

BETWEEN

STARSHINE

AND

CLAY



2020 national youth poet laureate anthology
edited by meera dasgupta, samuel getachew, and dr. camea davis

2020 NATIONAL
YOUTH POET LAUREATE
ANTHOLOGY

About the Youth Poet Laureate Program

The National Youth Poet Laureate Program is an initiative of Urban Word, in collaboration with local youth literary arts organizations across the country, The President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, and championed by the leading national literary organizations, including the Academy of American Poets, Poetry Society of America, PEN Center USA, and Cave Canem. In 2008, Urban Word launched the program, the nation’s first ever, in partnership with the NYC Voters Assistance Commission and the NYC Mayor’s Office. In 2013, Urban Word partnered with six of the top youth literary arts organizations in Los Angeles to launch the first-ever LA Youth Poet Laureate program, and announced the inaugural Los Angeles Youth Poet Laureate. Since then, Urban Word has partnered with leading youth literary arts organizations to launch Youth Poet Laureate Programs in 35 more cities across the country and counting.

Founded with the commitment to create elevated platforms to celebrate the intersection of artistic achievement *and* social impact, Urban Word partners with local literary arts organizations with mission-based commitments to marginalized youth and people of color, diverse artist-led organizations, and organizations that value youth leadership.

For more information visit youthlaureate.org



Letter from the Editors

This decade may be likened to a changing tide. A crest, erupting from the ocean's gut, consuming the shoreline and those who call it home. Some days, it may feel as if you are alone in this cyclical rising and falling. The exhale of rogue waves, pulling at your tethered limbs until even gravity grows tired of being defiant. Of revolting against a battle that has felt long overdue. The receipts have piled up over the years alongside the growing revolution and you wonder why your voice matters. Why do you matter?

Between Starshine and Clay is a poetic anthology depicting the voices of young writers and activists from across the nation. The name being a homage to "won't you celebrate with me" by Lucille Clifton, it provides a lens into the narratives of poets who are the exemplification of utilizing art as a means of making themselves known. Every letter is a journey, a microcosm of a survival story that declares "I am still here." Together, they manifest a tsunami from the depths, crashing into the world and an ocean which threatened to drown them because they are not alone, and neither are you.

Within the pages of this collection are inquisitive poems, introspective poems, poems on America, bilingual poems, poems that defy, poems that think for themselves; there are numerous unique perspectives and yet, they all share the experience of what it means to be human. Especially during times like these, it is vital that we continue to address these stories whilst relating to our own, because it is by uplifting each other that we can truly bring about change within society.

Thus, we implore you to celebrate these young poets with us and acknowledge the fact that they have chosen to brave the page. To be vulnerable with a nation that the very existence of their words had molded. Remember that this collection is more than a war bred in ink, but a recognition anthology. An *I see you* anthology dedicated to the youth who created it.

Individually we create ripples, but together we embody a storm that can shape the horizon. We are a lighthouse, our words making even the darkest of trenches seem brighter. You never know which ships may sink or float, but know that your voice can be a means for the vitality of another. That there is a reason to find joy in the simplest of phrases if you choose to see the person behind the lyric. That in this poetic anthology lays a future beginning to ascend.

Read On,

Meera Dasgupta
Samuel Getachew
Dr. Camea Davis

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this rickshaw has no room
for another man spread. or the venti chai
latte that he says *looks like you*. masticate

me like the cardamom in a
pakora. spit it out onto a paper plate only to sprinkle salt
back into its diaspora. makes it savory.
pick ancestral bone. from chicken curry. but when
you swallow. let history be hookworm in
a gut engorged by self-entitlement.



Meera Dasgupta
New York City Youth Poet Laureate

Northeast

New York City, New York, Meera Dasgupta

explaining brown girl feminism to a white man on the e train

“Like other woman writers of my class, I am expected to tame my talent to suit the comfort of my family.”
-Kamala Das, *Quotes for The Modern Indian Woman’s Soul*

brown girl feminism. a phrase
that blisters tongues not keen on
holding asian spices; changes the name of this
poem to a white man’s lament in masala tears. but

this rickshaw has no room
for another man spread. or the venti chai
latte that he says *looks like you*. masticate

me like the cardamom in a
pakora. spit it out onto a paper plate only to sprinkle salt
back into its diaspora. *makes it savory*.
pick ancestral bone. from chicken curry. but when
you swallow. let history be hookworm in
a gut engorged by self-entitlement. make it

enough for you to tell me
that i am caramel popped into working jaws. honey.
i sizzle like mistake. rise like steam off of
the bombay sidewalk. what is milk to chile pepper?
all you seem to do is curdle in the marinate. as i

froth over kettle. cleave origin from clavicle. ascend
like the smell of grandma’s kitchen into drying
linens. i am of borrowed taste-buds. voodoo queen
in the cupboard. girl born into a body that is
pressure-cooked in a nature versus
nurture tawa. sorry.
i spilt tea on your
white privilege. and
sliced too much meat off of his bones. but i
thrive in culinary. which means no food waste. so

i place him in a dusty cabinet elsewhere. atop life.
slick oil stains. and cinnamon rolls. some days

spooning powdered pieces back into trade recipe. he is but
ingredient. eternally searing
in the heterogony that is
my mother's homestyle biryani.

new york city, the insomniac

this is the accent of america. jam-packed,
bubble-wrapped, and liquored up like the
beer-bellied men that slur *hey baby* before
remembering their dead mothers.

new york holds me the way a lover does
in the rain. she embraces me with a thousand
skins, faces, tongues. i found her belly-dancing in
front of a jackson heights halal cart.

she swallowed a country and threw it up at night.
white privilege, toxic masculinity, the crimson
fanfare of shot-dead brown boys, a rancid
burning at the base of her throat.

remember to hold her hair up from the vomit.
turn her cheek to the toilet seat and flush her
tears down the swirling drain.

am I dying?
aren't we all?

set her down on a comforter after dabbing
the residue of yesterday off her chin with a
wet wipe. hand her your old band tee as a means of
escape and tell her that she looks beautiful, even as her
mascara gives her a black eye. and when you finally lay down to
rest, tracing a finger along her scalp, call her by her many
names. *the bronx, queens, brooklyn, manhattan, staten island.*
whisper fruit vendors, churro ladies, hula-hooping
toddlers, tik-tok dances, an old couple holding hands on the 6
the train, twerking brown girls, into her sensitive ears. throw
out the bottle of adderall. then perhaps, new york can finally
be laid to rest.

