

## LIBATION CEREMONY AT STANDPIPE HILL

The ancestors I call here will not find this space familiar. Here, the wealthy of us lived, trees outlining the square homes they erected like monuments. My folks don't come from that type of bricklaying; my great grandfathers were truck drivers & construction workers; my grandmothers, hairdressers & hotel maids.

Here, they stand awkwardly in the margins of my vision, not sure where they fit in amongst men in army uniforms & women donning pearls. The grandmothers keep their stiff upper lips, the grandfathers their brown liquor bottles. Everybody's husband was an alcoholic back then, Momma says, they were rationed sugar folks.

Only Grandma Ellis is dressed for the occasion, thin feet slipped into pointed designer shoes, a fox pelt stretched thin over her shoulders, eyes black & glossy as it stares back at me. Her husband sways, whiskey-eyed & singing. This is the man who passed out on my grandma's driveway, toes up & peeking from underneath her car.

We are not the picture of Black Excellence, I think as a beetle scuttles across the back of my knuckle. Behind me Grandpa Clemons pulls his pocket knife & twirls it a baton.

I am careful in my reconstruction, melding withered bone with dust-kept photographs, kissing the lesions and drawn out joints brought up from beneath my feet. Aunt Pigeon, Pearly Mae; I dream her nickname came from how she moved, hollow bones angled towards the sky, elbows & wrists twisting into feathers as she leaps.

Uncle Duck; gap toothed & round bellied, knees  
creaking a rocking chair's chorus. He has grandpa's wrinkled  
forehead, dark skin undulating into hillsides.

And Elmo; he is our first known ancestor, married  
into our blood. He is most at home here,  
Black Folks Are Black Folks Everywhere,  
I imagine him saying, teeth crooked & spitting  
tobacco into the earth. I cannot imagine him  
beyond his hands, calloused wounds  
from the labor decreed to have made him.

This ground holds memory, Miss Christine  
vows, there is life under your feet. That is  
what I am afraid of: this place will eat up  
the pain & the grief to go with it. *Ashae*,  
I whisper, & she is beckoned forth

Blue; Shaylene Antoinette. Hair cut close  
to her head, bug eyes wide as she watches  
my sister & I play *Uno* on a prison's cement  
floor. This will be my last memory of her,  
leant forward, elbows on her knees as she asks  
my sister & I how we're doing in school,  
holding her three year old to her chest.

I want to hide her away, wash my hands of the dirt  
that threatens to soak her shadow up. *Ashae*,  
Miss Christine says, a prayer I have slicked  
into my scalp every morning, pouring  
water from plastic bottles into buckets  
on gymnasium floors. *Ashae*, it is a release,  
& I am afraid to watch her go. Walk upon  
this hilltop & whistle at the view - Damn,  
They Really Do Got Y'all Out Here.

## CERAMIC HEXAGON TILE

What mornings have you seen? ; hurried shaves in a tiled bathroom ; socked footed children sliding on the floor ; rowdy and giggling ; imagining themselves as flying over frozen lakes ; mother's stern hand, threatening them into Sunday's Best ; white tights ; pinched shoes ;

Freshly washed  
of the soil that kept you silent ; gleaming ; I wonder if you are lonely ; organized into rows along the other ceramics ; salt tempered ; red brick ; do you miss your brothers and sisters? ; laying skin to skin with them ; a quilt of clay pressed into the wall ; I keep scrubbing ; white and meticulous ; like the bathroom

I am currently occupying ; it is free of the grape fruit  
scented candle I habitually light ; the flickering of my shadow ; the heated breath of the shower head ; these subway tiles smell of bleach and Oxyclean ;

Sometimes,  
cleaning feels less like rescuing and more like erasure ; what new meaning can be dreamt up when you drown the context ; black out ; all that made it personable

Are we erasing lives here?

I peel away my right glove ; grip the tooth brush tighter ; the waterlogged bristles chew away at the last clump of dirt ; a pale face peers up at me ; do you see clearly ; now that I have shed your tarnish ; thumbprints ; lay you flat on brown craft paper ; and been photographed ; sometimes, we speak of poetry ; as extraction, photography as a flattening ; I find these metaphors as you drip  
static

soaking through  
the dimpled paper until a hole  
is torn and  
opened.

