

for Andrew - Danez Smith

*i. swagged-out Jesus*

you named yourself that mess when you wore the rainbow  
beaded crown a la Stevie in the '70s & let the great religion  
of your belly hang like some Southside Buddha  
with a boombox dangling from your neck old Radio  
Raheem looking ass dude walking around blasting Ye  
random folk following you like you were the Christ  
of the night or maybe just a mirage of bass  
& flesh stained with June's turmeric—

o if the gods would let me edit & loop  
o if i could stop here—

*ii. ending with nothing*

~~what do you do when a boy lynches himself  
when the mob isn't after his skin~~

~~but under it, when anything that can hold  
his weight becomes a tree, when you can't~~

~~close your eyes & not see him there—  
low brown planet, swayed orbit~~

~~cooling rapidly? i counted all the things  
used to end a boy but forgot~~

the boy himself. how could i?  
i considered it

the matter of you neither created  
nor destroyed but something

we have no word for, only myth  
& faith & doubt about the place

that lives – we hope lives – after the body  
spits out the soul like a seed.

we are left to harvest this black fruit –  
your name perched in past tense.

what good is hiding the gun  
& locking the cabinet if the boy

can still find his own hands?  
if anything that loops can be a rope?

i want to believe you did an Ebo thing  
soaring the ocean floor to an older home

but dammit, Andrew  
they turned you into dust. dust.

your whole body grey in a brass bowl  
waiting to be scattered, to jewel

the wind, get caught in our eyes.  
in dreams, i pull at a rope for hours

miles of rope & rope & my bloody  
hands & when i get to the end –

you, hooked & laughing  
so hard i wake up to the windows

rattling with no storm or breeze  
or world out there at all.

*iii. for the dead homie*

bury me under your heft of titles:  
*love who makes me rude to other loves*  
*love who makes me like me like me*

*rose sweet chemical in the blood*  
*tender wind that makes the brain blush*  
*storm that scares the storm away*  
in me--a monument to your fray.  
in you--a trap door back to myself.  
before holy there was your grace  
messiah of the random Wednesday.  
a world without you is not a world.  
thy terrain & bounty include my hands.  
my main. higher light in a room of light.  
when you went i choked the dirt.

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when you went i choked on dirt  
i ate my way to Australia, i smoked hella  
i dressed in headlights & sirens  
i thought about it, i put the pills back  
i burned the medicine cabinet, burned  
the house, burned the city, burned  
the last years down to cinders & drank  
yes i drank them down, i wanted to be  
bloated with fact: you are not  
a thing i can touch, a voice i can call  
a shot at the bar, a shot at making it big  
but didn't you? didn't you make it big, fam?  
aren't you all of it now? i call for God.  
i call for God but out comes your name.

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i call for God & out comes your name  
& then your blood next, wraps its weight  
around your christening, next, bone-  
colored seeds plant themselves in you  
& become bones, bloom fields of muscle  
& organs from orchids, little dandelions  
that dry into skin. next come seeds  
for your eyes, a seed for your voice

a seed to make you dance, a seed  
that looks like your mother & a boy  
comes flying right out my mouth  
burrows root & prayer into your chest  
& had he always been there? the boy  
beautiful & waiting for someone to see?

//

beautiful & waiting by some sea  
purple with the waves of your laugh  
your frequency somewhere between  
sound & light, bright note singeing dawn.  
to arrive to you would be heaven enough.  
somewhere, you're a city with a boy  
in every window calling down to me.  
i call back, our voices fat the air  
with nectarines. you laugh so hard  
you become the wind & every ribbon it holds.  
your body is all silk & all air, you are in my hair.  
you're an opal braid, an amethyst twist.  
give me that eternity--i'll breathe  
you in, you nourish & strangle.

//

i breathe you. in you, i nourish. strangle  
your name out my mouth if you could  
but you are a smoke i can swallow, fire  
rich with something thicker, honey begat  
by flames, the wet of burned skin.  
your name is honeydew glass. i hunger  
& bleed for it, cough up burgundy mercies  
for it, but it's always true the same way.  
my nigga is gone. he took himself away  
from himself, he flung himself higher  
than the oldest light i know, light so old  
it's gone from where it started & is seen  
only years from here. it's true, a star

withers here, blooms up in a farther sky.

//

“withers here, blooms up in a farther sky.”  
pretty right? but wasn’t shit cute.  
i was ugly with your going. i had its bad teeth  
& scabs, heaving up dark, my skin clotting  
then becoming like black tumbleweeds.  
i was a hollow block, a ghost hood  
where liquor tips itself sideways  
bleeds out in memory of hands.  
over the toilet, nothing left to leave me  
but sound. i was not ready to be your witness  
i broke like champagne against your vessel.  
but to see your mother, to see her see you  
settled into a jar? what’s it like to lose all that?  
your child? your ark? your lil friend? your summer?

