Heritable

mace dent johnson

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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

Division of

English Writing

Program

Heritable

by

Mace Dent Johnson

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 2021
St. Louis, Missouri
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Mace Dent Johnson

Washington University in St. Louis

May 2021
I.
Twelve Cranes in a V-Formation over Georgia—Dusk

Those birds buzz sorrow into what teeth
we have left. One after the next, flattened
by the now of their going, opal brag from beak
to toe. Neglect under belly, they triangulate
among the braiding wind currents, making distance
known. Each wingfeather insists: farther, farther.

Below them: dugouts and corner stores and clogged gutters.
A sad mother, fastened to the TV. A father who, though long gone
unsaid, was thought as good as dead. What was once a daughter,
running away. A nation burrowing into its own lonely sunset.
Sweat forsaking the bugless winter.

The sky surrounding them chastens pink deflecting
What could I do? What could I deign to be besides here and always
already gone?
Nurse Log

My friend lays their hand
on the redwood’s, which clutches
its marrowing friend’s forever.
This one: a monolith,
a dinosaur skyscraper,
That one: a pile, only an arm left,
Like they were holding hands until—
and it’s just like us
to make fingers of roots
(carpet of moss, shingles
of honey fungus,)
though I worry for the tree
whose forever lasts only until
rot ends or an errant bolt homes
through the umbilical redwood’s
spine and makes it mulch too.
And what might my friend’s fingers do?
I don’t have much a mind
for these things. A moth interrupted
preschool and teacher taught us not
to touch—our flesh’s oils instant death—
it was wrong but I believed.
If I was a redwood I might want not
to be touched either way,
but what's death? I came here to weep.
The sign says there's no bare ground
left. We walk where we aren't sure
we're supposed to. Every green
is a green I've never seen before.
Could I stand to be a tree?
I keep my hands in my pockets.
I keep my hands clean.
Black Dog

Dad said he knew a boy who named his dog—well,
if I said it I’d have to watch you chew it up.

Grandma comes home with scratch-offs and marked-down
pork chops for the dog next door, to quiet the hunger she knows
he has for her children. A big black mouth wide open is always
going to mean something. Grandma says you could build a whole
country up in there. You could crawl in there and live.
Dad says it wasn’t the boy’s fault, it was his mother.

Where does need come from? Grandma never let me touch
the wanted meat. I could see his purple gums asking

where the wood was rotting through.
Just past her hem I saw that bleeding heap soaring—

Sunday bests, scent of pennies and cigarettes—
and never once heard that mess hit the ground
I’m imagining a different world

endlessly we porch-sit watching
the leaves on the trees change

slowly and flit around, families
do, together—elders alongside

children or friends and partners,
everyone has the time to,

and many do choose to, recognizing
movement in stillness,

the simple dances leaves do,
letting us breathe
Evasive Species

Grandma sitting passenger
a pot between her legs

forty hours, car crammed
all of Mom's belongings and
her mom, who flew

out west to drive her back
to Georgia, (Ord to Benning,)
Grandma felt the tug

beginning on the plane
(she wore her Sunday suit
and smoked two Slims.)

Back home, her husband dying, trying
to take her under too. She needed a break,

a souvenir. She saw those figs growing everywhere,
pig-faced down by the highway and declared:

Make it mine. Searching nursery
to nursery for this plant which stood
no chance, Mom sighed to the dashboard,

of surviving that Georgia home.
But Ella Mae doesn’t no. None of us do.
What it Takes to Live

That hot accord stretches zone nine out behind it, exhausting hardiness 'til the whole southeast sprouts alien succulents, arid succubus, making way where couldn’t be. As they pull into the driveway the ice plant complains, the sun beats weirder here, but before long—no more ground. Just unfolding, I know I don’t belong, but I long to see what happens next. Why not? I think she needs me here and their soil? Just as red.
the ice plant speaks

her thighs were my first

greenhouse my second

planet I wanted

to be taken

away unfastened bagged

but I'd prefer agony to moving

diagonally and these women
don't stop talking until

ye they do which is worse

I wanted to stay I think

I'll make it though each

horizon spreads seawater

farther and father away

bliss while sickening

commands a certain

elegance my mothers

racing back, father burning

down to keep me sponged
they gave their tongues: fish
fry sergeant major motel
radiation hooch jehovah I

thought we’d reach another
coast by now bowled highway
vibrating front yard

swamp valley honey
suckle nursing where
I come from you

drop roots wherever
my mothers
digging up veins

from mud I think
I’ll make it I’ll tell
my blossoms

I was in that car I saw
the naked hearth I became
a daughter there
her thighs her
soiled hands
is what I'm from
Who was the saddest apostle?

