

# **EVERYDAY ZULU**

**POEMS BY LILLIAN BERTRAM**

## **Everyday Zulu**

Thickit

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**Sing to Me**

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**VII.**

**VIII.**

**IV.**

## **Acknowledgements**

“Thickit”      *Oakland Review (2006)*

“Chiropractical”      *Georgetown Review (2007)*

## Thickit

*-after Cornelius Eady*

This is how it really feels  
inside the heart's black egg:  
a bed dampened with spirits  
& the cat clawing the bedpost by default.  
Outside a car idles into curved emptiness,  
I time wet footsteps returning  
to someone else's locked door.

It was you I didn't halfly hear  
through the window to the porch,  
siphoning a cigarette of streetlight.

I know a slick trick to make a home  
an open house.

What would you say if I knew you  
were at the bar till the moon fell,  
lost in deep crates & salted booths?

What if inside these walls  
were lovers masking up for a robbery,  
if inside or out,  
you knew what I was mixed up in?



## **In the Flooded Garden**

### *I. Untitled Communiqué*

We bite our lips  
into a mustard,

stretch skin into a projection,  
a projectile, declare public art,

we paint over our exported jazz,  
dump tar into the rented marina.

Our eyes howl in search  
of other eyes, thirsty for skylight

& in our chairs we rock,  
so presidential.

We've let our mothers be murdered  
then pocketed their bloodwarmed pearls.

Now, we are in so much danger.

We fold our notes to the size  
of postage stamps. Swallow hard.

## II. *At the Dinner Table*

Like dying presidents we scowl.

We enter one another  
like a priest to his cassock;

like fingers on a mission  
for the right exposure.

A wild rove slides into  
the bed between our legs,

at its touch we throw down  
the gauntlets of China's,  
of Russia's, of Spain's red side.

The Bonnot's and Bookchin's  
pile at our feet, the tomes we choose

to stand on, the runes we count  
& name our constellations by.

There are more in his sky  
than in mine,

& in the kiln of our minds  
our two black faces do not sew

a black flag, nor a country worth  
the song that catches our scream.



### III. *Untitled Communiqué*

In this world, when a woman breaks  
with the code of a woman

by sending weevils to work  
within the womb,

she places beside her on a cracked saucer  
a small empty teacup smudged by lips,

thin rim threaded with gold.  
The space inside the cup

becomes a crooked bird,  
a crow with wings of a chickadee.

*her mind is a pink meshbag  
filled with baby toes.*

Pink meshbag of god flunky  
is a woman's parish of fire on fire.

\*

In this world, that is to say,  
in the world of un-oaths

& re-seeing, the un-woman  
can re-woman

as a matter of facts,  
of putting a bone to boil.

To call on a new moon  
means casting out the rot.

#### IV. *Make*

She is undressing like a shadow  
in the front bay window.

First, a thunderous trombone  
undoes the skin

into a jacob's ladder  
aglow with sweat.

She strips off the muscle sinew  
stringing it through her teeth;

dangling staccato drip  
& pluck of harp juice.

Bone by bone she stacks  
up a little house,

a tiny cabin for the cold,  
scoops up one, then another

thick purple lip, a pair that mouth  
*here, this is the living room.*

*V. Retreat*

Winchester chested, taken  
from above the cabin fireplace,

we shoot into the floating  
leaves on the pond,

then dirt dances beneath  
the flourishing ferns.

We don't mess with the wasps  
or deer, just practice opening

our ears to the boom.

\*

On the block, a cigarette  
dangles from a lip for effect,

Timberland stomps by,  
blooms between city firefights.

The lovers recoil  
at the battery of this touch,

become dark oils in the windows  
& beneath tire-crushed leaves,

become bodies smoked  
in & out of hiding.

Loads of perennials  
from the hillside swirl

down the storm drains.

## VI. *Reconstruction*

Windows slightly cranked  
let in the tar & blunt scented

breeze of the beltway. I make  
the bed the way he likes

to have it waiting:  
sheet rumped and out of breath.

With pillows surrendering  
beneath sheet, it can look

too much like a dead body.

Facing cinched Venetians  
I perfume my private parts,

see through the slats  
the tip of the top of Congress.

The newly enacted laws  
are the same as all the old ones,

the one who waits is the first to go,

& my unspeakable somethings  
wait in shift beneath the dome.

