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notes on survival, despite

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Bachelor of Arts in English

Marshall University

May 2014

submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the

degree MASTER OF ARTS in ENGLISH

at the

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

August 2018

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Student's Date of Defense: August 22, 2018

## **DEDICATION**

to my mother  
who remains heaven & sky  
break of light  
the way  
forward  
always

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All my gratitude and thanks to the family, friends, and readers who have provided me encouragement and support throughout each of these poems; to my best friend, first reader, and more, Autumn Smith; to one of my closest friends and first readers of almost every poem that I write, Kevin Latimer; to the entire staff at BARNHOUSE Journal; to the entire staff at Long Long Journal; to William Lennon and Cleveland Review of Books; to Caryl Pagel for her guidance, feedback, and general excitement for the growth of my writing; to Krysia Orłowski for her early support and encouragement to push my writing to the next level; to Dr. William Breeze for seeing in my potential as scholar and student; to Sheila McMullin for her friendship and emotional support; to Ayesha Khanom for believing in me before I believed in myself; to Kassandra Machado for returning and being a friend, despite.

Thank you to the editors and staffs of the journals, magazines, or anthologies in which several of these poems have appeared or are scheduled to appear, sometimes with different titles, in different formats, or different versions:

*8 Poems Journal:*

“all on the altar”

*The Cerurove:*

“notes on freedom”

“after the state sends its thoughts & prayers & condolences” “field son witnesses a reunion”

*Cosmonauts Avenue:*

“field son survives the wilderness”

*OCCULUM:*

“of eve & adam’s apple: the will & testament”

*The Poetry Annals anthology: The Anatomy of Desire:*

“inheritance”

“what is love but an animal with its face buried deep in the ground?”

*Riggwelter Press:*

“in which america hears me”

*Sleeper Service:*

“body”

*TRACK//FOUR:*

“field son recalls the way it was when”

“lord, of countin’ balloons are you tired yet?”

*Winter Tangerine:*

“field son watches his mother”

“what is prayer in a mouth that never spoke  
arabic?” “prayer decaying on its way out”

*Longleaf Review*

“field son finds a way to make it on this earth”

*Wildness Journal*

“to the white boys who sang suwoop as we passed on a pwi”

notes on survival, despite

JASON HARRIS

**ABSTRACT**

In this collection of poems, the issue of damage-based thinking and desire-based thinking is being examined. It is being examined through the use of several different types of poetry techniques. Within the poems, the past, the present, and the future are examined and asks a larger question: How can we, as people take the daily violence that we encounter and find – and/or work our way to – joy.

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## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

notes on survival, despite: on damage & desire

“Desire is involved with the *not yet* and, at times, the *not anymore* [...] Desire is about longing, about a present that is enriched by both the past and the future. It is integral to our humanness”

- Eve Tuck, *Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities*

Before *notes on survival, despite* became *notes on survival, despite*, I had written a shorter collection of poems called *Unpacking*. The only poem that survived the revision and editing process, and the one poem that led me to what would eventually become “*notes...*” is a poem called “body.” “body” was cut down from two pages to one and the title revised to “self- portrait of field son as oxen.” The original poem narrated the commodification and exploitation of a young Black boy’s body being carouseled on an auction block and touted as the most impressive and able-bodied slave on the plantation. I remember having written the poem in 2017 and awakening something inside myself that I did not realize was there: a desire to take the past, the present, and retell different narratives. Upon the first several drafts of this poem, I was proud of myself for having written it but as I continued to explore myself and the reasons why I write, I realized that the poem was not okay. While writing this poem, I had no idea that the framework I produced the poem in was from a framework

of damage-based thinking.

Eve Tuck, Associate Professor of Critical Race and Indigenous Studies at the University of Toronto, describes two frameworks in her essay, *Suspending Damage: A Communities*, from which I borrow. In *Suspending Damage...* Tuck invites the reader to explore the “re-visioning [of] research in our [native, city, and disenfranchised] communities not only to recognize the need to document the effects of oppression on our communities but also to consider the long-term repercussions of *thinking of ourselves as broken*” (Tuck, 409). Looking back, I realized that much of *Unpacking* was written from a place of brokenness, from a place of mental oppression foregrounded by systemic oppression of Black bodies and Black male bodies. During the year I spent writing *Unpacking* I was struggling socially, emotionally, and racially. In addition, I was offered a teaching position, had broken up with a longtime partner, and often felt out of place, or as most consider: like an imposter.

Being a Black man in America was at the root of each of my hardships as one socially and politically cognizant might expect. My Blackness during the year I wrote *Unpacking* took shape in many of my outlets. I couldn't go anywhere, do anything, or enter a space without confronting my Blackness and, to be completely honest, haven't been able to do that since the time in junior high when I was walking home from school and had the police called on me.

Forecasts called for rain that day and so I had my mother's large black umbrella. On my way home from school, the umbrella sufficed as protection from the weather; when the rain stopped, and I held the folded-up umbrella in my hands and bounded the route home, the tool from which I sought shelter was weaponized. I think now, that

day, I was introduced to the multiplicity of a thing, the way objects in our lives function on many different levels. Hearing police sirens in my neighborhood was not out of the ordinary and so when I initially heard them, I simply kept walking because I knew I had done nothing wrong; because I had done nothing wrong. Squad cars surrounded me. I started sweating; stomach twisted in disbelief.

“Drop the umbrella and get your hands in the air,” one of the four officers said. Their guns pointed at me.

“Do you have any weapons on you?” “No,” I said, “I’m just walking home.”

“Walking home from where?”

“School.”

“Take the backpack off.

Slowly. sir.” I did.

For years, I internalized that moment and allowed it to start the self-policing of my Blackness and my body. So, going into a new teaching position at the university level and dating a White woman while I worked and served in predominantly Black neighborhoods and schools, I often felt unlike myself in public and private spaces. I struggled, to the point of having to seek counseling, to accept that I deserved to teach first year writing at the university level, to accept that because my partner and I could not work through our racial partition. As a first-generation college graduate, I felt that the more opportunities I was awarded by my university, the thicker the cement was laid between my family, my identifying as Black, and myself. Many afternoons, in the

middle of a discussion about gentrification or pollution or genetically modified babies, I would ask myself: do I really deserve to be here? on the other side of the lectern? I struggled to believe that my first-year students, predominantly white, would not consider me intelligent or smart enough to teach him, her, or them about writing. I often felt alone in the classroom as the only person, or one out of the few people, of color in the classroom. I allowed myself to see myself and think of myself as broken, as not smart enough, as not intelligent enough, as – simply– not enough. That is heavily the place from which *Unpacking* developed. *Unpacking* dealt largely with grief, and what it felt like to sit in that grief. Paralyzed by life off of the page, I realize that I did not do the actual work of experiencing grief (that is, to not only sit in grief but to investigate *how* we work through our grief or anger or sadness and *what* the other side looks like).

In addition to my identity issues, I was struggling with a longtime partner and at the center of our hardships and obstacles lied race. I would come home from work and share moments of my day, explain how certain happenings made me feel, and that I felt that had I been White, the situation might have gone differently, my day might have been better.

“I got pulled over again today.” “That sucks,” she’d say.

“It’s because I’m Black. I was going the speed limit.”

“Everyone gets pulled over, Jason.”

Our discussion routinely went this way and this erasure of my identity made me feel less-than, or invisible. My partner refused to accept that I was being treated a certain way because of my skin color. Many nights we discussed white privilege, discussed what it meant to exist as a white woman who is dating a black man, discussed what it meant to exist as a black man dating a white woman in a racially charged nation. Our discussions would ultimately end in silence, frustration, and anger; silence because

what do you say to the one you love but also to the one who cannot understand your perspective? frustrated because the one you love cannot understand your experience; angry because the one you love refuses to accept you are treated one way because you identify as this or that, etc.

*Unpacking* attempted to explore race, societal hardships, interracial relationships, and my attempts to unravel the twists and turns of being a Black man in America. For a long time, I got tied up on the idea, the metaphor, of unpacking. Of undoing the layers of a thing gone bad, of a thing that could have been had we not been exposed to certain violences or little horrors. While I believe that *notes...* is also exploring the same ideas or topics, it does not explore interracial relationships, but the many forms Black relationships take up. *notes...* also pushes the pen closer to the edge of the table by not stopping at the damage left after the violence, but exploring what happens on the other side of damage? on the other side of violence?

