

THE ELEVATION REVIEW



FALL 2023

BLACK

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REVIEW

“BLACK AS THE OCEAN”

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CONTENTS

Ciara Miller	"What the Black Boy Dreams" & "The Unaborted"	07
Henry J. Reneau, Jr.	"The Anthropocene Blue(s) / : Somebody Please, Tell That Nigga To Get Out The Street!!"	09
Ellen June Wright	"Innocent You, Innocent Me By Painter Amy Sherald"	11
Jennifer Nuesi	"Everything in Anything"	12
a.Soul	"the facade." & "to sink, or to swim?"	13
Dana Tenille Weekes	"an oak tree's lament," "The Wind Flying a Kite with a Father and Son on the National Mall" & "snowfall"	15
Traci Neal	"Crown of my South" & "Hear What Hands Are Saying"	18
Will Simon	"Black is a Distinct Personality"	21
Dee Allen.	"Counterfeit Rebel, "Beads" & "D.D.G*"	23
Tjizembua Tjikuzu	"On Cooper St."	28
Kassidi Jones	"Hood Pastoral"	29
Evan Loving	"kinblood"	30
Jasminum McMullen	"When"	31
Alexis Raymond	"i thought i could tell you this story"	32
Ilma Qureshi	"Gravelly Point"	35
Triston Dabney	"Untitled" & "Done for Love"	37
Laura Cesarco Eglin	"Well Done" & "Coming to Terms"	39
A.V.B Truitt	"Remember."	41
Regina YC Garcia	"Blue"	42
Phillip Border	"The Crime of the Shade Tree" & "Brother to THE MAN"	43
Carmen Barefield	"POV: You are unaware that a few hours ago, 10 Black people were killed by a racist mass shooter in a Buffalo grocery store. Much later you will learn how the killer saw a white face, said "sorry," then moved on to shoot someone who looked like you."	45
Devyn Riddick	"Honey"	46
Ruchi Acharya	"Forever in Doom"	47
Michelle Petty	"Tree Roots and Make Believe" & "Stardust"	49
Hollis Toussaint Druhet	"Damnatio Memoriae"	51
Tonia Dixon	"Black Womxn"	53

POEMS



What the Black Boy Dreams

Ciara Miller

After Paul Laurence Dunbar

I know what the Black boy feels
when the sun is a cartoon sketch
& English is a brick dog cage,
windowless. When he lifts
his voice to scream
because he cannot see his enemy.
I know what the Black boy dreams.

I know why the Black boy dares stand
outside at night—a phantom
of googly moogly frights,
his voice, a voracious splendor
cracked beneath the moon's glimmer.
I know why Black boy dares not hide.

I know why the Black boy does not sing,
why he leans & rocks—
his posture broken, a dispirited funk,
the tilt of his body, a homecoming
to be whole.
I know why his body begs
for a hold.



The Unaborted

Ciara Miller

Do not spank the baby in the bath water
is a lesson our mother's mother never spoke,

so we soaked our knees in the marinade of dirt
& baked. We (daughters, sisters, aunts, mothers)

anxiously cleanse our children
& flick fingers to their teeth.

How naturally the belt slips
through the hoops of our tired jeans.

Our fingers, thick & crusted, search
for the softest mush of our children's backs.

We forget that one day, they will look back
at us with every bit of regret

that they were born
into a family of heavy hearts & brick hands.

They'll hope to never look back again
to our homes of welted skin & seasoned meat.

They'll remember pleading: *May I eat the fish*
& not feel like an extra mouth to feed?



The Anthropocene Blue[s]/ :

Somebody Please, Tell That Nigga To Get Out The Street!!

henry 7. reneau, jr.

as a species we are both far too powerful & not nearly
powerful enough a paradox of denial
that came into shrill focus as we faced a global pandemic
that both separated us &
bound us together a cautious survival of the fittest
quarantined to cabin fever
that manifested the proliferation of our wanting the nine-
tenths possession multiplied the mass creation of waste
a magic trick muscle memory of acquisition—a side effect
of status—echoing the first trademark symbol (in /∞/ -finitude)
for plastic obsolescence/ : an eternity of more that is less but
much more expensive
contaminating our fading bluest ball of sustainability
with the malleable polyethylene half-life of hope

a meta-
phor plastic packaging the evidence of our lust
for something else the obsession that lodges in the mind
like a one-hit-wonder pop song (My My My Sharona . . .)
& the foreverness of a fashionable shamelessness
whether we admit it or not is a meta-
phor our crawling forward blindly to nowhere at a tipping point
state of des(re)pair like every Vitruvian-
splayed Black folk too often chalk-outlined post-
mortem on an urban city street made to feel the press of hot asphalt
into our chest & cheek (the post-

racial virus moving amongst us
like a quarantined inhale/ : *I can't breathe!!*)
only an everyday supplicant lament in hindsight
like the exponential young & old who now die of cancer
under the fossil fuel irradiation of a UV Anthropocene sun
the mundane & relentless molecular rain
of plastic microparticles that we regularly eat & breathe

