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## The (Un)seen

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Bernard Clay, Student

Frank X. Walker, Major Professor

Dr. Jill Rappaport, Director of Graduate Studies

THE (UN)SEEN

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THESIS

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing  
in the College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Kentucky

By

Bernard Clay

Lexington, Kentucky

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### THE (UN)SEEN

This collection of original poems features work created and edited over two years in the Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program. The poems collected for this thesis represent a Bildungsroman, a coming of age narrative, that details the psychological growth and education of a narrator who feels excluded or invisible as he grows up in America during the late eighties and early nineties. Progressing poem by poem, a myriad of subjects are explored including race, gender, religion, economics, the environment, politics, and even Muhammad Ali.

KEYWORDS: Race, Gender, Religion, Economics, Politics, Muhammad Ali

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The Unseen

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## The (un)seen

--A reflection on *Hog and Gun*  
Photograph by Ann Hoskin

I'm the only black  
in the building  
including all the students  
in my MFA program  
on a field trip here  
my focus-locked  
on the sole image  
on these art museum walls  
that reflects me:  
looking over  
the shoulders of men  
who could be three  
generations of my lineage  
but even they go unnamed  
in this black & white  
photographed titled  
"Hog and Gun."

the camera gazes into  
the shadowed kill box  
passed the cropped  
propped men  
the shutter's winked  
lens is automatically  
calibrated  
to bleach stark white  
all subjects  
as pale as  
overexposed pig skin  
to shine-up anything  
carbon black like  
rifle barrels  
until they recoil  
off the gelatin  
and to flatten  
anything else colored  
into a dull, latent grayscale  
like my granite skinned  
would-be relatives  
who were disappeared  
echoing me framed  
so far in the foreground  
that we're just background

## **Section I**

## questions of origin

if your momma had kicked  
your daddy out sooner,

or if your older sister had lived  
through the birth, two years earlier  
and your momma did get her *tubes tied*  
like she wanted,

or if your parents weren't separated  
and your momma didn't have  
the freedom or foresight to buy  
her first ever brand new  
butter yellow VW bug,  
with front wheel drive,  
that melted like a *hot pat*  
through the blizzard of '77  
on the talc night  
her water broke with you,

if you hadn't been conceived  
after ultrasounds became widespread  
and your daddy didn't know his first  
legitimate son was coming  
and he had missed it  
like the previous three,  
and didn't navigate that cotton night  
to get your labored mother and you  
to the hospital safe,  
to brand you with the same  
name as him and his father,

would you even be here?

probably yes, ambulances were around  
or your mom would have driven herself  
like she did before

and you would have ended up  
with one of those names  
from a French soap opera  
like all your sisters?

## hemlock street: june 1981

it's coming like puffs  
of mesquite stampeding  
down the street  
out of rusty half barrels  
and fingers poke through  
cling wrapped bowls  
of potato salads  
greens  
and macaroni and cheese  
to decide the block's best

it's coming like type-2  
and orange push-pop  
mustaches  
satisfied customers  
sold by ice-cream trucks  
book ending the street  
whistling Dixie in synth

its coming like intermittent  
smiles of blind-ten bicycles  
across the cigarette-burned,  
blotched faces of card tables  
winking golden beer  
bottle eyes up at the sky

it's coming like a needle switch  
to spinning black wax  
universes  
to that next aquatic  
off the wall bass-line oozing  
from porch-bound speakers  
that rattle a raspy Michael hook  
and little girls leap  
between double helixes  
of rainbow scaled snakes  
whose bodies thwack  
the sidewalk on beat with  
"can't stop 'till you  
get enough"

but you never know  
when you get enough  
when it will all stop

you never recognize the sights  
or sounds of change  
we just lego-stack around it  
around him splayed  
on the pavement  
the polka-dots of his shirt  
getting bigger and redder  
beneath him a perfectly round  
dark polished pool  
that engulfs his body first  
and then everything else whole  
including MJ's falsetto  
making this the last block party

## **cuss word**

a boy named man  
was my best friend,  
he lived next door  
and momma said  
they made him  
in a project

he once grinned at me  
as he choked-out  
his pet doberman  
with a fat gauged chain,  
the same grin he gave  
as he giggled thunder  
and showered warm piss  
on my face  
from the treetops  
and crunched into  
my little sister's forehead  
like a macintosh

i thought best friends  
were like daddies  
or appendages  
and birth marks  
something you were just  
born with  
so i became a parrot  
on Man's shoulders  
to keep the peace  
like i did at home

and that day,  
like man,  
i skipped crushed  
colt 45 cans  
across the street  
like creek stone  
at the big kids  
along with names  
that five-year-olds  
pitch at big kids  
like *booboo-heads*  
or *stupid-faces*  
they were all ignored  
anyway

so frustrated,  
Man launched  
a word like a mortar  
four rhythmic  
primordial syllables  
dive-bombing  
every ear drum  
the grown folks  
perched on porches  
perked up,  
teens straddled  
along fences flirting  
slyly smiled,  
murmuring about how  
*bad Man was*

so i blindly mimed  
sent that same word  
spinning  
like unleavened  
hot aluminum  
out into the universe  
and as it did  
i saw the shock shroud  
everyone's face at once

soon i was watching  
from the outside  
as my body  
was rabidly dragged by  
a multigenerational mob  
that joyously chanted  
over and over  
*awe, you in trouble,  
your daddy gonna get you*

at this point  
i'm not sure  
what he's gonna  
get me for

but put on the spot  
by the crowd  
daddy's eyes narrow  
and he growls  
*you know better*

but do I?  
then he lashed  
my bare rear end  
with his belt  
on the porch  
for five minutes  
in front of a vocal  
audience  
and through  
a blurry wet veil  
i see man  
and that same smile  
and i swear  
to never speak to that  
motherfucker  
ever again

## **Fellowshipping**

we'd go weekly  
daddy-less  
to this holy holiday place  
with jolly rancher windows

and even though  
the robed church daddy  
is mad at us all the time, too  
screaming until  
the sun shines  
from one side of church  
to the other  
because we tell stories  
which he calls "lies,"  
and we feel bad for that  
because stories  
makes it bearable

but when we all  
chant fourth  
commandments  
and tenet verses  
swaying in unison  
and then we open those  
bible-like books  
to gospel-spirituals  
that turns words from cages  
into bird boned  
feathered creatures  
fluttering out of our throats  
taking with it our thoughts  
our fears and selves  
that's when revisited  
that freedom i had before  
everything had to be  
interpreted

## barber school

*let me cut them sticker bushes boy*  
great aunt eva would say  
short, sturdy, and in a smock  
as i walked in the barber shop  
named after her  
*and give me some shugah too boy*  
her whiskered-lips pecked  
at my toddler cheeks as i cried  
and she excavated my head

after, she'd point at  
the many photographs  
of some guy  
dress normal  
who looked like daddy  
a little  
and says *he's your cousin,*  
*that's the champ*  
but I just wanted to leave  
that place

when i got older  
daddy said *eva never gives*  
*me the cut I ask for*  
so he bought some Wahl's  
hair clippers and tried  
to diy my hair in the kitchen  
with no training  
i felt the buzz before i heard it  
as the guard glanced off my skull  
and a black cloud floated to my lap  
as daddy gave a bass absent *oops!*

next day  
momma sanctioned  
daddy and i on an emergency  
sabbath morning haircut  
to stave of church embarrassment  
we went to the "big a" shopping center  
entered a wood paneled shrine  
of posters to that man aunt eva  
called champ  
only in these  
he's satin shorted and shirtless  
with shimmering sepia skin

while on tv played  
a vhs tape of this poetic warrior  
boxing through reporters  
and pundits and peers  
his whole career  
on infinite loop

when i get seated  
in the booster chair  
the barber asked me loud enough  
for the whole shop to hear  
*you know that you and your daddy  
are cousin with him?*  
he points to the tv, i shrug  
*did your daddy tell you about him?*  
i shrug again, daddy's eyes laser me  
then the barber using the  
blurring tube as visual aide  
proceeded to spin an epic tale