In one of my earliest memories I stand in the archway between
the kitchen and the living room, burgundy synthetic softness beneath me,
carpet not yet rubbed down under ignored communicative vacuuming
and soft little lotioned donut feet. Linoleum spreads between me and Grandma,
who towers before me, asleep, her body propped up on the broom. You’d have to see it
to believe. I don’t yet know how to say anything. Two fluorescent light bulbs encased
in crystalline beige plastic cast her in her own shadow. The memory is discrete,
but it was not uncommon to walk in and catch her asleep on the broom, the mop, the child
to whose head she held a hotcomb. Nor was it to hear, from the next room, (that next room
very often being the kitchen), someone, (her, my mom or dad,) exhaling the phrase, “Lord
have mercy on my poor old soul!” they’d fight and retreat to separate rooms and each loose
the same prayer through their teeth. They’d say it opening mail or moving pots and pans
around. I remember my mom saying it, whipping the massive pre-repossessed chevy
through the tiny wells fargo drive-thru while the sun and the AC locked jaws
on my exposed lap. It’d come pinned onto the end of Dad’s iconic self-censored “shit!s”
which he clipped in the middle with his teeth and, if you listened, (and I listened,)
mimicked the hissing spits of the sprinklers in the front yard, like shit! shit! shit! shit! shit!,
for which his “Lord have mercy”s sometimes seemed an apology, a salve. They’d sigh and
say it every day, sucked teeth, Lord have mercy on my poor old soul. My poor old soul.
The lord seemed very far away.
the ‘67 riots his battalion “quelled,” his recoilless M16 mounted to a roofless jeep, his memory, shards of shattered shop windows, his lime green eyes, phantom bullets whizzing past his nose at night as he sleeps down the hall, asleep in his barracks, Carolina, Panama, Germany, his memory, bullets whizzing past his nose he gave to me, in Georgia, where they took him on a bus down the southeast, and between, in nowhere where they wouldn’t let him eat at the rest stop, legally, so his battalion did not rest, they drove hungry, straight to where I’d be born, at the hospital where he now gets all his medicine, and those forests familiar he passed by hungry, and the rice paddies his boots stomped through, and the Carolina rice his great greats grew, were forced to under threat, near where he grew up, his ma’dear prayed whenever they drove past it, all the time, the plantation that made his green eyes green, and all those who ate that rice my great great greats grew, were forced to, and those whose crop his boots stomped through a hundred years later, food and ruin and the way he likes his rice, pearly white, cheap and buttered, a crater lake his spoon pressed in, careful gravy pool
things online he can’t believe are there

Wikipedia, the Wikipedia page for his battalion,
today’s crossword solutions, walking directions to Pasadena,
his hometown root doctor, Dr. Buzzard,

whose courthouse mastication changed truth,
or Father Divine, who he knew was crazy but whose parade
he went to anyway to see Muddy Waters live, or what compound

perforates his lungs, or whose uprisings and which numbers, 82nd, 101st,
43, scars on concrete that match the treads of vehicles he knows how to drive,
internal mechanics of machine guns he’s manned,

a list of every province and city in Vietnam, everything he did when he didn’t know
he was history, or what lies had been told, or what evidence there’d be, evidence against
any other choice he had and those he didn’t, what he’d change

if he’d known what his kid could find
in seconds on a machine he can’t turn on
though he’s never spoken of regret
If his window opened and his arm would move, he’d land that peach pit at the foot of the guard’s quarters. There, another bed where he’s slept. Before he was one, he’d catch patients broken out from the nursing home who’d wandered down the grassy hill to the prison. He and the other guards would have to coax them into their vans, drive them back. Sometimes they’d make it to the city dump, farther down the road, at which point they became sanitation’s problem.

He lies there for months, unaware his history is at his back. Years further down the road, a cotton plantation, bloody textiles sold to mills along river. Then unpeopling. Even farther: aquatic creatures with feather-like gills.

Back from war, making a living spending his nights at the prison. Now: the dump, the nursing home, the prison, a subdivision called cottonwood, his shameful parts, peeking out. He couldn’t wander if he wanted to. It’s summer. Clouds begin just above the asphalt. Hot rain catches in branches like milky sacks of spider eggs, sagging clumps we found in the bed of his pickup the summer he got rid of it and the dog got eaten. Sick weeks he can’t remember, phone calls he didn’t make. Children coming down from all across the southeast.
The top-heavy crepe myrtle cracked open in the front yard split in a thunderstorm. Popped vessels bleeding into lime green irises. All of a sudden, clocks work.
II.
Suzanne (Alternate Version) by Nina Simone

as a child I felt most sinister
singing the whispered parts

of schoolyard songs
bouncing my palms
down to the ground
tension in my brow

meeting eyes with another
lion-faced girl across the circle

I wanted to hold someone’s
hand in mine roundly

balled up, and sway together
I have a lovely time inside my head

can you believe?
she says salvation

not promised land
I wanted to skip down to the water
holy and untaken care of
I wanted that closeness

you know the one
a child—I found the perfect lover in Jesus

who’s going to be sweet to me?
black and comely in all conceivable ways

decorous, ferocious, fearsome and wise
the way the blue jays and the starlings talk
Prescience

In preschool I played a dandelion-in-the-outfield in a church play about baseball and Jesus. Red circles on my cheeks, green tights, yellow petals around my face, we sang a song I don’t remember, but it sounded like honey. The church sold our sound on cassettes.

