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Horsepower

Joy Priest

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HORSEPOWER

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in

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DEDICATION

For Elsie, Robena, Mary Louise

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“My Father Teaches Me About the Bees”
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ABSTRACT

Horsepower is a collection of poems curated to be a cinematic, black femme, escape narrative. The speaker, who is experiencing a self-imposed exile from her home, radically envisions waywardness as aspirational.

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HORSEPOWER

Offseason.

Before the racetrack opens,

I step through the threshold
of my back door.

Stable-side.

A dove takes off from a nest
tucked into the corner
of the porch awning, glides
through my known world
which I can see
in its entirety
from my top step:

the twin steeples
& emerald roofs just past
our garage,

a horse practicing
its start out of the gate.

Only Longfield—
that Avenue rounding
the perimeter of the pill-shaped track
where the red & white & green flags
ripple from balconies & my neighbors
sell horchata in Styrofoam cups, street tacos
in paper baskets w/ cilantro & lime—
Only Longfield & a chain-link fence

separates the horses' air from mine,

they work the loop of that circular mile
making everyone's living
except their own—

the motors of our economy.

Beyond the spires
is a larger world I do not know
exists. A mile West, in my line
of vision, is a family
I do not know
I have.

In that corner of the city
—shaped like it's separating
from the land like a cell in mitosis,
straining across the Ohio River
to the north—

my great aunt, black matriarch, rocks
on her blue porch

& my father, my father,

just a couple of blocks away from her, coos
my baby brother into sleep
while his new wife flours

the wings of a flightless bird.

But all I know for now
is the grandfather I live with,
the white one,
the only one I will meet,

& I know my mother, who I can hear now, roaring
home from work in her muscle car.

& wait—

I know the horses,

the horses & their restless minds.

*. . . Got no place in this ole world /
Shackle bound bound bound but still I roam
Runnin from my family / Driftin from my home . . .*

—Valerie June, “Twined & Twisted”

I

AMERICAN HONEY

It's easier than you thought—leaving.

Only one night spent sleeping on your own
in a motel parking lot beneath the stars
of a summer Okolona. Then, your long-built dread
dispersing like gas into a brilliantly black
Appalachian sky. For once, you are a girl

unmolested. You could do this: be a girl
without a home. Always gone. Perpetually leaving
behind Strip Mall, U.S.A & the dark
green dumpster you raid for food, something to own
& the two kids no one will take care of & the dread
that comes on when their father squeezes your ass. Sparkle,

let your freedom build slow like the death of a star
across the years. & when she calls for you—granddaughter
of Elvis, confederate flag bikini, voice you dread—
let the interstate's roar swallow her sound. In your leaving
you see the country for the first time. Your very own
seeing. When he howls for you, your body is a silent, black

barn hidden in wild grass & your locs—pastoral, black—
are ropes for him, swaying from its rafters. Dangling stars.
It's easier than you imagined—leaving behind your own

mother. Her daughter, her ghost. But now you can be a girl
on the back patio with three white men & you can leave
with their money, egg suede cowboy hat adorning your dreads.

You swallowed the Mezcal worm of your fear.
You're standing in the cowboy's convertible, black
wind at the edge of the camera's frame. You're leaving
with the get-away boy you found sparking
in a K-mart parking lot. You're keeping it alive—your girlhood,
the adrenaline, the novelty, the dying star that you own

a million miles away. You're learning how to own
yourself, how to be 14-deep in a 12-seater without dread,
how to disarm, how to let it go when the white girl
from Florida says nigga again, how to be the only black
girl among strangers. Dancing around a bonfire under the stars.
Singing out of the sunroof down the interstate. Leaving

each new town you meet and own a memory in. Leaving
behind your mother's dread-veined eyes, fuseless stars.
Learn it all, girl, until what you've left behind is a brilliant black.

BLUE HEART BABY

Everyone wanna put hands on a piece of your life.
Look at it: how it sags in the eigengrau,

like the yellow belly of a bitch heavy with litter.
No better than that meddlin-ass moon, full

as your own breast, hanging low between buildings.
People hang from the ropes your heart has let down.

The chaos of stars feel up the dead air. Tiny blue flames
in the eye bone of the young-old junkie girl

follow you around the floor of your humming days. &
have you seen yourself? *I think I am weak & without purpose,*

your father texts you from the kitchen, sauced up,
after he rolls his heavy body over the loaded pistol

he laid on your bed. *Get use to life.* Every piece
of advice is one the giver followed to his own

bitterness. You roll the heavy body of the car you loot
from your failed fiancé down the highway. Even

the wheel, wobbling with fury, insists on hanging on,
you must make it to each new mourning alive. Beyond

your silent mouth, what can you use to protect yourself?
The deceitful company of crowds will fail you, have you

out here with your young body, in the cold, a house
dress, barefoot on some other woman's back porch

where no one knows the address. Let it be,
if this moment is of use to your life. & how long

is a moment in time indistinguishable as speed—
peep the ant-sized airplane creeping across the crescent.

