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# You'll Never Love Me

Luther Hughes

*Washington University in St. Louis*

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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

Department of English  
Writing Program

You'll Never Love Me  
by  
Luther Hughes

A thesis presented to  
The Graduate School  
of Washington University in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Master of Fine Arts

May 2018  
St. Louis, Missouri

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Luther Hughes

*Washington University in St. Louis*

*May 2018*

To history.

**I.**

## **As the Fog Rolls In, Night Finds Its Footing**

What's that story about the blackbird  
visiting a man, or, more accurately,  
his depression? Making him recognize it,  
I mean. It was often like that  
with birds, reminding you of your flightlessness.  
It was like that, then more so, then only that.

I'm doing as much as I can these days  
despite thinking about what ails me—  
going on walks, slipping into bathroom stalls  
with strange men who become not-so-strange  
when they pull down their pants—without wanting more  
from absence, if a thing can even be considered absent  
not having been there to begin with.

If not a blackbird, something that was blackened  
by blackness, with an animal understanding,  
was in his room. Above. It had wings. No, it didn't.

**The Sound of Hunting**

I.

His howls, I hear.

Whoever he was, he is  
    now nothing  
but screams  
    and a constellation  
of holes.

From habit, more howls.  
    The mouth,

I imagine. The blood  
    crowning, deep red,  
the head  
    of a flattened rose,  
days sour, fallen  
    from its stem.

As if there is anything left,  
    I turn  
up the volume  
    of his suffering,  
flinch  
    as though seeing  
my fly-flooded  
    figure pushed  
in front  
    of the gun's eye.

I am trapped  
    by the anchor  
of his dying.

The screams have ceased.

The audio over.

I am heavy.

My hands press  
against my thighs.

I don't know

how to inhale  
death, so I rewind  
the audio.

I hear him again

slipping away.

## II.

When shot once, scream  
but quietly.

When shot a second time, let loose  
the lion from your throatcage.

If shot a third time, transform  
the lion  
into a harp  
and strum  
your way to sleep.

III.

I speak Trayvon's name  
when a man gardens into me.

I watch my blood

blemish the bedsheets like a painting  
gone wrong. I ask the man,

*What makes you different?*

*What makes you alive?*

\*

I claim *I am finding myself*. Because I am finding myself,  
I wake, drunk, in the arms of another.

Trayvon is dead, I tell him.  
Because I'm black, he is always dead.

\*

My hands will not release him into the earth.  
I give the night a loose definition of moving on:

blade to the wrist-flesh and a robin  
flitting through the thin air like a prayer.

## He Went Away Without Saying Goodbye

The flux of the city was comforting  
that afternoon.  
    The Starbucks was closed.  
    Chase bank, too.  
    I watched police cars thicket,  
watched the ambulance sift through traffic.  
    What could remain of him?  
Found and hideous on both ends,  
    sopped in his own flush.

Someone from work said, *Better here*  
    *than Suicide Bridge over in Aurora.*  
As I foxed between the pulsing crowd,  
    I ached to find myself  
within the splash, go rolling in it.  
    The spread of him flared  
my eyes wide, pretty, while the bust of sirens  
stabbed and the ill-gotten guts grew ginormous.

I was floored by the thought: the man leaping  
    from the roof like a shirt thrown out a window,  
    thrashing its thread and cotton for the wind—  
a dance      so familiar the breeze would take the cuffs  
    and twirl twice before leaving. Gentlemen-like.

During lunch, I ran outside into the after-scene.  
    The thicket shriveled.  
    The traffic barely combed the streets.  
I looked to the sky. It was Pacific blue, blue  
enough an orca whale could swim in its deep.  
    The twinkle of sunbeams serving as waves  
    crashing on the banks of the mountain range.

I was glad. Not because death promised  
arousal: I shook with thirst: the image painting me hypnotized.  
    For the man.      It was a beautiful day  
to die.      To give yourself back to the horizon.

*Are you, are you  
Coming to the tree  
Where the dead man called out  
For his love to flee  
Strange things did happen here  
No stranger would it be  
If we met at midnight  
In the hanging tree*

*-James Newton Howard, The Hanging Tree*

### **A Shiver in the Leaves**

A swallow of flies showers  
his open mouth  
where the blood crusts.

Dead, he will not speak, I know.  
I can see how pain once chewed  
the neck blacker than most.

I rest my head against the tree, sleep  
and wake in his call.

Like legs of a spider, his nature  
extends past his body,

saying,

*Like you I once harbored beauty*

saying,

*Like you my beauty takes the kingdom of blackness.*

It is dawn in the man's eyes,  
a cavern: a slow thaw to memory.

I look  
and look  
and look.

Who is to say what death is or is not?

He has his limbs, a sky overlooking ...

I know he is dead, nothing will change

but still I whisper in his ear,

*Breathe. I want you to breathe.*

**There Will Be Mourning**

I'm taking too long.

I'm at a bar  
ignoring my friend's call.

I take another shot, a pill, a drag  
of a man's cigarette out front.

He smacks my ass.

*Cue the war on everything,*  
a white man bellows.

