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# ALL THE BLOOD IN LOVE

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**ALL THE BLOOD IN LOVE**

by

**Maya Marshall**

**Bachelor of Arts  
Loyola University Chicago, 2013**

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**Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis uses poetry to explore my history and those of my matriarchs now that I find myself at the end of the line. The writing of this manuscript entailed interviewing my parents and their parents; researching Augusta, Ga and Brooklyn, NY have been particularly helpful in reconstructing the worlds my matriarchs inhabited from the 1940s to present. The work includes various characters—some amalgams representing my mother and grandmother—others, perhaps less realized currently, employ archetypes in an effort to turn their referents to unveil some truths about what it is to be an American. They include American Girl, Abiku (in this case, a girl-spirit), and Lavender Menace a queer woman in considering mothering a black boy. The American Girl series is intended to offer snapshots of a black girl's quotidian life as counterimage to the stars and stripes American Girl pop culture would have girls strive to be. The collection, as it develops, is moving toward a sustained close look at two mother-daughter relationships. I hope the fully realized version of this collection will reveal something essential, relatable, and legible about American black motherhood/daughterhood.

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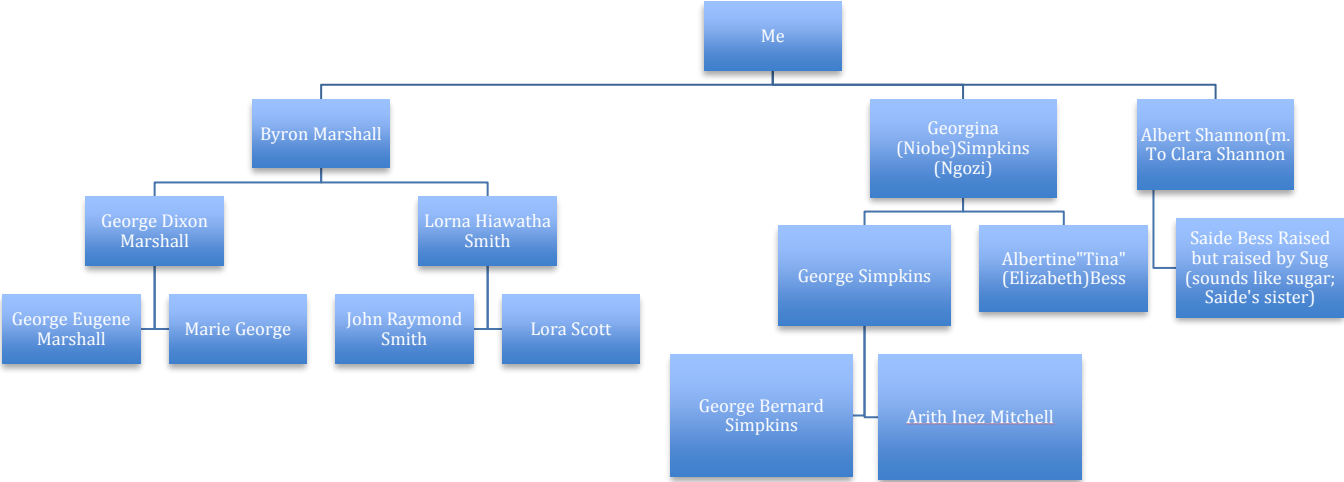
“You were hired by the tools in the box and set to work.”

Saskia Hamilton

“Memory is a mosquito, pregnant again, and out for blood.”

Gayl Jones

# Family Tree



## **Part I**

## American Girl Manages a Cafe

*Chicago, 2012*

I am tempted to look away  
from intimate gestures:  
a woman lifts her hands  
to her ears; a child wobbles,  
balance lost, the sky comes close;  
a woman crosses the street to turn  
and walk back the way she came; a man  
drops a tray, won't bend to retrieve it  
until no one is watching; a man crumples  
his nose up toward slouching eyebrows, a map:  
its letters all silent to him. I remember  
how across the street two men's hands  
hardly touch  
—nail to finger pad—  
accidentally on the train. They drape  
the same pole, sway toward the same doors.  
They are strange to each other, the hands.  
Never met, the fingers. A woman walks,  
one hip inches higher than the other.  
An obeyed slowness, necessary patience, resignation.  
A man, a customer, asks my permission  
to show me what happens to thieves  
where he's from. I am tempted. I begin to look  
while a man is set aflame for stealing  
a phone. I am watching,  
from America, on a phone  
with a man who wants my soft  
things and any job I can get him.  
I have no papers, he says. I live  
with a friend, he says. I will do any work.  
I workout all day. You may not  
be able to look. You may look away.