How to wake up the next day & the next & not simply
after a decade? After 13 blue moons? Stretched belly &

empty veins? The gas of constellations run out. Heart weighted
low in the sky. Your chances scattered across the dead years.

QUILT ‘N’ FRAMES

was what they called Charlie’s mule because its bones were like a rack its skin hung over. *The mule had more sense than he did taking his drunk ass home every day*, my grandmother says on the phone from Cleveland, a long way from Alabama now. She says when they’d been sewing for a while & the quilt had grown heavy as an animal’s coat, they would throw it over a wooden frame to keep it upright. Says she & the other women would sit on the porch, same time every evening, to see Charlie ride by on his way in from town—Landsville, where he’d go like all the other men after 13 hours in the field. *He’d be stone-drunk & thrown over the back of that damn mule*, she says which knew its way home & how to hold up a worked thing.

UPON READING JAMES LIPTON'S *AN EXALTATION OF LARKS*

The etymological origins of both *love* and *hunt* crouch
hidden in the same word *venery*.
A Bevy of Beauties can refer to deer, or quail
on the ground, or young ladies—



when he says to me, *I like a woman
who plays hard-to-get*, he is talking
about an old game for huntsmen,
camouflaged in the language, so that
where two women are gathered they
might be called *A Whisper*. . .



When he says, *a woman who makes
me work for it*, he is talking about his
desire, fixed on the chase, a fawn
caught in the clearing of his iris.
Desire, at its origin, so close to *kill*
 A Loot of Little Deaths—



Bob-tailed. Feather. Medieval
Arrowhead. Footed. Aluminum.
Guinea wing. Target. Quivered.
Bone. Sheathed. Bodkin's
dagger, metal spiked. Flint.
Breasted. Obsidian Broadhead.
White clothed clout for a future
beau—



What does it mean if a woman expresses desire? Well, *you can't rape the willing*. You've heard the saying before. A lioness presents her apricot belly, head-sized paw folds limp around a rifle. *A Pride of Pussy*, how grotesque—



If a woman is to be worn-down, won, mounted as trophy, then he can never be sure of her *no*. *An Illness of Inamoratas*. A hand hushed over Cupid's *bow*.

MY FATHER TEACHES ME HOW TO DISAPPEAR

Tonight we're standing on his porch
at the top of a hill. The darkness
up to our chins. The sky

a bowl of blinking lights above us. Perfect
for my father—a physicist,
an airplane mechanic, a veteran

of life—a Friday night fifth on his lips. A ritual:
It's been this way since I was a little girl:
He's doing the talking, I'm taking notes

on invisibility. *Before you*, he says,
from behind his telescope or binoculars,
your auntie'd be the one

doing the getting fucked up,
while we sat on the porch waiting
for the cool breeze. & he says

cool breeze like it's code
for something, a signal,
a blinking blue iris on the dashboard

of a parked van down the street.
He's foolin with the lens,
trying to get the focus right,

get his eye aligned
with a planet or person.
I was an operative back then.

Had a safe house over on Lakeview.

He's handing a Zig Zag-wrapped joint
down to me, imparting secret lessons

I may catch, or not,

about being watched—

T said he'd see me home

those evenings—about being followed—

Said, he'd ride up on me

at St. Clair, see me turn the corner &

vanish—about getting away—People used to

talk about it when I was a boy, how

I was always hiding in plain sight.

Who were you hiding from?

I still want to know. But a question

is not permitted during the test.

The test, always: what is true? /

what isn't? The answer

to surviving in the story

he is telling me. *It's all done*

with shadow, he is saying now,

eye to the scope. & I copy.

He means I better know

how to get gone.

When he looks up,

he best be talking to air.

& so the next time he comes for me,

THE PAYPHONE

Disappeared from the landscape.
Slick & black in the *Tangerine Diner*
Where I stood to speak into the handpiece
Greasy with other people's oil & spit.

Gone that day's newspaper, boot-printed,
The dog walking itself leash-in-mouth
Down the small avenue, the bookstore
Where I felt the train rumble past

On the other side of the wall. Gone
Those old men I watched smoke at their stools
& the bloodsucking bug I smeared in sweat
Until it was only blood. I am obsessed with

What's phantom: the younger self;
The angry & agile body, starved & able
To consume indiscriminately;
The gently-pumping vein.

The operator had everyone's number
At her fingertips back then. Who remembers
The sensation of the rotary dial whirring
Backward? Who of us keeps the record

Now? Outside of the gardens the smartphone
Missed my back pocket, smacked
The ground. Gone its face, diamonded
Into uselessness. No way to get ahold of

A way home. I hummed along while I waited
Across from the jukebox, in the booth

Ripped from its button, scratching
The back of my thigh. Gone the wild weeds

& Honeysuckle air
That made me. The coin slipped
Into its dark slot.

