final line of the collection's title poem, *After Pulse*. The final image and metaphor of the poem is that of a match being struck, and signifies the triggering of a willingness on the part of the speaker, to risk his personal wellbeing for the sake of his desires and beliefs.

but here, I'm at the brink,
writhing in the midst of great risk,
the names of the slain
like matches between my teeth.
I hold them in my mouth: a promise
struck between us,
rasp, catch, bloom.

I chose rasp, catch, and bloom as the section titles because they signal the forward temporal trajectory of the collection. Sonically, they mimic the process of a match being struck — its transition from inert to catalyzing object, the progression from stasis to agency. This trajectory also mirrors the mental and emotional development of the speaker over the course of the collection from a place of inertia (immobilized by doubt and shame) towards a more operative and embodied self.

The first section, *Rasp*, depicts the irritating conditions — the foundational discomforts — that push the speaker towards action: the “Hiss of parishioners” in *On Coming Out*, the “gym coach bellowing out [the speaker's] name” in *Skipping Lunch*, the pounding repetition of the epithets “Fat / Black / Fag” in *In The Locker Room*, and the monotonous laps “around the salmon brick perimeter” of his childhood home, in *Self-Portrait as Efflux and Swell*. The aggressions, degradations, and self-effacements that the speaker endures in the poems of section one gradually compound until they reach a point of transition, the catalytic moment for the speaker in section two, *Catch*.

Catch felt especially apt for the title of the second section, as the word calls to mind both the action of a trap closing (the quality of being caught) and the champ of a match being struck — the frictional tug toward ignition. The primary point of conflict and emotional transition for the collection's speaker occurs in section two through the title poem, *After Pulse*. In *After Pulse*, the speaker confronts both the potential culmination of his own internalized homophobia and the risks of outwardly expressing a queer identity. *After Pulse* depicts the speaker in a queer nightclub following the 2016 Pulse Nightclub Shooting. Through a moment of direct address, the speaker engages with what he believes to be the potential similarities between himself and the Pulse shooter Omar Mateen — a man who (early rumors claimed, though FBI investigation failed to substantiate) struggled with queer identity, and allegedly committed the Pulse massacre in an attempt at religious expiation and martyrdom:

I know what it costs to love a man,
how easily a dance floor can be made a tomb,
the body disfigured by attempted martyrdom,
by the need to outrun self-hate,

The speaker sees in the actions of Omar Mateen, a form of extreme and toxic reprisal for the compounding pains and stigmas one endures as a queer person, and is forced to confront his own contorted notions of queer identity, and whether he intends to exist as a visibly queer person in the wake of the attack. In this way, the speaker's gesture towards Omar Mateen, while highlighting potential similarities between himself and the killer, also calls into relief their differences. The poem culminates with the speaker asserting solidarity with the victims of the shooting, and committing to exist in opposition to the many violences that have claimed their lives. This assertion is an espousal of agency where previously there was only endurance, resignation, concealment, and shame:

but here, I'm at the brink,
writhing in the midst of great risk,
the names of the slain
like matches between my teeth.
I hold them in my mouth: a promise
struck between us,
rasp, catch, bloom.

These last seven lines of the poem parallel and reject the desire for violent self-revision espoused in “On Coming Out,” the introductory poem of the thesis. Through the title poem’s closing lines, the speaker rejects a belief in martyrdom as a means of atoning for the “sin” of being queer.

After Pulse’s narrative arc follows the trajectory of an abbreviated bildungsroman. The poems depict the progression of the speaker from a place of uncertainty and inexperience to one of conscious awareness, and choice. In the collection’s final section, *Bloom*, the speaker grapples with the uneasy reality of enacting his new found and hard-won sense of agency, a task he finds complicated by allegiance to multiple and conflicting identities. The poems in *Bloom* interrogate the complex intersections of those identities, what it means to be of and formed by many disparate experiences and traditions (e.g. queerness, Pentecostal Christianity, African American Diasporic experience, and Nigerian diasporic experience) and the ways in which those subjectivities may align with, complicate, or grate against each other.