## **Ear Nose Howl**

I notice absences in mouths. Missing teeth, tissue. The eustachian tube leads from the mouth to the inner ears, balances pressures. The system's runnel waters eddy. What waters does my mother's mythology name for crossing to heaven?

The eardrum protests. The eardrum protects the inner ear from prolonged exposure to loud low-pitched noises. Tensor tympani and stapedius pull the eardrum taut. This reflex kicks in whenever you begin to pray—elsewise the sound of your own voice would bounce drown down. Trampoline.

## Sugar

Great-granddaddy's blood is in my palm, on my fingertip, in the veins in my feet. Sugar insinuates. Missing parts: feet. Fallopian tube. Sugar greets mommy's blood like her fur-babies, rushing. The dog licks cake from her lips. Her granddaddy Albert was an alcoholic. Functional. His girlfriend kissed the liquor off his lips, *Sugar*. He got so thirsty, so diabetes skinny his baby girl cursed him to the doctor. He got his numbers down and right after the appointment he'd go straight to get some likkor say how good it was once it went down. Crown and Mad Dog. Strawberry ice cream and Almond Joy. More Little Debbie, than sweet mash. Bourbon, my sweet, helped me grow these fibroids, the stones in my garden, to make the lining grow and drop on any man who enters.

## American Girl Moves

Chicago/Columbia, 2015

She drives 900 daylight miles from Chicago  
to Columbia, SC. Away from her  
city rife with escape routes. American Girl drives south,

along the lake, south, past Kenwood, the Illiana Interchange,  
through Ohio, through Kentucky. She thinks of Sandra Bland  
who turned her blinker on or didn't and ended up alone in a cell,

dead with a pack of white men around her cage. American Girl  
drives a Uhaul across the country, in which she is black  
before American, black before woman. She brings a friend,

a lover, who is white and black, who is City of Big Shoulders,  
who is bold and black and lesbian and Jewish and American  
and a princess. Our American girls laugh, listen for sirens, sit

susceptible to her whiteness, her blackness and the men  
in the motel rooms surrounding the one they share. Our  
American girls huddle around cigarettes, retreat

from the man on the bench outside who assures *I'm not a cop*.  
As if either way is a comfort. Asks, *Which room are you in?*  
The Fort Jackson Days Inn is a prime spot for porn making and

smells like 30 years of cigarette smoke. Sex can feel  
safe and they want to, so our girls fuck in their room  
afraid they might be heard and hurt, like so many Black bodies:

spines torn, contorted into art pieces, massacred in AME churches,  
flung like dolls at pool parties, slung across classrooms, finger raped  
by police officers, forced to fellate police officers accused and accused

and accused and the news hangs on their skin. American Girl fears  
for her life. Our American girls—targets on radar, small lights blinking:  
*I'm here, I'm here.*

**[midnight with a new moon]**

*Columbia, SC, 2017*

what do I know about being black  
but my mother's hand and mine

but my sister's back in her white white wedding dress  
(her newly widowed face under new white hair)

but my brother's black boy feet running running  
against the NES power pad

(didn't know what was chasing him)  
I knew it meant dad

would visit and the boys would be boys  
the finger's narrow escape from fire-

crackers mommy in the night with fire-  
flies I caught

my black meant country club  
kids got out of the pool and I didn't notice until years later

but what do I know  
may as well be white

except my grandmother washed white  
women's floors and was common poor

except *shawty what yo name is* and *you talk white, you stuck up bitch.*  
but what do I know about black

but my obese african american woman fibroids  
or the policeman's gun to my face

the black policewoman, saying  
*but what you really gon' be college girl?*

or a white man who loves me and is



*noticing my blackness a lot less lately*

or another black woman trying to check me  
on any given day in my grown ass life

Girl don't,  
you say: *oh, she's basically white*

and I know you're worried  
we can't both exist

in some rooms, you know,  
even the fact of the conversation is treason

**2.**

[well bottom][a shadow][anansi] [hottentot berry baker jackson] [nostrils] [hearted]  
[coal] [lips][2 million American prisoners] [Baldwin Lorde hooks Morrison][lung][lives  
matter][enuf for ya?]