A decade later, Dad dug the tape from the console and fed it to the tape deck as we waited in the Taco Bell drive-thru after bible study. *Remember this song?* Of course I did, my voice a bell in a river of bells. I couldn’t have, but I think I thought to warn him then,

I think I saw the end before I heard it. I think I thought to say *No. Don’t press play.* He’d already pushed the prism in. The piano’s warm announcement, then our perfect little voices, then the ribbons twisting, crackling, gobbled up.
Jacob’s Ladder

One of the first white men I ever knew was the P.E. coach at the Baptist K-12 I went to for only my alphabet years whose muscles were spheres under his skin, his strength an image worn viscerally, twitching, taut globes.

In that big gymnasium that ridiculous rope fell from a ceiling as high as the sanctuary’s next door.

He’d joke around with us, toddlers really, hold us sweetly over his head, helping us over the knots, us giggling at exponential new heights. He held us like nothing, knowing next year, we’d have to face the rope on our own, climb as high as we could go, our classmates on the silent mat below. Could he find me comely, though the others were all fairer, and I could barely leave the ground, earthbound?

His promise out of reach?
zip lining @ jesus camp

you had to swim across the lake, walk barefoot up the bank in the mud
to the little log stoop which gave way from earth to water

I swam like a dog, fear a bone in my mouth I held tenderly above
the murk until I made it, the cliffside licking my soles, dirty tongues, dread

my holiest thing—on the forest-sided hill the shaggy blonde counselor
handed me a rickety pole—my only tether to control, my turn up on the log

behind me a growing line of smaller girls with stringy hair, uncomplicated desire
my anxiety as good as any voice from above saying don’t dare step forward—

pale optionlessness my only impetus, I had to let go, I dropped like a stone I remember
a sound on the rope like a gasp, though there couldn’t have been

not flight, not freedom, distinctly wrong, the world gone, my sudden weight beneath
me held only by the tension shot through to my pews, my pith ablaze gracelessly

falling through the air, gracelessly letting go too soon—hit the water like rock.
was god like the turnbuckle, designed for children lighter than me?

was god like the rope, brought by my burden
closer to the water’s muculent skin than it was ever meant to go?
whitetails grazing by the ID checkpoints

brother stripped the backseats out his car to make it go faster,
the rear a shell of exposed hardware, harsh unlawful seat

that summer he drove us to the gym on base each day
a half hour each way he’d speed down to twenty

the windows down to the thick morning heat my arm mirroring
his slung down the side of the car

the base a fortressed forest, a national park with more guns
tanks and nearly identical men at work to make the infantry go

past the golf course past the shooting range past the tower sometimes
with paratroopers practicing their descents to earth

he’d blast something angry from his souped-up stereo and we’d maybe sing
along together depending on the song, the hour, our mood, camouflaged

he’d sneak me into the gym, his rotc card greater than my dependence
and I’d run alongside soldiers, toying my exhaustion as he lifted weights

under a wall of clocks showing military time all over the world, we loathed
ourselves and loved each other but never learned to talk

we were skinny, getting skinnier, going fast. teenagers with nothing
due besides a lineage of warfare

on the body revolting fatigues, I sat in mine and he sat in his and watched
empire unmake itself on the drive back home
**Habitual Blue**

we walked into the woods on her family’s property

a friend and her two friends, a couple a couple

years older than us, that way you do


your first time, foolish and too cautious. I didn’t want
to be holy anymore. we sat around in pine straw,
and lit up. I saw the patterns of sky between canopied leaves

for the first time, bugs carrying twice their weight in crumbs,
the path we’d taken in unfindable, we wandered out prolonged,
zoomed in, uncaught and mildly changed, felt our bodies in that

rich turquoise pool. the others were white,

and I wasn’t anyone yet. I think they wanted me.