*

While stylistically, many of the poems in this thesis are consistent with much of my earlier work, demonstrating a characteristic interest in musical texture, wordplay, and careful attention to sound, here, I believe, these techniques are working to enhance, rather than obscure, the emotional landscapes of these poems. In the past, I sometimes let the aural beauty of an early draft dissuade me from fully engaging with or depicting the grittier and more painful elements of a narrative in revision. Often, I let sound play be another means of evasion. But over time, I’ve come to realize

how that same musicality can heighten the emotional thrust of a poem, instead of dampening it.

For instance, in *To a Friend on Coming Out*:

When he asked me why
I wouldn't, or if I feared
my family would love me less,
I knew he couldn't fathom
the scope of his request, had never felt
the coil of worry tighten
in his chest— a slow constrictor
strangling breath from its prey—
had never prayed to be the body
millstoned and roped and levered
by the throat into the sea, or couldn't
see the looks they'd give, hear the low
hiss of parishioners seething *sinner*
sacrilege, insisting I be partitioned
from their kids, had never wished
to, have it fixed, pay strangers to affix
two small electrodes to the temples
let the voice of god charge through,
never raved, or ached, or pleaded to be made
anew, that something new would come,
when nothing would,
and no one.

The consonantal interplay of s's in the line “hear the low / hiss of parishioners seething *sinner*” imitates the repetitive internal “hissing” of negative self-talk. And what I refer to as the “sonic transitions” from line to line (e.g. “prey” to “prayed” “sea” to “see” “fixed” to “affix”) mimic the associative progression of emotional logic; how in an emotionally heightened state our thoughts can transition non-linearly, based on the way things seem to be related. I'm attempting to put that impulse of dampening the poem's emotional thrust to better use in my poetry. Instead of letting the poem's music soften my depiction of harder truths, I've tried to let musicality lessen my anxiety around confession, to ease my exploration of what's painful by allowing that pain to sing.

After Pulse begins by vocalizing that discomfort. Both the collection and my poetics more broadly are shaped by the need to push against the influences that compound personal trauma, and

articulate a sense of what it cost to live within that pain. These poems aim to utilize the friction of existing in a stigmatized body to spark a discourse that might lead to broader change.

After Pulse

I don't believe in dying though I too shall die, and violets like castanets will echo me.

–Sonia Sanchez

To a Friend on Coming Out

—after Marie Howe

When he asked me why
I wouldn't, or if I feared
my family would love me less,
I knew he couldn't fathom
the scope of his request, had never felt
the coil of worry tighten
in his chest—a slow constrictor
strangulating breath from its prey—
had never prayed to be the body
millstoned and roped and levered
by the throat into the sea, or couldn't
see the looks they'd give, hear the low
hiss of parishioners seething *sinner*
sacrilege, insisting I be partitioned
from their kids, had never wished
to, have it fixed, pay strangers to affix
two small electrodes to the temples
let the voice of god charge through,
never raved, or ached, or pleaded to be made
anew, that something new would come,
when nothing would,
and no one.

I. Rasp

Skipping Lunch

Stairwells, mezzanines, washrooms, I'd spend that thin-stretched hour reading anywhere except where I should be, mostly myths or fantasies, especially the ones with the protagonists, who (if they roamed the hallways of my school) would never notice me, sinewy, trim-chested men whose thighs glided past each other without so much as brushing, unlike my heavy flanks, which thunder-clapped my arrival whenever I labored up a stairway, or lumbered down a track, the gym coach bellowing out my name on a bullhorn, as the lighter boys began their final lap. This is how I learned to bury hunger.

In the Locker Room

Fat Black Fag

Fat Black Fag

here syllables

snap crack a wet rag

a wrenched back

the will

limbs tied to a rack

first taut

now torn

now

slack

A - ssimilation

On VHS, my oldest brother
bedecked in polyester—
a mini cap & gown—
leads his pre-school
classmates in their speech.
He leans into the mic
and pipes the line
he's practiced
for a week—
A is for alphabet,
the ABC's you know.
His Naija accent's piquant,
sharp as pepper soup.
I put the tape on loop,
and can't stop laughing.
Our mom looks on
in awe of something lost.
Somewhere off screen
his ego's being bruised,
the other kids accuse
his voice is funny
In time he'll learn
to imitate their tune,
leave Yoruba behind—
give up that music—
an abdicated tongue
an emptied room.