*this man was a titan hero from the hades part  
of louisville, like you and I and all of us*

*said to have hephaestus hammer fist, to be as swift  
as hermes especially in the lip, and prettier than helen*

*kidnapped at an early age and trained in troy  
by a pantheon of mere men rich off inheritance*

*their new achilles with a heel of an iq being so low  
he could avoid vietnam, by their design*

*if he stayed in line, he'd be their next  
mr. bo jangles-jack johnson,*

*but cassius wasn't their atlas for long  
though he was a brown Delphi*

*predicting then delivering liston to the mat  
putting his benefactor into cash comas*

*when clay's chest opened post fight for the world to see  
and trojan horse style out danced Muhammad Ali*

*mouths were gaped and a soon-to-be black-demigod  
tongue was launching fiery barbs at the oppressors' press*

*torching contracts introducing us to black self love  
especially after the cabal went after his heel...*

*but that's another odyssey  
and i'm done with your cut*

there's almost an ovation  
as i yearn to stay in the chair  
and hear more from this sage  
but as daddy paid, he interjected  
*my cuz just traded one master for another  
that shows how weak minded he was  
changing the family name and all*

the barber curls his lips  
in disbelief at everyone  
as he brushes away my hair clumps  
and says, *you know you just jealous  
'cause you still got that clay money  
which ain't shit  
compared to that Ali money*  
and the shop erupts with laughter and jeers  
at my daddy who just smiles  
like he does at home before he got violent  
only here, these are grown men  
so he just tips the guy and we leave

## **in the empire of the ants**

i'm in a son sandwich  
stacked between slices of sisters  
raised, protected, and outnumbered  
by women like a male ant

momma ran our colony  
kept the cabinets full  
angie taught me how to read  
before kindergarten  
and yvonne fought tony and saul  
for spitting on me like she was ali  
but daddy, who'd be useless now  
if he was an ant  
mounted an insurgency campaign  
undermining momma  
with mocking and physical dents  
to her exoskeleton  
telling me his word was law here  
though he was never here  
but I was young clay  
ready for patriarchal molding

and after my little sister and I  
saw a matinee on our cabled babysitter  
about giant radioactive ants  
devouring a resort full of people  
because of an incompetent  
joan collins (according to daddy)

outside, I unleashed a holocaust  
of pin point light and rainbow prisms,  
every crumbly dirt mound  
in the front yard is irradiated  
as patent leather thoraxes  
and mandible heads glow yellow-red  
then ash and snippets of smoke  
never reach my nose  
but I still smell the carcasses

then my litter sister strolls  
from the backyard  
hands brimming with tiny, black specks  
scrambling up her hands as she tosses  
their shelled-skin bodies  
into the chomp of her baby teeth

and says *you ever eaten  
ant heads before?*  
her face crackling with discovery  
she extends a handful to me  
and a smile dashes across my face  
and I drop my portable death oven-lens  
then she adds  
*they're pretty darn good*

## corner store

the ice age created a suite of simian junkies  
spoiled by the coast to coast rain-forest buffets  
of africa, from way before

human evolution is just one big  
chase for the next fix

now, they build interchangeable temples  
to our endorphins on every corner here,  
some to religion  
some to liquor  
some to easy cash

as young ones we ran errands  
for cigarettes and beer  
up the street to that key lime  
cinder block shop,  
draped with a constant macaroni  
necklace of cars,  
fronted by a garden of statue-men  
frozen mid medusa kiss  
backed by felted alleys of chance  
where you could win a whole  
abandoned pool  
if the police just shot through  
here, we learn to exchange  
coins the color of us  
for pockets full of brain rushes  
and attention crashes  
and kidney strokes  
distraction from our conditions

we unwrap and sip pandora  
our gateway locks busted  
wide open, well before  
we know who mary jane is  
or what brown sugar  
and white horses are

## on walks to bus stops

through our parkland neighborhood  
at the tail end of reagan's first term  
where my mom still saw  
    a soda fountain shop  
    tasting the bubbly bite  
    of root beer, mesmerized  
    to be at the front counter  
        (and not the back door)  
    watching the bustle  
    brown pedestrians  
    in business attire pass by  
i saw a decapitated building  
with graffiti-boarded eyes  
on a sluggish twenty-year  
death fall into a puddle of bricks

at that department store sized  
gaping gun shot wound  
at the corner of 28<sup>th</sup> and catalpa  
mom would peruse phantom aisles  
    and try on invisible garments  
    (like she couldn't  
    at any other fashion boutique  
    in town)

then she'd cross the street to the cinema  
    replaying the half a dozen times  
    she saw hitchcock's "the birds"  
    from her front row vantage point  
        (not the balcony)  
    she'd snarl and say something like  
    *they killed king*  
    *so we killed our neighborhood*  
    *that's how integration*  
    *really happened*  
    *as if it made us better*

but i was far too young to answer  
i'd stare through the theater's  
scorched rib bone joists  
jutting up  
from that shelled carcass  
framing the distant  
grey louisville skyline

with the morning mist

steaming  
off the charred edges,  
this whole block  
seemed to still smolder  
like the night after  
the assassination  
summer of '68

## **iroquois park**

on occasional  
fall saturdays  
mom broke sabbath  
and us out  
early from stain-glassed  
man-fashioned shame

we'd careen toward  
a bluffed body  
that olmstead re-traced  
that loomed whale big  
over the south louisville  
concrete sea

and while most  
would see  
project homes  
contiguous  
sodom or gomorra  
or a big outdoor  
whore or crackhouse

we'd see bible stories  
a porcupine leviathan  
to be swallowed  
for an hour or three  
us voluntary jonahs  
who run into the  
infinite rows  
of tulip poplar spines  
scaling the sweaty,  
autumn blazed back  
of this beast  
trying to find a mouth  
a way in  
to something bigger  
than us

but all we ever found  
at the top  
of this preserved hill,  
named for  
a wiped out culture,  
was a corked limestone  
blowhole-overlook

& the grey city  
that spiderwebbed out  
to every horizon

## for bedtime stories

we abandoned fairytales  
and fables  
and racist-ass dr. seuss  
early on

expanded into the bookcase  
saved for  
older sisters' school projects  
and indoctrination

started with the children's bible  
searing electric turquoise edition  
22 books with bearded khaki men  
on jackasses or camels  
on the cover, inside  
hokey illustrations teaching me of:  
david slinging goliath  
jesus nudging lazarus awake  
lot's wife morphing into  
a bag of morton's  
but i soon out grow myth

by kindergarten i wanted to be  
the brown encyclopedia brown  
with a 27 volume set of world books  
bound the same color as me  
with gold etching  
and intoxicating aroma of glue  
and words—many an early  
adolescent buzz was had  
off binding chemicals and ideas  
as i worked my way  
from aardvark to zygote  
for fun at first looking at the pictures  
of bare breast africans  
and animals i'd never seen before  
but soon i'm building better lies  
and a vocabulary out of the data  
i gleaned

but still i thirsted for more  
but mom warned i was too young  
for the last set all the way to the left  
with the *ebony* emblem on the cover,  
like the photo-books we got in the mail  
*encyclopedia* and *afro-american*  
also donned the front of the half dozen

hard backs that i snuck-read  
on the first page i flipped to  
was a photograph of  
paper-colored people smiled and posed  
in front of and behind a man-sized  
licorice twist, half clothed and tied  
to an ash heaped post smoke  
still hovering  
and even at that age not really  
knowing what i was seeing  
but i did know to slam the book shut  
and to not sleep right for a few nights

## **Section II**

## TV land

I.