I think I wanted escape.
private land

down river road we passed the turn off turned around
trespassed and fence-hopped past the woods and wooden cabins
to behold the water falling like a secret thunder machine

in an offshoot of the chattahoochee I never knew was there
teenagers in that town all we had to talk about was what life
wasn’t and sunshine we didn’t kiss but knew we could have

and wondered if we should girlhood
was a patch on my back no one knew how to see
me I pointed up and said I’d never

jump from such a height land not mine I would have
fixed to any shining mouth to feel less untold
river road never your way not wanting to tear into
White teens I wish I’d never met, unless the fact
of wasting wishes. Rich fishes boiling their own water.
Kids bowed around a little box, doing lines. Bright,
the biggest house I’d ever been in, ugliest too.
Ginger fuck said put that soda back, his dad’d flip.
Careless girl had told me take it, had brought me there
in the first place. A covered piano. The basement’s basement.
Careless girl’s kisses whether wanted or not. Where had I gone?
We went to see his bedroom. The dog was dying. She kept burying
herself around the house. The maid was worried she’d rot somewhere
they wouldn’t find her. We were girls, waiting in his room
for something else to happen, or something. There’s nothing
to fucking do here, said the boy-prince of an Atlanta I’d never seen,
strung out court. All those rooms and we slept on a futon. I know
what being bored can do. I have and have had too much, too. Poolside
I don’t feel like making it clear. Dear, I’ve almost got you forgotten.
I’ve hid myself all over. Freedom wasn’t something I’d heard of yet,
and to be loved, free drugs and another skin to fill up with my liar bones,
I’d have gone anywhere.
The Color Sensation of Skin

The golden charm the sun sets out. To hold, be held, and behold blackness.

And myself. To hold and behold myself, and beheld. Thoracic wondering, can I kiss you here? Does love sit upon a greyscale? Let me catch you on my waveform.

Let me zephyr you a world right quick. Hues, ways to held and or beholden, and garden. Lifelong writing of different yous. The therapist says do you think you know your friends? Do you think your friends know you? The therapist says Yikes. Twice. Farewell to any and all white hands who have touched or thought to. Rebuked, cut down. I deforest your fingers. Never no for you. You get no name,

I hope never for you, and not much at all.

Where do white people go when you dream of your new world? I don't care. In my dreams, whiteness doesn’t come up. We build a car together. Spinners, neon, hydraulics. We drive it around and run people over. Do you know anyone in your family? Does anyone in your family know you? The first time whiteness touched you, did you know what it was? If only I knew then. You can feel the color sensation on your skin. It’s not poetry or complicated. I used to use the word resistance and I had no idea what I meant. I used to think I wanted resistance, but now I think what I want for us is loose, turned loose. I want blackness unfurling, total unfurling. I want spinned out roots.
senior prom @ the infantry museum

fireball shots in the parking lot
out the trunk, a misdemeanor in my bookbag
an awkward cinnamon hello to mister...

through a tunnel of polymer men, tumbling
their bodies out of empire into empire
clay hills and flame-slowing moss

streamers and elegant balloons among
clear jewel cases—the uniformed
not quite mannequins, young men in suits

labeled by plaques—frozen and marble-eyed,
waiting to leave. ass fat, black velveted,
hair on bone straight, war dioramas

glittering above us darkly, begging
the DJ for one good song, all the flags
on the way to the bathroom,

a memorial wall in the parking lot,
tanks in the ballroom, afterparty
in the middle of nowhere,
chaos unsprawling toward dark
outskirts skies trying to fling the film
of childhood from off us

beautiful, it feels beautiful knowing
nothing's going to happen
and waiting for it

what dioramas do our bodies make?
ball gowned and kitten heeled
or childhood battalioned

I try him on for size, a boy scaling
the walls, eyes green marbles, fitting death
into his curves. who we were

beginning to become, eighteen and on our ways to,
disappointment, riddle-spawned, and melting
transmission

mom says she doesn’t dream like us
she dreams happy dreams, gets visits
from her father, rides around in his truck

dad, I dream like you—
I’m being chased, my wrongs
have wings, weird, just weird

I see outrageous things
though I know they’re nothing
to what bleeds for you

to think, we are both somewhere
trying not to fall back asleep, or bracing
against impact, or pushing

our heads through terror’s film, or holding
a dead hand over mouths not quite our own
III.
Man! I Feel Like A Woman!

Let go, come

night, I feel a rig

let out
to make me real my voice

a want a shout

no

a lie a lie

ain't gon call

on go dim

best un woman

I have little
to forget: ma

Men, h rt, skirts,

real

attraction

or hair, do I dare

be free?

I feel like a
girl a break, tight e go
to own

need, man only a dance

We let our air hang

a man
I gave a little

to forge a

hell

off traction

oh, lord

I want to be free the way

Man feel like man

The thing about being

Is the proof, un-
total m a lady

Messs

Oh, h oll ow

ration

do I

want to be? to feel the way I feel?

man!