And that is desire. Is joy.

When I use the word violence, I use it broadly, because we live in a society, in a culture, that operates off of violence. The poems in this collection explore the dichotomy of race and religion as violence, the insidiousness of gentrification as violence, the thinly veiled film between an estranged lover pulling a nine-to-five for and pulling a knife on their person.

Violence, to me, is anything that disturbs our small and big universes. As someone who works in multiple high schools throughout the Cleveland Metropolitan area, I see, hear, and experience violence daily (i.e. the student calling another student out of his, her, or their name, the water shooting out of water fountains and faucets the color of rust, educators calling our youth stupid and lazy after the bell releases students home).

Violence is a gun being pulled in your face, is language and rhetoric shaping and reshaping our country's narrative for the victors, is a fruit fly puncturing the skin of an overripe mango, that has been rotting in the sun, to lay her eggs.

Eve Tuck pushes against the idea of damage-based writing/thinking by offering up the implicit theory of change. An implicit theory of change, Tuck explains, “will have implications for the way in which a project unfolds, what we see as the start or end of a project, who is our audience, who is our ‘us,’ how we think things are known, and how others can or need to be convinced” (413). It is through a theory of change that I began to explore what it was that I was trying to accomplish with *notes on survival, despite*. I began to ask myself the questions: what can I do with the violence that I, that others have experienced? What can I do with the violence, the pain, that I have caused others? What is on the other side of this violence? these little horrors? How do we attempt to make good out of the bad that we experience on a daily basis? How do we become the fruit fly's infants and not remain the mango rotting in the sun?

This theory of change happened for me when I read, particularly, five contemporary authors: Clint Smith III, Eve L. Ewing, Vanessa Jiminez Gabb, Richard Siken, and Kaveh Akbar.

Clint Smith's collection, *Counting Descent*, reconfigured what it meant to make the history that we experience, are taught, and are currently living through personal. *Counting Descent* also taught me how to look at something as simple as a window and find, in the reflection, a narrative, rooted in understanding, waiting to be shared. In his poem, “what the window said to the black boy,” Smith's narrator personifies a window. The window opens the poem saying:

“when someone breaks me, they call it a crime,” (Smith, 29) and in the second stanza says, “when someone breaks you they call it inevitable” (Smith, 29).

Smith’s ability to immediately place the reader in a damage-based scene, pays off in the end when the window explores the many Black boys it sees and how none of the Black boys are “the same” (Smith, 29). Instead, the window praises that “the more shards there are” (Smith, 29) the more chances there are to be seen in different lights, in different truths. The light, for me, mended the brokenness I felt. Smith has several personification poems that taught me how to look within the subject of the poems in *notes...* and focus solely on their experience(s). It is the several “...black boy” personification poems out of which the main character in *notes...* was born; his name is field son.

Shortly after discovering field son, I had starting reading Eve L. Ewing’s *Electric Arches*. The third poem of the collection, “the first time [a re-telling],” the narrator recalls a story of the first time she was riding her bike and was called a “little nigger” (Ewing, 8) by a White neighbor. The six-year old narrator’s bike then starts to fly “tight circles” (Ewing, 8) around the neighbor’s head until she falls dizzy. The little girl then catches her neighbor in a net before she hits the ground, carries her over a body of water, contemplates dropping her into it but feels bad about it and places her on a rock instead. Ewing’s ability to poke holes in the film between desire and damage, between violence and safety, depicted for me what it meant to write from a desire-based framework.



Many of the images that I focused on in *notes on survival, despite teeter* between violent images and soft images (soft in that the images could be considered pretty or futuristic, away from violence). Take for example, the image of the grandmother who lives forever in “on living forever.” The narrator explores the rhetoric of words and how those words can shape, and often do, shape different realities and narratives. The narrator calls up images that appear innocent but have a history steeped in violence. By the second to last line, the narrator realizes that his life is not secure, that even next to or near commonplace, everyday objects lies violence, or the possibility of it:

“...a dog is a dog a hydrant a hydrant            911 911  
‘til it becomes a tool            for oppression a telephone  
weaponized is life or death...”

Only after the narrator recalls the memory of his grandmother does he return to a mind space that is safe, away from the damage of everyday life and closer to a future where people live forever. The simile of the word “tool” is something borrowed from Richard Siken, in which I’ll come to at a later time.

Much of what I sought (and seek) to do with my writing is influenced by the work of Smith and Ewing. I take the questioning of what Blackness means, what Black joy means, what history in the present means by Smith and couple that with Ewing’s explanation and exploration in her own writing of what historically excluded communities desire and marry those frameworks with

my personal interest in the dichotomy of joy and suffering in an effort to amend, not forgive, a history that systemically and structurally ignores people of color. I want my work to represent the joy that comes and is found after, and sometimes during, hardships and suffering.

Two components that I wanted to focus largely on while crafting *notes on survival, despite*

are images and language.

In Vanessa Jiminez Gabb's book, *images for radical politics*, she writes a poem called "LBD." In the poem, the speaker says:

"Everything is political" (Gabb, 34).

As a person who explores and is interested in politics, I find that every poem that I sit down to write is inherently political. The poem "on 45th & bridge" was inspired by Gabb's "LBD." The poem is based off of an experience that I had while jogging in my neighborhood. Rarely do I jog outside because I have had a gun pulled on me twice in my running history, but because I moved to a new neighborhood, I thought that it would be "safer" to jog there – whatever that might mean. While jogging on this particular day, a Black man my age or so waved me down. In my head, I told myself to keep running as if I hadn't noticed his flailing arms, but something told me to stop. And I did. He asked to use my phone and I obliged, dialing the number for him but keeping the phone in my hand. When a woman, who I later learned was named Laura, picked up the phone, the conversation started off seemingly innocent.

"Hey baby," Keith said, "it's

Keith." "Hi, how you

doing?"

"I won't be able to get to you by 2:30. Rapid is down."

“Well that’s okay, we can hang out tomorrow.”

“But I need to see you tonight, baby,” Keith said, “it’s important.”

From here, the conversation turned violent. Throughout the next several minutes, I had learned that between the two of them: Keith was addicted to drugs, had physically beaten Laura on multiple occasions, stolen her money, and the two had broken up several times because of infidelity committed and admitted by both parties. I struggled to sit through the violent conversation and the second-hand violence I received listening to them discuss the physical and mental turbulence they had gone through as a couple. As the truth of their relationship surfaced, the louder and angrier Keith became. Walking down the street, people sitting on their porches, walking their dogs, and driving past would stare at us and it made me wonder how I had ended up in that particular moment. In “LBD” Gabb’s speaker says:

“I wrote  
about cities  
How every  
city is a city  
Of contrasts  
The  
living  
people  
Are  
opposites  
These are  
Because the others are not...” (Gabb, 34).

In “on 45th & bridge” the speaker is dropped into a situation in the middle of a city being gentrified. The speaker confronts his stereotypes or prejudices:

“what it means to be a good person: a theory. i often mistake

protection for aggression;”

he then investigates what it means to be two Black men in a gentrified neighborhood where the rhetoric that drives the narrative he assumes bystanders and onlookers might have (that he is as loud, as angry, as violent as Keith). That rhetoric, that narrative – itself – wants to change, wants to be something more than identity markers, wants to be:

“a horse [jumping] over the log

fence of teeth. it wants to be something that shapes reality.”

In that moment, both speaker and rhetoric itself loses against the reality of rhetoric shaped by outside forces. While violence is strewn throughout the poem, Keith mentions a few times that he has dreams and what is achieving one’s dream but a desire to move past one’s current situation? Past one’s identity politics? What is achieving one’s dream but a desire to become the young fruit fly taking off under a brand-new sun?

The final two poets who played an important role in writing *notes on survival*, *despite* are Richard Siken and Kaveh Akbar.

Richard Siken’s book, *War of the Foxes*, is elevated in images and in language. Siken, a poet, painter, and filmmaker, explores the obstacles of what means to make something and the difficulty of representation. The opening poem, “The Way the Light Reflects,” is about a painter asking why paint if nothing exists? The opening lines read:

“The paint doesn’t move the way the light

reflects, so what’s there to be faithful to? *I*

*am faithful*

*to you, darling. I say it to the paint*” (Siken, 3).