## THE STRATIGRAPHY OF A “RIOT”

they will call this a riot - there will always be a white man  
with a pen and a camera - naming the topsoil - smoke  
coloring us ash - marking - violence as inheritable - grief as  
mandatory - reducing us to nervous hands - war worn  
foundations - the scarring of this land - bullet holes -  
freeways slicing through hills - a rupture of our bodies

life goes on after the cameras stop rolling - babies cry and  
are lullabied to sleep - new things are born - music is made  
- the drum of banned bricks laid - churches are erected and  
pews filled - the rising of a celestial chorus - the sky is no  
longer empty

the whistle sounds - streets awash with stained glass - stars  
shattered under combat boots - fire - so much of it that for a  
moment the world expands - whitened and igniting - then,  
implosion - the darkness left behind opaque - they leave us  
nothing

I want you to remember that we had lived - graciously -  
defiantly - that the coins found here were ours - alone - we  
thrived - adorned with self-made medals - dripping in the  
silver once chained to us - we had lived - rambunctiously -  
eagerly - soaking the Tulsa sun into our skin - breathing in  
jazz and moonlight blues - our Sunday Best a uniform -  
wearing our dreams on our sleeve - cufflinks and charmed  
bracelets - say, *you will see we matter* - we had been  
mothers and fathers - painters - architects - chefs -  
entrepreneurs - school teachers - hairdressers and barbers -  
pastors - church ladies - children, learning this world was  
theirs for the making - do not forget - we had lived - we had  
lived - we had lived

they say the white man saved us - his crucifix the bullet of  
his own people's gun - *you should be thankful*, they say -  
*do not ask for more* - they freed our hands - put guns in  
them and said, *die for us* - survive the front only to be  
lynched at home - but what to do with newly liberated  
hands? - build towers - staircases to heaven - constructed  
by Tuskegee graduates - our minds long been free

if I am to die before you read this know that the trees will  
bring me back - pull me up through the strata - lay my  
fractured assemblage at your feet - and you will remember

WE FIND A BULLET IN STP-0038

hot in my hand / it bites / the roughened wrinkles of my palm / it wants to get out from the hole  
we dug it from / launch itself across the park / through stained glass / windows lodge itself into  
my rib / this is not a new feeling / when you have been a Black child once / you are forever

white street lights at our backs / teeth red  
stained / a 7-11 ICEE on prom night, rattling /  
eyes trained / in the rearview mirror a cop  
trails us / searching / are our seatbelts on?  
tail-lights busted? / how many mistakes  
does it take until our stomachs open / a home  
for an officer's heavy silver

*heavy*, / my professors calls it / and in the silence we know there is a story / here, in the earth we  
have moved / reached inside / begged with sharp-edged trowels / how many tree roots have we  
cut away / just to find this little thing, burning / shell intact and at once / I am again a child,

the girl frozen in fear / on my sister's prom  
night / when a white freckled boy pulls  
on my braids / as a man spits on my shoes in college /  
learning that I am synonymous / with  
*Nigger Bitch* / *criminal* / dead  
in the water I have been baptized in / trying

my best to convince whatever white god / that this  
death is regrettable / indeed / we are Black children,  
radio funerals / stolen / kisses in the tall grass  
and hollow / giggles in church pews / so loud  
they echo, fall / into the rhythm of feet upon  
a wooden floor /

*I am terrified of the police* / my new friend says and we stand / a cement wall at our backs / eyes  
trained / on the .45 hanging at the campus police's hip as he unlocks / a Black woman's door /  
look to each other and know: we are at once Black / children still afraid of monsters hiding in the  
dark / learning that this world is just heavy

and still we hold it /  
grant it a mercy I do not know for myself / I say / *I will keep you*, even if  
you do not deserve it / that gentle kindness / as I lower it into a clear

ziplock bag and watch it clatter / against the shattered glass it had already  
long known / smile as it leaves my palm and the  
warmth goes with it.

## BELATED VIGNETTES OF TULSA IN JUNE

### I.

Jean knows weather,  
grandpa says, cell phone in hand as he watches  
red polygons appear on the map I am just getting  
to know, names heavy on my tongue:  
Broken Arrow, Catoosa, Owasso, as unfamiliar  
as the shadow of lightning licking the cracks  
of the doorframe. It scares me, how the sky turns  
out here; I am used to vengeance in the form of  
brush fires and orange smoke, a spite reserved  
for the Earth, her tectonic teeth sucked and  
annoyed like a mother

My grandma is not scared. She knows weather.  
Evidence of this lays in the blue shoe box of  
family photos that sits across framed pictures  
of Navy men in monochrome. She is a sunspot,  
flared and singing the half-forms of her brothers,  
chunks of ice the size of bricks in their wool-gloved  
hands. Their smiles are brighter than the white  
swallowing their feet.

