“...to be unaware of one’s form is to live a death.
I myself, after existing some twenty years,
did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility.”
—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*
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Cento Against Invisibility

My soul has grown deep like the rivers,
has geographic power.
I saw it as a girl but didn’t know I was taking in myself.
Say: I have felt this before, it’s soft, human,
a splash quite unnoticed,
and how similar that world bleeds
song, before dawn reaches in, before you turn the page or a woman,
all the women who could have known me.
To tell her glories with a faithful tongue
I will claim poetry as my own
unseen kingdoms making them hard to place
among so many words. There are not enough words
grief and anguish won’t let my body say. Sometimes we
big girl poems, stories, curses
more than just endure
like unpicked fruit. No matter when
and how many times she broke the whiteman’s rule,
she like a restless bird
moon marked and touched by sun,
it is this woman's skin that covers me,
all of it, to the heart.

Sources: Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikky Finney, Marilyn Chin, William Carlos Williams, Gary Jackson, Jamaal May, Lucille Clifton, Phyllis Wheatley, Patricia Smith, Sandra Kasturi, Matthew Olzmann, Roger Bonair-Agard, Jaki Shelton Green, Sherley Anne Williams, Kevin Young, Michelle Cliff, George Moses Horton, Audre Lorde, Kelly Zen-Yie Tsai, Li Young Lee.
House Cats

If a lion attacks a woman while
in captivity and no one is around
to hear it, what sound does
the lion's paw make when her neck
splits against the ground? If you spend
your entire life preparing for lion attacks
and it still happens, who do her
parents blame? Will they C.S. Lewis
him into something nobler?
If she leaves the latch open,
if the lion fumbles with the language
of skin and can’t control how
his claws scissor through her
paper flesh, if she is breaking
protocol, will they call it rough
play or just an accident?
When your protocol is a Bible
and a bookshelf of happy couples
kissing for the first time at the altar,
is it naivete or just an accident?
Her father says she was never
rebellious, only frustrated when
she couldn’t come close enough
to feel fur and violent quiet snug
between her fingers. My father
will say how I was attracted to
men with toothy smiles, desire
rippling from their core like a low
purr, how I was always curious.
When touch is taboo you will find
yourself willing to be killed by the cat.
In my entire lifetime in the U.S.
there has barely been one death
per year by captive felines, but another
person will be sexually assaulted
before this poem even finishes.
Believe me, it would be so much simpler
to talk about the smaller statistic,
to say that lions can’t hide in house cats
to not wonder why he was more concerned
with contraception than full consent.
I wish I could just say men are made
of willing teeth and cowardice and I
am a meal of easy fear. But the word
survivor is a hospital ward filled with
jagged limbs and lost joints. The newspaper reports that the lack of lacerations at her throat means the lion must have read the wrong signals. My skin doesn’t hold a single puncture.
Years later, after his fifth ignored text and an apology lying in my inbox like a dead bird, I wonder if I am a failed trainer without the decency to let go, that if masochism is allowing him to gorge is martyrdom denying that you made yourself meat?
   No, I can’t tell you what I was wearing.
   No, I can’t tell you what day it was.
   No, I didn’t run away.
Every time I call it date rape I imagine draping myself in stolen trauma, a little girl crying lion over invisible injuries. But I can feel them manifesting as hesitance when my lover tastes like hunger. How loud do I forgive myself before it’s just another scream?

Before her death the woman wrote, “I have been learning how to care for these animals. I’m getting there.”
The sound the lion’s paw makes is the same force it takes to bite back at guilt.
   No, my parents don’t blame me.
   No, it’s not just an accident.
   No, you can’t prepare for lion attacks, but yes, you can recover.
I have been learning how to care for myself. I’m getting there.
I’m finding my own answers.
The Lottery

I. Without even asking my name
the customer, who has been
chattering exclusively with my
white manager for twenty minutes,
acts like he can expect an explanation
for my skintone because there’s not
a lot of color where he’s from.
Oh, he’s mixed, too, with French
and Irish and Vikings that were
the first to conquer England and maybe
my history has a few surprises
because it’s so different.