ALL THE MEN THAT SUMMER WHO SAID I LOVE YOU

After I made it out to the country,
the panic attacks came on

like minutes. Indiscernible.
Ceaselessly. The fence leaned

perpetually and the AC unit
droned on & on

in the window of the double-wide.
The mail planes passed overhead

like water from a hose—the most
I counted while out for a smoke was 13,

landing one behind the other.
Out there the world was steady,

untroubled, but my body
wouldn't let me believe.

Brandy's mother let me sit alone
in her jacuzzi for hours, comforted me

with rolled cigarettes and coffee,
a hymnal-heavy hand on the back.

Brandy came home with a bottle of Captain
every night after her shift at the Golden Corral

and sat with me under the tin roof
on the makeshift porch

while I confessed: How
that summer, after my fiancé followed me

through Chinatown for an hour yelling *It*
while I looked for the bus stop,

I'd pissed myself and rode the 14-hours
back to Kentucky, mildew and smoke

& How, once there, my father said *It*
while he rifled through my fiancé's abandoned car

looking for *evidence* and again he said *It*
while he was interrogating me

in drunken fits after finding
the name *Mohammed*

on the insurance cards & *Are you fraternizing*
with a foreign operative? over & over again

with a loaded pistol
between us on the kitchen table & How

I'd fled him, as I would an assailant,
ending up at Misty's—a woman

I waited tables with—
& How her husband

had looked at me desperately
as I was leaving & said It: *I love you*

& How he'd crept into the room
where I slept whispering *It*

while Misty was sound asleep
in the next, an empty balloon

lightly dusted, on the nightstand
& How there had been no panic

in my body then & then & then & then or then.

ELEGY FOR KENTUCKY

Nowhere to drive, night upon night
that last summer, but back back
to the cokey couple I was crashing with
in their 26-year habit. On the way there
the same horse always dying at the curve
before I turned, like a kitschy disco ball,
onto their street, name I can't recall.
There she lay toppled like a toy figurine.
Calm but huffing, a laboring machine
making steam, though the cold air
belonged to June, its grief. A filly
done before becoming a mother, great belly
black & wide as all surrender
& that magnificent face still against the grass
waiting for the end. There she was every time
whispering something to me, a line
throbbing, a visible heartbeat I watched
in the mirror for hours with my huge horse eyes.
I needed to see her, to make sure
she was still there. I went the same way each evening
wanting to feel something, to see
this once-immortal creature get up. Any weak thing
was welcome to finish me then & when he came
into the room with bridle & bit,

on his 26-year high, when he came
up on me where I was lying at that curve

in my mind, arms & teeth numb,
I did not resist. Just a muted yell inside for months

before it lit on me like an ancestor.
As a child, I followed my grandfather

across the street behind our house
—Longfield Avenue, backside of the track

where the thoroughbreds for that May's Derby
were trapped, bored of what they were bred for,

all their royalty within a corral.
My hand, a child's offering, was empty

when they snorted & drew their worn noses
across my palm, yet, it was in their nature to remain

friendly toward me. My home did not keep
its promise after my grandfather died.

There was no protection for what I was
without him. Lone black filly. Finished

before becoming. She must have tired
of standing there high-headed, waiting for me

to ride her out of that war, to call out
let's go. We are done here.

DEAR AUNT LOUISE, MUH

I am thinking of your blue-painted porch on 28th street, tucked between Catalpa & Olive—where I sat with my daddy when I was getting to know him.

I am thinking of your underbite and chin whiskers, your very distinct quiet,
which one only gets
being from a place

miles deep into the crop.

You took everything in through a tinted filter. Lived at the end of the red dirt road
in your laugh.

Your obituary in the black puddle
of my lap:

1955. Left Negro Church Road, Lawrence County, Alabama. . .

Went North on the train.

Sister went all the way to Cleveland and took up with a boy
y'all grew up down the road from,
Dennis Priest. Steel rail to steel mills.

You got off before the Ohio. Settled into alone & lived on a numbered
street like a city girl.

The obituary,
elusive archive:

Father's name	Racia	Gone	
Mother's name	Mary Helen	Dead	1936

By the time you were 3 years old, you were a girl alone.

A month beyond your homegoing

headed north 13 hours

in a pickup truck

Before I left that morning, I plucked a chin hair, sprouted overnight. Felt the heel
of your palm hit my shoulder
like a tambourine.

II

WINNING COLORS, 1988

I am born in the season of color-blocking and crack,
in the year that begets Al-Qaeda. The light and dark
shades of School Daze dance across movie screens.
A girl-horse wins the garland of roses.