the micro-
plastic glutted fish & drought-combustible grass



the traffic noise that cockblocks crickets & wild flowers sprouting
sans fragrance every day the nuclear bomb-proof
plastic packaging the latest gadget in recycled amber Fed-X-ed to
your front door or the gluttonous variety of techno-
shiny on Big-box shelves like Black folk everywhere
in[di]visible unseen as cigarette butts plastic bottle caps
the discarded boot-
heeled litter of toxic water bottles like petro-liters of plastic
twisted into kilo-tons of strangle
like the most dangerous word in the English language
is bad Nigger!! (the epigenetic generational rage & repetition
of chronic dissent) is a knee on our necks for four hundred +years
like the holy plague of Capitalism (the oppressed
who blindly cleave to
the worship of an alien holiness an unproven Trinity of blind/faith
/ hope/& God in absentia) like the white noise
emergency scissors of sirens
suffused the death toll pandemic & Jesus just a suicidal scarecrow
on a Roman wooden cross the myth of miracles
pulsing under his crucified skin
like all the plastic debris
that litters the gravel shoulders of highways the plasticized-
nylon work boot shoelaces
that won't stay tied the export car parts food wrappers &
broken zip-ties the flimsy wisps of plastic bags
now a ghostly haunting of obsolescence like the shushed apathy
of consumer hands folded indifferent but post-
pandemic the people once again
creatures of habit/: the return of congested traffic Big-
box checkout lines of stupefied shoppers round the block multiplied
exponentially to active oblivion rudely yap-yap-yapping into
cellphones into an environmental collapse & it seems
we have lost count of the names of Black people
who resisted arrest reached for the policeman's gun &
the media cash-
register tally of the murdered memorialized on T-shirts
the hashtags become all too fashionable what when left of us
would soon be cockroaches Dick Cheney &

Keith Richards

an Anthropocene oblivion because we just can't
get no satisfaction



Innocent You, Innocent Me By Painter Amy Sherald

Ellen June Wright

A Black teen stands alone, the subject of a portrait
unadorned by urban setting, or floral backdrop.

It could be after school or a Sunday afternoon.
The unidentified youth wears a camouflage tee-shirt

with four comic-book characters window-paned
on the front—not a child but suspended between

adolescence & manhood. His hoodie, canary yellow
under a jacket that echoes the hoodie with thick

white & yellow stripes & thin blue horizontal lines.
Cartoon superheroes peep out from under.

This boy could step out of the frame into the room.
His gaze, the gaze of one still too young to know

what life can do to a Black man. Big for his age—
a threat to those who fear him.

Someone's baby boy, soon to enter the world.
Like Obama said of Trayvon, he could be mine.

He could be anything at all. He's at that age
when the entire world should be open to him

to pick & choose which mountains to conquer,
but this is America

& Black boys still live endangered lives.
That's not gang insignia on his shirt or gang

colors on his jacket. That's not a gun in his hand.
He's holding a strawberry ice-cream cone.



Everything in Anything

Jennifer Nuesi

Depression lays on me
Like the coconut skin of my forefathers
Where wails and wallows do not run deep enough
to the place where we swallow niceties for peace

Depression is thick on me
like wet clothes drowned in a salt lake pool
Rotate between my side and Hyde I must because
the demons of these thoughts hunger for me

Depression is loving to me
It has never claimed a dollar
but rather a pound of flesh and since I have plenty
take all the skin off my back

Depression is clinging to me
It never leaves my side so abandonment is unfamiliar
Absorbent in the tissue and neurotic hands that choke you
Closed fingers melt together so one is never without the other

Depression is sickening me
Growing pains or showing stains
as I have cut myself into sizable pieces
so you can thrive in my strife

Depression is filling me
Inside the grey is sinking silky velvet clouds on the side
while the chasm of despair edges closer
Gargled suffocation hidden under the guise of love

Depression is everything in anything
When obsessed and depressed became the scene
and even now as you get down below into the cells of my soul
How can depression separate from me?



the facade.

a.Soul

under the floorboards they swore there would be a
mystical treasure —
for they themselves had done the ‘work’ of detonating every single
love bomb crater
every hopeful depth of our adolescent souls —
“for as long as we act, and do as we are told,”
public praise reward for being watered down
to their entire expectation..
had grown to show we were not necessary,
a pawn in their game —
a set of dolls only to be displayed - played with, dressed up and
touched..
“and girls, damn you — if you ever speak up!”



to sink, or to swim?

a.Soul

the 'shameful' product of
"at least i am not the one who brought a black girl home."
different.. dunked and ignored out, until —
 always present, available,
 disagreeable? pssht, could never live here!
decades of drought to pour my soul out for those,
that simply could not breathe —
knowing different, never once meant less.
"she does this with ease?
...someone shake this girl, please?!"
cried out by lifebuoys of souls — swaying with me through immensely
hard-to-swallow moments that stopped time —
observing the ropes to untie prejudiced anchors relinquished
"oh no, we are surely going to sink" fears —
lifebuoys of souls have been reunited with the hands of mine —
"we now only swim, wherever the sun decides to shine."



an oak tree's lament

Dana Tenille Weekes

after Ellen June Wright's Poems of Wisteria

i am sturdy stalk / never knowing the life of a blade / of grass that bends /
upon a footstep / upon too, too much dew / unable to hold the full weight /
of mamma earth's sorrows / i am not purple coneflowers / not spotted
geraniums / nor chicory christened / to run petals through strands / of wind
/ to chase the wind / among blades of grass leaning / trying to watch /
trying to get out of the way / i cannot lean / in such a way / unless i care /
to break / i am sturdy stalk / one may look for / with rope and a Black man
/ who has never asked / to be broken / never asked to be tied / around the
neck / to be choked of a language / a life / i have always understood



Crown of my South

Traci Neal

Melon skin of elegance.
Watch my hair move
mysteriously with the wind.
I wear my hair and
skin like soap. See the soap
seep into my soul.
I am black. I am the crown
of my south. These hands
are hard-working hands.
They were chosen hands
to scrub public toilets.
My ears remember
listening to the cries,
screams, and laughter of
children. I have been
working with youth
since the age of 12.

My birth is on
March 8, 1989.
This black voice
moves mountains and
makes memories.
These hands write wonder.
Thes hands welcome
ideas beyond all barriers.