Boston, Massachusetts, Alondra Bobadilla

And So They Sing

Let the people sing their hymns in the nighttime
That rock wounds to sleep on difficult nights

When work is too much
And pay is too low

When the only remedy for broken bones
Is making music from the soul
For what better medicine to the body
Than medicine produced from within
For the creation finds its creator through voice

Through song
Through worship

Through every Aleluya and every Amen
Through voices getting lost in the wind
Through every tear drop offered as sacrifice on altars

God takes needle and thread
And He begins to mend
And mend
And mend

Until wounds are scars
And dusk becomes dawn again

Providence, Rhode Island, Catherine Sawoski

Morpheus

Sometimes, in crowded streets you pretend you are someone you will not become for another few years. You stand across from the dark stadium next to people far too exposed, and watch their breath swirl up and out to form commas in the air as they do not wonder what you are thinking about, and you realize that it is always cold somewhere. Your hands move to create sparks without so much as a wave of warning, your mouth excuses itself with no hello, shivering and shaking to recognize that there is a strange kind of beauty to being alone on one-way streets, and as you gaze up at a LED billboard you secretly wish the power to go off - waiting until the second that you are standing in complete darkness, when you can convince everyone else that this is what your mind sees in the final moments before it goes to sleep.

Providence

It's 12:00 now with a 3:00 feeling in the air,
your glasses wet with droplets of god knows
what. It could be rain, but isn't that just a
safer way to say sweat, falling to us from
anxious clouds, too afraid to cry. Isn't the air
we walk out of just what we breathed in and
out ourselves, what we leave behind in every
city street and crowded room when we move
on and out and forward, as we step into a
cold apartment and only realize as bits of
water drip off of stale hair how ostentatious
the storm really was. Even here it seems that
every drop must think if it is closer to the
ground, then it must be closer to god.

But of course, we in this city have put up street lights
just to remind us of the stars. We in this city can
remember nothing more than the immensity of
staring down a 10:00 road as headlights dart in and
out from stop signs and pretend for just a moment
that they are the true sun, can feel nothing more than
what we know, of every glare to be terrifying when
we should be asleep.

And now, all of the lights in the building across from
you turn off at once -- this unsettles you, hurts you, and
you can feel the scar start forming where shadows have
just ceased to touch you, and though it has already
healed you know you will pick at it regardless. You
wonder if in the morning they will turn on again, and if
to watch that would be to see the sun rise
as we correct the misguided orbitals of the stars.

You dry yourself by the light of a single incandescent bulb,
and your feelings surprise you.

Providence, Rhode Island, Tyler Cordeiro

Medusa's Funeral

To the girl in me that never lived past thirteen, a corpse hanging in my closet like a sliver of moon, I'm sorry that you had to die for me to be alive.

When I was a small spark in the pit fire,

I begged to be put out like the switch of a lighter,

Girls stifling under wooden gazes like fuel for our own misery and dwindling self-esteem,

On the ashen pavement of a Catholic school parking lot

Where I'd bury your heart like a time capsule

I'd later unlock if I was strong enough,

You'd rise after 3 days and save me from this heat,

A fag's smoke winding down & hanging in the air like a burden,

Cigarette butts pressed against my skin.

Boy, please come back again.

The blood orange sun beating down on my long hair like serpent snakes of my own shame,

Their bitter bites of reality spread poison through the spiderwebbed veins on my nape,

I'm overcome with the immense burden of being a girl when I did not feel like one,

flames serenade on my skin like conviction

I burn with each move that I make in a body like a sacrifice that I do not belong in,

My broken Icarus wings beg to fly free from its gaze.

We tie back our hair, sparkling in the sun,

Like ropes of nooses, I'd later cut when I claimed my life for my own before I became another statistic.

Medusa is a tranny, they'd whisper between the static

When I cut my ragged snakes with a switchblade

You should really see the boy within me,

His tendrils bleeding through my ribcage like their own sun fading,

Dwindling by the moment like the silenced tongue of a candle.

He embraces the bitter poison of his own skin,

Waiting to be marked with the steely, greedy, teeth of society like pearls from broken jewelry, Forced femininity as whoever they want him to be,

The woman who turned men to stone with her gaze turned inward on himself,

Turned flesh into his own grave at the sight of his reflection,

The self-infliction, addiction begging to be traded for a confession, before he becomes another statistic.

I am not the one you think I am, my apparition rises above my bones like a dead name,
a foreign language that only I can understand,
I translate to an ignorant mind like yours when I make my body reflect who I am,
Not define who I can be, carve a statue from the granite,
The snakes at my feet like broken memories, they cannot control me.

If you're looking for solace, please do not mourn her,
I killed her long ago and keep her like a coffin in my floorboard, memories I flee but always surround
me,
You will not find her in a futile funeral service for the living a broken prayer exalted on an altar, You
pick me apart like petals from a flower, leaving only the stem behind as if my gender is superficial and
can be defined by you, your roots.

You mourn for someone who never existed,
Eve made from man's rib giving into the temptation of an image of the body she will never have but
always dreamed of,
A serpent with an effortlessly flat chest.
When she sinks her teeth into the forbidden fruit she's awake in a prison of flesh like a desolate
wasteland where nothing can grow,
Wrapped in pinkened thorns of her womanhood he falls
& rots away,
Is cast out from heavens gates
God welcomes with a warm embrace the boy that was always inside him,
I was never a girl, a sister, a daughter, do not waste your time mourning me
I have spent too long knees on the altar worshipping a god no longer within me, wishing I was never
born in the body that I was

A pretty girl with a snake-skin form clinging to jagged bones
Waiting to snap with each breath,
His lungs shed lies of rosy wine
Pressed subliminally on his forked tongue with a sharpened gaze of broken razor blades
Cutting Medusa serpent hair as it cascades from him like molting scales & he's free,
It falls beneath his feet, shedding a disguise like blood & his future is no longer a stagnant
gravestone—
He no longer stiffens when he looks in the mirror, he smiles.
He's alive.

Annabelle Lee II

they say all of space-time is composed of infinite, irreplaceable moments
but i never truly knew
that the ocean is contrived of single drops of water
until i spent the day with you, hand in hand like half moons.
controlling the tide to our supernatural will

sitting at the edge of the receding shoreline, watching the water claw its way up to the parched sand,
always reaching for more.
reaching to destroy more.
to consume more.
seaweed & barbed wire twisting in my core.
the tide took you away with merciless claws that bite & sting long after they are gone.
the pain never ebbs.

everything is so chillingly temporary like your cold body against my warm one.
i beat with worthless blood that cannot bring you back.
i cry salty tears from the depths of the sea for you to return to me

there are many nights when i dream of drowning while desperately swimming
towards a sliver of light on the horizon,
a reminder of warmth & tangible love.
the colors swirl around me like paint on a canvas that can never be erased.
the art that we were.
time that can never be retraced,
hearts beating in shells of bodies that can never be replaced.

there are moments when i am sinking.
my earthly vessel is dragging me under the depths of the sea,
begging to be intertwined in yours.
i cannot rise above.
i almost forget that mass, along with happiness; love
cannot be created nor destroyed.
it is infinite, just transferred to new forms.

as i float aimlessly in a sea of my own grief
on the battered shipwreck of your remains
& i scream my throat raw the story of your bravery in our unbeknownst naivety
—you & me dipping ankles into tidepools—
stories that will be carried to far away terrain, will always remain, just to be forgotten
i savor our memories floating in the unapologetically blue sky.
the sun sets.
we shine as bright as stars all night.