I pray to a god  
who has no eyesight, drink  
myself limp: for nerves to numb.

Someone chucks a glass  
of tequila into a wall.

I go home, cry  
into my roommate's lap.

My mother calls to tell me  
a woman from church  
has died. *You know her.*

*Knew*, I say.

Sometimes I react  
to things I never touched.

Behind the dumpster, a man  
tries to fuck some feeling into me.

Blue where it matters.

I want my roommate to change the channel.

He asks why if nothing will change.

The man I poured myself  
into, I can't stop.

Blame "the black" in me.  
I feed off the recognition.

The first step in cleaning  
is to recognize the infection.

## Culture

The headlights remember boys like us: black, unbroken  
by the law. As it mans us to the curb, Brandon says  
he's been broken before. But not like this. The car parks.  
Two white men get out. Their blue uniforms adore their muscles.  
*You boys up to trouble?* I want to kiss the question, make love to the word  
"boys" as I have seen in porn. We're told to sit. It's cold, Demicus complains.  
So busy studying the officers' pelvises, I don't notice the flashlights searching  
our faces, our bird chests, our legs. I wanted to touch what hung between their thighs.  
*Got a call about some houses being broken into. Know anything about it?*  
Prayer would be wise, but I don't remember. Brandon says we're heading  
to his house up the street and tosses his eyes. A flashlight pulls from his shoes  
to his lips, shimmering. Here, in the Southend, others know this recycled story.  
One by one, we are searched. Nothing in my friends' pockets, a pen in mine.  
They don't know how, after the frisk, the black boy in the porn is then scripted  
to blow the officers. I think tonight will be the night I'm written into the perfect angle  
but the production crew never arrives. I'm not headlined. I'm sitting next to Demicus  
in Brandon's bed talking about the rest of our night. Demicus says he has an idea  
and Brandon looks at me. We know what we came here to do. I take off my shirt,  
my basketball shorts, my boxers, say, *Stop bullshitting and take off your clothes.*

## Survey of Lust

I wrench the bone from my maw for three minutes before it flutters into a raven. You shove the raven inside your jeans, watch saliva thumb the chin. My fingers parenthesis my elbow, I shake. I hear many erotics: engines, wind-wrestled rain, humming glass. The raven begins again, pecking until your palm waxes it tender. I canvass your eyes: Cornea. Pupil. Iris. Lens. When I reach the vitreous body, I choke: *Fuck me. Fuck me, shapeless*—would I have known? I? Who wanted a man inside him. As thunder amputates the sky, the light above us grows blind. The raven swells, culls my attention. What I imagine: my hand thrusting the fowl by the throat until it chirps blood.

## Nocturne

If you did not see me at the end  
of our stillness, then what?

It takes my joints some work  
to do what the heart desperately craves,

but my mind is like a river, leaving  
just to re-enter a few moments later,

second-guessing, wanting to find some new  
revelatory thing. Most dreams, I open the front door

to find you on the porch letting the sky gown you—  
half-silk, half-veil: delicate.

*The riverbed is never empty*, you would say  
with your back facing me.

Then whatever wrestled my window  
jarred me awake. The window must have

wanted to be open. Or, the window needed  
distracting from all that waiting.

The dream was never wrong.  
Listen: I know objects cannot feel.

I know you must be thinking  
I, too, should not wait for someone else

to open me. I have come this far.  
Not as an object, as I would usually

have you to believe, only reacting  
to what has manipulated me. You see,

my lust is always moving  
inward and outward; little rose petal

in the wind ... I want to do something about my lust.

Listen: I know I should just do it, put my tongue  
to the flame—take me. Tonight, I am deeper  
than I have ever been.

## Sovereignty By Any Other Name

Somewhere between the sunken dark  
and the moon's anemic blush, a shadow  
opening his pants. *Artistic*, some would say.  
Others might spin the scene: *Intruder. Malice.*  
Those are beautiful words, too. Like a ruined  
church can sometimes become artifact: sickled  
wall, abandoned—a legion of dust. The language  
used will be that of history. I don't mind.  
If a deer is still a deer after the coyote releases it  
from its mouth, is it the chase that excites?  
If the coyote still hungers, does the deer  
hold all the power? By now, I am eager—  
I want to be digested. As darkness enters,  
it is he who belongs to me.

## Sweet Tooth

The hawk wasn't the first I've made an omen out of being  
as it perched in the puddle in the middle of the street, feckless.  
Though the hawk remained unruffled, it studied my approach  
as any would when threatened. I did what most might have done: took  
a picture as proof. I couldn't say what the picture would prove  
besides the hawk's existence. Perhaps, I'm siphoning a reason  
where there isn't one. Something trivial in the ways  
in which I understand intimacy. I don't think I'm wrong about this.  
Had I not known intimacy before, I'd say the hawk was pure violence—  
talons and hooked beak. No tenderness. That part, easy. I know  
I'm slighting its hawkness as simply such, but ignorance  
is of the body, too: a mole, a lonely parasite ... What is it about parasites  
that makes my blood frenzy? They must have their own lexicon for love—  
teeth in the tiny heart, a thread of bonework, grounds for taking a leap  
into the unknown.