II. In college, I am only black.

III. Brown wrinkles and bones
approach the back of my uncle’s
church, his voice a bouquet of
Spanish syllables I haven’t
yet learned to hold.

IV. In college, I am yellow.

V. Smiling between the drops
of sweat sliding down his face,
the man in the free comic book line
wants to know if I’m Samoan.
Responseless, he continues that
my people are beautiful.
Who?

VI. In college, I am only slightly
brown, says my performance partner,
because no one would mistake me
for black, right?

VII. Behind the counter at
Baskin Robbins a man matching
my tan waits until my mother slips
into the restroom before inevitably
inquiring where I’m from. After five
moments I finally have the good sense
to offer America. Peering into
the ice cream he murmurs
like he is burying a daughter
Oh. I thought you were Afghani.

VIII. Darting towards the parking deck, the man on the street states, “I don’t know what nationality you are but they should make more of you.”

IX. Once, a Moroccan dress and crayon-thick cat’s eyes convinced my classmate I was Egyptian.

X. When I reprimand a white boy for trespassing on school grounds in third grade, he brands me nigger. I know that I know the word but can’t decipher its object.

XI. Everyone can see the island is Asian once you tell them.

XII. After I answer Latin to the man at the teacher’s conference asking about my foreign language, he skeptically returns, “Nothing alive? You know, people look at you and expect a language” like I am the Racist’s Rosetta Stone.

XIII. I used to recite a proud list of myself on command one quarter Vietnamese one quarter white half black with a little bit of Cherokee and Blackfoot and Ethiopian but someone always wants to fact check now like I mistook myself along the way, like I walked in with the wrong numbers.
Erasure Poem
(An erasure of Asexuality Archive’s “I Am Asexual”*)

I don’t feel
men. women.

all

gay.
straight.
bi.

I’m

fake.
a problem.
a condition.

It’s not love.
some

shame
I don’t want to .
want you.
*I Am Asexual

From the pages of Asexuality Archives

I am asexual.
I don’t feel sexually attracted to anyone.

That’s all it is.

I’m not gay.
I’m not straight.
I’m not bi.

I’m none of the above.

Asexuality is real.
It’s not fake.
It’s not a hormone problem.
It’s not a way of running from a bad relationship.
It’s not a physical condition.
It’s not an attention grab.
It’s not an inability to have sex.
It’s not an inability to love.
It’s not some way to be “special”.
I don’t care if you have sex.
I don’t care if you don’t.
I don’t want to shame you.
I don’t want to convert you.
I don’t want to recruit you.

I just want you to understand me.
If you should ever find yourself sitting in the front of a class on racial diversity, ignorance eating its way through the roof of your mouth until it splatters acid across your tastebuds
do not ask

Why does it seem that
black women
have benefited more from the women's rights movement?

What we will hear is

Who let them colored bitches off their choke collars?
Doesn't a college degree look enough like a bone?
Don’t you know all tails twerk the same now?

Our skeletons will remember
when they were worth less
than table legs, when woman
was a locked house
and home was a burial site.
We will feel our scalps
expanding into petting zoos
thronged with the roaming
fingers of a thousand strangers.
Our sternums will sink
with the weight of an
unborn son’s face,
the one we pray cradled
by barbed wire
before white picket fence
because God knows
what target practice
they will paint him
in a neighborhood like that.

We will know when we hear it
the snap of a trap door.
Phan Thị Kim Phúc

has a name that is not her own,
a figure forever clad in brown paper
skin flapping at her elbows,
arms bent like a tangled marionette.

Napalm Girl.

We want her black and white and blazing
but the heat two generations removed.
We want her yellow angel,
crying child, village always a funeral pyre.
We want her nóng quá, nóng quá naked
beneath the blue smoke sky.
We want an emblem before a mother,
a sacrifice before a scholar.
We don’t want to know
if she made it out alive.