That box, that my family converged on in evenings,  
wasn't for me, at first, I much rather machete through  
condemned lots or listen to old timers on porches  
telling stories that I'd forget.

My neighborhood was a chrysalis of brown faces  
and all the flat people in that television  
glowed pearly and otherworldly even when in  
the sears catalog, but I never saw them around here.

Maybe I couldn't recognize them in the world  
like westerners couldn't see blue until pillaging the Nubians  
but the first morning of first grade was my Indigo Day.

Fooled by my sparsely filled bus of fellow flesh-tones,  
I'm flung into a lunchroom filled with tiny TV people,  
but through my lens their skin wasn't luminescent lily  
no, in real life, it ranged from fresh pimple pus to  
plain pork rind with hints of barbecue.

Not symmetrical either, lumpy heads and blue veined  
faces seemed to emit the thick aroma of my neighbor's  
backyard Doberman kennel mixed with charcuterie,  
which could've been sack lunches, either way  
I felt weird, here.

II.

I got assigned a seat and instantly some no lip  
the color of a two-day old Band-Aid started,  
*my father says you're the same color as a turd*  
*'cause ya'll smell like one, you stupid*  
(what sounded like) *digger?*

cue laugh track of entire table of tiny TV people.

were TV people dumb as well as mean  
for no damn reason?  
Skin doesn't rub off that makes no sense  
They've been watching too much...  
then I wonder aloud,  
*what's wrong with being a digger?*

as soon as I speak  
the cafeteria monitor pounces  
she's the same color as lard  
with a matching roller-curved afro  
but a buttered, toothy growl  
she grabs me and says  
*as soon as I saw you come in  
I knew you were going to be nothing  
but trouble!"*

cue laugh track of entire room of tiny TV people.

She throws me at an isolated table  
with the rest of the *troubles*,  
that look a lot like me,  
our backs to the throaty chatter  
in our own neighborhood again.

## **My early philosophies on being a Seventh Day Adventist**

In early mornings  
of Sabbath school  
when teen teachers  
would tell me  
I must believe  
Jesus walked on water,  
raised the dead,  
and will bestow  
eternal happiness  
after his return.

I didn't buy  
the first thing  
after almost drowning  
in the pool  
trying to reenact it.

And raising the dead?  
I was young, I knew I'd live forever  
so who cared about that one

For that happiness one,  
no need for a return,  
he could have granted that  
right then and there  
by letting me stay home that morning  
to eat a porky, egg McMuffin  
in my pajamas, on the couch  
watching Saturday morning cartoons.

## hair like Eve

*--for all of my sisters*

a hundred thousand  
mothers before Eve  
our now erect  
hominid heads  
were getting battered  
by the equatorial sun,  
and skin built a wall  
of pigment and perspiration,  
while hair thinned  
and converged  
onto cranium, curling tight  
like a light absorbing cobra  
holding skull snug  
to sweat droplets  
in the tangle  
until evaporation  
reclaimed the wet  
when it did  
those wired hairs, wrapped  
into refrigerated coils,  
chilled our brains just enough  
for us to evolve

in the old living room  
when we were younger  
all my sisters saw  
kinky hair  
as a life long ordeal  
enduring third degree  
chemical burns and scalp scabs  
to straighten it like a pelt  
adapted for this climate  
we find ourselves in  
but then, they'd style it  
crimp and bend it  
with enriched plutonium-rods  
posing as curling irons  
that they rested seething  
on that couch cushion  
where I frequently sat

too bad I squandered  
two million years  
of evolved intelligence

maybe too much tv,  
perhaps my close-shaved head  
fried by summer's fervor  
led me to forget about those  
1980's short-shorts  
exposing my butt cheeks,  
led me to forget about  
looking before I sat

it's true what they say  
about the third time  
after hearing yourself crackle  
on broiling metal like breakfast  
meat on a skillet  
(and getting the nick name  
sizzilean from your mom)  
after having the entire family  
convene around  
your exposed posterior  
like a tv set  
of gooey skin being  
swabbed and bandaged  
yes, three times  
was definitely the charm

and now those branded scars  
are barely visible on my behind  
thirty years later  
and none of my sisters  
singe their brains anymore  
they all wear their hair  
like Eve

## Getting Sharp

Every Sunday night, daddy seized the living room for this ritual, all with his eyes tethered to *60 minutes* or *Night Rider* or maybe even *Murder She Wrote* depending on how many dates or appointments he had this coming week.

He'd lop off the steel pokers plunging from his nostrils, scrape a disposable razor down his face like metal grinding across whetstone, wax that fat salt-and-pepper mustache black, twisting the villain-curved tips, *'cause, good lookin' chicks don't check out old-weak cats*, he'd say taking his gaze off the tube only to lose it in the porthole mirror he held inches away.

He'd buff and varnish for a whole TV show, until my snaggletooth smile reflected back into his many pairs of Stacey Adam's oxfords and tasseled loafers. Both buzzed off the Kiwi brand polish, he'd say, *shoes are the second thing the white man's gonna judge you by. Ain't nothing you can do 'bout the first*, he'd point to my forearm's skin, *so you better get this one right, if you want to work in his world at all*.

Final step was unfolding the arrowhead board and firing up the steel-hot anvil to stab across a week's worth of button-up shirts until they were as thin and as crisp as papyrus. And if momma wasn't around he'd whisper, *you'll never get a good lookin' woman looking like a wrinkled junkie with bunchy-ass slacks*, boy, then he'd hone creases into his wool suit pants that were so acute  
they could slice a throat.

## The greatest encounter

It's August and my three sisters and I are dog tongues  
hanging out of half rolled-down backseat windows  
The eighty-something Chevy Citation, a sun sucking burgundy  
putters through downtown on Ali's boulevard  
we bubble across the cobbled Fourth Street, Louisville's center  
and daddy sees something and gets all jittery.  
He stomps us to a teeth loosening stop in the middle  
of the street and an artillery of horns buckshot us,  
as daddy woofs us out of the car.

Urban revitalization erected a brass and glass triangle  
out of the wrecked city  
and called it a galleria, a mayor-for-life's legacy,  
so that the people who ejected themselves  
could have a reason to be back down here  
on weekends, like now, flushed and reddened  
lined and wrapping around the corner  
trying to get an autograph  
trying to get nearer to something to someone great.

The man before the lightly cop-checked crowd  
has his back to us, so daddy nasally jeers  
like a fifth grader: *Cassius Clay!*  
the man snaps around, one eye-brow raised  
the graphic outlined portrait of himself  
etched and stretched tight across his chest  
along with the capped words "THE GREATEST."

He is the same model as daddy, just a bit paler  
same height, squared jaw, and clobbering fist,  
the man winces a smile his eyes are neon signs  
but when he speaks it's a rasp and I'm too short  
and swift to hear his paralyzed vocal chords  
too fresh to understand that this man I watched  
on barber shop TVs, acting in his own bio-pic  
talking circles around people paid to talk  
composing fights like concertos  
now struggled to raise his fist to my chin  
for a polaroid-proof with a second cousin  
he had never met and will never see again.