Whatever takes up inside me, let it be beautiful.

I'm not saying to let the parasite make me an orchard. I already bear enough  
fruits of labor. I'm saying no matter the harm, I need, always, to be full.

**II.**

**Ode on the Middle Passage**

I double and double under another  
    Spoon-fished hooked into the splintered ship we a gallery of bodies  
        I hear my bones purr  
            Rattle a little psalm  
                A little salt

My limbs fold  
    My folds creek then hollow out into a flick  
How long til we get there  
    I smell dyin  
        I died hours ago  
Hungry and my stomach murmurs a blade of grass  
    I sick  
        Spew across the floor  
            Onto black  
                Into a pile of excrement

I hear the white man's voice claw at the winds  
    I hope he opens us up for air  
        For cleanin

He don't  
I try to breathe but black next to me says quit hoggin all the air  
    I shut my lungs til I plum the face  
The chains around my wrist tear through everythin  
    Skin snatched back  
        A fish out of water  
            I stretch what I got left

The black three rows away hums somethin familiar  
    *Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me*  
        I join  
            Hate bein left out  
                The black above me joins in  
                    Coughs then jingles his chains

The black below me is dead  
    We chained together

I continue to hum

The sea hums with us

The black won't stop singin

I look around Steal air in slices I look around See mornins flame serpentine I look  
down

See blood freckled across my knee Is that mine

The black won't stop singin

I an ailed bird with no song I think a beehive swallowed my tongue I think of swallowin  
everythin

I try swallowin myself

The black won't stop singin

I scorpion my naked spine I pry my beak I dust I pry my beak and

The black won't stop singin

I cough I wet slick into a wave I think I'm drownin I ghost Cup the ghost  
with my mouth

Where did my tongue fly off to I wave and fly and drown til the ship slow down I down

The black won't stop singin



The black won't stop singin

Sing Sing Sing  
Sing Louder Don't  
Louder Louder Slower

Ignore Pray Pray  
Pray Pray Pray  
Pray Pray Pray

Pray Sing Sing  
Shout Sing Shout  
Breathe Breathe Sleep

Sleep Sleep Ignore  
Sleep Cough Bleed  
Cough Cough Breathe

Bleed Bleed Slower  
Slower Bleed Bleed  
Slower Slower Slower

**Ode to the Whistle Boy**

O sweet boy, my sweet boy, are you there?  
O blue boy, my blue boy, are you there?  
O dead boy, my dead boy, what's the noise?  
O Till boy, my Till boy, many heard.

O chucked boy, my chucked boy, can you breathe?  
O blue boy, my dear boy, can you breathe?  
O filled boy, my filled boy, what's been said?  
O Till boy, my Till boy, they got some nerve.

O river boy, my river boy, can't you swim?  
O blue boy, cotton-gin boy, can't you swim?  
O bullet boy, bullet-head boy, can't you move?  
O Till boy, my Till boy, does it burn?

O blood boy, my blood boy, don't you worry.  
O blue boy, southern-blue boy, don't you worry.  
O whistle boy, lovely whistle boy, see ya kin?  
O Till boy, my Till boy, ya've been tortured.

O stripped boy, stripped clean boy, heaven'll come.  
O blue boy, August-blue boy, heaven'll come.  
O black bird, my black bird, they cracked ya wings.  
O Till boy, my Till boy, ya breath deferred.

O croon boy, bye baby boy, I'm sick of their shit.  
O blue boy, revenge-blue boy, I'm sick of their shit.  
O resurrect boy, resurrect-boy, wanna see you rise.  
O Till boy, my Till boy, I see ya conjured.

O Tallahatchie boy, Tallahatchie boy, let's go a haunting.  
O blue boy, haint-blue boy, let's go a haunting.  
O please boy, pretty please boy, can't we go a killing?  
O Till boy, my Till boy, we will slit their throats.

## Custody

When he crawled out from the river, clothes  
fragmented, a bad argument, there were no signs  
of loss, except for his eyes that asked,  
*Have you seen my mother?*

The day, teeming blue, was mostly spring.  
I handed him a slice of watermelon  
knowing he wasn't hungry, knowing he'd take  
the fruit to his mouth, let the juice glide down his chin.

To ask him what it felt like to be free  
of the thing that once consumed, to slip away,  
would be customary like blood streaming from a bullet wound—  
that's what it looked like: the parade of holes  
that peppered his torso.

I held him until he became part of me, until  
the sky forgot itself a sky and the wind mumbled.  
*There, there,* to smother his misery. But I was mistaken.  
What I thought was his voice writhing, sobbing,  
was the frantic voice of the river asking for his return.