Self-Portrait as Efflux and Swell

Before the first bowl, she'd make me run twenty laps
around the salmon brick perimeter of the house. Mother hoped
turning circuits would quell my swelling waistline.
Afternoons would pass like this: brow slick and panting,
sweat and loathing rolling off in sheets. Heaving after the first
lap, pacing down a want I couldn't reign in. Mobius loop
of hunger turning and turning over, like dairy curdling in a gut.

*

And there was never room there, in the off light
washroom of my parent's house, to stand and press
a hand to the shoulder of the boy cradling the brim
of the bowl, take the spoon he'd used to hollow out
a half-pint of vanilla peach, then jabbed into
his throat's wet wall till: sugar run, gut cloud, candy clot
of sorghum, salt, and cream—slow churned and syrupy
sweeter even than the first scoop.

*

After every run I'd slurp my noodles shamelessly, lapping
every morsel from the fork tines, untying my pant strings,
sipping the spice rich liquor straight from the bowl—
turning permeable, like the vacuole of a cell,
a fluid thick body, succulent organelle filling and filling.

Chromolaena Odarata

*Most of these weed species smother out the natives forcing them into extinction....
Considered an invasive weed... Its use...as a soil fertility improvement plant in the slash
and burn rotation system of agriculture has contributed to its continued use and spread
in Nigeria.*

—"Biological Control of Invasive Weed Species: Nigerian Experience"

Escaped the terraced
gardens of Dacca:
the devil weed
took wind, took root
in Western Africa.
The pail invader
slithered from a seed,
sprang up and around
the sprawling canopies,
clutched: mango, cocoa,
and ogbono, crept along
the limbs of native trees.
It colonized the ridge,
the wood, the field,
set sentries poised
to carry on the breeze.

Hack haul heap , hack haul heap,
we bag the brush, drag it
to be burned. The year's yield, lower
than the last— camphor grass, choking
out the growth. We pile it up,

place the reeking stumps

in a tall pyre, let fire

swamp the field.

A smoldering swidden,

ridden of the weed—

soot to seed

another season's plenty.

This blaze, we pray,

will fertilize the plot—

bring back our bounty.

How we beg

the growth to stay

fear that it will not.

Triptych Epistle, to the Man Before Our Father

I.

Because, most days, I still cannot ask your name,
do not wish to imagine a time before
the syllables of my own father's name
nested in the hollow of our mother's chest,
the morning thrush of his devotion
birdsonged in the corners of her smile,
I write to you—
not solely to sate my curiosity,
the tar-thick wondering
that oozes at your every mention,
nor solely for my mother,
who cut her cautious teeth
on the rough-hewn edges
of your absence,
but for my brother.

II.

I write to you on behalf
of my brother, who,
my mother's family
tells me, bears your face.
A knowledge which hangs
a furtive cord about my neck,
as though, someday,
from a fleck of skin
or a bit of fallen blood,
you might bloom
up, and back into our lives.
The phantom father,
come to claim some piece
I often feared was yours.
The same fear that grew in me
with every introduction
when teachers, teammates, colleagues,
would stare at us, perplexedly,
and say, *You barely look like brothers.*

III.

Perhaps, the man: my brother,
wears your smile,
perhaps, within his laughter,
the tincture of your name.
Some days, I hear his daughter
laugh and think of you.
The jingle of her tittering,
echoing a man she will not know.
Wonder, perhaps, if given all to do again,
you would have stayed.
Still, I thank the ghost of your genetic legacy,
the lingering bits of lineage
swimming through my niece's bloodstream.
Those crimson cells encoded for her smile,
that hardened carbon fearlessness
she wears about her shoulders like a shawl.
Her shield against the threat of break, or bruise,
or even being left behind.
A gift, I think, she must have gained from you.

Doubt

will wear you
like a sock,
un-shoed:
tracked through
damp grass,
gravel;
wear you,
threadbare
through cow pens
sole sunk,
in fetid muck
skunk musk
sticking
to the skin,
till you can't
know where
flesh ends
or fear
begins

II. Catch

In the Dream

My mother, in a satin housecoat,
holds court, at the bottom of the stairs.

It's Christmas, and — though she swears
they're tacky — she clasps a strand

of rainbow colored lights between her hands;
the sun diffuses through them, dappling

her chin in variegated daylight.
She turns to me and smiles.

Her grin, so bright, it
startles me from sleep.