## **making of a casual astronomer**

at nine i wanted to blast off  
into the twinkle stifled, wisteria sky  
from my nocturnal west louisville backyard

because of incandescent city smog  
i didn't see my first milky way until  
the rain-danced renditions  
of the heavens bowed  
across a planetarium's dome

there they spoke of halley's coming  
once-in-a-lifetime journey frozen  
on the horizon edges for weeks  
and big-banged my interest  
in a telescope for christmas

didn't know people like me  
could go up there until ronald mcnair  
made me think it possible, to space camp  
in hunstville, decode background radiation  
at m.i.t., or scale olympus mons, someday

then that january morning  
in my third grade class via  
a live feed from cape canaveral,  
my dreams strapped to a shuttle  
that plumed orange halfway  
through lift-off  
into the glacial blue firmament

all our mouths stuck open  
as comet tails of white  
dissipated into nothing  
like any ambitions I had before

after that, i was content  
to pinhole project solar eclipses  
into shoe boxes, to hike parsecs  
into the wild on moon-bow hunts,  
to recline on indigo meadows  
embraced by black cliffs  
my nude eyes pointed up at the slate  
expanse, composing my own  
constellations out of a sky full of suns

## Mia McKenzie

I was over the god thing by the time she came to town,  
but her baby-hair side burns peeking from under pressed mane,  
milky way bar skin, and devout parents made me a believer again.

I don't even remember public school at this time, life was Sabbath  
to Sabbath. I even joined the Pathfinders, because I liked the outdoors  
and also for a chance to pitch a tent with her.

I made the bible bowl team to show her how quick I could recall  
the most mundane biblical details about Micah and Elisha  
even went to bible studies every Wednesday just to stare at her  
to get a glimpse of those Disney-doe eyes—the week after  
she was baptized so was I, even though I didn't know what it meant.

I got on the young pastors' track because her twin brother did  
hoping he was my in to her, I got fluent in all of Ellen G. White's  
visions of Jesus and the cherry picked bible verses, the foundations  
of S.D.A. sect. I even practiced to become good household sovereign  
as the bible instructed to train my wife right. I daydreamed some day  
that would be Mia and whatever that meant kissing? fighting? having kids?

Then abruptly one mid-week her family moved to D. C.  
I got stuck at a bible study heartbroken, but a part of the flock now,  
so all I could do was pray to God like Job to send me a new *one*  
like a featured sandwich at McDonalds. *Lord please send me*  
*a McRib of a girl to reproduce with and rule.*

## The inner monologues of lawns

“...it sent forth a green army and each week I beat it back with my infernal machine.  
—Michael Pollan, “Why Mow?” *New York Times*, 1989

When a boy, only on this continent because of a distilled tropical tincture of us, is old enough to be told by his father to take over from his mother the chore of mowing our green cuticles from a half-acre feudal remnant, that their pointless lives are built upon the boy sings, *I’m a man now*, and dances a rite of passage on top of our bladed bodies, and like leaves, we shake with laughter.

Us unmentioned deities—sun and chlorophyll fills us so efficiently for a millennium of millennia, we rounded the high crown molars, quadrupled the guts, and inflated fauna into the fur mountains grazing across the panoramas, while you still had a tail and a tiny brain overdosing on fructose in the endless trees.

We lured you out of the forest with the promise of obscurity in our fescue bosoms you nurse and grow, gangly like hairy periscopes stretching themselves out to see over our scruff.

Your coat thins from the heat and as you swim the savannah with new dolphin skin scavenging the scraps of big cats, fattening your cranium, elongating your fingers, and femurs until... finally, we stand you up.

After your slow adjustment to the climate and the annihilation of the most inept of our mega-propagators and their apex predators too, the scarcity left behind domesticates you into one of our best grazers so far.

You build sponged pyramids out of our toasted progeny to clog your colons. You don’t have enough stomachs yet, so you boil and spoil our cremated remains to sip our spirits to numb yourself to your own malnourished cerebral atrophy—aimlessly slashing, burning, and enslaving your way to what you call progress,

and when your species-wide kamikaze mission is complete, since you’ve colonized the entire planet with us, we will make short work of overgrowing all of so called *progress*.

**House listing: 1522 Hemlock**

*- Courier Journal classifieds, Bernard Clay Jr,  
Louisville, 1987*

Early century Arts and Craft bungalow:

deep stone porch,  
coal chute (lockout work-around)  
only two owners, and HVAC (minus the AC)  
back porch (half-fallen, mischieved with rats)

One bedroom:

big enough master for a king size  
(with closet space for wife in basement)

One bath:

shower-less spa tub, resilient toilet  
big, mirrored medicine cabinet  
easily handled four (ungrateful)  
women (hair-doing, makeup  
and toilet paper eating)  
for ten years

Converted attic:

two rooms one closet large enough  
to sleep 3 girls and a boy  
asbestos free most of the lead paint  
gone (chewed up by the boy)  
and great (box-fan sized)  
windows for summer

Unfinished basement:

completely finished (un-stocked) bar  
(slight tendency during down pours  
to flood into indoor pool of city sewage)

Huge backyard:

bald and completely shaded  
by a fence of trees  
perfect off street parking  
(as theft deterrent)

Gem of a house only reason I'm selling  
(my no-good wife said she didn't need me no more)  
I'm moving to Atlanta (where she wanted to go  
but couldn't afford) to become a preacher  
so get this place at a steal.

### **Section III**

## Doing the Ali Shuffle

I.

Daddy called it that when he saw family  
trying to use their link to the champ  
for personal benefit,

he'd reminisce to when he did it  
back when it was called  
doing a Clay shuffle.

He avoided many an ass-whooping  
in Central High hallways  
on the strength of the fear  
of his cousin's fist  
but daddy was adamant it ended there  
he wasn't *weak like the rest of them*.

But I guess I was,  
I started doing it too,  
but in Louisville amongst black folk  
unimpressed summed it up  
and when my bluff was called  
I'd end up getting in fights  
and after that time I got home  
and mom freaked out  
about the footprint on my face  
I stopped.

II.

Then I got sent to the wrong  
Seventh Day Adventist  
summer camp in Tennessee,  
and instead of Chattanooga  
I was in B.F.E..  
That is when I first realized  
that faith could be segregated  
and during that week,  
I grew crocodile skin and learned  
to swim, became an archer shooting  
bull's-eyes blindfolded,  
and hiked to high heaven and back.

But I never had so many good,  
white Christians  
call me nigger so much  
(usually, I never responded  
to white folk's chagrin)  
but seven days of non-stop slurs  
even broke me down.

Never had I blacked so many eyes  
happily fulfilling  
so many regurgitated stereotypes  
and when mom refused  
to come pick me up me early,  
I was quarantined.

My warden, who ran the concessions,  
made the connection of my last name  
with my hometown and I happily  
played it up, telling of a scenario  
where Ali cared about my grades.  
They wondered if he trained me,  
I and my bruised knuckles concurred  
(they either didn't know  
or cared of his illness).

After that they stocked my room  
with every confection and savory  
crisp fried treat they had  
and on the final day  
kids were running up to me  
to sign their bruises, happy someone  
that close to being a great, a nigger even,  
dotted their eyes  
and I never did the Ali shuffle again  
until I wrote this poem.

## Wildcrafting

As a Seventh Day Adventist  
armageddon was  
always around the corner.

In the 80's, Hollywood  
raised us babies on nuclear winters  
and extinction level event flicks,  
and the leader of the free world  
with a cigarette for a voice  
was always pre-empting  
the Cosby show to remind us  
of mutually assured destruction.