\*

Cooling unit coolant smudging  
against legs, post-midnight,

post-tapas bar, blinds opened on us,  
in full view of homebums,

of whirling rooftop ventilators.

One gray sheet, jersey soft,  
rolls around us, we roll

the bed around the one room,

one room filled with Capitol halo,  
refracting, vanishing as the bed pirouettes

away from E street and towards F.

\*

Beside steady breath I lie awake  
in queen sized makeshift darkness.

Congress too, is lying awake, legislating  
knees together, breaking a sweat

over our breakfast of waffles with wine.



## Miles and I

The I in This does not know  
what Nina Simone looked like, never seen a picture  
but thinks she sounds not Blue, but pretty sad.

The I in This only knows of Baraka's tongued-up  
impression of Miles's *papastoppa voice*  
so The I thinks *he must have made for an awful singer.*

When I was twelve Ma took me&bro to Shirley Chisolm's house  
during her spring closet cleaning and I didn't give a shit about how kept up  
the garden was, but was pissed off that she gave the stereo  
with all the light up buttons  
to my brother

& I think all I got was a tackyass wooden wall clock.

Then again, that clock was likely my own impulsive  
flea market purchase from the year I did vintage,  
remembering it this way is from a need to unmake my fault in that décor,  
as The I didn't really get anything from Shirley's house, just complained  
about being up so early on a Saturday until Ma took us back home.

I do remember she had a whole lot of records in there,  
probably Miles too, but what's a record to a twelve-year old  
if not another *don't touch* album sleeve where black men  
all look alike especially, with a trumpet in their hands.

(did Miles play a trumpet?)

—and what's a Chisolm '72 button

if not to be pinned on for *Flashback Day* at the high-school  
where someone came dressed as Miles and This I didn't  
recognize him even though they say  
he stood next to me in the line for cheeseburgers.

## Africa needs us

*Africa needs us.* Muhammed saying this,  
beads of other worldly abacus  
singing through his fingers.  
I steal looks: he's cross legged,  
spirits beckoning.

He says it again: *Africa needs us.*  
This time it is walking on an ice-pick;  
like flipping through a *Women of Soweto* picture-book  
while slinking out of my mother's eyeshot.

Back to empty blue enchanted land,  
great Nile-side real estate;  
dollar cabs and jitneys between shanties  
& for the choir's lost child  
repertoire: courtesy citizenship.

*You can get there, and they'll take anything* he says.  
*Even send our retired textbooks*  
*with Africa written out out-right*  
*and they'll give you a ticket to fly along.*

My lips clamshell my mother's Africa trip,  
a truth & beauty fact finding tour some ten years ago,  
bus trips through Egypt & east Africa, though all of this  
does not compare to being scared shitless about her  
going so far on an airplane.

The singular vision left in my mind is of the sun hat  
she bought especially for this journey: wide brimmed  
flopping straw still-life masterpiece  
billowing like a lift off

& the cool of her bedspread on the back of my legs,  
purple flowers winking up at me as I pulled at the tips  
of my braids, braids that would have to be  
left to my father's hands.

Upon return, of course there were papyrus samples,  
kente cloth, cartouches; pictures of camels,  
sand, & scarabs. All these, I must have flipped through.



Most in focus is the photograph of her stabbed by the sun,  
wearing her souvenir of sad looks, cradling fistfuls  
of leaky facts, her head wrapped in shrouds of shadows,  
of antishadows, the hat having been lost on a tour  
through a tomb, having been misplaced in some pyramid.

## Chiropractical

It was the month of July and I couldn't be  
Japanese enough: lifting weights only made  
me thicker. I was seen hijacking a bus, but the  
office ladies vouched for my alibi: on the phone  
with Tech Support. Faux: I was at the bookstore  
giving a radio interview about gentrification,  
fielding questions like Kournikova  
until they asked me where I was born and raised,  
the question to which I have never concocted the  
suitable enough answer and blurt out *Parkside*.  
One lone goldfish shimmers by and swaps  
my khoofi for a surfer hat. Truthfully: it's a  
reasonable guess that this poem ends with me  
on a concrete bench outside the admin. building  
at the Big U, watching pre-college ponies in ruffled  
skirts prancing by with gumball tears in their eyes.  
I might even have a Dean Young book in my lap,  
and be wearing Terminator sunglasses or  
Michael Jackson's one glove.