## Ode on Seattle

I lie. Above ground. Like I'm saving myself. I'm not humble. I'm a Seattle boy. Boy broken open. Boy who breaks open for other boys. In Seattle, I fracture. I speak city. I kiss rain. I Seattle. Next to a blanket of water. I jump in. Like I'm swimming myself. I sink. I'm not a needle. I overcast the darkness. I blue. In Seattle, I slip inside myself. My family ashore. They wave. I'm nothing but head. Sink. I'm nothing but bubbles. Drown. I'm salt against salt against wet flesh. I lose focus. I sweet talk myself. I pray a wetness. I'm saving myself. In Seattle, there's space. *Can you hear me?* I can't, I'm drowning *remember*. I left. In Seattle, I leave everything. Like I'm saving myself. My family ashore. They run in. Splash. I speak oxygen. Seize oxygen. Seattle is rain. I coddle Seattle on my tongue. I'm not humble enough to live. But I do. Because.



## **Barkless, Without a Fight**

I was molested. Everything was  
a game. The story chores.  
I played in places that didn't  
have a mouth. It was August.  
There was a couch  
where the moon watered.

Sometimes possession  
is a complex animal.  
Sometimes what hides  
also defines. As in,  
*you my nigga.*

It was September.  
I wore the basement  
like a love song. Inside  
his pants, a pair of fangs.  
A safety word. It didn't hurt  
long and the fireplace bled.

Blood is the same texture  
no matter where. Mine was  
a hairless lamb: rose-eyed  
and seething.

It sounds crazy: the hum of a heater  
the moment you start listening  
after not having been, not once, listened to

when begging to stop. There's a myth  
about that isn't there? A man falling  
in love with another's disregard?

Beneath him, I imagine him  
a small child lying on top of a pile  
of freshly fallen leaves.

Another deacon touched a little boy,  
the local news tells me. I tell my mother  
and she cries; I'm not that child

anymore, I reassure her. Although, I was  
never. At least not in this context.  
I haven't forgotten about the smaller things:

the ceiling light rewarded with gnats.  
I'm quick to dead something. Nothing lives  
the way I want it to. I'm entered, I'm an exit.

When he handed me my underwear, it was like  
a confession. I miss his voice. It was like one of those  
things you're told exist but never actually see.

In a dream, I unpacked  
tirelessly my bones. For what  
is a home if not something  
returned to? I unpacked

and repacked: insanity,  
the right cologne. I'm asked  
what makes one remember.  
Time, my bones respond.

If it were that simple, I'd be  
everywhere. No telling how  
long it takes the dream to finish.  
I just got here. I'm just visiting.

What say I, the drool-flooded tiger of want? There is always a day I give to my devil.

Today, a man sends me a picture of his dick, its eye already emitting the right lush. The man follows with:

What you on

Nice dick. You tell me.

What you tryna get into

*I send him an old picture of my ass hiked high*

Here you go. Where do you live?

I stay off Rainier down the street from Safeway

*I'm bored with this conversation, touch myself a little*

You're far.

Where you at

Too far. Maybe another time.

In the clinic waiting room, a man grabs my hand. I repeat my number in my seat. The walls hold a few specks of history and a painting of an arrogant zinnia says, *Kill yourself*.

I prefer dahlias. Inside me, the wrong kind of love. The room labors. The man turns around in his chair. I pretend nothing. The nurse calls my name and I pretend nothing. It was April. The doctor crushes a pill for me. Gives me a shot.

A few years pass, and time tells all: in the clinic waiting room, a survey:

How many times in the past twelve months have you had unprotected sex?

I pretend nothing.

How many times in the past twelve months have you had unprotected sex with the same partner?

I pretend nothing.

How many times in the past twelve months have you had unprotected sex with multiple partners?

I pretend nothing.

How many times in the past twelve months have you pretended nothing?—

Fine, I'll answer the questions. He was a parasite: he tore through a fish's gill, ate the tongue, then became it.

I trifle.

I want to control many things about the room: the doorway, the texture of the chairs, the receptionist. Some things are easier. I want this to go easy.

My lover tells me to slow down  
look him in the eyes  
Little does he know  
I was elsewhere  
a field between us  
a field I have fallen into  
When I returned  
the deed was done  
I studied the mess  
I was nowhere

It was June  
When it comes to growth I prefer June

I watch a man shoot  
a shot

of whiskey into his mouth  
He prefers my mouth

and the liquor blackening  
our throats Hours this blackening

Suddenly we are two heaps  
of muscles Brackets Who heap

and hunt *Where did it all begin*  
*your obsession with touch* I began

as the root for black Dark  
spot in the pupil Dark

layer of filth With my brother  
I say he

touched me

I said he touched me  
and the story goes elsewhere:

I see a swan dirtied by lake water.

The ghost flower isn't spiritual. It was the season.

Lying a type of body.

Okay. I took a razor to my wrist.  
I swallowed a panther of pills.

Okay. It was summer. I saw him cracked-out on the corner of Rainier and Othello. My friend offered him a ride. He knew him: childhood friends. I pretended nothing. Every time I investigated the rearview mirror, he was in the backseat. Where else would he be? My friend asked, "How have you been?" "Everywhere." He was timeless. Why can't death be this easy? He asked me how long it's been between us. He asked how my parents were doing. He said remember that time we played bloody knuckles in his bed all night. He said we were reckless kids.