554 blooms sprout red around her roan neck—shock
of black mane, haze of white down her nose.
Before her only two fillies clutch
the purse: Regret, 1915; Genuine Risk, 1980—

our names for girls. When my birth horse
sets off out of the gate, a man and woman are working
their eleventh hour, twirling around the country club,
in the graceful choreography of weathered

servers. The woman is just 12 weeks pregnant,
not yet swollen with her dark choice. The man
is taking bets and slurs alike out of the mouths
of the club's members—rich and red-faced from

mint julips. When the woman hands off dirty glassware
to the man, father of her child, she giggles, smacks
him on his great black ass. When the girl comes down
the last stretch, she's been out in front the whole race:

foal of Caro, violencing the dirt.
Expectations stamped into bets, at one point
her odds: 100-1. When her neck clears the wire
into the known world, the dark trumpet sounds.

DERBY

First Saturday in May. My mother wrestles my hair into two ponytails.
The only day of the year she bothers. The upsweep of skin

pulls my face into a grin. Special occasion
barrettes molded into the white, plastic body of a horse
gallop behind me at the tip of my braids as I race
the stretch of our narrow alley street, shouting
into the shimmering cars' mirrored windows
through cartoon-sized teeth:

PARK HERE! TEN DOLLARS!



Eight years old and I am a professional.

Up early to greet the regulars:

Mr. Whitlock, Black Lincoln Town Car.
Mr. Crouch, Red Topless Corvette.

I usher the expensive machines
into the VIP spaces
of our carport,

pander through the heavy hands
dropped on my freshly-parted scalp. All day long,
up & down Cliff Ave.,

I am my mother's gimmick,

reeling in the big bettors,
slipping stiff money into envelopes
giving directions to the entrance
in my tiny voice, picking
the sure horse, selling
plots of our yard and lemonade

to orange-tinted men sweating
through linen, their nameless
women under gaudy hats . . .



We memorize their faces
from scratchy lawn chairs,
beneath a mellow blimp
humming through the sky.

And then the streets empty.

The announcer's voice echoes,
blankets our roofs. A distant Oz.

Grills warming, beers hissing,
crowd buzzing like a radio
between stations. Waiting

for the races to let out,
for our customers to stumble back
from that fortress we never saw
inside of,

we argued
garage-to-garage,
placed the real bet:

which of us would be the first to go.

THE WHEAT FROM THE CHAFF

My skin is summer, red-brown and singing.
Me & Pappaw at his kitchen table, antique pennies
Stacked in leaning towers of ten. He learns me
Through magnified glass, offers what he has of value:
How to spot the twin wheatheads sprouting
Up the curves of the coin. His hands, translucent
& veiny—one cradling a Viceroy—sort
Through the pile of pennies along with mine.

*He would've been born to farmers in Custer, KY.
1929. Stripped tobacco & sold eggs, strawberries.
Had eleven brothers & sisters. Would've
Been five years old when the Depression hit.*

I am small enough to tuck myself into his lap
When I land a finger on my first red cent.
No Lincoln Memorial on its tail, only frontier-era
Stalks of unassuming wheat. He tosses
The coin into a cigar box, each roll into a cotton
Sack. When we find ten we stack, tilt,
Slide a row down the paper wrapper.
Copper cascades into the dark.

*Before he retired he would've delivered
Dry cleaning to families in the West End. . .
Resented that. . . said the most off-color things
About the way they lived.*

We take the cotton sack to Gumer's & Co.
Down on Broadway, and then to the bank on Woodlawn
To buy more rolls to sort through. To get out
Of the house a little, out of his idle mind. Back at home

The Dresden Ave. breeze reaches at us through the propped-
Open screen door, while we search for the one
Worth more than the others, the exception.

*Would've been an old gentleman he delivered to
Down on 32nd & Magnolia, Mr. Crittenden
Would've been his name. The sat on his porch
& traded fishing stories. He would've been the one*

*That got him started on catching blue gill & filleting
Them on the pit. Mr. Crittenden. It would've been
Him who got Dad started on the wheat pennies,
Who gave him that first fat jar of coins.*

NIGHTSTICK

In Kentucky I am a Black girl, but don't know. I sleep
next to it. Crooked bone, split-open head. Patrolling
through the night. Don't even know I should be trying to run away.
It rests in my night terrors, in a bureau between my grandmother's
quilts, with her thimbles & thread & dead white poems. Don't think
for a moment my grandfather won't pull it out, make a cross of it
with my arms, gift me its weight & crime. Do you believe?
What if he said its name was *Justice*? Would that be too much?
If he was the only man my childhood saw hauled away in handcuffs,
pale & liver-spotted & stiff in limbs sharp enough to fold into the back
of a cruiser? Me. That long bruise of irony. The only two Blacks ever allowed
in his house. & at night he be singing me to sleep while it sits invisible,
sentry-like out of sight. He be humming hymns—*I come to the garden alone
while the dew is still on the roses*—knowing how much blood it has seen
& whose. He be holding me to himself like a secret & every song be a prayer
for my daddy's sunken head. Me breathing one for his whole face
before me. Bullying a shit-shaded boy's head is what it's made for,
he say, my pappaw, while I hold it, not knowing enough about myself
to understand the cannibal nature of chewing on his words with no riot
inside. No baton twirling in the air of my stomach. No notice of the grand
wizard & his wand when he appears in my nightmares. I be closed-eye
& it be there, Black as who it means to beat.

