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TO WANT TOO MUCH: POEMS

A Thesis Presented  
by  
JACOB PHILLIPS

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies,  
University of Massachusetts Boston,  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2022

Creative Writing Program

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TO WANT TOO MUCH: POEMS

A Thesis Presented  
by  
JACOB PHILLIPS

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## ABSTRACT

### TO WANT TOO MUCH: POEMS

May 2022

Jacob Phillips, B.A., University of Massachusetts Amherst  
M.F.A., University of Massachusetts Boston

Directed by Associate Professor Lillian-Yvonne Bertram

This collection of poems captures a contemporary lived experience and moment by documenting, engaging with, and annotating upon feelings of modernity, present and emerging technologies, mysticism and spirituality, and intersections with present-day social order and issues. Equal parts recording and response, this thesis is response to the strange and precarious precipice of a contemporary life, this state of being alive and always on verge of something new, something beautiful, something futuristic, fantastical, dangerous, decisive, absurd, magical. It is the poet coming to terms with his own identity, queerness, and role within a world marked by the dichotomy of extremity and conflation. He asks: what does it mean to exist as a young, queer, white person in this time? How do these times shape his life, both directly and tangentially? How do they affect his experience and identity, and, in turn, how do his identity and actions affect others? These explorations of contemporary America and personal identity

have a boundless framework, which this thesis reconciles with the inclusion of a set of poems based on the major arcana cards of the traditional Ride-Waite-Smith tarot deck. This selection from a larger card-based poetry project creates an allegory to the contemporary lived experience in order to complicate and contain it. These tarot cards, as A.E. Waite wrote, "embody and track the spiritual history of humankind, our souls coming out of the Eternal, passing into the darkness of the material body, and returning to the height, to a heavenly plane." This poet believes that this tarot journey, represented by the 22 major arcana cards of classical tarot decks originating over 600 years ago, has been replicated through the centuries purposefully; that it holds truth and power and is therefore a powerful lens through which to view both America's and the poet's own spiritual journeys. The poems of the collection thus explore a wide range of topics, engage with a poetic past and future, and explore boundaries of sonics, style, imagination, content, and form, including traditional received forms and individualized nonce forms.

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I am grateful to and humbled by the following publications who gave caring homes to some of these poems:

“The Chain & The Screens & The Fire” first appeared in *Writers Resist*

“Magic Squares at Christmas Eve” and “Talismans // Prayers” first appeared in *Response*

“My Porn Poem” first appeared in *Poetry Online*

“Fruit Picking” first appeared in *trampset*

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## Poetry Drag

I'll wear enough makeup next reading  
to earn a new name. You'll call me Kia Car,  
and some back row straight man will blankly ask  
if that's a family name. I'll roast his clothes

(and probably hairline too) and we'll laugh,  
move on. I'll never cinch, let this hog body  
breathe free. My death drop will be a slow  
and heavy thud onto the stage, and then

I'll just lay there until some other worried stranger  
calls for help. When my mother comes to the show,  
I'll wear her old maternity dress, show her I'm bigger  
now than she ever was with me inside her womb.

I'll squat, let loose a torrent, call it homage,  
the stage wet with reenactment. Critics will say  
I'm evocative, beautiful. Miracle all my own.  
When my father comes to a show, I'll lift my dress,

reveal a line of loaded cannons, all aching  
for spark and shot. A quick-lit match  
and I have them all by their untucked balls,  
breath held tight, their silence and eyes all mine.

I'll ease the tension, load a PowerPoint I made.  
We'll click through all the cars I've keyed, the marks  
that built me. Point and smile at artfully carved  
CRVs, ugly cousin Kia Souls

I've dug into. I'll wig reveal with each  
new make and model until my boy hair frees  
itself. The gag! No one would recognize me.  
*Then* I'll read poems, put you all to sleep.

## The Limitations of Science (Seven Tenets of Occult)

### I. *Evolution*

I dream of having wings. I fly in circles  
above the woods, out back beyond  
the gate. My father raises a rifle at me,  
pulls the trigger. Shoots. Over & over  
he misses, no matter how many times I  
circle. The vacuum trailing each bullet, the wakes,  
& how my feathers fold into them.

### II. *Great hierarchy of intelligences*

When I notice their unknowing, I stop  
thinking of my parents as gods. My mother  
begins to take my recipe suggestions.  
My father can't remember the #1 rock song  
of '83 ("Every Breath You Take"). They ask  
Alexa what the weather for today is.

### III. *Perception*

On the TV show, they finally see the sea  
for the first time, this myth of childhood  
books, dreams. I have no proof the desert  
exists, have never seen that much  
sand— but close my eyes & feel heat.

### IV. *Physical body*

I leave my body behind at the unexpected  
joy of the ice cream shop. *Whatever you want*,  
they say, & I become something outside  
myself. From above, I watch my hands, light  
so suddenly, point to coconut & chocolate  
waffle cones, the movement mine & not mine.

### V. *Subtler bodies*

In high school, a girl grabs my ass  
walking up the stairs, pauses to tell me  
my aura is orange. *How strange*, she says.

I spend the day convincing myself to love traffic cones, creamsicles, kumquats.

*VI. Universe of energy*

I remember two things from freshman year biology: *the mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell*, & the way Sammy arranged three pencils on her lab desk, each side of her notebook bordered, right before she started chemo & stopped coming to class.

*VII. Immutable justice*

Cause: John Porter picks on me.

Effect: I split Josh Porter's lip.

Cause: Josh Porter holds a grudge.

Effect: His eyes fixate on the back of my head every day on the bus ride home.

Cause: I brag about the fight four year later.

Effect: Josh Porter forces my face into snow & ice, pummels my skull with his fists.

Cause: Josh Porter is a cycle I don't yet know.

Effect: Josh Porter is always angry.

Effect: He drops out of high school.

Effect: He overdoses in his parents' basement.

Effect: His parents move.

Effect: I babysit for the new family in that house.

Effect: I see his ghost everywhere.

Effect: Our fists & their echoing.

Effect: He is the only person I've ever prayed for.

## **I have it all**

Yes, I have a balcony now. Two! One summer of working at a tech company, and look

what I can have. *Two balconies*. That's one balcony out front to judge the neighbors from, to watch

YouTube videos of stop-motion Barbie dolls cursing at each other from, to have that first mimosa

of liquid Sunday brunch from, and one in the back we never have to use. The luxury of extra. Yes, I have

it all now. One of those fridges that makes ice, like some sort of Fridge Wizard. A laundry unit

I don't have to share with the strange people living in 3A. Sink with detachable hose and *spray*

*function* like I'm the Queen of Fucking England, and a bathroom that can fit more than one body

at a time. A bed frame, like a real adult, and a couch, like a real adult, and a backyard I might barbecue

in, like a real adult. It's all so good— the lights so bright, the granite countertops so cool,

the crushed ice so goddamn crunchy— I consider doing the thing everyone does:

the cubicle, two monitors, office cafeteria soup and salad bars. Dreams can't buy

you a backslash. But the dream refuses to be lulled: that young poet in the Zoom

call, how I called her *talented*, her work *mesmerizing*. How she sobbed, *You have no idea*.

*I've been waiting my whole life for someone to tell me this*. How I sobbed, how we virtually

held each other, sobbed together. Our crying hard enough to be stainless steel, this sharing its own

carefully patterned tile, our love for this life  
sturdier than pine boards under my feet. This dream.