Sorrow might say I look for him everywhere.

Are you okay? Do you need therapy? **No.**

I Google, “post-traumatic stress disorder.” I skim. I watch TV. I have myself a glass of wine.

Someone says, *Some lucky boys are just born with the talent of violence.*

The quote scratches.

I kill the bottle.

I know how I got here.

The red buckeye tree nags to be noticed. When the wind punctures the branches, there is a small whine against my window. Child in pain: the tree wrung by the wind's appetite.

I have more stories about things taken, no consent. About power and something—someone—unmade beneath a star-pocked-sky. I belong to many. Enough about me.

Even trees—yes, trees—are forced. Barkless, without a fight.

Some call me psychotic to see abuse in all that breathes. The next morning: a tree split in fourths, red foliage freckling the pavement. There is wind.

## You Ain't Ever Gonna Fly

Spilled from a tree branch, Unknown vanishes.  
A wick of light lingers where  
the mouth once sprang  
and snapped and bribed Unknown home.  
A wick of light lingers,  
slacks when the earth opens below  
and snaps to bribe Unknown home,  
begs Unknown to rid breath, let rest survival.  
Slacking, the earth opens below.  
Unknown is less known, more undone. The wind  
begs Unknown to rid breath, let rest survival.  
Not a single voice troubles this cruelty, this  
Unknown less known, more undone. The wind,  
bringer of bones, carries their music, but  
not a single voice troubles this cruelty, this  
silkless tradition of sorry. I,  
bringer of bones, carry their music, but  
who am I? Who rallies my nerves into  
a silkless tradition of sorry? I  
belong to many or I belong to none. I test  
who I am, who rallies my nerves into  
a hyphen of blood. *Blood*, the first language,  
belongs to many or it belongs to none. I test  
what I can grammar, read  
a hyphen of blood—*blood*, the first language  
of violence. I prostrate. I stroke the glorious face,  
what I can grammar, read  
the salt's last glimpse of self,  
of violence. I prostrate. I stroke the glorious face.  
The freedom in surrendering is sometimes  
the salt's last glimpse of self.  
To solder the two—death and power—is lifting.  
The freedom in surrendering is sometimes  
nature's way of getting back what has been promised.  
To solder the two—death and power—is lifting,  
yes. But sad. The animals weep. The trees join

in nature's way of getting back what has been promised:  
spilled from a tree branch, Unknown vanishes,  
is one color shy of naught and decay lingers

## **Faith Opens the Trapdoor**

When, all day, I realized the dead  
sparrow in the not-yet dandelions  
marked depression, I looked through  
the tree to find a half-nest perched  
at the highest branch.

Looking through, I found not only  
an almost-home but the question of full  
versus empty. I wanted to be full  
and thought the tree was sick  
of the sparrow's labor.

Now, empty of wings, the nest  
proved still. I believe a thing can be  
both restless and at rest. Take the blood  
the way it's both a stream and the boat.

God is like that: swelling as he enters  
from behind. Sometimes, I wear nothing  
but his mercy, the myth of flesh.  
Then, at times, I alarm like a warning  
to what's coming—I am dangerous.

*I wonder if he can taste the sadness—*

Earlier, I overhear  
and repeat it out loud  
while studying

the video  
of a black man  
fucked by a larger

white man, longer  
in his stroke, a rhythm  
so unfamiliar, so alien,

I rewind the video  
to the earliest kiss  
before the white man

grabs his ass, says,  
*I can't wait to get into that.*  
A script. A script adopted

when I respond,  
*Your dick is so damn beautiful*  
to a video

sent to me, unsolicited.  
I wasn't lying, though  
hunger can make me

forget otherwise.  
The last time  
I spoke the word sadness

out loud, I was reading  
a caption that said,  
*Ask me how I'm keeping it together.*

I've sung enough songs  
to know the difference  
between whatever is true

and whatever trusts. Take  
the mouth. Take the mouth  
that asks for a condom.

## A Wretch Like Me

Like one of those slave ships, I harbored.  
Only, I wasn't a ship.

Or at least not the type that brought slaves  
to labor. I was neither the ship

nor the water that kept the two.  
I was the tune come crooning

from the soot mouth, leaping  
black to black to the almost corners

where a young boy who, now tossed  
overboard, coughs bile into his hands

while singing. Let me be clearer. I was a song.  
I made men feel good when throated.

When he, not the boy but my lover—  
only, he wasn't my "lover."

He was like one of those horse flies, furious  
for death. When he wanted release,

I gave him a door. At the bottom of the door,  
rainwater pooled, reflected: my body

splashed open like freshly hammered wood; the moth  
that flickered a curse below the light

before falling ill against the window; him.  
As if the door was a present thought owed.

Let me be even clearer. When he needed  
to fuck, he scoured my insides.

## Benevolence

I place my mouth on what he calls his weak spot.  
We are in my mother's bed. It is relative to say  
the cherry blossoms washing her bedspread  
wanted to do something with their pink.  
He says he has been there before, to the place where  
I ended up: broken: a few chips of blood  
that, when I say, *Blood*, does nothing.

