

# **Matriphagy**

A thesis submitted  
To Kent State University in partial  
Fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Fine Arts

by

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*No man shall make a muse of the devil in me and call it beauty,  
unless he wishes for my death.*

Attributed to LaWomann

## **LaWomann**

*I stand in a column  
of winged, unmiraculous women.* Sylvia Plath

LaWomann is Eve, the first, middle of seven,  
or eleven uneven. LaWomann is Cleopatra,  
an enchantress. O, Mark Antony, brave, naïve  
and saintly. The French, too, the good god-fearing

people led astray by a witch. LaWomann is  
Jeanne D'Arc. She is Marie-José Péric, *Perec*,  
a gazelle running from her demons. She is  
Vicky Gutierrez, Monica Lewinsky, Anita Hill,

someone's sister. She is Michel Bennett, a *mulatresse*  
married to a negro dictator subjugating  
*un peuple aussi noir que le charbon*.

LaWomann is and isn't part of history,

depending on your definition of victimhood.  
She is Susan Sontag from head  
Marilyn Monroe to toes. She is Catherine Romanova  
owing the title Great to Grigoris.

She is what we start with when  
our hands, too short, reach for words,  
our thoughts leap from object to concept  
and our hips ionize into bricks.

“We ain’t gon’ be in no fire. Not today,”  
shouts Michelle Dobyne. LaWomann is Ching I Sao  
waiting for centuries in Guangzhou or  
in Blackbeard’s shadow for recognition.

She counts her coupons,  
refuses to put on glasses, expiration dates  
always on the bottom and in small print.  
LaWomann, on her deathbed, smiles for her man.

She is a room of empty bookcases,  
of high venetian windows that shut  
on shadows, ask impolite questions.  
A lover, a lapsus in a theory, she is

the space between the pencil and the page.  
A mother, she is what was never there,  
a father’s pipe or its smoke. She is a night  
of four moons, a year of occurrences, a smile,

a tear, life. She is dissent, a woman,  
victorious but dying, the carving of paths  
in the snow and this all-encompassing word  
that has never seen the inside of a school.

LaWomann is not a by-product of Jean Jaurès  
or Bernie Sanders. She is a child of her children's hunger.  
She builds her ex a home one brick, one child at a time.  
She stuffs chicken thighs in her dress pockets.

She has five kids waiting at home. LaWomann  
is Haiti, just after 1804, turns her back  
to the tsunami that will last 200 years.  
She crosses rivers and oceans.

The world lolls inside the cadence of her hips.  
She speaks good English. LaWomann buys second-hand  
clothes, dresses nice, smiles full teeth, dances salsa  
under bright lights for your dollar bills.

She is the lamb we bring when the voice of our  
own making calls itself god. Gods. She has made  
them out of winding hips, heavy thorax, and not once  
has she asked why they always end up wanting her blood.



**Matri/**

**January 1, 1991**

It is well known that when a queen bee wants to mate,  
she flies so high that the only drone capable to keep up  
will die after the act.

LaWomann flew so intently, so freely for so long that her  
wings scrunched up under the clouds. Astonished,  
she kept her man alive.

I kicked the nurse's face after I refused to cry at her slaps.  
*This one will fly high* she said, stretching unformed  
limbs.

Wings bother me, feathers too heavy for my unformed  
body. Unnecessary appendages null the chance of any  
prediction of a third shift nurse.

There is no realization to it. We are not born to be something.  
Life takes us into its womb and spits us out on a New Year's Day  
like an unfinished song.

## History-less

We are born with our eyes full grown,  
with little plum fingers folded on themselves,  
pear-shaped lips, and our heads. Yes, our heads,  
hairless, bulbous, slightly out of proportion.  
I found a monkey and a woman in my genes.  
Half Y, half X with a contradiction for body,  
undeveloped nipples, brassy voice, hard knuckles,  
wide hips. We are born with features, except  
for LaWomann. Formless, two gourds for breasts  
filled with milk, and a vase we call vagina.  
She is eternally grey, saintly, with wisdom  
for desire, wrinkled fingers cracking when gripping  
on life. LaWomann is sexless like all mothers  
with a past that goes no further than her first born.

## **Compassionately Resentful**

The moment a mango fruit falls off the tree  
doesn't tell us about the putrescence of its stem.  
When we pray for rain, we don't ask for  
the death of the sun. It just happens.

I became wary of Christ when he answered  
my prayers with blond locks. She worshiped them.  
LaWomann is a new world Christian with a  
compassionately resentful killing smile.

After all, how could she survive all the hate she cages  
inside her belly without Sunday masses? For  
babies do come and go, but fear is eternal.

Because the only readable words in the book are "kneel,"  
"thou shall not", "love", "fornicate", "sinner", she needed  
a belt to tie me into Abraham's genealogy.

## **Aid Staff Would Pay More**

actually, more than five times a local could.

I have eaten men with five children to feed,  
with strong moral stand, erectile dysfunction,  
god complex, and still bringing two dollars home.