i was mothered by scorching summers
spent ripping weeds from the seed up
baby, leave no roots i have no roots
forever fish out of water
writing to imagine
the world anything less
than lonely how dare you



Taylor Gensolin
South Florida Youth Poet Laureate

South

Weston, South Florida, Taylor Gensolin

Chastise Me, But Like This

i know you keep calling psychics.
i know you keep dialing different numbers and leaving
voice messages for people who swear they can speak to the
stars
i know you're searching the universe for reasons to let this
go,
and just maybe
they aren't so hidden at all
you won't find them in dark alleyways, or
brand new bodies that always swear they know what loving
feels like, i know you swore this is what loving felt like, but
you don't need to summon a higher power
to sort through tarot cards
pick love-me, love-me-not petals
to see how tired you are
of staring at him through a two way mirror, tired
of being
a surveillance camera on a convict,
always unable to decide if you want to play
bad cop or good cop or
bed warmer tonight,
it's a shame he only likes to see you
in that blue uniform—
armed,
guns blazing, yes;
he likes that you don't trust him,
and loves that
you still adore him enough to try,
i think you know
that love is not a two way mirror at all.
but rather a pane of glass;
you barely know it's there
until it's been shattered,
and you're sitting on your bathroom floor
trying to swallow the shards

a brand new breed of a big pill, just
a little harder to swallow with
all the blood clogging up the back of your throat,
crying into the mess you made,
pathetic and ruinous.

i know.

and there is no comfort for you,
no comfort that you deserve,
but i will hand you a clean rag to spit up in

once you've finished tidying up the tile floors.

there's a convict on the loose, and we've
no time for a pity-party.

They Ask, & I Wish I Had Less To Say

north miami little girl like me

gets raised on fear

i was

breastfed a sense of wariness,

swaddled in safety precautions

taught how to count

all the ways the world could chew me up

and spit me out between my

A-B-C's and 1-2-3's

the 305

will keep you grounded.

my hands are

most familiar with keystone concrete,

lined with strange men that

call me beautiful

even when it's

too dark outside to see faces

and the only thing guiding my footsteps

is the periodic taste of gasoline

and old rainwater

and Newports

mingling in evening air

this is where i learned

why we walk home fast

with a cheap smile handy in our back pockets,

anxious to toss it in the direction

of any stray,

ayo, ma!

venga aquí mamíta,
it gets you home safe every time, cause
most of these boys just take what they can get—
like my young soft palms plucking
the fruit hanging off my neighbors fences, the trees
all pregnant with
mango blossoms that burst with

sticky saccharine sap

drenching the skin in a golden film
that looks just like mama after a day in the sun
fishing on the
clam-clad boardwalk lining my neighborhood canal—

keeping my eyes peeled
while searching for all the low hanging fruit
'cause

little girl like me is low hanging fruit, yet
that was never what scared me,
you know.

some days mama was mango and other days,
without warning
she grew an

impenetrable thick skin
and woke up vacant of all signs of life, this
is where i taught myself
how to listen for the low hum of a heartbeat
where i learned that the sweetest of us
ripen to a fault,
soft and heavy and tired of feeling like a burden on
branches this
is where i learned that i can't fix everything
where i learned

exactly when to stop trying,
you know
north miami little girls leave the city
with the self-restraint
that our fathers and brothers will never have,
never need—
you can
picture daddy and i miles off the coast

in a little yellow boat

caught in a storm he'd seen coming
he shoulda turned us around,
gone back to shore
but it didn't matter how hard the sky was coming down
he was an angry man with
something to prove and
it didn't matter if my seven year old palms
clasped together to
pray without any aim or strategy
or if my body thrashed between the metal of his seat
and the wall of the dashboard,
caught
like a rag doll in the jaws of a pit bull
it didn't matter, cause
north miami little girl like me can take it,
she can survive off of nothing but rotten mangoes
and sail ever-swelling seas with a coked-out captain
cause north miami little girl like me

gets raised on courage
teaches herself how to bite back between her A-B-Cs and
1-2-3s,
the 305 streets
are warped and cracked, the
water doesn't shine like it used to,

the worlds a whole lot smaller

and my pockets are heavy with trauma
but I've learned to carry it
with the kinda grace that turns heads

and makes you wanna say,
god damn lil girl, where
did you get allat attitude from?

i earned it.

Jacksonville, Florida, Niveah Glover

Bitterly Strange Fruit

The swing created the Rhythm
That rhymes.
The leak of our veins
Spill into the soil they trample
With feet of slave labor.

Bitterly strange fruit become us.
Our melanin is
Stranger than the rope
You strung us up with.
We are left in the sun's
Rays to rot, left to be forgot
Till our body's decay away
And our skeletons drop.

We can still taste our death,
It stained our teeth.
The ways of the world
Played out in the
Palms of our hands.

Coated in this Southern humidity
And mixed with the cracks of a whip
Make too many mornings into a mourning.

We are bitterly strange fruit,
Swinging in the balance.
With life behind us and
The shackles of a slave chained
To what was once a future.

Trees forever green.
As we swing.
Unharvested fruit.

Once I'm Gone.

I wish for markings to be left explaining my existence.

I pray for parades and streets to be given after my name, claiming with pride I've done something great.

I want for my family to speak nothing but graciousness at the mention of my name.

Pour their heart into speeches they'll give when I no longer open my eyes.

I hope for them to say this emptiness was fullness,
that the light in my eyes never dimmed, always shined.

Tell everyone who asks of me that my attitude wasn't
just merely a smokescreen, but my actual boldness.

Talk to millions about my smile, explain that it never
died, maybe exaggerate about how I laughed all the
time.

Once I'm gone,

Just make me sound great.

Don't talk about the times I couldn't get out of bed long
enough to walk those streets.

Skip the question if they ask was I satisfied with what
I thought I would be.

Never speak of how I poured my soul into a bucket
tears.

Trail around the assumption that I didn't actually want

to be here.

Make sure they know I had it all figured out, that I was
happy with all my choices and never had to beg for my
loneliness to go away.

Once I'm gone,

make me wish I was still here

Nashville, Tennessee, Alora Young

If Edgehill Could Talk

After If Beale Street Could Talk by James Baldwin

If Edgehill could talk
you'd see that she who birthed these streets was a black woman.
She's got child bearing hips
and stretch marks
and scars-
She calls them all tiger stripes.
Her dress is a mosaic of fractal glass,
made of different shade shards of fractured past
that highways busted open—
I've heard em say that pain looks "good" on Her.
if Edgehill could talk
She would say that every bluegrass song
was plucked on the vertebrae of a black man, whose style we steal
whose name we forget.
His bones hummed deep with that Lawry bass
and His city stole his songs
to spite his face
and DeFord Bailey's legacy has been erased
because the camera of history
glances right past Us.

Edgehill loves to jive
and She loves to wop
and She dances in honor of the children
She lost when Nashville forgot
Their names,
Their voice,
when a thriving black village faded into gunshots and white noise
because that is Edgehill's legacy,

forgetting who was really there
for some tragic new age fantasy.
Edgehill was Currie's Hill
was Meridian's Hill
was slave country.
She raised artists, like William Edmondson, who were acclaimed internationally.
A road bears His name, but who knows His story?