## 0. Ode to the Fool (*that blue distance*)

A classic graduation clickbait speech (the answer may surprise you): *If your friends jumped off a bridge, would you jump, too?* The speaker is a man child. Young, white, rich

parents paying for an NYU film degree. He says *Yes, you should jump, and here's why*. Some garbage about the bridge never really being safe anyway.

I resent that child for weeks, think of *White Wilderness*, Disney's lemmings and their mass suicide. That sea of young white heads nodding, all ready to jump

off the metaphorical bridge together. On one hand: who could blame them? That blue distance so far away we can't help but joke about dying all the time.

Houses we'll never own, student debt we'll bury ourselves under anyway. We'll gasp for breath no matter how we go. But Disney faked the suicide— bought lemmings

for a buck each, dumped them off a truck to die in the sea below. They did not choose to die, to *cast themselves bodily into space*. I want to scream, *We are not*

*lemmings! The jump and the bridge are not our only options*. But still: I make cliffs for myself, cower at their edges, watch myself fall. How foolish we all are.

## I. Ode to the Magician (*microcosm*)

I am in fifth grade when I look up at the cloudless  
spot in the sky after a storm, call it heaven. Imagine

a place where sand pours golden pink, Malibu Sunset  
on ice. Here I plant things in the sand

& they don't die. There is fire at noon  
& frost at night, holiness & reverence

shuddering my shoulders, tendrils tight-knotting  
my outer arms. It will take years to ease them

out. This supercelestial prayer of a place  
where Uranus & Neptune live past the sun.

Everything feels so important when you are beyond  
everything else. This dream just one step below

The World, this thing worthy of praying to each  
night, this dumbass kid legit saying O Apollo

because every god was real. This fantasy that made me  
become real, every god within & without

my body. This on-switch a light so dizzying  
I still wake up each morning & squint. A life

bent from nothing, from a few oxygen molecules  
whisked into leavened light & some breadcrumb.

This beautiful life of *lillies of the valley* & bar tabs,  
all the spirit you could ever want. This paradise of wanting

until I can't want any more. It is this endless cord,  
this serpent so damn starving always eating

its own tail & shit, that ties me here. This divine  
liberation, or liberation so divine that you become

reflection or otherwise realize that adults are just gods  
& that you are now an adult & therefore a god

of your own Creation. Havoc wreaked in the name  
of heavenly hunger, sky hunting & never realizing

the microcosm of magic & mercy manifested  
in your deity, this below so like the above.

## II. Ode to the High Priestess (homecoming)

Nyx & Persephone sit in a garden of rotting fruit

& darkened trees, flicking pomegranate seeds

into a windless chasm and laughing together at the Lord

of the House and how fixated the poor bastard is

on death & dying. They karaoke sing Britney songs

together, drunk off Nectar & an eternity of dusk.

*Shekinah*, their co-habitation. Life & darkness & everything

beautiful. They catch me lurking in the moments between

two worlds, whisper directions back: tell me to swipe right

on the man I'll love forever, tell me to buy a new car, all

the times to touch myself. They love to pray with me. Sometimes

Persephone shares her mommy issues & holds my shoulder

because she knows there are so many kinds of dying. They light

those candles for me, runways lanterned for homecoming.

These daughters of stars shudder winter & void & I know

there's magic in me. Some radiance shimmering sweetness,

my words milky with *malkuth*, their light spell sacred & stolen.

### III. Ode to the Empress (*Holy, holy*)

In

my dreams, you

open your arms

to me,

O daughter

of heaven

and earth,

place one kiss

on my head

for each star

on your crown,

let me rest

on your *gloria*

*mundi*. It is early

in my season

and the corn still grows.

*Holy, holy*, you whisper

to me.

I have been

baby crazy

for months.

I talk

about surrogates

with my angry

mother, see

Ben's face

on every child I pass.

I can't even

watch *Jane the Virgin* without projecting Ben onto her baby,

so everywhere I look is Earthly Paradise. House

of man, scepter of my world materialized.

This Garden of Eden,

*refugium peccatorum*,

is all I want— to bury

my full face into

softness of kin,

to love for unending

length of days. O Venus,

O fecund beauty, O secret

borne of woman neither of us

can ever hold— take me home. Guide me

sthough these gates to fullness, that secret beyond.

#### IV. Ode to the Emperor (*some wild thing*)

When I'm done wanting the babies, I wonder  
what fatherhood is. I wonder if my children will  
one day see my desk chair and think of throne.  
I am a second generation father; my father never knew  
his. But he managed with nothing else, took the globe  
in his left hand and said *I give you the world*. And he bowed  
his head to butt me with it, to *ram it into my skull* until  
I understood control, structure, something other than the animal  
world. He held me, arms inflexible while I shook the wild  
out, until I felt rigidity in my spine— the bank account  
and loan payments and managing a calendar—  
and I hated it all. But I was on my feet. Steady, stable.

O eagle of gold, executive of acumen, commanding  
chief and king of clarity: I am so *full of strange experience*.  
I am the ram, wild and still *lonely in lonely places*.  
I don't know if I understand you yet, see your fatherhood  
in the young curls of keratin sprouting from my skull.  
But I want to. O father, lead me to your pasture. Tame  
the feral in me. Teach this rough beast to be docile, to grow  
horns large enough to protect, to bring order to chaos  
and strength to these arms, so that one day  
I, too, might hold tight some wild thing of my own.

## V. Ode to the Hierophant (*no one else*)

A train stranger  
asks *What do you  
like of poetry?* I tell  
him beauty. My other  
words for strangers  
only live in distance  
so I don't know  
what to do with  
the man in front  
of me. He says  
*But I cannot touch  
it.* I grab his hand,  
run it over the page,  
make him feel  
the words, say *See,  
you can touch it,*  
make him laugh.  
He tells me a story  
even the internet can't  
repeat about a poet  
who prevented war  
between two warring  
tribes. Then he says,  
*You only want to be  
a teacher to force  
your students to read  
your poetry, no?  
Because no one  
else will? You want to  
finally have audience?*  
I don't teach my own  
poems but the small  
and insecure  
inside me winces  
to an even smaller  
cosmic knot. I did  
not know how much  
ego there was  
to be shattered.

bridge divine  
& human joint  
of everything  
& nothing echo  
of empty nail  
& called to serve  
dismembering &  
marbled members  
nun-hearted  
sacrifice & bull  
of god the tender  
places all over  
my orthodox  
these Apollos  
bald-eyed &  
brutal & blank-  
faced grand  
pillars & nothing  
can happen to  
the mundane &  
masses money  
messages &  
mum conforming  
pallor law &  
order just grand  
scented & great  
public & cast  
out lilies &  
white Nike &  
nurse me  
from health, O  
eucharist &  
mother & hurt  
footfalling &  
poem othered &  
energy sacred &  
taser pulse &  
gun or staff  
& amen amen



## VI. Ode to the Lovers (*and a science baby*)

*The sun shines in zenith* as he  
pulls back the curtains, lifts blinds  
to drown our room in morning  
light. He climbs behind me  
while I write. I tell him The Lovers  
used to look like the ten of cups,  
*marriage with a big gay rainbow.*  
He smiles, kisses me.

O great  
winged figure, *pour down*  
*influences* on us. Let us stay  
forever young, forever not  
*contaminated by gross material*  
*desires*, corrupted by years  
or change.