I have amassed enough of his kind in my river delta to carve  
my place in this street, in this world. Long ago, I learned  
the bluer the logo on the SUV, the more likely  
a gun will be pulled, or anal requested. I have let  
the night open my legs with large, white hands  
that secure tomorrow. Milk is expected when an ox  
enters a farm, but so is manure. For when the earth rumbles  
with its mouth wide open and swallows the future,  
passing cars in unlit corridors color my daughter's dream  
in myriad shades of translucent green.

## Braided

With each tangling of the comb in an ungreased shrub of hair, my sister let out a groan and mother, annoyed, yelled *Stop moving, girl!* The teeth of the rake hitting her bare shoulders were soon covered by the French songs dad put on to ease him back to sleep. *Affaire de Femmes*. The first time my mother shaved my head, she mapped the middle passage routes so artfully, you would not believe it was her ancestors who jumped off the ships. Her Van Gogh's fingers cat-hauling on my head numbed the veins such that I could barely feel the hydroxyl. It wasn't that her classmates called her horsehead or landed origami boats on her hairless skull. The day her dead cuticles touched the hot comb, she learned you could not kill what was already dead, that you needed to look further to know who you were, past your mother's oval pores, in the shaking of Miss Universe's mane. She learned straight hair does not make you less of a negress. You can still be called ratchet in your graduation gown.

## **Love Flew Out**

*for Maj Ragain*

of the windows the day of our wedding.  
LaWomann told me, there is no honeymoon,  
just love's funeral, honey. As I put on my wig,  
she cursed the ring that wouldn't stop shrinking.  
We buy our hearts with gold  
and cage them between our fingers, she said.  
I stayed quiet as she slid my feet into the slippers.  
We were young once in another life, she said.  
Children are proof of our multiple lives,  
each one filling the lacrimal glands,  
taking all except black gums and empty holes.  
It is with spreading legs and undressing our breasts  
that we confront the teeth of the lion, she said.  
I wonder if my soulmate is not on some faraway beach  
reading Joan Didion, mourning her husband, I said.

**1994**

**I**

The sound of my father's hammer  
would wake me early in the morning.  
The attic, too small to contain the cry  
of the angels under his arms, would  
let the sound filter into my room, my ears,  
my belly, as if I were the sun he'd conjure  
to rise. I'd start on the piano the only tune  
I knew, and he would hum  
the same song over and over,  
willing courage in me with each strike.



## II

The year I first saw my skin color,  
the wind of the choppers  
blew my friend's toothbrush away  
over our giggles. We ran toward  
the men, their long black flowers  
pointing at us. Our smiles disarmed their fear  
and covered their captain's order.  
They became conductors with tulips  
for batons, and we danced. We swayed  
our backs, tightened our derrieres  
and moved our shoulders and heads  
in opposite directions, just like the chimps  
they thought us to be. We kept executing,  
kept smiling. Soldiers can't shoot glee.

### III

LaWomann is made of supreme griefs.  
Apollinaire stole her kinky hair and  
replaced it with blonde weaves. Verlaine  
took her sun, her coconut tree and her beaches –  
gave her snow and a sense of second class in return.  
Baudelaire gave her a big bottom, a Creole complex.  
Hugo talked of violence like he knew what raising  
three kids on his own meant. Her son's heart  
they conquered with words he had to turn  
his tongue into a viper to pronounce.  
*L'hiver a couvert la terre d'un tapis blanc.*  
He has yet to learn *Je t'aime* in her language.

#### IV

FDA announced patient zero!  
Guantanamo, declared HIV prison camp!  
Haitians can no longer save  
their *frères de sang*! Still now  
my cousin can't come out, while the man  
who put them there is AG again. The clock  
is sure to make its round. For remembrance  
calls for the destruction of the self, as  
devastation calls for pity, pity for fatigue,  
fatigue for forgetfulness and forgetfulness  
for devastation.

V

This we endure!  
In exchange for our unpaid,  
unacknowledged labor on our bare backs,  
centuries of negation,  
flagellations,  
working in the scorching sun,  
chains, rape, cat-hauling, branding,  
birth of a nation, Christianity,  
planking, imperialism,  
Emmett Till, George Stinney  
marginalization, the ghettos,  
the crack epidemic,  
all, we sacrificed for one word. NIGGER.

## VI

Long after he passed,  
I would accompany the thrumming of the choppers  
with the same tune and they would wait  
for the last note before they started shooting.  
The day they took him, I asked  
for music and they gave me colors – purple red  
on the street, like carnival's masks.  
I asked for a boy, they gave me fear of smile,  
of dance, and of remembrance.

## Lake Erie Effects

As I stood in front of the lake this winter morning,  
you came again. This time, you left your head at home,  
only the contours of your hips Botticelied their  
reflections in the frozen waves. And unlike Venus',  
these hips have birthed five children.

My umbilical cord was still attached to my mouth  
the night you gave me as a sacrifice to the sea.  
How could I find myself in the ocean?  
That night, I had enough fear in my belly, I remember,  
to feed a horse, and waited thirty long days  
for the guards and their tired faces.