Feel the motion of my
marches as I play on words.
When I breathe in and out,
my beauty breaks bondage.
Look deep into my eyes.
You will witness a warrior.
The overcomer of domestic
violence at 16 and rape at 20.
I am not done. A teacher
beyond the classroom.
I would not allow failing the
South Carolina teacher exam
10 times for 10 years to be
the end of me. Do you hear me?
This is an example of black joy.
Handle the hurt and hunger
for healing, while choosing to
rise higher. Blacks are the
foundation of a new nation.
We showcase survival every day.
I am black.
I am the crown of my south



Hear What Hands Are Saying

Traci Neal

Church	seats	fill up	with	saints,
but	each	is a	distinctive	rainbow color.
Hear	what	hands	are	saying.
Hands	stretch	high	as a form	of praise.
Hands	raise up	as a cry	of	surrender.
Which	life	is worth	sparring	in sympathy?

Hands are working. Many hands burn and beg for a way out.

How often will people suffer, while shouting
for the right to live? I remember and reflect on my black hands.
As a little black girl, I want to understand why people think
the way they do. I dry my tears and remove my worries.

The fight for freedom no longer frustrates me.

My hands wait to heal and be made whole.

These hands hurt from those hungry for help.

I see the old black church.

Imagine the brown wooden pew
and pat marks from the patient hands.

Witness the hands hitting floors
to fuel fortitude.

Hands hold us up
as we get through the storms.

We believe this too shall pass.

Hands are clapping.

Hands are reaching.

Hear what hands
are saying.

Listen.

Hear hands of hope.

Hear hands of peace.

Hear hands of love.



Black is a Distinct Personality

Will Simon

My mother says Black is warmth.
Within her arms lies solace for her babies,
A shield from the cold, a covering from the dark.

Black is a tapestry of uniqueness.
A magic. An everlasting movement.
Black is Amina emerging.
Kingdoms bow and narratives change.
Her spirit is unbroken, unbowed, undying
With the blazing fire of courage in her bones.

Black is Nana Asmau, veiled in modesty
A ravishing beauty standing against the norm.
A beacon of intellect, a teacher, a sage.
A mother to mothers, a sister, and a daughter of wise men.

Black is Achebe, welding his words into weapons.
Merging creativity with bold outspokenness.
Revolution blooms in his literary foundations,
Unveiling truths, dismantling oppressiveness.

Black is mother, hunched over her wilting plants,
Her weary back, a tapestry of bones and lines
tells stories of hard work and of exploitation.
Tired, she never stops. She is a testament
To the rhythm of life, tired today, strengthened tomorrow.

Black is water.
A river slipping through the hands of its captors.
A Nile meandering through ancient lands.
Powerful, relentless, as destiny commands,
Its currents carry stories, where history expands.



Black is beauty kissed by an adoring sun.
Hues of ebony's grace and perfection.
Like fine wine.

Black is we.
Is us.
Our fortitude, our tale of tenacity in the face of pain.
Of conquering and being conquered.
Of fighting for a dignity that was ours in the beginning.

Black is we.
Proud children of an undying heritage.
Proud children of a distinct branding.
Black is we.
Black is we.



Counterfeit Rebel

Dee Allen.

Chickens will start
Clucking out loud
When a rat comes
Sneaking into
The hen-house.

Such a rodent
Crawled its way
Into swollen ranks of the
Black Lives Matter
Movement in Colorado Springs

Wearing a masque—
Bright-eyed enthusiasm
For “fighting the good fight.”
She would be found
At a street march

So easily, compared to the rest.
Known for the tightness
Of her halter top
And bubblegum
Pink hair.

Busy lady soldier with big
Energy for a righteous cause.
Is this the profile of a vile rodent?
A few occasions at her spot
Changed the tone to this tale.

Plans were set.
Create the crime.
Run illegal guns through the movement.
Two activists were lured in.
Both refused the bait.



Zeal for racial justice—False.
Her identity—False.
Her sex work—False.
Her long pink hair—False.

Intent to sabotage—Real.
Her entrapment—Real.
Her hidden police rank—Real.
Her F.B.I. handlers—Real.

Poison to the movement—
Real.
Chilling effect—
Frighteningly real.

Chickens will start
Clucking out loud
When a rat comes
Sneaking into
The hen-house

Moving in daylight,
Looking not
For eggs,
But for
Arrests.



Beads

Dee Allen.

The only physical reminder
I have of my grandmother
Mixed African
And Native American

Is a string of coloured beads.
Crafted, strung together by her
Aged hands whilst sitting in bed, gifted to me
At age 27. Her way of telling her Afro-Punk grandboy:

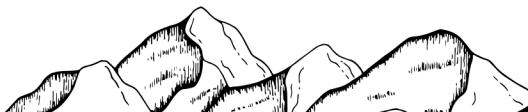
Never forget your roots.
Roots running deep
In each tiny bead
In Afrocentric primary colours:

Blood of West African
Southeast North American tribes—Red.
Skin of the first people on Earth
Responsible for firsts—Black.

Jungles, woodlands taken
Out of greed and conquest—Green.
Shining sun, restorer of biology
And good vibes—Yellow.

Sole remnant
Of my beloved,
Of mixed heritage,
Hand-made bridge

Between continents
Expropriated,
A string of coloured beads
I label as “nothing fancy”



Yet wore on special occasions
With black for the black
Recalls my grandmother's unspoken plea:
Never forget your roots.



D.D.G.*

Dee Allen.

Drop-dead gorgeous
Women are where you find them.

Some will say
At cook-outs, at nightclubs.
Some will say
At college campuses, at strip clubs.

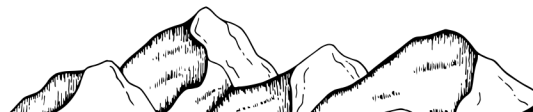
Might I suggest

Namibia
Senegal

Where the Khoisan ladies are?
Where the Fulani ladies are?

Indigenous beauty.
Worth a second look. And a third.