So at age ten I became a proto-prepper  
armed with a book  
to identify food sources and medicines  
from the weeds growing out of cracks  
in the roads the piped, brook marshes  
the hectares of forgotten prairies  
and the gaunt, edge-woods

I taught myself well,  
harvesting and processing  
for that day when this  
would all collapse,  
and my family were guinea pigs  
trying my creek cattail pancakes  
with fence honeysuckle syrup  
and steamed wild curb carrots  
with watercress  
and ditch, tadpole tar-tar  
on a bed of dandelion greens.

Because maybe they loved me  
or maybe they believed  
the world was going end too  
so they dealt with the bitter  
gamey meals I drug in  
from the wild fringes,  
endured them like a cold war,  
like judgment day.

## Contracting face blindness

I fit through loopholes  
testing into classes where I'm  
a Franklin, in a class full of peanuts,  
the silent brown addition,  
the Jim to all those white boys'  
Huckleberries, a viable prince  
for white girls if I wasn't, you know...

But this was only within  
the confines of school grounds.  
Outside at the Sizzlers,  
the malls, and the fall fairs  
at first I was overwhelmed  
by the barrage of pale,  
soon I started to filter out  
*friends*— out here  
there was no box  
for me to be ticked into  
and when I waved at them  
sometimes my face  
would melt into a pigmented  
blob to be feared or avoided  
as monstrous,  
or just invisible.

When I came home hurt,  
mom pulled me aside  
and said, *it does no good  
knowing people who  
don't have to see you.  
Just flatten them  
into the background  
and keep on walking.*

By the way they acted,  
I figured all my *friends*  
were taught the same thing  
so, I became a quick study  
of this game  
a real petri dish  
and the outside world  
soon transformed into  
a big obstacle course  
filled with two legged  
obstructions frosted away  
never recognized again.

## West End Venn

- A. A. The sour and yeasty breath of the distillery invisible and thick
- B. that spreads out for city blocks
  
- A. B. The tarry, cloud coughed up by the cigarette factory on eighteenth
- B. that curtains the whole area
- C.
  
- A. C. The acetone peppered vapors tooted by the water treatment plant
- into morning fog, turning it gold, as it rolls across the neighborhood

What do *they* call the “Intersection”  
where the diameters of A, B, & C’ overlap?

A burnt-out shell of a place for victims, too lazy  
to make a living? A reservation of hoodlums?  
Diabetes alley? Heart disease city? A place  
to avoid-at-all-cost (you hear from someone  
who bought drugs down there)? Or a future  
development boon, once the undesirables  
are displaced?

I called that vector home.

## Too old for recess

Around hour two  
we play a game storming  
the pixel bricked castle  
thinking we're bare lipped  
Luigi's and Mario's  
offering services for services.

We hop drawbridges,  
squaring off against  
eighth grade Bowers  
avoiding hammer fist  
and the Dozens  
to sometimes  
rescue the princess  
coconuts or pineapple  
from the clothes burning  
pelvic thrusts  
in hopes of receiving  
a lip glossed badge  
on the cheek.

We never ask the girls  
what they thought,  
we just grabbed the scruff  
of their school uniforms  
and yanked them  
from under the throbbing  
drenched male frames  
that pinned them  
to Ping-Pong tables, walls,  
and floors  
and while some fixed  
themselves up  
and thanked us  
some yelled at us  
like momma did  
when I tried to break up  
her and daddy.

And the big boys  
thought nothing  
atop the food chain,  
they were on autopilot  
perpetually grinding  
until they found  
something more tactile  
than air  
to octopus their bodies  
around

if we took that away  
sometimes  
we were on the menu too.

## Disfellowshipping

Eye shadowed, high heeled, crushed velvet  
regal capes, spritzed, fluffy 'do—an 80's Mozart,  
your virtuoso strum and high pitch raptor screech  
about petite scarlet Chevrolets, albino pigeons  
weeping, and periwinkle precipitation falling  
was the air my oldest sister breathed.  
That's how I heard of you.

I remember a guy at church—his fruit salad  
array of suits, processed hair, studded  
ears, and shadowed eyes at this place totally  
against makeup and jewelry on women  
much less men.

He was unique and sang in a high, fake pitch  
eyes closed, clapping his ringed hands  
as all the old ladies popped their necks  
and sucked on their teeth  
'Vonne start calling him baby Prince, after you.

You became a target of pastor Lestor's  
he started calling you out from the pulpit  
said you were ex-Seventh Day now sinner  
to the 28 fundamentals, un-wholesome  
lifestyle holder, all the while looking  
down at your double with disgust.

Later that year all the unwed mothers  
and baby Prince were purged  
from the church membership roll  
the same year I cheated  
at the conference bible bowl finals  
and won a trip to regionals in Biloxi  
my first trip alone across state lines  
but the guilt got to me  
and I confessed to Lestor  
who said he was proud I told him  
and that I seemed to learn my lesson  
so there was no need for our church  
to report this to the conference  
and get me and him *in trouble*  
for something I intentionally did  
unlike unplanned pregnancies  
or birth-given sexual identities  
and for that Lestor gave me  
a book written during  
the second great enlightenment  
just a sign of the times  
that my days maybe numbered here

and I see why you left this group  
why you turned from a god like this  
so you were my revelation.

## Do colors have brains?

Does red have a head  
on its shoulders?  
Can pink think?  
Does gray conceive  
that it matters?

If I was to pick  
a intellectual color  
it'd be green  
for chloroplast  
of course,  
no green people left  
except for ill whites  
but we all  
get a money tint  
before blowing chunks.

Nah, the genius hue  
is regal blue,  
blue people  
would be Atlanteans  
with cities built back  
in thirty thousand BC  
laughing at our color  
coordinated lives.

Here, in 1990  
Atlanta  
(or is the second nine  
upside-down?)  
did my classmate,  
who calls himself *friend*,  
really just pay me  
the *compliment* of being  
the smartest colored  
he ever met?

Did I really just croak back  
an instinctual: *thank you?*  
Instead of: *too bad I can't*  
*say the same.*  
No, down here,  
I keep my black mouth shut.

## The Dragon

Your father had a dragon living in his gut  
not a benevolent one like from Asia  
but an evil, European one— probably raped  
into our bloodline—your mother blamed  
his skipping meals all the time  
he would come home ready to lay waste.

Your sisters and mother were incombustible  
tangling tall those years toe-to-toe  
with his hugs, kisses and back-handed  
comments and hands  
but you couldn't even stand the  
sermon/belittling rides after the divorce  
back and forth from Atlanta  
he'd speak so long flapping those yellow,  
gapped teeth that abstract patterns  
steamed up all the car windows,  
as that vile creature inside him systematically  
picked you apart, that it controlled him is what  
you all hoped, he shoved everyone away constantly  
so that no one would get singed to death.

Puberty hit, and you needed a *male role model*  
so you lived with your father and started skipping  
meals, he made just a little too much for free lunch  
and those were the same days you'd get to sent  
to the office for choking out a kid on the bus stop  
and you noticed people's faces melting like Vick's  
vapor rub was smeared under their noses  
when you talked like your face did  
when your father spoke  
and that girl from across the street  
who sat next to you in art class who  
you constantly jeered yelled out to everyone  
just how stank that little creature that lived in you  
you had to admit it was genetic  
and now you had a dragon in you too  
would you destroy families? On think of yourself?