Edgehill knows.

The gory truth is the plantations that surround Us have shaped Black lives for centuries.
for most of U.S. history Black people had to be the state's enemies because the letter of the law
led Us right back to hell,

these laws left us constrained and the books
have been amended
but some things never change—
that's why in Tennessee private prisons
are at an all time high.
no matter what shade of chains You wear
slavery has yet to die.
the plantations that surround Us, well,
they just go by different names
and when Edgehill speaks
We don't listen.
not anymore.
it's easier to let children suffer
when They're from places we abhor.
We didn't listen when She told us
urban renewal was just a thinly veiled way to erase black history,
to make way for white supremacy.
We didn't listen when She said
that Black people will always
be forgotten by Their legacy.
We didn't listen when She said that
the memories that line these streets don't show the bass that ricochets through the dark;
You wouldn't recognize Her melody if Edgehill could talk,
if Edgehill could tell You how Her bosom held the beat of Nashville's Black history.

would You still just see the misery?
would You see the way a new age white wave stands in the same old place?
would You see how our culture is beaten into disgrace?

this is no ordinary mortuary—
Edgehill's legacy is buried beneath
boutiques and coffee shops.
mountains of Her history
were plowed through by I-40
and Her body is underground with Us.

My halls are full of false prophets.
My head is full of false promises.
and My classroom looks like the textbooks
because They will always
always
try to keep Edgehill silent.

Norfolk, Virginia, Tiffany Sawyer

Anxiety

Hey we need to talk... when you get a chance can you call me back? Thank you bye

I mean of course someone needs to talk to me.

But of course they wouldn't tell me why they need to talk to me.

Are you okay?

Did i do something?

Did someone die?

DO you need anything?

Why did you leave me a voicemail?

Who even uses voicemails anymore?

Oh Anxiety does...Duh i mean who else would purposely want me to drown in thoughts that don't exist.

But My anxiety is the only ride or die i have.

She always be riding in the same car as me but makes me feel like dying at times.

I can't be mad at her tho.

Because anxiety has been my only friend that hasn't switched up on me.

My anxiety puts me through a daily intense painful excessive overwhelming obstacle course race.

And of course, she always wins because she herself is intense painful excessive and overwhelming.

She is the reason I sweat in a cold room.

The reason i believe that no one loves me even when everyone says they love me.

She always brings up stuff that doesn't exist.

She molds my personality

Makes me feel like I don't exist.

She doesn't like me talking to people.

So i'm sorry I didn't talk to you today.

Sorry

I'm Im sorry for saying sorry to much.

I'm Im sorry

I'm sorry .

She is really possessive .

I've tried to tell people about her.

But they just generalize who she is.
Anxiety...she can't be generalized.
Anxiety reminds me of scary movies
Making me wait for the jumpscare that never happens comes..

She makes my mind race through thoughts...
I often think what would happen to a girl who is anxious to speak up for herself,
Would she soon be like me.
Riding in a car.
When anxiety takes the aux cord
Plays every song every poem every rap
That reminds herself of her past...
Of every friendship
And relationship that never last.
Simply because Anxiety makes me
Over think over analyze over process the most simple phrases.
Deconstruct the most simple phrase.
She's restless.

But Anxiety is the most persistent person i know.
She helped me pick out my clothes and hairstyle today.
I find myself not being able to talk in an argument...
just because i'm fighting with her in my head
It's hard to fight with you
When i'm fighting with her
She's in my head.
I know she's in my head.

I start panicking .
Because we never handled getting yelled at well
Or getting into situations well
Never handled the stress well
I've been competing with her my whole life.
Trying to kick her out of the race she forces me to be in.
I'm tired of running . I always seem to stay in her shadow.

Anxiety never lets me feel the sun.
She is constantly raining down negative thoughts

When i'm just trying to be happy.
I'm trying to live my life.
She has been with me my whole life.
But she has been the same since day one.
Anxiety is the only ride or die i have.
I'm tired of riding with her
So i guess . there is only one choice left

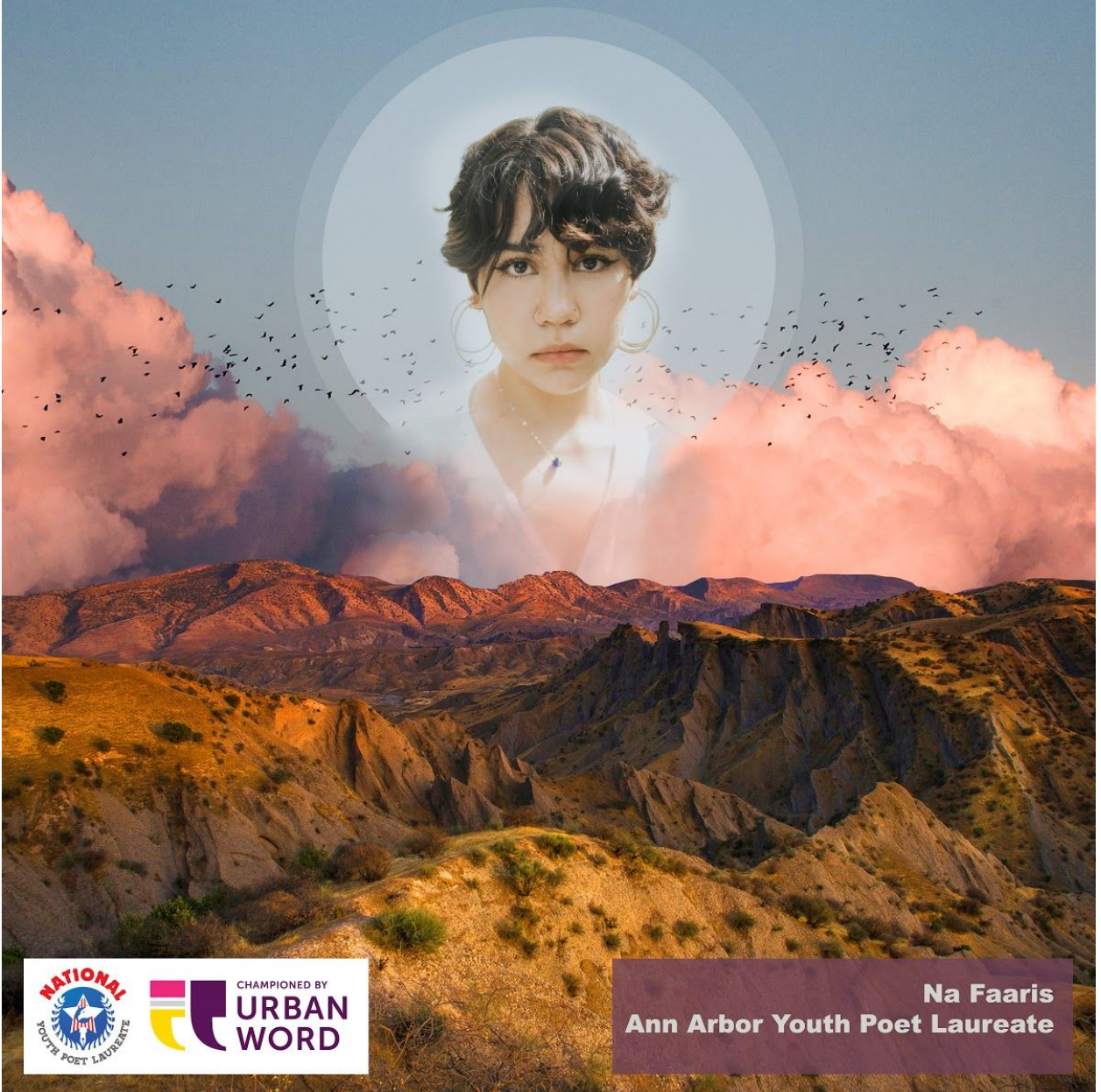
Hey... what was it you needed to talk to me about again?