**Drop Dead Gorgeous*



On Cooper St. Tjizembua Tjikuzu

The wind takes from sky
to street—
arranging and rearranging
the yellow leaves
plucked clean from young
oak trees lining the road.
Gray clouds creep
southward,
preparing the landscape
for the inevitable.
I have gone to Delaware River
five times in a single day,
lamenting what will be lost,
soaking up the unpredictable
late autumn sun
before the impending
white gloom and glory
begins its sermon
on the meaning of solitude.
No green to lean on.
No blackbirds singing.
Only the cold blue
landscape of memory
to carry the day.



Hood Pastoral

Kassidi Jones

O— the way the sidewalk cracks
a childhood open. The line between
my grammy's spot and the homies'.
The line the splits my palm spits
cherry-bomb pop red on the pavement
when I fall off the bike I must've forgotten
how to ride. And even beneath my cracked
hand, a dandelion, of all things. A dandelion
I've crushed and stained and perhaps absorbed
in the process. And who patched me up?
Hard to say. Too many shepherds, too many porches
to tell. The only beautiful thing I remember
is how beautiful everything was before I knew
what I didn't have. How quickly the lawns changed
on the bus ride between our apartment
and the private school. How quickly there were lawns
once the place where my mother sleeps
went out of sight.



kinblood

Evan Loving

I am/was: Ghanaian. Congolese. & the shadow of the beast: in white folks' eyes:
pupil: massa's guilloric barge unto: burial sites ancestral: cottonblood. ginblood.
crownblood. kinblood. cane/ichor. bloodmines: bloodsoil oceanic. saltgnaw:
spectre of chest cavity, hallowed spiritual: blackboned. barracooned.
conundrums: (inside the chest): guineaman rot: ol liberty's hanged oaths: We,
The People whose birthright is eponymous with: shackle. chattel. devilskin,
eclipsed. clipped lip: a bit tongue's sick worship. & the bit. or: hound snarl spit
snapping at the music box we coffined our suffering in, all to make holy limbs
in heaven break. then rapture the american dream/scape with none too good to
play God: The Ghost: or: The Asphyxiation of Christ: a son's exchange with the
dawn: freshblood: without flesh picked clean of the bones.

Look, ain't nobody dead still singing my name into a crisp genesis each
morning for me to let y'all tar my mother's good gifts: my eternal becoming:
like blackbirds spun from the blues— duskslick: the promise of sun-worn
wings: tuning skies the key of resurrection.



When

Jasminum McMullen

Let me put it tuh-yuh like dis
When yuh mama die, everything about life sounds stupid, even your breath.

Let me put it tuh-yuh like dis
When yuh mama die, t'ain't nobody gonna stan at the winduh watchin fuh yuh.

Let me put it tuh-yuh like dis
When yuh mama die, the phones ring then stop.

Let me put it tuh-yuh like dis
When yuh mama die, you gon go through some changes.

When yuh mama die,
Let me put it tuh-yuh like dis
Y'know what it's like to be friendless?

Let me put it tuh-yuh like dis
When yuh mama die, whatever woman making you had left to do witcho self, done.

Let me put it tuh-yuh like dis
When yuh mama die, everyone she ever known comin' to the fune, claim they know her,
true, versions of her, but dassit,

gotta have her blood understand', gotta have her heart
tuh understand',
gotta have her worry, understand,

they mawrn moments, you
you mawrn the severin'
you got dem silver cord tears



i thought i could tell you this story

Alexis Raymond

the one where my skin is not the subject
the object
the focal point

but i can't tell you the story
the one where everything comes together
perfectly enough to present it
with your bow on top

i can't tell you this story
the one where i overcome
where i persevere
where i do better

generations
and generations
and generations
later

i thought I could tell you a story
one where i hold your hand
make all the negative positive
shine brightness into the dark

but i can't tell you the story
of the beautiful black princess
that's saved by the wise words or her father
i'm dressed by rats not mice

there isn't a monster
there's a group of men
who sit behind their desks
determining my rights



who make laws that enforce
to keep my hands on the steering wheel
bullets lodged in my chest
while white tears shed from their living room

i thought i could tell you the story
where i overcome a space that suffocated me
red hand over my mouth
demanding i stay silent

scared to put words on the page
for your comfort
to make sure you could go home
smile in the mirror every night

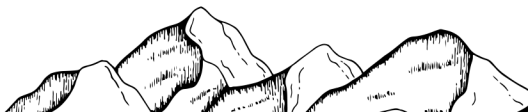
i can't tell you the story
where the white moms
hold space for your
black babies

don't you see?
i am the face
the memory the shame
that threatens their existence

i thought i could tell you the story
where the unnamed is named
the middle passage crossed
with no blinders on.

the one where we honor
where we teach
the history of the brutalized
raped and destroyed

there's no safety in this cage
the one your god, giver of all forgiveness,
the one you pray to every night
wrapped me in



i can't tell you the story
that ends in my sureness
that my skin is not a sin
for your white redemption

i'm scared and—
i really thought i could
tell you a better story



gravelly point

Ilma Qureshi

sometimes a poem escapes through your palm
like a white bird
you wish to hold it—
write of sunlight and kisses
and it hops over to the sky

sometimes you wish to lean into metaphor
and share secrets without sharing at all
and like a loud-mouthed friend
it spills all you wished to hide

sometimes you wish to lean in
look hard at your palm
and notice all the ridges
the way some lines stream like waves
and others end like an abrupt tale

and the poem, like a chirpy child
leans you outward
'look, how the street is shining with rain'
'look, how the frog is making hoops'

do you remember the last time you met a soulmate?
the way conversation streams and flows
and how you do not need to touch
to lean into a soul
but there are times
when you want to write about the first time he took your hands in his palm
and stars shimmered through the sky
and suddenly at Gravelly point the world seemed to have stopped
you could not believe how colors could spill and pour and shoot through the sky

the way traffic lights seemed like fireworks rippling to the sky
the way seagulls streaked the ocean bed and you looked into his eyes and gave a sigh
the way a candle burning by the bedside so melted your world and you could cry



the way his arms looped around your shoulders
and his eyes said things you did not wish to hear and yet you did
and you gave your heart
cracked and full, into his palm

in moments like these, a poem sits down
coddles in your lap, leans down, looks into your eyes
and submits its all to you



Untitled

Triston Dabney

Black boys
always have to be men
when the streetlights come on,
when the sirens come conjuring their name,

My grandmother's knees
have coughed up enough ash
from laundering us with her prayers,
And my mom's daily hugs,
Each a skipping stone
trying not to yield
to America's gravity.