Your father's advice was  
that girl probably liked you  
then he gave you pack of Lifesavers  
said *winter green puts the dragon to sleep.*

## corporal training

it starts at home  
hand to butt simple enough  
then it escalates as you grow  
    green switches opens up legs  
    then belt welts back  
    then palm swells cheek  
    then balled fist quakes skull  
and what always followed:  
*i did it 'cause i love ya'*

in pre-k, preschooler knuckles  
    get racked daily by plywood rulers

first grade, the teacher is uncomfortable  
    so you get psychoanalyzed  
    & isolated, categorized uncontrollable

second and third grade they throw two black  
    surrogate *mammies* to control you  
    with their *black woman ways*

and in fourth grade the school ran out of diversity  
    in weekly disciplinary conferences  
    with the afro wearing principle,  
    your daddy frequently rain-checked  
    whoopings for when *you get home*  
    and the school made it formal they'd rather  
    you not be back for fifth grade  
    you just not *traditional school material*

then after the divorce, in indiana  
    that fifth grade teacher  
    that you threw a desk at  
    finally got to paddle you  
    like she deserved  
    two whacks and a denzel "glory"  
    tear rolling down your cheek

At seventh day adventist church school  
    You'd think they'd spare the rod for  
    sixth graders?  
    but the teacher had a shrine  
    to whooping ass  
    swatters as big as femurs  
    hanging on the wall  
    perforated and studded  
    pine, cherry, even ebony  
    bought in africa  
    while on missionary  
    now used on preteens

grabbing walls like toby  
you develop callouses

at the age they can charge you as an adult  
in the south, you watch,  
held rigidly at bay by billy-clubs,  
as a mother's head is driven  
into the black top by bright red  
men and in dark blue  
who have her son's throat  
crushed under military boot  
for loitering in an apartment  
complex he lived in

and while yours callouses aren't baton  
or bullet proof  
as you'll see in the future  
when people like you  
are beaten or wiped away  
on gashes of film on repeat  
in your morning news scrolls

at least you will be prepared  
for it...  
the no love this world  
has waiting for you

## **Section IV**

## The scrapped book

—*from the album*

They bought me at Target or some place like that  
when there were only four of them.  
I'd unhinge my jaw and open my mouth  
to a hundred and eighty degrees  
and my a hundred and twenty sticky tongues  
would capture and slow digest  
their memories by the slice.

At first my diet was just paltry portraits  
but after they got the Polaroid  
I started getting fat  
off of muted-colored moments  
blocked in white that smelled like carcinogens.  
But they still gave me check ups, making me say *ahh*  
especially when they grew into six of them  
feeding me and I got morbidly obese.

Kids shirtless wearing underpants as hats  
Fu-Man-Chu mustaches, three sheets to the wind  
stares, church choir solos, and Easter outfits,  
graduation and just because it was nice day.  
I became what I ate. I became them.

I don't know why they started moving me around,  
so much that my jaw tendons became stretch marks  
and I could barely pull myself together and then  
they stopped feeding me and examining my insides?  
Then the big, male one, the one I've barely tasted  
who's barely glanced at me anyway  
he puts me away somewhere out of the house  
it's dark but with all their stuff for a long time  
he was the last one I saw before I'm taken to here  
to be slowly buried under a mountain of memories  
as I liquefy, and dissolve their's forever.

**nomadic**

*--For mom*

there' nothing keeping  
us here but tending rot  
and force, why not leave?

it's cold and away,  
migration for the sake  
of sanity's peace

through the garden of  
divorcee's we find ourselves  
and our brass backbones

even if returned  
we will never be able  
to stay in this drought

so you have to get  
content with being out there  
always moving on

## **Cult (*kült*):**

1. a. Initially, a harnessing of human energy  
around an idea.
- b. Later, a yoke for consciousness, a system  
of sacramental tyranny  
for the befuddled  
its origins unknown  
but still followed.

*A patchwork of **cults** currently composes  
our capitalist societies.*

2. a. An obsessive, groupthink collection, gen. in the service  
of one person, a small cabal,  
or even the worshipper themselves  
where people feel exclusive  
to suffer ritually and intellectualize away  
guilt created by the bogus scheme originally.

*Mom lost another 200 bucks to that **cult** Avon.*

- b. A coalescence around esoteric interest, like reserving blocks  
of hotel rooms and exhibition space  
at exotic locales only to spend hours  
in drab convention centers discussing  
the rapture. Or secede from the US,  
force every childbearing female to marry  
and have a kid by the same father,  
the reincarnation of Jesus Christ.

*That Waco, Texas **cult** that went to war and lost  
in a fiery televised stand-off  
was an offshoot of the Seventh Day Adventist...  
which is a legitimate church not a cult?*

*So then is atheism a **cult** or even science?*

## Rewind of a Central High Dance

Saturday 8:25 AM. Home. He wakes, sun eats his eyes, carpet filled mouth soaks up the Cisco after taste, his subwoofer heart beat is booming. Strange bite marks around his mouth ache. His mood sours when he notices scarlet lashes across his new kicks that he still wears face down in the middle of his mother's kitchen. Last night was an absolute disaster.

Saturday 3:30 AM. Heading down Broadway. In somebody's backseat. He devours the extra spicy two piece and wedges from Indi's. He can barely keep his head up. His lips are on fire but not from the chicken. He feels like an LP spun at 45 RPMs.

Saturday 2:10 AM. Central High parking lot. He's posted up on a car in the gridlock of people, scattered terrestrial thunderstorms erupt blaring from car trunks. He puts up a brave front but all he sees are lips moving and heads jiggling on stumps. He burps up bile after awhile. He wonders where his Cisco and girlfriend went. And oh yeah Rocket.

Saturday 1:30 AM. Central High Gym. Lights up. Linked off-duty officers and security guard's baton sweep across the floor. The DJ is a rooster-less hen during a coyote attack clucking orders into the mic as He listens entering the crush of the crowd and slips in the blood, staining his new Air Maxes, but he's barely in his body much less his shoes. He gets tugged through an exit by his boy Kamal, but Rocket is no where to be found. Rocket's billy clubbed now, he guesses.

Saturday 1:00 AM. Central High Gym dance floor. the song "Ain't Nothing But A G Thang" debuted just weeks ago. and now he is in a step-line with Rocket and Kamal leaning back at the *duh-da-duh-da* part in the middle of the woven, spiral of people and *ole girl's* lipstick is smeared all over his face and every time he thinks about it, his first kiss as blurry as it is, he misses the beat so they boot him from the line and he goes back to the bleachers to polish off the Cisco bottle he lost or maybe see *ole girl* again but he never finds either.

Friday 11:56 AM. Central High Gym bleachers. He's arguing with his nemesis who's also drunk but they keep getting side tracked and giggle. The tension is thick as they continue to drink, next thing he knows *ole girl* has him pinned to the bleachers and they are swallowing each others faces. Wait, is she biting his face, he thinks until the V.P. breaks them up again and again.

Friday 10:52 PM. Undisclosed West End liquor store. It's packed like every other liquor store. Has the bulletproof glass like every liquor store. As Rocket orders in front of him, he wonders why this place sells to under age kids but then it was his turn and he quickly chirps, *two purple Ciscos please.*

Friday 10:10 PM. East 70 mph somewhere on I-64. His dad is pushing the disintegrating Corolla to assured destruction and to the most important dance in the history of dances and suddenly says *Oops!* Comes complete stop in the middle of the Interstate, flips the car into reverse and catches that junction he missed a hundred yards back, all the while a wall of semis are breathing down their rearview. He looks at his friend Rocket who is looking at him like *What the fuck is wrong with your daddy?*

Friday 8:56 PM. backline of McDonald's, Mall St. Matthews. The stores are about to close and Rocket and him are devising a way to both leave at the same time which is notoriously hard when one person is delegated to dish washing. They are both admiring what their first paychecks have bought them from the Nike company and dogging out *ole girl* who they both hate and hopes she's not at the dance tonight. Rocket has a plan to get some liquor but they need a quick way downtown. Rocket tells him to hit up the last resort.