She made it out alive.
She scraped her black coffee cup
heart from the ash of bombs
and fire jelly
and grew a family on foreign ground.
The Miss Saigon we couldn’t trick into suicide
is reaching the children we’re still charring.
Thank God she believes in forgiveness.
Thank God she is less picture than person.
She is more woman than flames, than God.
curiosity

in the wild bird store
there are no birds
but there are socks and sacks
of safflower millet peanuts sunflower hearts
all stacked in multi-colored mountains
by the front windows
mixes for woodpeckers or juniper berries
and papaya for the particularly indulgent
libraries of suet cakes which are really
thick packages of animal fat loaded
with orange or insects or hot pepper
for the squirrel-cursed
towards the back shelves of cotton
and wooden bird houses
feeders like little cottages or the tubes
banks used to use in drive-throughs—shoop
up went the money into space
crowds of fountains and stone basin baths
half a dozen cds laden with songs and screeching
dried corn on the cob and tree nuts
for the squirrel-blessed
hummingbird feeders snaking off a trellis
like bright glass trumpet flowers
a hanging garden of wind chimes
a case of sparkling binoculars
a fairytale’s worth of gnomes in stone
at the counter by the register finally
find something truly exotic a northern brown
girl probably not the owner
her markings hard to make out
there should be a guidebook for this
maybe you ought to ask where
she’s from with all your white
pleasant teeth don’t just stand there
ask her
Avocado

My blackness is an avocado, sometimes called an alligator pear. What I mean to say is, my blackness is scale armor, has secret teeth buried deep in the bright buttery meat. What I mean to say is we are still bodies being eaten centuries after we were picked from the tree. What I mean to say is, of course they mistook us for fruit, hung us from the branches and buried at the root. Even so, my blackness ripens, browning deeper every day. That is, what I mean to say is my flesh is growing into its blackness, gentle cradle for my hard seed of a heart. What I mean to say is my blackness is a pit I carry hidden from the chawing, thirsty with sprouts to split apart.
Notes on the Rapist’s Nose

i. Thought I saw its silhouette
in an armchair
by the big windows
while leaving work today.
Also a month ago
at a red light
in the rearview.
My mind kept replaying
a glass rainfall
that refused to happen.

ii. Aquiline, I think,
but also absurd like proboscis.
Less elegant
than picking off the easy prey.

iii. Its shape is the only thing
headbutting could have changed.

iv. The women at the nail salon
always know I’m part Vietnamese
by the shape of my nostrils.
This kind of recognition
is wasted on good people.

v. Once, it nuzzled a lazy
circle around mine,
an almost perfect
mimicry of intimacy.
Pork Chops

Earlier this week I told you I left five pounds of pork chops soaking in blood and thawed ice, a puddle of probable rot the way the ones before you sunk their bicuspids into want, no chewing while they waited out the growth of their man manes.

How when I woke up to the raw stew I saw nothing to salvage, days' worth of bones and fat and food thrown away. Now,

I do not cry in your arms in the kitchen for either waste; my mind has learned to gristle better than it brines. The reasons are all forgettable, only that my heart was sad warm meat, and yours forgiving of thoughtless slaughter.
If Schrödinger Moves In

When toeing the black carpet
that is not a carpet on our
bathroom floor and retrieving
rat-sized blockages from
the drain as the tub
gurgles into a tepid swamp

or when, shuffling into
the kitchen after five
snooze-swats, he swings
the fridge door into a fringed
arc and spots a slim
pencil-like line clinging
to the milk jug

or when his favorite shirt,
the button down that imitates
Rothko’s *Blue Divided by Blue*
with a cotton sorrow
sprouts the beginnings of
something like a dark scarf
even though it is August,

if there is no cat,
he will need to remember that.
Contrast

Our protagonist sifts through a bowl of denim-colored fruit, apple peels bunching on the counter like frayed cuffs. Burrowed against the inside of the bowl her periwinkle bananas ferment into a soft mash; on Tuesday she intends to steam the kitchen with the smell of cornflower banana muffins. Outside, the cul-de-sac flushes with the rust of sunstill (once, the sky changed to the color of skinned peaches, she has been told. Once, the sun shifted like a restless hen). If she walks through the door now the landscape will greet her cobalt snap with sprays of carrot grass, oriole sidewalks stretching thick into the distance. She will pop.