## Study in D.C. Stoop Sitting

all men look at least once, black men two  
or three times.

(thirty-five-and-up with orbital afros usually  
double back,)

only the khaki'd blond who knows he is  
second fiddle

to the third string in some low rent capitol  
orchestra says *hello*.

## Assed Out

I know you know how to play dress up.  
You wear the pink feathered Mardi Gras mask,  
and I'll wear the long nails. I choke on noodle soup  
while sitting down by the river & you get sun spots from  
the ballpark lights. When you ask me to imagine  
what it was like before there were buildings, I tell you  
I see the beginnings of buildings. I am accused  
of being too imaginative and a little bit colonial.  
When making love to one another, you think  
of your beneficiary & I think of mine.  
I am jealous because yours is wealthier.  
You are jealous because mine is black. When you  
make love to your beneficiary, you think only of her.  
I make love to mine & think only of the cat hair  
on my futon slipcover. Every time you make a decision,  
someone somewhere drops a pocket. Every time  
you try to make me decide, dents appear in all  
the cans in the grocery store. Every time I write,  
I write a voice about a voice. When you run  
down the sidewalk chasing your dogs chasing  
someone else's dogs and your pants fall down  
this voice yells: *ass all out! ass all out!*



## #191

the last bloodless coup might have been when the cat came  
to live at my house, and gift giving gained a new impossibility.

crouched in this toyota staring up at the unattended light  
of a television in a window that sleuthing says must be yours —disgust  
is in the air—and between the two of us—the time it takes to walk  
back from having a corona with another woman. building letterhead  
reads: *Casa de los Santos*. your new house houses the saintly.

few beings dissipate like this: into longing, hatred, a foreign word  
for irreparable loss. the open veins of tattered countries and smoldering  
truce dinners are being welcomed in to storage.

one loss deserves another: we are done vying for supremacy.  
no scouring the parking lot in search of small stones. saints  
need no polishing nor reasons to revel in the cold face that sits  
bumper to bumper with vacancy.

## #190

the rolling wheel of madness only gave us heaviness  
on the mind like an old poet or a garlic spill. all praises of oaths  
and words in confidence aside,  
here is a rude domino player: this is your driveway, your table,  
and the chips dance to your fist like a crew of cats in a bathtub.

these run-in's at the grocery store (for even those forced underground  
still need to eat) are begging for new character assassinations  
and angry trips to the nearby bar. this kind of warfare, trench digging  
on a balance beam, is in the market for a printable name.

doves quit transporting messages across these lines  
and the bottles pile up in a cool heap next to spent branches  
of cure-all and foolish reconnaissance missions. still, we  
go on for longer feasting on vacancy at overturned tables,  
mismatching dotted pairs with our battered and blinking eyes.

**#192**

calling at the place where you were has been made ridiculous  
by poets with third wives and forever beautiful children. by the end  
of this story, hanging on has become terrible.

at the place where voices were left hanging in the air no one  
was watching when we became plain-clothed, no more lovers  
or thinkers swapping eyes and ears in the face of disaster.

to let us leave mountains alone, and turn aside are breaths pending  
in birth, waiting to be fed, take their place among so many leaky doubts.

everything here has died and someone has come kicking up the dust, looking  
for treasures, for foreign histories. story writer – in this world drunkenness  
and beauty increase in tandem and now there might be wolves in this territory.  
peddle your jars and stone polish at some other port.



### #193

suckling for air, a plant is our love affair in permanent ill health—struggling to be kept alive in the eyes of a cat that nibbles away at it each day.

such an uneasy sensation to wind together all this common history, bathe it in the same water, and shoot it full of holes. bones rolling around in this bag we take out back to bury, murmur over, mark the spot with stones just in case—yet—the idea of return is a little too provincial, the way it always tends to be when confronting the startled heavens, sternums lurching forward through the skin.

here is our unfinished trestle that genealogy never grew or climbed around, an imminence never inspired. in the simplest of terms we have been killed—slaughtered in the slaughter.

we put it in the wash and out came a song, a fear of death, gaps in the skin. if all things succumb—then a creaky dock will always attract vultures to what ever we have left and are so unable to protect: these fallen apples in the hands of castaways.