Siken’s decision to ask a simple question in the first line of the book’s first poem and then turn around and answer it changed the way I saw the use of exploring a speaker’s mentality throughout my own poems. For example, in the third poem of *notes...* called “love,” the speaker contemplates what love means if couched between memories of violence?

“what i know of you: that  
you are the act of  
punching clocks  
for money &  
punching holes in  
bathroom doors  
when you are not  
understood.  
how much  
does it cost to  
be repaired?”

The speaker here begins to offer to pay love money to understand why it makes people act out in both tender and violent ways. Posing questions, after reading *War of the Foxes*, also taught me ways to keep the reader engaged, especially when these poems are not read or performed aloud. One revolving image in *notes...* is the image of a speaker questioning, or almost interrogating, God. This interrogating God is personal because I have long challenged the use of religion in my life.

I was born into a family that practices Christianity. As an adolescent, I never asked the questions to myself: Why go to church? Do I truly believe in what Christianity is teaching me? How do I know if Christianity is a religion I would have chosen to practice if given the option as

a child? In undergrad, I took an African American history course and learned that many early Africans that were stolen and brought to America practiced Islam. I then questioned: what if my ancestors were traditionally Muslim until they were brought to the United States of America? When I learned this, I started to explore Islam. Eventually, I would convert, where I practiced for almost five years, until I started to see a lot of the same issues in Islam that I had tried to escape from Christianity (i.e. toxic masculinity, gender inequality, sexism, colorism, feeling as if I didn't belong). My history with Islam is explored through a few of the poems in this collection. One major concern I felt after converting to Islam was that I felt like I was appropriating a culture, and not practicing a religion. I started to hang around other Muslims, learned the dos and don'ts of the culture, learned to pray in Arabic. In hindsight, I felt like an imposter, as if I was trying to become someone that I truly was not. Practicing Muslims would ask me if I would change my name to a Muslim name and I highly contemplated it; it was during that time that I started to question if I had made the right decision.

In the poem, "what is prayer in a mouth that never spoke arabic?" the speaker explores the remnants of a failed engagement. The speaker asks God:

"what is placing  
blame... what is  
advantageous?"

For several months into an engagement (prior to the relationship spoken of before the one that opens this essay), blame was passed from partner to partner, until it became a tool for which we would use to gain advantage over the other. Siken's questioning allowed me to explore truly what that meant, but unlike Siken, I allowed the questions to sit because, after the rings were removed,

there was no one really to blame for a failed engagement. We simply were not a good fit, and while I think we both knew this, we still tried to make it work – and that is a kind of violence on the heart.

In *War of the Foxes* Siken writes a poem called “Logic,” where the speaker says: “The body puts glue on a twig and catches a bird. Glue is a tool, unless you are a bird. If you are a bird, then glue is an inconvenience” (Siken, 29).

Siken helped push me to think about the multiple uses of the words, the language we use on a daily basis. As I contemplated this poem, I started to draw connections between the rhetoric around ordinary things we use today and are being shaped in popular media. In “on living forever,” the speaker opens the poem saying:

“a word is not just a word but a tool rusted & hammer-headed  
smashing into wood  
  
difference between toy guns & ones preceding death power &  
fragment...”

By the end of the poem, the speaker subtly draws connections between the multiple uses of the words and the objects dogs, fire hydrants, 911, and telephones. I found the idea of referring to different words/objects as tools to work well in this collection because it encourages the reader to bring his, her, or their own values and judgements to the poems themselves.

Siken also has a poem called “Four Proofs,” which are four separate ekphrastic poems. In part two of *notes...* the speaker is or is addressing a character named field son and the poem, “field son survives the wilderness,” was inspired by Siken. One technique that I focused heavily on in this collection was writing succinct images. In addition to “field son survives the wilderness,” there are two other ekphrastic poems: “gratitude for the way we make it work” and “binky opens up to tony, forever.” Writing the ekphrastic poems challenged me the most, but positively. “field son survives the wilderness” forced me to take in each of the images of Frida Kahlo’s painting separately while staying true to the larger production. In the first section of the poem, I am experimenting with gender identity. field son lays his head on the breast of a naked man who not only reminds him of his mother but, is named Brenda. The poem has elements of magical realism in that the entire piece happens in what field son considers “groundwater.”

I use groundwater as a metaphor for America. On the surface, America seems like, or once seemed like, the place to be (but only if you were White and male and in the familial company of wealth). As one dips its head below the surface water of America, we start to experience what I like to consider the groundwater of America – where everyone who is not White, male, and wealthy live. In the groundwater is where you find the spoils of war, the obstacles and hardships of trying to stay afloat in a body of water without having been taught how to swim or doggy paddle, without having been given a floating device. In the groundwater is where the rotten mango remains a rotten mango.

In the groundwater, violence stacks upon itself. A finch crashes into the mast. A volcano erupts. Blood fills the water and mice scurry toward the deceased. By the end of the poem, through



all the violence, field son finds a way to make it to the surface for air, as many who do not identify as white, male, and wealthy in this country are forced to do: fight until survival is within reach, or at least sight. Another poem in which the side-effects of living in groundwater is explored is in the poem titled, “god in the groundwater.” In this poem, there is an impending natural disaster coming and regardless of warning, a shepherd continues looking for his sheep, a mother continues to call out of the window to a son that has already died – hoping for his return – and a woman in a sari walks without worry. The characters in the poem seem to live as if they are not afraid of death, as if they are preoccupied with things more important than their own safety, much of what it feels like to live and exist in a marginalized space in America.

The last poet who I read, and who had a major impact on my work while writing *notes...* is Kaveh Akbar and their book *Calling a Wolf a Wolf*. There are two poems in particular that helped me form the vision of this collection: “Wild Pear Tree,” and “Heritage.”

“Wild Pear Tree” is the poem that inspired me to inspect my relationship with Islam.

Toward the latter half of the poem, the

speaker says: “...I have forgotten even  
the easy prayer I was  
supposed to use in  
emergencies...” (Akbar, 5).

In my poem “hymnal for the sacrilege or Nia Wilson,” the

speaker says: “...how sweet the haves i have  
missed fajr  
this morning every surah learned forgotten...”

The speaker is recalling the reality of having not prayed and having forgotten every surah/prayer he memorized. This segment of the poem is in conversation with the earlier poems “prayer decaying on its way out” and “what is prayer in a mouth that never spoke arabic?” Another strong element that I learned from reading *Calling a Wolf a Wolf* was the technique of building images off of images introduced earlier in the poem. Akbar’s ability to do this almost makes the poem read as if it was written based solely off of association. I, too, have attempted to do that in several poems, but most successfully in “hymnal...”

In “Heritage” by Akbar, I was drawn to the use of white space and the lack of punctuation. I later experimented with this in several poems of mine. One of the poems that I found this technique to be most useful was in “to the white boys who sang suwoop as we passed on a pwi.” Akbar omits punctuation and breaks his line with additional white space when one of two things happen: when the sentence or thought is complete, or when the image stands on its own. For example, the speaker writes:

“I’m becoming more a vessel of memories than a person  
it’s a myth that love lives in  
the heart it lives in the throat we push it  
out  
when we speak when we gasp we take a little for ourselves”  
(Akbar, 18).

In “to the white boys...” I attempted to use the white space and omission of punctuation when I came across full sentences or powerful places to break the line. For example, in the opening stanza the speaker says:

“you are lucky i have control of myself my boys i  
have armed all of us with patience we have had that  
conversation

& if we wanted                      if we *really* wanted    we could have made that call.”

I find that the content and the form of the poem compliments the poem’s title. As it is the first thing the reader sees, rhetorically it makes the poem feel tense. The repeated whitespace and line breaks almost makes the poem feel hesitant. What this poem also does it make use of the questioning that Siken does in *War of the Foxes*.

Underneath the techniques that I borrowed from Smith, Ewing, Gabb, Siken, and Akbar lies Tuck’s theory on damage-based thinking vs. desire-based thinking. The title, itself, suggests that through all the violence, the hardships, the obstacles – structural and internal – we undergo, we come out surviving, despite the setbacks. One of the poems that means the most to me in this collection is called “despite.” It is one of two pantoums in the collection. I found the pantoum form to work best for this poem because it has a circulatory structure to it to begin with. Much of the violence that we endure happens in a circulatory structure. We are safe for three months, then attacked by large or small violences for a few days, then find safety again, and repeat. “despite” opens:

“he does not, himself, know what he is in  
for. despite a small series of crises, he is  
joyful still...”