I get totally crazy

you

come on

like a

the snow, the shouting

the tree’s black bark, veins running through
bleeding bolder beneath the snow,
is what makes the snow lovely, those breathing,
asking branches reaching toward the low gray sky,
what it covers, what hard edges fall away beneath,
what jaggedness obscured—the notion of fence
goes away beneath the roundness, the weak manner
of chain-link is easy work, disappeared
under just a couple of inches, walls thinning,
one great house roofed by low sky

last night, a fight before first snowfall, broke
among a family nearby. an orchestra of hurt
we could hear from our bedroom window, aching
voices bringing us into their living room, shouting
and shouting and soon the weeping which accompanies
and becomes the shouting, the kind of shouting nothing good
can stop, the shouter’s head a big ringing bell. what colder
agony than the whole house, screaming? the roundness
of the moon as I listened and remembered and did
nothing and now the snow, the morning
after, moving in circles over our shared backyard
I lose my body again

& again I've lived enough
    wet brown life inside the suck

between meat & its tearing
    off the bone—this my favorite

outfit I tithe at the alter
    of undaughtering loose

a soft holler from nowhere
    in particular to cradle

my unmothers name it's no-
    thing that can be fixed by

anything but the clock
    counting both ways

so I just get it removed
    or reflowered or both—

both genders roughage
    & scabbing & need
like a tongue fire forked
& flicking down my throat

last time I just left figured
you walk long enough a night

this dripping is bound
to drop a baby bird

at your feet spatchcocked
& been-blaring I don't

remember breathing but
a dull slap of breeze & lucky

tiring siren scent something
screeching out of me

my navel breaches the slough
of shrugged bloodshed

spreading for eons past my toes
up from the horizon is all
empty parking lots every time I get
dressed I finish with a sigh

I read the bible I climb
into you like a dead whale

I wear your discomfort like
strung meat I make an apatite

chain of all your wondering
eyes you hold a knife or a

baby or a breath tight enough
your spine just finds away home

I've already done the worst
of what your words could do

to erase me & yet
Coles shadow

not him and at once his,
his underling his

slave, so menacing
he sends him and he goes, fetching
answers from the underworld

dough in the devil’s hands
a man, slanted

but sometimes teeth-gritten,
he does flicker, quiver, seems to
doubt, guesses, the shadow

hesitates,
peels off a bit,

Cole comes in parts,
gesticulates his bodies down
both neither and another

human, demon, otherwise
sacrifice, humming utensil
hallowed eyes, strung between,
eventually, he has to choose
just one thing to be
not quite a co-op; rabies quarantine
	he house cat got bit by something
feral, a fox, a racoon, we couldn’t be sure,
one of us were there, all so busy gender-less and addicted to something, we’d wanted
to live somewhere different, and now we were
here, falling apart together at weekly check-ins
none of us were okay, and the litter box was full,
and the dishes, the dishes. we bobbed about death
that semester like depressed fruit flies.
I stood in the foyer and half listened,
a compassionate white lady explaining to me
the parameters—practical and legal—
of rabies quarantine. you could look right
down into the cat, into the animal of her,
her meat, bright punctures. in another universe
the cat took care of us, she stopped opening
the bathroom window, she stopped letting us
climb down onto the roof, when she went out
onto the fire escape to smoke she shut the screen
behind her, we’d cutely nose the mesh and gaze
out at her beautiful tendrils, but she’d deny,
it was a wake-up call for her, she told her friends
she was getting her shit together, for us,
she licked our abscesses with razor kisses,