This is what it means to be alive now: to be in motion is to be in constant composition. She will stand hours on any street corner looking for the right flecks of ginger in the cement. Shabby patches of hair cling to her scalp from a spectrum of navy washes. It used to be that a goldfish in an azure globe could be startling; now, they are props in every film. But aren’t the movies so realistic? All those phosphor dots in strips like little candy buttons? Isn’t that pleasant sugar rush of color what they call art? Aren’t we all sucrose-glazed children hunting for the next pretty thing to consume?
Vagina Dialogue

While trying to convince my vagina that she is in dire need of a haircut, she reminds me of the last time some man critiqued her curls, the way the razor scathed her face into a landscape of livid hills.

For the most part we two are indifferent roommates, absent when we can be. The first time we really gazed at one another was during a homework assignment for Vagina Monologues, me bent in an awkward trance before the compact mirror, she an origami of pink and purple flesh. Just staring.

Now my vagina is trying to go all Betty Friedan, says it’s a losing game, my coy batting of the word children as I browse photo galleries of someone else’s, pausing on a baby with my lover’s nose, my eyes, all some creamy brown stirring of us like a coffee bar. She says I’ll be sorry when he gets bored. She says she’ll dry up, lips tight, or else scream bloody murder from the uterus, she says anything to prevent the possibility of cold gloom creeping into my bedroom again. It doesn’t matter how he still greets her with a kiss despite the coarse, sprawling tangle, all the sweet heat she can consume. How can it matter when she is so unseeing, small, her defenses only made of soft?
Ace for Short

Imagine waking up to a world obsessed with asparagus. Middle school boys doodling boiling pots all over their homework ask in code how many stalks their classmates have consumed. Mainstream rappers salivate over its fibrous crunch, crow about women with doorhinge jaws. Pop stars coyly hint at the “feathered texture” in their lovers’ mouths. Poets are torn between calling them “verdant woody spears of ecstasy” and of course, the always edgy, “Damnit, I just want to eat asparagus with you. Raw.” Parents swiftly sign forms to keep their children out of home ec classes; the best way to eat asparagus, some say, is to not eat it at all. Comedians claim that we’re chowing down all the time, even if we have to fix microwave dinners for one. And in the midst of this asparagus-crazed thicket is you: someone who may occasionally have cravings but could probably last years without it. Cookbooks are fascinating for their science, but you can’t remember the last time you saw someone and thought, “Wow. I really just... want to eat asparagus with them!”

For the average person attraction is a cafeteria line of choices; we slop on whatever looks edible and call it “like,” “lust,”even “love.” Sex is always king of the buffet, the dessert with the biggest billboard. But for an asexual the plate probably looks pretty full without it.
I mean, you have aesthetic attraction, holy crap, you’re gorgeous, can I just stare at you all day?
sensual attraction, let’s hug and cuddle in a blanket fort right now,
emotional attraction, wow! I love you!
not to mention romantic attraction, wow... I love you...
The meal isn’t always less enjoyable when lacking; sometimes it’s possible not to want one or even care.

Asexuality is not a choice any more than any other orientation. It’s not a religion, not repression, not the ability to create another human independently, not another word for “I haven’t been getting any so I’m going to be clever and ironic about it.” It’s not about experience: some aces are virgins, some have sex constantly. After all, most people wouldn’t walk up to a straight person and ask, “Are you sure? Have you ever tried gay sex?” Asexuality is not trying to co-opt the queer struggle, is not an invitation for rape jokes, does not make someone less human. Asexuality is just not interested in your asparagus, but sure, some of us will eat it (though we prefer cake).

Being ace is like spending life tripping over the sagging, hand-me-down sweatshirt of heterosexuality before finally finding a fabric that fits. It’s like trying to do multivariable calculus on your fingers and one day being handed “y;” it doesn’t solve everything, but at least now you can ask the right questions. Sometimes labels are the hall passes through normality, the comforting shorthand for “there’s nothing wrong with me.” Identity is learning to name and rename the myriad of shapes in our lava lamp spirits: there is so much more to feast on in all of this glow.
Prayer For A Dominatrix

Blessed be your riding crop,
your toes a harvest of sweet grapes popped into mouths.
O, you dungeon goddess,
paddle handler, bearer of the cross with all its rivets and straps.