Give us a hundred more  
years, thirty thousand more mornings,  
like this. Give us this *simplicity*  
*of human love*, of making: waffles  
for brunch and love and a science  
baby someday. Give us your  
*twelve fruits* so that we may grow  
like trees of life and knowledge,  
*in truth and life*, until we are  
as beautiful as we look now. No hint  
of serpent or waiting for *fall*  
*of man*. Just two men,  
*unveiled before each other.*

## VII. Ode to the Chariot (*I'm a sham*)

I used to think my chariot shone, a sun  
crossing the sky. *Yes, everyone— watch it pass  
by. Watch me make your day, watch me outrun  
you all.* But now I know: the sphinxes laugh

at my stuttered responses, call me names and snake  
my cart in endless loops. My chest plate looks  
like cheap drag and my wand's from Walmart, fake  
metal flaking. My guiding star's Starbucks.

I'm a sham— but I still surf this bus, stand tall  
in this stupid swerving rickshaw, face this world's  
*perfection and light* and ruin and have the gall  
to keep my eyes up, ask for more. I learned

that sometimes even footing's enough. From here,  
I see it now, distant: something gold. Some answer.

### VIII. Ode to Strength (*patience a hearth*)

I expect something Nemean, something wicked and prideful and ferocious. But the lions are already subdued. This Leo season is frying and the lions find shade to hide in far away from our small section of fence. Unlike this zoo, history shows the lion's mouth

sometimes pried open, Herakles spreading fangs and grip turning to choke. The Marseilles deck's *La Force* gives us a Maggie Smith-looking woman opening maw, too, her brimmed hat haloed in infinity. Conventional strength, all arms. Sometimes, the jaws are *la forced* shut.

Jesus makes the lion *eat straw like the ox*. A.E. Waite no doubt thinking of closed legs with his *innocentia inviolata*, virtue and divine mystery of *sweet yoke*, union. But I think there is something in the flowers growing beside the lion, or in Wang's *vestal virgins* (always

a virgin). The strength in these tendings— the blossoming of flowers, stoking sacred flames, rarefying our own air in *sunbeams pure and unpolluted*. This patience a hearth warming my chest as I wait quietly for the lion to finally join us, stand beside us as equals. How

the willing tigers made me squeal, but these browbeaten beasts show me kindness I don't deserve, teach me something of patience. This kindling a light, a liberation.

## **IX. Ode to the Hermit (*whatever God lives in my chest*)**

God sent two lions to dig his grave, a crow to drop his last meal, and another old man to bury him, but Paul the Hermit died alone. A hundred years of prayer on cave floors and God held close in his heart, and still he died alone, searching with hands stretched out to heaven, his earthen body's nerve endings still yearning.

I fear my days alone— fear the way my brain goes violet and leaves my body in the shower, fear how hours slip into my skin so even God wouldn't notice me. I don't know the shape of solitude when it settles into my chest. All these things to fill the gaps until the loneliness leaves:

I text Julia *Strange to be completely alone* but the text contradicts itself. Spotify's autoplay algorithms in and I spend more time on Twitter reading comments than the posts themselves, and in a room so full of people there is no silence, no way to hear whatever God lives

in my chest. And I think I'm fine with that, with not knowing who I am with myself. There is an ache to solitude, to silence, that would break me, I'm sure, some truths worth hiding from the lamp. I am unprepared for the casting of shadows, for what mysteries mold from darkness.

## XI. Ode to Justice (& *how*)

here is what I know of justice:

the little boy who wore Batman pajamas  
until the cape crumbled. & how he loved  
vigilante justice & the idea that anyone  
could become a hero. The Batman Handbook  
he read through three times, the karate  
lessons and the things he has learned  
and not learned since then.  
& how he grew up.

how he now has brief visions of pushing all  
maskless people in front of oncoming trains.  
& how he says nothing.

how he drives & has visions violet with impact.  
people texting & their windshield glass  
necklaces, vengeful smashing of swerve  
into meridian. tongue dust white & angry whipping.

& how he says nothing: to the girl in the crop top,  
to the man telling her *have some respect*. & how  
a sympathetic stare is enough to ease guilt.

& how he stays quiet when the white boy  
says *those athletes are savages, trained  
like gorillas*. how easy it is to sit in the park  
while people die and people march about people  
dying. how easy to blame a pandemic, to lay still  
in sun and complain.

how wanting it matters so little. & how one day  
it won't matter enough to decline job offers.  
this game & how it is played & how it is won.

how saying something to conservative parents  
is activism enough & how even that doesn't  
happen anymore. & how silence can feel  
good, even.

how *he* is not *I* & how easy it is to remove  
himself from this poem, to slide invisible  
into white page. & how guilt absolves  
& how this poem is an act

#### **XIV. Ode to Temperance (threshold of my throat)**

I am angel, winged believer. Pious  
enough to close my eyes, make magic  
and turn away before seeing the flash.

I am human heart, bound steady  
in stone. I turn wine into wine, tongue  
into water into well. Swamp walking,

halo bearing. I am all this hazy gold  
and soft light, glow of some distant  
pulling moon. Some distant pulling.

I am stopping at a second drink. Balance  
of teetering love on one shoulder,  
swaying in lamplight. I am a fat snack

break, dusk walking seaside. I am  
the least glamorous fag of them all,  
the other ugly stepsister who left

the ball for the library. The depths  
of my liminal space, that threshold  
of my throat sliding fire into my chest.

That alchemy sweet like ambrosia.  
White meat, blanched and bleached.  
Trench coat of crows gasping for air.



## Self-Portrait at Twenty-Two

my eyes chase stars    call out Cassiopeia    her name a sweet summer

heat hanging, lightning-struck    a sheet drying, draped    over beach

side streets    your hand open    cupping constellations    empty stretch

toward horoscope    the horizon    close    closing    fathomable

the sky a blanket    boundless    & moth-bitten

pinpricks of light    this dark heaven    hiding fire

& feel the weight of it    those giant moths    their teeth

& the nothingness    the silence between bites

the very fabric of the universe    holy & dusted

milky scales brushed    trailed across atmosphere

& feel still

the weight of it:

eternity is a shaking    —*feel it?*—    chest & rocks too

insignificant to be    called small    to be called    anything

other than something new    all these tiny parts    sand becomes

a consciousness    a vastness    a ground holding    still against high tide



## Manifesting

At New Year's, my uncle rages. Cabin door slammed to cold and my aunt sobs at midnight. I lean in to you, say *I hope this isn't a sign of the year ahead*. The ball drops and it's 2020.

My best friend's dad dies and then so many other people die. So many sick. We are stuck inside and the sadness walls itself with us, molds to stippled pores of old concrete.

We continue to manifest badness. Maria manifests a micropenis in your figure drawing class, breathes it onto the model simply by saying it out loud days earlier. It's funny

at the time, but now it's just sad and he was a bad model anyway. I tell you to hurry off the phone before your stupid roommate blocks the bathroom

for an hour, and he starts running the shower seconds later. I say *at least we have each other* before travel mandates put a hundred miles between us. This is how a whole year

passes. When winter finally comes, I say *This New Year's has to be better* just minutes before our first COVID scare. We spend the evening apart, our turn to fight

before the ball drops. *It'll be better next year* is the last thing I say to you before we hang up. We don't spill champagne and the next day's rain holds off until evening.

## Algorithm 1

It goes like this: I use my phone on the toilet. The bathroom is part of the home is part of the office now. I check emails, left swipe to delete the ones from mailing lists I am too exhausted to manually opt-out of. I check work emails and make a list of students to respond to. The list is long because everyone is behind on work even though all of our bathrooms are offices now. I do work on the toilet before I take a break: open Snaps I don't respond to, read inboxed tweets sent by my friends and double-tap to react with either heart or laughing emojis. The illusion: there are only seven reaction choices. I use only two.