For the rest of the afternoon, I look at how simple  
the sky is when empty. I could watch nothing  
stay nothing. When I lift myself up from his musk,  
he asks where I am going. Sometimes the questions asked  
are not from a mouth but are from the room. When I exit,  
it should not ask why or from whom. *The room is a room.*  
I open the door. I devour the house.

## Heat

Between the staggered trees  
a quilt of deer graze

Where a boy was  
shot

For having a face  
that reminded someone

Of terror The deer  
taking in the earth

How it was given are holy  
the way a chest is holy

After inhaling a choir  
of bullets I too bleed

When the black cop  
swears at me

To lick his pistol  
I do I want

The breadth of the metal  
to swell in my throat

Before placing the barrel  
in my mouth

I say simply  
*The boy did nothing*

*Wrong* He says  
*Don't move*

He unloads  
the pistol

I swallow

## I Want to Talk About Water

Though it might lead to drowning. I hardly remember  
the sound. The gulp my throat made. Tell me  
your throat is similar. The soft walls expanding  
then resting. It was okay. I had enough room  
from never being whole. Was that good enough reason?  
There are many for wanting to die. I flooded  
a white spider in the kitchen corner, poured it down the drain.  
A white butterfly muttering above, smashed then flushed.  
I was the type of blackness who knew his power,  
so I owned it. When a white boy asked me to break him  
in the bathtub, I swelled. Inside him, he hurt.  
His expression filled. A year later, I thirsted for that.  
I drank wine in old bathwater and heard the rain seeping  
beneath the earth's thick coat like a fever. I let go  
under the weight, gave in, gave legs to fullness,  
imagined a blue ocean. That formless thing  
so wide, so needed. A home in that wet.  
But I came back. Wouldn't you? Wouldn't you  
get out the tub, run outside into the rain screaming *mine*?

**III.**

## Apotheosis

The doctors have him  
on pills. Just pills, he says.  
Never giving the name  
as if to hold on  
to some sort of power.  
I'm surprised by how much  
of my father he still is  
despite his own withering.  
While he has stopped drinking,  
he has picked up weed.  
Somehow, this is better for him.  
He asked if I wanted to smoke.  
As we stood outside  
in the parking lot, I watched  
him: he brought the blunt  
held perfectly between  
his thumb and index finger  
to his lips, closed his eyes,  
inhaled, and blew  
a heavy bale of smoke  
that diluted his face  
for a moment. *Did you know  
the Old Man died a few days ago?*  
That's how he'd ask  
me about his father  
every year. Yes.  
Our voices slumping  
back to silence.  
Or instead of talking  
about his father's death,  
he'd asked, *Did you know  
about the black kid  
that was shot?* I heard.  
Sometimes when I tell  
my friends that I smoked  
with my father, they say

I'm lucky. I despise  
that opinion. Scoff  
and roll my eyes.  
I want to talk to my father  
about other things:  
It was a nice day, the sun  
wadded in the blue sky.  
I wasn't promoted.  
I'm seeing someone.  
But it is always this:  
death and who  
belongs to it.  
It's not his fault. I suppose.  
His eyes wandered  
over the parking lot,  
to his car, and then back  
to me. I wanted to say,  
*I understand*. Still being  
my father, he frightened me  
a little. I always saw  
in his eyes, discipline:  
a smooth smack of his hand  
or a leather belt to the behind.  
And just then, in his eyes,  
sadness. I saw my grandfather  
trying to speak.  
The things the dead want  
to tell us but can't.  
When the blunt got too small  
for me, he took one  
last drag, threw it  
to the ground, and smashed it  
with his old work boots.  
*Ready to go inside*,  
he asked. I wasn't.  
I walked three steps  
behind him, his head down.

My father's mind must be thick  
with the thought of dying by now.

## Considering Death

My grandmother beat a bat to death  
with a shovel, my friend says. Another's uncle  
split a snake in two. On the highway, a dead wolf.  
Yesterday, a squirrel with its skin and innards divorced.

I am alive. I have to say that sometimes.

Grief is as clingy as it seems. It's winter.  
The trees recycle something I don't. Stubborn things.  
The past is endlessly cruel with its venom, always  
poisoning the song of my day. What do I expect?  
I have no more grandparents. My will to nurture worms  
with the night and the night sheds its wet.  
Plants don't trust me, ignore my existence.

—I apologize. I'm not usually like this. Once I swam  
in a man's beast and it was good. So good.  
While the crickets violined, he milked  
his tongue: *Let's go again*. The trees gagged  
his window—so good. The next morning, a herd  
of dead animals I couldn't figure ...

## It Was Snowing and It Was Going to Snow

Sometimes I admire the way the scrimmage between crows  
for scraps of carrion thrown to the dumpster sounds.  
It's not something I often hear these days. There's no shame in that.  
But, without shame, the ability to foster guilt, am I still considered human?  
The drama of thoughts like these breed reasoning.  
Think the hue of sex. I should know better  
than to sacrifice intelligence for pleasure.  
Is that what makes art  
so desirable? What makes the flesh tasteful? I should stop  
listening to animals lose their mind for blood but my neighbors can't stop  
fucking so why pretend? A man explodes inside me a few times  
a month. He asks if I've ever seen that movie  
where a group of crows dive-bomb a boy in the field.  
*A murder, I say. A group of crows is called a murder.*

## Obsequy

### I.

I should give the robin a proper burial given the season, rather the month, of my grandfather's death.