Take not the name Pandora;
this box of bullwhip tips and leather lingerie, may they give you your giving.
May the needy receive.
Let the fetishists still find the kindness of your grisly snarl and be fed.

May your hands never want for shackles, rope, or cuffs. May your ankles never want for lips. Praise be laces and hips, heels and slits. Blessed the bare flesh, every inch. But most praise be to your always open ears. You, patron saint of human touch I cannot be.
The Curse

i. The waxwings in my painted field
guide were an imagined smoothness,
buckskin feathers like tiny brushes.
See how the red and yellow tips might
flit across the sky with a Pollock dash?
I kept my mouth an eager splash of
names and song. I kept my eyes
hungry for a flicker of their sound
from the woods and prepared for
distractions: a blue jay’s violent screech,
a begging blackbird, a cardinal bleeding
through the bush in the backyard.

ii. The waxwings outside my window
hushed me with unexpected reverence
at their elegance, my face so close
I could have peeled the bandit masks
from their eyes. My best friend on the
phone asked what? what? I did not hear
them steal her bit by bit in their beaks,
every year a fist-sized fluttering of excuses.

iii. Seven years later, the waxwings dripping
themselves across the foggy branches beneath
my balcony were a Japanese watercolor of
weak tea, the sheet music for silence. By then,
the man I did not see coming had happened.
When I could look no longer, they melted
through the moist cloud like little banshees.

iv. The waxwings ornamenting the morning tree
are a witness of frantic squeaks and clicks. I want
their magic to be too late; they, who have pecked all
my best parts clean. But their chatter remains restless,
fevered, their small bellies thrumming with want.
After the Murder

“JASON: Let me bury these dead boys and mourn them.
MEDEA: Never. My own hands will bury them. I'll take them to Hera's sacred lands.”
-(Medea, Euripides, translated by Ian Johnston)

Of course, Medea is a wet hiccup when she gets there, can't even be bothered with the waiting box of ambrosia truffles on the table or the honey goat milk bath drawn by some demigod or sub-spirit, doesn't matter anyways, like anything could compare to the smell of that tacky bastard Jason’s burnt crisp bride (which she will never know, as a matter of fact, her revenge only enacted from afar). All that whining about security for the family’s future as if he wouldn’t be Minotaur manure but for her, Medea, as though she hadn’t chopped her brother to pulpy pieces just to save his worthless ass, all so he could propose to some teenage—

Out front is Grandpa Helios’ sun chariot, and within the two children, lifeless (now by the Corinthians, now an accident, now her own rushed decision), the harnessed dragons trying to catch a gory whiff, stomachs rumbling like motors. No good, she says, her hatred shriveled to a sigh. All the witch art in the world and history will only remember she who couldn’t keep her kids out of the sword’s swing. Maybe the south side of the temple for the graves...

It’s only then when Hera appears, pats the bloodied palm in her own, her brown cow eyes mother warm. Medea has known from the moment she left that the meddling goddess would not bring the boys back to life, would not offer apology or reparation for tricking Medea into love, would not say I know, Sweet Pea, or It Gets Better.

It doesn't. Instead, she lets Medea crawl into a nest of peacock feathers, tells her
to save the burial for morning, but mostly they share their jealous hatred together like a candy bar. Mostly, she just listens.
Separation

Sliced until the tip is sharp,
the bamboo stalks prick
through the supine victim’s skin
like a patient stitch, still sprouting.

Cradled in the low belly of a boat
the intended’s lips crust with milk
and honey, the only sound the hum and buzz
of insects picking at
soft bowels and softer flesh.

When the drop hits, the pain
is a relief. The art is in the moment before,
the water’s slow squeeze like a fist
hovering above the stalagmite of brow.

Your goodbye is a flimsy reed,
a toy canoe, a child’s sigh,
an insult to the artists I survived before.
Retelling

The sparrow didn’t die so much as appear, dead, 
an eyeless white tuft on the brick walkway, 
hers slack yellow legs and six toes 
pointed in delicate curls. 
Nearby squats the apartment I pass daily 
with its bedroom where I could not say no because 
adult women do not say no, 
they say thank you and more 
and of course, yes!