The first line implies to the reader that the person the speaker is exploring is a willing participant in this life. He engages with the world without knowing what to expect from each day.

Immediately after this unknowing, he goes out into the world, despite the hardships he has endure and remains joyful. And for me, choosing to remain joyful in a world where we endure small horrors on a daily basis is the groundwork of what it means to operate from a desire-based framework. To say to oneself, yes I've lost my job, yes I've totaled my car, yes my country places less value on my life than on my counterpart's lives, but I refuse to allow these little crises to dictate how I live my life and from which perspective I choose to see the world and my life from.

notes on survival, despite

“I do want to create art beyond rage. Rage is a place to begin, but not end. I’m not as wise as my work, but I know if I take the writing deep enough, something larger and greater than myself will flash forth and illuminate me, heal me. I do want to devour my demons – despair, grief, shame, fear – and use them to nourish my art. Otherwise they’ll devour me.”

- Sandra Cisneros, *I Can Live Sola and I Love to Work*

“What did I know, what did  
I know of love’s austere  
and lonely offices?”

- Robert Hayden, *Those winter Sundays*

“And did you get what  
you wanted from this life,  
even so? I did.  
And what did you want?  
To call myself beloved, to feel  
myself beloved on the earth.”

- Raymond Carver, *Late Fragment*

part i  
notes on survival

**holding**

*for my mother*

after father left her alone w/ two kids, mother dropped me  
on my head. a blue heron, later, came to her in grievance.

said: *don't cry child. these things happen.* still, at night, i hear  
her pray: *what is an ache to be forgiven, god, but an animal*

*w/ wings struck down by lightning & nothing soft to land on? thump,* my  
body went & mother took it hard, the fall. & hurt

about it forever. bereft & alone. without guidance, mother  
spent nine months w/ a gun in her mouth. now, every time

a bird perches itself on the front porch, I hear god comfort  
my mother in the breath of the chirp: *don't cry, child. don't cry.*

*hands are only as strong as the arms they are connected to.*

## **inheritance**

on no sleep my father lived. went against everything he was told. didn't show anything. ever. i could hear him wail inside the bathroom at night. still hear it in my dreams. mouth agape.

tongue & teeth missing. a spoonful of spice doesn't burn anymore. When i see him under moonlight petting stray cats, i smile. offer him yellow onions, jasmine rice, sockeye salmon,

lentil soup in a cracked pot. the last meal he ever cooked his favorite, though never finished. behind his apt. complex, when i was twelve, i kissed a boy. my father caught me then

& for two long months i bled into a ceramic bowl. does not the potter have the right to shape clay? like a mother takes her kittens, my father took me by the neck & i hung there

in the balance, unmoving in his strength. he died a drunk, in his early 50s, who moaned incessantly underneath his breath: *god, i did all i could. damnit, look at the son you*

*gave me!* his food turned cold & his heart into a tattered nest in which two sparrows sparred. before he died he gave me his wedding ring, his bible, an apology. said,

on his way out: *i loved you like a begotten son. no matter what you think.* his final breath:  
my mother's name; a bird-song; his last &  
dying will.

**love**

*after Franz Wright*

“Love is never any better than the lover.”

Toni Morrison

always here. i was always waiting.  
naive & without real understanding,  
of course, but always here. i call this  
beautiful. you are on my hand &  
on my arm & on my breast. love, i  
wear you like a scent. beautiful, i call  
this. but what do i know?

what i know of you: that you are the  
act of punching clocks  
for money & punching holes in  
bathroom doors when you are not  
understood.

how much does it cost to be  
repaired?

my parents still will not speak  
of what happened to the bathroom  
door but the proof is there.

said if i pay, they'll speak.

more readily at your expense: the  
time my uncle died. who, also, in  
your name, took a knife  
to the lung & survived. instead, it  
was christmas & the highway  
& the speed that stopped the lungs  
completely.

but what do i know?

i come to you with my hands above



my head. not in surrender but in  
consent. do with me as you want.  
do with me as my lover does,  
in the palm of dusk, with me.

what is love in the act of violence?  
a hole through the door? tire  
tracks leading nowhere?

& how do we navigate such  
terrains?

take me, the way my lover took me  
as two gangs shot it out up the  
street.

let's call this beautiful, or perhaps,  
love.

## notes on disappearing

god in the sky a bald eagle hunts  
me crashes commands god i hold  
on as it carries my black ass home  
like all this time it has been told is  
this god what you intended?  
out of breath god toward free-  
dom i spread my wings: flowers my  
legs: petals what does it mean god  
to be grounded & fighting for a plot  
which has no ground? in an  
attempt to understand to bat the bird back  
into the flock from which it flew i fail  
out of breath god harder  
i close my wings & the desire to  
uproot from a groundless plot god  
dissipates  
in the air as mist does god

help

**prayer decaying on its way out**

what do you god call a room  
of prayers unanswered a blessing  
waiting to happen is one thousand  
church bells

banging on the tongue's floor  
the devil's feet

/

if i were you god i would not to worship  
or prayer respond i would set the books  
on fire

/

resentment in the prayer  
in the pulpit god  
is suicide note and  
cymbal contralto  
and trumpet  
crashing

/

what do you god i am praying you  
answer call prayer undoing itself

/

what do you god call a room  
of prayers unanswered one  
thousand hail mary's

scaling the  
temple of  
mouth

**what is prayer in a mouth that never spoke arabic?**

we fell in love after shahada / survived  
adulthood without christ / learned violence / isn't  
what makes man a man learned in the absence of  
fathers / early we learned desire and hunger exists  
without women / what is placing blame god / what is  
advantageous / astaghfirullah / when christ failed  
us muhammad (sallallaahu alaihi wa-  
sallam) found us / trumpetless soul-crushed / we  
fell in love after shahada / became sin / prayer  
routine until god it wasn't / unclean  
since i have been / astaghfirullah  
astaghfirullah

## on saving an only son

walking down the street lord            when photobook & glassware & powdered milk  
fall from the sky            what is            god            a family being evicted?

what is for the good    of the economy?            the landlord & the developer stand  
together            smiling over the new deal lord            as a child straps wings

to his back            stares at me with his head hanging            from the second story  
window            *i swear i'll jump*            *if the they don't leave* he says

should i lord    before i am ready            intervene? should i    with what little privilege i  
have    take & tithe what little money i have            to save a home?            to buy plot

for safer landing?            to save a family's only son?    lord    the right            as if they  
are you            god            from behind muffled conversation            about family values

responds            firmly:  
*no*

**lord of countin' balloons are you tired yet?**

none of us have seen shootin' stars in the city only shootin'  
then stars / then yellow flamed moments of silence  
then flower arrangements underneath streetlights / then lord

what do you call a flower that grows from blood?

mama gave me a dollar for flowers instead lord i tried to buy a  
balloon i bought the balloon but couldn't  
afford helium or to exhaust my lungs

lord i stand within the breath of you without my own &

lord why won't the store clerk ever tell me  
how much helium costs? &

i'm wonderin' lord  
of countin' balloons, are you tired yet? say, how many  
have reached you

lord  
mid-evenin' as the angels & the beloveds  
scoot chairs 'cross the orange sky'd floor  
prepare for a homecomin'  
from those of this life?