I forgot it could be like this,
that once, there was nothing

between us that was
broken.

On Valentine's Day My Mother Asks Her Name

Valentine's Day, 6:00 pm, and the light
thins, like my mother's
gaze — narrowed to a squint.
And there is still time
to lie about it,
sit hoarding up the silence
like war rations —
secreted until
the fighting ends,
but she knows
there's only one way
out of this room,
so I, take
the bait, say
his.

Confession of the Minotaur

The truth is
you were tired
of throttling them, of feeling
how their hip sockets
uncoupled in your grip,
and you grew bored
with the moaning, the slow,
dolorous lowing the youths
would make, shaking
as they prayed you'd let them live.

And though sometimes you even
wanted to let them
slip the chokehold
of your labyrinth, find
a way back home, in the end
you never did.
You made them stay,
and share the fate
that would be yours.

On Intimacy

press of a warm stranger's palm
one-two shift of hip under strobe light
the way our bodies forget to be fearful

here, in the fracture of a dance floor's strobe
the bass line like a river of forgetting
beat-drunk we plunge and spring

our names are an echo of treble
a down beat in the blood
and what is dance, if not

dominion over the body
the muscles' supple dialect,
pell-mell and frenetic,

reined and held in check.
here on this lit strip of ballroom
we are gods over ourselves

lost in the swell of a
blistering rhythm,
we could almost forget

the thick dread loitering
at the threshold of the club
standing by the curb

like an old lover
waiting to take us
back into his grip.

After Pulse

Beyond the velvet-roped vestibule
the nightclub is a tabernacle,
the dance floor an altar,
and all of us, worshipers
bidden by the hem of desire.
Hunger thrums inside
me, drives me headlong, longing,
into the crush of the crowd,
grinding past the backs of strangers,
steady chaff of shirts against chests.

I know what it costs to love a man,
how easily a dance floor can be made a tomb,
the body disfigured by attempted martyrdom,
by the need to outrun self-hate,
but here, I'm at the brink,
writhing in the midst of great risk,
the names of the slain
like matches between my teeth.
I hold them in my mouth: a promise
struck between us,
rasp, catch, bloom.

Prayer of the Dispossessed

 forgive
my
 whittled
faith
 my
widened
 hunger
this
 riddled
heart
 the
way
 the
love
 (despite
attempts
 to staunch
its flow)
 seeps

out.

Withholding

Seven days past the appointment
the little red walnut of my want
is still swollen, florid, tender fleshed
with ache. The sun's a hot bright bead
slipping on a thread toward noon.
Nothings come in weeks.
It's January, and my mind, parched
as the yellowing stands of rye grass
withering outside my window,
their spread arrested
in the steepening cold, holds
the words hostage. Like that rock
at Meribah, secreting the water's flow
from the Israelites. Their plight
a cry to pitiless earth. Once, like Moses,
I could've whispered to the stone,
trusted some unseen force
to make a spout. Now, I'd drive
a stave into the boulder of my brain,
to watch a single word run out.

Portrait of a Mother in Confession

Like some eerie reenactment
of my birth scene,
I wake to find her welled eyes
inches from my face:
salt sheen still
visible on her cheeks.
For weeks, we've managed
the careful choreography
of mutual avoidance—its practiced
arabesques—though truthfully
we've spun like this forever,
mirrored bodies in cautious interplay,
our wants opposing from the outset.
Our courses, set
to never intersect.

*

In that room, the rhythm of the ultrasound
set cadence for a score of early hopes—
dreams she dressed in drawstring gowns,

and seersucker smocks, puckered and blush
pink as the ring of rhododendron bushes
flowering outside her Doctor's window;

their slow growth reflected in the sonogram's
muted glow, phantom of my curled
hand gradually unfurling like a bloom.

*

Then, the birth cry, high note, trumpet
of a throat, billowing the room with music.

And the little pang of grief, when she
held me—saw the swollen fact of my

dissent—blood bright and mewling
umbilical string, cut clean. Severed

like all her dreams of ever teaching me
to brush or part my hair. And the little stare

I gave her, already resisting her requests.
Frowning as she whispered, with her first kiss,

you were supposed to be a girl.

Mother Tongue: A Homecoming

Deplaning at Murtala
Mohamed Airport,
that familiar tone
accosts me.