MY FATHER TEACHES ME HOW TO SLIP AWAY

*with Clarence Carter on
in the background*

& there I sit, in my mother's white Plymouth
Stolen in the open, under advisement of
This country's laws and customs—I wait beneath
The Hollywood Video's fanatic purple lights—
Their appliance buzz, sound of the spectral past,
Crackling in and out—I wait
For my mother to return, to go back
To the only home I've ever known—But inside
She's been stunned-still at the sight of my father,
Possibly a mirage—I must've been
Asking for him, begging, but she had no address
No number to call—This moment, pure chance, a warp
In the spinning wax come back around—her mind skipping
As she stands before him with *West Side Story* in hand,
Then speaks, finally, to tell him I am out in the car—
& that night my father will tell his wife I exist
& he will make it to my grandfather's house

With this declaration on his lips, he will try even again
After being turned away for seven years
By a many-chambered gun
—& this time when he arrives, somehow
My mother will know he is there
Waiting in the outer space air of October—
This time a window is open & my father's mantra
Is the call of a mourning dove
& ash is falling from his cigarette
Behind the barbecue pit where he crouches
Just as the nightmare is curling
Back from my skin like smoke—
This time my grandfather is lame & unaware,
Fettered to his makeshift couch-bed,
When my mother pulls me through the cone of light cast
From his living room & toward my Black life—
When we steal past the safe
Holding the revolver wrapped in a tea towel,
My free fist turns like a wrench
In my eye—& then the heavy oak door
Whispered open by the sparkle of my father's knuckles
& then my mother pushing me onto the night porch saying,
“Your father, this is your father”—Before me, a mirror—

My horse mind flickers—

When I step into him & look back at my mother, she

Is on the other side.

ABECEDARIAN FOR ALZHEIMER'S

Angel was my pappaw's girlfriend when he died.

Back there, in my memory, I hear my mother fussing about condoms & *AIDS!* She is saying, *The girl is only 25, & Black!* My daddy, amused at the irony of racism, whispering to me: *He's at his end anyway.* Angel was stripping at Déjà Vu when he moved her into the front bedroom & this is where I began to realize what, precisely, was going on: He couldn't remember me, but by then he was forgetting who he was too. Outside the club, next to our world famous horseracing track, the infamous sign read: *Win-Place-Show Bar | 99 Pretty Girls & 1 Ugly One!* A jab at Angel—their only dark-skinned dancer. She mystified them with her kaleidoscope of color contacts & quick weave. They loved her *equine* legs. I loved her for telling my secret loud, for making a messy joke of him & my mother the way I felt they had made a mess of me. After Angel moved in I never saw him again. My mother avoided his street. She could not get over the hypocrisy: How he'd disowned her when I was born, then made her promise not to speak of my blackness, my father, to me. Buried hole of quiet lies they dug for years before it opened beneath the two of us & ruined everything. Maybe my mother envied Angel because she saw the truth of him out & when he began forgetting to hate us, to put his white hood on every day, Angel used him the proper way. I like to think of her as Veritas, the goddess at the bottom of that empty well, naked & holding a hand mirror. Or maybe it was me, a xeric un-blooming thing down there beneath them. I had, for

years, been taught to live that way: Black, unassuming,
zipped up in history—a disease not even progress can cure.

MY FATHER TEACHES ME ABOUT THE BEES

before the scientists do. Our backyard
is his armchair. He rises from
the buried roots and tomato vines

to come see about us: Me, running. My honey-
dark baby sister—who I’ve just caught
stick-poking a hive stuck

to the side of our house—tangled
in my arms. He sees the world in us.
Knows the huge, abstract names

for emotions, when it comes to plants,
but not his own self. He stops me,
spins me nose-to-nose with him,

our top lips beaded with sweat. Says,
“What is it?!” “Bees!,” I squeak.
“BEES!” His eyes, erupt into a forest

fire: *Don’t you know I am a bee. You: a bee!*
they were surely saying. Today on a podcast
the entomologist says, *honeybees are actually an invasive*

species, in the sense that they don't belong here . . . imported
by early European settlers, and—as he continues
talking about our solitary American

honeybee species brought over
for their weight in gold—
I want to hug my father, put an ear

to his hive-chest heart buzz. Whole ecosystems,
the country's fauna, built through
our long blood. I want to listen

before it's too late, remember always
what he said that day: "Don't teach
your sister to fear the bees."