## #194

books are done abusing their dust. the space between them is sifting  
somewhere slightly beneath paradise—and in the window box—  
the fragrance is startling.

something inexplicable has been left to the birds: an armistice in the space  
where names used to be. we are dismantling the podiums. crystal balls  
return to their cabinets, and knives from under the pillows to under the beds  
or to places where they cannot be nearly as important as what they remind.

tucking away the gunpowder on our lips to disarm the revolver of our  
words, we sow our chests with seeds of departure as the marathon poet  
arrives—twenty six miles late to die with the news of love in his hands  
that some kinds of knowing are exercises in cleaning up.

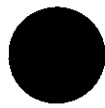
**#195**

so we are flying (yes, always flying) towards a motherhood that is  
no longer such a perfect idea.

oblivion is nesting on our skins today, the same place where african violets  
and rock gardens on your birthday are forgetting how to speak to us.

the one thing that was wanted cannot be trained for: a flag  
waving frantically—the full length of our tongues stretched  
across years, the space in the very back that has learned to stab.

so who was it then, if we are among the lost—found retracing the stitches—  
if not some secret part that hates to inhabit this space between skin and here?  
did we know it was already there when we arrived: a new speak  
that has words we cannot wrap our words around.



## EVERYDAY ZULU PHRASEBOOK

*-found text from "Everyday Zulu, a vocabulary and reference book"*

### I.

Hello, Miss.  
What is your name?  
I am John.  
I live in Natal.  
Where do you come from?  
I must go now.  
Wait a minute.  
I must go now.  
What is your name?

Sawubona, Nkosazane.  
Ubani igama lakho?  
NginguJohn.  
Ngihlala eNatali.  
Uvela kaphi?  
Sekofanele ngihambe manje.  
Yima kancane.  
Sekofanele ngihambe manje.  
Ubani igama lakho?

### II.

a storm  
clouds  
drizzle  
it is thundering  
heavy rain  
windy  
there is lightning  
the sun has set

isiphepho  
amafu  
khiza  
izulu liyadoma  
ozamcolo  
nomoya  
izulu liyabanika  
ilanga selishanile

### III.

Hello, Miss.  
How are you?  
Are you very busy?  
I shall not keep you long.  
I enjoy music.  
National anthem  
Love songs  
Folksong  
Gospel music  
Hymn  
Wedding march  
Jazz  
Latest hits  
What do you say?  
Yes.

Sawubona, Nkosazane.  
Unjani?  
Uxakeke kakhulu?  
Angizukukubambezela.  
Ngiyawuthokozela umculo.  
iculo lesizwe  
iculo lothando  
umculo wendabuko  
umculo wokholo  
iculo  
imashi yomshado  
ijezi  
izingoma ezintsha  
Utheni?  
Yebo.

Truly!  
Wait for me.  
Let's go.

Ngempela!  
Ngilinde.  
Masihambe.

IV.

a lion roars  
feed the fowls  
fierce bull  
flock of sheep  
hens lay eggs  
herd of cattle  
kill the snake  
make biltong  
shear the sheep  
slaughter the ox  
spray the flies

ibhubesi liyabhodla  
yipha izinkukhu  
inkunzi enolaka  
umhlambi wezimvu  
izikhukhukazi zibekela amaqanda  
umhlambi wezinkomo  
bulala inyoka  
enza umqwayiba  
gunda izimvu  
hlaba inkabi  
futha izimpukane

V.

helmet  
blue eyes  
cheek  
mustache  
beard  
white face  
mask  
ten fingers  
fist  
cloudburst  
trapped  
flying squad  
take cover  
scream  
explode  
dagga  
I wish...  
dizzy

ihelmethi  
ikhala elikhulu  
isihlathi  
udevu  
intshebe  
ubuso obumhlaphe  
imaski  
iminwe elishumi  
isibhakela  
isihlambi  
bhajwa  
iflayingi-skwadi  
casha  
klabalasa  
qhuma  
insango  
Ngifisa  
nenzululwane

VI.

Excuse me.  
He isn't here.  
I don't know.  
I will tell him.  
I don't know.

Uxulo.  
Akekho lapha.  
Angazi.  
Ngizomtshela.  
Angazi.