what happens to the bodies without a love to recognize them?

did they ever live?

were they ever loved?

where do they go after this if not in our prayers?



**Na Faaris
Ann Arbor Youth Poet Laureate**

Midwest

Ann Arbor, Michigan, Na Farris

unsolicited advice to adolescent girls with no home and “a bad attitude”

after jeanann verlee

when your shadows start to eat you, ask for help. when your nightmares only get more vivid, sleep longer and when you finally get the chance, throw that futon right into the dumpster, next to your last apartment. you'll have to drive an hour before work with the purpose of picking it up just to throw it away but it will be worth it. the knots in your back will relieve themselves from the satisfaction alone. when apple slices give you panic attacks, eat more apples. when they ask how you got so thin, say you walked a lot. when you start eating again, keep the food down. when your significantly older coworker asks if anyone's told you how cute you were before, say yes. when you miss your second bus for the day, just order a lyft. when your peers high five you for losing weight, don't return their hand. when the circles under your eyes turn to pools, ask for help. when your hair starts curling again, let it. when deciding between a brazilian lace front and winter boots, pick the boots. when a boy calls you the girl of his dreams, believe him, and leave him anyway. when they ask if you're happy, tell the truth. you don't know happy. when they ask “what your heart wants,” tell the truth. you haven't known want since before october 2018. when the thin boy with a nose ring calls you a throwaway, call him a honkey. spit on him and don't run. when half alive figures start manifesting in the corner of your room, call their names. when they start moving towards you, ask for help. When you have a panic attack on your bedroom floor, kick your head against the wall until someone comes. when the counselor asks about the bruises on your legs, say you're clumsy. when the circles under your eyes turn to pools ask for help. when your shadows start to eat you, ask for help. no one's going to understand you if you don't say it. you won't die if you say it.

questions for baghdad boys

did the dead men love us too?

would they cry for us the way we do them?

or are they nation wrapped in a casket?

only marked by the shirts they were last seen in
or the scent of their mother's saffron pudding

what happens to the bodies without a love to recognize them?

did they ever live?

were they ever loved?

where do they go after this if not in our prayers?

do baghdad boys stay alive thru these eulogies?

how many caskets did i miss yesterday?

how many bodies lined themselves into a path of roses for us?

Chicago, Illinois, Penelope Alegria

Papa's Deli Order

When my Social Studies teacher spoke of DREAMERS and visas,
she said undocumented was a synonym for illegal.
My hand shot up to tell her she must be mistaken:
My parents were undocumented, and they were not criminals.
Illegal is a synonym for killers or criminals,
and my papa was no criminal.

On weekends, I help him with the deli order at Jewel.
I point out verses on the posters behind the counter:

Yo quiero cuarto de libra de Sarah Lee Honey Turkey
"I want a quarter pound of Sarah Lee Honey Turkey."
Yo quiero media libra de Queso Americano.
"I want a half pound of American cheese."

I walk him through each word,
but he gets stuck on the *r*'s and the *s*'s--
he says he hears English like hissing radio static,
but I need him to walk up to the deli counter and order American cheese
because criminals don't eat American cheese.

When my father is pulled over on 69th street,
passengers huddle in the backseat of his Uber
as red stars, blue shirts, and badges
float in the grey sky outside.
Silhouetted against the city of big shoulders,
my father's big shoulders knot against their hissing English.

Because I am at school at debate practice,
I miss 19 of his calls.
After the March sun has set, I finally call back,
but I am too late.

The passengers have been Ubered by someone else.
He sits on the cold, concrete curb while
policemen hiss radio static, open compartments, turn over seat cushions,
and all my father hears is,

“car,”
“license.”

They say,

“exit,”

and he thinks the country,
he thinks expired visa,
he thinks goodbye hugs and tears at O’Hare
and returning to his mother’s house in Peru,
to the yellow streetlights of the *barrio* he grew up in.

When I finally call him back,
I want him to put the cops on the phone.
I want to tell them he only drives Uber on the weekends,
to tell them he’s on his way to pick me up,
to tell them he can order a pound of American cheese for 1.99 at the deli
and that is important because criminals don’t eat American cheese.

Instead, I tell my father,

*Yo siempre estoy contigo.
Vamos a Panda Express cuando regreses a casa,
podemos conversar sobre pollo de naranja.
Let’s go to Panda Express when you get home,
we can talk about it over orange chicken,
but when we go to the deli this weekend,
you have to order.
¿Como se dice? Dime.*

And he says,

“I want a quarter pound, uh, Sarah Lee Honey Turkey.”

The blue and white lights fade
and he turns the key in the ignition.

“I want de half pound of cheese American.”

And under the yellow streets of this cold March night,
he starts home.

Suegra Rosa

The dead bodies of Óscar and his two-year old daughter Angie were found on the Rio Grande's riverbank and recorded on camera. His wife, Tania, saw her family drown before returning to her mother-in-law's home in El Salvador.

guiso. guiso de carne y cebolla
was the last thing Rosa made
before we left.
when Rosa could still walk. talk.
trudge to the clothing factory.
la situación was never so bad
for that woman. idle hands make
for the devil's playground and
an empty fridge. at least
we were working. always towards
something. now my mother-in-law
can't get off the sofa.
doesn't move anything except
her fingers to stroke
Angie's Disney Princess Blanket
like it's her hair. her cheek.
doesn't eat anything except
canchita. grinds her teeth on
hard corn like she hopes
it'll dislocate her jaw.
how can I feed a woman
who doesn't want her mouth.
she prays
to die and sinks
into the sofa even after
I've seen death in the water.
watched mija y mi marido
slip under the current.
fourteen hours deep frying yuca
didn't prune my hands helpless
like muddy river did.
flooding Oscar's mouth
a loud gargle two
strokes from the border. Rosa,
take me back a month or so.
give me back the graveyard shift.
return me five dollars short

at the market and boiling oil
bubbling like panic underwater.
I want to be hungry again.
I want an empty plate for dinner if
there'll be four of us at the table.
not a lonely sip of water
that swishes over my molars
like strong dark stream.
I know that's all you see
when you look at me.
water.
mosquito bites.
your son on every newsstand.
I know you look at me
and hear la vecina's knock of
bad news and pulling on his sleeve

no te vayas
no te vayas
no te vayas.

who am I to tug you off the sofa?
who am I to return and expect a warm meal?
who am I other than esa mujer ingrata who left and took your son with her?