I was told there's a theory that describes different types of remembering. What harvests my memory: the city wearing the horizon like a rash. I open the backdoor to a wooden porch, patch of green on concrete. Something outside wants this to be easy. Instead of scouting the source, I toss the yard the bird, sweep dust into the corner. I'm repressing.

Two dreams ago, my grandfather was an animal paralyzed in a field. It's been years, this beast. A friend asks if I had time to name the bird, what would it be? My answer: *not yet*.

### II.

Behind the robin, a scatter of weeds—dandelions, daisies, thistles—my father thirsts to uproot. The grass around is stale-yellow. The sky carries grey. When I touch the bird, my fingertip digs, disappears, is—never mind.

About being broken, the fence with a small hole in the middle. The chronic problem with openness is where. What enters: a wind, a lament that forces surrender over the bird.

It doesn't rain—of all the seasons in Seattle, not this. I hear a siren chime, fade. My father screams my name from the window, but the window is closed.

### III.

How many times have I seen the dead robin between gravel, greenery, and the ugly stains left by midnight's storm? Every angle captures darkness. Where the scarlet belly avails the disrobed feathers, a tiny fist-sized hole.

I can forge many things: my love for overcast, patterns, nostalgia for my grandfather.

What if, instead of "bury," we say, "decorate?" Isn't that graceful—the tongue dabbing the roof to feel favored?

I know it's inconsiderate of me to muscle beauty into everything.  
I don't speak when I decorate the bird with my shoe and dirt.  
What I mean is, there once was a robin.

## Fallen Angel

Blue, what could be sky  
unknotted—bluer even  
    than a lake shuffling  
into the lungs,  
the lungs forgetful  
    of self, a blackness  
that tars every inch of inside.  
Therefore, my inside is mysterious.  
    My wings want to blossom  
and ask: *Am I still wings?*  
There are animals  
    that can't be named surrounding.  
A violence. A sex  
without erection.  
    Eventually, I'm without closure—  
transparent. Anything can fit:  
a heart, a bird, a second penis.  
    There is a mouth  
I call mine  
but given to the wind: red  
    how blood is red  
when it frees itself  
from the I. Today, the I  
    is master: a horse with wings  
that pearl when the blue sky lathers  
and the horse emerges  
    through the clouds  
sifting the faint hairs  
like waves before the mammal  
    collapses against the shore, tired  
from being horse, howling—  
the legs howling—*Amputate me.*  
    Yet, I am no horse.  
My eyes sink into the skull  
behind the jelled sphere  
    like a snail vanishing  
beneath the sand.  
Look at all my colors.  
    What my body takes.

The sun crystallizing me  
into a fossil.

## Elegy, Almost

You Google “Tamir Rice.”

Google says:

People also ask:

- Who killed John Crawford?
- Where was Michael Brown shot in Ferguson, Missouri?
- When was Jamar Clark shot?
- Who is Oscar Grant?
- Who are the officers involved in the Freddie Gray case?

You take a picture of your face. You sleep recklessly.

The church prays for your deliverance. You turn

the corner like any maggot turns in a graveyard.

You’re only a matter of time:

- Who killed Luther Hughes?
- Where was Luther Hughes shot in Seattle, Washington?
- When was Luther Hughes shot?
- Who is Luther Hughes?
- Who are the officers involved in the Luther Hughes case?

The hole in your head is like any old hole, you tell yourself.

A man slides in. Any old hole, you remember. You watch

the news, you tweet. Your cell phone dies

before you send the picture. You’re not like them other

niggas you whisper in his ear. You’re alive. You’re not

Tamir or John or Michael or Jamar or Oscar or Freddie.

Look how God shows his grace when you breathe, heave

when being run through. You count to three before clicking:

“Tamir Rice Shooting: A breakdown of the events that led to the 12-year old’s death”

A video:

Tamir...Police car...Police men...Guns pulled...Altercation...Gun  
shots...Dead

all heavens are for black boys  
all will be heaven for black boys  
black boy heaven for all  
for all black heaven  
will the black boy go, will he heaven  
will heaven be a black boy  
boy be black in heaven  
all boys that are black will heaven  
heaven will be black for all black boys  
let heaven be in every black boy  
black boys take heaven wherever they go  
wherever you go black heaven  
heaven goes wherever you heaven  
you go to heaven black boy  
all your black boys will heaven  
all black boys want heaven  
all boys black for heaven  
for heaven a will for boys  
a will for black boys is heaven

It's the middle of death season.

You live with dead bodies because you keep searching for them.

You take turns with yourself, imagine what coffin they'll lay you in.

Mahogany, marble.

You think love couples with violence.

You visit a clinic to get rid of yourself.