He is a ghost story, little friend. Being dead 
you will understand what it means to feel 
your back concrete stiff, the unseeing fright, 
the sky suddenly nowhere. 
There is nothing brave in retelling him. 
You and I could have had it much worse: 
after all, here we are, 
skeletons and feathers in the pine trees’ shade, 
the wind still summer warmed, 
two ghosts entirely intact.
Reboot

When I first heard how DC had deaged our Justice League for the reboot it read like a lazy plot twist, superheroes suddenly shrunken back into quarter life crises, decades of camaraderie reduced to awkward introductions (like God knows when Batman picked up all those children sidekicks). Who desired this: Superman barely graduated from work jeans to costume, Green Lantern all greenhorn eager, Wonder Woman wrapped in identity issues tighter than her lasso? As if generation millennial, stumbling towards stability, asked for a reflection. As if watching my own parents loosed back into their youth (my father a demi-god of football and funk music, my mother an artist unlearning to call me mistake) might draw me closer to them. See, here, how Diana and Clark might make love midflight now that all their wisdom is gone? See, here, how my mother wades in a warm hope, my father’s touring and groupies still some small obstacle. Every obstacle is small: the manager firing my mother for my father’s black, delayed graduation, endless needs of child me. Yes, hear how far future screams are from this couple’s gentle, as though history were pencil sketch simple, erasable, pain as preventable as our wrinkles.
On Asking My Mother How She Feels Vietnamese

A tongue dreaming of prawn crackers, beef fondue, rice wrapped in banana leaves.

Boundless chopsticks clicking to pick up toast, scramble eggs—strangers in the silverware drawer.

The stone dragon sleeping in my closet, jade-scaled, guarding the other secrets.

Where did we bury the mahogany Buddha whose belly flopped fat and lavish above the TV set?

Where did we bury my grandmother’s accent or the first fistfuls of long, hoisin-black hair chemo clipped?

Some cool cellar of memory with the patience of mung bean seeds, awakened to shocked trôi dạt ơi as easily as heaven and earth can be parted with the wide soup spoons she and I renamed shovels.
Sehnsucht

Dear Dr. Wallace Ray Peppers,
I am pleased to inform you that I, who have been handed your name, am next in a long lineage of awardees for African American Literature. Have you ever felt your blackness a consolation prize? I only ask out of curiosity.

Dear Dr. Wallace Peppers,
did you know Wilson Library has a fourth floor? I followed your black ghost sass there after checking out every book on you I could find. I think I spoke out of turn last time; I hope we can trade interest for forgiveness.

Dear Mr. Wallace (may I call you Wallace?) Peppers, it took two slow weeks to release the interview recording. I let my own father drift farther into indifferent conversation, but to you I am willing to give patience. You imprint of feet in waving wheat, I chase and I chased and I chase.

Dear Mr. Peppers, I wasn't no leader, I was a follower you lie to the interviewer, rhythm warped by ancient equipment. If you’d waited 25 years I’d have known your laugh better, maybe. But if you’d waited, maybe I would not learn to love the things I’m most afraid of (southern and black) being.

Dear Wallace, how do I unwhite my writing? Would it be easier to unreason your body from lupus, bring back the cells? Your friend described your unwritten book, The Things They Have Said to Me. I wish I could tell you we are not still being killed, that erasure is not still a slow death unseen.

The first time I meet you my mentor, your mentee, reenacts your reaction to the faux pas he made shortly before being hired: Oh honey, you stepped on
your dick. This is how I know for sure
you are charmingly honest the way
I wish it was with all my great loves.

Wallace, even though I know what it is
to be measurements, pieces, I wonder how
you can never be a person whole again, your
story only uncovered in obituary and hearsay
by the stubborn willing. Wallace, I am sifting
through the ashes of a stubbled field. Stranger,
I am wheat set aflame for you too late.
Batman the Father

The first Robin is the one everyone remembers best: the swell of my pride, a self-portrait that won’t stop smiling. He ran away the day I stopped calling him “old chum” and started telling him to wipe that disgusting clown smirk off his borrowed face. But he keeps flying home anyways. His forgiveness is an explosive I am still trying to disarm.