Detroit, Michigan, Mahalia Hill

in the waiting room with the mauve carpet

I remember the wet violet bag of maggots,

at first defying bacteria, at first seeming fresh
in the rain—I think myself a wax sculpture, I won't live

to reach twenty and even then
i will remain a statue

what lives inside the mill soft belly?

I remember being nine
finding the fledgling corpse—its skin so transparent

I glimpsed the stagnant heart
I glimpsed the stream colored

veining throughout its stubbed
haunches, the beak soft enough to crumble

as my sister squirmed at its vision
I sifted a heft of sandy earth over

the pink lump body, I did not cover
it well enough,

I did not invest time into
the grave,

when I came back to visit
the mostly rotted body had been dug up

and was gone,

the small worms left writhing in its absence

Work

the butchers home
smells of lavender,
and wet metal
brick blush stains the room
wall to wall
a blanket of soft animal wounds
the butcher leaves work tools
in the tub and sink for cleaning
the butcher prays in whisper
to each of them before the cleaver
finds home between
joint and fresh winter fur
the butcher knows which parts
the butcher knows the cost
and burden of the innocent,
it weighs like iron chainmail
weighs and stings and wakes him
to the days work, the only work

Indianapolis, Indiana, Alyssa Gaines

Tongue-tied

On Saturdays, my tongue is naked.

It tastes like ropa vieja y cafe,

Sips malta goya,

Sits in the back of my mouth and relaxes, ignores the s's in spanish sentences,

Tastes like the chitterlings my grandma makes,

With extra hot sauce.

Tastes like hot cheetos and takis,

And stains red.

On Saturdays, my tongue sings Celia Cruz,

My tongue dances over every syllable to the rap songs on the radio

Without fear or the restriction of any stereotype

White dress left hanging in my closet

Chants zúmbale mambo pa' que mis gatas prendan los motores,

Without tripping over tricky lace.

And dances to R&B, and to alternative like Nao, and to soul.

My tongue moves fast and flips around a new facet of me.

Naked, it rediscovers what it's like to be heard in my own language,

What it's like not to have to preface my own words with intonation

What it's like to prove nothing and say everything

My tongue is multidimensional, fast-moving, and unmasked on Saturdays.

On Sundays, my tongue wears black.

Mourning the now-dead nakedness that it wants back.

It knows what we must do tomorrow.

On weekday mornings, I squeeze my tongue in a white dress,

Pull a veil down over the tip of it, a mask over my language,

That when I talk drapes out of my mouth to floor.

Throughout the day my tongue is married to my private school.

Tied up in matrimony and faithful commitment to the culture there.

Committed, in fear, to the concept of being well-spoken.

Tongue tangled up in all this white and they call me articulate.

When I talk, I taste the weekday worn clothes and they feel foreign against the roof of my mouth.

Mother always taught me to dress appropriately.

Even when nobody else's tongues are clothed.

My peers introduce themselves with Hermes bracelets and Balenciaga shoes,

They say their greetings in skin, and say goodbye in material items they leave behind and never come back for.

Generational wealth follows them into each educational space they enter

And I am left with my tongue all dressed up trying to haggle down the difference.

Our relationships are founded in my tongue's fidelity

But there's clothes in the way.

It's hard to be understood when you're talking through thread.

Etymology is lost in translation,

And connections get lost in this dress.

I was just supposed to be another brown body,

Now I'm waving my tongue's marriage certificate as if it can prove my intellect,

To people who don't believe it exists, and to people with whom I can't connect,

But when I said my vows I knew the newlywed specials in life that come from this white dress.

Ambition walked me down the aisle, knowing that this wedding was the only way to success.

Now I'm waving my tongue's marriage certificate as if it can prove my intellect,

To people who don't believe it exists, and to people with whom I can't connect,
But when I said my vows I knew the newlywed specials in life that come from this white dress.
Ambition walked me down the aisle, knowing that this wedding was the only way to success.

Tongue tangled head to toe in total white and they call me articulate.

My use of naked tongue can never be appropriate.

Is always rude.

I know that being black means existing as two.

I know that wearing this dress is something I must do and so I do it.

And wait for that feeling of freedom that I get on Saturday mornings and relinquish Sunday
night.

St. Louis, Missouri, Sarah Abbas

HOLY BODIES

On grandmother's book laid salvation.

I found her:
Skin laid out in front of her deity.

I smelled her body.

No,
her book.

There is no distinction.
There is no blood.

Lifeline and ecstasy,
She held it in her hands.
Kissed the book more than her genesis.

She begged for parallel,
Prayed for piety,
Breathed for divinity.

I wanted to possess: -all of this happiness-
-god in all his comfort-
-to make salvation from it-

I laid out,
Bloody body,
Dripped onto clean arabic.

Iron met paper,
God spoke.

The book of God is sterile and you are not.

(forgiven)
bruised skin,
cut tongue.

The book of God defines you rotten

(inexorable)
I laid next to grandmother's skin.

I begged for acceptance,
Prayed for cleansing,
Breathed for admission.

I found it nowhere here.

I held my body.
Kissed myself empty.

Found euphoria-

In myself.

TAXI RIDE WITH FRANK OCEAN

Frank told the taxi driver to leave the meter running.

I begged him to explain what Ivy meant and asked him to write me a song about my mom and god.

He held my hand tight and told me they were the same thing,

I cried.

I asked him where we were going and if he had a pair of earbuds.

He said it wasn't up to him and he always carried an extra pair.

He told me to breathe it.

The lyrics behind the catalyst.

The body fighting for reason.

The body you tried escaping.

You have created it, don't waste it.

Sarah these lyrics cannot be your satisfaction.

The point is to not reach serenity at the end.

It's to find it on the way there.

To find it in yourself.

To find it in empty taxi rides with strangers who are also waiting.

To love the silence and call it god

To love your mom more than she loves god.

To rewrite your life for resolution.

My songs aren't your life but you can sing along.

You are the opera.

Finish the story yourself.

The meter hummed.

He tapped to a beat on the rainy window.

Ears wet.

My earbuds tangled.

I was holding my own sweaty palm.