Before doctors, you had nothing but a history of names.

Now you can add yourself, you think.

A testament: just this one pill this one time.

It's not the end for you.

Swear it.

## Obsession Gets on One Knee

Still, everything is dead. Doesn't everybody see  
how the day skulls its dying? The sound of rain peeling  
back the sidewalk. I skulk about everything.  
My dead dog. The dead deer flashed open on the highway.  
A car drips in its passing: *every single day every time I pray I'll be missing you*  
Sometimes a tree broken for my misery. Deserted.  
A fly hurls itself against my window, each  
thump thump thump a heart unraveling.  
Nothing ...  
I am selfish. The birds outside molt for me. The flowers study new skin.  
In the mirror, my mouth lurks behind the dead mouth.  
Every mouth the same strand. I give the room its thunder.  
The fly drops dead.

## Object Permanence

You were missing and nobody said  
to look for your light. It wasn't asked,  
but *suicide* was mentioned. *Lynched*, first.

It's morning now.  
I'm watching a teenage boy toss a basketball  
into the air while sitting under a tree.

I admit that it's been some time  
since I thought of the body  
as something past tense.  
How does it feel to be  
both memory and, like a moon  
hanging in the afternoon sky, here?  
It is *hanging*, right? Not *hung*?

Morning was mentioned.  
I haven't forgotten. Quickly, I can lose myself  
if I'm not too careful.  
The choice between giving up  
and breathing can be difficult.

I know. Kind of. I once watched  
a cockroach swim in a sink full of water  
and then with some form of hell,  
stop, as if the choice was so simple:  
a craving for heaven.

My mother raised me better  
but I still enjoyed watching the lowly thing  
flail its legs, slowing with each movement.  
Small moments of pleasure.

Back home in Seattle, the wind is tender.  
At times, foul. It lifts me up  
against the closest tree  
and the tree, like a bell, rings.

## Passed Down

You see him, dead now, you said.  
Her and her, dead, too. Your face  
so unchanged in the year of too much rain.  
It wasn't the year I loved a man

with a head bald like yours, but after.  
Summer, I worked by Puget Sound  
and you were happy I was home. The city  
always told me best: *Your grandfather is dead.*

Since you have the same name, it's safe  
to assume part of you is dead, too.  
The living room never settled so kindly.  
On the walls, pictures of your new children,

who later that year refused to buy your pills  
and you cried on the phone to me, said sorry.  
The year of crying. The year of cracking  
into men and the men ridding themselves.

I have the same name too. The year  
of collective dying. What I thought was mine  
belonged to you first. To think otherwise  
was foolish of me. When your father died,

the crows sorrowed the sky and the field lost  
its green heart. It was out of the blue, you  
showing me the old photo, digging it out  
from a box beneath the TV. You look like him,

a man told me, meaning my grandfather,  
meaning already dead, a sapped star.  
He clothed me carefully like a tradition,  
like a bitter chain passed down through generations.

Forgive me for the meaning I make of this.  
You gave me a chain with your father's gold ring.  
It broke. I never told you. Forgive me  
for being careless with your mourning.

Forgive my bones, my healthy little animals,  
for bringing his face into your house. I'm glad  
my dad got us out of Mississippi, you said, your voice  
sprouting for the first time after months of surgeries.

I sat, picture in hand, eyeing all the dead smiles  
the ground has grown tired of. The year of extreme  
heat, you said. You opened the back door  
and the city, being merciful, gifted a breeze.

## **Aubade**

This is the best time to say it is misleading  
to sing in the presence of death. If you do not  
agree, don't. This much is certain, a father shoots  
his son for being gay. Silence, or whatever it calls itself  
after a bullet passes through the first layer of husk, must  
have stepped into the scene like a musical rest.  
Soon the scene was just a scene.

It is late. I am in bed. My bedside lamp projects  
its numbing. A calmness about the open door  
and I forget what defines me. The darkness, as it grows,  
says to be still. In the morning, there is nothing but.

## Notes

*You'll Never Love Me*, is a line from, "Garden (Say It Like Dat)" by SZA.

The epigraph in "A Shiver in the Leaves," is from, "The Hanging Tree," from the movie *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay—Part 1*. This poem borrows language from "The Yoke" by Frank Bidart.

"You Ain't Ever Gonna Fly," borrows its title from, "Blackbird," by Nina Simone.

The song lyric in "Ode on the Middle Passage" is from, "Amazing Grace" written by John Newton. "A Wretch Like Me," borrows its title from the same song.

The quote, "Some lucky boys are just born with the talent of violence," in "Barkless, Without a Fight," is from the TV show, *Game of Thrones*.

"It Was Snowing and It Was Going to Snow" borrows its title from, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" by Wallace Stevens.

"[all heavens are for black boys]" is after, "Everywhere in the World They Hurt Little Black Girls," by Tafisha Edwards.

The song lyric in the poem, "Obsession Gets on One Knee," is from "I'll Be Missing You," by Puff Daddy.

"Passed Down," is after, "Bird in the House," by Natasha Trethewey.