The second Robin rages like a speared creature, can’t ask questions without raising his fists. He calls justice love that compromises its morals. He will never stop hating the good man in me.

The third Robin thinks that combat is an equation, was born to crack codes before bones. His empathy is exponential. So when he says, “I don’t want to be Batman” he means he is already working on a better solution.

The fourth Robin plummets into catastrophe like a mistake made animate. She is so willing but she waffles more than strikes; her guard is the easiest to rupture.

The fifth Robin snaps the word “father” like an expectation. Swallowed in the honeycomb of his mother’s adoration, he reminds me often of the perfection of his design. But he is a starved dog so desperate for orders he spills blood just to be told “Soldier, stop!”

But sometimes I dream of a sixth that looks just like her mother twisting across rooftops with an equally feline flick. “Batman” is her favorite word second to “Daddy;” she uses them interchangeably. Gotham is a play castle and she is a princess in body armor. Here, I have finally perfected the formula. Here I can trust myself to stop training my children
to be just like me.
Not Supposed to Happen

i. Must be the swelling number of phone calls this month. Before I can prepare my father to prepare himself the words crack open like split eggs, the watery white of survivor, the bright glare of rape. When my grandmother found out, she nodded at my forced naivete, insisted on a lack of experience, smothering. My mother blamed sin. My stepfather prayed. But how easily I slip into sympathy now, excuse the occasion, downplay through comparison, it's not like he held me down in an alley. Months of practicing acceptance like posture break with my father's voice. He guesses wrong twice, can't recall the name until I do. But the rage is the same, some animal terrifying in its Cerberean quiet. What a danger awakened. What a killer could he be. What explanation for all the days I've shoved inside my filing cabinet heart, the drawer always forcing itself open.
ii. Suppose he will wait for the weekend to recount a childhood terror. Suppose there is a cousin. Suppose this cousin is many cousins. Suppose he is grateful they are women. Suppose his other daughter sleeping deep within the house will one day be a woman. Suppose we give her acrid heirlooms too numerous to count. Suppose she, too, grows into grief’s husk or hardens like a marble. Suppose she already knows our stories are only bits of shell, the raw run of *survive or survive.*
Conversation in Transit

One quarter is enough
to say *xi muoi* so that the
Vietnamese man does not
correct my syllable shuffle,
but rather reminisces on
dried plum pits in porridge,
a gift for the sick. To this,
I think grits. It’s not so
different. While we talk,
he does not inspect my
eye slant or ask through
which side my experience
passes as though these
tastebuds were tributary,
my birthright a stream.
I, who have barely
steamed a dozen bowls
of rice to my name, once
refuser of language lessons,
am no halfbreed here—
right now, in the doorway
of an acquaintance's
apartment. The man is
recalling watching his
cousins shed their
appetite, how they
carved the homeland
from their mouths, ate
only the white off all
the rice. He says thank you
without saying thank you.
I am at least enough to
know he means *cảm ơn*. 
Whitewash

_for Connor Hawke_

When the next issue of _Earth 2_ slides onto screens and stands, your face is the plot twist. Can't call it winter coloring, that paleness you're sporting like a new full quiver, always some halfbreed archer as it was, now with thinned lips, pinched nose, all that wilderness bleached right out, all that history gone like grass stains. You're your daddy's boy now, and isn't that what you've always aimed for? His blonde crowning your world map in reverse, colors sucking backwards into blank. Sure, you can be kyudo and kimchi when convenient. Hours of relaxing creams, sitting through the fuming stench of burnt hair, I get it: when your skin says _burial_ you can only hope to blend. But on the second Earth, Connor, ain't no white people coming back black. Meanwhile, on your old Earth, another brown boy goes gone.
Comic Book Death

"Mutant Heaven has no pearly gates, only revolving doors."
— Professor Charles Xavier, X-Factor #70

Some fans will tell you it started with *The Death and Return of Superman*, how issues of mourning later readers raged at the revelation of a catatonic state, our Man of Steel less human, more Jesus with a mullet. But what can you expect when Marvel and DC envision Death as a woman you can talk to, ogle, fall in love with?