I left the sea and never looked back.  
No wonder your face is as remote as  
this country you saved me from. Can we call it saving?  
*Fighting, you said, is an act of faith.*  
The odds of giving up is one broken heart  
over two deaths. You also told me,  
*To survive the winter, fish have to go down.*

But there is no sea here, just water fighting the cold.

### Coumbite

The women lead the way with their skirts tied up their bellies, stomping the ground, shaking big buttocks. Fifty choppers thrum in the air. The hoes of the men lose their sound under the rumbling of the elder's chant. In the clamor, LaWomann's voice comes on uninvited:

*Samba he, samba he, samba he*

Samba comes tambou in hands a little oilier than his front. Drunk. The voice stammers, a hammer hitting cardboard. Nothing left here except for an urge. Creature of habit, he sticks his tongue out when he approaches the boys. The girls look him down, witches of another time. LaWomann invigorates delicate men:

*Samba he, samba he, samba he*

Men with asthma complain too much, live on the communion of brotherhood. Stumps begging for flowers on dry soil. That morning, one rooster forgot to crow, and a man lost his ax. There are pebbles in his rice. LaWomann crunches her pillows under her armpits, lowers her voice, begs to differ, and whispers:

*Samba he, samba he, samba he*

The children fill the holes with handfuls of corns. It is life. Men dig holes, children occupy them, and women mend the world. One, two, three, *tchoupth*. They stop the dance when the drums start their rolling. Bellies gurgling calling out for intermission, she goes:

*Samba he, samba he, samba he*

## **If He Had a Mother**

She would have to be large, proud, resentful.  
She would feel small and be a braggadocio at times.  
*Lookeehere, ain't my boy something? Once,*  
*he says, 'let there be light' and there it was.*  
*Just like that. The night eats my tongue*  
*if I knew what light was.*

Like every other woman, she would scorn Him  
for her place in the world, for being last, for that tree,  
and for a good man lost in the night long ago.

She would have to be grateful, full of rage.  
She would be praised for a son  
raised on selling second hand-clothes.  
“Mother of the Great” they’d call her.  
They would forget her name was LaWomann.  
His omnipresence would swallow her whole.

He who created the earth and the sky, dinosaurs included,  
He who sits on a throne too far for our eyes  
would cradle in her arms after heartbreaks.

She would have to be small, sweet, love.  
She would have to be fierce, emperor penguin  
resorting to kidnapping when His crown is lost,  
sing lullabies under the wall of Jericho and parade  
pride to Sodom and Gomorrah in trance.  
She would be less I AM, more I CARE.



### **To a Son on His Fourteenth Birthday**

If we must start somewhere, let it be with death. But before that, we will live. We will do it well. By that I mean we will play our role, pretending. For peace, you will be sent to meet a boy no older than yourself and you'll end his road where yours should start, unpleasant and shoeless. For love, don't think. Time is precious. Smile when she leaves. Give her gifts to the sitting doctor in one of your Thursday meetings. For God, trust in your doubts. Drop on your knees when you are too sure. Speak when it is necessary and sit down when you're tired. For politics – not that I know much but – I have seen monkeys with checkbooks do better. For Power, a man can walk into the supreme court and lay his *Long John Silver* on the bench without losing his dignity when it comes to marriage. For race, nature decided you had to wear your crime in your eyes, hair, and fingers. For death, live in the smallest details.

## Musical Ghazal

When I am lonely, I dream of marrying a Haitian woman.  
 The way the sound glides over the curves of a Haitian woman;  
  
 the bumpy roads by a sea that bathes and bakes her darker  
 and deeper. No words uttered just the music of Haitian woman's  
  
 body; a contralto of silent hands punctured by void and flesh.  
 There is a pool somewhere in my dream and a Haitian woman  
  
 is wearing all black in the night, and I hope she too is alone and lost  
 waiting for my muffled call like a savior, begging. *Hey Haitian woman*  
  
*would you marry a fella for a night? No contract. Just our lips*  
*fluttering like hummingbirds. What do you say Haitian woman?*  
  
*Would you let the waves move with our muscles, lose our bones,*  
*let your evasive sun undress whatever sense is left in this low Haitian man?*  
  
 I want to marry the music, all the black keys of her thighs,  
 the sharps and flats of a belly rebelling against a Haitian Woman,  
  
 reluctant beats trickling down, cascading command of breaths  
 over drums, the keyboard, and the strings of a Haitian woman.

## **Morning Recitations**

On Monday mornings,  
the chameleons in the magnolia tree  
would change colors.  
So, did my mother, red with anger.  
I used to think it was because of  
Lucky's barking,  
or the cock-a-doodle-doo,  
or the busy day ahead.

The arch of her eyebrows  
would lead the session.  
I would stop when they went up  
and moved down with them.  
“Repeat!” she would yell,  
her face too close behind the book.  
Each lesson was repeated three times  
until there were no ups and downs.