Tongue I cannot fit
inside my mouth
though claim to love,
the way I love

the best parts
of my mother—
's country:
the facts that fit best

on a postcard,
read best on a tomb.
In Nashville I wear
my buba and sokoto

to overpriced brunch,
want white folks
to think me cultured,
not from here

I mean to say.
At the terminal
the customs officer
spots my middle name

says in Yoruba
o ti wa si ile.
interprets my blank
stare, then instead

What is your business here?

Sibilance

*When you're young and closeted and trying to pass, you police yourself
for evidence that might betray you.*

—Dan Savage

I sit in fabricated
quiet—a voicing booth—
the sound designer

tells me to *run*
the line again.
Too much bass

in the take
the voice's logic
lost to lower tones.

I think of risk,
of strident pitches
smothered from the tongue

its raucous timber
tamer now, the breath
reined back, bridled

by the diaphragm—
its muscled dome.
I hold my tongue

ponder how my body
may betray me;
its sibilant S's

restless in the mouth
wrested from the mouths
of southern boys—

or choked.
Pernicious fricatives,
I hear in them,

the quickening of keys,
the hastened breeze
of bludgeoning—

downbeat of a bat
on the skull,
that dull familiar terror.

He tells me
run the take.
I want to say

they'll kill me,
you know. Instead
I tilt my chin

I clear my throat.

III. Bloom

Poem in Which the Hookup Asks My Name

No, your real name,
he says, and I glare,
refrain from saying
it is, or at least
a version of it,
much like the thing
we're here to do
might—generously— be
termed a version
of intimacy, a half
truth, like how I'm
only ever half-
present in any room
in which my clothes
have been
removed.

Love Poem Ending at UPS

We've been at this for hours now, trading
narrow breaths in the off-light hollow

of a freight container, ordering the eagerly-awaited
ornaments of other people's lives into temporary

structure, building box walls out of what we don't
possess. Over the clockwork churn of package-rollers,

we trade barbs, constructing the first shelf, set the firmest
boxes flush against the corner of the shipping crate,

only breaking to call bullshit on an anecdote or crack
wise about which of us has stronger morning breath.

And this is how you tell me that you've met someone:
slantwise, off-hand, tucked into the backside of a joke,

then turn with equal ease, and ponder if possibly
I'm seeing someone, too? I let the question pass,

press the last box into the C-Can, step back
onto the loading dock grate, and pause,

as everything we've spent the morning on is hauled away.

What I Know I Cannot Say

—after *Camille Dungy*

This is what I've come to know of love,
of language — the ways in which a thing
can fall short. How a word, carries meaning
like water in a cupped palm,
some of what's meant gets spilled
goes unsaid, flows through our fingers
like a sieve.

Love like language is fashioned
from imperfect things.
With love, we are always
in the process of becoming,
grasping for some better self —
reach after reach — and perhaps
we will never arrive.
Though isn't that the beauty?
The persistence of attempt.
A palm drawn up to the lips,
again and again.

On Seeing Alvin Ailey at the Tennessee Performing Arts Center

I would watch how black people moved.... as if their bodies could do anything.
— Ta-Nehisi Coates

Staccato of hips, flutter and whip of silks

—glassine—as dancers: lilt, shift, shimmy;
their swift feet pattering in a practiced ragtime.

Even in the cheap seats,

you can still see those acrobats
shimmer in their glittering shifts.

Under the spell of low light, the black body

is infallible. From here, it seems
it could be true. That this stutter and juke,

could slip the cinching rope of history,
or fray its noose.

Self Portrait As Atalanta And Suitors

—after Jorie Graham

1

It's uncertain if they knew (those men, those men who— thought they'd know...)

2

her body: lither even than an arrow piercing air (air: the swift swish of their undoing, air: their last breaths passing from their bodies into wind) swiffer even than their end— those men—those men, gouged and gleaming in the grip of that great beast;

3

heat of their bodies—seeping— heat of its harsh breath pressuring out their terror into steam, bodies into strings of raw meat;

4

their feet, ungluing from the earth—its tusks tucked Into to the wet heat of their rib cages, their tendons tearing

5

tearing, tearing like a bolt through bright air.