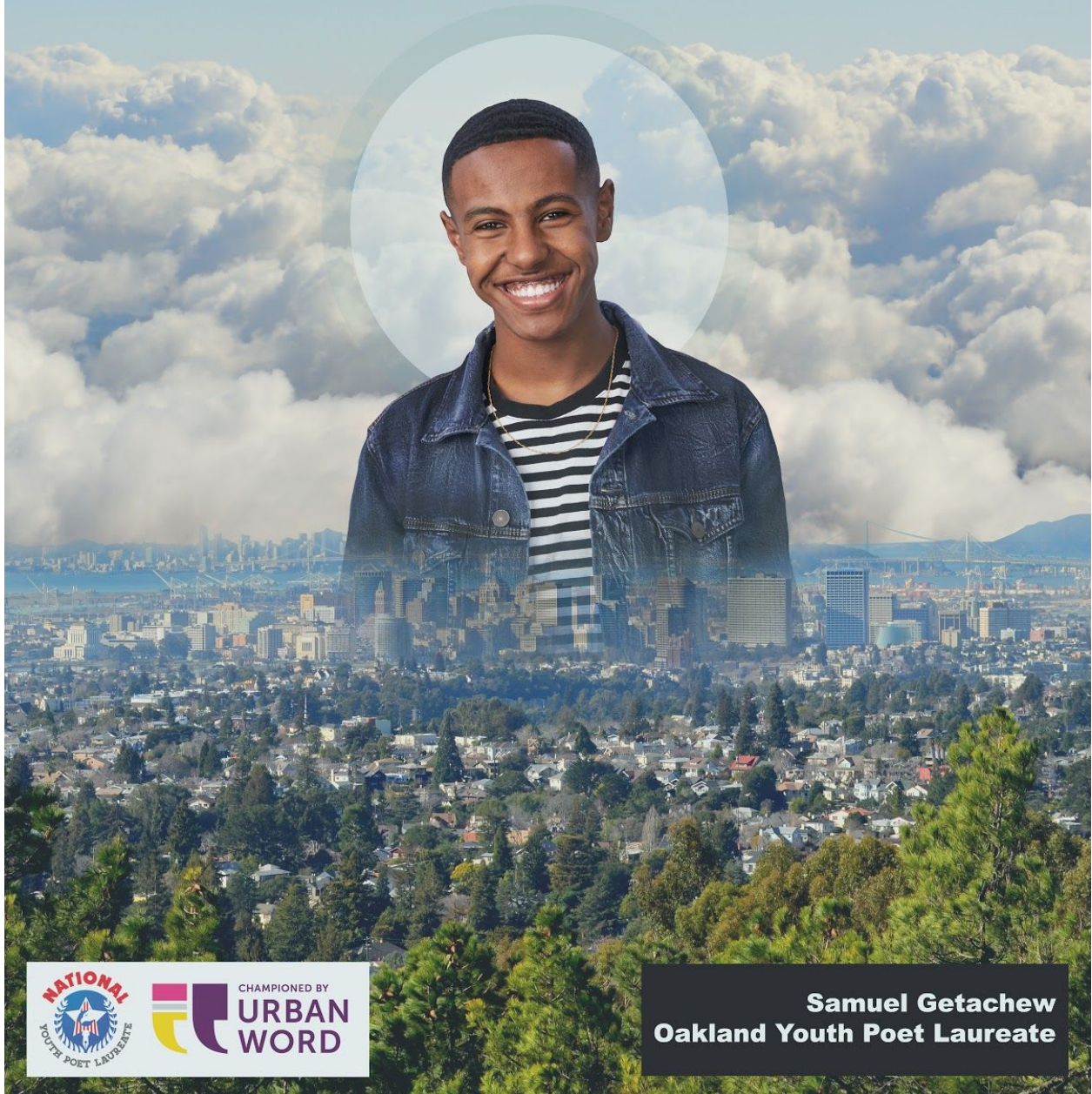
Frank was playing in my ears.

I replayed the song again.

Somewhere between *fereng*¹ and *sedetegna*² there is a boy who does not know how to watch. He has never been taught how to cry. How to hold other people's pain. How to bear witness to the libation of your living ancestors, watch as they coax the congested rage from their stomachs and spill blood on the floor.

¹foreigner, typically used to describe an Amercian

²immigrant



Samuel Getachew
Oakland Youth Poet Laureate

West

Oakland, California, Samuel Getachew

on joe biden and the exceptional negro

“we’ve got to recognize that kid wearing a hoodie may very well be the next poet laureate and not a gangbanger.” - joe biden on the issue of racial profiling and mass incarceration, june 2019

when i receive notice that i am a finalist for national youth poet laureate,
i exhale in relief. at last, my worth validated. my life quantified. my entire life i have been told
i am exceptional. i am not like the others. i am different. how thrilling
to be raised on the myth of individuality. how misleading, how egomaniacally delightful
to know that when the floodwaters come you will be saved. to walk among the sea of
regular negroes gangbangers hood niggas thugs superpredators deadbeat baby daddies
a god amongst men. a man amongst boys. a boy amongst slaves. how blessed am i,
to have an opportunity to prove once and for all that i deserve freedom. prove that my wrists
are too delicate for bondage, my hands too inclined for the pen. if i die, i know they will show my
grade point average on the evening news. how blessed am i, to have a resumé worth mentioning
in the headline. how blessed am i to be a viable candidate for martyrdom. how lucky am i to be able to
write myself into a place on the porch. a seat under the table. how blessed, to be graced
with the possibility of scrounging scraps as they eat above me, how lucky, how lucky, *how lucky.*

the crying

According to Ethiopian tradition, when someone passes away, a lekso is held at the home of their closest relative. Translating directly to “crying,” a lekso consists of one to several days of the mourners of the deceased visiting the home to weep together and pay respects.

The aunts fill the air with chanel no. 5 and sobs and whatever else was on sale at macy’s. The uncles permit a moment of emotion sanctioned here. Where it is not anywhere else. Where it is not visible. Not public. Enumerated in their very presence here. The house is the type of clean that suggests it is not always this way. The surfaces are dusted. The knick knacks and papers have been shoved away, out of sight. Into drawers, into neat stacks, into bedrooms. There is nothing here that is not meant to be seen. All else is concealed, at least for now. There is only room for one thing to reveal itself today. Somewhere between child and teen there is a boy drifting in the doorway down the hall. He does not know who died. He does not understand that this is necessary. The coca cola and sprite and ginger ale and water laid out in neat rows in the kitchen, next to the napkins and paper plates, a product of his labor. Somewhere between *fereng*¹ and *sedetegna*² there is a boy who does not know how to watch. He has never been taught how to cry. How to hold other people’s pain. How to bear witness to the libation of your living ancestors, watch as they coax the congested rage from their stomachs and spill blood on the floor. He has never seen his mother cry. He has never seen a man cry. He has never seen a man show emotion. He does not know the art of hiding these things Bringing them out for a few hours and then gathering yourself and leaving. Does not know the art of packing your grief into tupperware and laying it out with the other dishes on the table, ripping out your soul from your throat and making a plate before you go. Does not know the art of containing your pain in three simple hours, releasing it, and continuing. Dropping the kids off at soccer practice. Going back to the office. Picking up groceries on your way home.