each day she checked the corners of our lips

for foam, applied our ointments, fed us goop

from a little syringe, it was overkill, some bites

are no big deal, no virus was taking hold,

just winter, all of us piled up around her,

made helpless, and we were helpless,

and we all just stayed alive
**a black slug’s intake form**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What sort of work are you doing now?</td>
<td>seeping weeping mucus music (like a comet like a trail)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your present work satisfy you?</td>
<td>moving stays me alive. my present doesn’t work. time? no time. black time. slugtime.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does any member of your family suffer from an “emotional” or “mental disorder”?</td>
<td>i come from a tangle, from a snapping on and off, we all tangle up inside, who? family? i seep, no mother comes out—what we know of suffering was made without our hands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State in your own words the nature of your main problems</td>
<td>retracts? attracts? ahhhhh niss stee. ahhhhh niss tea. if i stop, i can’t see the trail i made. but i know it. i smell it. i hate it, sometimes, when i stop and smell my trail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What seems to worsen your problems?</td>
<td>thinking, needles, needle-loping, needle-lopers, parching parcels, people, erudite droughts, probing, probing along</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What have you tried that has been helpful?</td>
<td>i smell like a sieve, not like a sleeve. water. what else? water.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are some special talents or skills that you feel proud of?</td>
<td>once i lived with a crown of fruit flies chomping at my back. they seemed to think i was finished. moments and moments and moments passed. i had them thinking i was lunch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How is your free time spent?</td>
<td>tuberous begonias, petunias, chrysanthemums, crosswords, hollyhocks, conversations, irises, strawberries, mushrooms, earthworms, slugs, sex, shrooms, carrots, peas, apples, cabbage,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you could have any two wishes, what would they be?</td>
<td>human extinction giant swamp orgy bubble bath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List your 5 main fears:</td>
<td>1. june 2. public speaking 3. the dream where i wake up without my mantel 4. sinkholes 5. people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When are you most likely to lose control of your feeling?</td>
<td>dry heat gives me itching beneath the mantel and the screaming of the foot. then i think: still. july. shrivel. shovel. underneath. to go underneath? teeth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What sensations are unpleasant for you?</td>
<td>do you really have to ask?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe a very pleasant image, mental picture, or fantasy?</td>
<td>black. pitch black. sopping, up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What would you consider to be your craziest thought or idea?</td>
<td>teeth. i want teeth.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
guardening

our landlord reminds us that if we plant a garden,
we must replace it with patches of grass when we leave
(though naturally the yard is primarily violets, swaths
of clover, leaf compost ravines, seeds, fallen branches,
trailing ivy…) we’ll put her patches down when we go.
when we go, where will we be going?

I mean to say I can barely see my future.
I mean, can anybody? I’m not special. I mean that.
my grandma disagrees, reminds me to write poetry

with words she can understand, and tells me what
to plant: broccoli, greens, I forget. the garden, in pictures
I send her she can barely see, makes her prouder than anything

I’ve ever done. grandma, what else do you remember?
that one chaotic month or two of just me, you, and mom
living in that house we couldn’t afford, all fighting?

the perfect baby girl, fossilized, sheers fiddling in the garden
blossoming

dispensary customer, I never caught and wouldn’t have remembered your name
but I wonder about your child sometimes, who you came in not thinking about,
but when I asked about your day, you looked moved just to recall the image

of the preschool graduates fluttering down the schoolyard hill, pastel
and ribbon-clad, they call it their blossoming ceremony, you seemed to want
to want to roll your eyes, but didn’t. post-petal, your kid would matriculate

into a dual language immersion private school or something, and you worried
about the change. your baby, so soonly pressed in many paged books. I didn’t say
much, I’d asked to distract while my hands packaged and labeled,

while I climbed across math, glancing between your knit brow and the cash register.
I didn’t care so much about your new money, your portland life, your born-and-raised,
your wife and kid, what you had to say about public schooling. but that look

when you started to talk—in your eyes I saw that big green hill, a world,
I saw them gowned and tumbling down its side. I saw the inevitable wilting.
even then, I thought, I’ll put that look into a poem. here it is.
Immature

I was not ready for your love.
You all but told me so, though
I'm sure I barely heard it. You did
me wrong. I did me wronger.
I did you wrong, I loved you and didn't
know how to and barely said so.
I was and you told me so, and what
I was coming from, childhood a wave
I'd hardly broken breath from, first
lover's loose fingers, ugly ghost, clinging
caul—a shame I couldn't cut the membrane
off my mouth. A song I loved and couldn't
even mouth the words
I had a best friend named Penelope. She lived inside my head, so she lived inside my crate with me.

You wouldn’t believe all the jokes I can make about meat.

Once I was a boy in a bottleneck, I was fed only to be fed, only—

I have wanted to be free. I have wanted to die.

Cross sections of any of my thighs could perform for you the story of the first time I ever ran. Like a tree.

But you’d have to kill me first, you’d have to call it flank.

Nurture can be torture but not the other way around.

In the songs I sang I was free already.

I was never a calf. I was dead and then an idea. I was an idea,
then I was gone. I was a girl. I was perfect.

*Sometimes,*
the scent of pine / dirty slats, vacant
hay / the scent of pine / it catches me
I wonder why you went away

Face it. You just want to know how
I learned to fuck. The ground

is my mother. I put you in
my mouth if I mean it
Counter Indication

Pharmacy phone reps can’t pronounce you,
so I call you by your corporate name.

Annually I place my head within an egg-like plastic basin.
I have to, the awful males I call my doctors tell me so.

Each year, a new me hallucinating light speckles where there aren’t any
Is this it? Flashy corneal farewell?

I see the dots, the doctor checks me off.

*

New medicine right after we broke up.

The first time we shared a bed I insisted on sleeping flip flopped,
head by foot—otherwise twinbed midnight would make morning

migraine misery. You took it as a slight.
I wouldn’t say it was a fight, just the engines always sputtering.