6

Then the hair thin glint of the spear tip, twisting— splitting air, twisting—splitting skin: bright spill of blood on shit-striped earth

7

And the archer notching and re-notching her bow, soft dock of the bolt on the bow string, and the string singing, the dart filling the next mark in the skin

8

And the men, hungry to make use of her, hungry to make use of her conquest

9

notch her catch on the hilt of their acclaim.

10

And the men, all the men, burning, burning, their breath turning sour in their chests, shallow in the grip of their want for her.

11

Even Hippomenes', shored up by the glint of strategy shored up by assurance in her defeat.

But her feet: unstirred by his cunning (unstirred by the gilt colored glisten of his schemes)
beat down on the path, down on the back of his lust for her, trod sure spurts, trod the worn earth
into steam.

Love Poem

—for Azealia Banks

I, too, knit my sorrow
into a permeable shield:
the way Azealia weaves her lyric
out of heartache, a hurt, knit close,

cropped, and gleaming, luminous
coverlet with enough width for a spear
to pass through. Its bright links
catching in the light's teeth.

How people love to watch
a dark thing glimmer,
their favorite freak show.
Like how those white boys

would throw firecrackers
at the feet of black girls
hear their patent leather tap dance,
patter in the echo of their teeth.

The church skirts spinning
shimmering as the cries caught wind.
How like the wind the little bombs
came back in volleys, boomeranged

to the snapping of their hems. A sudden
music, like the sounds a flock makes
right before the terrier closes in.
Their fear pealing: shrill

as grace notes. And with no hope
of salvation, itinerant act of god,
the girls, trod sure. Their skirt tails
smacking against the smoke,

shredding and stirring the air
like dervishes, lifting past their
midriffs as they go, make them
vulnerable, glinting and exposed,

but their swift feet flit so lightly,
no one ever lands a blow.

Crowned

—for my niece Amaka, whose name means beauty

At first the spirals
of your hair
were like patches
of scrub grass
sprung up
around your papa's
childhood home.
Friends said:
shear it short,
clip it
at the roots
till it comes in
even
but at ten months
your tangles
were still halting,
clung
to your scalp
like fingers
to your mother's hip.
Kinks
we couldn't keep
contained, curled
under in places
broke loose
after braiding,
broke br—
istles, bristled
when brushed.
Once, as she sifted
through a sea
of sequined
head bands,
I heard
your mother sigh,
If only
she didn't
have my hair.
I thought back
to my summer
in Tuskegee,
the women

with heaps of hair
 in head wraps,
dreadlocks, bantu knots
slick strands slipped into
 plaited twists,
two strand twists, twist outs,
blow outs, and sew-ins.
 the women
who wore lace fronts,
 the women
who wore pixie cuts,
 the women
with tresses
trimmed down to the scalp,
realized how blind
I'd been not seeing,
what of course your mother knew,
that each of them bore up
under the gravity of beauty.
A weight I somehow hoped
we'd keep from
you.

Awash in Blue Light

I was just another black face in the street.

—Alex Landau

i.

I can still see that picture of Alex Landau,
the one where it took 45 stitches
to suture back some semblance of his face.

Can still imagine the slick puddle of crimson,
pooling beneath him, and the flicker
of those sapphire lights that tinted
the concrete that deep lacquered purple
of a ripening bruise.

The first time I heard his voice,
I wondered what he must have felt in that moment.
Was he a man, like myself, who thought
language would be his life preserver,
a buoy against the crush and swell
of white men's hate?

ii.

I think back to my father saying,
*Even after medical school,
the sudden flood of those blue lights
can still make you feel like a criminal.*

iii.

Perhaps, my mother's faith,
pressed under the burden
of rearing three black sons,

is the life preserver, which keeps her,
perilously suspended above fear's slick swallow,
bobbing at the tug of an unnerving certainty
that she, like Alex Landau's mother,
might one day answer her cell phone's tremor
to hear only...

You'd better come see about your son.

and arrive to find one of us a casualty,
the battered collateral of circumstance,
the earth-toned jetsam,
in some other officer's wake.

A Sanctuary

On Dec. 28, 2016 an Ohio grand jury cleared Cleveland police in the shooting death of Tamir Rice.

First ground of pepper in the pot,
minced garlic, simmering on the stove top,
the bacon's crackle hiss,
blue flame, bristling the back of a skillet,
sudden pop, spring of grease, dots
speckling the edge of the counter.