## **Nest**

in a corner of a covered  
porch outside a house  
that never belonged to us

hung a dung-gum  
dangling palace  
dual bodies hummed

inside my parents' marriage  
a dry corn cob  
the whole husk rattlehiss

in the spring hornets buzzed  
never slick with anything  
sweet like honey

## **First Miscarriage**

Abiku escapes her mommy.

In the kitchen with dinner

the first drops of blood hit the floor:

amniotic fluid drains the lock.

The whole scene covered in flour—

it'll take months to repair the wishbone

shape of the clitoris.

## **Girl Born with Cleft Palate Turns Ten, Divines for Water in Her Backyard**

*Houston, Texas 1994*

Eustachian tubes' Y link the nasopharynx to the middle ear. Y the shape of a discarded branch. Y over the dog dung spread in the yard's overgrowth. Y of two arms reaching out to dry their sweat in the sun. She cannot hear the voice of God, though her mother prays for her each morning. Sixteen dental surgeries, and she has recovered perfect hearing, recalls the space after death. She cannot hear the voice of God; she knew it in her swaddling clothes. Whip thin. Her now functional mechanisms: tongue, teeth, nose, uvula, the inner ear, gnash a prayer *lead me to water, lead me to God* while she wanders her backyard with a divining rod.

## Mockingbird

Chicago, 2014

My mother lets me look through her jewelry boxes when I visit, tells me about the woman who sold her the Roman glass, about the resale shop where she found the switchblade, the turquoise ring she gave to my father and then to me. She bought me a piano for my thirteenth birthday, an upright. She framed a jazz man and put it up on the wall for me to see his black fingers on its black keys.

Once we found a dog with mange in a ditch; after church, she wrapped him in a towel, brought him home and named him Blues Man. Once in a torrential downpour, we drove past a woman carrying her groceries; my mother stopped the LaSabre to invite her in. I put myself in the back with the groceries.

My mother laughs loudly, reveals her crowded teeth. She loves the giant mole on her lip and her haint grandma Sadie who she says *kissed it there*. Once I bucked at her, and she stared me down. My mother will cause a scene anywhere. She respects children and suspects adults. She puts God before all man, including her children. She named herself Niobe.

Once my mother fell down a flight of stairs. Once my mother was a president. Once my mother bought my debt. Once she came to me with a suitcase and a two-dollar fedora, her little arms like pussy willow branches in her leopard print coat. She tells me I should be happy; her mother called her all types of whore.

She's feast or famine. She does just what she wants. She is sunlight on wide white walls and amber oil and glass. She came to me with her suitcase and a smile reminding me she'd lost everything—even almost her sister, Pretty Girl Angie, who talks to people no one else can see, even her son who didn't die, but wouldn't let her stay.

My mother, spitfire, African dancer, president, executive director. Once my mother passed out at work. Once she stopped taking her medication. Once she thought she had breast cancer. Once she needed money so we took in a boarder. She would have parties and I'd take shelter on the roof. Once my mother was my best friend. Once we didn't talk for a year. Once she gave me all the poems she ever wrote. Once my mom did a one-woman tour of her one woman show across Texas. Once she told me my home is where she is.

In every bathroom of hers is an orange tin of Murray's hair dressing, short vials of Egyptian oils, a towel for a floor mat, rings and beaded necklaces, heavy amber and gold

earrings, goat's milk soap, Dr. Bronner's peppermint soap, lavender soap, upended tin tops full of ash, cigarette butts in the toilet bowl, a swollen bible on the bathtub, candles with ash and crisp wicks, some knick-knacky little black Jemima and a small black tchotchke, a picture of a smiling black girl, and a thin film cast by oil and hair and powder and lipsticks and pet hair and dander and living alone.