It's not my fault.  
No.  
Please.  
Please.  
You must.

Akusilo iphuthalami.  
Qha.  
Ake.  
Ake.  
Kufanele.

VII.

black tea  
blonde hair  
brown bread  
green uniform  
grey sky  
red bus  
white face  
white shirt  
white bread  
Roses are red.  
The sky is blue.

itiye elimnyama  
izinwele ezimhloshana  
isinkwa esinsundu  
iyunifomo eluhlaza  
isibhakabhaka esinsundu  
ibhesi elimbumvu  
ubuso obumhlophe  
iyembe elimhlophe  
isinkwa esimhlophe  
Amarozisi abomvu.  
Isibhakabhaka sisumi.

### **Paging Dr. Zeus**

There are no men in here today,  
save the one who saves,

who is manning the machine,  
the *crank-crank-suck-suck*.

After cleaning house this unwondrous magus  
plunges his speckled gauzes into

the dirty water buckets,  
flings them out the door

on the stroke of midnight, making a new  
new years day.

All the mops in this mans hands  
can dance without a spell,

in each cheek he can fit  
a bakers dozen of cherries.

Less than five minutes for each  
go-round, *crank-crank-suck-suck*,

in a days work, the work of  
a moment, of a million moments, is undone.

There are no men in here because there can be  
no man in here, save the one who saves

all other men, his turpentine tools  
can scrape a canvas cleaner

than white. So white it's crimson.



## **Knock Knock**

My sternum is made of knock knock your tapping index finger  
makes me sound made of wood, made of Hobbitowne, USA.  
You came knocking at the holy land and were left in the fisheye air.  
Don't knock knock my wishbone, or survey these surroundings.  
I do disco, but not after discourse. If there is no town, there can be no  
town bank robbery. I put my cellarbone to the tracks. Knock Knock.  
High Noon. Nothing's been delivered yet.

## **Bohr takes the El**

liquid, solid, then back to a liquid,  
the oscillating fluid jet injected in direct symmetry  
to the pumping organ equals the intensity of the nod, entropy  
of the face facedown in the cheeseburger in proportion  
to the quality of the Stuff, the liquid theory of junk droplets  
in blood gas, mixing a nucleus pupiled with (    ),  
planetary model of heaven, radii continuum of gram joy clouds,  
orbiting a heart of all gears but no longer an agent of purpose.

## 8 things to see in Dee Cee

- 1) *that shiny dome  
before it gets blown*
- 2) weight limit  
on Q street
- 3) whirlygigged  
firetrucks
- 4) a man dressed  
as a woman  
playing  
the recorder
- 5) BlackHappyAfros
- 6) Adam's  
Morgan's  
Parkingscapades
- 7) melting  
sno-cone  
on capitol  
sidewalk
- 8) National  
Association  
Of  
Counties

## Apropos, Queens

Slugging across the rivers elevated trestles,  
    steely boxes of steel cars leave  
Manhattan fifty minutes behind us now,  
the city's barreled heat watering our eyes  
as we knock the bottles  
on the corner bar's corner,  
    fuming on fumes, torn on drunk need,  
I said *I'll cut you*,  
no one believed I would do it, so I didn't.

Against one another we push, shout, then kiss—  
pass the bottle back & forth until  
we are shoved on our way again,  
gnawing P.M. grit  
from beneath our fingernails,  
as we stand under a tenement moon,  
    on the other side of breath fogged glass  
over a pizza spread before us,  
crated by falling rain unraveling the rows—

We hold our hands knowing they are the only  
hands we have to hold, so we pick something  
out together in the neon counters  
of mafia parlors,  
where one of us is chickenshit  
    & it's not me;  
a hoop here, hoop there—  
emerging swollen  
in Times Square as the light  
of day swims through the haze, a granite kiss  
beneath the infinitesimal ticker,  
*lets pick a winner this time*,

while we squat & squabble, waiting on the next A,  
the 6:42 A.M. through to Jamaica, Far Rockaway  
Rockaway Beach—

dreaming up a cup of coffee through shoulders  
pressed to our faces, to the last stop  
where the pickers & brick layers are gulled  
on the corner,  
as our unlovely shoes collect shards on the overgrown  
concourse, a sun could rise between our clasped hands,

quarterless & bottomed out, but with two  
& a half inches of hawk ready to fly from our back pockets,  
ready to curse at the last gaunt mile.