It took time but at the wedding  
when she signed LaWomann with an X,  
it became clear that I was a blind man  
led by a farsighted woman.

## The Flat Line

The traces of motherhood burden  
tell a story of a color migrating  
turning red into black  
from a man's hands grabbing belly

Covering the purple of her *linea nigra*  
from Latin *linea* "line, string", *nigra*  
the line is shut black  
on compressed bodies moving sideways

Where her big-headed child sits  
he is brown contrasting the blue thrown  
blackier than that he will become  
in the arms of friendly northerners

## The Oblique Line

the traces of motherhood burden  
covering the purple of her *linea nigra*  
where her big-headed child sits

tells a story – of color migrating  
from Latin: *linea* “line, string” *nigra*  
he is brown contrasting the blue thrown

turning red into black  
line is shut black  
blackier than that he will become

from a man’s hands grabbing belly  
on compressed bodies moving sideways  
in the arms of friendly northerners

## The North Line

in the arms of friendly northerners  
blacker than that he will become  
he is brown contrasting the bleu thrown  
where her big-headed child sits

on compressed bodies moving sideways  
the line is shut black  
from Latin *linea* “line, string”, *nigra*  
covering the purple of her *linea nigra*

from a man’s hand grabbing belly  
turning red into black  
tell a story – of a color migrating  
the traces of motherhood burden

## The Circle

The little Pigmy who first jumped into the Congo river  
could teach De Soto a thing or two about the Mississippi.  
It is the same water flowing in our hearts through our veins,  
from the Jordan river to the altar of the last Chilean priest.

The pregnant mother who breaks water accomplishes  
no lesser feat than Moses before the Red Sea.  
The men who went to the moon brought their mud with them,  
so did the woman who leapt legs wide open into the volcano.

Before the Messiah met John the Baptist,  
our ancestors worshiped the sun, rocks and trees  
until one rainy October day, Massacre river ran blood  
and flesh, carrying in its mighty bed their gods

and their hope. When I was little, my momma told me  
the future is a snake swallowing its tail. My daddy said  
it was a dog sucking on his own dick, that we ought to have  
another Gandhi, another Einstein, King, Kennedy,  
and, no doubt, another Adolf. Life will continue,  
swallowing its circle.

**Buy Back the Block**

*after Rick Ross*

every day i'm hustling  
and my fridge still looking scarce  
carwash ain't bringing shit  
in my pockets and chitlins' still served  
on Sundays  
i grow a beard on dollar general lotion  
colored bandanas for women to hang onto  
i rent cars to pop the boy's eyes up  
bragging to my niggaz of Rolex shit  
that flows will bring feeding dreams  
with words making them a future  
we can all feast on *i will make it*,  
didn't I tell them pussies. i did –  
keeping on tracks, dropping them  
on intervals so short, Columbian bars  
paid their respect  
i perfected my hustle  
they come so fast, ain't they now  
them women, money, and babies too  
when business is booming  
listen! my garage is looking empty  
so i need me some Ferraris  
i need to get my momma outta that block.



## Inheritance

One Sunday, I stopped chasing my father  
and fitted myself inside his red cloak.  
I walked into a church, changed my socks,  
and married the second woman in the confessional.

I stood in front of a mirror before I went to the brothel  
and saw a man; a real beast ready to face the pack  
with his bald head, a thin well-groomed mustache,  
lines tracing the void felt for too many years.

The presence of his absence suffocated every memory  
from first communion to high school graduation,  
except for that Sunday when the smile tattooed his lips  
and I stood over his closed black box staring back.

Puppies tell their mothers they will be wolves  
when they grow up. They learn only to wag their tails  
and be good. A boy is not a boy when his first knowledge  
is the heaviness of his skin. At fourteen, a man knows.

**/phagy**

## **Matriphagy**

Twelve years later, when her son learned  
of postpartum depression, LaWomann  
smiled and raised her hands up to the sky.

*I am a mother spider!*

When she lost her Calypso body to a Medusa head,  
she knew the doctors were a lost cause.

Instead, she went to the houngan who tied her down  
to beat the devil out of her.

Each bite of the belt felt like a need for nutrients  
on every inch of her back, her breasts, her ribs, and her thighs –  
unleash wild peonies on purple flesh.

The devil, it seemed, was in her exposed derriere.  
For when he felt it, his grin turned into a wide smile.  
And the more she sobbed,  
the more impertinently his fingers foraged  
for unhatched eggs.

**Vanishing Torso**

*After Rainer Maria Rilke*

Imagine that I had indeed changed my life.  
That I had started pushing up and down,  
and my belly had become flatter, and my sides  
more oblong, that I hadn't lacked the aristocratic grace  
of a young man, that my back muscles could sprout out  
at the will of my fingers, that Ardi and Lucy had run through  
un-bumpy roads, that we could fill the gap  
between our opposable thumbs, that age indeed was just a number  
and names were clocks lost in oblivion.  
What would be left of Michelangelo, or the *teste divine* boys  
with their extensive flowers of youth, or the one who cried  
when she laughed that we-all-can-see laugh, or the man who  
hid in the gym bathroom, or the girl who wore an extra bra?  
It all makes me wonder if David ever was.