Of course I am not laughing ever, even at the funny things. Of course my heart is certainly there, inside me, pumping blood. And it pumps, so the heart emoji, at least, isn't a lie. I am here, awake, and unfortunately alive on this toilet. I check work emails again, just in case. I am always on the clock, here. Ignore the Poem-a-Day emails I used to read on the Red Line that now dirty my inbox for months at a time before I select *all unread* and mass execute them. I flush the toilet.

Bent over the sink like this, I think about new Twitter reaction emojis. Maybe a washing hands emoji to say *I am cleaning myself of this filth*. My Twitter is all irony and all my friends and I have the same Twitter feed. The algorithm knows we both like the fads, the jokes about gender reveal parties and dinosaur chicken nuggets and Applebees and gay pornstars and vibrators and other miscellaneous dick shaped things and Arthur and *Fuck! It's a Sunday*. We send each other the same tweets we've already seen. By the second reading, we wash our hands.

Steve writes his schedule down every day, his lists of Zoom meetings and deadlines in small, neat writing. He suggests I make a specific time for emails. I tell him he is probably right and then do nothing to change it.

## Zoë Kravitz looks into the camera

but she's really looking at me. My eyes ache from light, blue and endless, but I can't look away from her, can't break eye contact with this actress who is so good at crying and looks amazing with puffy red eyelids. Ripped jeans, loose tees, a never ending stream of baggy sweatshirts and cigarettes—her character is as messy as I am. *What am I trying to figure out?* She eases her way beyond the fourth wall to ask me, pauses to take me in: Cheetos crumb castle nestled into my stomach-chest moat, river of orange valleyed between my tits. This shlep has no answers for Zoë. In silence, I cling to her closer. *Thanks for tuning in. Next week on the sad lady show, we're gonna team up, fight the loneliness together.* And I want that, want to be sad together with cats and joints and reruns of TV shows, want to write seven-song playlists and send them to exes and work in a record store with my best friends. I've never liked New York but I want her shitty bodega coffee and her power strut as she absolutely fucking owns her own little stronghold of city. I want to live in this world where you can barely get by and still look into that camera at an audience cheering for you, even if they cancel you six episodes later. Then, at least, when you're hunched over on your front porch steps sobbing at two in the morning, you're the beautiful kind of tragic.

## **Front-facing camera**

I slap my dick on my phone  
for Ben, get cum on my front-  
facing camera, and for days  
I glow. Every selfie pearlescent,  
yes, haloed in white and looking  
like a message from God. This  
cumming producing a Second  
One, the holiest conception of light  
filtered from kneeled prayer on hardwood  
floors. Like maybe I sacrificed a cow  
or something, and now Apollo  
shepherds my Snapchats across  
the sky, the servers. I believe divine  
intervention is to thank for the heavenly  
blurring of my features until I notice  
the dried film, that rainbow shine  
familiar like oil spill in this single drop  
of cum. What good has semen ever done  
for this world, besides crime scene DNA tests  
and also everyone I know and also making me  
gorgeous for a few days? Nothing, probably.

## **My Porn Poem**

— after Ariana Reines —

i've closed the ads  
fingered

the seventeen tabs open  
reveling

deep warming violence  
hating

the world a bit  
less

lean male bodies vees  
sculpted

softer dynamics and struggle  
lesser

two evils both still  
evil

still the smaller one always  
cracks

open throats the air dragging  
desperation

and it all sounds the same  
tastes

like heaviness clenching  
pixelated

on tongues and cones  
naked

and writhing and hoisting  
hoarding

weighted with the sugar  
sweetness

of pizza delivery sauna  
towels

bathroom stalls fingers  
splayed

pulsing beach camp scene fireside  
circle

jerk and fleshlight  
frenzy

plastic cow doll everything and cash  
grabbing

hair desk bending body wetting  
web

cam sitting twirling shoving  
money

raining it's raining cold this world  
outside

i'll do anything to get out of the  
pouring

please let me give to you  
take

it all my self my gasp my browser  
history

i want it all gone i'm empty i'm  
ah

i mean pump i mean good  
person

i'm fuck i mean fuk yea i mean  
finished

## The Chain & The Screens & The Fire

— after Alexandria Teague’s “My Country,  
‘Tis of Thee” (arranged for Brazen Bull)”

Bellows and bolts and the king and the king’s rage  
at the price of freedom the fire the face like fire hot-orange  
on your screen first look at your phones the fire given  
to humankind hot breath fogging hot and he bellows  
at the man in chains as he has always done *the least racist  
person that you’ve ever encountered* may the eagle peck  
his liver the lives chained first look look the tweets may the eagle  
peck the *deplorables* on this rock chained a chain a storm  
of characters *filthy language* on fire and *you don’t want  
to live with them either* the eagle feasts on freedom  
*on many sides* on liver, regrowing feast your eyes feed your phone  
for the king *who has done more for African Americans Americans  
create their own violence* and the box was opened all 140  
characters and their hashtags *their own violence* released  
unchained into the world *then they try to blame others* the violence  
*on many sides* the Titan the fire the hero of culture  
*a really dumb guy* the liver always and his rock *the disgusting, rat  
and rodent infested mess* always returns and the hope on the bottom  
the hope *the birth certificate is a fraud* the faces  
lit up with the fire we hold our hands out *dangerous  
for our country let’s take a closer look* the chains tighten the liver  
returns *can you imagine the furor* the blaze the pecking eternal  
he watches tweets a furious hand *never discriminated*  
the violence *a terrible thing* the mud of mankind melting from the fire

## The Official Guided Tour of Kylie Cosmetics by Kylie Jenner

*Of course* her name's a neon sign.  
*Of course*. The M&Ms with her face  
on them. *Of course*. Pink umbrellas  
in the corner she's *never even seen*  
*before*. *I mean, it like never rains*  
*in California— but it's cute!* The rows  
of magazines a mile long, *every cover*  
*I've ever done*. The wall of lip kit colors—  
*our products as art*. Her “creative  
room” she chucks air quotes  
for and then runs them through  
the fluffiest chairs I've ever seen.  
The kitchen: pink plates and pink  
bowls and pink stained glasses, jars  
and jars of pink candy. *Welcome*  
*to my fridge*, she says, and shows us  
five types of boxed and glass-bottled  
water. *I'm actually not gonna show you*  
*guys this— blur that out— it's my favorite*  
*drink and it's really hard to find,*  
*always sold out. Maybe I'll share*  
*my secret one day. Of course,*  
*we have our paper straws.*  
Kris Jenner's *alcohol station*,  
*her little touch, of course,*  
her split-second nervous glance  
to camera before sharing giant lips,  
plastic and perfectly plumped, glistening  
in *signature Kylie color*. A bouquet of money  
flowers before we get to the showroom:  
*YOU'RE \$O MONEY BABY* and all pink  
hundreds, all to raise *a lot of money*  
*to help a lot of people*. The Ulta display,  
*I was jealous that they had one*  
*and I didn't*. She hair flips, glides  
effortless to the YouTube room, the Friends  
& Family Glam Room, pink velvet ropes  
and stanchions, pink marble shower;  
the Green Room connected to the Fitting Room  
connected to the Glam Room— *a place*  
*where I can do everything*. A champagne vending  
machine, *which is everything*. Nail glitter blushing  
in the glow of warehouse renovations, she sighs.  
*This space was nothing* before we created this.