*
I guess I've lied. Many years I miss the test.
I would prefer: no doctors, just medicine.

I obsess with the palliative, but despise
phone calls and elevator rides.

They fumble my body.
Mark-making, weight-taking, clicking

the clicker, conspicuous dots, I see fine, I see enough.

*

Maybe we might've made it, if not my many
knots. We would have been kissed by then

and slept all snuggled up. I would have never *tired,*
*I'm sorry, I can't talk,* and you would've

not ignored it. I don't mean to say I wish.
I imagine myself a fish in the dark,

dead under the covers, powered down for days and days,
head bad, bed weather, bones pickling. You said,
do you feel that?

Had I said not as much?
IV.
heritable

in a dream my mom and I are in love
    with the same man. I whine
for him to spoon me into sleep
    in the bed she and I share.
though I love him I know
    we’ve never met. he’s a famous
stranger we made into a cocoon.
    for long I was afraid to sleep alone.
in the dream I'm still a girl until
    I’m not. when you wake me up
I fear I’ve been talking, though I never do.
    She never asks, but I often catch
her looking away from my eyes.
    just once she says I wonder where
your breasts have gone. a porous
    canoe of a thing to say.
our father lover doesn’t mind.
    I turn to kiss his crow tail chin
and he frowns at my lips, hurries
    mathematics with the rest of me.
how did I get here? I imagine my two
    breasts running down a street.
they are glad to get away. the man leaves
me a wrist with just heat and static
at the end of it to remember the night by.
as a child I worried about the kind of love
I learned. I looked at my mother and I looked
at my brothers’ wives. I looked in the mirror.
now I grow worry and ignore it like hair.
she tells me there’s no love to be lost, as
though it should come as a surprise after
two decades of pressing the last thoughts
of my days into the cold at my back. I think
I saw it in a cartoon, two breasts
bounding, unbodied, over a hill, a street
cutting right down the middle, perfect
grass on either side, the sky floating
like a floating sky. lover,
you hate it when I say you can do whatever
you want with my body. sometimes
I wake up in bed with you and the first
thing I say is mom.
I’m afraid if I lay down I’ll lay there
forever. I fear the same for you.
the outline of a woman, the outline of
a sofa, a television’s dutiful
radioaction. we take turns wanting to be.
I wake you up to tell you of my dream.

I wake you up and beg, *teach me please*

*what hands are for.*
heifer returns to the veal crate, post-op

herbs chopped fine, butter dug
beneath skin, two despined
chickens crisped perfect,

girl cook just like ella mae
but what suckles here?
and where’s grandma then?
tv-land, niggers,
black and white pictures,
indians, cowboys, shopping-

network, mother sadness,
consanguineous
baby girl, butchered

ghost scalpels, chest
a gourd, which utters
what won’t mom

say. what dad didn’t do.
pinkened bedroom.
regression
Two paragraphs in, I think of you and put it down.

Have I made of you an object of desire? Made a you from you which is really for me. Embarrassingly and for so long. Saccharine stand-in. I was once a child, technically, writing to a white you (who’d abused, as they do) the way I used to talk to God. First beloved, first beloved—fervently and with my eyes closed, soon broken from both. Can I blame that? Who I've been has hated who I've been. Another You, Other use. I think of you all the time. I wrote an almost sonnet for you and found it thin. I'm under the moon and may never see you again. What clusters I’ve fastened to, and how far the little word from breathing?
heifer’s dream

out to wander, we saw a glowing
flock of something else beyond the fence

we watched for hours as they grazed—
awed by their presence, certain sense

and magnificence, only an inkling
as we paddled inlet in late spring

I knew then, no more fence
a mixed herd, we observed,

often seeming to move as one
organism. they took us in.

we introduced ourselves.
they told us they were against.

against what? we asked,
and they lowered their gaze

to the chain link at my ankles.
I felt my udders blush.
we watched for chemical warfare
with deer, awed by their presence,

plastic gloves and retractable mortars
once around 400,000 strong,

the herd splinters and
wanders randomly until fall,

when it congregates again and
then the whole herd, following the

primordial spectacle of open water.
Oh, what I learned.

Great Slave—They conquered a buoy,
not a body. They defeated the lake

en masse and struck lead, they want us
dead. They took the path to barren ground.

twin, we are not just two
and it isn’t you who lets us live
Gullible

A few times, out at parties, they’d reach toward me
and push my shoulders down from my ears, a big smile
on their face. I’d feel like a lovely specimen.

A sucker for cumulonimbus, and no mathematician
on my own, I’d ask them to explain simple things,
like why the sky was blue, and they’d try. I was an open pupil.