¹foreigner, typically used to describe an American

²immigrant

The boy learns this art soon enough. The boy learns this on the day he breaks the promise his father made to the heavens. The boy learns this on the day he goes to war with his mind. The art is refined on the day he bears witness to his own sacrifice on Grand Avenue in plain sight. Cuts open his midsection from navel to chest and allows the sobs to spill onto the pavement, wipes away all evidence and is finished with the task within thirteen minutes. The art is perfected on the day the boy calls a number promising relief and finds out that the promise is a lie. The art is perfected in the moment he learns how to grieve the death of himself. In the moment he learns how to finish grieving within the hour. Wrap up all the unraveled bits of himself and move on. A one man *leksa*. The boy becomes so good at this that he can do it on command. The boy becomes so perfect at this that he can do it alone. The boy becomes so perfect at being alone.

³something we do not have a word for.

Santa Fe, New Mexico, Hannah Laga-Abram

Ode to Home by a Teenager Dreaming of College

My eyes turn into cactuses
when I think of you. When
I think of leaving you.

You are too empty
to let go of. You tell time
by the underside

of fingernails. Your stories rip
coyote from starlight or chamisa
from that curve of I-25

and then
sew the fringes back with cobbled song
and the clink of juniper

wine on Christmas Eve, all of us
bundled together on our only street with a name.

Harsh and raw,
you taste like heart,
like memory, like
a word that is too dangerous

even to write, these days.

You have taught me
contradiction. Ecstasy.

Patience for rain and
how to quote Abbey into the lips
of a lover, too long past dusk. The methods

for tracking dust and
unpacking my lungs
one sinew at a time in order

to take sacrament
and breathe at the blue well
my only calloused offering.

You.

You who has burnt
sunset and resin into skin, hair,
ears.

My turn now, to gift you with tears.

Te quiero, mi tierra.

Weathering

A man in blue: no.

A boy wearing thunderstorm: yes: maybe.

Gaze shines shoes: polished

Reflection: practiced

deflection...

Reads the newspaper: pavement.

Same: as under our skin

same: under bark: under

ripe limb.

Throbbing blood: ocean
of the memories: he shone: pulsed out
of his shoes.

Ocean ebbs and flows: here too.

His lightning tie: time in creating:
inside his belly: fall: leaves
blushing: age rushing:
waterfallen

dark.

He tumbles: anger drips into cracked
rotting carpet.

Purple bleeds soft when dying.

Los Angeles, California, Demeter Appel-Riehle

37 words til sundown

i want
a new word for poem
when my cousin asks me
what the hell i write about
floods and gladioli
the last time i ran a mile
i thought i could see god
quick & tired already

when i start panicking, i play joanna newsom

just like my mother taught me

i cry when the song comes on

let the sound take me

sow a lake to sting my cuticles

bury my sorrow soft in the backyard

and plead for a darkness thick enough to drink

i earned my sweetness

a mouthful of mulch & clean sheets

from a woman who yells

i make my escape with silk feet

from a family trying to crawl out of itself

teach myself counting the blessings

hiding the scorch marks

playing lullabies loud enough to drown everything out

i remember my mother

playing joanna newsom with the same vengeance as the woman who
kicked down the door with one broken foot

anointed the first apartment with glitter and called it fairy dust

i remember my mother as

the woman hiding the divorce with tea lights & shrinky dinks
the woman throwing a cast-iron pan across the room

teaching me how to be soft enough to survive

remembering to sink her teeth in.

Los Angeles, California, Sophie Kim

BIRDHEART

I can't write about Pulse because the bullets
still haven't hit the floor. Out there
someone's heart spoke to the air and the air
stopped speaking back, I can't write about
Pulse because I stopped believing in the
power of flowers to be anything more than
dollar-store apologies from straight people
who couldn't bring themselves to pin
bluebell boutonnières to their daughters'
blazers, sew roses on their sons' prom
dresses when they were still alive enough to
twirl,

I can't write about Pulse because I'm so tired of
showing strangers how to play truth-or-dare with
the mirror, just wear my heart on my sleeve, hope
no one else does a double take. How do I tell you
that I twirl like a dead boy in the mirror, and every
time I crook my bowtie and lock the front door, I
leave my beating heart on the doorstep, and hope
I'll come back. One day I walk
into the candy store at the mall and a chipper
voice from behind the counter calls out, *Hello,*
Sir!

and I taste cotton-candy clouds

for about two seconds before the clerk starts
apologizing like she's just committed a crime, like

she hasn't made my heart on its doorstep break into birds with just one word, like she hasn't made me wish my heart was still in there so I could take it out of my chest and give it to her. I want to tell her my mirror's been following me around like a stranger, or washed-up imaginary friend, but now I could turn round and crack a knock-knock joke, make my own shadow laugh. But I still leave my heart at the door of every movie theater and concert hall, too afraid of the sharpshooter in the balcony to give my heart to the silver screen and the disco lights, let those birds break rank and fly. I had a dream last night that I was standing three stories up in the churning brain of the mall, in a candy store where the bullets still hadn't touched the ground and when they called my name I fell

to my knees like every good victim, became a little kid playing hide and seek by crawling under a bathroom stall, hands over my own eyes. And God I can't write about Pulse because I want more hearts that don't know they're birds until they're birds, that break because they want to, a shattering the bullet will never know.

ELECTRICITY

For every LGBTQ+ person sentenced to death for their identity.

There's a frequency at which the heart burns so bright, it couldn't possibly be anything but alive. That's what your Biology teacher says when he pulls out a diagram, draws gold arrows from left atrium to right. Says it's electric impulses that keep us from dying. You know it's true: there's a girl three desks down, whose voice turns your pulse to lightning strike. Halts the breath in your lungs but makes ventricles sing like drums, how could you possibly be anything but alive?

But at church, electricity also keeps you alive: conversion therapy, defibrillation of the mind. Or capital punishment, clean and white. They want to put you in the chair for that spark between your tongues, hearts singing at the frequency every priest is afraid of. You look away from the girl three desks down, too cool for class, who short-circuits your whole system every time she laughs. You want to tell the teacher you know your heart could kill you, you don't need a textbook for that.

Still, they catch you in the basement after Sunday Mass, alchemizing her arteries into power lines. Charge you with indecency, sentence you to the chair, and I remember that Biology lecture. The doctors say that lightning kills, but they can save you, turn static sin into holy light. When they strap you into their righteous throne, freckle your skin with electrodes, I imagine you're far away, three desks down from electricity. You're watching her chest rise and fall, circuit humming in her ribs, volts surging through your veins, demanding to live. You turn to the doctor, ask, how could you die? How, when your heart is

burning this bright, it couldn't possibly be anything
but alive?

I imagine that, when they pushed the button, you died with
your heart in your throat, loving each damned beat. I
imagine you stood in the atrium of your body, or hers. A
church, and you both were God. And when they pack away
the chair, somewhere, you're holding her hand, or maybe
she's holding yours, your heart caught on that frequency
the doctors feared, the frequency they never wanted us to
touch. I want to think that, even with their monitors and
machines and wires, even though they wanted to stop us,
even though they tried, somewhere, your heart is burning
so bright, it couldn't possibly be anything but alive.

WE. ARE. STILL. HERE