**Joints**

At seventeen, when the girls' eyes became too burning  
for my cheeks, I looked down, and found a colony  
of white-winged doves living in my elbows  
in their perfect linear nests. Since then,  
I've looked for them in men with olecranon  
busting, searched for a wife's ribcage  
in boys mimicking the bigger apes by flexing abs  
and faking loud grunts. I've looked in the delicate  
folding of synovial joints, in pouting at the sight  
of ashy skins. I've looked in my girl's bed,  
in the curvatures of her knees, in the fading  
of her melon painted lips, in the stranger's arrogance  
she brought home. I've looked in the sheep  
genuflecting in the blood colored mud for the last time.  
I've looked. O god, I have looked.  
Until one morning, or maybe it was one night,  
a red-tailed hawk plunged into their midst  
in a rivulet of discord and agony.

## **Solo Waltz**

The day she first died,  
her unstrung clitoris  
elongated into a penis.

She gulped down lozenges  
and masqueraded her grief  
under static baritone chords.

How does one make a man  
out of a shell-less turtle if not  
to morph him into a snail puppet?

Under the roof built by the man  
whose labor deprived  
her mother of her ovaries,

she survived a husband  
in full womanhood, while  
welding jewels in dirt,

braiding pubic hair  
in snaky lines each  
morning – just in case –

shaving calves  
in the bathtub in  
her blue tuxedos.

She left behind a trail  
of kittens who couldn't  
stop calling her mother.

*We ought to die more  
than once if our urchins are  
to survive this war, a wise man said.*

Wise man was  
a pseudonym she used  
in her early twenties.

*It is in the lines of the stars that  
the sky has formed, not the other way  
around.* There is no astrological

solution for a divorce, for  
no signs can predict  
how large of shoulders

are needed to cover bruised armpits  
and tone plangent enough  
to rub out lipsticks' residue.

## **How the Victorian Woman Killed LaWomann**

Do tell, girl. Do you remember the games we used to play?  
My corset keeping your back warm and my skirt like an elephant  
swallowing your small figure? The days, I became quite naughty  
and ate all your cookies?

Now, girl, when you finish your chores in the kitchen, read a book  
and learn to be as witty as him. Polish your enunciation.  
Leave the plantation behind. Befriend Milton and find your paradise.  
It rests upon us to open Heaven's gates.

The Bible teaches us to submit but, never forget, it was Mary Magdalene  
who first learnt of the Lord's resurrection. Be born again and  
in your language be a living Christian, do in all things His deeds  
and you will see His light.

Do tell, good girl. Should your head be held up high if your ears  
are not as familiar to Mendelssohn as his fingers to the harp.  
How could you be respected by a man if you do not master  
Shakespeare?

Ah, how seamlessly has time passed. Only in our mothers' time,  
your kind had more in common with your African cousins, hanging  
in the trees of the Congo Basin, wretched and Godless.  
How far have we come!



## **L'Enfant Terrible**

Was it your mother's death? Triggered. Latent memories. The shrink was as good as his decency, after all. It was your father who told you of the dreams you never had. Of the ridiculous noise of your tongue clicking truth. Imaginary hands, he called them. Now, memory is a river raised by hate. You can't be sure anymore if they were his hands or hers.

To know the past is to collect heads.

There was nothing to be afraid of, especially when her smile was so white. Beauty births fear. She liked your eyes, too. Ink drops in two bowls of milk. When she touched your elbows, it was to chase the innocence in you. She was to replace your poor mother.

Shame, to be told whole, needs brusque stops.

To love is to care. For when he put you out in the streets, your father's house was as empty as his bed in those nights she warmed your cot. A man does not share. He knew. He refused to accept. The change on his lips was only of disgust for your sins. You were simply a lost lamb.

Suppression of memories is recommended in this case.

## Homage to Jacques Stephen Alexis

Compère Général Soleil had a stain on his collar  
the day he stood next to El Comandante.

Twelve others were waiting in a boat, big enough  
to contain their week-old beards, their pens and

two liquor carafes. That day, Romancero aux Etoiles,  
felt a twinge on her left breast and she knew.

At Port-au-Prince Bay, a doctor was waiting,  
eraser in hands, to edit the last chapter of his novel.

LaWomann told him once, *fingers are mightier  
than guns*. His mother said *cut them*.

In Berlin, a gypsy man read a guillotine in the General's palms

just before he lost a bet. The sharks confessed during  
their feast that the words were sour on his tongue.

Papa Doc, sit me on a chair and recite them aloud.

## Grooming

I am nostalgic of places and times,  
stories molded in childhood dreams  
now muddied in the whiteness of snow and skin.