## **My Single Mother's Lullaby**

Papa's gonna buy you

Papa's gonna buy you

Papa's gonna buy you

Papa's gonna buy you

Papa's gonna buy you

Papa's gonna buy you

**Part II**

“...my blood, my mouth  
all buttoned away—”

Jean Valentine from “Open”



## **Cleft**

There's violence in the failures of the body.  
Born with a cleft palate,  
I was hollering unfinished  
at the start, flailing tongue  
with no roof to push against.  
There is a violence in repair:  
a few sutures, hot cautery of edges.  
I am not perfect, but whole. Reconstructed,  
I've learned to speak.

**WKRB Brooklyn, Sunday Morning**

*Flatbush, 1963*

Hunger and the radio call us to the kitchenette.  
Mama and that nasty-ass Bill at the table  
with paring knife and lime sipping gin already.  
Mama say, "Go 'head. Show Bill what all you can do."

Mama and that nasty-ass Bill at the table  
watch me drop my hip like little Sally Walker.  
Mama say, "Go 'head, show Bill what all you can do."  
Twist and twirl. Blossoming at ten, I can tear.

Watch me drop my hip like little Sally Walker  
with a paring knife and lime. Watch me  
twist and twirl in time. Blossom, tear.  
Hunger and the radio call us to the kitchenette.

## **Joan of Arc Administers Insulin**

*an imagining, 2017*

Ms. Tina pinches her grown daughter's belly.  
The diabetic's needle a sword into flesh.  
*They used to call me Joan of Arc*, she says  
and tongues the gap between her dentures  
and gums. She sucks her teeth as if  
remembering. Child rearing is a holy war.  
Her daughter remembers a hot pot  
against her collarbone. No one talks  
about all the blood involved in love.

## Girl Secrets in Her Own Cocoon

*Flatbush, 1968*

To have a door! The back of which she could  
wake to, smile at, brush her girl lips and hips  
against. At night, she'd sit cross-legged  
on the floor, press her knees to the door's face.  
In her room, she'd deny her mother  
entry, adorn herself in costume jewels  
and pick her hair out round. She'd say yes  
to her own face, neither too dark nor too much her  
daddy's. In her mirror, she'd perfect her  
smile—with teeth, without—smack her lips,  
play woman without her mother's boyfriend  
telling her *feed me a little a this*  
*fish*. She'd take her cue from Martha Reeves,  
jerk and gyrate. She wouldn't need *nowhere to run*.

## Eviction

*Crown Heights, 2014*

Her sisters carry her things to the stoop.  
Six dachshunds herd the fur she hasn't cleaned,  
chase hard diabetic feet up, down the  
winding wrought iron staircase. Tomorrow

she will miss all of her rooms. True, no room  
or man was ever hers at all. She has  
been waiting for God to pay. She has been  
winding yarn in the absence of filters,

ash. Each year leaving home brings her closer  
to its every chamber—each block and sibling.  
She has been waiting for all of these years.  
Untethered, she will not look to her mother,

the wrinkles of her, the sag she made when  
she filled her, the stretch marks that surround the  
exit wound, nor wonder that we do return  
by necessity. We return by necessity.

## **Baptism**

Last night my brother called. We made promises.

*Don't leave me alone with our mother while she's dying.*

*Promise me you won't be her or her mother: blue light  
single women, amber oil on bulbs, sleeping in ashes*

and urine with nine dogs to replace her living children.

I do. I remember when I would pray. I would talk to the belly

I came from, murmur to it like it was demigod, rest my cheek  
on its sag and C shaped scar. I remember us singing each other

to sleep. I can dream what not to be: blue notes, don't smoke  
in bed, anti-anxiety meds, baskets of paper, piles of clothes, death by rebirth.

I still remember who she was: energy crystals, books:  
books for interpreting dreams. The Bible. Books for interpreting

numbers. The Bible. Tarot cards. The Bible. Marquees. She was light  
and dazzle—her name in jumbo letters. Her sinner-self died in water

leaving a semi-stranger behind. All her stories, loves, lovers, the women,  
drowned in baptism. She rose, still broken, to live in wait, to die eventually.

The truth is, we won't find her—her children—  
instead, we guess which will win: the depression or the diabetes?

Imagine we find her in melted ice cream. The truth: we don't  
find her. She sleeps cigarette in hand, burns the house down.

Charred puppy bones. Or she falls. The truth: we, her children,  
don't talk the right way. There's so much poison in guilt.