What left
do we have to give
from our blackest well?
For even the sun
enjoys driving out
the dark of the night,

Instead,
Ask me this,
Ask me how my people learned to trust
the darkness for direction,
We could all learn a lot
from how they put their faith
in things not felt or seen
to help them move forward.



Done for Love

Triston Dabney

We sit at the dinner table in silence
this Wednesday evening,
Tyra is critiquing an 18-year old's figure
on ANTM in the background,
Father has eagerly slipped into his gym clothes,
Mother has just finished pressing the dishes
into their corners,
And we each fox trot our peas around our plates
for the 3rd time this commercial,

It is because I said,
"He has pretty eyes"
That the saltshaker has mouthed
more than us in the past 5 minutes.

I know that love makes
practice of the escape,
but what is escape if not to
try to return to something eventually withstood.

Maybe it was done out of love,
Out of fear,
And maybe we were just doing what we could
to fit all that we could
in between dining chairs
and the water stains of the mahogany.



Well Done

Laura Cesarco Eglin

I'm done with boxes and moving, done
with packing and remembering
where things are and where
they go, done with leaving
and being new,
done with a list that expects
items to be crossed out—
done with what weighs
on the shoulders, on my head.
In my head lives the heart
heavy and done.

Done can be finished. Done,
gone
undone.

I'm done with doing as being, done
with this past participle. I want to
participate, as in bring the gerund,
as in being done with endings
as in leaving what weighs me down
to done.
I want to gerund the pause and be
still.



Coming to Terms

Laura Cesarco Eglin

Peeling a tangerine, slowly. Calling it mandarina because I need the extra syllable to take time, to touch the peel, feel it orange in my hands. Rip it apart. How different things are when we open them. How we do it. I look for another word that will lead me in without violence. Mandarina. Unfurl and release. To let go of force. Mandarina. Let the opening up happen of its own accord. Offer the hand. The rind on the plate, sometimes curling, sometimes many hints of what it used to be. A word as a contract with all of its letters.



Remember.

A.V.B. Truitt

You don't remember.

You don't remember the nights we spent on the phone.

Now you call her late at night.

You don't remember the stories and sonnets you would read to me in the night like scripture.

Now she's the only muse you'll ever admit to having.

You don't remember the way you would look at me as if I were something worth all your time.

Now she's your messiah, something holier than I ever was.

You don't remember the inside jokes.

Now you've told them all to her and forgot I wrote them first.

You don't remember the shared food.

Now you buy her coffee and she ignores that you don't like the taste.

You don't remember the songs we sang together.

Now you've taught them all to her.

You don't remember walking side by side as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

*Now I see her stride next to yours like a parasite, something with its jaws deep into your
flesh.*

You don't remember the warmth we shared.

Now she's made you so cold you don't remember the sensation of our heat.

But I do.

I remember.

I can't forget.

Some days, actually

I find that I envy

That you can.



Blue

Regina YC Garcia

The color blue indicates a temperature even hotter than white. Blue flames usually appear at a temperature between 2,600° F and 3,000° F.¹

The poet said...

She said—*Grief is not the only geography I know*²

& my heart thumped loudly in affirmation & sorrow & fear
for I can plot clouds that hang dark & black & and low
whose water cannot quench
the blue flames of this fire
bluest despair, bluest depravity
driven by derision & exclusion & death...
The bluest eye scorches outward & deep to find
the flaw in poverty & pain &
it glories as it sees no
promise running wild across a loveless terrain...
This bluest burning orb rotates inward to its god
and offers sacrifice

I know well the land charted as chasms ever-widening
swallowing dreams
I know well the land blackened-blue from the unchecked
flaming of self-anointed authority for
in this land, the brilliance of sky & the cool of sea
have no say
& layers peel away
incinerated into nothingness
as we burn inside-outside-in
embodied in horror

This is the land on which I live
I am brought here to stand atop
to add to the mounting mourning of
ashes & darkened weary bones

1. from Laurel Chen's "Greensickness" — <https://poets.org/poem/greensickness>

2. <https://www.wonderopolis.org/wonder/what-is-the-color-of-fire>



The Crime of the Shade Tree

Phillip Border

Today, no one forgave
The felony of my feet
Walking past a neighbor's house
Or the air I breathed easily
between each step.

It is my thirteenth birthday
And I am man
According to the steel blue
Eyes of the law, wishing me
What they wish for

All black men. In my country,
The sky over the long, looming
Branch of a live oak tree
Darkens, and I begin to age
Forever out of youth

Beneath it, cuffed and stripped
Beyond dignity in the officer's
Search for drugs and whatever
Dangerous imaginations
He goes on inventing for me.

He wants to know what I was
Plotting with all those damn
Steps and breaths in between
Walking past my neighbor's house
But even more, he wants to

Club the crime out of my skin
Beneath the cover of the shade tree
While above, the half moon
Continues to darken among
All its bright badges of light.



Brother to THE MAN

Phillip Border

He thought he could ignore the cries
He heard in the streets,
And forget how
He profited from them daily—

With his cool incredulous
Silence, a privilege. He numbed himself
With the news, taking comfort
In the indifferent opinions

Of handsome strangers, eating up
Every word through all those
Pretty white teeth. Meanwhile,
Smoke began to rise in the city—

For now the cries for justice
For the never ending list of names
Of the lynched, had suddenly begun
To burst into flames. Then big

Brother is all over the screen
In full uniform, with the live feed
Cutting out on his black boot
Adding another name to the fire.