The nun told us des tours de la Cathédrale de Dijon  
as if they were alive,  
ready to swallow our feeble minds whole,  
*If you touch Saint Benignus' sarcophagus  
and make a wish, it will be granted.*

I miss the green hills of Normandy,  
la neige d'Ancelle, and les patins the priest wore  
so elegantly in his pictures.

Robespierre never made it to my Paris—  
my city of lights, of Rousseau, and of Voltaire.  
La France de mon enfance erased the Haitian sun.

France was Jacques Chirac's speech at Vel d'Hiv.  
It was Zinedine Zidane scoring twice in 1998.

My France was an old man on his vélo,  
a Michel Audiard film with a happy ending.  
My France, I did not adopt, but given,  
forced into, so do not call me stranger  
when I knock at your door. I know of nothing else.

## Spotlight

Fingers fly from hands like disturbed pigeons  
on a busy street. The music doesn't skip a beat of her body.  
Limbs, veins, fibers, all playing the instruments

of strings, of air in space and light. Her shoulders, bared,  
collapse in a pirouette leave her hair floating,  
gold dust smoke from Arthur Mitchell in his later days.

The air is changing. The face in the mirror does not match  
the fresh and full legs under the tutu in the photograph.  
The roses stop coming and her name becomes smaller in the flyers.

But her body, incredulous, follows no more her will.  
Nothing's changed. The birds still fly, and silence endures.  
A couple greets the lady at the corner. Fingers wave still,

impertinent, bony. Absence weighs as much as presence  
when time is added, and the equation reversed. Faces dissolve  
just as the rain starts and hair erode into dust.

Time swallows its circle, 360 degrees when the arc of the spotlight  
last no more than 30 years if corrected with plastic.  
Tonight, the lights dimmed over her aging skin.

The public hastens its applause, impatient to see  
the new revelation, the all smile, red lips, considerably younger  
master of glissés and perfect pliés. No standing ovation.

## **Dark Light**

I am terribly black.

I am Stevie Brown,

a walking contradiction in exile in its own skin.

I hold a gun to my brother's head to amuse Facebook and  
draw a bloody spider on the streets of Ferguson.

I am James Kaepernick,

prisoner of a city,

a king dunking over giants but afraid to take a knee.

I fight the injustices of the body I was born in,

rejecting the rules while waiting to be blackballed.

I am Obama Winfrey

the ceiling breaker,

the excuse of how far we have come.

I built your white house on well-fed belly,

and raise your children behind the screen. Slave nonetheless.

I am Whoopi Dodson.

Hide your kids,

beauty will not save you.

I am colored, with big lips, small ears and hips to keep

all your family warm. I am what you call white trash.

I am so black you should squint your eyes to see  
beyond the skin for the lies of your past.  
While we are at it, sprinkle some of your touch,  
add the name calling. I am more negro than black.

I am the voice you lost, the whip you hold, and the back  
to face you. I contain the sun, dangerously welcoming,  
between my legs. We drink water here. Keep your cannons.  
I am the light, the road, and the truth. Read my smile.

I tame your guns and make songs out of them.  
I raise my hands and catch your bullets. I am strong still.  
I am a lost lion walking back to its captor's cage  
tamed by time and hunger, I retract my claws.

## **The Charcoal Maker**

That morning, he died for good once again.  
He took his ax and machete down the hill  
headed to the last maple tree,  
the big one with ravens for leaves.

The sun was chasing the breeze and  
the rooster that does not sing.  
He had stopped singing long ago.  
He wondered if his arms would not be silent, too.

The earth was an ingrate, deaf to his frail labor.  
The seeds shied away from the moon, rain hesitated  
to come, only to bring flood before harvest.  
No cow's desolation could lead water back to the creek.

The dust in the field welcomed him with its brown look  
as if its thirst was his fault and cutting the trees was not vital.  
Looking around, he knew death would never come like this again.

## Asile

*“... let us remember the baby they were  
as their parents gathered them up in their arms...”*

Hannah Stephenson

Considering the flood and the tragedy that followed,  
considering he could not bear his children's sight anymore,  
considering he did not have enough in his account for a visa.

~~Strike that.~~

Considering he did not even have an account,  
considering a visa cost more than his house,  
considering a place in a boat allowed him to keep his kidneys,  
considering his luck when he evaded the coast guards,  
considering his first job at Popeyes, his boss firing him  
when he learned how to pronounce dignity.

Considering he later he took on carpentry,  
considering you caught him on his way to work at 7pm  
when you heard his accent,  
considering he was a criminal. But before that,  
considering his wife is about to give birth. No.

His mother is about to give birth to her only boy.

Considering he is no stranger to violence. Survival  
of the fittest is violent.

Considering his only crime was trying to survive  
which later you will come to doubt.

Considering he is a human,  
considering no one is hurt, except his ego,  
considering by bringing him here,  
you assume responsibility for him and his family.

Considering a law can be criminal.

Consider just for a second that I know my father.