Her assistant finds her. Or her angel, Michael the security guard,  
who prays with her. He's the last man to touch her hands in love.

I don't remember the last time we prayed together,  
but my heart wants to be faithful. I love to touch her hands,

the yellow curve where she holds her cigarettes. I remember her stories.  
I'll build a house of old stories, no longer loves, tales for my nieces.

My mother can live with me when my brothers leave me to wash her  
softest parts, hear her final secrets, watch her next rebirth.

## Port of Entry

*St. Helena's Island, SC, 1998*

My mother took me  
to an island once.

I remember the thick, how jet  
the forest, how canopy

the stars. My body like panties then.  
What web and stretchable. What prevention.

I was just a visitor there. My little room,  
that vessel, its arms and its hips,

their sucking whirlpool surrounded  
by ocean and hanging moss.

We searched for our faces among strangers;  
we looked first through the church yard.

Tombstones will tell you where your hyoid fell,  
who taught your lips, your nose.

There are more of my grandfather's people there.  
It is where our women wove earth into toys.

The trees know the grazing hem, the line  
between sweet heat and deep sweat,

the woman('s) sex, her hanging. But for the grace,  
my dress may have lifted as rope pulled.

My mother told me nothing about how to invite,  
only to add oil.



## Poem for the Morning with Extra Virgin Olive Oil

My mother, my first and only preacher, opens the bible and begins to read at the tip of her thumb. Olive oil runs from the soft spot on her crown down the back of her neck. Anointed by her own hand, she prays to the rhythm of her sister shuffling up the scent of dog urine in the shit brown shag outside the bedroom door. She says *It is illegal to worry in God's house* (and every house is his) and so, she says, she does not worry.

## Family Photo

There is a picture of my grandfathers  
on my parents' wedding day. The Georges face  
each other, stare off in different directions.  
a whiskey in each right hand.  
Ceramic elephants in front of the frame  
trumpet toward each other, see nothing.  
Praise the Lord for all dead things;  
they cannot speak for themselves.

I speak to my grandfathers in the photo:

What's your favorite color?

George:

George:

What does your voice sound like?

George:

George:

How old were you when you died?

George:

George:

Did you ever say no to a white man?

George:

George:

Did you ever hit your wife?

George:

George:

How many times?

George:

George:

## **Learning to Pray**

Ten small fingers steepled,  
I watch my mother's hands amen  
like the lilt of the word. Amen,  
like the wave of her breath.  
I make my voice an ode to every name  
in my family's country and try  
to trust God, the man who never comes home.

## **Daddy on the Sofa**

Last night the soft satellite of my father's  
ear fell toward his shoulder.  
His chin floated up from his clavicle.  
The giant slept.  
His hands seemed still  
to lead me through circus grounds.  
When some breathing thing is vulnerable,  
I understand the impulse to crush.  
I'm inclined to pierce the softness like a spit.  
Tenderness is the impulse to protect  
what you know you could destroy.  
This is the gift of my father's neck.

### **Part III**

“like everything else, I evolve”

—Albertine Simpkins

**Ms. Tina, The Frankfurter Lady**

*Brooklyn, 1983*

Aluminum drawers jangle.  
At forty-three and a buck ten,  
she hauls her cart. Shoulder thrust  
against the stairwell wall, palm pressed  
to the cart's undercarriage.  
She pushes the contraption  
like a stalled car. Her knees gain  
water as her hip gains purchase.  
Tonight, Ms. Tina, in her new post  
"dismissed-with-cause" career  
will sleep on the couch.  
Her grown daughter in the bed.  
And in the morning, begging help  
from no one, she will set up shop  
again. She will back down the stairs.  
Four floors. Calf then calf, toe then toe,  
thump-clanking step by step  
toward the street door and push her buns  
and hot water tray up Rockaway  
to the Brookdale Hospital doors.  
She'll buff then post her permit,  
ready her mustards. Her gloveless  
hands will wrinkle in sauerkraut steam.  
She'll wait for the waiting room dwellers,  
the nurses, the EMTs, the doctors,  
the interns, the infirm to swarm the cart.

**An American Workplace: Howard Area Community Center**

*Chicago, 2013*

Shout out to the receptionist who  
sees the bloody and lets the drunks  
and their shat pants sit

until one screams,  
hits somebody, or shows a child  
his dick.