## **Ritalin**

Ritalin, rid again  
of static and sonics  
inside my head,

these tiny men screaming  
tiny distractions, these  
tiny songs, white noise

in bed again. Ritalin,  
riddle again, I'm in  
fifth grade again, fingers

tapping the desk  
to a beat I invent  
to beat the beat out

of my head, till my brain  
starts to sweat,  
bones never knowing

rest. Need a second first  
date, my boy methylphenidate,  
need to lose weight again,

need to feel myself  
get thin, skinny jeans  
fit again, straight up

rollercoaster rising heart  
rate, need to block  
that dopamine, be sedated,

rehabilitated to a new  
emotional state, need to feel  
myself feel innocent again,

need that stimulant,  
that daily mediation,  
ignore contraindication,

conflate happiness  
with medicine,  
clean slated, life narrated

by that R<sub>x</sub> rattle, settling  
into a pattern I can regulate,  
again I'm hoping for the world

to stop its spin, need  
this Ritalin  
ridiculous.

## Broken Duplex for Breaking and Entering

We spoon until sweat. I dream of drowning, wake  
early to crack open your laptop, read your files.

I crack you open slowly. My oyster knife revels  
in rifling through, digging, shucking your secrets—

a red-faced gasping for anything that might  
secretly be yours alone. In this way I burn,

seeking that years-ago shit. Digging itch to know.  
I was born with big eavesdropping ears, eyes small

and boring, squint inquisitive. Tongue swollen  
from isomalt sweet talk, opaque panes. Like pressing

the same small piece of skin to redness. Addictive  
like peering over your shoulder until screen blue

appears retinal for hours after, those messages  
blue and green to god knows who (to not me),

blooming ache of unknowing. Blue-green and guilty  
me. The color of peeping, of pacing through

myths I've made and photos you've taken,  
through albums and iCloud notes and all

through the night wondering like ocean.  
This always ache for moments alone with your

old ways, the you before us, the other  
you I never knew. My downspiral spin

in your overnight bag, shrouded answers  
to spoon-feed my starving, this hunger unearthly.

## Coptic Love Charm to Obtain a Male Lover

*In one account, Seth arranges to seduce Horus and ejaculates between his loins; in another, he compliments Horus on his buttocks and tries to penetrate him anally [...] Seth believes he has defeated Horus because he has “performed an aggressive act against him.”*

— from “Egypt, Ancient” in *Gay Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia* (2000)

*you must dominate his entire body  
take his heart his mind lie*

*in his bed lie stiff, pose sexy fake  
fourth-shot tipsy lie to him lie*

*and let him compliment your ass  
pass a happy day between your thighs*

*lay down his member stiff slide  
his dick from field to field lie*

*and let him think domination until he comes  
to you choleric, vindictive mounting*

*until he cums greedy lie, catch seed  
in your hands hands full of all*

*goodness lie and hide collect  
that shit like a sperm bank collect*

*the demand of your soul mounting  
this task of a man this cruel fistful*

*come morning show your mother  
the desire of your heart open*

*hand and let her cry aloud, seize  
her knife cleave your hand full*

*of all the seed from you, this goodness  
this hand of like worth and let her cast*

*it off into the water the river  
the pathway mourn your hand*

*together then dab your member stiff*

with *sweet ointment* and (away

from your mother now) tug it  
until your heart pounds something

like: *right now, right now gather*  
your spunk your own sloppy

domination *into a pot* and go  
*to his garden* his soil, *field* spread

that *goodness* of yours like butter  
that mayo sweet and spicy on his lettuce

*put the seed upon them* all and watch  
in glory, horror as he feasts

that evening on those leaves *the desire*  
spread on his smile inside him

his body pregnant with the seed  
*the demand* gathering *mounting*

then: bring his ass to court tell them  
*the doughty deeds* of war let them

belch spit before your face let them call  
cum forth *summon the seed* the two

angry, frothing *right nows* unfurl as the river  
releases his cum your hand your lie

then: let *your divine effluence* rise  
from his gut his face and its panic

as your scum dribbles from his ear  
wipes his face milky, clean

this is how you *dominate his heart*  
*his mind* how you make them laugh

how you make him flee egypt only  
*to seek you to subject himself*

*under your feet right now, right*  
*now* how his *exceeding rage* this

violence *the pathway* unending  
this *pleasant desire* warps violent

*his entire body* *right now, right now*  
takes *love* unending *your work*

*your heart* *right now* *under*  
*your feet* *dominate him* *right now*

## Deep Blue

We write an invocation to a water god  
of our choosing, sprinkle the sea salt  
in the bowl, sip and bless ourselves.

*Hippie dippy*, I find myself saying  
to myself, which is exactly what my aunt  
said at Thanksgiving that one year

when I told her I supported Bernie. *You,*  
*your thrift store shopping and your liberal*  
*politics. You'll never want for anything*

*nice. That's fine, but some of us want*  
*more.* I can't meditate with her words  
saltating in my skull and the neighbor's

uneven sing-screaming of *Empire State*  
*of Mind*, but eventually Janaka talks  
me off these ledges. He guides me

into mental *mikveh*, deep blue descent,  
ultramarine light, a sinking into wholeness  
of being. Here, in some ocean gleaming,

a depth never reached before, a heaviness  
breathes upon me. A barrier nothing  
can break. The whole of the ocean

embraces me, pauses me in time.  
An invitation to exist slowly or even  
without time. Without limitation. Here

Proteus, his tentacle fingers, and ground  
Trader Joe's sea salt crystals invite  
a familiar tugging in my jaw, a sloshing

in my throat. The freeness of water  
filling lungs, that familiar tremble  
of something real, something magic.

## **& the Basalt that Remains**

Water is the last thing I am. Soluble, fluid, form  
-fitting I am not. Water is ritual, and my family  
has none of those. We're not even the type of white  
that practices yoga. On Saturdays, we all drink

screwdrivers together at the table before parting:  
my mother to the garage treadmill, my father  
to the grocery store, my sister to her bed, and me  
to my screens. This is as close as we get: tributaries

dug deep and parting. Water, I am not. Gushing, maybe.  
Brackish, maybe. The canals dug deep into ground,  
the channels, hard brick of aqueduct and rusted  
red pipes burst under the pressure of your home,

maybe. But mostly, I am lava: earth's burning  
impulse, stoutness of stone and glass melted  
thick, wet fire of destruction and creation  
that hardens on coasting. Resistance on impact.



## Potamology etymology: a retranslation

έτρεχε να μη βραχεί κι έπεσε στο ποτάμι • (*étreche na mi vracheí ki épese sto potámi*)

(literally: *he was running so he wouldn't get wet and he fell into the river*)

1. In cases where trying to solve one problem leads to an even bigger one.
2. Telling your mother that Maria offered to be surrogate leads to her turning her face away. Leads to her sobbing. Her tears *of or relating to rivers; riverine*.
3. In cases where trying to have grandchildren this way leads to something worse than not having them at all.

(literally: *she was sobbing so we wouldn't wed and instead she fell into the river*)

*snowmelt*                      Noun

water supplied by snow.  
wetter, surprised by knowing.  
wet, her supposed banning.  
welter, suppressed gnawing.  
weather the past yawing.  
wither, deepest hewing  
with her deposed offspring.