## **on living forever**

a word is not just a word but a tool. rusted & hammer-headed smashing into wood  
difference between toy guns & ones preceding death power & fragment  
violence outside narrative have you seen it? from whose fingers does the blood  
drip? narrative is rhetoric & rhetoric language dizzy & running circles a-  
round itself anything chasing itself a tool to be chased a tool  
for exhaustion a dog is a dog a hydrant a hydrant 911 911  
'til it becomes a tool for oppression a telephone weaponized is life  
or death when I was five my grandmother aged & blind sat in a rocking  
chair said to herself *child learn the multiplicity of a thing & you'll live forever*



**after the state sends its thoughts & prayers & condolences**

every day in this country a mother drowns  
in white condolences. fights god. & as she  
waits for him to get up she sits disciplined,  
grounded like a statue in her decision  
to not turn the other cheek. standing on the  
edge of an empty couch, she taunts god:  
*come on nigga*, as he collects himself the  
way dust collects, *what was 'at shit on  
behalf of the*

*state 'chu was talkin?* dull light shines  
through an open door. a curtain gives at  
the nudge of wind across

the room. every day a mother mourns in  
death's frayed fabric. she thinks she hears  
her twenty-six

year old laughing in the front yard.  
realizes

that it is only a bleating goat in the grass.  
imagines her twenty-six year old here  
again.

this time without bruises & torn flesh &  
skin still in healing. every day a mother  
waits  
in dull light, mourns into an empty room,  
wails the name of her twenty-six year old  
until  
god, like dust, collects all pieces of  
himself  
& thoughts & prayers sent on behalf of  
the state from apology's floor & rises  
once more before her with another  
condolence

from the country's floundering flag then  
swings. says as god is on his back, wiping  
blood from his nose &

into the crux of his elbow spitting white  
teeth, *no prayer, my nigga*, tears in her  
eyes, *will bring my baby back -- oh god*  
*my baby!*

## **in which america hears me**

i pledge allegiance to follow your footsteps to tighten  
the elbow to rotate the barrel & not get caught to ignore

the guilt to continue this kneel to mount the flag  
striped & waving in my people's graveyard in which i

grant them citizenship after 400 years i pledge allegiance to shoot  
down the birds my brothers & sisters dead 400

years now let us to a god who cannot hear us pray  
that the hollow insides of a casket soften the blow in which

gratefulness arrives o america i pledge allegiance to not pacify  
& to at the end of all of this sleep with both eyes closed

i pledge allegiance naked on both knees with a black  
fist raised & to give my life to have it taken for the freedom

of those who suffer of both transactions i know the difference o  
america this is my pledge the one in which i do not falter

the one in which i do not die goodbye america in which i  
mean stay goodbye america in which i mean go

**silk**

& god i with no premeditation lit on fire my shirt & shot myself  
was not afraid & hated no one that obscure hour most  
unlike myself heard neither my mother's words nor  
footsteps stomping the earth angry three  
years ago nine black disciples were slain in bible song & since  
nothing has made sense & beggars steal & beg  
from cafe to courthouse & god please please god silence the man  
hiding underneath a red hat yelling *go home, nigger! go home!* &  
god i not yet in love nor belonging  
to anyone without premeditation lit on fire my shirt  
& shot myself the wound made room where no room existed  
behind the stained glass door of my death  
in a teal kaftan my mother prayed in the quiet of heaven's silk  
as she unraveled as i my body went thud  
went as low as it could go she prayed a prayer without words  
took everything she thought should be taken from my life-  
less body as if trying just trying to save my life cried not  
once

& god said nothing

## notes on survival

flock breaking  
sky. the i:  
kaleidoscope.  
shattered  
mirror. bleeding  
in the arms  
of your lover. i  
am cutting  
close  
to that which keeps  
me formed. every person i  
know:  
within me.

at the foot  
of a grassy hill,  
on a balmy day,  
a man's head is on fire  
& he walks  
happily  
through a yellow  
field.

*how do i know  
the head burning  
is not mine?*

nothing  
but his head  
burns &  
above  
the clouds a flock  
breaks sky. takes  
attention.

how much  
of a smokestack

is man made?

is water good  
for drinking yet?

will water stop  
the burning?

the burning  
man is cutting  
close  
to that which keeps  
him formed.

on the other side  
of the hill, a vulture  
swoops down  
from a long  
conversation  
with god. lands  
calmly  
on a branch.

from the branch,  
below it,  
on a bank  
of water, hands  
cupped over lips  
i call  
upstream.

the i:  
kaleidoscope.

in yellow grass:  
shattered mirror.

in the arms  
of the one i love i  
am bleeding. i

call  
this beautiful.

the i:  
splintering.  
kaleidoscope.

is love  
that which keeps  
me formed?

where is the knife  
when you need it?

let me tell you  
a story  
about survival.





**field son watches his mother**

i do not believe in destruction

trees no longer are what they are / i

do not own a telephone / rising

on the third day: ten million women

what do you call that / my mother in

a dress marches down a dirt path /

holds two housed hands over her

womb / squeezes the fat there / does

what little she can

to protect what yet has been

destroyed / wonders how she birthed

a field son

## field son writes a letter

why is my mom outside shooting her wedding dress with a gun  
filled with paintballs? *the colors* she said *remind me of gratitude*  
& then she told me to axe you why but what i really wanna know  
is what makes the sky blue? what is the difference between flyin'  
& fallin'? between talkin' & communicatin'? mom says all  
you do is run your mouth that you tell her things & don't show up  
that she still don't believe a word you say when are you  
gonna call dad? do you remember the sound my voice makes  
when i'm happy? & if so do you miss it? i wonder does  
missing someone ever end? & if it does does it  
ever really matter  
that we missed 'em to begin with? mom says you left not b/c of  
me or her but because you thought you  
were untouchable dad  
what does that mean? what does love mean dad? i don't know  
what i think of that or family i only know what i am told are  
we bound by blood? grandma say we bound by christ  
but i can't believe a word she say 'cause she dead' do you know  
the difference between lyin' & tellin' a story? & why grandma  
always correct me in my dream when i say axe? she say i gotta do  
better she always axe me not to mention two things to you:

1. nothin' 'cause you don't deserve to know nothin'
2. your name 'round her 'cause it boil her blood but she  
dead

but i dream a lot dad & she say i sleep talk & when i sleep talk  
i say your name she axe me why i do that & *don't you*  
*love your momma?* why do we dream dad? say things we don't  
mean? say things w/o knowin' we say things? what do  
you call a dream that comes true? i keep havin' this dream  
where i jump over power lines but cain't come down  
i'm stuck in the air 'til i wake it reminds me of when you were  
drunk one day & said *black people 'gon fly in the future*  
*son you can bet your wings on it* i believed you it's like i have  
wings now but don't know how to work 'em i saw a paintin' of  
a man in a field  
with his head on fire at the museum the other day are you the man

in the painting?    mama say he remind her of you    *hot-*  
*headed & unaware of the smoke that follows* she say    *unbothered*  
*by the fire on his shoulders*    mama say don't axe you this but  
what's it like in jail?    mama say she refuse to take me up there  
say    *i'll be damned you end up like him*

sincerely,

field son

**field son witnesses reunion**

tonight i do not believe in god or  
saints savior or prayer / water no  
longer is what it is / i do  
not own a boat / what do you call the  
air we breathe or don't / is oxygen  
subtracted helium / ten million  
souls tied to deflated balloons drop  
into a field of water / welcome home

## field son recalls the way it was when

until another breath brings you to birth, i pledge allegiance to nothing.  
for months this feeling, this trembling that ends all wars has inched  
its way closer, cat-like, toward hallowed freedom. sweeping his kitchen,  
the neighbor who knows what's going on outside does not favor

the way you used to lift a newspaper & put it back exactly as & where it  
was. that neighbor, with broom in hand, does not favor the way birds  
move above & cast origami shadows over your cold blue-black corpse  
all day in the rubble streets of this country.

& i'm sure the neighbors who know little, nothing, can recall the mood  
of the morning you were up & free & combing  
your 'fro in the glass mirror. can recall the mood of the morning you  
were up & charming & telling your mother: *for months*

*this feeling, this trembling that begins all wars has been closing in,  
timidly, cat-like, as if called to take the order of my life. why, into the  
phone you said, am i telling you this before saying goodbye, mother.  
always, more, there was to you in places*

no one could see. the sound of an airplane or a car stalling recalls to me  
the way it was when no people were killed on this ground. recalls to me  
the way it was when the dog or the deer or the cat crossing the road was  
the only heroic

thing. recalls to me the way it was when after the war began  
you took a moment then took your bravery and took your camera then  
took a photo of a widower from Gaza pushing to the side  
of the road rubble & whiskers & paws & body. recalls the way

it was when the pause you gave me for a chance to speak, to ask you to  
stay the morning you left me there, standing,  
unfamiliar in the breath of god.