To accounting  
for wanting to work here  
with clean hands.

To the social workers  
smoking in the back alley.  
To the IT guy who'll be gone

within the year. To the men who steal  
copper wires.

To the teens duckin in hollerin'  
they shootin'! and laughin'  
when any body say they can't come in.

To the quarrel of ladies who leave  
the office, treading gingerly  
into the darkness down the block.

To the women from the shelter  
next door who come for formula  
and stay for class. Who moved

from Mississippi to Chicago.  
Who gon' move from Chicago  
to Louisiana cause they got cousins there.

For the staff at Paulina  
Certified and their quarter-a-piece  
candies from Halloweens past.

and the kids coming home to a burnt  
down building on Juneway. To the twin  
toddlers' bodies mixed with the mattress

they thought would save them. To their  
daddy who tried. To the man with schizophrenia  
who scares women walking past,

who throws a football with the kids.  
To the staff at Around the Clock  
Liquors. To the abandoned

paper factory reborn  
community garden  
for immigrants who know how to grow.

To the defunct shoe store. To PJs.  
To Cricket. To another defunct Shoe store.  
To tax advance fronts.

To handwritten, misspelled signs.  
To the Redline. To the Skokie Swift.  
To the loose-y man down by Pete's.

To the shuffle and pile  
under the platform. To the rattle. To the shake.  
To the scuffle. To the hustle. To getting it in.

To the currency exchange  
and the same faces. To the bus depot.  
To the goings on.



## Musing on Arith Lost to Time

*a guess from Brooklyn, 2016*

Granddaddy's mother birthed 12 children  
by 12 discrete men. I asked what she did for work  
and my big brother  
of a different father laughed at my insinuation  
that sex could be her job.  
As if being a whore is a joke a lark. As if she  
a ground-dwelling songbird  
with her streaky brown plumage  
didn't shift her bones to shape the world  
12 times. It was America after all.  
It was 1930 to 1953. It was Beaufort,  
South Carolina, and a woman  
is her own business. What's so funny?  
How many times did she make the shape of the sky  
with her legs, the oblong sphere of the earth  
with her belly? How many times was she an ossuary?  
Arith with her crooked feet  
maybe could only deliver her song  
in flight, crest pressed forward by her back's arc,  
belly swollen from fucking in that good  
sweet way women do when they want to  
feel goose-skinned, beautiful, slick, alive.

## American Girl Stays for Brunch

*Atlanta, 2015*

In the dining room,  
with the cheese grits and salmon,  
my father's wife  
tells some story about her friend  
hollering how she wants to ride a phallic  
looking sculpture at the edge of some freeway  
all because I wondered aloud at the pastel pink  
and yellow fish scale rainbow of the black cowboy  
painting affixed to the wall.  
His hat's down low and his baby blue pants  
are tight beneath what we can't quite see of holster.  
He isn't waiting on the other side of the river  
for any of Johnathan Green's women.  
I know not only my father  
decorated his house like I know my father's taste  
in women is like my father's taste in the giant colored cowboy—  
just arrogant enough.  
His wife traces the faint outline of his  
penis with her eye and then cackles as my father  
takes our plates from the table,  
and I say *thank you, Daddy* and she says *thank you  
Daddy*, before she looks at me and smiles.

**An American Workplace: Scene of a Downtown Chicago Parking Deck from A 12th floor Window**

The working girls are in the loop tonight. Stars and names tattooed around wrists and thighs bathed in metal halide light. The Van Buren parking garage, their private stage. Across the street, prisoners peep from the prison's windows. Wood and metal rattle in the wake of the green and pink line trains rounding the loop. Stilettos on asphalt. Prison cell lights flicker applause. Litany of clicking light switches. The building's 250 eyes flutter and clasp like syncopated fireflies.

## **American Girl Learns to Hustle**

Keep still when the men come  
to rest their fingertips on a bare shoulder.  
Smile when you sink each ball  
into a pocket, then twirl the cue, swallow  
another drink as the men clap. Girl  
*work work work work work.*

## **Buck**

This morning, I washed the dishes  
in my father's kitchen. Splattered  
lather. Water splutter flicked specks  
of pepper jelly around the basin.