How much *fear* sounds like *destroy*.

ODE TO HUSHPUPPY

say *here* & it sound
like a heel shoved

down a throat.
a horse hitched. guttural.

tough meat yanked,
bones crushed by teeth

minted in gold. sound
like a sixth generation

curse when it fly
out your mouth little god.

a bolt cracking ‘cross
field laid flat beneath indigo

clouds. you say *come back*
heel & you mean

your daddy too. mean
we are so ancient.

how long we done
lived— us-folk,

for whom heaven
is live broadcast.

our down-at-the-heel
place. filthy & barefoot.

double-wide on stilts,
a body to be burned

if need be, 'cause
already. already no fear

of fire in you.
of sharp gill or heavy

hand laid into your cheek.
you've caught

on early, turning—
through cylinders

of nature—root,
rainfall to praise. making

rubber tire, rusted
scrap into playground.

sun-bleached boats,
fish nets are birds

in your hand,
there on the divine screen

of poverty. ingenuity,
beggar's alchemy:

what we got into
what we ain't meant

to have. *we's*
who the *earth*

is for, you
squeak. & you sing

two kinds of people:
your daddy & you:

those who stay
& those who escape

the heel.

III

*Some girls are daughters
& some are ghosts*

—*Rachel McKibbens*

MY FATHER TEACHES ME HOW TO HANDLE A PISTOL

Twin Rugers resting side-by-side
on the emerald felt. *For the Good Times*
playing low through evening's kitchen

as he takes them apart & puts them back
together. How can I know what he is
remembering as he shoves one, grip-first,

into my hesitant hand & swallows
the last of the Malbec, his stained lips
cracking into a rare authentic smile.

He cannot imagine the first gun
I held belonged to a boy who loved me
too much when he pointed it my way,

cannot know I'm still holding
its contents back with the force
of my eyes, where my father says

his grandmother, Elsie, lives now
to terrorize him. I think about her,
working those Moulton fields,

how tough she must have been
living alone with two
of the meanest men in our family

of mean men. When I learn
how tough it is to pull back
on the slide, I think of her:

pretty yellow negro, the men say,
so poor her mule had no name.
It's ribs visible across the field

where she stood watching
her father-in-law, Spence,
beat blood & foam from it.

When I learn to lock the lever
& look down the chamber,
I think of her: oiled pistol

exhausted at her dirt-stained thigh,
hand on her hip. Insouciant
& tired. Just tired. *Don't ever*

put your finger on the trigger
unless you're ready to pull it
my father says, so I keep it straight

I learn what she was tested by
to get eyes old enough
to hold a bullet still.

GHOST RIDE

I don't mean the midnights I steal at fifteen, floating air & fuel down Dixie Hwy,
under the streetlamp's orbed glare *invisible* *after I slip*
my 1988 Cutlass Supreme Classic from my father's driveway. & this isn't code between
my phantom love & I for when *we meet* *in a shadow*
near the Downs & I vanish behind illegal tint. I don't mean the dips we take, the smoke
in twisted wisps *hovering* *near quiet lips*
sheets of white brick beneath the floorboards. Nor the time we get lost & disappear
into the dark part of morning *hours cuffed* *on a curb*
for refusing to let them search us for a wickedness that wasn't there, how they came
& went that time, unable *to touch us* *like unclean beings*
wandered into the wrong realm. A girl I can't remember is what I mean. Look: me behind
the wheel in a brown boys' *radiant* *procession*
of candy paint. Each one the same age, then, as his ghost now. My baby cousin a reckless
angel next to me *going dumb* *shotgun*
on the bench seat of my Oldsmobile when he still had teeth in his head, had yet to touch
flame to the underbelly of a spoon. *With the boys* *my sex*
became neutral—a gear I shifted into throwing open the long coupe door, swinging
my legs to place both feet on *the risk of* *pavement*
West Coast sound bubbling into a night otherwise country & silent, save the slow crunch
of tire. I mean I got out, left *the whip* *with no direction*

GOD OF THE MOTORCADE (2005)

In Louisville, from a sidewalk-
turned-sideline on West Broadway,
I catch my beloved,

absent for weeks now,

leading a cortège of Chevelles through the chaos
of revelers,

as earlier that day the children
led their handmade floats around a grade-school
Derby parade.

As he comes toward me,

so too does a throat-dark woman
carrying past the scent of coconut,
her naked breasts glisten, slick
as the skin of his convertible coupe.