### **self-portrait of field son as oxen**

it wants to be america. unbroken. bellows  
loss loudly. directs a rake of itself from grief's  
pasture. captive, herders inspected it. fixed  
it was chattel & mush. sunlight &  
southern oak. *it's the biggest, best one we've  
got.* patting its brown limbs. *this one here* they  
said. *strong & healthy this one here.* yoke  
tight a- round its neck. in its prime  
they boxed it. taught it to be hard- working &  
target. to pray next to the dead. they made it  
stand on two hooves. & *spin!* auctioneers spit  
logic: *male. old enough. able-bodied & unlike  
the others this [ ] doesn't smell. limbs  
strong. healthy, this one here!*  
*good sperm too. good sperm buyer up!*

**field son survives the wilderness**

*after Frida Kahlo's painting: "What the Water Gave Me"*

1.

submerged in a rusted clawfoot tub  
filled with groundwater field son lays  
his head on the missing breast  
of a naked man.

the naked man  
is bleeding  
    but alive / reminds field son  
                                    of his mother.

where the scar meets the tissue  
field son exists.

he undoes       / on the sofa  
                                    next to the bleeding man /  
himself.

cushion by  
cushion /       skin by skin.

this naked man is named brenda  
& is the last man alive  
& is loved.

2.







chasing a woman as the woman

chases god & field son asks himself:

*god, which party is the hunted?*

*which party the hunter? & who /*

*god / who, alone, survives*

*wilderness?*

**field son finds a way to make it on this earth**

*after Kendrick Lamar, FEAR.*

a red gusher in his mouth & a gun explodes. kids,  
blocks away -- monarch butterflies on the playground  
-- scatter. heels turn up. mulch & glass, broken, go  
flying. playing kendrick's *FEAR.*, a cell phone is left.  
hot cheeto bags & condensed pop bottles like sour milk

down the throat spill into the hungry stomachs of  
youth. blue recycle bins knock over. an attempt to  
survive this summer means every black body for itself.  
within seconds, field son takes leave in the nearest  
bando. looks down  
at his sneakers, knows that's his ass when he gets home

'cause these his good sneakers & he done been told  
too many times. for no longer than a minute do these  
things last. then, like that, like nothing ever happened,  
the all-clear is given. older, braver kids from the 'hood  
pop up first with cicada joy after what seemed like  
forever

in hiding. field son runs into a cloud of gray gunsmoke.  
imagines himself on stage. god, in how many ways can  
a boy experience smoke? into the smoke, field son  
screams: *that shit was crazy, man.* from the crowd of  
his conscience, he hears his mama behind stage: *boy,*  
*watch ya goddamn mouth*

*before i tell ya daddy.* god, what do you call a father  
who is only good for discipline? even in the opaque  
smoke of the world, caterpillars still become butterflies.  
field son leaps, hands first from the stage, onto a set

of monkey bars. holds tight & swings until the new  
pâtisserie is built.

part iii: survival despite

**all on the altar**

tomorrow will be different. no one will die.  
the canaries will not beg for help.  
perfume will not be poured without consent.  
god, do not make me lay it all on the altar.

the canaries will not beg for help.  
when the train leaving town comes, i'll take  
it. god, do not make me lay it all on the altar  
& i know on the other side is rest.

god, when the train leaving town comes, i'll  
take it. my people hungry & with diamond  
teeth suffer damn it, i know god, on the other  
side is rest. in my voice is a song. i do not  
know the words.

my people hungry & with diamond teeth  
suffer. having yet given up, still, god they  
arrive. in their voice is a song. they do not  
know the words. for how much longer will  
the poor sing among us?

tomorrow will be different  
i know it god & the  
song will be learned  
& consent will be given.

## suffering

we sat at the kitchen table & read a story on our phones about a house fire on cleveland's east side brewed coffee batched by calloused brazilian hands drank it from mugs made in china the table at which we sat & underneath which we crossed our legs discussed our plans for the future as if it belonged to us already the sun, that morning, was out & the door was open & the cat still alive god what an act of love & privilege it was to pull back red curtains when the sun turned belligerent we ate fish under rice & beans that morning healthy & well to hunger's content leaned in to one other disappeared & then your mother called to tell us another officer walked free her voice remained strong the notes carried familiar the song of american suffering the u.s. courts upheld the travel ban 5-to-4 that morning & our bills were paid in full our savings account proof that we knew what it meant to hold back to keep what was ours to ourselves the lodging for chicago cleared over coffee we sat cross-legged oblivious to what mattered outside of our own matters you hung up the phone & mumbled a word about the state of our country & then like our conditions weren't tied to the conditions of a neighbor's across the atlantic like our existence wasn't a spool of string unraveling in a child's hands & only then did we admit: *it's time for a break a vacation. Something* across the city a second body burned we kissed & i asked: *what time does our bus leave for chicago again?*

**on 25th & chatham**

sent by god again and again  
a harmless bumble bee hovers

above a pot of geraniums.  
lures a little black boy into its

center. the sun shines against a  
sky the color of catmints. the

little black boy, approaching, grips  
his father's fingers around his

own. asks what it means to die?  
where did momma go? will you, dad,

always be here? jumps  
from ventricle to ventricle.

on nodes and atriums he lands.  
ungrips his father's fingers. the

bee, he swats at it. leans his round  
wide nostrils into purple leafed

plants. from aperture of jannah  
god or some obscure prophet speaks:

*lil nigga god says don't give up  
your right to be a nigga or*



*stone or man twenty years from now  
unafraid to smell flowers to*

*bat away what injures you. the  
prophet says lil nigga father*

*-like more concern in his voice than  
anger if you 'ont bring yo' ass*

## of eve & adam's apple: the will & testament

every city: a landscape reigning absolute entropy  
& if you ask the children how they are, with a mouth  
full of hunger, a thin hand out, they will respond:  
*we don't know what's going on.* & perhaps  
that is how it should be. but at the expense  
of who? my mother never told me what a loaf  
of bread & fish could do. my father swished  
alcohol in his prayer. only ever spoke to god  
that way. told him everything he knows  
but what do adults know? my parents  
only taught me to go on eating my own  
truth: 1 plus 1 is 3. a body can survive  
without water. black & brown & trans  
lives matter. try to convince me  
otherwise. sometimes i think about surrounding  
the white house with firecrackers  
& lighting a match. filling the moat that sur-  
rounds the garden with serpents. telling stories  
to the cherubim in a dead & confusing language.

throwing stones at anything moving  
& made of glass: resistance.

stone: proof. god exists both in stone  
& in hand from which the stone is released.

in jordan stones meant miracle. in eden  
stones meant protection. today: resistance.  
another kind of protection. i am afraid

i have lost sensibility. once, with a barrel  
in my mouth & a flower in my breast  
pocket, i lost control of myself. screamed  
into the air. no one heard me.

one hot saturday in chicago, a child saw  
me & i cried. it was a matter of endearment:  
the seeing, the crying. he held a small hand  
out. asked: *please?* when a body like your  
own enters the space, comfort hovers  
like a halo. god, did you intend it this way?

my mother never told me what a loaf of bread  
& fish could do. my father swished alcohol  
in his prayer. only spoke to god that way.

god, what is a pair of hands unfolding  
above a cloud the shape of jerusalem?

& is joy the right emotion  
if an apple appears in its palm.  
rolls. falls stem first toward  
the mouth of a hungry child.

nearly dead. not knowing  
what's going on? he asks:  
*what all, god, i got to know  
for a bite?*

## on 45th & bridge

i am running down bridge & a man who looks like me,  
except he is shorter & without glasses, stops me. he smells  
like father smelled after a night out without mother. his teeth  
jut from his mouth. remind me of the other side of having, of  
the other side of privilege. what do my degrees mean  
if my people are still without? he is looking for a phone  
to use. in other words: he is looking for joy // *dial this  
number* he says. to say i was not afraid in that moment: a lie.  
afraid that he would snatch my phone & run or worse put a  
cool barrel to my neck on this hot day. what is a label?

capitalism is a tool. to own anything: a privilege // *hey baby*  
he says into the phone in my hand // *laura baby, it's keith.  
callin' to see if you still love me?* his voice: faithful &  
virtuous. eyeing over every dog that passes until it snarls,  
until it shows its teeth: risk. what it means to be a good  
person: a theory. i often mistake protection for aggression //  
*dreams baby, i have dreams but you, you gotta love me* keith  
says // *for me & no i won't stop smoking that hard.* i imagine  
laura on east 105th street, sweat pooling across her hairline //  
*well then, keith i just can't love you //*  
*this bitch,* he whispers // *walk with me man & we walk.*

what do you call two black men in a gentrified  
neighborhood? rhetoric is a tool dressed in jogging pants, a  
hoodie, & a pair of shoes for comfort walking down an  
almost empty parking lot being reminded of poems about  
love, logic, a suitcase, the moon. in its hand: a book, a pencil.  
it's desire: to be dialectic, to be tongue & mouth from which  
language leaps, like a horse over the log fence of teeth. it  
wants to be something that shapes reality //