A whitetail buck materialized  
in the backyard, his antlers covered  
in velvet and blood, tines tipped up  
like supplicants. He browsed a few leaves  
from the pines and, chest-bare, gazed  
at me. I wrung soap water with my hands,  
my 30-something eyes seeing me at 15,  
the deer in his dotage at five, and my daddy  
at 76, sitting still with his invisible prostate  
cancer.

## **Part IV**

## Lavender Menace Considers Adoption

In summer black boy burns. Say,  
black boy takes shelter. Imagine  
summer camp. Black boy afloat  
in Lake Michigan. Black boy  
piñata. Black boys dance. Death drop.  
Black boy could be a first cousin once  
removed. Black boy would be ten now.  
Or twelve. Black boy looks  
like a father he's never seen. Black boy  
is a grandma's boy. He is amalgam.  
Black boy is dragonfly: brilliant, iridescent,  
conspicuous in flight. 24,000  
ommatidia. Black boy is anther  
and filament. Black boy is a tyger,  
tyger. Adopted black boy is a steal.  
17k. Black boy is waiting. Is chicken  
chest. Black boy is grandfather clock tall. Black  
boy is never a clock tower. Black boy  
is egret wings. Is flying. Is his father's  
arms. Black boy is lisp and puppy scented.  
Black boy is whipping eggs for breakfast, boy.  
Black boy is billy goats gruff. Black boy's first  
home is ragdoll, is a closet corner,  
is tender purple. Black boy is plum pit,  
walnut hull. Black boy is curupira.  
Black boy is a dark city, is an open  
window, is a roving squad car, is crashing  
glass and song. A single black boy is the  
softest avocado in the market.  
A black boy is confetti. See his locked  
hair fairy. See his smile shatter light. See him  
shake in his new bathroom. See him wash  
his hands and brush his teeth.  
See the little boy explode into laughter.

## Family Circus

When I say son I mean the sun's corona blistering, bright  
covered in shadows, a circumference of dark flames wavering.

\*

In an alternate life, I adopt. My son calls me by my first name.

\*

A smoker, single with a near teenager, a cat asleep on her couch. His neck  
and forehead. His shoulder blades bent toward his spine like wings. The lithe black cat,  
purrs. The woman, late to gray, proud in her office, scribbles at her desk.

\*

A little boy, four-feet tall, puts his hand in a woman's brown hand.  
He is led to a Volvo asked about his day. He raises his brown  
eyes to the woman's brown face, examines the eyebrows, the lines on her  
forehead, before he says, *we learned about exoplanets,*  
*exo-skeletons, the word "suffLix,"* *exo-is a "suffLix."* There is a light  
rain on his knees.

\*

By *childhood* I mean bathtubs and closets, open doors  
to moving cars and big brothers cycling in and out between moving  
boxes and rain on sunny days.

\*

I have never been a black boy, and I have always loved castaways.

\*

I can't seem to put the years back in order.

\*

When I remember the man I wanted to marry but couldn't,  
I think about the children we didn't have.  
How my fibroids would have had to make room.  
How my love and I would have had to return to sex  
with blood mixed in.

\*



Bless the diva cup, bless the bloody penis. Bless  
the boy I haven't conceived.

\*

The circus: a hodgepodge of collected souls. My people sent caterwauling  
from up and down the eastern seaboard hoping to find love and life  
far from the homes that reared them. A circus. If my mother were an animal,  
she would be a peahen, one of her mate's feathers tucked safely away in her  
coverts.

\*

50 Circus Animals Need New Homes

\*

Men are cities I can't see until I move outside of them.

\*

A mother births a son, finds it hard to love an absence.

\*

A son takes  
"always be there" from family.  
only ever takes, never shows up, rarely says sentences  
that don't begin and end with lack or a daughter's name.

\*

I ask K\_\_\_\_\_ why he doesn't walk on lit major streets.  
He says he is afraid to be outside in his body.

\*

Anything is dangerous if you spook it.

## An American Nightmare

You hear a boy skipping up and down the block, begging his mother, for Halloween,  
*Mom, can I please be a ghost, please?*

What special depth there is in a child's daydream.

A woman slips out of the lone house next to the garden on the other side of the street.  
Smaller animals, still alive, cling wide-eyed to the branches of the barreling trees, bodies  
hunched, wet faces pinched with fear.