My eyes—lit up at him—know
why he chooses this very spot to turn
the chain of revving beasts
through a slow U:

picture the Nian at New Year, now
his headlights flooding across
my red velour Rocawear dress
& for a moment you can see
I am the one. Rumor has it

the beast's weakness
is an aversion to loud noises,
fear of the color red.

We are all too familiar with this combination,
myths that we are. Even this night

on the main thoroughfare of River City, splitting our side
in two, a few of us will become

legend. I hear a girl say *there he is*—my lover
who is also her lover, I see.

I watch
a boy dance with sharp & ancient movements
to Lil' Boosie on the roof of an old Buick.

Someone' daddy calling out *Redbone* to me
from behind a pit, thick with smoke
& the end of an animal. The tail

of the monster that keeps him from me, always
out of reach, whips away & evanesces
at the bend on 18th street.

IN THE CITY

rear-wheel-drive cuttin co'ners rims rubbin through the city
fishtail swingin switchin lanes floatin tub in the city

M-4 extended barrel peeks out from beneath the seat shit
gotta stay above the mud in the city

spit-rolled blunts sit coolin in the swivel of air vent there
for when it starts the tug of the city

palm the finger waves her face hidden in the sex of my lap
this how a king fall in love in the city

family heir at age twelve when pops went to the grave
couldn't find my heart if they dug up the city

mothers shoot brown sugar into the rupture of vein
i live like this through the blood of the city

stay glued to the rearview in a forever state of flight
a bad omen i am the black dove of the city

not quite a fiend just sprinkle a little out the bag
to do a few bumps just because in the city

redbone rhythm her first time breaths only sound
that ever drowned out the buzz of the city

now the joy of her moan live ringin i waste in La Grange
forever reminiscing how it was in the city

GIRL 6

I know happiness is chemical. & that I exist. As: an intense state of longing punctuated by quick sparks of contentment. As: a body not allowed to pursue its own pleasure. So, it becomes a game of finding ways around politeness, my own split-open mouth. I tide my bed in salt waves, wait to be satiated, degraded. Wet with shame, I offer myself in cyclical failure to no one in particular, a religious practice. I demonstrate 365 maneuvers in swallowing grief, a self-defense discipline. I want to be disciplined for wanting to enjoy the end & shudder of anyone trapped inside my mouth—that wilderness.

My heart has gone the distance so soon, I worry.

I reprogram parameters for survival & end up at a canyon called Segregation of Feeling, what I used to know of my body left on the other side. As: a woman disenfranchised from touch—that impoverished excuse for kindness. Hide me somewhere really dark. Hide me inside your hand. Turn me like an hour glass, my own recognizable voice giving up inside your scythe-shaped palm, becoming two voices. One a master of hurt—that science. One saying yes in the language of gravel, in a register lower than smoke.

MENACE

His family well-off—his daddy do Hollywood films
his skin a kind of pearl everyone wraps their fingers around
when they hear the news. He was ill, they say,

but not my boyfriend, who carried his father's infamous name
& thick herringbone chain around his neck. His entire life
a hand-me-down. When they say he was ill

—the young man in Isla Vista, who made shells dance
the ground like a snatched necklace—
they mean to say *mental*,

but not my sweetheart when he raised a gun eye-level
at me on his front porch.

This boy had a European father, an ocean view.
He was sick in a way, a way reserved for clean, white,
fragile things. He was not quite right, a rich aristocrat
who hated blondes. . .

Quite unlike the boy I loved—shirtless & oak-shaded,
stinking of summer when he dropped the pistol to his penis,
smirked at me for not having a sense of humor, his gold teeth
loud as the corner streetlight.

NO COUNTRY FOR BLACK BOYS

when walking while black
from a 7-Eleven. conceal your

watermelon Arizona fruit juice
no sudden movements like say

reaching for a pack of Skittles
you might end up wrestling for

the right to live you
be second-class citizen unarmed

three wks seventeen. fight howl

for help in your

home heart
suspended over a hollow point

remember to call out a mother's
name. they don't know

your screams apart from
man w/ gun. he is the one who

survives in America

i am always there. i patrol. i follow
dark skin in a hoodie

i leave my vehicle. come after you
trying to get away. i neighborhood watch

like a suburb with color rushing in
your life has low value, boy

parade around here
like that. like you are only

victim. plead

savage life. get trial & conviction
on my Florida sidewalk. remember me.

pain. die with only a ghetto
heart. how does it feel? listening to

your body expire *these assholes*
always get away, but i am the one who

DRIFT

after Robert Frost's "Directive"

It becomes too much for us,
so, we take a dip. Ride
 aimless down this parkway
parting unruly brush. Nature

 so heavy it feels, at any moment,
ready to erupt & absorb
 this silly city men have made.
We are magnificent & overhead

 the trees crowd, like a mob,
into canopy. The butt of his boxed Chevy
 sways across double-yellow bars,
eroded lanes cutting

 east-to-west on our side
of the city. Beech
 & Cypress, 22nd & 18th
where it turns into Dixie.