## Apropos, LeRoi Jones

This is how we know each other.  
You went to PS 54.  
Drank pints of soured milk at recess, it made you strong.  
We carpooled. You rode up front with my mother  
in the '78 luxu Olds, fingers drumming wood grain, thighs to cherry red  
leather, snapping chromed out radio buttons, ogling the flipping number  
clock. We sang along to WBLK, slapped hands to Ms. Mary Mack.

I heard you went on to work a desk where every time you answered  
the phone you couldn't help but laugh and yawn—  
where you said the word *information* so many times over  
it became *in for a nation*, then *affirmation*—

Then you juggled names, first The Noble Savage, Night & Death,  
*El Matador*, Blessed Prince—  
and my mother said she thought you were crazy, bug eyed & bugged out  
on your secret passport to the lyric stash-house,  
where you broke it, shaved it, thought it without thinking it,  
and passed along a song for the long nightmare's dashing flight,  
but the nightmare flight woke into another nightmare world singing  
a rhythmic something sick and sad.

\*\*\*

Because I want to tell to the truth I will say  
that I am inventing you, a truth I like, like  
a vapor between the leaves of a book seen in a storefront window  
in a neighborhood where there should be no bookstore.

But I never knew you, not unless you were like a brother  
who came sneaking back some bitter November night,  
back from another country and defying the dial,  
holding a new fashion for a foreigned family,  
not unless on air and on record you've come back to  
hold us, remember memory, to hold us through  
the broken wheel,  
its cooked up logic, the great empire and its great fall—

So hold us. Hold us through all the do-whop  
and all the diddy-bop,  
hold us until we meet again, a first time, for real this time,  
*all dressed in black/silver buttons all down your back*  
over your axe music, as you rematerialize, taking the triads three by three  
bringing down a canary in one fist and a boom in the other.



## What a strange spring

that began with a rainbow then rained out,  
and everything went badly from there.

A mother visits her son away at school and finds herself strangely relaxed when she is pinned under a car at an outdoor vegetable stall on a Saturday morning, and she is timeless with the question no one asks. Another woman successfully unbolts the mind of another writer who rents a room at the hospital on the hill, the pages lumped and stuck like a fist in his throat; and in the back of a girl's mouth her teeth of sage come punching through like arctic ice seals and she bleeds out of her lip corners all through chemistry class.

If the mother could look up through the new hole in her mind she might think *things look the way they should*, that she smells the sweet uneven bloom and quick death of flowers born too soon to last. *What a weird way to end things*, she ponders, her hand still clinging to the mashed guts of an artichoke as if she still intends to buy and then cook it, as if at the end of a children's primer on history she was a prince, or the czar, running for safety, now short of breath, until he reaches a strange door at the end of a palace hall he's never seen before, turns its brocaded handle and throws it open to find a blinding moon above a forest of coal black snow, gently falling, and no one around to know what it means.



## Four Letters

I.

*dear lakeside imagist,*

I eavesdropped on talk of your collection; so you have a Monet masquerading as a Basquiat? How nice that you are keeping current, though counterproductive. Being somewhat of a curator myself, I can understand the urgencies needs can bring, that the sympathy of the effort ought to be documented. Does this weather make your feet peel too? I can't help but notice that people are planning on living longer these days, so many children around. I left the cat in the car to run in and get a coffee: all the signs of a bad parent. Did you know television watching was once called fire gazing, that we used to circle up with inconvenient emotions? Send me your new address.

*very sincerely,*  
*unlikely candidate*

II.

*dear desperate luminary,*

I got your note. Tell me that your residency is not the land of broken men, that your clocks are not running rabid. I would second your proposal for the elimination of streetlights, if Copernicus hadn't already died trying. Did the two of you ever get to meet, share something of the solid earth? Word travels that you might be thinking of returning to the archives for inspiration; and I haven't forgotten your promise to do something with the letters of my name. If you need assistance, or a good recipe for working among small dark words —

I will remind you for the last time that it is May and you should have set the clock back by now.

And your offspring? The cello lessons?

*very sincerely,*  
*argument*

### III.

*dear whimsy,*

Neither of us would readily take  
to incorporated islands for a holiday, but for some  
these antiquated spots are a perfect fit, the charm of  
oxidation on it all.