The water, sinking now, wallows against the lowest tips of leaves, swaddles and licks the  
earth-dark ends of the dresses of newly childless women.

Women use interlaced hands, baleen, to sift through black water on their road. I have  
never before seen this machinery at such close quarters, and I confess that I am both  
fascinated and challenged.

It is hard to see if they mend completely or are forever damaged.

I am thankful I can see so little.

Maybe I'm kinder to things that are not alive.

There are several ways of addressing oneself to some attempt to find out what *expense*  
means here.

One of the *good* risings from the stricken cloud and hurricane of our time is the  
understanding that old concepts must be adjusted or re-styled, or tested and dismissed—  
or rested.

You hear a boy skipping up and down the block, begging his mother, for Halloween,  
*Mom, can I please be a ghost, please?*

### Notes

“American Girl Moves” includes references to various acts of violence incurred by black people since 2014 to present. For more information, look to links or just listen to the news. <http://www.wbaltv.com/article/neurosurgeon-freddie-gray-suffered-complete-spinal-cord-injury/7097683htt>. Kenneth Goldsmith used Michael Brown’s Autopsy as “poetry” <https://hyperallergic.com/190954/kenneth-goldsmith-remixes-michael-brown-autopsy-report-as-poetry/> . Reference to the shooting at Mother Emanuel <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2015/06/shooting-emanuel-ame-charleston/396209/> . Reference to the beating of a student by an officer <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/sc-high-school-officer-beats-student-arrest-article-1.2412147> . Reference to officers raping people in police custody: <http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/21/us/oklahoma-city-officer-daniel-holtzclaw-rape-sentencing/index.html> . Reference to police officers sexually abusing woman in custody. <ps://photographyisnotacrime.com/2015/04/nebraska-deputy-who-forced-woman-to-perform-oral-sex-in-exchange-for-not-arresting-her-convicted-of-misdemeanor/>

“First Miscarriage” began as a negative image of a news article

<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/canal-collapses-in-bihar-a-day-before-inauguration/article19719724.ece>

“Learning to Pray: *If I Should Die Before I Wake*” was initially in Terrance Hayes’ anagram form. This poem was generated with the word documentary.

“Port of Entry” The hyoid bone (lingual bone or tongue-bone) (/ˈhaɪɔɪd/;[2][3] ) is a horseshoe-shaped bone situated in the anterior midline of the neck between the chin and the thyroid cartilage. At rest, it lies at the level of the base of the mandible in the front and the third cervical vertebra (C3) behind. It is the bone doctors look to identify whether a person has been hanged.

Unlike other bones, the hyoid is only distantly articulated to other bones by muscles or ligaments. The hyoid is anchored by muscles from the anterior, posterior and inferior directions, and aids in tongue movement and swallowing. The hyoid bone provides attachment to the muscles of the floor of the mouth and the tongue above, the larynx below, and the epiglottis and pharynx behind.

Chicago’s Jailhouse Strip Club <http://chicago.suntimes.com/news/chicagos-federal-jailhouse-strip-club-that-officials-say-they-cant-shut-down-metropolitan-correctional-center-the-watchdogs/>

“Lavender Menace Considers Adoption” includes a reference to a curupira which is a mythological being who among other things attacks people who hunt animals while they’re caring for their offspring.

“Family Circus” is partially a response to 50 Circus Animals Need New Homes

<http://time.com/4638078/ringling-circus-animals-fate/>

“An American Nightmare” is a cento from the following texts: *Report from Part One* by Gwendolyn brooks, *40 Short Stories* ed. by Lawn, *Hunger* by Roxane Gay, *Ozone Journal* by Peter Balakian, *Kettle Bottom* by Diane Gilliam Fisher, *In the Wake* by Christina Sharpe, *Trouble the Water* by Derrick Austin, *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* by Alexandra Fuller, *In Another Place, Not Here* by Dionne Brand, *Blanche Passes Go* by Barbara Neely, *Medical Apartheid* by Harriet A. Washington, *Scale* by Nathan McClain, *Collected Essays*, James Baldwin, *Your Baby's First Year* from The Cleft Palate Foundation, *The Old Dictionary* by Lydia Davis