Friday 7:22 A.M. Home. He wakes in the hide-away bed a bar in his back but a hope in his mind that this dance will be different. That he won't just sprout roots and attach to wall at this dance tonight. All he had to do was make it through a day of class and a few hours work at the Mickey Dees and then he'd be at the apex.

## **The greatest, missed encounter**

Muhammad Ali,  
first black poet I ever idolized  
from “Eyes on the Prize II,”  
that accentuated his word-talent  
over his orchestrated violence.

I retraced his footprints  
through the hallways  
of Central High school  
I scribed my own rhyming  
radical psalms,

when he visited  
junior year,  
my own blood,  
I watched as  
classmates mobbed  
this man entombed  
on two feet  
a trembling wax statue,  
all of them taking pictures  
with their fist raised,  
and him, assisted,  
has his single fist raised,  
his eyes dribbling  
down puffy cheeks,  
he’s barely dwarfing  
anyone now.

And I can’t go or  
speak to the champ,  
I can’t even look him  
in his eyes.

## Black Friday

I.

St. Matthews mall. McDonald's at the food court  
day after Thanksgiving '93 the crowd is like  
"The Terminator:" *it absolutely will not stop*

We are also a man down and I'm flipping  
24 burgers at a time as the tan-bed Peter Pan  
owner (who was gifted this place from his daddy)  
is elbow deep with me on the backline, for once  
his black-mossed arms a duo of rabid minks  
attacking tray after tray of quarter-pounders  
that I spatula over to him as he shoots mustard,  
ketchup, and rehydrated onion guns onto toasted buns.

Then I notice one of his knuckle barbs protruding  
from a Big-Mac that he's boxing up and I miss  
the split second transfer of burger to bun  
and a soggy near-meat, patty flopped to the floor  
and normally *that product* would get tossed  
(or if we are really busy five second rule),

but the boss-man uses this opportunity,  
in the middle of the grand pappy of dinner rushes,  
for a teachable moment/ temper tantrum  
(like only white men can legitimately get away with)  
exploding all over the backline his synthetically  
olive skin now flushing burnt sienna lecturing me,  
simultaneously kicking the McNugget fryer,  
about how that fifteen cent patty cost me  
one of those mythical raises whites talk about

maybe he notices the look on my face  
maybe he thinks I will walk out on him  
and he'll be stuck as tickets still rang in  
so he stops and says, *look son, I'm a perfectionist.*  
*Let me see if I can put it into terms you might*  
*understand, you play ball, right?*  
I look at him blankly and he shakes his head for me  
*Well I'm like Phil Jackson—no, Bobby Knight*  
*and you know how he is? Right?*  
I'm still blank but he doesn't even look this time  
*I just expect the best from my players like him*  
*you see? That's how he got a perfect season*  
*and we can have a perfect night. So follow my order;*

*and don't waste my shit!*

I just respond  
*Well if you start throwing chairs and screaming at me  
like you crazy like Bobby, do know  
there's no scholarships restraining me.*

He nervously flashes his veneers  
and volunteers to work the grill

II.

Rocket would always say  
*snitches end up in ditches*  
(I guess to avoid the cliché)  
after we noticed that our golden arched  
monogrammed uniforms  
were invisible cloaks  
at the Bacon's department store  
and we started a venture of gifting gear  
for a rebate to our class mate  
this was before security cameras, ink bombs,  
and tracking electronics  
we were the reason for these things

and that day was supposed to be like  
our first 16 Christmases combined  
a smorgasbord of gear to loot  
disappearing into the clutter of people  
and the proof, was eight hundred dollars' worth  
clothes currently stretching the seams  
of the break room

but with a half an hour until close  
Rocket thinks he's omnipotent  
takes one more run at it  
leaving me owner to drown in his wake

an hour into closing clean up  
the police stop by to ask if I  
was in on the felony theft  
of all that stuff back there  
Rocket says I was

But when I pull out a receipt  
for a single pair of turquoise jeans

the insurance items I bought  
every time we *worked* the Bacon's,  
the police tell me to leave  
and I'll start calling Rocket  
--Prophet if we ever speak again

## **Hitch hiker's guide to lust**

I'm clueless on the matter of double X'es  
despite being embedded with them my whole life,  
dad's insight only accounted for his conquest.  
Sister's boyfriend said, in no specific order,  
*put the girl's hand to your meat and talk  
the bullshit she talks*, so no wonder why

she keeps on passing me by.

I was only infatuated with those  
hyper-colored acrylic nails and hair,  
merlot lips that framed gold capped teeth,  
effervescent lingo, and an entire Claire's boutique  
on their knuckles, noses, ears, and necks  
my choices always picked thugs or dealers  
over me, they just wanted to be poetic muses  
leaving me on TARC stops wondering why

she keeps on passing me by.

Eventually, rap lyrics and instructional videos  
lifted from nudie stores gave me strategy  
for an assault on the other sex.  
I wrapped and palmed my way to second base  
on an art camp bus leaning my eager body  
on her until I'm deflected and know exactly why

she keeps on passing me by.

## In the Act of Stealing

--“Cash Clay Caught”  
Oct 14, 1883 Courier Journal

Great, great uncle: “notorious Cash. Clay”  
and I, over a hundred years apart, got jammed up  
in that same human history long discourse over  
ownership, you know, finder’s-keepers,  
until men with bigger sticks come.

Cash got arrested grifting a bolt of goods  
worth \$40 dollars from a brick-row general store.  
He fought off three officers before he went down.  
At Cash’s house they found his stash.  
He had been stealing a hat-a-day  
and was suspected after too many coloreds  
had bought the expensive one dollar Bowlers  
from a Smoketown pawn shop.

On the first day of senior year  
I got pinched at a mall-bound JC Penny’s  
for stuffing a pair of \$50 dollar jeans into my book-bag  
as my friend Rocket played lookout, but not very well

Handcuffed, facedown on the backroom office couch,  
my captors lamented calling the mall cops at all,  
because, I really *seemed like a good one*,  
*oh well, too late now*.  
The never found the car trunk load of clothes I stole  
before they caught me.

Cash got a grand larceny conviction and 7 years  
hard labor at the state pen—some of that James Crowe  
deluxe treatment, that was getting started back then.

I got labeled an underage offender, given 20 hours’  
community service that I worked off playing Sega  
Genesis in the basement of the YMCA for my sister’s  
baby’s daddy’s after school program.

Cash got written up with a headline in the Courier,  
portrayed spooky, “Birth of a Nation” style  
as a *scary hoodlum* who continually terrorized the town

I got my record sealed for being a minor.

we both offered no apologies over stuff over things  
not to the descendants of those who  
offered none for pilfering a people.

How to cheer for an Uncle Tom

Reward police let them off scot-free  
for a televised beating in an apartheid city  
that erupted in flames.

Take a perfect coon  
so removed, he's the mayor of Brentwood,  
who see's the world as post-racial,  
a meritocracy he conquered  
through sheer thigh power alone.

Interrupt the NBA Finals  
with a Bronco truck chase  
elevating a gruesome crime  
to the grandest stage ever networked  
giving us just a taste  
of the 24/7 news cycle  
using a slave day narrative  
of a buck run amuck on *a pure* lady  
to fuse us to every screen.

Adjudicate the case  
in daily video increments,  
an indictment on our judicial system  
and our standardized skin bias  
because the overseers have been beating,  
killing, and setting us up since before  
they were called officers  
and now we were finally on the jury.