*you know what then, we stop in front of an ice cream parlor  
on the corner of 45th & bridge. people with waffle cones  
in their hands stare at us as i look down in embarrassment. or  
was it shame? as he screams in the phone in my hand // you  
know what then? fuck you, laura. fuck you.*

**to the white boys who sang suwoop as we passed on a pwi**

*for Jonathan Peters (1995-2016)*

you are lucky i have control of myself my boys i have armed  
all of us with patience we have had that conversation  
& if we wanted if we *really* wanted we could have made that

call 'cause where we come from everything leaves the  
mouth in plain speech or song has meaning  
everything we say a message wrapped in warning  
which is to say *i do not want to do this*

but away from  
flame a wick so much  
can only dance

where we come from everything we say a matter of concern  
couched in safety *You good?* rhetorical for *I see you*  
*Be safe* rhetorical for *please come back it's okay, it's okay*

in which we mean *i understand* strapped  
with patience we stopped

in our tracks & the tour guide o the tour guide kept  
speaking when your mouth's shaped like theirs you don't  
realize the hurt coming from it or when to stop

*remember our conversation about micro- aggressions?* my lips  
trembled *that was one of them* summer heat diffused  
my patience into a puddle of humiliation in which  
later on the ride home i sat in like grief

summer heat blossomed my fists into opened palms  
facing god her light & goodness falling  
across my lifelines *this is why we have those discussions*  
i say *& the road the high one we learn to maneuver*  
*early in adolescence needs love*

*affection a break* because white boys who  
make light of the lives we live  
& the colors we've chosen to claim  
leave us no option but to take it

the high road when we arrive there is a wait & traffic is jammed  
how badly i wanted to call up Johnny from the grave who died  
for an avenue which is to say property by gunshot wounds

to the head had he picked up  
i would have told him *get the strap*  
but i have learned better & loved  
more warmly Johnny would have said  
pulling shell casings from his head like flowers  
from earth *we savin'*

*our bullets now we savin' our bodies too for opportunity to*  
*occupy space so keep ya' patience bruh & let me rest &*  
*besides burgundy ain't a color we fight fo' let*  
*alone die fo' where we come from*

**what is love but an animal with its face buried deep in the ground?**

*for my one*

tonight, i feel as if my heart might stop, but i am not certain. certain i am  
of only a few things tonight: of the moth that flies toward light, of

the gnats wine-soaked & dead; that love is simply love & nothing else,  
that a day before you left, i was headed south which is to say: away from  
home, away

from all & whom i love. sometimes, when i'm alone, to myself I repeat a  
thing so intimate it undresses before it leaves my mouth: *come back*. i am

uncertain that i know anything: how to comfort you in distress, the true  
distance between *affect* & *effect*, exactly what my heart is doing, or

what is on the other side of the dark blue sky. love is simply love. nothing  
else. this, my one, is my undoing. & *this*, my one, is a love poem &

nothing else. what does it matter if it takes a plane to get to you? or that  
the heart always lives up to its hype? or that the sky is luminous &

black & beyond the dark blue our prayers gaslight the stars? tonight, i  
feel as if my heart might stop & i am certain the moth flying toward the  
light

& the gnats wine-drunk & dead, whispering *Jason*, knows something i  
don't.



## despite

he does not, himself, know what he is in for.  
despite a small series of crises, he is joyful still.  
the only thing he wants is for the vultures to stop.  
if he offers you his life, would you want it?

despite a small series of crises, he is joyful still. in  
his face, a trigger is pulled. the shot blank.  
if he offers you his life, would you want it? a  
token between a bull's horn he is after.

in his face, a trigger is pulled. the shot blank. his  
fight is one of agility. he is tired.  
the token between the bull's horn he gets. a black  
man reverting to a child is fear.

his fight is one of agility. he is tired.  
it occurs to him that he, too, is america. a black  
man reverting to a child is fear.  
what do you call a series of crises overcome?

it occurs to him that he, too, is america. a black  
man, gap-toothed & tall, smiles.  
what do you call a series of crises overcome? what  
if grief is love with no place to go?

a black man, gap-toothed & tall, smiles.  
a mother, named joy, welcomes her child home.  
what is grief but love with no place to go?  
a black man's favorite sound in morning: *hi*.

despite a small series of crises, he is joyful, offers  
you his life.  
does not, himself, know what he is in for.

**god in the groundwater**

a single sheep, from the  
flock strays.

a red cardinal, as it  
soars over shifting  
plates, screams.

in her bonnet, a  
mother yells out the  
window to her  
imaginary son:  
*what's the weather like?*

& the dead are one with mud.

& like numbers that never  
existed, the dead are still  
uncounted.

unlaced, a pair of  
brown loafers sit  
without knowing  
at the swallow of a burial.

what is a man with a reef  
of flowers around his  
head?

this is not a love poem  
but a poem of remembrance.

& god, what does it  
mean to be too far to  
get close to?

a tropical wave east  
of the caribbean islands  
is absence.

in another world, i  
find you alive &  
pretty as lilac. on a  
gravel path, prophets  
come forth from the horizon.

a woman wearing a  
turquoise sari walks the  
street, ignores  
forecasters.

& the groundwater is braved.

& one thin brown ankle lifts.

& one gold anklet,  
glimmering is trumpet &  
prayer.

a reflection in water  
means you're alive.

the heart is a woman  
selling peaches on a  
street.

this is not a love

poem? love poems

require a child  
running barefoot toward safety.

in the groundwater, no  
running is allowed.

there is no safety.

the mother hears her son  
imaginary, yell: *storm*  
*coming!*

on the other side of the  
mountain a shepherd scours  
green pasture.

**a note on freedom**

god / all my life i have been moving amongst the red & blue & white  
sky with a register of everything i am owed: forty acres / a mule / joy

an apology / my argument today / god / is this: america is neither life  
nor liberty nor pursuit of happiness / in the air / closer to freedom

i thrive / & god what is freedom but a breath & small act of  
love? a farmer on 40 acres / a mule's head on his  
shoulder: joyful

**gratitude for the way we make it work**

after Deana Lawson's photo, *Woman With Child*

*"How much a dollar cost?"*

Kendrick Lamar

i

my arm a tool. my thumb a  
tool. my couch too. *you  
cain't clock*, mama say, *no  
9-to-5 on ya ass*. dreams.  
she still dreams of workin'  
from home. how much a  
new couch  
cost? i ask god. *how many  
ways, god, can a couch be  
used for somethin' other than  
sittin'?* one day as a kid i  
woke up to my daddy, who  
mama say ain't shit. *usin' the  
couch as a hospital  
bed my ass* but my daddy, he  
somethin' to me. mama was  
gone that day &  
there was no nurse in white.  
no nurse in blue. only,  
underneath a bag of ice  
wrapped in a wet rag on top of  
mounded flesh, a black eye.  
*what good is a tool that don't  
work? what good is a tool  
not used right?*

ii.

my arm a tool. my thumb a tool.  
my couch too. i sit everyday &  
stare blankly into a mirror. like

it's a camera or somethin'.  
hopin' it'a capture somethin'  
worthy enough to be called pretty.  
my face a tool. if i turn it this way,  
you use me like that. if i turn it that  
way, you use me like this. my body  
a tool. my body: (no matter the day it  
comes) a gift. a baby, maybe mine's,  
maybe not, wails underneath my  
collarbone. doctor sayi need to eat.  
another child, my baby girl,  
everybody mistake for a boy, sucks  
his thumb. i mean her thumb. my  
child: a girl. the pink birds on her  
shirt mean she a girl. the mind a  
tool if you let it.

iii.

assumption a tool. judgment a  
tool. curiosity too. dependin'  
on how you use 'em.  
'magine, if my arm a tool  
& my thumb a tool & i take this  
couch back to where i got it,  
what i could then do with that  
money.



