To Want Too Much: Poems

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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
ABSTRACT

TO WANT TOO MUCH: POEMS

May 2022

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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.
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 backsplash. 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 though 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
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places all over
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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.
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
depth warming violence
hating
the world a bit
less

lean male bodies vees
sculpted

softer dynamics and struggle
lesser
two evils both still
ever

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 Alexandrea 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,
	hese 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,

conflated happiness
with medicine,
clean slatted, life narrated
by that R, 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.”


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 now 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

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 • (έτρεχε na 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 yawning.  
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 πέταω (pḗtō, “to fall”). Could also relate to πέταννμι (petánnumi, “to expand”), which would make it identical to Proto-Germanic *faþmaz (“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 shotgagged
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
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
going 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.

Ironic 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 unhiding

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.