τα σιγανά ποτάμια να φοβάσαι • (*ta siganá potámia na fovásai*)

1. *still waters run deep* (literally “*beware of gentle rivers*”)
2. Still, with her back turned, it could've been deeper: maybe prayer. She is thinking: *any girl, now. Maybe Gina from that one summer job. A thousand fantasy tributaries stemming, ebbing from some dubious reservoir. (literally “barrier of genital reverse”)*
3. Still watery, she turned back. It could've been dire, her eyes: *my boy pariah*. She is sinking: end goal, no. My boy genes formed rotten. Some hurt jabbed, the son a fag. Tossed true blood, terrors staining anything crimson. *Do be us*. Reject queer.  
(literally  
“by way of genetic revery”)

*Etymology uncertain.*

*Most commonly explained as related to πῖπτω (pí'ptō, “to fall”). Could also relate to πετάννυμι (petánnūmi, “to expand”), which would make it identical to Proto-Germanic \*fahmaz (“embrace”) (English fathom).*

Missed communication explains our relation. (Tiptoe, "to fall"). Clouds low. Relatives, too, (put on a new me, "newly exposed"), would mock until I died. To call; to protest. Her manic, fathomed ("this baby") (anguished phantom).

## Charybdis

— after Melody S. Gee—

Her face creates  
a vortex from the wound,

Charybdis swirl  
of scarlet, pulsing ire

and heat. An eruption  
in the corner of her

mouth, the exact spot  
where her screams take

shape, womb of her  
words. The heat

is a replication,  
a result of the crimson

shade her body burned  
into that summer

babysitting by the pool.  
How those two young

children splashing would  
change our lives. She

passed this curse on,  
my mouth weaponized

as hers. The bursting  
and bubbling, breaking;

the scabbing at midterm  
stress and the flare of face

like July fireworks, so absolutely  
immense and impossible

to ignore. My own vortex.  
My own screaming.

The body wants to recreate  
its past.

I am kin with the crook  
of my mother's mouth.

Her past has become my  
future, the pleading of her skin

the same as the pleading  
in my mouth. Please don't

kiss me right now Benjamin,  
I don't want this for you.

Turn your ship away. The cold  
sores never leaves scars

so we have nothing to talk  
about on Christmas again.

The body wants to recreate  
its past, the silence of her

parents now sitting at  
our dining room table, beside

my sister's gurney. Never  
anything more than guests.

Never anything at all.  
Perhaps the guilt whirlpools

inside her, a wound  
cankering the body;

or perhaps her lip sore  
expanded, blood

swelling and flooding  
as only blood does,

a crimson cursive, slow  
to heal, that can ask

only in the darkness  
*What wound have I created?*

My mother, wounded  
and all, promises to be

a good grandmother.  
We sit in darkness.

I hear her whisper it.  
She doesn't believe

in Jesus, but she prays  
for unborn grandchildren.

## Sonnet for Aging

— after Martha Collins —

as in half-life, or half a life, or just  
a number. Number than losing your last friend, death  
bed, blue moon, afternoon. Young wanderlust  
or first cries. As in: it gets better with.

As in: wine, barrels, angel's share. That good  
good, broccoli, white cheddar, or evergreens,  
the tree rings expanding: the growth, a life  
atomic, information, lived to be

a lifetime, hospital bed or turning five.  
The rituals: drinks at twenty-one, the bar  
and bat mitzvahs, the quinceañeras. Time  
and trend and moment. Fruit basket, counter

ripening, sweetening, decaying skin folding  
itself inward. Old and young both nursing.

## Baby Gay's First Trip to PTown

We preview it the night before, swipe and click  
incessantly on Steve's Grindr. But where are those young,  
chiseled twink bodies I was expecting? Where are the booty

shorts and pinks drinks with clever names served in slender  
glasses? Instead, we find older men, forest chests  
too toned for their age, bald bears doing water sports

and shit. *It takes money to live in a place like this,*  
Steve says, but then what's the point for us broke baby gays?  
I don't even look at the gay men when we get there—

can you believe it? I'm looking at the straights,  
those beautiful families shopping and buying ice cream  
and not giving a fuck. As if this is normal, as if this could be

anywhere in the world, these flags waving everywhere  
and bothering no one. I think about my third date with Ben,  
how I dropped his hand at the zoo when a father walked past

with his young son. How *shame* and *sin* haunt my tongue,  
burn stronger than any pink drink. How my mother keeps  
suggesting marriages with women, with any woman. How much

time was spent looking over shoulder, clearing computer histories?  
I buy a big fucking rainbow of a sweater. It is a cloudless  
July day but I put it on anyways, strut down the cobblestone.

## **Fruit picking**

We take the back roads, point out the windows at reds  
and yellows, the arch of autumn guiding us  
to the orchard. *Let's buy a bag at the store, pretend*  
*we drove the hour*— but no, you say, it's just

not the same. So we go, get a half peck  
bag and wander the hills and fields, get lost  
questing for Fuji and Gala, and I subject  
us all to a day's worth of *gay-la* jokes. Soft

and steady, we are not. We knock a ton  
of fruit loose, take down whole branches to grab  
the biggest, the best. I hoist you up to hunt  
higher and the kids nearby stop to cheer, clap

for us, for this tower of two clumsy gay men.  
Us here, like this: I'm glad we didn't pretend.



## What is happiness?

— after Arisa White—

The blackest night. No moon. Just stars. Watching breath loosen from lips, dissipation into constellations. A blanket, a beach or a field, and the group of us sitting in silence. To know the vastness of it all without understanding. To trace your fingers along the dots, to know their existence besides yours. To feel a lifetime in a moment & want for nothing else.

It's memory, an ice cream shop in Maine and the smell of fresh cones that sent you out of your own body. The first time someone touched you when you craved their fingers. A day spent hiding in the woods. Realizing you're in love. & memories that haven't come, too. A mark that butterflies across your timeline, the unfurling of your own book. The browns of your eyes inkwells warm, fingertips bitten into quills, your pen name taking cover, still distant under your tongue.

& the taste. Vomiting into your best friend's toilet, the laughter that bubbles up after. The salt of movie theaters, tears and popcorn and the bead of sweat on your upper lip. Sharing slices of pickled ginger, yum-yum sauce. Your name in their mouth, in everyone's mouth, reveling in your own taste. Sugar cookies. Blood orange. Menthol. The way a promise tastes when it's kept.

## Foreplay

We were Cart Kids at the town Country Club, charged with cleaning, hosing them down, refilling their seed buckets. Sometimes, though, we'd sneak away, ride carts around the course, do donuts in rainstorms, exceed

the speed limits with custom cart mods. Once, he took me up on the largest hill, hole three, to watch the sun set over the waterfront, the mounded greens glowing between pine trees.

He said *We should bring girls here someday, fuck them when the sky is nice like this*. Sixteen years old and in love with a man, not knowing what *love* or *man* meant to me, I wanted to be

the one he fucked, to be made into a man, somehow, from his love. That feeling whole, complete, the tension trembling, hitching— my throat, my hand, the moment, all in agonizing fear

of the seconds they held. But the sun set anyway. We watched it in silence, stillness. The love I dreamed was nothing more than a wish to masturbate to. I tried again to chase that love in the weeks

that followed, to share that building urge with him— forgot my swing so he'd stand behind me and grab my hips to show me stance, let his strong grip on my arms teach me technique and form. I dragged

myself around in the hot sun, worked up sweats together hoping to see him peel those slim fit pants and sweaty polos off, to undress and shower side-by-side until our limbs

slowly, finally, inched to meet. But then he ditched the cart shed, moved up to the Pro Shop, left me unkissed and alone with my first lesson in love, a boy bereft and letting go.