Attending an under obligation cocktail  
party (carnival print coattails are the worst) your  
name came up. So you have decided to call it *Songs  
from my life as an accordion*. As there are other  
things that need tending to—the slipcovers have been  
far too patient with my distractions— but do send me  
a chapter, it sounds fascinating.

*very sincerely,*  
*practical training*

IV.

*dear hedonist,*

To follow the general rule: if it is  
detailed, hang it where it will capture the most light.

*very sincerely,*  
*temperance*



## Sing to Me

I.

*Let me give you a little advice about historical writing*  
my mother says. The panelist's opinions were sweet, but curt.  
Was she a historian? Perhaps, but without portfolio,  
without the button of closure. She could have told them  
that a woman of her kind didn't live but once, and most,

not even that. She came to her marriage with a history  
of two dollar skates, basic math, a love for theater,  
and a knack for recipes of make-do & move-on.

Her kind had been sculpted by others, eased into *art*,  
museums of owl eyes & nappy hair peaking from behind  
laundered skirts were immortalized, given *legacy*.  
Others took their place in undocumented collections,

to be dismissed and mismanaged. A little advice?  
For gravy, brown the butter with cornstarch, add the neck bone  
and its broth. Don't even bother with the panel  
of paperclip counters. *Let them roost in their own shit.*

## **Sing to Me**

### **II.**

Niggerish.  
Watermelon sellin'. Tar babies.  
They were the undeserving poor,  
no alms came around there.  
For nickels and dimes my mother  
was nickled & dimed  
to look after *Little Bilsey*,  
when pissy pink babies  
meant a new yard of linen,  
a new dress for the Memorial Hall Cabaret Hop  
where she could dance  
close like a forbidden nighttime swimmer.  
They say that on the hill  
John's Hopkins loomed  
like a lantern in Hawthorne's woods,  
sending down bewitching ambulances,  
wide open mouths to snatch up  
the shiftless children.  
Their tiny brains, cradles  
of false starts, were swapped  
into the bombed out skulls of Vets, then,  
let loose, noses running green  
and eyes crying about everything.

*Sing to Me*

III.

To get to the bottom of the barrel,  
so says my mother,  
one must climb inside of it.

Now, all children know that a barrel  
has no corners, but only poor children  
know that it hides things anyway.

Not that any place was a good place to be it,  
but she was black & poor,  
poor & black, on the east side of Baltimore  
before there was blacktop.  
Everyone rode roughshod  
& got roughed up.  
It was a sad way to be in those times.

She was the runt, the pigmy,  
the baby toe of the family,  
but with nimble fingers  
good for scraping clumps  
of flour from the barrel corners,

from the same spots where the bugs  
fed & laid their eggs.  
They ate those too, for better or for worse,

them and everything else  
not-so-good-looking  
on the butcher's counter.

In the dusted wooden frame on the living room  
picture table she is dressed  
like a baby doll, a frilly white smock,

nothing too fancy with her hands  
behind her back, trying to look proper.  
There is no color, but mother says the bows  
were pink, and the Buick  
in the background was black.



She remembers the Buicks, all of them.

Work didn't come round often  
and when it did, her father, the drunk,  
came home with a different hardtop  
each year, a newly painted rust bucket  
& newly topped off bottle.

Took the kids for rides around town  
till he couldn't drive back home,  
while the Fridgedaire languished,  
poisoning every last one  
in a house of some thirteen-odd babies.

*Sing to Me*

IV.

The profound symptom was tragedy, the well everyone dredged their water from. The Chesapeake was infested *allkindaways*, but who knew better.

Summer's heat made the liquid behind one's eyes begin to bubble, it pushed the brownstone bricks out a little further, then a lot, leaning as if they knew the second coming, was coming.

The way my mother tells it, they snuck down to the water just after sunset, foolhardy, and waded in. There were no lights back then, nothing to shine upon something sharp

like a beer bottle shard or peeled off tuna can top to slide through her friend's foot, letting the fouled green water come inside to rest. It might have been that some of the others

ran off when they smelled the trouble that would summon a grandmother's switch to their palms. She couldn't walk, so my mother carried her, piggyback, her blood

running open & free. The way my mother remembers it, the blood was dark, shimmery, and impossible in the way it seemed to warm and fill up the bay.