If *Marvel Zombies* and Solomon Grundy are separated from miracle by a mere degree of gutspill, then imagine I reboot Cyborg, we can’t tell Spider-Man from his clone replacement, another Robin fakes again. What then? If your loved ones can always resurrect, fresh flesh, their goodness still intact, from what are they being saved?

And yet, all that waiting: every hour earthquakes clapping their jaws, two hundred bodies burned to cinder, four more knot a noose, shoot, swallow something poison, our god and hero lying comatose in his Fortress, frozen as a processed meal, any hope of purgatorial dreams interrupted by the constant sound of ending.
Five Portraits of *Karōshi*

Somewhere in a Tokyo office a man flattens across his desk, paper tower an impending lean, eyes closed, body rigid with only sleep, his heart my heart, his heart attack—mine

or

I was created with thirstless veins, a tongue with no taste for wine, a nose with no desire for powder, lips that will not smoke, so God blessed my brain with autophagous teeth

or

circuits are only temporarily malfunctioning, the pain is only the sparks spitting against my steel guts, the pain can be deprogrammed, close all windows reboot now please try again

or

if someone demands the wood of my cross I will be too preoccupied with calculating its efficiency, measuring limitations, I will be begging *please, let me make a new one, better*

or

they will not know to find me until the unanswered email, the meeting missed. The funeral song will be a chorus of ticking watches. Just to be respectful, they will cremate a calendar with my corpse.
Instructions on Reversing Paralysis in an Unwilling Tongue

Think of cliff jumping,  
the way your toes leap from the chalky bite of rock  
into a net of air.  
Do not think of the size of the cliff  
or how people could jump further  
and still land with graceful precision.  
These are the reasons you find yourself muted  
in the first place,  
the fist snatching your courage by its windpipe.

Before you sleep, peel off disappointments  
like a stale husk.  
Curl into the sound of shrill birds  
and neighbors screaming with laughter  
behind slammed doors.  
Set your alarm for the peach burst of dawn.  
As you wake, slap snooze exactly six times.  
On the last rejection,  
cradle the clock to your chest like a sick child.  
Know that Time believes in reciprocity.  
Know that healing is not instantaneous.

When hungry, carry your dinner in a grocery bag.  
Boil eggs for all occasions.  
Devour the melt soft flesh of ripened avocados.  
Decide someone admires you.  
Do not verify this finding on anything with petals  
less complex than chrysanthemum spikes.  
Allow yourself to find this frightening  
especially if you admire them back.  
Meditate on receiving and not the return.  
Yes, you do deserve happiness.

If your father calls, let him.  
Listen to his listening.  
Unwrap it like tissue paper.  
Save it for the moments when you forget  
he is trying his best.  
You are trying your best to collect what scraps are left  
so expect to start small.

When your voice finally peeks from your lips  
like the hatchling your sadness would swallow whole,  
distract yourself.  
Cut out collage art from pixels.
Blur the edges. Stuff the sides with shadow.
Discover a new font.
String it across the picture like a beaded necklace.
Remember when words were the sunny sounds
your tongue played with like a prism.
Plan a garden made of Lamb’s Ear.
Follow the pollen trail of a swallowtail.
Do not dust yourself in wysteria
or dip your hips into dark wet plum.
Wear the purple dress
because it is purple.
Uncomplicate.
Add more water than coffee.
Fold ingredients into an overcast blanket.
Let dry in April sunshine for 1-2 weeks.

For the moments when your will is a sandpit:
repeat as necessary.
When your brain is a thousand channels of static:
repeat as necessary.
When your safest places sink into a vacuum,
refuse to slam the knife of grief into your skin.
Learn to place it quiet, gently
into the shelf of your ribs.
Extract doubt like a foreign growth.
Flood the gap with every good gift Time gave you.
Know that now, when your timid tongue
approaches the incisor’s cliff edge
your voice will finally be light enough to take the leap.
Repeat as necessary.
Repeat as necessary.