## **fourteen strategies for being remembered**

1: stand for love 2: & joy 3: against suffering  
4: witness the body you inhabit uninhibited by old  
terms 5: create a world where hands become feet  
& feet mouth 6: witness the body in new terms  
in new colors unashamed & without hindrance  
or name 7: teach a child how to paint how to steal  
for the benefit of all people is it immoral to steal  
what was stolen? or brave? water is heavy because  
we are still there still finding our way home every  
day new footprints appear on the shore & so  
soften the world 8: teach a child thievery & history  
will rewrite itself 9: teach a child how to sneak  
into an art museum act awed over bronze statues  
& acrylic paintings 10: teach her how to dream  
about the painting of a man on a horse until she can  
practically paint the man on a horse in her sleep  
11: to imagine the lucky hand holding the brush  
at the painting's inception her own

what difference would it make? how long would a  
revision take then? there would have been a small siege  
of blue herons emerging from the horizon casting shadows  
the shape of clouds on the ground instead of a cannon's  
residue graying the sky in the foreground a younger  
version of her father in a boat translucent. wading  
in a slow creek fingers locked behind his head passing  
underneath a mango tree to mix linseed oil with dammar  
varnish: a strategy for being remembered to leave  
the expansive landscape alone an act of love, an act  
of understanding what does not belong to you  
does not belong to you where on the other side of the  
tree-filled mountain two lovers build a home together  
acknowledge that sap on grass in morning is proof  
that earth weeps for how we made it out with joy

12: rub the brush over the man on the horse  
& over the horse too what is understood need not be  
stated twice 13: leave only the black girl in the  
background picking cotton 14: paint a smile on her face  
& the cotton in her hand gold on the back of the canvas a  
litany or question or prayer: *god / in how many ways  
can one amend the past? in how many?*

## **survival despite**

if i pee  
the bed one

more time or accidentally

spill my father's glass of ginger

beer across the dinner

table & he is violent &

he is there to pick me

up by the neck or expose

my body from beneath

the blanket lash it

with a belt  
as i am dreaming

have i been taught to not make

a mess? or that i am light

enough to be made an example? god

what lesson is there to be

learned  
in violence?

anxiety brought the jitters.

the weak bladder.

the will  
to give up.

god  
what does it mean

to resist? to  
continue living? once

before the leather came down

at midnight i dreamt i was

w/o body just a heart

to hold everyone i have

ever loved is all i had.

& inside  
my heart two

lovers who  
never learned how

to pronounce the other's name threw a bed

through a window. doused the mattress

in blood & sun- flower seeds. said

*grow*. then pale-

skinned & almost

dead attended the proposal

of binky & tony where she said

*yes*  
as three bullets pierced

the skin of night. kissed her lover

as the cruisers spun out. stared down

at the ring. saw red. god

survival despite betrayal of flesh: joy.

**binky opens up to tony, forever**

after Deana Lawson's photo, *Binky & Tony Forever*

sometimes i feel  
like a penny stamped  
from the beginning & ready  
for use / leaving a small  
child's fingertips at the foot  
of a fountain i am forced  
to meet the rush of water  
forced to have my worth  
rubbed down by raging down-  
pours instead of up against  
what it's worth / measured / say  
how much does survival cost?  
& how much to heal this wound?

i promise not to burn /  
    with this blunt  
    between my fingers  
    as we hug /  
you.

sometimes i feel  
lonely & i was never taught  
what to do with loneliness  
& i don't know what to do  
with that  
either.

my niggas like you

understand but they won't like you  
ask about my heart &  
what i've done w/  
the baggage i've kept &  
how it makes me feel  
to have my edges rubbed  
smooth before i under-  
stand the use of them / they  
won't like you  
encourage me  
to consider how my longest  
relationship existed  
in a vacuum  
for three years  
what was her name  
again? & what again  
did she look like?

love is never  
any more memorable  
than the memory.

tony  
if i never call  
my brother will he  
remember the sound  
my voice makes?

& what does that say  
about me?

with this blunt  
between my fingers  
i promise not  
to burn you only love  
you lean into you like  
happiness i won't fall  
not today / the floor  
is clean & the closer  
i look the more i see  
everything it holds.

the last time  
i was cute i was three  
the last time i was three  
i learned  
how to ride  
a bike without training  
wheels. & perhaps that  
is all this is. that:

love & learning.

how to exist to to  
remain afloat  
against a washing  
force is learning to ride  
a bike without training.

nothing good happens  
without consent & this  
is shorthand for comfort  
& this is shorthand for balance.

what do you call a child  
unsteady on a bike  
as his mother squares up  
with a man she met  
minding her own

business  
twenty years ago?

the fly's buzz & bang  
against the glass behind  
the shades is that  
which disturbs  
silence.

i am creating  
for the use of my worth  
a space.



## hymnal

for Nia Wilson

how sweet the organ from the pulpit the one never penetrated  
w/ a knife      the one that doesn't stop beating 'til the cords  
are released      how sweet the children of sun who violence  
doesn't reach & my god how sweet the snot / clear & thick  
& runny of every infant      how sweet the thought of  
flowers or something gone wrong      no longer am i charting  
new hypotheses      *god will you accept me the way*  
*i am?* i intend to do well      am often taken out of my element  
w/ grieving an eighteen year old black girl was stabbed today      to  
death i know b/c npr said so      dear heavenly mother how  
sweet the metallic drip      the nasal reporting      how sour  
the fruit of those who leave no hope for this country      how sweet  
the haves i have missed fajr this morning every surah learned i've  
for- gotten      how sweet Summer 2014 tasted      bedford ohio  
the sight of you w/o hijab      w/o t-shirt      to say i wept  
in the soft light of your bedroom / holy quran prostrated  
above your head      an understatement      to say i ever  
retained any- thing in life      blasphemous      al-fatiha  
is one i remember the light      the bee      a cow's  
heart      the size of my head beats sixty beats a minute  
the body      a temple on loan from jannah      'til npr  
tells you it isn't.      tells you *the suspect is still on the loose*  
how sweet the metallic drip      nasal reporting      b/c  
grass is greener there does not mean angels have arrived  
how sweet the partition      between damage & desire  
once i wrote *beat me* in a poem *as my lover beat me* i still  
don't know what i meant      or to which lover i was  
referring      one expects a lover to be memory  
easy to conjure up      to block out      vice-versa  
always good      always there      kind-

hearted as an extended palm    a palm clenched is a sign of  
aggression say i'm-done-talking say what's-up-then?  
a knife to the lung    across the knape of the neck say  
*someone- call-the-police!*    say *this girl is dying!* say *black*  
*lives matter!* one can expect one of two things    when  
falling out of love    or out of line    *god, do*  
*you heal all wounds?*  
b/c i appear it does not mean i am okay    my father's  
fianceé birthed two girls this year    & this year marks four  
years since Michael Brown in Missouri was killed    dear lord  
          how sweet the grievance    four years later anytime i  
am sick or think about my own death    reported by npr  
          i become anxious    dear god    when i die or in  
another world live forever    instruct someone to write on the  
tomb- stone    a registry of my gratitude: being black  
public radio    a caesura that shakes its head / shivers at the  
adhan / when Kaveh said in a poem: *it is not God but the*  
*flower behind God I treasure*    & so it is not death    but Nia  
Wilson smiling behind death & who this hymn is for

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## NOTES

“silk” is a cento. Lines borrowed/revised from:

- Philip Nikolayev, “Bohemian Blues”
- Wisława Szymborska, “The First Photograph of Hitler”
- Rob Padgett, “Charlie Chan Wins Again”
- Olivia Rice, “Timely Enumerations Concerning Sri Lanka”
- Sharon Olds, “First Hour”
- Leanne O’Sullivan, “Crescendo”

“field son recalls the way it was when” is a cento. Lines borrowed/revised from:

- William Stafford, “At the Un-National Monument Along the Canadian Border”
- Wisława Szymborska, “The End and the Beginning”
- J. Allyn Rosser, “Before the Sickness is Official”
- Kristen Kaschock, “Man-Made”
- Douglas Goetsch, “What I Do”
- Jane Kenyon, “The Suitor”

“a note on freedom”

- The line “my argument is this” is a revised version of Chase Berggrun’s line  
“my thesis is this” from “R E D.”

“on 45th & bridge”

- The line “to be dialectic” is borrowed from Vanessa Jiminez Gabb’s poem

“LBD.”

“gratitude for the way we make it work”

- The line(s) that refer to body parts or ideas as a tool is revised from Richard Siken’s poem, “Logic.”

“hymnal for the sacrilege or Nia Wilson”

- The line “it is not God but the flower behind God I treasure” is borrowed from Kaveh Akbar’s poem “Prayer.”