Now, Lois sticks her head out of the window to catch  
fallen power lines, white hair pinned in place  
by plastic curlers she's had since 1995. I try  
to pull her back inside, afraid of the magnolia's  
full arms hanging above us. This is just like Christmas  
Eve, I think, when she stuck her head into  
the lit fireplace. Our women don't have bad luck,  
just too much faith in their own bodies.

### II.

I am the only Jew on the dig, and the folks  
there get excited when they find out - there's  
not a lot of y'all out here, someone says,  
and I nod, thinking of the lone synagogue

on the outskirts of Utica Square, quiet  
in the company of a church bell tolling every  
quarter hour. I am a very bad example of a Jew,  
I say, I don't ever keep kosher

My father's folks don't talk - they are used to it,  
the cold, ushering snow and dead leaves out  
from the roof gutters, noiseless Thanksgivings  
and leftovers. People love to tell me I got my dad's  
father's brain, tumor riddled and focused.

I only see my grandfather cry once,  
as I sort through his mother's jewelry box  
on the living room floor, cataloging  
each rusted ring with the precision I would  
in a lab. I wipe my thumb across a mezuzah  
looped on a silver chain, laying it to bed  
in a shoebox for the three hour ride back to  
Providence.

The next month a cold snap hits; my roommate  
and I play hooky from work and throw water  
into the air to see if it will crystalize  
before it hits the ground. My grandfather  
sends me an email a day later, asking after my  
grades and the student paper. He signs off:

Love and be warm to you,  
Grandpa

### III.

The woman in my family know weather:  
Auntie lived in Baton Rouge until the wind  
turned sour, my momma stealing her away  
in the middle of the night, killing her engine  
and rolling out the driveway. A lesson learned  
from clay colored women I only know through  
the albums tucked in my Grandma's attic, whispering  
the easiest way to escape a man over kitchen



fires. I memorize the faces of the boyfriends  
my sister brings by her door, and in turn  
she teaches me to hold my keys between  
my fingers.

Somewhere, the line between Ellis Women  
And Clemons Women get blurred, names  
erased off the back of polaroids - at the end  
we are all just Weathered Women.

#### IV.

In the lab I find myself pounding prayers  
into my chest even when the words don't  
come. Hava Nagila is not far from my lips,  
elbow deep in water slick with ancient  
pesticides. Upon my tray lays geography's  
fractured mosaic, shards piece together  
landscapes with each maker's mark.  
I am merciless - latex on my skin ripping  
and mud on my nose. Shattered glass  
has many meanings, my fist hums  
on my sternum, bottle glass or window pane

#### V.

My momma says places like Tulsa wear you down,  
make you hard; she knows, her family's got that  
Tired Blood only two generations removed from  
Texas. She says I got it too. I'm not sure; I got  
soft hands, skin pale from weekends tucked into  
the library basement hiding from ankle-biters

She's got it in her head that I know weather now too,  
having ushered my grandparents into a hallway  
at the first sight of lightning and settled them  
into wooden chairs, shutting doors behind me  
and thinking, God, this rain. The women  
in my family know weather, I remind myself  
on nights my dorm room gets too cold, waking

to find frost dripping onto my pillow

## I KEEP SPACE FOR WHAT YOU HAVE LOST

push through the trampled earth & let my stubborn roots do the talking - become the fortress around your rectangle skeletons, indents in the blades of grass. I am not without my own losses, the skin fire has shed from me & the darkened roughness that grows back over. this massacre once tried to unmake us, turn out the earth until I have shuddered into pieces, the green of me falling away & curling into dust.

Do they not know our bodies remember even after the scars are paved over? the collagen of a human bone winds itself around blood vessels like rings, a constant cycle of building & tearing down a never ending structure. I carry these wounds with me just as I carried yours. the sparrows nip at my fingers & spread the dripping sap of my blood, scatter my body until a new one rises from the displaced flesh. embed our history upon this hill, stretching our arms to filter the sunlight through our palms

& so you too will find yourself - in every sapling, young hands cupping colored glass & trying to catch the light.