POV: You are unaware that a few hours ago, 10 Black people were killed by a racist mass shooter in a Buffalo grocery store. Much later you will learn how the killer saw a white face, said “sorry,” then moved on to shoot someone who looked like you.

Carmen Barefield

You are scrolling through a popular app. The next video is of a white woman—all arms. Not like the choreographer, the Black woman who only got pennies for creating the dance that this white woman now butchers. She'll probably get another brand deal just for her smirk and the off-beat fan of her faux-tanned arms. So you scroll up and up and up. You scroll. A pit opens in your stomach. The algorithm breaks. You are unaware the app attempts to hide something because the videos are no longer for you. Just more “popular videos” full of white faces. The app attempts to keep engagement with more POV “your hot boyfriend is jealous and angry skits” where white hands pretend to choke you. More white faces. More AAVE being chewed apart with a gory giggle. More milky white faces. More white violence. As they look. At the camera. At you.

You close the app fast,
escape and finally
see the awful news.



Honey

Devyn Riddick

after Langston Hughes

Baby, don't be mad at me.
Your thick lips pucker,
the music gone from your body.

What happened to:
the crescendo in your smile
the treble in your voice
the bass in your hips?

Come inside, baby.
A city stoop in the sun
is no place for a precious jewel like you.

Dance with me, baby.
Forget about the funk, let's jam to jazz.
Please give me back your rhythm.
I'm tired of the blues.



So beware, dear traveler, of this place unknown and untold
For once you enter, there's no escape
 You can barely find words to describe your fate
The horror and madness, they will consume
And you'll be left to wander, forever in doom.



Tree Roots and Make Believe

Michelle Petty

Moving into a new neighborhood while Black
requires forethought.

Walk my fluffy white dog at different times of the day.
Neighbors meet me with her at my side.

Count 'thin blue line' flags.
File the knowledge away.

Walk down the block to the police station.
Introduce ourselves to the local cops, just in case.

I relax, just for a moment, to enjoy the ocean
California spring winds bring to my front porch.

I swing in my hammock and watch the children
climb among tree roots, play make-believe.

Stick my hand into my pocket and find another
golden badge sticker. We have so many.

Can I make a bulletproof vest out of them?



Stardust

Michelle Petty

We are star stuff.

Dead stars gift us beauty.
The same materials
that made particles of light
so bright they lit our sky
from unfathomable miles away?

They live in us.

If we are made of the heavens
and the earth, perhaps we can
learn to approach our bodies
with reverence.

My body-mind, made of stardust,
earned a PhD in the halls
that denied my ancestors.

My body-mind, made of stardust,
re-fed to remind myself
my ancestors were worthy
of taking up space.

So am I.



Damnatio Memoriae

Hollis Toussaint Druhet

For Gregory Pardlo

See a path worn by trenchcoated confidants
running double-wheeled two-seaters
hitched to a horse fleet.
See the brown mirage cut roughly
with boxed-in wind
signaling Mississippi in heat.
See mantels inscribed with the names Clark and Lewis.
See fishhook, pull fresh gut, and tassel iron
prior to your prayer solemnly sown for release.
See dandelion and milkweed, blue dye ironed
beneath an officer's gold collar
clutched to his neck receiver. See plenty possum,
old eyes bloodshot beside dice
pooling amber mischief.

Do not speak. See —:
Men wandered these mountains, fished ravines
clean, save for buffalo spectrals' low steam
still nuzzling the messy field.
Men became stem, flaxseed, maple leaf
and more. Told the whole lay could be theirs,
a half-truth, becoming one with the border
distinguishing acts of creation
from the rhetorical source.
See rusted rail tracks made plain
by invisible men's hands, their bodies
labored in pain. Sticks of nauseous dreams
planted in rockface, blackened ash would reign
in choked designs of pulsing flesh
set in a false relief.



A heritage: your great grandchild's palms
shaky with last winter's glistening cold.
Plenty efforts went unpictured, unspoken
yet rehearsed today: raw knuckles
aspiring to shape dry clay. And the voice expires.
See the loose leaf, the figment of imagination
chasing hollow shadows in memory's void—
chipped carpal remaining a whisper
unbeknownst to strangers who exclaim daily,
bowled over by some image of nature
untouched by man.
See the image, how it withholds the threatening
pleasure of speech. See the length of limb
becoming a stalk of tree, almost gratuitous
in the sun's red-blooded motion.



Black Womxn

Tonia Dixon

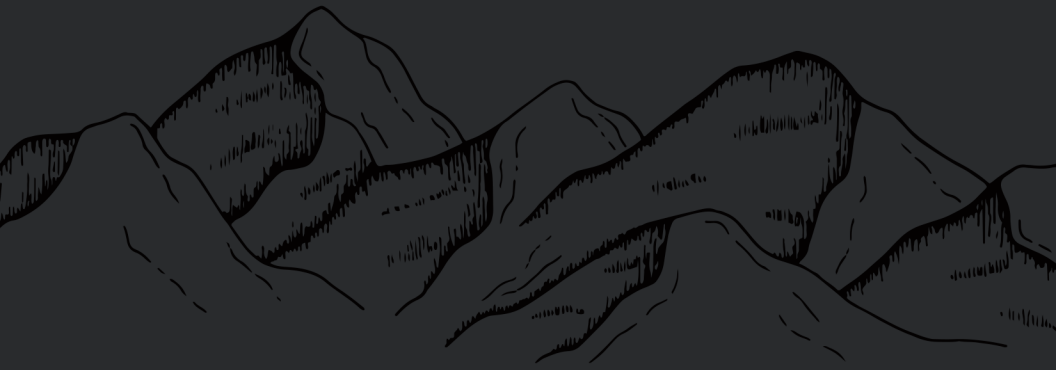
We are not made
of leather
or stone
or anger
but blood
& bones
& sinew

We are earning
our affections
with tender
touches &
dreaming of
soft landings &
grace for
our faults

We are not made
of brass plates
or steel hearts
or tree bark
but collard greens,
sweetened iced tea &
peach cobbler.