Wait for a verdict  
with a world wide audience  
so that a man  
we barely knew or liked anymore  
could get acquitted  
for our four-hundred  
and fifty years of suffering,  
a reverse Messiah  
whose name *we* can use  
like a trigger,  
like an *N word*.

## **Section V**

## misogynist bisque recipe

quarter every female body into categories  
grade and rank every curve

take a daily preaching from every father  
raised the *old way*  
(who never considered a woman  
could not take his name or  
not know her place)

marinate in 1 society constructed entirely  
of *locker room* talk, of *boys will be boys*,  
of letting everything slide  
because, *we gotta propagate, right?*

2 cups of *hormone*-induced laziness  
a pinch of privilege (depending on skin color)

pummel and pulverize together with fist,  
systemic fulcrums, and gun butts until blended  
into a roux of self-righteousness  
heat with defensiveness until smooth and creamy,  
warm to the tongue and easy to swallow

## poet versus the professional

he waits	to smelt his pain
back there	with imagination
to ambush	for pennies
with silk slip knots,	he smiths words
starch-collared straight jackets,	and dreams of full stomachs

he wants his body back

to homestead	to submit and get rejected by
cubicle ranches and	slowly asphyxiating journals stuck
bouncing ergonomic chairs	in debt black holes for degrees
off of glass ceilings	of separation to the literary famous
punching clocks	no dollars and a jaded dream
instead of air	just marauding for ear-fulls

but we have no choice  
but to coexist

## The Enchanted Rotunda

The capitol of this once  
Switzerland of the states,  
is a stone carved,  
Greek revival behemoth,  
atop a hill with a tulip tongue.

Inside is the man attraction  
Abe Lincoln whose mettle-  
backboned, bronze brown,  
cloak thrown, 6 foot 4 inch  
frame is ready to strut  
across the great lawn  
to free the slaves again.  
Circled around him  
were the state's *most notable men*  
from doctors to compromisers  
them all in bronze too.

All except for the self professed  
Mississippian gentleman,  
Jefferson Davis,  
the president of a figment  
leering directly behind Abe  
he's white on white  
speckled fine Tennessee marble  
like the walls his eggshell eyes  
sternly, locked on the back  
of Lincoln's brown head.

Only in this fantastic place  
does Davis tower over  
his adversary who defeated him  
(even though he commanded  
West Points brightest)  
and here, Davis (is the only)  
engraved "Hero,"  
his resume etched pedestal as tall as he  
and redacted of the rivers he ran red  
with the blood of the poor.

Whose children's-children's-children  
stampede through this magical place  
today, bussed from the hollers to the burbs  
on mandatory school civic field trips  
posing in class pictures at Davis' feet,  
because this (they've been told)  
is their heritage  
this is what makes them great(er).

## Excavating the neighborhood

### Park Duval

A government's new hope  
part six for the millennium  
vinyl cloned homes  
and mixed income apartments  
crowded onto postage stamp lots  
that dash toward the interstate-  
obstructed horizon,  
barred by the shadows  
of coal-ash smokestacks,  
a gentry prepping,  
antiseptic model  
of inner-city suburbs,  
engineered over  
the powdered bones  
of Southwick  
& Cotter Homes.

### Southwick & Cotter Homes

A fifty year, federalized  
social experiment,  
named after a white developer  
who got rich off coloreds  
and the poet mayor  
of the previous  
autonomous locality,  
it's a labyrinth of brick  
megastructure tenements  
with terra cotta knots of poverty  
tied along a single snaking  
strand of perforated street,  
dead-ending at a fortress-  
headed cul-de-sac,  
with blue and white eyes  
that shoot through  
and vaporizes  
a bills of rights,  
this is the beast  
that swallowed whole  
Little Africa.

### Little Africa

Sometimes called  
the Black Parklands,  
once called Needmore,  
forgotten freed slaves

self governed  
self educated  
poplar boarded paths,  
framed by businesses,  
by homes—from wood  
cottages to two-storied  
bungalows  
stacked and cobbled  
choked to the river  
growing  
like a trumpet vine  
from the black earth,  
from this  
bypassed swamp

bypassed swamp

Nameless estuary  
*too many mosquitos*  
*& stink*  
*to do anything here, yet*  
back before  
Beargrass creek  
was a sewer,  
and it still flowed  
through the middle  
of what would become  
downtown,  
draining sediment  
into the river  
feeding Corn Island enough  
to birth a city  
before it too got chewed down  
into the spangle of stones  
breaking the dark  
Ohio's current.

## **original trekker**

it's funny when i'm wrapped in green  
feet beating to the universal thump  
i have my hiking poles and trail runners  
and when people see me out there  
say the canyons of kauai, or a conifer  
forest in arizona, or an elk prairie in the smokies

i get the same look like i just pissed in their pool  
and corn flakes, like, what the hell am I doing here?  
these places, these national parks, these back  
country trail, these paradises aren't for  
people like me the color of wood and earth

which is funny because if you go back  
to antebellum america or prehistoric man  
back to land masses and you'll see  
that most of the first footprints  
to impress upon these places were like mine

## Spell to evaporate essential hypertension

Prepare the body by exposing it  
to untold amounts of radiation  
and other intrusive rays  
costing three month's salary.

Have a smug witch doctor  
read your tarot chart  
where he can't identify why  
your blood pressure is so high  
but have him diagnose you anyway  
say it's must be your skin color  
although they haven't really  
done any studies on it  
or developed any drugs,  
too small a population,  
not enough money in it.

Invoke a mantra in your mind  
that will open an Einstein-Rosen  
bridge to every Atlantic ship  
filled with breathing cargo  
headed to the new world  
from the oldest  
going back five hundred years.

Take the junk they throw overboard  
who can't handle the vitamin D  
deficiency and put portholes  
in the hauls, for the ones who can't  
retain salt enough to drink every three  
days, build canteens down there  
expand the gene pool  
so that people only built to survive  
the extreme don't become the normative.

Better yet incite insurrections on every ship  
and turn them around, every single one.

## **The last greatest encounter**

Last time we met  
he's boxed and shrouded  
in black velvet and gold Arabic  
but his presence was felt,

propelling the pedals of a thousand bikes  
cruising through the peaceful West End,

padding the soles of a city running along side  
his twenty-mile long funeral procession,

pumping through the veins  
of anyone he encountered,  
that he treated like family,  
they all have reverence for him.

Meanwhile, his actual family,  
posted to social media  
pictures posed with caskets  
and celebrities  
from the wake and memorial  
like it was a night at the Oscars.

## The shave

In Pokhara, Nepal  
I limped into a candy cane  
pole-signed stall  
off the main drag  
post trek and bearded

I sit and a gentleman  
straight razor armed  
dispatches my facial hair  
with the least amount  
of water possible  
and as a warm towel  
a clear astringent stone  
soothed my face  
I noticed a tiny black  
and white picture  
of a young  
Muhammad Ali  
stuck to the mirror

I'm struck  
and proud by this  
my eyes smiled  
he sees that  
and points at the image  
I say *that's my cousin*  
which the man believes  
since the whole world thinks  
all darker people  
are related and know each other

the barber  
who had only spoken  
two words of English,  
proceeds to chant,  
*Ali Bomaya! Ali Bomaya!*  
then he tells me  
of the Ali he knew  
the Samson-Gilgamesh  
of a man who took out  
a hundred challengers  
with a jawbone of an ass  
and is still as pretty today  
as he ever was and I feel like  
I'm a five years old again.

## **Vita**

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