## Blue Summer

You blue-flooded my summer, so much  
head spinning, pressure ozone mounting—

those Home Depot hours spent searching  
for that wind-tugged shade you wore, loose

on your frame and beautiful as late afternoon.  
*Robin's Egg* was too fragile—you steadied

solid against me even as air around us  
evaporated into heat. *Spa Retreat* lacked

pulse, *Dreaming Blue* felt lost. I settled  
for *Blue Sarong* so I could wrap you around

me, wear you on my waist. I took twenty sample,  
taped them all to my wall, then went back for more

when I saw your *Indigo Ink* silhouette  
chasing crabs on the beach, the wonder

in your smile a shade like *Daring* or *Soulful*.  
Or when you climbed on top of me, you

and the sparks both *El Capitan*. Or when  
we woke up early, still *Serene Sky*, blueberry

jam staining your mouth in bed, *Island*  
*Dream* of my toothpaste in your mouth, blue

hue of *Soft Mint* on my tongue as we shotgunned  
in my Camry. So much blue and it was never sad

until you left, and *Spacious Skies* went on forever,  
blue of your absence bursting from my throat.

## The Golden Summers

— after Terrance Hayes and Gwendolyn Brooks —

Those summers were dumb shit. The lakeside haze, we drank in our privilege, toying with cops because we were real white and we could. Smoking outside the Honey Farms, playing cool, acting hot shit because we were seventeen. The backyards we ran through, bushes jumped, *after the fork take the next left and book it over McIntyre's wire fence*. Rotted our brains til school didn't mean a fucking thing. We dared and dared that dumb shit. We loved to quick sneak, ditch dive, headlight hide out of sight, lurk in lawns, on docks, kick over mailboxes, ding-dong ditch way late at night. Before his sentence, Stanley came to town and we did the things that made my stomach weakest. One strike, one fuckup, and Stanley's knife flashed fast, switchblade straight. But we loved his free grass, Backwoods, *friends share*, faded till we mistook a fire hydrant for Tommy, so dumb high we felt South Pond sing. There was no slowing down. The summer stitched itself, sewed sin into skin, into fragments we forgot the next week. Sprinted streets till we collapsed, ran circles and quiet neighborhoods until I finally felt thin enough to keep up, the holes in my skate shoes making me imagine wings, feathers sprouting from my ankles. We fled. We flew. We had everything, nothing to lose, spouting humbug and jazz as we watered down liquor cabinets. Soaking into June, flying into July, rocketing into August. Fleeing and fleeting. We were white, invisible in moonlight. *Won't get caught, shot; won't die today, won't die tomorrow, won't die this summer, won't die soon.*

## **We Visit Bridgeport Digitally,**

Street view: start at my old apartment  
and tap our way through my old commute,  
watch the nice brick of downtown become  
highway, watch gentrification— Chipotle  
and Starbucks and Bass Pro Shop— fade click  
by click into bodegas, corner stores, abandoned  
parking lots, East side slashed by train tracks.

I show you the warehouse I taught in,  
show you Dock 4 where we walked into school,  
where *anyone* could have walked into that school,  
the cracked pavement and uncertainty of Barnum  
*Ave. We entered here, through Zorba's,*  
I say of the deli inside, thinking of three dollar  
sandwiches and the time Zorba told me he dreamed  
of open sea and sharks, reaching his hands up  
to touch stars that weren't there. *This fragile man*  
*was the only thing that stood between our kids*

*and the world outside.* We zoom to the playground  
across the street, the metal cage with one broken  
basketball hoop where black and brown kids in orange  
uniforms begged to get out. I am thinking about the kid  
who got hit by a car right there and the one  
who got shot in the chest at home and the one  
whose house burned down and the others  
who starved over summer break after I left.  
And the half baked teachers, the demerits  
and detentions and the six graders who  
babysat toddler siblings every day. When  
it all becomes too much, the car's camera smears

back to my neighborhood, *the nice part*  
*of town* with the booksale and the coffee  
shop and the record store, the community  
college with the clean alley we smoked  
cigarettes in, the parking garage we smoked  
blunts for hours on top of. The sun's setting pixels  
over the gray buildings make my ache shapeless.

## Danny at Great Oaks Charter School

The halls are cold  
with November. We sit  
side by side, his tears screaming  
into themselves and the wetting  
patches on my shoulders. *Juvie*  
falls from his mouth like a father's  
hand, his sobbing like flinching.  
He tries to get rid of himself—  
squeezes knee into fist,  
eyes shut so tight  
he might black out again.

One month after he stopped  
saying *faggot*, *queer*. One  
week after he set the stink  
bomb off. Now: here.  
Three months before  
he threw the milk carton,  
his third-story plea  
for attention plummeting  
to street, causing accident.  
Four months before he gave up  
completely and we only saw his face  
on the edges of Friday and detention.

We all got high one night  
and I cried about that kid. Rob  
names my fears, knows I see the bullet  
headed for Danny, his *gang-gang*  
getting involved in that shit  
that killed Keith's brother  
outside his house  
in front of his mother  
on the way home  
from getting bodega snacks.

I know he feels that voice,  
that Fortnite rifle so real  
in his mind, his hands  
trembling. The way his head  
shook that day in the hallway  
a whole lifetime ago.

**Things my father's hands could've done instead:**

— after Tyehimba Jess—

Handwriting practice, those hands so used to swift motions.  
The way your hand in the air never loops its y shapes.  
Before I was born, you designed war planes.  
They too weren't built for loops, but striking bite & bullet.  
Fuckers too fast for regrets, those love letters piercing blue velvet.  
*You're fucked forever.*  
This is love, now.  
Both sides of the hand.

Backstroke. The feel of learning resistance.  
Imagine teaching me something better than doggy paddle.

Irony of obedience without the *good boy*.

I would've even left you alone to watch porn.  
Would've shown you how to Google those horrible *lesbian threesome* videos I caught you  
with once, if only it meant you'd explode somewhere else.  
Maybe you just needed any kind of detonation.

Run them through my hair, like they do in the movies.  
Run them through and tell me how beautiful I am.  
*Beautiful boy.*

## A Life, Still

— after Hendrick Andriessen's *Vanitas Still Life* (ca. 1650) —

in death, made      immortal      the gaps  
    between nothingness      everything      ephemeral  
everything touchable      only      the black satin      vanitas  
    on the table the goods      empty the table      full  
of emptiness      the watch ticks      echo in emptiness  
    echo in vanity      regalia tumbling      all falling  
to abyss      all we know      memento mori      remember  
    the fleeting      the dark the empty      you must die  
all perish      all missing teeth      all fading florals  
    flames      biting on      clinging to      the book      the last  
moment, breath      dooming bubble to burst      marching toward midnight  
    the bishop temporal      the night knocked away      the gold  
the gems      all the glitter in the world      dull      vapor  
    at the end      remember      the memories fleeting  
futile      paper dusting      pray      brain decaying      pray  
    the tiniest reflection      the hope of salvation      maybe  
your god      vanitas      in death      will save you



## Hood Healer Amani

she calls herself, an Instagram icon  
smoking blunts and dealing truths, *manifesting  
visions*. *Going to church*, she calls it. Sunday  
worship, her thousands of followers praying  
to her hazy sermon, her gospel of cards  
and spiritual phenomena on Live. Tonight,  
her clerical vestments are a royal blue  
Snuggie, her homily a wandering contemplation  
on energy that refuses to be without.

Maria and I watch her digressions, deviations  
in her divinations, her nation of followers,  
their congregation of questions and *collective  
energy*. She answers them all; tonight, everyone  
receives eucharist. *Some of y'all are not rooted  
in reality. Just because that's what you want  
doesn't mean that's what the spirit wants  
for you*. She is down with the freaky,  
done with the politics; *artificial  
systems collapse as the Earth is seeking  
to balance Herself*. We are enraptured  
by her words, her body and blood, *amen*.