If I watch the sunset from my window for too long I convince myself
the ubiquitous helicopter sounds are after me this time. For a second
I think I see a little drone bug hovering just beyond the glass. Blue pink

and purple like cotton candy ice cream the sky just exists for us to see.
Maybe I know nothing of love. Brother says the word is written
on the ceiling, and I look up
heifer’s thinking about wanting

a baby, again
but again
she’s stuck
on obstacles:
no longer including
alimental glands
and ducts and semi-
frequent drug use or
having been fathered
informationally mostly
and mother, well,
you know. but,
everlasting, the songs
she thinks
she’d sing
to them,
sing with them,
make up together
stranded
   for Sarah

we walked so much that summer
cause you loathed spending and sometimes
without purchase there there’s nowhere to go

you shook my casing through
down to the bank of the Harlem River
you comfortable further down the rocks than me

we sat along its rough edge, other together
sweating among the high grass and city lights
our misses matching and the rats scattering

like little explosions in the sudden brush between us
beneath us waves crashing in, like some mucky ocean
at our path’s natural edge

the last bus back to yours had long left.
driving from Pasadena, retching
in the passenger seat. listening

to beautiful music very quietly
as you slept on our aubade exit
from the PNW. when what was dead

on the roadside pulled a shriek you couldn't stop.
Sarah, are we a list of cities?
tender and good

roads and spaces
thriving and not
wherever we go
greeting

it matters not whether the motion was caused by squirrels or wind.
I saw the leaves at the end of that vine wave like a hand, and knew it
to be so. I said hello back and the earth heard. I heard the earth's answer.
the earth can move the squirrels and wind just like its hands can't it? the bare
walnut body nearly rhizomatic, set in the earth and lurching with its gusts.
I yearn to switch over into the other world. anyone has it, that buzz at the back
of the neck. let us submit to the earth. let us welcome the earth. let us feel
the earth not forgive.
Rearing

We close our eyes in front of each other,
the cat and I, because we know the other
to be selectively non-murderous, trust
the other would quicken in
danger's sudden face.
This is the third dead bird he's brought us
in three years.

Purplish, grey, alive and dying, the resurrection
lilies in the backyard—sick stalks thickly robed
tall and falling out the earth.

Just past them, his song sparrow
decapitated, clean white spout of spine
meat-haloed like a cartoon. I know

I'm doing the wrong thing, letting him outside.

But could I deprive him of all this?
This sky, any of its many unreal blues,
our garden's first monarch, all the dirt
he could ever roll around in, the world's
open mouth. Death will always come.

Its little missing head.
our garden

it seems without us our garden’s ecosystem
has leaned toward insect-kind,
our neem oil un-spritzed, our cat’s paws not stomping,
our balance no more.
did birds not intervene? didn’t grasshopper mutiny
offer robin buffet?
or had they lazed in our absence
spreading out across the lawn?
on return of my hands
each plant shook loose a cloud
of wingings: whiteflies, moths, aphids, one dead cutworm
on an eggplant’s slit leaf,
I know I own nothing. summer’s end, bugs win
with us or without.
there is no stopping. their electrical din
sends you back inside.
tiny, stubborn creatures. I do not mean to lord
the land I live on. I try to be with,
but cops, charisma, jerusalem—once it’s going down
I want so bad to be
someplace untakeable. I close my eyes and many men
are on our porch.
finally. I’ve been waiting all my life for the return.
I’ve seen their quiet army. I’ve seen their quiet kill. I learned to speak amongst that rabble. I know the ending won’t be peaceful.

I right a cinderblock from the garden’s wall felled by the edge of a nationwide storm.

at least three dozen clinking bodies leap from beneath looping, little locust juke busted, but as they flung away still singing:

*ours soon ours soon ours ours ours*
yes, I've gone to the river's edge when I've no longer wanted to be

rivers which loop and bend and take life
and make life, full of bodies both gone
and thriving, river of my hometown brown

breached by manmade rapids, made a money
machine, whispers beneath of what always returns,
rivers whose curves my ancestors knew,

ancestors I don't, rivers I do,
alchemy sanctuary, homes on stilts,
river whose seen my bodies taken,

cold river up north, whose shores I knew
when I most wanted to undo my body,
I come to you empty, outsized,

not to be filled, but to know what remains
Notes

1. “Schatulga” and “Chattahoochee” are both words in the Mvskoke language used as place names in my hometown, which is on unceded Muscogee land.

2. The italicized lines at the end of “Suzanne” are from the book *Black Dolls* by Margo Jefferson.

3. “*Man! I Feel Like A Woman!*” is an erasure of the song by Shania Twain.

4. I composed the collages throughout the manuscript from clippings of thrifted *National Geographic* magazines. The poem “heifer’s dream” is composed mostly of phrases clipped from the same magazines.