//

your fat cheeks, your ark arms, your summer  
everything, your royal radius, your bleeding yes  
the verb your name makes, so much  
to smile about in spite of that final data.  
in your honor, we plant an acre of blue  
a row of collards for you to bouquet or boil  
we sing a hymn made of chamomile & kush  
sing our lines of sparks & gone suns  
until our song is a wall of light so thin  
you could miss it so wide it halves the world  
& out the bright, you stumble  
pat yourself gently &  
  
enough.

Jos Charles - *feeld*

## The Door:

BY JEAN VALENTINE

When I first heard you on the phone  
your voice had to be that '40s wartime voice  
for it to get under my skin like it did,  
after seven years asleep.

*You're at the beginning of something,* you said,  
*and I'm at the end of something;*  
but you didn't go away,  
twice-born, three times, coming around,  
rough cello.

Late days

I want to drive to your grave,  
But I don't belong to it.

LVII.

tonite i wuld luv to rite the mothe inn the garden / 2  
greev it / & as a mater off forme / did u kno  
not a monthe goes bye / a tran i kno doesnt dye / just  
shye off 27 / its such a plesure to be alive /  
inn this trembled soot / u lent / shock is a  
struktured responce / a whord lost inn the mouthe  
off keepers / & u thum at the mothe / a dozen bes /  
i tetherred thees nites / i gathred so manie trees

## blessing the boats

BY LUCILLE CLIFTON

(at St. Mary's)

may the tide  
that is entering even now  
the lip of our understanding  
carry you out  
beyond the face of fear  
may you kiss  
the wind then turn from it  
certain that it will  
love your back may you  
open your eyes to water  
water waving forever  
and may you in your innocence  
sail through this to that

## the mother

Gwendolyn Brooks - 1917-2000

Abortions will not let you forget.  
You remember the children you got that you did not get,  
The damp small pulps with a little or with no hair,  
The singers and workers that never handled the air.  
You will never neglect or beat  
Them, or silence or buy with a sweet.  
You will never wind up the sucking-thumb  
Or scuttle off ghosts that come.  
You will never leave them, controlling your luscious sigh,  
Return for a snack of them, with gobbling mother-eye.

I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of my dim killed  
children.

I have contracted. I have eased  
My dim dears at the breasts they could never suck.  
I have said, Sweets, if I sinned, if I seized  
Your luck  
And your lives from your unfinished reach,  
If I stole your births and your names,  
Your straight baby tears and your games,  
Your stilted or lovely loves, your tumults, your marriages, aches,  
and your deaths,  
If I poisoned the beginnings of your breaths,  
Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate.  
Though why should I whine,  
Whine that the crime was other than mine?—  
Since anyhow you are dead.  
Or rather, or instead,  
You were never made.  
But that too, I am afraid,  
Is faulty: oh, what shall I say, how is the truth to be said?  
You were born, you had body, you died.  
It is just that you never giggled or planned or cried.

Believe me, I loved you all.  
Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I loved you  
All.

## Conversation by AI

*for Robert Lowell*

We smile at each other  
and I lean back against the wicker couch.  
How does it feel to be dead? I say.  
You touch my knees with your blue fingers.  
And when you open your mouth,  
a ball of yellow light falls to the floor  
and burns a hole through it.  
Don't tell me, I say. I don't want to hear.  
Did you ever, you start,  
wear a certain kind of silk dress  
and just by accident,  
so inconsequential you barely notice it,  
your fingers graze that dress  
and you hear the sound of a knife cutting paper,  
you see it too  
and you realize how that image  
is simply the extension of another image,  
that your own life  
is a chain of words  
that one day will snap.  
Words, you say, young girls in a circle, holding hands,  
and beginning to rise heavenward  
in their confirmation dresses,  
like white helium balloons,  
the wreaths of flowers on their heads spinning,  
and above all that,  
that's where I'm floating,  
and that's what it's like  
only ten times clearer,  
ten times more horrible.  
Could anyone alive survive it?

## Author's Prayer - Ilya Kaminsky

If I speak for the dead, I must leave  
this animal of my body,

I must write the same poem over and over,  
for an empty page is the white flag of their surrender.

If I speak for them, I must walk on the edge  
of myself, I must live as a blind man

who runs through rooms without  
touching the furniture.

Yes, I live. I can cross the streets asking "What year is it?"  
I can dance in my sleep and laugh

in front of the mirror.  
Even sleep is a prayer, Lord,

I will praise your madness, and  
in a language not mine, speak

of music that wakes us, music  
in which we move. For whatever I say

is a kind of petition, and the darkest  
days must I praise.

## Catullus 101

from *Nax* translated by Anne Carson

Many the peoples many the oceans I crossed —  
I arrive at these poor, brother, burials  
so I could give you the last gift owed to death  
and talk (why?) with mute ash.  
Now that Fortune tore you from me, you  
oh poor (wrongly) brother (wrongly) taken from me,  
now still anyway this — what a distant mood of parents  
handed down as the sad gift for burials —  
accept! Soaked with tears of a brother  
and into forever, brother, farewell and farewell.