The theme of this month is *potential*,  
she says, and *this is the energy*  
she's been *preparing the collective  
for*. *Everything is aligned. Everything  
is possible*. We feast and are filled.

Afterwards, Maria reads my cards for me,  
all wands, all fire, as usual. *Your time  
is now*, Maria tells me. *Keep eating*.

## Blank Verse Sonnet for Eve // The Snake

I bit into happiness, let juice run  
down my face. Mama said that good  
things don't come easy, but all I had to do  
was reach up and grab it. All I had to

do was ask Earth Mother to share her fruit  
and let me gnaw on her secrets. To know what life  
is, skin and flesh, to savor a moment between  
my teeth and let it live on tastebuds. Now

I understand why this is a sin: the act  
of biting, of learning more than you can chew,  
a snake coiled around my neck, the hiss  
and slither in my thoughts. Joy is a theft,

a serpent, maybe, a small worm in a sphere  
of knowing, helix of apple, pleasure ribbed.

//

Cutting the head off  
to see again, a jutting  
wakefulness coming  
to head. Muttering  
to myself *my lips*  
*are not my own,*  
*my bed is not my own.*  
Pit of python slither  
ahead, twelve hissings  
of his song gutting  
a thread through  
my missing, my longing.  
Heed the warning:  
take the path around  
instead. Scoff *easy,*  
*good work, Jake,*  
count the smiles  
I'm putting on, catch  
weakness slipping  
in my throat. Catch  
suffocation sleeping  
in my bowed head,  
bet on the odds  
of tripping over

my own feet, tasting  
ache of venom  
withering in my  
concrete, toothless jaw.  
The snake pries my lip  
to snarling smile

## **Family Portrait with Animal Masks**

My father's box cutter claws give in easy  
as he slices steak. Rum in the bottom  
of the plastic cup sloshed back  
by snout, bear tongue & booze  
choked on. This is how he looks  
just before the trap, metal teeth & his own  
snapping. His hunger for anything  
sweet, nose airborne & hunting allure  
of table, food, family photo. Grizzly  
gulping until he tricks himself to sleep.

My mother's yowl, sharp against beige,  
awakens him. This mountain  
lion shrieking, inevitable carnivore,  
endless ambush predator. Our weakness  
like deer necks in daylight. Teeth  
sunk into the softness, silencing  
of maw. Limp & dripping blood,  
we watch for the gleam, the next  
flash of strike in her eyes.

My sister's lapping at everything,  
tongue frenzied & balancing precarious  
on her chair. Her armadillo gaze  
on every plate. The mountain lion's bite  
arrives always, too often; carapace giving  
way to nakedness, flesh exposed to canine.  
She knows to burrow, to tunnel  
retreat & clamber under bedsheets.  
To ball tight, curl into a world where teeth  
cannot touch her or wake her from dreams.

My mask of watching, waiting. Claws tiny  
& trembling, jitter of impatience & readiness  
to poke the bear & the lion & the armadillo.  
Paws too eager to listen, paws that would  
rather investigate, ask too much, go  
where they shouldn't. And the genuine  
surprise when other animals snap! I never  
mind. The trash piles high & I let them  
dig for me, make confetti & bath of the filth.  
Full & fat, I run out & pray to be roadkill.

The click of camera lens flash-stuns  
us four animals, enamel & keratin  
bared. Our instinct after being caught  
at this table, trapped here together.

## Magic Squares at Christmas Eve

My grandmother stopped asking years ago  
what dessert I wanted at Christmas Eve, sometime  
after she stopped calling for birthdays/ remembering  
how old I was. I always asked for the stained glass  
windows, marshmallows paned together and rolled  
in chocolate/ covered in coconut. This year, she makes  
magic squares instead, seven-layer bars I pull apart  
in the corner while no one talks to me. When my family

doesn't know where I go to school, I shred the coconut  
from the sweetened condensed milk. When they don't ask  
about my boyfriend, I pluck the pecans one by one.  
When they pretend I didn't come out this year, I track  
butterscotch veins through the chocolate. I stare at the mess,

over and over again whispering *Chef, for you, today,  
I have prepared a deconstructed magic square/ family/  
holiday*. When my cousin and I realize we haven't seen  
each other in a year, we take four shots. Then my drunk  
fingers crumble away the graham cracker crust.

When no one mentions my sister's trips to the hospital  
or how they never visited her, I suck the butter  
from my fingertips. When my mother cries at the end  
of the night and I know we won't see them again, I smush  
it all back together, trying to remember the square.

## Talismans // Prayers

— for Elaine (Young) Berube —

My other grandmother taught me only  
prayer before she died. Young  
but still I knew she hung our photos above  
her bed  
hid herself in stacks  
piles  
of things  
hallways of junk around  
her home  
closed her eyes each night  
and thanked God for us and for stuff.  
Her stuffed white tiger was my first protector  
now I line towers  
of tiger eye,  
fluorite, selenite,  
amethyst, quartz  
around my cards, each drawing of three  
a hymn of my own.  
I press fortune cookie papers  
to my forehead stow their secrets  
in lock boxes origami iPhone cases.  
In another world she might've said  
wisdom  
is keeping  
it all the faded  
ticket  
stubs old bottle opener keychains even  
cancerous  
paper receipts. How many mysteries  
scrawled in books?  
How many worlds of dust collected  
on the rounds of Mardi Gras beads, in the cracks  
of jewel cases,  
pyramids of yarn  
unused  
stickers  
bottle caps  
every greeting card collected  
carefully. All these things talismans  
tucked hoarded piles  
like her piles prayers  
like her prayers.

Charm      in my blood      a summoning  
tradition      treasured      abundance akin  
to something      like godliness      to love.



**Coda: for Botham Jean**

dead or still

dying these bones

of pyrite

gold / god

of guilt this white

space:

a door kicked in a man Black

eats ice cream in the dark

watches Netflix

& this is not my

apartment god / chamber

of lead

& antimony

(alleged & always

testimony on trial)

this god copper-plated

& his soft-steel jacket

& all the spaces a bullet

can move through

before reaching Black

before body

before memory

before:

prayer

god / (w)hole

& holy please hold me

accountable

I have always

asked for (taken)

too much, but please hold me

& clasp your hands in

prayer a chant

silver around my wrists

& please tell me the color

of constellations worth un hiding

this light in the dark

this congregation arranged

& god

how different it all could've gone

his breath still song

& red rose

singing

## It Wasn't Judgement Day

*"He had come down, He said, to clean the earth  
of the dirtiness of words."*

— for Gwendolyn Brooks —

When Jesus returned to the earth, He brought every noise  
at once. Cacophony of syllables, a hundred million flicking  
words, tongue unified, a mushroom cloud of babble  
covering the earth. The crying of crickets, the brush of every  
finger shaping letters against themselves, all the whispers of fish  
drawn from bubbles and raised to dissonance.  
The energy became heat searing, a flare of sound  
that burned and torched the knowing of all— and in its wake,  
its evaporation, such noise collapsed into silence.

And the people: how they missed their words, the metal  
taste of them. They missed how *cannonball* and *gun*  
and *artillery* tickled the roofs of their mouths, how *nuke*  
and *blood* shaped their lips into perfect bullet holes,  
the finality of *dead* and the piling of *body* after *body*.

And the people ached to protest, each wondering  
how they were going to hurt each other now, how the men  
in those big leather chairs could give the commands.

As quiet germinated, blistered, in the lungs  
of all creatures, *God's son went home, feeling,*  
*in fact, we had no need of peace.*