## **On the Massacre River Bridge**

The woman who pees standing  
has fire between her legs. Beautiful  
rusty streams, metal hitting tortoise  
shell, iron cutting iron. Nothing less.  
She travels miles with feet in the air,  
elbows digging into ribs, lifting both  
heavy hips and the baggage she carries.  
With five mouths to feed, not time to pick up  
lost shoes. The good lord must sweep  
thorny streets or else she would offer  
a little blood sacrifice again.

**Pleurer**

***Play Ray***

*after Jacques Brel*

Bien sûr qu'il neigera demain.

*Ben sure Kills the negro demon*

Bien sûr que le soleil s'éclipera

*Ben sure kills her sole excess clearer*

et la terre engendra de nouveaux visages.

*Ella Tehran genre the new vault veers age.*

Qui ne l'a pa vue venir cette constant surprise

*Killer per view Benny swept Constance  
surprise*

Elle, qui nous embête depuis si longtemps.

*Hell, Key news amber at their pee see long ant*

Bien sûr que j'ai vu un ami pleurer

*Ben sure cages veering me play Ray*

bien sûr qu'elle me quittera un jour

*Ben sure quells Market terra on jaw.*

et ca ne m'empêchera d'être déprimé.

*Essa Norman Porsche raw date de-prime. Ay!*

## Rosenstrasse in an Icebox

The man who took her boy at the borders shared her skin,  
her fear, and her tongue. *No tengas miedo*, he said.

While his hands closed on his little shoulders,  
she saw the moon shining over Rosenstrasse, and  
the women who went before her each morning  
yelling *gib uns unsere manner*. They took their men.

Unlike her, these women did not have to ride *la bestia*  
from Tegucigalpa to Texas, cross two borders,  
to lose a son to an icebox.

The man who took her boy shared her blood,  
her *historia*, and her route. Or, was it his father?

## **A Bucket List Filled with Buts**

In the notebook the boy who would be the orc  
wrote *ask Terri Gross a personal question* but  
an interviewee asking questions is objecting always  
then laugh with Seth Meyers laugh the whole time but  
shouldn't publishing a book be the first item yes but  
there is no chronology in a Haitian's bucket list  
or else it's called survival but everyone's list  
is a utopia of the past but it makes the world reachable  
and death more distant but doesn't death take care of itself but  
please keep dreaming your first line is your mother's last.

## Twice Opened

The day the orc broke her clavicles  
and pushed his dagger into her soft flesh,  
she powdered her cheeks in small circles,

put on a mango dress, applied fresh  
mascara under her eyes and waited for her man  
whose shoulders – she hoped – would be a perch.

When he came home and found another woman  
under her new façade, he couldn't help himself,  
he asked her to make him a man again.

At birth, a child has everyone's eyes  
the flatness of the front, the little nose,  
the fingers, everything to persist the lies.

When a man knows a man knows  
unless if his love is all there is to see,  
then the truth is a loose hose.

For the man that made the baby  
is the hunting face of memory.

## **Manifesto of a Foreign Writer**

I refuse to give it easy to you.  
I wan you to bend your ears,  
tilt your head, narow your eyes,  
I wan to reed the confision in them  
I wan you to question your good senses.  
Did he just say rich or witch?  
I wan you to work for it,  
more than your father did  
when he came with hims boots  
and dirtied my father's living room.  
I wan you to count the spelling mistakes  
and think you could done better  
but you ain't me. You lack history.  
I wan you to tell your friends  
your families, the strangers  
how much you hate it when  
peeples don't speak English.  
How dare they? I wan you  
to forget your grandmothers  
in the kitchen yelling  
becose them love you.  
I wan you to reed dis and  
surprise youself how well  
you can touch your words  
when you reed your history  
in your grandpa's stories  
and his nostalgia for the old country.

## To All the Girls That I Loved Before

the French version  
I am still an adolescent  
and  
you are a movie star  
with a boyish haircut  
Everything is fine  
this is a confession,  
your purple eyelids  
bruised elbows,  
his hands my hands  
I have not forgotten  
your confusion  
my letters are still not answered  
the words I had no meaning for  
poetic, you called them  
You are still looking  
this is a confession  
his fist my fist  
Your frequent visits to the hospital  
your concussion  
how can love be so...?

I am still fourteen

how many mangos can I suck on

until I make a name for myself?

my songs unfinished

To all the girls I loved before

this is not an indictment

I was never there

our kisses unchanged

his feet my feet

fractured ribs,

irregular menstruations

I am still behind them

when a chain is broken

do you see the other side?

Here I stand

To all the girls I will love after

you, her, them

there is a woman behind the mirror

she is you

or was she left here, wanting?

a broken heart for a broken vow

his words my words

a child game, a player



this is not a confession

A man will try to blame her

this is not news

a woman wears several  
masks

a man's ego is yellow, visible

behind the mirror is an excuse

to all the girls I now love

your names are my mistakes

## **The Monument of our Heroes**

Even now, their clenched jaws  
hold the fear of the task at hand.

These jaws used to be chubby cheeks  
holding wet tongues when passing gas.