## Sing to Me

V.

I am on the lookout for lost & found histories, pilfering this tucked away photo  
from the pages of *The Kings of Kush*, where my mother  
is reclining on a barstool, one leg slightly extended, beveled,  
as if we should be looking at her ankle, entranced & in love with it,  
strapped in stiletto, the rest of her swathed in gold plated shells  
that go *clinkclinkclink* when she does the Wop.  
Seeing the clay they were cut from, I caress my own crisp collarbones,  
her hotcombed hair hangs straighter than mine will ever allow,  
& as if her captured image could ice-grill me, I don't ask  
if she's of drinking age. A woman who poses as unquestionable  
is never questioned.

Yet, by this time in her life, underneath all of this  
might be a head like a fuzz covered marble, discovered  
one granite morning she rose from her pillow & all her hairs stayed behind,  
a besieged city of scorched fields where nothing grew again,  
the calling card of some botched gene--the sort of thing that happened  
in colored families of dubious ancestry--though not quite as subtle  
as her sister Ursula, born sister but blossomed into brother,  
or, something of both brother & sister until she grew  
into something of no known name to simply disappear from family register,  
save one or two photographs in the back of mother's untouchable  
makeup drawer of a woman with a mustache--  
& here began her fifty-some years of roundabout wraps, replacements,  
and her rush-hour hands holding down wigs in the wind.

*Sing to Me*

VI.

We are one breath that begins  
where everyone else leaves off,  
our matching smiles raise  
in crooked arcs across our faces as if drawn  
by offstage music—  
but this is no everyday mirror,  
in raw light I appear yellow.

We know we are not twins,  
that my face maps on to none.  
We could wring our hands until  
they break off, but right below the surface  
what brought me to this world is a nature  
that will always come between us.

*Sing to Me*

VII.

What the New Era gave with one hand,  
ordinary folk snatched back with the other  
& on cream-colored carbon paper, slightly perfumed,  
the pretend higher class letters came,  
typed in the font of the *Times*, their polite discourse  
*we don't appreciate your kind around here.*

In a city on the Last Stop on the Railroad  
those with no pretensions to nurse  
sent slanty jagged ransom-style notes, as if cut  
from classic cinema, all comical and sad.

It wasn't like enemies were a new fad, so nobody bothered  
to pay them mind, get to the bottom of which neighbor  
owned an *after-dark-behind-your-back* kind of face.

It was as if regular people sprouted the thought  
that there was more than one well to cast your bucket in,  
as if all the fish weren't already three-eyed, or as if fear  
grew like fruits that could be shaken down all at once.

*Sing to Me*

VIII.

You can't know about ghosts  
until one has climbed in bed with you,  
draping a cold arm, the memory  
of its flesh, over your tepid breast  
as it whispers in its rattle of falling teeth,  
some other woman's name.  
After that, my mother gave up house-sitting.  
No deal was this good, no nickel, not even  
for university tuition, was worth the unseen  
elbow jabs, ragged breathing  
from the bathroom, or the banging about  
of some lost mind in the kitchen drawers.  
Some women did worse,  
but this was more than just what a woman  
*had to do*. Burned by the shadow  
left behind, she leapt out of the master's bed and shaking  
the bruised peaches of her hands at the end of each wrist,  
brandished all she had.

*Sing to Me*

IX.

I wonder, delicately, if my mother imagined  
an easier life with a white man,  
if she imagined carving him into part of her,  
the way a scrap of Caesar's dust  
resides in every being.

When the laboratory of her mind  
quieted at night she thought she could hear a tree  
singing, that its song was a red song  
about a rock she could step on to reach it,  
if its blossoms didn't become briars or pop off as cattails  
or ripple into pools of moonshards breaking over water  
when she touched it with her infinite hand.  
She thought of paintings lit by their own light,  
shining inward on castles nested in landscapes, wracked  
her brain for a myth starring her at one end of a sea  
filled with flaming mouths and at the other,  
all she was unable became her,  
the way a piece of cut tin glints  
at the bottom of a hole borne in wood for the raccoon to grab,  
so swollen with promise, her clenched paw  
too bursting to be pulled from the trap  
without leaving the jewel behind.

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