Is it ready?

My niece chimes out from the living room.
Chorus of spices, clang of spoon,
call her to the kitchen like a song.
Her brother nestled soundly
in my brother's lap.
How they don't yet pay attention
to the news — its discordant blues
sifting in behind them: an old tune—
too young to know this pang
beyond hunger.

Learning to Fight

My father never taught us,
said the only thing we should be *fighting* over,
was an education,
if we wanted to break spines
we could crack open a book.
We didn't raise any barroom brawlers,
my mother used to say,
if ever we chose to start
a fight, we could be sure
she'd finish it.
But, whoever told them,
Thou shalt not wrestle against flesh and blood,
clearly never caught an episode
of The A-Team,
or a scene from Monday Night Wrestlemania,
couldn't know,
that the proper placement of fist to hip,
can make a grown man turn a somersault.
How the sudden thrust of thigh off rope
can buoy the body over a ring.
How the subtlest shift in grip
can make an opponent sing out in submission.
Those shows, taught me the only moves
I knew to use that summer,
when those big kids
tried to pound us,
and my attempt at Mr. T.
left us bruised, and pressed
into those pricker bushes.

Let me begin again,
the first time I heard my parents fight,
I was twelve years old.
Huddled in front of Wrestlemania's
technicolor glow, the clamor
of my parents' voices, building
to the decibel of a breaking storm.
Not that thunderous clamor of clapped hands,
for another of Hogan's aerial finishers,
more like the sudden crack and fissure
of a lightning bolt,
breaking over the banks of the Detroit river.
No one ever tells you
the body doesn't rebound,

like a wrestler off the moorings of a ring.
That the sudden crack of knuckle
against bone, can echo louder
than the thunder of any cheering crowd.
I can still see, that image of my father,
driving his fist, over, and over, and over.
As if the repetition could teach her something
she didn't already know.

Years later, when my mother finally left him,
and stood at that wavering edge of new beginning,
I asked her, *Why?*
Why, now?
To which she'd replied,
that she finally knew
what he thought he'd meant to teach her,
only wished,
it hadn't taken,
forty years,
to learn.

When the Swim Instructor Teaches Me the Stroke

Hunger is a hard
grip on the ridge of
a waistline, a thumb—
pad pressed into the
divot of a hip,
the wrist mimicking
the cadence of a
dolphin kick, his hand
cupped and puppeting
the pelvis', slow pitch.
Can you feel it, he
asks, *just there*, before
the dip, the rising
up, the flood of air,
the sudden lift.

Notes

“Learning to Fight”

Was first drafted for Pastor Napoleon Harris as part of The Porch’s Poetry on Demand Project, Nashville, Tennessee (Sep. 28, 2015date).

“After Pulse”

Was composed in honor of the victims of 2016 Pulse Night Club Shooting in Orlando Florida in which 49 people – mostly LGBTQ – were killed and 53 were injured, making it the second worst mass shooting in U.S. history.

“Mother Tongue: A Homecoming”

The Yoruba phrase “*o ti wa si ile.*” translates to “He has come home.”

“Awash in Blue Light”

In 2009, Alex Landau was a student at Community College of Denver. After a traffic stop one night, he was severely beaten by Denver Police officers, after requesting that they provide him with a warrant before searching his car.

“Chromolaena Odarata”

Chromolaena Odarata chronicles the spread of Chromolaena into the forests of southwestern Nigerian, and foreshadows the threat of its supremacy. The epigraph is from *International Journal of Agricultural Research* (2010).

“A Sanctuary”

Tamir Rice was 12-year-old African-American boy, who was killed by a white police officer, on November 22, 2014, while playing with an airsoft pellet gun.

“Sibilance”

Dan Savage is a journalist, and LGBT activist, who writes the nationally syndicated sex advice column “Modern Love.” The epigraph is taken from Savage’s interview on “Do I Sound Gay?,” a documentary that explores the existence and accuracy of stereotypes about the speech patterns of gay men.

“On Seeing Alvin Ailey at the Tennessee Performing Arts Center”

The epigraph is taken from Ta-Nehisi Coates’ “Between the World and Me”

The epigraph for the collection is taken from Sonia Sanchez’s poem, Malcom, from her collection *Shake Loose My Skin: New and Selected Poems*. Beacon Press, 2007.

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