But here in this chiseled mass of brass,  
their eyes are the only remnant

of that time in their mothers' arms, for  
the same terror at the world's birth

surges at its end for all of us.  
They saw it coming and never heard

it hit its marks, their heads.  
We cannot honor the victors only –

there is a horse and under, LaWomann.  
There is a woman under the horse.

There is always a woman under  
one's tongue, drifting in the lines

of a history crooked by lost names.  
The past tremors in her voice

shouting "*En avant! En avant!*"  
the truth writing on her back with no

face, no name to put on it. We ignore.  
Men win the wars women fight.

Men whose immortality is carved  
on the mortality of their brothers.

Even in this bronze mountain,  
with their arms raised, muscles dancing

in static repetitions, pants bulging  
with certainty, high collar redingotes

nothing short of a Bonaparte's guard,  
there is still a woman with thighs crunched

under the horse that carries them.  
LaWomann carried a horse on her breasts

at birth, the river ran joyful black tar,  
her star lost its balance,

and the Mambo asked they planted the cord  
under the peach tree. Her peach tree that now

grows crooked in a dance with the sun.  
When she stared back after the ceremonial

spanking, the Mambo took a big gulp  
in her mouth, gargled it inside her cheeks,

and when it was as dark as the newly tared street,  
she sprayed over her freshly cut tube

expecting for her mouth to quiver and  
a sound to be heard. She had none of that.

She stared back and took on the room.  
A black room with hard faces

just like the day of her funerals, they expected.  
They got none. She stared back.

*This one is going to live life backwards,*  
the Mambo said. Her mother laid there

feeling the silence of the place emptying  
her belly. She knew what only her could

learn nine months earlier.  
Earlier that month, nine pair of eyes

saw LaWomann gasping for air under the horse.  
She was not always a woman. A plain little girl

with nappy hair, haughty breasts too young  
for the masters and hands alike ogling with

their seven deadly sins heavier than the jugs  
of water on her head. She was thirteen once.

She was fourteen forever. A year relived  
over and over never ages if the memories

are of men on pedestals with fingers sharper  
than épée slicing thighs in the dark.

She was open once, arms reaching the North pole  
cold membranes finding their way to her South hole.

There is a truth in every unsaid word  
and there is the world outside every picture,

and out of frame in every monument,  
there is her past held between clenched teeth.

## Necklacing

*What's madness but nobility of soul*

*At odds with circumstance?*

Theodore Roethke

The way his skin popped  
like dried wood, the way  
the tires in their ceremonial  
dark smoke kept him  
straight while ardent fire  
puffed out of his mouth,  
the way the others clapped  
and cheered at the marvel  
of a cheap jug of gasoline,  
a handful of matches,  
and the way I forced myself  
to stare at LaWomann  
in the corner sobbing,  
as if I, too, did not point  
my thumbs down.

## **The Diaspora**

After Michel Sardou's *La Neige*

Wyclef Jean is killing Jacques Brel  
in a Bois-Verna's Beach.  
His shiny shoes were made of children's skin.  
His shiny shoes were covered in mud.

How impertinent of him to think he could save us?  
How arrogant? No one knew, let me tell you,  
no one knew how haughty this little fella was.  
With his guitar and broken Creole,  
what were we to do with a deserter?

O, you should have seen his swaying;  
legs arching, arms swinging deliberate,  
his monkeys dancing around him as if he were  
Mansa Musa in flesh, as if our sour looks  
could not kill him. *Kisa li panse li ye?*  
Didn't he learn dignity is misery's son?  
Who did he think he was?

Look under his white shirt, and see  
a dark skin's rebelling. A Creole is hiding  
under his heavy tongue. His guitar is mourning  
the loss of the line between land and home.  
What is Bois-Verna to a deserter in shiny shoes?  
No one knew, let me tell you, no one knew.

## **To a Passerby**

*After Charles Baudelaire's A une Passante*

In the street where she's parading her living corpse,  
the smoke of the burning tires dyes her dusty  
frock, coloring her face black, bringing her down  
to the land she escaped under Baudelaire's pencil.

Woman to the last penny, beautiful as were the faces  
on the TVs of her youth, plump, white. Yes, so white.  
Me? I sit there, a whistle dying on my lips, an unuttered  
sound streaming down the crevasses of her wrinkles.

A shooting star, then dawn. Fleeting treacherous beauty  
that have carried wishes of young and old alike,  
where has its swag gone to? Where is everlasting?

Somewhere else, maybe. In this child's eyes, waiting,  
a flash of recognition of my feet trotting  
next to a girl unaware of my hands wringing.



## **Add my Name to the Wall**

### ***A Self-portrait***

dreadlocked

wannabe

a poet, suplex moves –

dead locked

inside a boat

drifting incessantly offshore –

red socks

under yellow jeans

inexistent abs or flow –

pep talks

when stuck before a wall

useless survival machinations –

i wave through crests and troughs

contradicting the antonym of enigma

my body, an island knocking at the sea door

i have lived in the wrong skin tone, upright

**The End**