FIN.



ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Ciara Darnise Miller, a native of Chicago, holds both an MFA and MA in Poetry and African American/African Diaspora Studies from Indiana University. She also received her BA in Liberal Arts from Sarah Lawrence College. She has published poems and academic essays in such collections and periodicals as *The Whiskey of Our Discontent*, *Break Beat Poets*, *Mosaic*, *Fjords Review*, *African American Review*, *Callaloo*, *Muzzle*, *Alice Walker: Critical Insights*, *Chorus*, and many more. She currently lives in Chicago where she serves as writing professor at DePaul University, an Afro-American Studies professor at Kennedy King College, and the CEO of Miller's Learning Center (MLC), a test prep and career-support company.

henry 7. reneau, jr. writes words of conflagration to awaken the world ablaze, an inferno of free verse illuminated by his affinity for disobedience—is the spontaneous combustion that blazes from his heart, phoenix-fluxed red & gold, like a discharged bullet that commits a felony every day, exploding through change is gonna come to implement the fire next time. He is the author of the poetry collection, *freedomland blues* (Transcendent Zero Press) and the e-chapbook, *physiography of the fittest* (Kind of a Hurricane Press), now available from their respective publishers. Additionally, his collection, *A Non-Violent Suicide Poem [or, The Saga of The Exit Wound]*, was a finalist for the 2022 Digging Press Chapbook Series. His work is published in *Superstition Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Zone 3*, *Poets Reading the News* and *Rigorous*. His work has also been nominated multiple times for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net.

Ellen June Wright consulted on guides for three PBS poetry series. Her work has been featured by *Verse Daily*, *Rappahannock Review*, *The Good Life Review*, *Passengers Journal*, *Scoundrel Times*, *Banyan Review* and others. She's a Cave Canem and Hurston/Wright alumna, a 2021 and 2022 Pushcart Prize nominee, and was recently nominated for Best of the Net 2024. Follow her @EllenJuneWrites on Instagram.

Jennifer or Penofthepeople, a moniker that has stuck since she began writing, is a new writer with an old soul. She writes her personal stories of grief, loss, and discovery, while other times, it's a story that needs to be told. *THINGS* is her first published work. She has been featured on *The Well*, *The Dumping Grounds*, *The Author Show*, *105 Publishing*, and the *ArtsXchange* in Georgia. *THINGS* has hit Top 100 on Amazon in the categories of Poetry by Women, Love Poems, Women's Poetry, and Top 100 on Kindle with a strong presence on the Top 100 list in Audible within her genre. In addition, *THINGS* is currently circulating within the Sarasota County Library System.

a.Soul (unraveling) is a lighthouse of vivacity for survivors who have experienced multiple forms of abuse, minorities, and women.

Phillip Border received his BA in Literature from Frostburg State University, where he served as chief editor for *Bittersweet Literary Magazine*. He earned his MFA in Creative Writing from Carlow University, where he served as the inaugural emcee for Carlow's MFA Alumni Reading Series, *Raising Our Voices*. His published works have appeared in *The Amistad*, *Coal Hill Review*, *BackBone Mountain Review*, *Rigorous*, *Wingless Dreamer*, and other journals. He is the two-time recipient of The Allegany Arts Council award for best poetry.

Dana Tenille Weekes navigates the worlds of law and policy in the swirl of Washington, DC. Some of her poems have been published in *Apogee*, *Torch Literary Arts*, and *A Gathering of the Tribes*, and will be in a forthcoming issue of *Obsidian: Literature & Arts in the African Diaspora*. She is a 2022 Pushcart Prize nominee and finalist in Rhino Poetry's 2022 Founders' Prize. Dana is the daughter of Bajan immigrants and is the first in her family to be born in the United States.

Traci Neal is a spoken word artist listed on Poets & Writers and resides in Columbia, SC. She is featured in *The New York Times*, *Mahogany* (Hallmark) writing community, *Sheen Magazine*, and many other media publications. She is the 2023 second-place poetry winner of the National Career Development Association, the 2023 second-place winner of the South Carolina Career Development Association, the 2022 third-place poetry winner in the Global Arts and Poetry Competition for the United Kingdom Thalassaemia Society, and the 2021 second-place winner of the virtual poetry slam "Taking It Global" in Toronto, Canada. Neal uses her poetry platform to help bring awareness to non-profits in need worldwide.

Will Simon is a wordsmith, and she looks up to her African contemporary female warriors as proof that she can be anything she wants to be.

Dee Allen is an African-Italian performance poet based in Oakland, California. Active on creative writing & Spoken Word since the early 1990s. Author of 7 books—*Boneyard*, *Unwritten Law*, *Stormwater*, *Skeletal Black*—all from POOR Press; *Elohi Unitsi* (Conviction 2 Change Publishing), *Rusty Gallows: Passages Against Hate* (Vagabond Books), and *Plans* (Nomadic Press). He also has 68 anthology appearances under his figurative belt so far.

Tjizembua Tjikuzu is an essayist and poet from Aminuis, Namibia. He graduated from the Rutgers-Camden MFA in Creative Writing program in 2021. He has poetry and essays published and forthcoming in *Doek! Literary Magazine*, *Obsidian: Literature and Arts in the African Diaspora*, *Rigorous Magazine*, *Emperean Literary Magazine*, *Columbia: Journal of Literature and Art*, and *Consequence Forum*. He currently lives in Philadelphia, PA.

Kassidi Jones is a poet representing Connecticut (begrudgingly). She is pursuing her Ph.D. in African American Studies and English at Yale. A 2017 Callaloo fellow, Kassidi is an alumna of the Excelano Project, UPenn's premier spoken word poetry group. Her work can be found in *Black Napkin Press*, *Winter Tangerine*, the *2019 Best New Poets Anthology*, and other interstices of the internets.