Past Park Hill's dull yellow brick,
its clotheslines and identical yards
 —building after numbered building
crossing the glass globe of my eye.

Past the hair store, Grand Mkt.,
the apts. where my father lived
 when I met him, & the loud teal
awning of Shark's Fish & Chicken.

I sit shotgun sans seat belt.

Tonight, knot-gutted—that tell
for fear. Maniac is leant
behind the wheel, eyes nearly closed,

in his gut: a fistful of pills,
tiny yellow footballs. Before
he slams into that giant pin oak
down the pkwy, before the steam

& the rust flakes floating
through the one beam
of that insistent headlight,
that streetlamp giving up

to the dark, something telling me
to get out. When I leave
his grey Caprice, I step out of
a dimension, a place in my youth

I can't return to. How quick
the fire turns to ash as I hand
the smoke to him. He is pulling away.
The cigarillo is slipping through

his dangled fingers to join the ground
like every ending thing: he's done
enough to escape our streets—
numbered, or named for the trees.

**ODE TO MY FIRST CAR, 1988 CUTLASS SUPREME CLASSIC 307
V8, DUAL EXHAUST**



My mother had one first. Arterial red. Mean.
She sent it through the car wash on Taylor Blvd
once a week. I would follow it down the line, nose
to the glass. At the other end vein-armed men

air-boxed over who'd be the one to polish
it down. Always so glossy, I could see the contours
of my girl body, & behind me, Churchill Downs
reflected in the wet paint. My mother's freedom

in short pockets of time. Our little room of song.
The radio hiccupping over potholes betrayed
our harmonies. If I pulled the metal latch
& the door swung open, I snuck behind the wheel.



On the citation there was a box labeled Black & it was checked.
Then, there was my mother's question—*what did you do*
to make him think you were? The fact was that I was. I am.
But for her, I blamed it on the Webbie, the power under

the hood, the silhouette of my black boy cousins'
heads bobbing with laughter in the headlights.
The fact of our free movement
was a threat to the cop. Now I know

it wasn't what we were that was wrong—Black
blood tunneling. It was her refusal to see me
apart from her. It was her question cracking
at my back from across that historical chasm.



The scorched pistons clanking my favorite machine
to a stall on the dark parkway
named for a Nation corralled far from here.
The oil pan run dry. 307 horses giving out,

their knees dropping to winter
asphalt—I'd been trying to escape
my stall. But it was over.
550 feet from Dixie, the red light

falling into green, someone's horn cursing
like a starter pistol. Since the gun went off
I'd been running. When they lifted the gate
and brought me out into the light, I knew to run.

PEGASUS

Before I leave for good,
I lift the pie server a final time,

drop the receipt facedown
next to the lemon blueberry slice, then my apron
in the parking lot. I can't go home,

so, I disrobe in a strange yard,
wash the batter away

with a garden hose, then I ride
the night buses like a carousel. Static girl. Moving room
with mirrors. Stilled blue

bolts streaking the dark, there
and then not. I go looking

for you in all your haunts,
until I realize I will find you at one of my own:
in the long field, the synced

lightning bugs nearing their show's
climax, in the brief flashes of cold light,

a glimpse of your coat,
black as flight. When they move on, it's just us,
six legs to the ground,

still as statues, touching flat
the bridge of our noses.

When you release your wings
they swing open like a door & the air lifts the snakes
from my shoulders.

NOTES

The twin steeples in “Horsepower” are used as a symbol for Churchill Downs, where the Kentucky Derby is run, and are the most recognizable architectural feature of the racetrack.

American Honey is a 2016 road film starring Sasha Lane and written and directed by Andrea Arnold.

“All the Men that Summer Who Said *I Love You*” is after the poem “The One Person That Winter Who Said I Love You,” by Samuel Amadon, which appears in his 2012 collection, *The Hartford Book*.

“Winning Colors” was the filly that won the 1988 Kentucky Derby, and was only the third filly in history to do so.

It is my understanding that the wheat pennies referred to in “Sorting Wheat” are worth variably more than the standard Lincoln cent, and that collecting them is a decidedly working-class thing.

“Ode to Hushpuppy” refers to the protagonist of the 2012 film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

“Ghost Ride” refers to a Bay Area phenomenon that involves exiting one’s vehicle while it is still moving and dancing around it, as popularized in the 2008 documentary *Ghostride the Whip* and the bay area rapper E-40.

Girl 6 is a 1996 Spike Lee film about a young woman who works as a phone sex operator.

“Menace” refers to the 2014 Isla Vista shooter Elliot Rodger.

“No Country for Black Boys” was written upon the acquittal of George Zimmerman.