Evan C. Loving, MFA, is a 28-year-old Boston-native, poet and writer. Evan was a member of the Emerson College 2017 CUPSI Team and 2017 National Poetry Slam "Last Chance Slam" Team. Evan's poetry intersperses panoramic scenes with dense, heat-forged phrases exploring a range of subjects from Greek mythology to alternate realities and Jazz legend Charlie Parker's legacy. His background in spoken word is evident in the richness of his sense of sound. He earned his MFA from Rutgers University-Newark and his poetry is published in *Apogee Journal*, *Jabberwock Review*, *Juked*, *The Offing*, *Lumina Journal*, *Wildness x Platypus Press*, and others. Follow him on Facebook: @CuttsArtistry and Instagram: @fg_loving.

Jasminum McMullen's last three streams were *I AM A Virgo*, *Black Mirror*, and *Real Housewives of Atlanta*. Her writing is forthcoming from *BLF* and *Black Lawrence Press* and has appeared in *Baby Teeth*, *midnight & indigo*, *Past Ten*, and *A Gathering Together*. She writes in Chicago and holds an MFA in writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts.

Alexis Raymond is a Black poet who writes about the complicated life of someone raised in the whitest state in the Nation. She writes to honor her identity, voice and experiences. While trying to connect with others through complex emotions and learning how to live with them inside of you.

Ilma Qureshi is a doctoral candidate at the University of Virginia. For her research, she focuses on South Asian Studies. Born in Pakistan, she writes short fiction and poetry in Persian, Urdu, and English. Her work has appeared in various literary journals such as *The Roadrunner Review*, *Quillkeeper's Press*, *Streetlight Magazine*, *Tafheem*, *Tareekh-e-Adab-e-Urdu*, *Active Muse*, *The Ice Colony*, *Rigorous Magazine*, *Tiger Moth Review*, *Poetry South*, *Last Leaves*, *Audio Times*, and *Wingless Dreamer*, amongst others.

Triston Dabney is an Oprah Winfrey English scholar from Baltimore, Maryland. Published 10 times in the past year, he hopes to publish a collection of poems and attend an MFA program in the near future.

Laura Cesarco Eglin is a poet and translator from Uruguay. She is the author of six collections of poetry, including *Between Gone and Leaving—Home* (dancing girl press, 2023) and *Time/Tempo: The Idea of Breath* (PRESS 254, 2022). Cesarco Eglin is the translator of *Claus and the Scorpion* by the Galician author Lara Dopazo Ruibal (co•im•press, 2022), longlisted for the 2023 PEN Award in Poetry in Translation. She is also the translator of *Of Death. Minimal Odes* by the Brazilian author Hilda Hilst (co•im•press), which was the winner of the 2019 Best Translated Book Award. Cesarco Eglin is the publisher of *Veliz Books* and teaches creative writing at the University of Houston-Downtown. More at lauracesarcoeglin.com

Axel Valentine-Baroque Truitt is a young biracial author, actor, singer, poet, and playwright currently in his junior year of high school, from his beloved hometown of Seattle, Washington. He enjoys theatre, history, classical studies, and reading. His biggest inspirations are Anne Rice, Stephen King, and Edgar Allen Poe. He currently lives with his parents in Southern California.

Regina YC Garcia resides in Greenville, NC and is a Poet, Language Artist, and English Professor at Pitt Community College. She is published widely in a variety of journals, reviews, and anthologies. Regina is the 2021 National American Heritage Poetry Award Winner, a 2021 and 2023 NCLR James Applewhite Semifinalist, and is the transitional poet in The Black Light Project, featured in an Emmy-Award winning episode of *PBS Muse*. She additionally has poetry and voice work featured in Tulane University's *Sacred 9 Project*. Her book, *The Firetalker's Daughter* was released by *Finishing Line Press* in March 2023.

Carmen Barefield (she/her) is a poet and writer living in Salem, Massachusetts. She is also a Watering Hole Poetry Fellow and Associate Editor for *Zoetic Press Magazine*. Some of her work can be found in *Popshot Magazine*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Kissing Dynamite*, and *littledathlit*. You can find out more about her at carmenbarefield.com.

Devyn Riddick is a female aspiring writer from southern New Jersey. She has recently become an alumnus of the Rowan University Writing Arts program. When Devyn isn't working or writing, in her free time, she enjoys reading a good book.

Ruchi Acharya, the CEO and Founder of *Wingless Dreamer Publisher*, has garnered acclaim for her poetry book, *Off the Cliff*. A summer graduate in English Literature from the University of Oxford, her work has been applauded by numerous publishers worldwide. When not writing, she explores historical buildings and ancient ruins, all while residing in Chennai, India, cherishing its coconut water, palm trees, sandy beaches, and sunkisses. Visit her online at ruchiacharya.com. "All worries are less with wine."

Michelle Petty is a professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She researches higher education pedagogy and Writing Studies. She has previously published in the fantasy journal *Astral Waters Review*, *Zingara Poetry Review*, and *Spoken Girl Magazine*, among others. Making space for creativity during motherhood and her professional life has been a challenging pleasure.

Hollis Toussaint Druhet is a Midwestern writer living in Champaign, Illinois. He is a recipient of the Lawson Prize for Poetry and his writing has been featured in *Lolwe* and *The Bell Tower* with a publication forthcoming in *Bacopa*. He received a B.A. at Purdue and is now pursuing a Ph.D. in English Literature at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

Tonia Dixon is an English Professor at a community college who teaches English Literature, creative writing, and speech courses. Teaching her avocation serves as an impetus for her greatest passion—writing. She writes when there is nothing more to say whether scribbling in journal pages, crafting poems, or playwriting. She writes to comprehend the chaos and bliss of life.



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